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Maritime chokepoints and the politics of energy security in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract
The growing geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific has drawn increasing attention to the strategic role of maritime chokepoints in sustaining global energy transportation and trade. This paper examines the significance of key Indo-Pacific chokepoints and their implications for regional security by focusing on major passages such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca, which together serve as critical nodes in the global energy and trade network. Drawing on insights from sea power theory, complex interdependence, and energy security perspectives, the study analyzes how the concentration of maritime energy flows through these narrow passages creates both strategic opportunities and vulnerabilities. The paper highlights that major Asian economies—including China, India, Japan, and South Korea—remain heavily dependent on energy imports transported through Indo-Pacific sea lanes, while the maritime engagement of the United States, China, and India reflects the growing strategic competition surrounding these routes. It argues that Indo-Pacific chokepoints function as critical intersections where energy security, maritime strategy, and geopolitical rivalry converge, making their stability central to both regional security and the functioning of the global economy.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Maritime Chokepoints, Energy Security, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), Regional Security

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Indo-Pacific has increasingly emerged as a pivotal geopolitical space where maritime connectivity, energy transportation, and strategic competition converge. Linking the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, this vast maritime region hosts some of the busiest sea routes in the world, carrying a substantial share of global trade and energy supplies. As the economic center of gravity continues to shift toward Asia, the security and stability of maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific have become essential not only for regional economies but also for the broader global economic system.

Within this maritime domain, a number of narrow sea passages—commonly described as strategic chokepoints—play a particularly critical role in facilitating the movement of global commerce and energy resources. These chokepoints function as key gateways connecting the hydrocarbon-rich regions of the Middle East with the rapidly growing economies of East and South Asia. Among the most significant of these maritime corridors are the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, the Lombok Strait, and the Sunda Strait. Together, these chokepoints form an interconnected network of maritime passages through which a significant portion of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments transit.

The strategic importance of these chokepoints has grown alongside the increasing energy demand of major Asian economies. Countries such as China, India, and Japan rely heavily on imported hydrocarbons transported through these maritime routes. Consequently, the uninterrupted functioning of these sea lanes has become a matter of critical importance for their economic stability and national security. Any disruption in these chokepoints—whether resulting from geopolitical tensions, regional conflicts, piracy, or military confrontation—could significantly affect global energy markets and supply chains.

At the same time, the increasing importance of maritime energy routes has intensified strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. The evolving rivalry between the United States and China, along with the expanding maritime engagement of India in the Indian Ocean, has transformed the region into a key arena of geopolitical interaction. States increasingly seek to secure their access to maritime trade routes and energy corridors through naval modernization, maritime partnerships, and strategic infrastructure initiatives. As a result, strategic chokepoints have become focal points where questions of maritime power, energy security, and regional stability intersect.

Although existing scholarship has examined various dimensions of Indo-Pacific geopolitics and maritime strategy, the relationship between strategic chokepoints, energy transportation, and regional security remains insufficiently integrated within a single analytical framework. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how maritime chokepoints shape the politics of energy security and influence the broader regional security environment in the Indo-Pacific. By analyzing the strategic significance of key chokepoints—including the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, Strait of Malacca, Lombok Strait, and Sunda Strait—the paper aims to understand how the growing dependence on maritime energy routes intersects with geopolitical competition and shapes the evolving regional security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Understanding the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific requires an analytical framework that integrates insights from maritime geopolitics, international political economy, and energy security studies. This study adopts a multi-theoretical approach by drawing upon Sea Power theory, Complex Interdependence, and the energy security perspective. Together, these theoretical lenses provide a comprehensive

framework for analyzing how strategic geography, economic dependence, and geopolitical competition interact to shape the politics of maritime energy transportation in the Indo-Pacific.

1. Sea Power and Maritime Geopolitics

The strategic significance of maritime routes has long been emphasized in classical geopolitical thought, particularly through the work of Alfred Thayer Mahan. In The Influence of Sea Power upon History, Mahan (1890) [6] argued that control over sea lanes and maritime trade routes is a critical determinant of national power and international influence. According to Mahan, states that possess strong naval capabilities and the ability to secure key maritime routes are better positioned to protect their commercial interests and project power across regions.

Within this perspective, maritime chokepoints occupy a central place in global geopolitics because they represent narrow passages through which a significant volume of international trade must pass. Control or influence over these passages provides states with strategic leverage over global maritime commerce. In the Indo-Pacific, chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab el-Mandeb function as vital arteries connecting energy-producing regions with major consumer markets. Contemporary maritime strategists have further emphasized that the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) remains a fundamental component of modern naval strategy and international trade (Till, 2018) [10]. Consequently, maritime chokepoints have become focal points of geopolitical interest and naval activity in the Indo-Pacific.

2. Complex Interdependence and Maritime Connectivity

While classical geopolitics emphasizes competition over strategic spaces, the theory of Complex Interdependence, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, highlights the growing economic and institutional linkages among states in the contemporary international system. According to Keohane and Nye (1977) [5], modern international relations are characterized by multiple channels of interaction, the absence of a clear hierarchy among issues, and the increasing importance of economic interdependence. In the context of the Indo-Pacific, maritime trade routes represent a crucial element of this interdependent global economy. Many states rely on the same sea lanes for the transportation of goods and energy resources. As a result, disruptions in key chokepoints could have far-reaching consequences for multiple economies simultaneously. The interconnected nature of maritime commerce creates incentives for cooperation in maintaining the security and openness of sea lanes. At the same time, this shared dependence does not eliminate strategic competition; rather, it produces a complex environment in which cooperation and rivalry coexist. The Indo-Pacific therefore represents a region where maritime connectivity generates both economic interdependence and geopolitical contestation.

3. Energy Security and Maritime Transportation

The third theoretical perspective employed in this study focuses on the concept of energy security, which broadly refers to the reliable and uninterrupted availability of energy resources at affordable prices. As global energy demand has grown, the transportation of oil and natural gas through maritime routes has become increasingly important for the functioning of the global economy. Scholars such as Daniel Yergin emphasize that secure energy supply chains are fundamental to economic stability and national security (Yergin, 2006) [14].

A significant proportion of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments transit through a limited number of maritime chokepoints. These chokepoints are therefore critical nodes in the global energy transportation network. In the Indo-Pacific region, the movement of energy resources from the Persian Gulf toward East and South Asian markets passes through passages such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, the Lombok Strait, and the Sunda Strait. The heavy reliance of major Asian economies—including China, India, and Japan—on seaborne energy imports has heightened concerns regarding the vulnerability of these routes.

Energy security considerations therefore shape the strategic behavior of states in the Indo-Pacific. Governments seek to protect maritime energy supply chains through naval modernization, maritime partnerships, and investments in infrastructure and alternative transport routes. These strategies reflect the intersection of energy security concerns with broader geopolitical dynamics in the region.

4. Integrating the Analytical Framework

By integrating these three theoretical perspectives, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the politics of maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific. Sea Power theory explains the geopolitical importance of maritime routes and the role of naval power in securing them. Complex Interdependence highlights the shared economic dependence of states on maritime trade and energy transportation networks. Meanwhile, the energy security perspective emphasizes how reliance on seaborne energy supplies shapes national strategies and geopolitical competition.

Taken together, these approaches illustrate how strategic geography, economic interdependence, and geopolitical rivalry converge around critical maritime chokepoints. This integrated framework therefore provides the analytical basis for examining how the politics of maritime chokepoints influence energy security and regional security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

Strategic Geography of Indo-Pacific Chokepoints

The strategic significance of maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific is fundamentally shaped by their geographic position within global maritime transportation networks. These narrow sea passages connect major oceans and facilitate the movement of international trade and energy supplies across regions. Due to their limited width and the concentration of shipping traffic that passes through them, chokepoints function as both critical arteries of global commerce and potential points of vulnerability within the international maritime system (Rodrigue, Comtois, & Slack, 2020) [8].

A substantial proportion of global energy trade and commercial shipping flows through the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor, linking the hydrocarbon-rich regions of the Middle East with the rapidly expanding markets of East and South Asia. Within this network, several chokepoints play particularly important roles in shaping the structure of global maritime trade. Among the most strategically significant are the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, the

Strait of Malacca, as well as alternative passages such as the Lombok Strait and the Sunda Strait. These chokepoints collectively form a chain of maritime gateways that sustain global energy transportation and international trade (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023) [11, 12].

Beyond their role in energy transportation, these passages also function as critical nodes of global commercial shipping. A large share of world maritime trade moves through the Indo-Pacific, making the stability of these routes essential for international supply chains. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, more than 80 percent of global merchandise trade by volume is transported by sea, much of which transits through strategic maritime chokepoints linking major economic regions (UNCTAD, 2023) [13]. Table 3 illustrates the estimated share of global trade that passes through major Indo-Pacific chokepoints and highlights their significance for the global trading system.

Table 1: Estimated Share of Global Trade Passing Through Major Indo-Pacific Chokepoints

Chokepoint	Key Trade Routes Connected	Estimated Share of Global Trade	Major Trading Regions	Strategic Importance
Strait of Malacca	Indian Ocean – South China Sea	25–30% of global maritime trade	East Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe	Shortest maritime route linking Asia and Europe
Strait of Hormuz	Persian Gulf – Indian Ocean	20% of global oil trade	Middle East, Asia, Europe	Primary export route for Persian Gulf hydrocarbons
Bab el-Mandeb	Red Sea – Gulf of Aden	10–12% of seaborne trade	Europe, Middle East, Asia	Gateway linking the Indian Ocean trade with the Suez Canal route
Lombok Strait	Indian Ocean – Pacific Ocean	Smaller but increasing traffic	Asia-Pacific shipping routes	Alternative deep-water route bypassing Malacca for large vessels
Sunda Strait	Indian Ocean – Java Sea	Limited regional trade	Southeast Asia	Secondary alternative shipping route

Source: Compiled by the author using data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (2023) [11, 12], United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2023), and Rodrigue, Comtois & Slack (2020) [8].

As Table 3 indicates, the Strait of Malacca represents one of the most critical maritime corridors in the global trading system, carrying nearly one-quarter of global maritime trade. Due to its geographic position connecting the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea, the strait serves as the primary shipping route between Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Scholars have therefore identified the Strait of Malacca as one of the most strategically sensitive maritime passages in the Indo-Pacific because of its role in sustaining global trade flows (Kaplan, 2010) [4].

Similarly, the Bab el-Mandeb functions as a crucial gateway linking the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal. Maritime trade passing through this chokepoint connects Asian markets with European economies, making it an essential component of the global maritime trading network. Political instability and security challenges in surrounding regions, particularly Yemen and the Horn of Africa, have therefore heightened concerns regarding the vulnerability of this route (Rodrigue *et al*., 2020) [8].

The Strait of Hormuz occupies a particularly important position within the global energy system. As the primary maritime outlet for oil exports from the Persian Gulf, it serves as a critical gateway for energy shipments destined for Asia, Europe, and other global markets. The strategic significance of this passage stems from the large volumes of oil that pass through it, making the strait one of the most important chokepoints in the international energy system (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023) [11, 12].

While the Strait of Malacca remains the primary route connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, alternative passages such as the Lombok Strait and the Sunda Strait have also gained strategic relevance. These routes provide alternative shipping corridors for vessels seeking to bypass congestion or potential security risks in the Strait of Malacca. Although they handle smaller volumes of global trade, their strategic value lies in providing redundancy within the maritime transportation network (Till, 2018) [10].

Taken together, these chokepoints form a geographically concentrated system of maritime gateways that underpin global trade and energy transportation. Their strategic importance lies not only in facilitating the movement of goods and resources but also in shaping the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. As global trade volumes continue to grow, the security and governance of these maritime passages will remain central to maintaining the stability of the international maritime system.

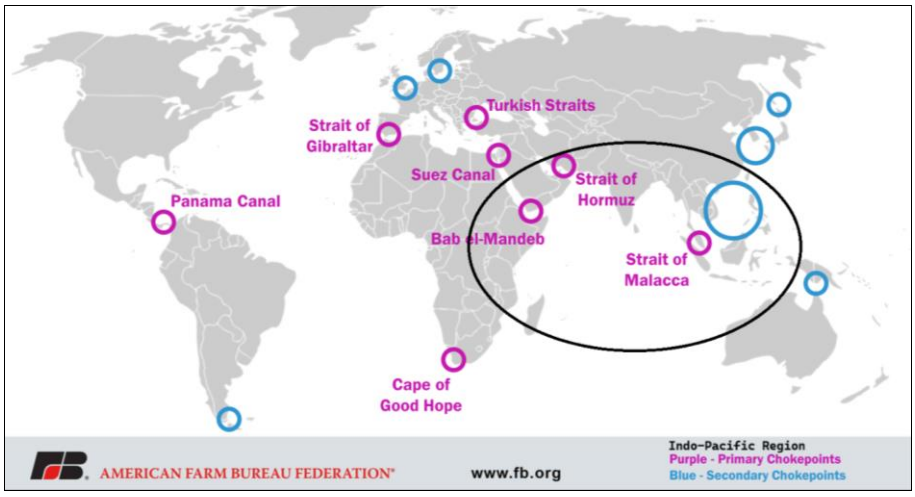


Fig 1: Global Chokepoints for Maritime Trade

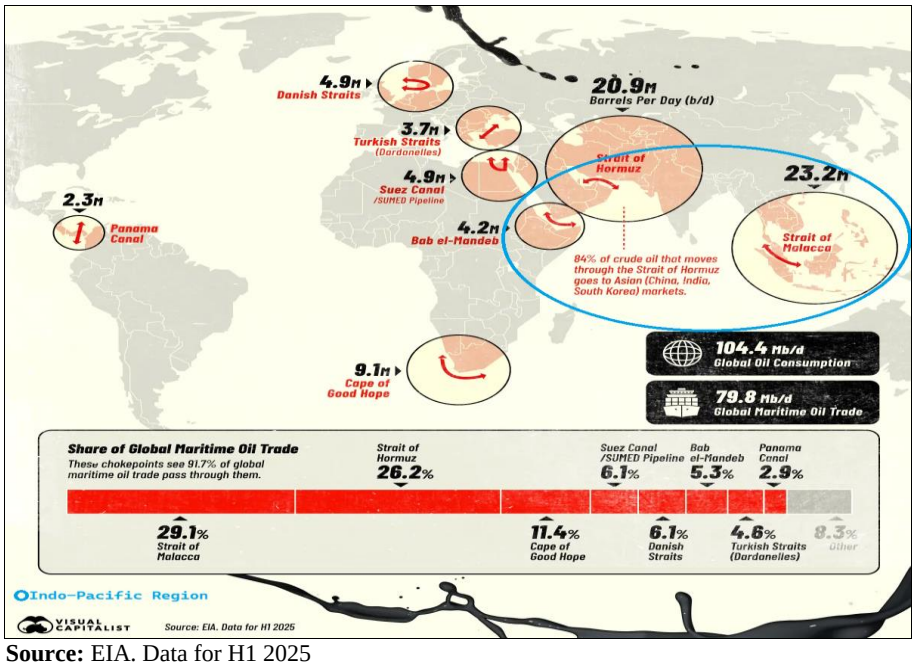
Energy Flows through Indo-Pacific Maritime Routes

The strategic significance of Indo-Pacific maritime chokepoints is closely linked to the movement of global energy resources across the region. A substantial portion of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade travels through a network of maritime routes connecting the energy-producing regions of the Middle East with the energy-consuming economies of Asia. Because these routes pass through a limited number of narrow sea passages, the stability and security of Indo-Pacific chokepoints play a critical role in sustaining global energy supply chains.

Global energy transportation remains heavily dependent on maritime shipping. According to the International Energy Agency, roughly two-thirds of internationally traded crude oil is transported by sea, highlighting the central importance of maritime routes for the functioning of the global energy system (IEA, 2022). Much of this energy originates in the Persian Gulf and must pass through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the most important energy chokepoints in the world. Data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration indicates that approximately 20–21 million barrels of oil per day transit through the Strait of Hormuz, representing nearly one-fifth of global petroleum consumption (EIA, 2023). After leaving the Persian Gulf, these energy shipments cross the Indian Ocean and move toward Asian markets.

As these shipments travel eastward, they encounter another critical maritime passage: the Strait of Malacca. This narrow waterway functions as the principal maritime gateway connecting the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. Approximately 16 million barrels of oil per day pass through the Strait of Malacca, making it one of the busiest maritime corridors in the global energy transportation network (EIA, 2023). In addition to oil shipments, the strait also handles a significant share of global LNG trade destined for East Asian markets. Due to its geographic position and high shipping density, the Strait of Malacca has become a focal point of strategic concern for states that depend heavily on imported energy.

Another important chokepoint along this maritime corridor is the Bab el-Mandeb, which connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean. This passage is strategically important because it serves as a gateway linking the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, approximately 9 million barrels of oil per day transit through Bab el-Mandeb, underscoring its significance for both energy transportation and global trade (EIA, 2023). Disruptions in this chokepoint could therefore affect not only Asian energy supplies but also energy flows between the Middle East and Europe.



Source: EIA. Data for H1 2025

Fig 2: Major Energy Supply Chokepoints

The heavy reliance on these maritime corridors is particularly evident in the case of major Asian economies. Countries such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea are among the largest energy importers in the world and depend heavily on seaborne oil shipments. Japan and South Korea import more than 90 percent of their oil consumption, while China imports approximately 70 percent of its oil demand, much of which travels through Indo-Pacific maritime routes (IEA, 2022). India also relies heavily on external energy supplies, importing roughly 85 percent of its crude oil consumption (Government of India, 2023) [2]. Because these imports originate largely from the Middle East, they must pass through the chain of chokepoints connecting the Persian Gulf with East Asia.

The reliance of Asian economies on these routes highlights the structural vulnerability of global energy transportation networks. Scholars have noted that the concentration of energy flows within a limited number of maritime chokepoints creates significant strategic risks for energy-importing states. Kaplan (2010) [4] argues that the Indian Ocean has become a central arena of geopolitical competition precisely because it hosts many of the maritime routes that sustain global energy flows. Similarly, energy security analysts emphasize that disruptions in chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz or the Strait of Malacca could produce cascading effects on global energy markets and supply chains (Yergin, 2006) [14].

One of the most widely discussed strategic concerns associated with these vulnerabilities is the so-called "Malacca Dilemma." Chinese policymakers have frequently expressed concern that China's heavy reliance on energy shipments passing through the Strait of Malacca exposes the country to potential supply disruptions during periods of geopolitical tension. According to Brewster (2018) [1], this vulnerability has played an important role in shaping China's maritime strategy and its efforts to diversify energy transportation routes across the Indo-Pacific region.

At the same time, the reliance of multiple economies on the same maritime corridors creates a form of strategic interdependence. Because disruptions in chokepoints would affect several major economies simultaneously, states share a common interest in maintaining the stability and openness of maritime trade routes. From the perspective of complex interdependence theory, such shared vulnerabilities can encourage cooperative mechanisms aimed at safeguarding maritime trade and energy transportation networks (Keohane & Nye, 1977) [5].

Taken together, these developments illustrate how energy flows through Indo-Pacific maritime chokepoints play a central role in shaping the geopolitical dynamics of the region. The concentration of global energy transportation within a limited number of strategic passages not only increases the economic importance of these routes but also amplifies their geopolitical significance. As energy demand in Asia continues to grow, the security and governance of these chokepoints will remain a central concern for regional powers and the broader international community.

Table 2: Major Energy Transit Chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific

Chokepoint	Geographic Location	Estimated Oil Transit (million barrels/day)	Strategic Importance	Key Security Risks
Strait of Hormuz	Entrance of the Persian Gulf	20 mb/d	Main export route for Persian Gulf oil to global markets	Regional conflict, military confrontation
Bab el-Mandeb	Between Yemen and Djibouti/Eritrea	9 mb/d	Connects Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal	Regional instability, piracy
Strait of Malacca	Between Malaysia and Indonesia	16 mb/d	Shortest maritime route linking the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean	Congestion, piracy, potential blockade
Lombok Strait	Indonesia (between Bali and Lombok)	Smaller but growing traffic	Alternative route for large tankers bypassing Malacca	Maritime security vulnerabilities
Sunda Strait	Indonesia	Limited energy transit	Secondary alternative maritime route	Navigational hazards, congestion

Source: Adapted from U.S. Energy Information Administration (2023) [11, 12] and Rodrigue, Comtois & Slack (2020) [8]

Chokepoint Politics and Great Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific

The growing dependence on maritime energy transportation has transformed Indo-Pacific chokepoints into critical sites of geopolitical competition. These narrow maritime passages serve not only as essential arteries for global energy trade but also as strategic spaces where major powers seek to secure their economic and security interests. As a result, the governance and security of maritime chokepoints have become increasingly intertwined with the broader dynamics of great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Scholars of maritime geopolitics have long emphasized the strategic importance of sea lanes and chokepoints in shaping global power relations. For instance, Robert Kaplan argues that the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific region have historically served as the central arena of geopolitical competition because control over maritime trade routes enables states to project power and influence across vast regions (Kaplan, 2010) [4]. Similarly, Geoffrey Till highlights that the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) remains a fundamental concern for maritime powers whose economic prosperity depends on uninterrupted access to global trade and energy transportation networks (Till, 2018) [10]. These perspectives underscore the enduring strategic relevance of chokepoints in contemporary geopolitics.

The significance of these maritime passages is particularly evident in the context of the evolving rivalry between the United States and China. As China's economic growth has accelerated over the past several decades, its demand for imported energy has increased substantially. A large proportion of China's oil imports originates in the Persian Gulf and travels through the Strait of Hormuz before crossing the Indian Ocean and passing through the Strait of Malacca. This maritime route represents the primary energy corridor linking the Middle East with East Asia.

The heavy reliance on this route has generated strategic concerns in Beijing regarding the vulnerability of its maritime energy supply chains. This concern has often been described as the "Malacca Dilemma," a concept that reflects China's fear that potential disruptions in the Strait of Malacca could threaten its energy security and economic stability. According to David Brewster (2018) [1], the Malacca Dilemma has become a central element of China's maritime strategy because it highlights the structural vulnerability of energy-importing states that depend heavily on maritime chokepoints.

In response to these vulnerabilities, China has sought to diversify its energy transportation routes and strengthen its maritime presence across the Indo-Pacific. One major initiative in this regard has been the development of infrastructure and connectivity projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. As Nadège Rolland (2017) [9] notes, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a broader effort by China to expand trade networks, develop strategic infrastructure, and reduce its dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints. By investing in ports, pipelines, and transport corridors across Asia and the Indian Ocean region, China aims to enhance the resilience of its energy supply chains.

At the same time, the United States has continued to maintain a significant naval presence in the Indo-Pacific in order to safeguard freedom of navigation and ensure the stability of international maritime trade routes. The United States Navy has historically played a central role in maintaining an open maritime order that facilitates global

commerce and protects critical sea lanes. As Till (2018) [10] observes, maritime security operations conducted by the United States and its partners contribute to ensuring the continued openness of strategic chokepoints that support the global trading system.

Within this evolving strategic landscape, India has also emerged as an increasingly influential maritime actor. India's geographic location in the Indian Ocean places it near several important sea lanes that connect the Middle East with East Asia. Consequently, the security of these maritime routes is closely linked to India's own energy security and economic interests. Scholars such as C. Raja Mohan argue that India's expanding naval capabilities and maritime partnerships reflect its broader ambition to play a more active role in shaping the strategic balance of power in the Indo-Pacific (Mohan, 2012) [7]. Through initiatives such as maritime security cooperation and naval exercises with regional partners, India seeks to strengthen the security of sea lanes and promote stability in the region.

1. The Chokepoint Security Dilemma

The interaction of these strategic interests has produced what can be described as a "chokepoint security dilemma." In this context, states attempt to enhance their security by increasing their naval presence and strategic influence near critical maritime passages. However, such actions are often perceived by other states as attempts to gain strategic control over vital trade routes, thereby intensifying geopolitical competition.

Security scholars frequently note that maritime chokepoints tend to become focal points of strategic rivalry because of their dual economic and military significance. Control or influence over these passages can provide states with considerable strategic leverage in times of crisis. Consequently, efforts by one state to secure these routes may prompt other states to increase their own military presence, leading to a cycle of strategic competition.

This dynamic is particularly visible around major Indo-Pacific chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, and alternative routes like the Lombok Strait. As Brewster (2018) [1] observes, the concentration of strategic and economic interests in these narrow maritime spaces often generates competition among states seeking to ensure uninterrupted access to global trade routes.

At the same time, however, the shared dependence of states on these maritime routes also creates incentives for cooperation. Since disruptions in chokepoints could affect multiple economies simultaneously, states often support initiatives aimed at strengthening maritime security and ensuring the continued openness of sea lanes. In this sense, the politics of Indo-Pacific chokepoints reflects a complex interaction between competition and cooperation, where strategic rivalry coexists with shared interests in maintaining the stability of global maritime trade.

Implications for Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific

The strategic importance of Indo-Pacific maritime chokepoints becomes particularly evident when examined in relation to the energy security needs of major Asian economies. As illustrated in Table 2, countries such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea rely heavily on imported hydrocarbons to sustain their economic growth and industrial production. A significant share of these imports originates in the Middle East and must transit through a chain of maritime chokepoints linking the Persian Gulf to East Asia. Energy shipments leaving the Persian Gulf pass through the Strait of Hormuz, traverse the Indian Ocean, and reach Asian markets through passages such as the Strait of Malacca or alternative routes including the Lombok Strait and the Sunda Strait. The concentration of energy transportation within these narrow maritime passages creates structural vulnerabilities that significantly shape the security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023) [11, 12].

Table 3: Comparative Dependence of Major Economies on Maritime Energy Routes

Country	Oil Import Dependence	Share of Imports from Middle East	Key Maritime Routes	Strategic Implication
China	72%	45–50%	Strait of Hormuz → Strait of Malacca	"Malacca Dilemma"; strong vulnerability to chokepoint disruption
India	85%	60%	Strait of Hormuz → Indian Ocean	High dependence on Persian Gulf oil imports
Japan	94%	90%	Strait of Hormuz → Strait of Malacca	Extreme vulnerability to maritime disruption
South Korea	93%	70%	Strait of Hormuz → Strait of Malacca	Heavy reliance on maritime energy trade
United States	20% net imports (declining)	Limited	Global maritime routes	Strategic interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and securing global energy flows

Source: Adapted from the International Energy Agency, U.S. Energy Information Administration, and national energy statistics (2022–2023) [3, 11, 12].

One of the most immediate implications of this dependence is the heightened vulnerability of Asian economies to disruptions in maritime energy supply chains. Japan and South Korea import more than 90 percent of their oil consumption, while China and India rely on imported hydrocarbons for a substantial portion of their energy demand (International Energy Agency, 2022) [3]. Because these imports must travel through a limited number of maritime chokepoints, any disruption along these routes—whether caused by geopolitical tensions, military confrontation, piracy, or political instability—could significantly affect energy supplies and economic stability across the region. Energy security scholars have long emphasized that the reliability of energy transportation networks plays a central role in maintaining economic stability in energy-importing states (Yergin, 2006) [14].

From a strategic perspective, the vulnerability of maritime energy routes encourages states to prioritize the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Maritime strategists argue that the protection of SLOCs remains a fundamental objective of naval doctrine because national economic prosperity depends heavily on secure maritime trade routes (Till, 2018) [10]. In the Indo-Pacific context, the growing dependence of Asian economies on seaborne energy imports

has encouraged states to expand naval capabilities, strengthen maritime surveillance systems, and enhance their ability to protect critical sea lanes. These developments reflect the increasing convergence between energy security concerns and maritime strategic planning.

The concentration of energy flows through strategic chokepoints also contributes to the intensification of geopolitical competition among major powers. The Indian Ocean and surrounding maritime corridors have become central arenas of strategic rivalry because of their role in facilitating global trade and energy transportation. Kaplan (2010) [4] argues that the Indian Ocean is emerging as one of the most important geopolitical theaters of the twenty-first century due to its position at the intersection of global energy routes and maritime trade networks. Consequently, the security of Indo-Pacific chokepoints has become closely linked to broader patterns of geopolitical competition.

This dynamic is particularly visible in the evolving strategic interactions among the United States, China, and India. China's growing dependence on imported hydrocarbons transported through maritime routes has heightened its concern regarding the vulnerability of these sea lanes, often described as the "Malacca Dilemma" (Brewster, 2018) [1]. India, given its geographic location in the Indian Ocean and its growing energy demand, has also expanded its maritime capabilities to safeguard sea lanes connecting the Middle East with Asia. Meanwhile, the United States maintains a significant naval presence in the region in order to protect freedom of navigation and preserve the stability of global maritime trade routes.

The comparative data presented in Table 2 also highlights an important distinction between energy-dependent economies and maritime security providers. While China, India, Japan, and South Korea are heavily dependent on imported hydrocarbons transported through Indo-Pacific sea lanes, the United States has become less dependent on external energy supplies due to increased domestic production and diversification of energy sources (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023) [11, 12]. Nevertheless, the United States continues to maintain a strong strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific because of its broader interest in safeguarding the global maritime order and ensuring the uninterrupted flow of international trade.

Another important implication of chokepoint politics is the emergence of maritime security cooperation among regional actors. Despite growing geopolitical competition, many states recognize that disruptions in major maritime chokepoints could have widespread economic consequences. From the perspective of complex interdependence, shared vulnerabilities within the international system can generate incentives for cooperation even among rival states (Keohane & Nye, 1977) [5]. In the Indo-Pacific context, this has encouraged various forms of maritime security collaboration, including joint naval exercises, coordinated patrols, and mechanisms for information sharing aimed at combating maritime threats.

Finally, the concentration of global energy transportation within a small number of maritime passages highlights the systemic risks associated with chokepoint disruptions. Because large volumes of global oil and liquefied natural gas shipments pass through narrow maritime corridors, disruptions in these passages could produce cascading effects across global energy markets. Yergin (2006) [14] emphasizes that maintaining the reliability of energy transportation routes is essential for ensuring stability in global energy markets. Consequently, the stability of Indo-Pacific chokepoints is not only a regional security concern but also a matter of global economic importance.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that maritime chokepoints function as critical nodes where energy security, maritime strategy, and geopolitical competition intersect. The heavy dependence of Asian economies on maritime energy imports, combined with the strategic involvement of major powers in protecting sea lanes, ensures that the governance and security of Indo-Pacific chokepoints will remain central to the evolving regional security architecture. As global energy demand continues to grow and maritime trade expands, the stability of these chokepoints will play a decisive role in shaping the future strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

This study has examined the strategic significance of maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific and their implications for energy security and regional security dynamics. By focusing on key passages such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, the Lombok Strait, and the Sunda Strait, the paper has demonstrated that these narrow maritime passages represent critical nodes within the global energy transportation network. The concentration of global oil and liquefied natural gas flows through these routes highlights the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific maritime domain for the functioning of the international energy system.

The analysis shows that the growing dependence of Asian economies on imported hydrocarbons has significantly increased the geopolitical relevance of maritime energy routes. Countries such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea rely heavily on maritime transportation to secure energy supplies from the Middle East. As a result, the uninterrupted functioning of Indo-Pacific chokepoints has become a vital component of their national energy security strategies. The vulnerability of these routes to geopolitical tensions, maritime insecurity, and potential disruptions has therefore elevated the strategic importance of protecting sea lines of communication in the region.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that the geopolitics of maritime chokepoints is closely connected to broader patterns of great power competition in the Indo-Pacific. The increasing maritime engagement of the United States, China, and India reflects the recognition that control, access, or influence over critical sea lanes can shape regional strategic outcomes. While energy-importing states seek to secure their maritime supply chains, maritime powers also view these routes as essential for maintaining the stability of global trade and the broader maritime order.

At the theoretical level, this study contributes to the understanding of Indo-Pacific geopolitics by integrating insights from sea power theory, complex interdependence, and energy security perspectives. Sea power theory highlights the strategic significance of maritime routes and the role of naval capabilities in protecting them. The concept of complex interdependence explains how shared dependence on maritime trade routes creates incentives for cooperation even among rival states. Meanwhile, the energy security perspective illustrates how vulnerabilities in energy transportation networks influence national security strategies and geopolitical behavior.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that Indo-Pacific chokepoints function as critical intersections where geography, energy security, and geopolitical competition converge. The politics surrounding these maritime passages reflects a complex interaction between strategic rivalry and economic interdependence. While major powers compete to secure influence over key maritime routes, they also share a common interest in maintaining the stability of global energy transportation networks.

Looking ahead, the strategic importance of Indo-Pacific chokepoints is likely to grow as global energy demand continues to increase and maritime trade expands. Ensuring the stability and security of these routes will therefore remain a central challenge for regional and global actors. Strengthening maritime governance, enhancing cooperative security mechanisms, and promoting confidence-building measures among regional powers will be essential for maintaining the stability of maritime trade routes and preventing disruptions to global energy supply chains.

In this context, the governance of Indo-Pacific chokepoints will play a decisive role in shaping the future regional security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. As critical gateways of global energy transportation, these maritime passages will continue to influence the strategic calculations of both regional powers and external actors, making them a central feature of the evolving geopolitical landscape of the twenty-first century.

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