

The maritime chokepoints that could be worse than Hormuz

From Taiwan to Panama, here is how threats to four shipping hotspots could add to global economic disruption, warns Nitya Labh.



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Since the outbreak of conflict between the United States and Iran, the Strait of Hormuz has been effectively closed to international shipping. At first, the closure was imposed by Iran through strikes on ships and mines laid across the strait. Soon after, the US declared a maritime blockade to counter Iran's moves, blocking all movement of Iranian vessels and goods. This later turned into a widescale embargo on all Iranian-linked goods crossing the Indian Ocean.

According to the International Energy Agency, the blockade has created an oil and gas crisis more severe than those of 1973, 1979 and 2022 combined. The battle to control the strait has led to a slowdown in global economic growth, widespread fuel shortages and deepened humanitarian crises around the world. In Sudan alone, shipping disruption has cut off medical supplies to an estimated 20,000 people.

Though an initial deal to reopen the strait has been announced, few details over long-term access are known. Disruption to the critical waterway over the past few months has put a spotlight on maritime chokepoints and the vulnerability of international supply chains. It has also shown how the global economy – often imagined as fluid and borderless – is dependent on a few, narrow shipping channels. Part of the problem is that the legal and institutional frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas, are no longer keeping pace with geopolitical realities.

Major powers selectively interpret or ignore legal obligations when they conflict with national interests while enforcement mechanisms remain weak or non-existent. As global consensus around these mechanisms fractures, countries have increasingly turned towards military force to safeguard their interests.

Responding to the repeated closures of chokepoints is not just a question of crisis prevention, it's about understanding who can disrupt, who can endure the costs and who is

forced to adapt. As the world grapples with the fallout of Hormuz, other chokepoints could pose even greater risks. Here, we examine four.

1. The Taiwan Strait

The Taiwan Strait is one of the world's busiest trade corridors. Approximately a fifth of global maritime cargo and more than half of the world's container fleet pass through it.

Over the past few years China has repeatedly carried out military drills around Taiwan. In December, for example, China's Eastern Theatre Command conducted 10 hours of live-fire exercises in the waters around Taiwan. Over time, Beijing has started to use this kind of military activity to trial a possible blockade of Taiwan as a coercive tool to bring the two governments together.

Though it is wider than most other chokepoints, disruption to the Taiwan Strait could cause a bigger shock than the current closure of Hormuz. Taiwan alone accounts for 90 per cent of leading semiconductor manufacturing used around the world for AI and electronics. More broadly, East Asia accounts for about 95 per cent of global shipbuilding and over 40 per cent of global maritime cargo handling. Because of these dependencies, a Chinese blockade of Taiwan would prompt an estimated 5 per cent fall in global GDP. A conflict over Taiwan could trigger follow-on disruptions such as sanctions on China and regional shipping delays that would multiply the systemic economic shocks.

As China increases its military actions around Taiwan, the chance of an accident or miscalculation increases. Take, for example, the notorious incident in 2001 where disagreements about territory and transit rights caused a midair collision between a US navy surveillance plane and Chinese fighter jet.

Were such an accident to occur between China and Taiwan, China may be tempted to use the crisis to assert its control over the strait. For as long as geopolitical tensions over energy resources, alliances and territorial disputes simmer, the risk that the Taiwan Strait is used as a strategic bargaining chip will remain high.

2. The Strait of Malacca

The Strait of Malacca is a chokepoint connecting the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean. It is the default corridor for trade between East Asia and the West. At its narrowest point, the strait is about 1.7 miles wide. Almost 24 per cent of global seaborne trade by volume flows through the strait. It carries 45 per cent of the world's seaborne oil, over 25 per cent of all cars traded internationally and 23 per cent of dry bulk cargo, including key agricultural commodities such as grains and soybeans.

The waters of Southeast Asia surrounding the strait are also home to one of the world's largest piracy hotspots. From 1995 to 2013, Southeast Asia accounted for 41 per cent of the world's pirate attacks. Like the Horn of Africa, piracy is on the rise in Southeast Asia. In the first half of 2025, experts reported an 83 per cent rise in piracy across Asia, mainly targeting bulk carriers.

In addition to piracy, the strait is facing a rise in the activity of dark vessels – ships that deliberately turn off their tracking systems – linked to the sale of sanctioned oil from countries such as Iran and Russia. Nearby, off the coast of Malaysia, is an area commonly known as the Eastern Outer Port Limits anchorage. Between January and April, at least 250 ship-to-ship exchanges of suspected sanctioned goods took place there. As the US continues to conduct ship seizures and interceptions of vessels linked to Iran, scrutiny around the area has grown.

A more hostile American naval presence in the channel would challenge the authority of regional states such as Singapore and Malaysia and disrupt traffic through this corridor. Together with organized crime, piracy and sanctions evasion are increasing pressure on the Strait of Malacca.

3. The Mozambique Channel

Sometimes referred to as the 'Forgotten Chokepoint', the Mozambique Channel runs roughly 945 miles between Madagascar and Mozambique. For centuries the channel served as a key passage connecting trade from the Indian Ocean to the rest of the world.

It was only when the Suez Canal opened as a faster route between Asia and Europe, in 1869, that its dominant position in global supply chains started to decline. Today, the channel still hosts nearly 30 per cent of all global tanker traffic, carrying more than 500 million tons of oil each year. Recent disruptions to shipping routes in the Red Sea have elevated the importance of the channel once again.

Its status as a secondary trade corridor means that maritime security in the region is consistently overlooked. During the height of Somali piracy in 2011, attacks on commercial ships frequently extended into the Mozambique Channel. Since 2017, Mozambique has also struggled with an Islamist insurgency along the northern coast which has led to disruptions and attacks on maritime infrastructure. In March 2021, for example, a large-scale insurgent attack in the coastal town of Palma forced the suspension of the Mozambique Liquefied Natural Gas Project and its \$20 billion investments. The project resumed in January 2026, but full production is not expected until 2029.

The channel is also home to one of the world's largest gas reserves, with more than 100 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas in the offshore Rovuma Basin, in its northern stretches. The energy shock triggered by the closure of Hormuz has increased competition to access resources in the channel. Even before the crisis, energy companies from the

US, China, Japan, India, Korea, Italy and Russia had tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to secure a share of Mozambique's offshore reserves. Now they are redoubling their efforts.

Over the past decade, Mozambique's navy has developed its patrol and security capabilities but regional surveillance and monitoring remains limited. International partners have occasionally stepped in to provide patrol support, but competing security priorities have hindered any lasting commitments. Mozambique has also been reluctant to involve external partners in its naval and intelligence operations. The lack of coordinated monitoring and the increase in rerouted shipping traffic through the channel increase the risk of Islamist insurgents sabotaging shipping, ports and energy supply chains in the months to come.

4. The Panama Canal

Chokepoints in the Atlantic are often assumed to be more stable and less contested. However, the Panama Canal and the Caribbean region have a long record of disruptions. Like the Mozambique Channel, these secondary corridors become more important when other chokepoints are closed.

The canal is one of the most critical links between the Atlantic and Pacific. For the US especially, it is a strategic artery: around 40 per cent of US container traffic relies on it, especially flows between the east coast of America and Asia. China is also heavily reliant, accounting for 21.4 per cent of the canal's cargo volume in the 12 months to September 2024.

Geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing has a direct impact on operations through the canal. Since returning to office in 2025, President Trump has repeatedly threatened to seize control of the canal, citing security concerns about China's growing influence over this critical waterway.

A series of standoffs between Washington and Beijing culminated in February 2026 with the decision of the Panama Supreme Court to revoke the longstanding contracts that allowed the Hong Kong-based company CK Hutchison to operate container ports at either end of the canal. The ruling was seen as a victory for the US. In retaliation, China has detained an increasing number of Panama-registered vessels at Chinese ports ([136 in April alone](#)).