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Law

US blockade of Iranian ports raises 'double risk' for shipping

Targeted move avoids Hormuz closure but still raises concerns over maritime norms



The Commander's Handbook on the Law of Naval Operations, used by the US Navy, US Marine Corps and US Coast Guard, identifies the Strait of Hormuz as an international strait where transit passage applies, while the Newport Manual on the Law of Naval Warfare states that belligerent vessels have a right of 'non-suspendable transit passage' through such straits.

Photo: Huaqing Ma

Huaqing Ma

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The targeted US blockade of vessels entering or leaving Iranian ports raises fresh questions over risks for shipping.

The move has sparked concern among legal experts and shipping markets over how it fits with established maritime norms on transit passage and neutral shipping.



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US naval blockade starts, threatening Iran's \$4bn-per-month oil lifeline

Legal frameworks governing international straits place strong limits on restricting transit passage, with naval guidance stating that belligerent vessels retain “non-suspendable transit passage” through such straits.

They also emphasise that neutral shipping should not be impeded, highlighting tensions with any enforcement that affects wider traffic.

Legal limits meet operational reality

A strait-wide blockade would likely conflict with transit passage rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos), while “either type of blockade” runs counter to key provisions, according to Thomas Lim, associate research fellow at Singapore’s S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

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Lim added that a blockade is, in itself, “difficult to justify” under international maritime law, even if such measures often arise in extreme conflict scenarios where states prioritise national survival over legal constraints.

Andrew Rigden Green, partner at maritime-focused law firm Watson Farley & Williams, said the current approach avoids directly impinging on Gulf states’ rights under Unclos. But it still raises legal tensions over how far enforcement can go.

“Under [Unclos], it is not permitted to blockade international waterways,” Green told TradeWinds.

He noted that the San Remo Manual — a widely recognised set of guidelines on how international law applies to naval warfare at sea — allows blockades against belligerent states, with vessels breaching them subject to capture or detention.

He added that neutral merchant vessels should not be attacked and that humanitarian access must be maintained under established naval warfare principles.

The shift towards targeting vessels entering or leaving Iranian ports reflects a narrower operational focus to Trump's earlier threats, bringing the US approach closer to traditional blockade doctrine centred on enemy coastal areas rather than global chokepoints.

In practice, however, enforcement is expected to be far more targeted.

United Against Nuclear Iran senior adviser Charlie Brown said that enforcement is likely to prioritise vessels supporting Iran's oil exports and military supply chains.

"The blockade will focus on stopping ships that directly support Iran's war-sustaining efforts," he said, adding that past US actions against Venezuelan oil shipments offer a useful "starting point" for how such enforcement could unfold.

Brown added that interdictions could take place near the Strait of Hormuz or further afield, including in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, where US forces have greater freedom of manoeuvre.

Brown described the move as turning what he called a "de facto" disruption of navigation by Iran into a declared blockade targeting the country's "illicit" export lifelines.



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US narrows Hormuz stance as Centcom outlines Iran port blockade

Commercial fallout comes into view

Alvin Looi, head of Asia Pacific freight, demurrage and defence claims at insurer NorthStandard, said the situation remains "fluid", with uncertainty over whether vessels entering or leaving Iranian ports would be turned away, detained or face other penalties.

He said the measures are likely to hit Iranian oil exports and some bulk imports, although such trades already require extensive sanctions compliance checks and

may see limited change in that regard.

Looi warned the blockade could cause delays to cargo movements and, if performance becomes impossible, may amount to a “frustrating event” under English law.

Shipowners are likely to review charterparty and bill of lading clauses on calling at Iranian ports, and may seek alternative loading or discharge options, he added.

But Looi said there is unlikely to be increased reliance on letters of indemnity at this stage.

For shipowners, the key issue is not legal theory but how enforcement plays out in practice.

The Strait of Hormuz remains one of the world’s most critical maritime chokepoints, carrying about one-fifth of global oil shipments and a substantial share of LNG flows, with most volumes heading to Asia.

Despite the narrower scope of the US action, risks for shipping remain acute, Green warned.



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Hormuz access splits shipping as Singapore and Malaysia diverge

“I am stating the obvious when I say that there is now double risk for vessels in or destined for the Gulf,” he said, citing exposure to both Iranian threats and US enforcement actions.

While transit through Hormuz may remain open in principle, he said the practical risk environment remains “very high” for vessels operating in the region.

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