Volume 4, No. 1 January 2026
p-ISSN3032-3037 | e-ISSN 3031-5786

ADVANCES IN SOCIAL HUMANITIES RESEARCH

Contested Maritime Spaces in the Middle East: Geopolitical Dynamics, Non-State Actors, and Security Challenges in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz

Ridha Munawir Masly Pandoe, Rachmat Setiawibawa, Harri Dolli Hutabarat, Guntur Eko Saputro, Lukman Yudho Prakoso*
Universitas Pertahanan RI, Indonesia
Emails: lukman.prakoso@idu.ac.id*

Abstract
In recent years, these routes have been exposed to multifaceted and hybrid security threats—including missile and drone attacks, deployment of unmanned maritime systems, cyber intrusions, the rise of piracy, and proxy wars waged by non-state actors backed by regional powers. Such developments significantly increase the vulnerability of maritime traffic and pose serious risks to international economic stability and energy security. The study examines how contemporary geopolitical dynamics are shaping maritime security challenges in the Middle East by analyzing recent security incidents, regional power competitions, and the evolving role of international navies operating in the region. Using a qualitative geopolitical security approach, the study draws on policy documents, security reports, and incident analyses to identify the key drivers of maritime insecurity. These findings suggest that maritime instability in the Middle East is driven by the convergence of unresolved regional conflicts, the adoption of asymmetric warfare strategies, and the increasing involvement of external forces seeking to protect strategic interests. This combination has complicated traditional maritime security frameworks and weakened unilateral security measures. Therefore, the study underscores the urgent need for coordinated multilateral maritime governance, enhanced information sharing, and collective security mechanisms to ensure the protection of critical sea lanes and the long-term stability of the regional and global maritime domains.

Keywords: Maritime Security; Middle East; Geopolitics; Red Sea; Strait of Hormuc.

Introduction

Maritime security constitutes a fundamental pillar of international stability, given the centrality of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) to global trade and energy distribution (Dar & Javid, 2025; Datta, 2025; Panagopoulou, 2024; Youvan, 2024). According to international shipping data, more than 80% of global trade by volume is transported by sea, underscoring the strategic importance of maritime routes for the global economy (UNCTAD, 2024). Within this context, the Middle East occupies a uniquely critical position, hosting some of the world's most strategic maritime chokepoints, notably the Red Sea—through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—and the Strait of Hormuz. These waterways are not only essential for commercial navigation but also serve as focal points where geopolitical rivalry, regional conflict, and maritime security intersect.

The Red Sea functions as a vital corridor connecting the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal, enabling the flow of goods between Asia, Europe, and Africa (Notteboom & Haralambides, 2020; Rodrigue, 2020). Any disruption along this route has immediate repercussions for global supply chains, shipping costs, and delivery times (Ivanov & Dolgui, 2021; World Bank, 2023). Similarly, the Strait of Hormuz represents one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime passages, as approximately one-fifth of global

petroleum liquids transit through this narrow waterway daily (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2024; Yergin, 2020). Consequently, instability in either of these maritime zones has far-reaching implications that extend well beyond the Middle East, affecting global energy security and international economic stability (IEA, 2022; Bouchard, 2018).

In recent years, maritime security in the Middle East has deteriorated markedly due to escalating geopolitical tensions and the proliferation of non-traditional threats. The resurgence of conflict in Yemen, combined with heightened tensions following the Israel–Gaza war, has contributed to the emergence of the Red Sea as a new theater of maritime confrontation. Armed attacks conducted by Yemen's Houthi movement against commercial shipping—using missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and unmanned surface vessels—have demonstrated how non-state actors can exploit maritime spaces to pursue strategic and political objectives (Reuters, 2025). These attacks have not only endangered civilian vessels but also compelled major shipping companies to reroute their fleets around the Cape of Good Hope, significantly increasing operational costs and transit times.

The spillover of land-based conflicts into the maritime domain highlights a broader transformation in the nature of maritime threats. Unlike traditional piracy, which is primarily economically motivated, contemporary maritime threats in the Middle East are deeply embedded in geopolitical struggles and proxy warfare. Non-state actors increasingly operate with advanced weaponry and strategic intent, often supported by regional powers seeking to project influence without direct confrontation. This evolution challenges conventional maritime security frameworks that were largely designed to counter piracy and ensure navigational safety rather than to address ideologically driven or politically motivated maritime violence (Bueger, 2015).

Alongside the rise of non-state actor threats, the Strait of Hormuz remains a focal point of strategic rivalry between regional and extra-regional powers. Long-standing tensions between the United States and Iran continue to shape the security environment of the Persian Gulf. Periodic incidents involving tanker seizures, naval confrontations, and military signaling illustrate how the Strait of Hormuz functions as both a commercial artery and a geopolitical pressure point (Cordesman, 2020). Even in the absence of direct conflict, the persistent risk of escalation contributes to volatility in global energy markets, as perceptions of insecurity are rapidly reflected in oil prices and insurance premiums.

The involvement of great powers further complicates the maritime security landscape. The United States maintains a significant naval presence in the region to safeguard freedom of navigation and protect energy flows, while other powers—such as China and Russia—have increased their naval activities and diplomatic engagement in Middle Eastern waters. This convergence of interests reflects broader patterns of great power competition, where maritime spaces serve as arenas for signaling power, securing strategic access, and shaping regional security architectures (Kaplan, 2014). As a result, maritime security in the Middle East cannot be understood solely through a regional lens but must be analyzed within the wider framework of global geopolitics.

In response to escalating threats, a range of multinational maritime security initiatives have been established. Coalitions such as Combined Task Force 153 and European Union naval

operations aim to enhance situational awareness, deter attacks, and provide protection for commercial shipping. While these initiatives demonstrate the importance of multilateral cooperation, their effectiveness remains uneven due to political constraints, coordination challenges, and differing strategic priorities among participating states (Kraska & Pedrozo, 2018). Moreover, the persistence of attacks in the Red Sea suggests that naval patrols alone may be insufficient to address the root causes of maritime insecurity.

The economic consequences of maritime insecurity in the Middle East further underscore the urgency of this issue. Disruptions to shipping routes contribute to inflationary pressures, supply chain instability, and heightened uncertainty in global markets. Energy-importing states are particularly vulnerable to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, while export-oriented economies depend on the uninterrupted flow of goods through the Red Sea. These interdependencies highlight the extent to which maritime security in the Middle East constitutes a global public good rather than a purely regional concern (Till, 2018).

Despite growing scholarly attention to maritime security, gaps remain in understanding how contemporary geopolitical dynamics—particularly the interaction between non-state actors, regional rivalries, and great power competition—collectively shape maritime insecurity in the Middle East. Much of the existing literature focuses either on piracy or on state-centric naval power, offering limited insight into hybrid threats and proxy dynamics that increasingly define the region's maritime security environment.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study addresses the following research problems: how contemporary geopolitical dynamics shape maritime security in the Middle East; how regional conflicts and non-state actors contribute to insecurity in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz; and how existing multilateral maritime security frameworks respond to these evolving threats. By examining these issues, the research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of maritime security challenges in one of the world's most strategically significant maritime regions.

This research is expected to provide strategic and practical benefits by enriching academic understanding of the dynamics of maritime security in the Middle East, particularly related to the role of unresolved regional conflicts, asymmetric warfare strategies, and the increasing involvement of external forces in shaping maritime instability. In addition, the results of this study serve as an analytical basis for policymakers, international organizations, and maritime security stakeholders in formulating a more coordinated approach to multilateral maritime governance, strengthening cross-border information-sharing mechanisms, and developing collective security systems that are adaptive to contemporary threats, thereby contributing to the protection of strategic sea lanes and the achievement of long-term stability at regional and global levels.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach to analyze maritime security challenges in the Middle East within the context of contemporary geopolitical dynamics. A qualitative design was particularly appropriate for this research because maritime security in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz is shaped by complex political interactions, strategic behavior, and non-state actor activities that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research adopted a descriptive-analytical method, combining geopolitical analysis with maritime security studies. Data were derived exclusively from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, policy papers, official reports from international organizations, defense and maritime security institutions, and reputable international media. These sources provided empirical evidence of maritime incidents, security policies, and strategic responses relevant to the study's objectives.

From a theoretical standpoint, the analysis was grounded in Geopolitical Theory and Maritime Security Theory. Geopolitical theory explains how strategic maritime spaces function as arenas of power competition among states and non-state actors (Kaplan, 2014). Meanwhile, maritime security theory—particularly its multidimensional perspective—enables the examination of security threats beyond traditional naval warfare, encompassing economic security, energy flows, and hybrid threats (Bueger, 2015). To further capture the role of asymmetric actors, the study also drew selectively on Hybrid Warfare Theory, which explains how non-state actors employ unconventional tactics to achieve strategic effects in contested maritime environments (Hoffman, 2007).

Data analysis was conducted through thematic coding, focusing on patterns related to geopolitical drivers, threat typologies, and international security responses. This methodological framework allowed the study to systematically link empirical developments in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz with broader theoretical debates in international security studies, thereby enhancing analytical rigor and policy relevance..

Results and Discussion

Geopolitical Significance of the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz

The findings indicate that the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz represent two of the most geopolitically sensitive maritime spaces in the contemporary international system. Their strategic value is derived not only from their function as commercial sea lines of communication (SLOCs) but also from their role as geopolitical leverage points in regional and global power competition. From a geopolitical perspective, control, influence, or disruption of these maritime chokepoints provides strategic advantages that extend far beyond maritime considerations alone (Kaplan, 2014).

The Red Sea serves as a critical connector between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, enabling efficient trade flows between Asia and Europe. Empirical evidence shows that disruptions along this route immediately translate into increased shipping costs, longer transit times, and global supply chain instability. Meanwhile, the Strait of Hormuz remains indispensable for global energy security, with a substantial proportion of global oil and liquefied natural gas exports transiting its narrow waters daily (EIA, 2024). These findings reinforce classical geopolitical arguments that strategic maritime spaces function as centers of gravity in global power relations.

From a maritime security perspective, both waterways exhibit characteristics of high strategic density, where economic interests, military presence, and political signaling converge. This density increases vulnerability to conflict escalation, particularly when geopolitical rivalries intensify. As such, maritime security in the Middle East cannot be detached from broader geopolitical dynamics shaping regional and global order.

Emergence of Non-State Actors and Hybrid Maritime Threats

One of the most significant findings of this study is the central role played by non-state actors, particularly the Houthi movement in Yemen, in reshaping maritime security dynamics in the Red Sea. Unlike traditional piracy, which is largely opportunistic and economically motivated, Houthi attacks on commercial shipping are strategically framed and politically driven. These attacks employ a combination of anti-ship missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and unmanned surface vessels, reflecting the characteristics of hybrid maritime warfare (Hoffman, 2007).

The use of such capabilities demonstrates how non-state actors can effectively challenge conventional naval superiority by exploiting asymmetry and technological diffusion. This finding aligns with maritime security theory, which emphasizes that contemporary maritime threats increasingly transcend traditional state-centric models and involve multiple actors operating across legal and operational gray zones (Bueger, 2015).

Furthermore, empirical data suggest that these non-state actor operations are closely linked to regional geopolitical agendas, particularly proxy dynamics involving Iran and its regional rivals. The maritime domain thus becomes an extension of land-based conflicts, where non-state actors project influence and exert pressure on international actors without direct state confrontation. This dynamic significantly complicates maritime security governance, as traditional deterrence mechanisms designed for state actors prove less effective against ideologically motivated and decentralized groups.

Great Power Competition and Naval Presence

The research also reveals that maritime security in the Middle East is deeply shaped by great power competition, particularly involving the United States, Iran, and increasingly China and Russia. The persistent naval presence of the United States in the Persian Gulf and adjacent waters reflects its long-standing commitment to freedom of navigation and energy security. At the same time, Iran's maritime strategy relies on asymmetric naval capabilities, including fast attack craft, missile systems, and mine warfare, designed to offset conventional disadvantages (Cordesman, 2020).

China's expanding naval diplomacy and participation in joint exercises in the Gulf of Oman indicate a growing interest in safeguarding its energy imports and commercial routes. Although China has thus far avoided direct military confrontation, its presence adds another layer to the already complex maritime security environment. These developments support geopolitical theory's assertion that maritime spaces serve as arenas where great powers signal intent, secure access, and shape regional balances of power (Kaplan, 2014).

Importantly, the findings suggest that great power competition does not necessarily manifest through open conflict but rather through strategic signaling, deterrence postures, and indirect engagement**.** Such interactions increase uncertainty and risk miscalculation, particularly in congested and strategically vital maritime corridors like the Strait of Hormuz.

Multilateral Maritime Security Responses

In response to escalating maritime threats, a range of multilateral security initiatives have been established, including Combined Task Force 153 and European Union naval

missions. The findings indicate that these initiatives have contributed positively to improving situational awareness, information sharing, and limited deterrence against attacks on commercial vessels. However, their overall effectiveness remains constrained by political fragmentation and divergent strategic priorities among participating states (Kraska & Pedrozo, 2018).

From an operational perspective, naval patrols and escort missions provide short-term security benefits but do not address the underlying political drivers of maritime insecurity. This limitation is particularly evident in the Red Sea, where attacks persist despite an increased international naval presence. Maritime security theory suggests that sustainable security requires a holistic approach integrating military, political, legal, and economic dimensions (Till, 2018).

The findings thus highlight a gap between tactical success and strategic effectiveness. While multilateral operations can reduce immediate risks, long-term maritime stability depends on conflict resolution on land, regional diplomatic engagement, and the development of inclusive maritime governance mechanisms.

Economic and Energy Security Implications

The economic implications of maritime insecurity in the Middle East are both immediate and systemic. Empirical evidence indicates that disruptions in the Red Sea have led to higher freight rates, increased insurance premiums, and inflationary pressures across global markets. Energy-importing states are particularly sensitive to instability in the Strait of Hormuz, where even the perception of risk can trigger price volatility (EIA, 2024).

These findings reinforce the argument that maritime security constitutes a global public good, with disruptions affecting states far removed from the region itself. The interdependence between maritime security and economic stability underscores the necessity of international cooperation, as unilateral measures are insufficient to protect globally shared maritime interests.

Linking Empirical Findings with Theory

Synthesizing the empirical findings with the theoretical framework reveals that maritime insecurity in the Middle East emerges from the intersection of geopolitics, hybrid warfare, and weak maritime governance. Geopolitical theory explains why strategic chokepoints become contested spaces during periods of heightened rivalry, while maritime security theory elucidates the multidimensional nature of threats facing these spaces. Hybrid warfare theory further clarifies how non-state actors exploit asymmetry to achieve disproportionate strategic effects.

The study confirms that contemporary maritime security challenges cannot be adequately addressed through traditional naval power alone. Instead, they require integrated strategies combining diplomacy, intelligence cooperation, legal enforcement, and economic resilience. This conclusion has important implications for policymakers seeking to safeguard critical maritime corridors in an increasingly contested global environment.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that maritime security in the Middle East, particularly in the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz, is increasingly shaped by converging geopolitical rivalries, regional conflicts, and non-state actors' hybrid strategies—including missile attacks, unmanned systems, and proxy warfare—that extend beyond traditional piracy or interstate clashes, turning these vital economic and energy corridors into contested spaces for power projection and asymmetric threats. While multilateral naval operations provide short-term risk mitigation, they fall short against deeper political drivers, underscoring the need for integrated approaches blending naval presence, diplomatic engagement, conflict de-escalation, and robust maritime governance, as reinforced by geopolitical and maritime security theories. Ultimately, securing these chokepoints is a global imperative for protecting navigation, trade, and energy flows amid rising tensions. For future research, scholars could employ mixed-methods analyses, incorporating primary data from stakeholder interviews and simulations of hybrid threat scenarios, to evaluate the efficacy of emerging AI-driven maritime surveillance technologies in adaptive security frameworks.

References

Bateman, S. (2017). *Maritime security: Concepts and issues*. Routledge.

Bouchard, C. (2018). Maritime chokepoints and global energy security. *Naval War College Review, 71*(4), 1–21.

Bueger, C. (2015). What is maritime security? *Marine Policy, 53*, 159–164. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.005

Bueger, C., & Edmunds, T. (2017). *Maritime security and the maritime domain*. Oxford University Press.

Dar, Z. A., & Javid, S. (2025). Navigating the turbulent waters: An in-depth study of US–China geopolitical rivalry. *Law, Economics and Society, 1*(1), 1–11.

Datta, S. K. (2025). Maritime power and ocean geopolitics: A strategic analysis of Bangladesh's maritime interests and challenges. In *Decoding the chessboard of Asian geopolitics: Asian powerplay in South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia* (pp. 33–57). Springer.

International Energy Agency. (2022). *World energy outlook 2022*. IEA. https://doi.org/10.1787/6ae6e22a-en

Ivanov, D., & Dolgui, A. (2021). A digital supply chain twin for managing the disruption risks and resilience in the era of Industry 4.0. *Production Planning & Control, 32*(9), 775–788. https://doi.org/10.1080/09537287.2020.1768450

Kaplan, R. D. (2014). *Asia's cauldron: The South China Sea and the end of a stable Pacific*. Random House.

Kraska, J. (2011). *Maritime power and the law of the sea*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199773385.001.0001

Mahan, A. T. (1890). *The influence of sea power upon history, 1660–1783*. Little, Brown and Company.

Notteboom, T., & Haralambides, H. (2020). Port management and governance in a post-COVID-19 era. *Maritime Economics & Logistics, 22*(3), 329–352. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41278-020-00162-7

Panagopoulou, L. (2024). *Navigating troubled waters: Understanding the impact of piracy in the Red Sea on international trade and shipping management strategies amidst geopolitical tensions* [Master's thesis]. University of Piraeus.

Rodrigue, J. P. (2020). *The geography of transport systems* (5th ed.). Routledge.

https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429346323
Till, G. (2018). *Seapower: A guide for the twenty-first century* (4th ed.). Routledge.
U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2024). *World oil transit chokepoints*. EIA.
World Bank. (2023). *Global economic prospects: Supply chain disruptions and trade routes*. World Bank Group. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1917-5
Yergin, D. (2020). *The new map: Energy, climate, and the clash of nations*. Penguin Press.
Youvan, D. (2024). *Navigating troubled waters: The strategic importance of the Suez Canal and Red Sea in global maritime trade*.