

SWP Comment

NO. 41 OCTOBER 2026

Sea Lanes at Risk, Maritime Order under Threat

Between Collective Defence and Global Power Projection: How Germany Can Retain Its Capacity to Act

Julian Pawlak

In the Strait of Hormuz since the beginning of the war waged by the United States and Israel against Iran, it has become evident how vulnerable sea lanes are and how fragile the global political and economic order is. Today, actors willing and able to use instruments of power can threaten key maritime chokepoints and thereby exert political pressure. Germany, acting in concert with its European partners, should adapt to this reality of power politics. Among other things, it should establish a strategic framework for maritime security policy and cooperate closely with old and new partner states to defend the international order.

The restrictions currently affecting shipping in the Strait of Hormuz are symptomatic of the increasing erosion of freedom of navigation, an essential element of international maritime law. Sea lanes are of the utmost importance for the economy and trade, energy security, food supply, and security and defence policy. Germany and Europe have long relied on the United States and its navy as the guarantor of these pillars. Today, the question arises of whether Washington is still willing and able to perform this role – both in the long term and worldwide. The de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz is just the latest in a growing number of restrictions on sea lanes and unlawful territorial claims at sea.

For Berlin, it has become evident how limited its own options are in such a case.

The European states lack the financial and material resources to increase their deterrence and defence capabilities vis-à-vis Russia while at the same time responding globally to acute and strategic threats to maritime security. Germany should address the issue of how it can position itself strategically so that, besides providing national and contributing to collective defence, it remains able to act in other regions of the world and, together with international partners, counter threats to sea lanes – from Hormuz to the Port of Hamburg.



The vulnerability of sea lanes and maritime chokepoints

Around 80 to 90 per cent of world trade is carried by sea. Maritime chokepoints can become bottlenecks for that trade. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), shipping at such chokepoints is generally subject to the right of transit passage (Article 37) or innocent passage (Article 17). Which right applies depends on whether the vessel is travelling on the high seas or in a maritime exclusive economic zone. It is in this way that peaceful international trade is made possible.

Similarly, almost all global data traffic — more than 95 per cent — runs through submarine cables on the seabed, which are often laid along shipping routes. Thus, seas and sea lanes constitute a “super highway” of the globalised political and economic order.

Time and again, however, sea lanes and chokepoints come under threat. They harbour within them a form of asymmetric dependence: many countries and their economies are highly dependent on certain straits and maritime trade routes, while only a handful of littoral countries are able to exercise *de facto* control over them. This can lead to dependencies being deliberately used as an instrument of power — a strategy referred to as “weaponized interdependence”.

This combination of dependence and restriction of sea lanes is evident in the acute case of the Strait of Hormuz. Between February and June 2026, as a consequence of the hostilities around Iran and the Arabian Peninsula, crude oil prices worldwide rose by around 60 per cent, while European natural gas prices rose by almost 50 per cent over the same period. But alongside the higher costs and the accompanying economic pressure, there are beneficiaries. Russia, which is subject to European and other sanctions, has exploited and continues to exploit the current market situation. During the same period, it was able to increase its oil revenues significantly — in April 2026, those revenues doubled —

contrary to the declared intent of Europe and the United States to curb Russian oil revenues and thereby deprive Moscow of one of its main sources of war financing.

A growing number of threats

The Western economic order, in particular, is based on the assumption that, at most, chokepoints will be disrupted sequentially and that, at all times, rerouting options will be available as temporary alternatives. Moreover, Europe has relied on the United States, with its global naval presence, to ensure open sea lanes and undisrupted supply chains. The restrictions on shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, however, are part of an ever longer chain of disruptions to critical sea lanes.

As early as the beginning of the 2000s, piracy and armed robbery off the coast of Somalia was causing such serious disruptions to global shipping that many members of the international community felt compelled to intervene militarily. On the basis of UN Security Council resolutions, the EU-led Operation Atalanta and the multinational Combined Task Force 151 were established in 2008 and 2009, respectively. That there is a shared conviction worldwide about the need for maritime security is reflected in the rotation of command over the latter: besides the United States and the United Kingdom, the task force has been led by Kuwait, Pakistan and Thailand, among others.

While it was possible to contain piracy for a time, the threat appears to have returned to the Gulf of Aden. Not least because of the power vacuum created by the absence of an actor enforcing the law at sea, attempted acts of piracy are once again being recorded in growing numbers.

In 2021, the grounding of the container ship *Ever Given* paralysed the Suez Canal for six days; and the subsequent delays in deliveries of imported goods had a direct impact on Germany and the rest of Europe. The incident showed what consequences even a single event at a maritime chokepoint can entail.

In recent years, the Houthis have been threatening shipping in the Red Sea and at the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint. Between October 2023 and 2025 alone, they attacked 178 vessels with missiles and drones. As part of the EUNAVFOR Aspides mission, European naval forces, including the German Navy, intervened to protect the transit of merchant vessels, with the US Navy being significantly involved. But as the Houthis are supported by the Iranian regime, the risk of renewed disruptions remains and has only increased with the announcement of a naval blockade and further territorial gains in September 2026.

Challenges posed by state actors

The Strait of Malacca, which lies between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, is essential for daily trade between Asia and Europe. Here, too, isolated cases of piracy are being recorded. However, there has been another, more important signal: referring to events in the Strait of Hormuz, Indonesian Finance Minister Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa recently asked whether the littoral states of the Strait of Malacca should levy a transit fee for the water route. Such ideas are untenable under international law, but they are emblematic of the growing challenge to international norms, including by state actors. If such conduct is allowed, it is tempting to exploit dependencies and profit from geographical location.

Russia, too, is making territorial claims that go beyond individual sea lanes. It is thereby pursuing a strategy of *lawfare*, that is, the deliberate misuse of international law as an instrument for its own advantage. For example, Moscow is seeking to have the Arctic Northeast Passage legally declared part of its own territorial waters. By persistently laying claim to and declaring sovereign waters, it aims to bring large parts of the Arctic sea regions under its control and its own legal regime. In other words, it is attempting to set the course today for unlawful control of sea lanes in future. And it has the support of China, which, in return,

is to be granted its own exclusive rights in the Arctic.

At the same time, China is attempting to enforce national territorial claims in the Taiwan Strait and far into the South China Sea in defiance of international law and regional littoral states, while ignoring international arbitration rulings. To this end, it is not only constructing artificial islands but also steadily increasing the presence of its naval and air forces, its coastguard and its maritime militia, a state-controlled fleet of civilian fishing vessels. Concerns about growing Chinese influence over sea lanes have been voiced by the United States, among others: Washington warns that the Panama Canal (whose transit capacity is, in any case, shrinking owing to prolonged periods of drought) is becoming ever more subject to Chinese influence.

Similarly, maritime infrastructure on the seabed is increasingly at risk. Submarine cables are more frequently exposed not merely to accidents but to deliberate damage that has been linked to Russia and China. This applies to European waters such as the Baltic Sea as well as to the Asia-Pacific region, particularly around Taiwan. Threats by the Houthis and Iran to take action against the submarine cables in their respective straits only reinforce the image of infrastructure lying largely unprotected on the seabed.

A problem of growing proportions

Restrictions on shipping are nothing new. The situation becomes problematic if there are several incidents, especially simultaneous ones. That is when the structural preconditions of open economies — such as general security of supply — come under pressure.

The growing disruption of and threat to free navigation has two mutually reinforcing causes. First, revisionist states are increasingly challenging norms of the law of the sea and attempting to change the interpretation of those norms to their own

advantage. Second, as a result of the global proliferation and increasing availability of modern weapons technologies, non-state actors and militarily less capable states have acquired disruptive capabilities that were previously the preserve of militarily capable states. The cases of Iran at the Strait of Hormuz and of the Iranian-backed Houthis at Bab el-Mandeb testify to the asymmetry of costs and threats in favour of the aggressor: global trade routes can be disrupted with comparatively modest means, while even the world's most powerful navies seem to be able to counter such destructive interference only at great cost.

The United States, which has long performed the role of protector of the world's sea lanes, is now prioritising its interventions on the basis of political decisions and practical constraints. Amid all the difficulties it is encountering in its attempts to force an "opening" of the Strait of Hormuz during the war against Iran, its conventional military ability to prevail — and thus, ultimately, the guarantee of freedom of navigation — is being called into question.

The consequences go well beyond the affected seas and therefore are of direct relevance to Germany. Far more serious than the short-term rerouting of shipping is the structural shift in the balance of power that caused it in the first place. The rules-based maritime order — codified for decades in multilateral treaties and legal norms and frequently guaranteed by the military presence and power projection of the United States — is increasingly being challenged by state and non-state actors alike. It will not collapse as a result of the blockade of a single sea lane, but one precedent follows another, eventually creating *faits accomplis*. While Iran is prevailing in the Strait of Hormuz today, the Houthis may prevail at Bab el-Mandeb tomorrow, as they are already positioning themselves there. In the absence of a power capable of enforcing order, global maritime interdependencies are becoming a lever through which actors are able to exert influence over sea lanes.

Capacity to act and power politics

Conflicts and crises such as those at the Strait of Hormuz do not originate in Germany and Europe; their impact, however, is clearly felt there. Power politics — the threat and use of military means to achieve own interests — has returned as an element of global great-power competition. This observation also applies to the maritime domain. Germany should accept that a power-political component is the basis of the capacity to act.

However, there is no implication here of the need either for a permanent military presence or unilateral action at maritime chokepoints. Rather, what is needed is strategic planning and the readiness to maintain the relevant capabilities and the ability to employ them, together with partner states, in conformity with international law so that sea lanes are protected and the global order upheld. All this can be done, for example, within the framework of NATO, the EU and other partners.

In the defence of the principles of international law, only those who are able to act when necessary will be taken seriously by those actors who understand only the language of power. By combining the strategic planning of maritime security policy with the corresponding operational readiness, Germany can, alongside its European and non-European partners, help shape an international order so that stability and predictability can be maintained.

The need to act – from Hormuz to the Port of Hamburg

The capacity to act when sea lanes and chokepoints are threatened or blocked requires a comprehensive strategic effort that does justice to the various dimensions of maritime security policy. This means that the security policy options themselves must be diverse. Instead of reacting to specific disruptions and crises as and when they occur, Germany should take a forward-looking approach to building and strength-

ening its capacity to respond by pursuing three individual courses of action.

The first is developing a range of military capabilities that allow the armed forces to operate at long range, sustainably and in line with the requirements of national and collective defence, including beyond operational areas at home. The second is ensuring political preparedness for power projection, that is, the resolve to use those capabilities as instruments of power. And the third course of action is stepping up cooperation with like-minded states – those that share fundamental strategic interests – wherever freedom of navigation is being restricted and international law violated.

Only if these three requirements are met can operational actors such as the Bundeswehr meet both the need for national and collective defence and the demands of power projection and crisis management within multilateral communities of interest.

What is required for the capacity to act

In the case of Germany, the capacity to secure sea lanes requires, above all, a Bundeswehr that is as well equipped as possible. Its primary mission – operational readiness within the NATO framework along Europe's northern and eastern flanks – is undisputed. Going forward, the conditions should be created so that, when necessary, sufficient assets for deployment beyond home waters can be provided. For the German Navy to live up to its own claim of being “regionally rooted, globally committed”, the synergetic use of maritime capabilities, including for the purpose of international crisis management, should at the very least be considered. This is the necessary complement to a range of instruments of power that are indispensable for countering threats from adversaries such as Russia. At the same time, strategic planning can prevent another abrupt U-turn in German security policy.

Both approaches are relevant. That is because symmetric adversaries such as

Russia can pose asymmetric threats at regional and global chokepoints – from Hormuz to the Port of Hamburg – namely, at those points where Germany and Europe are particularly vulnerable.

There is no contradiction between today's protection of sea lanes and the (correct) decision to refocus on collective defence. Such protection is an essential part of the necessary strategic planning. That much is evident not least from Germany's immediate geographical situation. The Kiel Canal, which runs from the North Sea into the Baltic Sea and is the world's busiest artificial waterway, provides a very good example of how the functions of important trade routes overlap with the requirements of national and collective defence. Furthermore, the new Overall Concept for Military Defence (*Gesamtkonzeption militärische Verteidigung*) names the protection of international sea lanes and communication links as one of four military-strategic priorities.

The refocusing on national and collective defence should remain the central strategic guideline of German security and defence policy. However, that prioritisation should not lead to the total neglect of out-of-area capabilities. The testing of modular weapon systems for the F125 “stabilisation frigate” has demonstrated how Germany can maintain those capabilities in parallel if it wants to remain capable of responding to future threats to global maritime trade routes.

European potential for optimisation

At present, there is a problem of overstretch when it comes to adopting such a broad strategic posture. German and European naval forces are preoccupied with building a credible deterrence and defence capability vis-à-vis Russia. Thus, the capabilities necessary to secure global sea lanes are available, at best, within narrow timeframes and under heavy prioritisation pressure. To address this issue, a strategic orientation should be pursued that combines the targeted development of military capabilities, forms of cooperation with partners and an

arrangement whereby responses to international demands are undertaken to a greater extent within the European framework.

Similarly, in view of limited financial and personnel resources, that framework could play a much more prominent role when capabilities and operations are being planned and conducted. This applies both to maritime platforms and to the procurement of weapon systems. The aim should be to build cost-efficient capabilities that take into account the fact that precision weapons are increasingly becoming available in large numbers (precise mass).

Equally important is the joint prioritisation and pooling of maritime activities. For example, it should be examined whether Germany's lead responsibility for the NATO support mission in the Aegean, which has been in place since 2016, needs to be exercised permanently by a German unit or whether alternative solutions would allow for more efficient use of the forces available.

Meanwhile, availability and effectiveness could be increased through a more closely coordinated European foreign and security policy. This applies, for example, to the Indo-Pacific region, where European states maintain a considerable presence but have so far pursued only limited coordination of their activities on land and at sea. The already initiated and coordinated deployment of carrier strike groups could serve as an anchor for the establishment of a joint European task force for the Indo-Pacific; and rotating the lead nation each year could increase the diplomatic weight of such a presence and at the same time enable more intensive cooperation with old and new partners. Furthermore, the existing fragmentation of national deployments could be at least partly overcome.

Once these consolidation measures have been implemented, more demanding activities should be considered and existing strategic paradigms questioned. Such activities could include freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), which have so far been conducted mainly by the United States to uphold freedom of navigation around

the globe (even though the US, like Iran, has not ratified UNCLOS). Given Washington's changed political and military priorities and the growing challenge to international legal norms by state and non-state actors, it is valid to ask whether Germany and Europe can continue to afford to forgo FONOPs.

To date, European naval deployments have tended not to be carried out under an explicit FONOP declaration and thus not avowedly in the service of an unambiguous rejection of unlawful maritime territorial claims. Europe's own normative interest in a globally enforceable order of the law of the sea, however, requires the applicable law to be regularly affirmed. And such affirmation is even more necessary given the potential for confrontational protests by those actors already attempting to change the law of the sea in their favour.

Cooperation with like-minded states

A joint European presence outside Europe paves the way for opportunities to cooperate with partners facing comparable security challenges. Such like-minded states are indispensable for securing open global sea lanes. When Germany and its European partners maintain a joint, regular and visible presence around the world, they reinforce their claim to be upholding the applicable norms beyond their own territorial waters. The maritime domain, in particular, is a good starting point, since it is here that the preservation and enforcement of international law can be combined with security cooperation. And it is especially in those regions mentioned above, where threats are acute, that joint activities can help deepen cooperation with partners and increase the resilience of maritime security.

Untapped potential in the Gulf

The war around the Strait of Hormuz opens up the possibility of strengthening cooperation with partners in the region. So far, there has been only limited such cooperation. An institutional framework for remedying that situation is provided by NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), which, launched in 2004, involves Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The potential of this initiative has not yet been exploited to the full.

Given the disastrous consequences that the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has for these states, there is currently a window of opportunity for Germany and NATO to use existing structures and channels of communication to develop long-term and sustainable security partnerships in the region. For example, there are shortcomings among the littoral states in the protection of critical maritime infrastructure, not least as regards the undersea dimension. And as far as the Strait of Hormuz itself is concerned, mine-clearance capability needs to be expanded considerably.

After coordinating within NATO, Germany could build on its capabilities in this specialist field by suggesting to the ICI partners that it take part in the envisaged mine-clearance activities in the Strait of Hormuz. Such confidence-building cooperation could mark the start of a long-term deepening of the partnerships. Joint formats could be established for exchanges and for expanding existing capabilities and developing new ones – both in mine hunting and in the protection of critical maritime infrastructure. There are also overlapping interests with regard to securing submarine cables. Beyond that, opportunities could arise for joint investment and broader-based procurement projects – for example, to build joint repair capacities.

Counter-lawfare in the Indo-Pacific

In the Indo-Pacific, unlawful territorial claims and challenges to transit passage

should be contested through a jointly developed counter-lawfare strategy. This strategy could be regional in scope at first and gradually expanded to the global level.

In concrete terms, this means the consolidation of multilaterally agreed legal positions and informing the public of UNCLOS-based common positions against violations of the law of the sea. In this way, the power to define central norms of the law of the sea would not be left to actors seeking to change the legal order but would be defended in a multilateral framework. Besides traditional partners, the countries particularly suited to be involved are those of Southeast Asia, which are already confronted with such challenges on the front line.

One possible approach to follow is that of the Philippines' naming-and-shaming campaign. By publicising aggressive actions by the Chinese coastguard and the maritime militia in the South China Sea, Manila has come up with an instrument that makes violations of the law of the sea visible and draws international attention to those activities. It is effective, however, only if the accusing state is able to defend its position by appropriate means in an emergency and has credible partners at its side. For German policy, this means participating more visibly in the initiatives of Indo-Pacific partners – for example, by making public statements in response to rigorously documented incidents of attempted breaches of the law at sea. If that were to happen, it is more likely that those states would support European concerns in return.

Pressure to act here and now

The more firmly revisionist interpretive practices become habitual, the more difficult it will be to counter them effectively at a later stage. Containing such practices requires the interplay between a clear normative position, on the one hand, and robust operational capabilities and reliable international cooperation, on the other. The realpolitik recognition of power-political realities must be combined with greater



This work is licensed
under CC BY 4.0

This Comment reflects
the author's views.

The online version of
this publication contains
functioning links to other
SWP texts and other relevant
sources.

SWP Comments are subject
to internal peer review, fact-
checking and copy-editing.
For further information on
our quality control pro-
cedures, please visit the SWP
website: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/about-swp/quality-management-for-swp-publications/>

SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN (Print) 1861-1761
ISSN (Online) 2747-5107
DOI: 10.18449/2026C41

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 45/2026)

European consolidation so that the strategic capacity to act is acquired.

If Germany wants to continue to lay claim to defending international law, freedom of navigation and the universal validity of these norms even under the conditions of a return to power politics, it must back that claim by providing material substance. This includes credible military capabilities, a resilient industrial base, functioning logistics and the societal and political willingness to use those means when required. Revisionist actors are reckoning with the absence of a national and international consensus and count on it allowing them to assert their interests in the long term.

What is required, therefore, is not the development of individual capabilities but a strategic framing of maritime security policy. Such a maritime security strategy should prioritise the sea areas, sea lanes and trade routes that are of vital interest to Germany and Europe. It should stipulate how and in which formats those passages can be protected and how cooperation with existing and new partners to uphold the international law of the sea is to be organised.

Without such a strategic framework, individual measures risk remaining reactive and isolated. If Germany and its international partners do not jointly stand up for the international order, no one is going to do that for them in the foreseeable future.

Dr Julian Pawlak is an Associate in SWP's International Security Research Division. This Comment was produced within the framework of the Strategic Threat Analysis and Nuclear (Dis-)Order (STAND) project.