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Meysune Yaşar



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Meysune YAŞAR

Lecturer, İstanbul Medeniyet University, İstanbul

Abstract

This study examines the geopolitical importance of maritime chokepoints through the lens of the evolving use of naval power. By comparing the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the study argues that the strategic importance of these chokepoints stems not only from their geographic locations but also from the nature of the critical maritime flows passing through them. The Strait of Hormuz is examined in the context of maritime denial and the vulnerability of energy flows due to the concentration of global energy flows; the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is examined in the context of the disruption of commercial flows due to the security risks to maritime trade. The comparison demonstrates that different maritime flows give rise to different forms of maritime power and strategic vulnerabilities. The study argues that maritime power should be assessed not only by its capacity to control maritime areas but also by its capacity to influence the security, continuity, and availability of critical maritime flows.

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Introduction

While the oceans continue to be one of the cornerstones of global economic and strategic relations, certain maritime chokepoints retain their strategic importance within this system. These passages cause maritime routes—which enable energy resources and commercial goods to reach global markets—to concentrate in specific geographic areas. For this reason, security issues arising in straits such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb can affect not only regional maritime security but also, on a broader scale, energy supply, global trade, and the continuity of supply chains. However, it is not sufficient to explain the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints solely through their geographic locations. One of the key factors determining a strait's geopolitical value is the nature of the flows passing through it and the extent to which these flows are vulnerable to disruption. In other words, a maritime strait's strategic importance stems not only from its being a narrow geographical area but also from the concentration of critical energy and trade flows within that area.

This situation brings the question of how naval power should be understood back to the forefront. Classical naval strategy encompasses not only the control of maritime areas but also the protection of maritime communication lines, the maintenance of commercial and military transportation, and the limitation of an adversary's ability to use the sea. Therefore, it is incorrect to view the current shift as the first time maritime trade has gained strategic importance. The real issue is that the military control of a maritime area does not always align with the effects on the security, continuity, routing, and cost of critical flows passing through those areas. Even without fully controlling a specific maritime area, an actor can threaten the energy or trade flows passing through it and force commercial actors to change their route preferences, which can have significant strategic consequences. This study examines this relationship through the examples of the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

The Strait of Hormuz is analyzed in terms of the concentration of energy flows and the effects of the threat of maritime denial on energy security; the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is examined in terms of how maritime security threats lead to route changes, delays, and increased costs in commercial flows. This distinction is not based on an absolute energy-trade dichotomy, but rather on the dominant vulnerabilities and strategic impact mechanisms evident in each strait. The comparison demonstrates that two maritime chokepoints with similar strategic characteristics can give rise to different forms of naval power projection and produce different outcomes. Within this framework, the study's central question is: How does the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints shape the form of naval power projection?

The Changing Logic of Sea Power

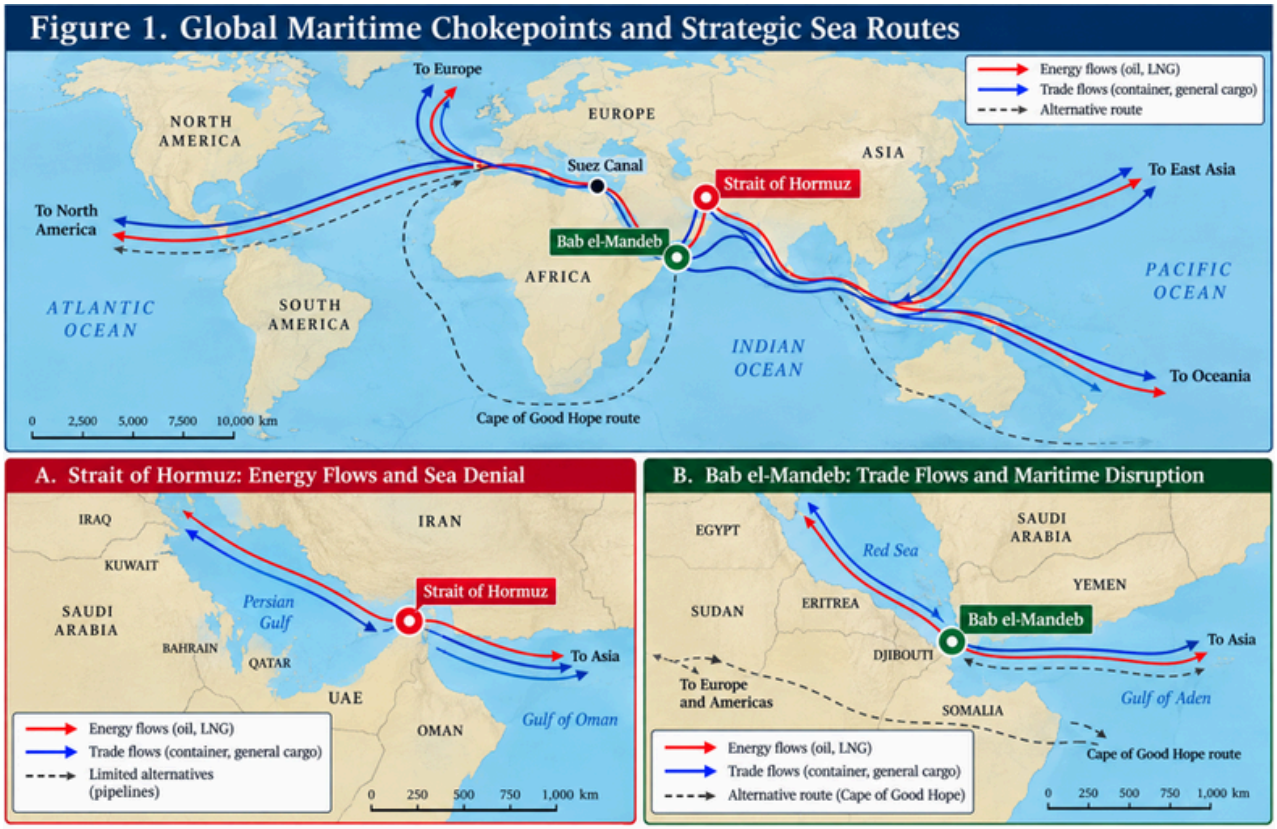
For a long time, naval power has been assessed based on states' capacity to control maritime areas and deploy military force within them (Mahan, 1890). In classical naval strategy, the protection of maritime communication lines, the maintenance of commercial and military

maritime transport, the restriction of an adversary's use of the seas, and, when necessary, the control of sea lanes are already interrelated objectives. Therefore, it is incorrect to claim that the traditional approach entirely excludes maritime trade (Corbett, 1911; Till, 2018). The shift that has become apparent today is not that trade flows have gained strategic importance for the first time; rather, it is that developments such as precision-guided weapons, shore-based missile systems, mines, unmanned vehicles, and asymmetric tools available to non-state actors now enable even actors that do not maintain constant control over maritime areas to influence the security and usability of these flows. Furthermore, the interdependence of global supply chains and the decisions made by commercial actors regarding risk, insurance, cost, and routing make it possible for a limited security threat to produce economic consequences that extend beyond the geographical area in question (Till, 2018; Vego, 2016; UNCTAD, 2024). Therefore, this shift requires—rather than the elimination of the traditional logic of maritime control—an analytical distinction between the military situation in the maritime domain and the effects on the flows passing through that domain.

Within this framework, the disruption of maritime flows is not treated as an independent third form of control on the same level as "sea control" and "sea denial," but rather as the strategic impact that the use of naval power can create on critical flows (Till, 2018; Vego, 2016). Sea control focuses on ensuring that a specific maritime area can be used for a specific period and purpose; sea denial, on the other hand, focuses on making it difficult or impossible for an adversary to use that area effectively (Corbett, 1911; Vego, 2016). Maritime disruption, meanwhile, refers to the disruption caused by these and other forms of intervention on the continuity, direction, cost, speed, or predictability of maritime flows. This disruption is not limited to the physical halting of transit: commercial vessels avoiding a risky route, changing course, rising insurance and transportation costs, or increased uncertainty regarding energy supply can also create effects of disruption (Yu, 2026). Therefore, these concepts should not be treated as mutually exclusive categories but rather as concepts operating at different analytical levels: "sea control" and "sea denial" describe the state of military use of the maritime domain, while "maritime disruption" explains the resulting impact on critical flows (Yu, 2026).

Maritime chokepoints are among the most important areas where this transformation can be observed. This is because the geographical narrowing at chokepoints causes energy and trade flows to concentrate along a specific route, thereby creating asymmetric strategic effects (Verschuur et al., 2025). As shown in Figure 1, the concentration of energy flows in the Strait of Hormuz makes the capability to deny access from the sea strategically important, while the safety of commercial vessels and the continuity of shipping lanes in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait make the disruption of maritime traffic one of the primary security challenges.

Therefore, to understand modern naval power, greater attention must be paid to the relationship between maritime space and maritime flows. An actor's capacity to control the sea is not the same as its capacity to influence the flows that occur across it. However, particularly in strategic chokepoints, the latter capacity can enable even actors lacking the former to exert significant geopolitical influence.



Source: It was created by the author using AI.

Comparing Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb: Differing Forms of Naval Power

The Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait are two strategic chokepoints located at critical junctures of global maritime transportation. Since both straits are used to transport energy and other commercial goods, it would be incorrect to treat them with a strict distinction along the lines of "the Strait of Hormuz is for energy, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is for trade" (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2026). What sets the Strait of Hormuz apart is that a significant portion of global energy transportation depends on this narrow passage, and threats to the security of transit can exert direct pressure on energy supply and market expectations (EIA, 2026). The distinctive feature of Bab el-Mandeb, on the other hand, is the role of the Red Sea–Suez route in the broader trade network between Europe and Asia, and the fact that security risks can divert ships to alternative routes (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024). However, energy transportation is also part of trade, and some energy shipments originating from the Strait of Hormuz may use the Bab el-Mandeb–Suez route (EIA, 2026). Therefore, the comparison is based not on an absolute distinction between flow types, but rather on the mechanisms of dependency, vulnerability, and strategic impact that are prominent in each case.

Hormuz: The Strategic Exposure of Concentrated Energy Flows

The key factor determining the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz is that a significant portion of global energy transportation passes through a narrow geographical passage. This situation leads to the concentration of energy flows at a specific point and, consequently, causes security issues at that point to have broader economic repercussions. The strategic vulnerability here is not limited to a complete halt in energy flows. Uncertainty regarding the security of these flows can affect transportation costs, insurance premiums, market expectations, and governments' energy security calculations (Verschuur et al., 2025). For this reason, the concept of 'denial of access' holds particular importance in the case of the Strait of Hormuz. Denial of access to the sea does not require an actor to maintain continuous and complete control over a specific maritime area. Even with more limited capabilities, making it difficult for a rival or third parties to use the sea safely can yield strategic results (Vego, 2016; Till, 2018). In a narrow strait like the Strait of Hormuz, the geography itself can amplify the impact of actors possessing such capabilities. Coastal missile systems, mines, small and fast naval vessels, unmanned systems, or other asymmetric tools can elevate the risk level of maritime transit without directly competing with a powerful navy.

The key point here is the difference between naval power and control of the seas. An actor may not need to have the capacity to completely halt the passage of energy-carrying tankers. If it can make such passages more risky and, as a result, alter the behavior of energy companies, shipowners, or states, it creates a strategic impact. Thus, the effect of maritime denial extends far beyond physical control. This mechanism in the Strait of Hormuz also highlights a distinctive feature of energy flows compared to other types of maritime trade. Energy markets—particularly those for oil and natural gas—are extremely sensitive to global price movements and supply expectations (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2026; Meza et al., 2026). Consequently, even the mere possibility of a future disruption—without an actual halt in energy flows—can yield strategic consequences (Meza et al., 2026). From this perspective, the Strait of Hormuz's geopolitical impact is based on its capacity to generate risk even before an actual disruption occurs. This transforms the Strait of Hormuz from merely a regional maritime security issue into a component of global energy security. The security risk at the strait affects not only ships transiting directly through it but also the markets served by the energy they carry (Meza et al., 2026; Verschuur et al., 2025). Therefore, the strategic impact of naval power in the Strait of Hormuz stems not so much from the geographical area itself as from the systemic vulnerability arising from the concentration of energy flows.

Bab el-Mandeb: Trade Route Resilience and Maritime Disruption

In Bab el-Mandeb, however, a different strategic mechanism comes to the fore. The strait's importance is linked not only to the number of ships passing through it but also to the role of the Red Sea–Suez route in the global trade link between Europe and Asia. Consequently, security issues arising here can affect not only the physical safety of specific ships but also the functioning of a much broader trade network (UNCTAD, 2024; Kamali et al., 2024). Since late

2023, attacks on commercial vessels in and around the Red Sea have brought this vulnerability to light (UNCTAD, 2024). A notable point here is that the impact of these attacks is not limited to the ships directly targeted. The rise in security risks has led some commercial actors to avoid the Bab el-Mandeb and Red Sea routes, opting instead for longer routes via the Cape of Good Hope (UNCTAD, 2024; Kamali et al., 2024). Thus, maritime trade has not come to a complete halt, but the same trade has shifted to a longer, more expensive, and less predictable route (Kamali et al., 2024). This situation highlights a significant distinction in understanding the strategic impact of naval power. The underlying mechanism here is not maritime control in the classical sense. The actor posing the threat does not need to maintain continuous control over the Red Sea or the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The mere fact that commercial actors do not consider the current route safe and choose an alternative route is sufficient to produce a strategic outcome.

For this reason, in the case of Bab el-Mandeb, the concept of "maritime disruption"—that is, the interruption of maritime traffic—is more explanatory. The term "disruption" here does not imply a complete halt to trade in an absolute sense. Longer routes, higher fuel consumption, longer transit times, higher insurance costs, and ships remaining in operational capacity for longer periods can also indicate that a maritime flow has been strategically disrupted (UNCTAD, 2024; Kamali et al., 2024). This situation also necessitates distinguishing between the direct and indirect dimensions of the economic impact of maritime power. The direct impact is the attack on a vessel or the effective rendering of a specific route unusable. The indirect impact, on the other hand, is the change in commercial actors' risk perceptions and, as a result, changes in route preferences, costs, and logistics planning (Kamali et al., 2024; UNCTAD, 2024). In the case of Bab el-Mandeb, the second dimension is particularly important. This is because the strategic impact does not require a complete halt to all trade; the fact that trade becomes more costly and time-consuming is also a strategic outcome.

Similar Geography, Different Vulnerabilities

A comparison of the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait demonstrates that the strategic importance of maritime straits cannot be explained solely on the basis of their geographical characteristics. In both straits, energy and trade flows are intertwined to some extent; therefore, attributing the difference between the two cases solely to the type of cargo transported would be misleading (EIA, 2026). The primary purpose of the comparison is to identify the strategic vulnerabilities that stand out in each strait and how these vulnerabilities come into play. In the Strait of Hormuz, the concentration of energy transportation and the limited availability of alternatives lead to the threat to transit security exerting strong pressure on energy supply and market expectations (EIA, 2026). This mechanism is closely linked to the capacity for maritime denial (Vego, 2016). In Bab el-Mandeb, however, the Red Sea–Suez route's position within the global trade network makes it particularly evident that increased risk diverts ships to alternative routes and raises logistics costs (Kamali et al., 2024; UNCTAD, 2024; Verschuur et al., 2025). This mechanism highlights the impact of maritime disruption; however, it must also be acknowledged that it may overlap with sea denial (Till, 2018; Vego, 2016).

The vulnerability highlighted at Bab el-Mandeb is not a “trade vulnerability” independent of energy supply; more accurately, it is a vulnerability related to the continuity of the extensive maritime transport network passing through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal (UNCTAD, 2024; Verschuur et al., 2025). This network may also include energy shipments (EIA, 2026). Even if the increase in security risks does not lead to a complete halt in trade, it could cause ships to divert to alternative routes (Kamali et al., 2024; Verschuur et al., 2025). In this scenario, the vulnerability lies not only in ships being attacked but also in the existing route becoming less viable economically and operationally (Verschuur et al., 2025). The existence of an alternative route via the Cape of Good Hope does not eliminate the strategic importance of the chokepoint, as the alternative route entails longer transit times and higher costs (UNCTAD, 2024; Verschuur et al., 2025). In the Strait of Hormuz, however, the limited availability of alternative capacity—particularly for energy transportation—can increase vulnerability under certain conditions (EIA, 2026). These differences are not absolute; they should be understood as the dominant forms of dependence and impact in each case.

Therefore, these two cases demonstrate that geographic concentration and strategic vulnerability are not the same thing. The nature of vulnerability is determined collectively by the composition of flows passing through this geography, the availability of alternative routes, the means of threat, and the cost of intervention (Verschuur et al., 2025). In the Strait of Hormuz, the capacity for maritime denial can create strategic impact, particularly by threatening the reliability of energy flows (IEA, 2026; Vego, 2016). At Bab el-Mandeb, on the other hand, the security threat manifests as maritime disruption by causing commercial actors to change their route preferences (EIA, 2026; Verschuur et al., 2025). However, in the second case as well, there may be effects of maritime denial aimed at deterring the use of a particular route (Till, 2018; Vego, 2016). Consequently, the distinction between the two cases stems not from mutually exclusive concepts but from the relative weight of different mechanisms.

In this context, to understand the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints, the question “Which geographical area is under control?” alone is not sufficient. It must be supplemented by the questions: “Which flows depend on this geographical area, what are the alternatives to these flows, and what costs would an interruption of these flows entail?” This approach moves beyond viewing maritime chokepoints as static geopolitical points, making it possible to assess them as dynamic strategic nodes where different types of critical flows become vulnerable in various ways.

Flow, Alternative Routes, and Strategic Impact

Three factors are particularly important in explaining the strategic vulnerability of maritime chokepoints: the nature of the critical flow, the degree of geographic concentration, and the availability of alternative routes. First, the nature of the critical flow is decisive. The security of energy flows and the continuity of container shipping do not share the same strategic characteristics. While disruptions in energy transportation can directly affect prices and supply security, disruptions in trade routes tend to have an impact primarily through transit time,

freight rates, insurance, and supply chains (EIA, 2026; UNCTAD, 2024). Therefore, the outcome of the same type of threat will differ depending on the flow in question. Second, the existence of alternative routes is of critical importance. There is a significant difference between a bottleneck being completely indispensable and the availability of an alternative route. However, the existence of an alternative route does not eliminate the strategic importance of the bottleneck. If the alternative route is much longer, more costly, or limited in capacity, the threat can still lead to significant strategic consequences (Hamdan et al., 2025). The Cape of Good Hope route in Bab el-Mandeb is a clear example of this. An alternative exists; however, using it increases the cost and duration of maritime trade (Bogetic et al., 2024).

Furthermore, there may not be a linear relationship between the cost of an intervention and its strategic impact. This is where the fundamental characteristic of chokepoints comes into play. Geographical concentration can amplify the impact of an intervention carried out with relatively limited capacity (Vego, 2019; Verschuur et al., 2025). For this reason, chokepoints are areas conducive to the asymmetric use of naval power. When these three elements are considered together, a simple analytical framework can be developed to assess the strategic importance of a maritime chokepoint:

Critical flow + high geographic concentration + limited alternative routes = high strategic vulnerability

How this vulnerability is exploited, in turn, determines the nature of naval power. In the Strait of Hormuz, this mechanism manifests primarily as maritime denial and the vulnerability of energy flows, whereas in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, it manifests as the rerouting and disruption of commercial flows (Vego, 2019; EIA, 2026; UNCTAD, 2024; Verschuur et al., 2025). This comparison highlights the need to broaden the scope of approaches that explain the impact of naval power solely through the control of maritime areas. While the ability to deny access from the sea in the Strait of Hormuz threatens the security of energy flows, a disruption in maritime security in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait can divert commercial traffic (EIA, 2026; UNCTAD, 2024). However, the commonality between the two cases is more significant: In both instances, the strategic impact stems not from the complete control of a maritime area, but from altering the availability of a critical maritime flow. Therefore, defining naval power solely as the capacity to 'control the sea' or 'prevent an adversary from using the sea' is insufficient (Corbett, 1911; Till, 2018; Vego, 2019). Today, an actor's naval power must also be assessed based on its capacity to influence the security, continuity, direction, and cost of critical flows (Verschuur et al., 2025). This approach demonstrates that the concept of naval power has expanded from geographical areas to encompass economic and strategic flows.

Final Remarks

A comparison of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb demonstrates that approaches which explain the strategic impact of naval power solely through the military control of maritime areas may fall short in understanding contemporary maritime geopolitics. However, in classical naval strategy, control of the seas and the protection of maritime transport routes are already linked to the continuity of trade. The theoretical contribution of this study is not to argue that this relationship is new, but rather to demonstrate that, in the present day, the strategic effects of military control over maritime areas do not always align with the continuity, route, cost, and predictability of critical flows. “Sea control” and “sea denial” are concepts related to the military use of the maritime domain and an adversary’s capacity to utilize that domain; “maritime disruption", on the other hand, refers to the strategic disruption in the continuity, route, cost, or predictability of critical maritime flows resulting from military interventions, security threats, and risk perceptions. This disruption may stem from various mechanisms, including sea denial. The Strait of Hormuz, due to the concentration of energy transportation, highlights the impact of the maritime denial threat on energy supply and market expectations; the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, on the other hand, particularly illustrates how security risks create route changes, delays, and cost increases across the broader maritime transportation network. The difference between the two cases, therefore, lies not in an absolute distinction between energy and trade, but rather in the dominant vulnerability and strategic impact mechanism.

This theoretical expansion also provides a new framework for assessing the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints. The strategic vulnerability of a strait arises not only from its geographical narrowness but also from a combination of the concentration level of critical flows, the availability of alternative routes, and the capacity to interfere with these flows. Therefore, maritime security policies should focus not only on physical control and military protection but also on enhancing the resilience of critical flows. The development of alternative routes, the diversification of logistics and energy networks, and the strengthening of crisis adaptation capacity are the key elements of this approach. Thus, this study proposes considering maritime geopolitics not merely through the question “Who controls the sea?” but through the question “Who can influence critical maritime flows, under what conditions, and to what extent?” From this perspective, power struggles in the maritime geopolitics of the future will be shaped not only by maritime areas themselves but also by the security, continuity, direction, and cost of the critical flows passing through these areas.

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Meysune YAŞAR



Meysune Yaşar is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations at İstanbul Medeniyet University. She received her PhD from İstanbul Medeniyet University with a dissertation examining defense diplomacy and Sino–American rivalry in the South China Sea. She is the author of *Sino-American Rivalry in the South China Sea (2010–2019)* and co-editor of *Asia Anew in 21st Century Turkish Foreign Policy*. Between October 2024 and June 2025, she was a Visiting Researcher at the University of Exeter, where she conducted the research project “Ontologically Insecure Waters: A Comparative Analysis of the Eastern Mediterranean and the South China Sea in the Nineteenth Century”. Dr. Yaşar’s primary areas of research include theories of international relations, maritime security and strategy and foreign policy analysis.

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