

**THE UNITED STATES' PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE INVOLVEMENT IN THE  
STRAIT OF HORMUZ**

**PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD JAVERIANA  
FACULTAD DE CIENCIAS POLÍTICAS Y RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES  
CARRERA DE RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES**

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## INTRODUCTION

The following document outlines the historical trajectory and the current situation of the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz, where both the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran compete for control over the Strait. Framed within the larger animosity between the Islamic regime and the U.S, the struggle for dominance in the Strait has led to an increase of tensions between both States in recent years, putting the stability of the Strait at risk.

The methodology used in this investigation is that of Case Study methodology, specifically congruence procedures. This methodology dictates that the researcher carry out three steps: stating the theory, stating the expectations of what should be observed in the case, and, finally, identifying congruence or lack thereof between the expected and the observed outcomes (Van Evera, 1997). The theory that will be used throughout the investigation is stated in the theoretical framework and consists of several perspectives on issues inherent to the field of International Relations, such foreign policy, conflict, security and foreign policy tools. Taking into consideration that the United States has long been interested in ensuring the security of the Strait in order to guarantee a stable global energy market, that it has been involved in several conflicts in the region, and that it has historically been more than capable of safeguarding the right of transit passage through the Strait, even in the face of Iranian aggression, the expected outcome is that the United States will be more than capable of providing security to the Strait of Hormuz through the use of a wide range of foreign policy tools.

### Research problem

The Strait of Hormuz located between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman is the passageway through which twenty percent of the oil produced worldwide transits as it makes its way to its destination from oil producing countries such as Saudi Arabia (Gilsinan, 2019). The twenty million barrels of oil that pass through the Strait every day (Ma, 2020) make the passageway a point of interest for U.S foreign policy; whose objective is to guarantee its safe

passage in order to keep oil prices from increasing, and to ensure a steady supply of oil for Asia, and the United States itself.

The importance of the Strait of Hormuz is further emphasized when one considers that it has been the location of rising tensions between Iran, which borders the Strait and desires to control it, and the unwaning presence of the United States. Though tensions between the U.S and Iran have been on the rise as a result of several incidents in recent years, the territorial dispute for the control of the Strait can be traced back to the Tanker War in 1984 during which Iran and Iraq targeted each other's merchant ships and oil tankers that transited through the Strait.

As oil prices started to hike, and casualties began to mount for the Gulf States, whose ships were being targeted by Iran, the United States led an intervention into the Strait and the surrounding Gulfs to escort Kuwaiti ships, in an operation codenamed Earnest Will in 1987 (Eisenstadt, 2019). At this time, the sinking of USS *Samuel B. Roberts* led to the launch of Operation Praying Mantis, that resulted in the sinking of most of the Iranian navy's most important ships. The high toll for the Iranian navy forced the diminishing of its operations in the Strait of Hormuz, and the ending of the Iran-Iraq war shortly thereafter (Crist, 2009).

Three decades after Operation Praying Mantis and the open confrontation between U.S forces and Iranian forces in the Strait of Hormuz, tensions between the two countries are at an all-time high, with the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, a high-ranking officer within the Irani armed forces, and a series of incidents in the Strait, such as the seizing of a British tanker and an attack on Norwegian and Japanese tankers crossing the Strait in June 2019.

As tensions have escalated, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps made its position clear regarding the presence of the United States in the region, and began executing ballistic missile exercises, which forced U.S military bases in Qatar and the UAE to enter high alert (International Crisis Group, 2020)

Taking into account the importance of the of the Strait as one of the main shipping routes worldwide, the history of conflict that plagues the region, and the rising tensions between Iran and the U.S as they both contend for control over the passageway, it is clear that there is no end in sight to the conflict that rages on in the region. The aim of this study is to determine the capacity of the United States to advance its interests and to provide security in the region, through foreign policy alternatives at the U.S' disposal at the beginning of the Biden presidency.

### Research question

Considering the recent events in the Strait, as well as the history of conflict that has plagued the region, to what extent will the United States be capable of providing security in the Strait of Hormuz at the outset of the Biden presidency?

### Relevance of the investigation

Keeping in mind the importance of the Strait of Hormuz as a shipping route, the conflict currently brewing in the Strait and that the possible escalation of said conflict could further destabilize the Strait, the situation poses a threat to the security of the United States (Slade, 2019). Considering the importance of the Middle East as a thriving area of study within International Relations, especially in the aftermath of the 2011 revolutions called the Arab Spring (Dalacoura, 2020), the possibility of another conflict in the region is of the utmost importance to the field of International Relations.

Moreover, continuous incidents in the Strait could mean a sharp rise in oil prices all around the world, possibly up to a 100 dollars per barrel (Meredith, 2020). Skyrocketing oil prices would have far reaching consequences worldwide, and as seen in the past, with the oil crisis of 1973 in which the United States was forced to take action to stop the economic downturn, the possibility of another crisis would prompt the United States to spring into action. As David S. Painter argues, "Control of oil played a vital role in establishing and maintaining U.S. preeminence in the international system" (Painter, 2014) during the cold war, a fact that

is still valid today as oil continues to be the primary energy source for the United States (EIA, 2020) and a central requisite to military power (Painter, 2014). Taking into account the importance of the United States as a prominent actor in the international system, the possible courses of action that it can take to stop what it perceives as a threat to its stability and security, would likely have sweeping consequences, and, therefore, is especially relevant to International Relations.

Aside from the importance of the United States as the primary provider of security in the region, the formation of the IMSC as a coalition led by the United Kingdom tasked with maintaining order and security in the Strait of Hormuz as well as the P5+1 group (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, China) in charge of the nuclear negotiations with Iran highlights the role that other actors in the international arena, such as international institutions and organizations play in the handling of multidimensional issues. As explained by Robert Keohane, “problems of energy, food, monetary arrangements, nuclear proliferation and military-security issues in the Middle East are linked to one another in a complex and frightening system” (Keohane, 1975, p.357) in what he calls “interdependence of interdependence” (Keohane, 1975, p.357). Although this analysis was made from the point of view of liberal theories of international organizations, when scrutinized through a realist perspective that considers international institutions as a tool at the disposal of the great powers to carry out their interests (Mearsheimer, 1994), international institutions that operate in the Strait of Hormuz or that could be created in the future could be used by the United States to provide stability to the Strait. Therefore, this study will consider not only States as important actors in the international arena, but also international institutions and the role that the international community takes on in providing security for the Strait.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE INVESTIGATION

### General objectives



1. Understand the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz to the United States' interests.
2. Explore the United States' ability to provide security in the Strait of Hormuz at the outset of the presidency of Joe Biden.

### Specific objectives

1. Understand the events that led to the current situation.
2. Ascertain the United States' foreign policy objectives in Strait of Hormuz.
3. Identify possible courses of action for the United States in the face of Iranian aggression.

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study is qualitative in nature. More specifically, documentary research is utilized to gather the information necessary to answer the research question. The analysis itself is based on the Case Study method. In Qualitative research researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.4).

The qualitative method of documentary research consists of “studying excerpts, quotations or entire passages from organizational, clinical or program records, memoranda and correspondence; official publications and reports; personal diaries and open-ended written responses to questionnaires and surveys” (Patton, 2002, p.55). Documentary research is a method in which the researcher collects an abundance of information pertaining to the focus of the study, through the collection of personal and official documents, which can include newspapers, diaries, stamps, directories, handbills, maps, government statistical publications, photographs, paintings, gramophone records, tapes, and computer files” (Scott and Marshall, 1998).

Due to limitations that stem from the geographical circumstances, in which the researcher is far removed from the area of study, methodologies that require the researcher to get physically involved with the subject matter are out of the realm of possibilities for the completion of the study. Therefore, the methodology of documentary research is appropriate to achieve the goals of this investigation.

The application of the methodology of documentary research to the problem at hand will be as follows. To understand the events that lead to the current situation, an emphasis will be placed on historical documents and recounts of the events that took place during the conflicts in the Strait starting from the Iran-Iraq War. To ascertain the foreign policy objectives of the United States with regard to the Strait of Hormuz and even Iran in general, so long as it pertains to the investigation, the use of official documents which state said objectives and strategies will be a priority. Close attention will be paid to the events that take place in the Strait in recent times. Lastly, the information gathered from the investigation through documentary research will be put to use in the formulation of possible courses of action that the United States can take to continue to provide security for the Strait.

Together with documentary research, the Case Study method will be used for a better comprehension of the situation at hand. The Case Study method is considered to be especially useful within the qualitative approach to social sciences, as it allows for the study of “complex and relatively unstructured and infrequent phenomena that lie at the heart of the subfield” (Bennet and Elman, 2007, p.171), such as wars or the formation of new international security systems. This method can be used to study situations that escape the grasp of statistical models or other methodological tools employed in the quantitative approach to social science, such as complex or *sui generis* phenomena found in the field of International Relations (Bennet and Elman, 2007).

The Case Study method involves three main steps: stating the theory, stating the expectations about what should be observed in the case, and exploring the case looking for congruence or lack thereof between the expectation and the observed data points. The form of Case Study

relevant to this investigation is that of congruence procedures, in which observations within a case are used to test the theory (Van Evera, 1997). This allows the researcher (and the reader) to better understand a situation within the field of International Relations riddled with complexities.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To carry out this study, a robust theoretical framework is needed, built from the knowledge constructed by International Relations scholars. The theoretical framework will be structured as follows: the Governance and Social Development Resource Center (GSDRC) framework for conflict analysis; a classical definition of security; a definition of foreign policy, what it encompasses and how it is put in practice by States to achieve their interests; a realist view of international institutions and lastly; foreign policy tools like hard power and diplomacy that the United States can use to enact its interests.

These elements are important insofar as they will bring structure to the study, for instance, the GSDRC conflict analysis framework provides the mold that will be followed to analyze the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz, and the foreign policy tools of hard power and diplomacy will be broken down into more specific courses of action that the U.S can undertake to carry out its interests in the Strait. Likewise, foreign policy is central to this study and must be defined to determine the internal and external constraints on a States' behavior and how a State conducts itself in the international system. Finally, the realist perspective of international institutions explains the way in which the U.S can use certain international institutions in its favor, but also indicates that the study will be carried out from the point of view of the realist theory of international relations.

### GSDRC analytical framework for conflict in the Strait of Hormuz

According to Karin Aggestam, conflict analysis is the “the systematic study of the causes, actors, processes and resolution of conflicts around the globe” (Aggestam, 2014) and it strives to generate suggestions on how to manage and resolve conflict. The May 2017 Topic

Guide of the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre at the University of Birmingham provides a framework for the analysis of conflict, which takes into account a series of variables such as profile, actors and dynamics of the conflict, that can be used in the analysis of the situation in the Strait of Hormuz.

By “profile” the GSDRC conflict guide means the overarching context in which the conflict is framed, the history of the conflict, the political, economic, social and environmental structures that shape the conflict. Actors are the different players that influence the conflict: their interests, power or resources, incentives or disincentives for conflict or for peace, and their capacities. Lastly, the GSDRC includes dynamics in the analysis of the conflict, specifically the conflict trends, the conflict triggers, and what future scenarios can develop in the conflict (Herbert, 2017).

The GSDRC analytical framework and its components will be applied to the case of the Strait of Hormuz and United States’ involvement in the region. It provides a structure for the first chapter: (i) through the analysis of the profile of the conflict in which events throughout the conflictive history of the Strait will be taken into account, (ii) the actors, primarily the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, (iii) the causes and the dynamics, such as recent triggers and escalations in the intensity of the conflict and the animosity between the actors.

### Security as a matter of the State

Considering that the study will focus on the provision of security for the Strait of Hormuz by the United States and its allies in the region, one must first define what is meant by security. According to Martha Barcena Coqui, in its most classic sense, the word security comes from the Latin words *Securitas/securus*, which itself comes from the words *Sine cura*, which means free from worry or free from problems (Coqui, 2000). In other words, in its most basic form security means being safe from harm and free from worry of harm that could come from others.

Despite the new dimensions that security encompasses, this study will understand security from the point of view of the traditional approach. The traditional approach to security, which stems from the realist theory of international relations, considers that security must remain in the areas of the military, the political, and the interaction between States. This approach takes as a presupposition the anarchical nature of the international system, or the lack of a superior entity in the international arena which forces States to resort to the notion of self-help to guarantee their own survival. Likewise, the term international security is used in reference to the use of force, how to identify it, resist it, or use it, it pertains mainly to the State and exists in close relation to peace and war (Coqui, 2000).

#### Foreign policy: definitions and perspectives

This study also aims to understand the importance of the Strait of Hormuz to the United States' foreign policy. Therefore, it is important to define what the meaning of foreign policy is through three levels/lenses provided by different authors. Firstly, political scientist James N. Rosenau defines foreign policy as “authoritative actions taken by governments or ones they are committed to take in order either to maintain the desirable aspects of the international environment or to amend its undesirable aspects” (Rosenau, 1974, p.6).

Secondly, Daniel Carrasco Birhuela defines foreign policy as “the set of principles, orientations, programs, agreements, institutions and actions that characterize relations between states” (Carrasco, 2015, p.5). In his theory of foreign policy, Carrasco considers the importance of the decision-makers, those who possess the power of the executive within a State. Although consigning the power over foreign policy to a few individuals can be considered negative or undemocratic, the author argues that this is the case because of the need for secrecy and confidentiality in the making and implementing of the foreign policy, the safeguarding of the internal cohesion of a State in the face of other powers, and ensuring a fast process of decision making in moments of crisis (Carrasco, 2015).

Carrasco also explains the way in which the type of regime affects how foreign policy is formulated, and presents the case of the United States. In a democracy, the decisions of foreign policy are taken by the president, but he cannot do so entirely on his own as this would be undemocratic, which is why the Congress also plays a role, as its permission is needed to undertake certain actions (Carrasco, 2015).

Through these three definitions of foreign policy, we have gathered most of what is considered necessary to understand the process, external variables such as the systemic variable by Rosenau, internal variables such as the role played by congress in the United States as explained by Carrasco, and the importance of crisis, rapid response, and the perspectives of the decision-makers in the decision-making process.

#### International institutions through the realist lens

In the text *The False Promise of International Institutions*, the renowned realist John Mearsheimer argues against the central tenets of liberal institutionalism, which considers institutions to be an important cause of international stability as they reduce the possibility of cheating that limits international cooperation. Instead, the realist scholar claims that international institutions are actually created and shaped by the most powerful States so they can maintain their share of power, and serve to enact their interests (Mearsheimer, 1994). International institutions are a reflection of the distribution of power in the international system, they are created and modeled by the great powers according to their self-interested calculations and have no independent effect on State behavior (Mearsheimer, 1994, p.7). From this point of view, international institutions can be used by the United States in its favor to secure the stability of the Strait of Hormuz.

#### Hard power, intervention and diplomacy as tools of foreign policy

In the same way, the historical conflicts that have occurred in the region, just as the more recent confrontations in the Strait have involved the use of the military and, by extension, the

use of hard power. Hard power is defined by Joseph Nye as the use of military or economic might to get others to change their position, and that it rests on inducements ("carrots") or threats ("sticks") (Nye, 2005). According to traditional realist scholar Hans Morgenthau, the sources of power can be equated with "the possession of identifiable and measurable resources and listed geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military, and population as stable power elements of a nation" (Morgenthau, 1954). Likewise, hard power is defined by Ernest J. Wilson III as having the capacity to coerce others to act in ways in which they would not have acted otherwise (Wilson, 2008). Hard power is enacted through strategies of military intervention and economic sanctions among other strategies.

Taking this and the limited confrontations between the United States and Iran into account, military action must be considered as a possible tool of foreign policy at the United States' disposal. As explained by Hans Morgenthau, "intervention is an ancient and well-established instrument of foreign policy" (Morgenthau, 1966). However, the intervention that the author refers to is that of a military intervention that violates the sovereignty of another State, which is not the case in the current situation, since military action of the United States would be limited to the physical safeguarding of the Strait through naval action or otherwise.

Despite intervention being a tool of foreign policy, it is unlikely to happen unless absolutely necessary, given that the costs of it are extremely high and the American public has grown more and more skeptical of this tool since the Vietnam War. Therefore, another alternative is the threat of the use of force, a relatively inexpensive persuasion tool that is used not as part of diplomacy, but as a last resort when it fails. (Blechman and Wittes, 1999),

As shown in the past, such as in the intervention in Libya in 2011, there are specific instances in which the United States is willing to use its military might. During the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, the United States, backed by the authorization of the Security Council and in conjunction with NATO, led a military intervention on Libya, with the intent of protecting civilians under the Responsibility to Protect principle. The intervention was narrow in scope, primarily enacted through a naval blockade and a no-fly zone (Jentleson, 2013). It

exemplified some of the trends that the United States has followed during military interventions in recent history, military action in conjunction with other States through cooperation, alliances and coalitions such as NATO in the invasion of Afghanistan, and limited scope of operations such as the bombing campaigns in Bosnia during the crisis in the Balkans (Edwards and Solarz, 1997). In the case of military action in the Strait of Hormuz, it is very likely to be another operation of narrow scope with the support of various allies.

Another tool of foreign policy at the United States' disposal is that of diplomacy. According to author Hedley Bull, there are different ways to understand diplomacy, but in its most basic form, diplomacy can be understood as "the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means" (Bull, 1977, p.156). In another definition, Bull highlights the importance of diplomats: "Diplomacy is the management of international relations by negotiation; the method by which these relations are adjusted by ambassadors and envoys; the business or art of the diplomatist" (Bull, 1977, p.156).

Hedley Bull also highlights two important aspects of diplomacy for the study at hand. In the first place, diplomatic relations can be bilateral or multilateral, through the direct link and communication between two States, or by the communication between several States, through conferences or international organizations. Likewise, diplomacy allows the negotiation of agreements, so that the only possible scenario is not confrontation between two or more political communities. Negotiation can only take place when the interests of both parties overlap, and diplomacy, through communication and persuasion, is what enables one party to identify the area of overlapping interests, and to bring it to the attention of the other parties so that the negotiation may commence (Bull, 1977).

The importance of diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy and possible course of action for the United States is further emphasized when one takes into consideration an interview done with Doctor Dorian B. Kantor, an expert in American Government and National Security. When asked about the importance of diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy of the United States in



the case of the Strait of Hormuz, his answer highlighted diplomacy as the best of the available options:

The U.S must be willing to offer some carrots along with maintaining the sticks (for example: sanctions, some form of protective measures against illegal attacks). The Iran Deal offered sufficient incentives to Iran to abide by some rules – and the U.S needs to participate in other multilateral efforts to contain the threat of military or nuclear escalation in the region. Diplomatic efforts must be applied to keep the Gulf States from obtaining nuclear weapons – because nuclear escalation and potential conflagration is not an acceptable option. So, the only option is de-escalation: which is what we saw after the IRGC captured a British oil tanker (*Stena Imperio*). But some degree of spunk on the part of the international community is necessary – international cooperation to ensure safe passage of goods and resources as it is required by the UNCLOS and without engaging in outright gunboat diplomacy. (Kantor, 2020)

## CHAPTER 1: ANALYSIS OF THE CONFLICT IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ

The analysis of the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz will be conducted using the GSDRC conflict analysis topic guide by the author Sian Herbert. This GSDRC document provides a framework for the analysis of conflict and proposes a set of variables to analyze (Herbert, 2017). These variables are actors, profile, and dynamics of the conflict, in the order that they will be used in this investigation.

### Actors

The main actors that currently have an effect on the security and stability of the Strait of Hormuz are the United States and Iran, as they both have interests in the Strait and contend over its control.

Within the “actors” variable, the GSDRC conflict analysis framework asks the researcher to consider who the main actors are, what their interests are, what power or resources they have, what their incentives and disincentives for conflict and peace are, and what capacities they have to affect the conflict (Herbert, 2017).

### The United States

The United States is a country located in North America, it has a population of 328 million people and a GDP of 21 trillion dollars (World Bank, 2019). It is one of the main actors in the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz and has been since the second half of the twentieth century, when the Carter Doctrine called for continued presence in the Strait and the gulfs that surround it to protect it from external threats (Brands, Steven and Kenneth, 2019).

Although the current interests of the United States in the Strait of Hormuz will be expanded upon in the second chapter of this thesis, in its basic form, the U.S recognizes the importance of the Strait of Hormuz as one of the main passageways through which oil transits worldwide as well as it being in close geographical proximity to its allies in the region. As previously stated, the Strait of Hormuz which is located between Oman and Iran is the passageway through which over twenty million barrels of oil transit daily (Ma, 2020). Having learned from the experience of the oil crises of 1973, when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) enacted an oil embargo against the United States which caused an economic recession and highlighted its dependence on foreign oil (Ilie, 2006), the U.S now recognizes the stability of the Strait of Hormuz as an important factor in the price of oil (Meredith, 2020), and, therefore, its economy.

Likewise, the United States has a variety of allies in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia, whose safety and protection is relevant to the U.S insofar as it intends to maintain a foothold in the Middle East and counterbalance Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia is one of the most important oil producing countries worldwide, with over 17% of the world's proven petroleum reserves in its territory (OPEC, 2020). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia sits across the

Persian Gulf from Iran, which since 2019 initiated a series of attacks on Saudi oil facilities through the Houthi rebels located in the neighboring country of Yemen. The most recent attack took place on March of this year, when Iranian backed Houthi rebels launched over 14 drones and 8 missiles at the Ras Tanura oil refining facilities on the Saudi coast (Wassef, 2021).

In terms of power and resources, the United States is also one of the most powerful nations on Earth. As previously stated, The U.S has the largest GDP in the world with over twenty trillion dollars in the year 2019 (World Bank, 2019). Moreover, according to the 2019 Military Strength Ranking, it possesses the largest military in the world (Loanes, 2020) and has far reaching resources, especially in the Middle East. This becomes evident when one takes into account that the national security budget for the fiscal year 2021 is of 740 billion dollars (U.S department of Defense, 2020).

Considering the relevance that the Middle East represents to the United States, it has strived to maintain an important presence in the region, and therefore has a sizeable capacity to affect the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. According to the American Security Project, the U.S maintains over 36 military facilities (naval, army, air, or joint facilities) in the Middle East (ASP, 2021) spread out over countries such as Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, and Afghanistan (Chughtai, 2020). Furthermore, in recent years, and amid rising tensions with Iran, the U.S Central Command has called for the constant presence of U.S aircraft carriers in the region and the Persian Gulf (Larter, 2020). Although the *Nimitz* aircraft carrier has since left the Persian Gulf headed for the Indo-Pacific (Ng, 2021), the U.S maintains a strong presence in the Gulf, through the Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group (USNI, 2021). Thus, the presence of the United States in the Middle East is ubiquitous, and it is clear that both Iran and the Strait of Hormuz are within its reach and its capacity to affect the conflict.

Lastly, there are a series of incentives and disincentives that the United States responds to with regards to the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. In the first place, acts of aggression on

behalf of Iran in the Strait of Hormuz, such as the harassment of ships crossing the Strait as well as the occasional seizing of tankers such as the *Stena Impero* (Al Jazeera, 2019) are intolerable and impossible for the United States to ignore. Likewise, Iran's strategy of using proxies throughout the Middle East to carry out its objectives are of special interest to the U.S. Several factions pervasive in the region, such as the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Gaza strip, and Iraq among others are rebel armed groups backed financially, and militarily by Iran (Parker and Noack, 2020), which it uses them to carry out attacks that it cannot be held accountable for.

On the other hand, there are also a few incentives for the United States to strive for peace in the Strait. In the first place, the continuation of the conflict in the Strait and the surrounding regions has led to the escalations of conflict between the United States and Iran, which becomes evident in the shooting down of a U.S drone by Iran's military in June of 2019 (Martinez, McLaughlin and McGraw, 2029) and the direct attack performed by Iran against U.S military bases in Iraq in January and March of 2020 as retaliation for the U.S drone strike that killed Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani (Pickrell, 2020). The escalation of tensions between both nations brought them close to an open confrontation in March of 2020, and it continues to be a possibility if no measures to deescalate the conflict are taken. Secondly, even though the JCPOA is currently in a stalemate after President Donald Trump pulled out of the agreement, it represents another incentive for peace. The nuclear deal between the United States and Iran establishes the precedent that a negotiated agreement that results in the attainment of both parties' interests is a real possibility – an alternative that can be applied not only in the nuclear arena but also in the endeavor to maintain the stability of the Strait through rules-based peace.

### Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country located in Western Asia, more specifically in the Middle East. As of 2019, it had a population of 82 million, and a GDP of \$454 billion. It is one of the main actors to consider in the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz, as it is

geographically positioned at its northernmost point and has historically vied against the United States and its allies in the region over control of the waterway, participating in important conflicts that took place in and around the Strait, such as the Tanker War and the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s. Recently, Iran has ramped up its challenge against the United States in the Strait, conducting acts of aggression against ships transiting the Strait and against Saudi oil facilities.

Iran's interest in the Strait of Hormuz stems from the same economic motivations as those of the U.S, the importance of the Strait as one of the main shipping routes worldwide, and the artery through which twenty percent of the oil transits daily. However, as opposed to the United States' interests in the security and the stability of the Strait to keep oil prices from fluctuating and therefore guaranteeing a steady supply and protecting its economy; Iran's strategy is the opposite: the control of the Strait as a bargaining chip or a threat against sanctions imposed on its economy by the United States. After the United States and its European allies imposed sanctions on Iran's oil-based economy in 2011, Iran threatened to militarily shut down the Strait (Haynes, 2019), arguing that it had "comprehensive control over the strategic waterway" (Sayyari, 2011). The blockage of the Strait by Iran through military action or the laying of mines (Ma, 2020) would mean an oil price hike of up to 100 dollars per barrel (Meredith, 2020), affecting the United States in a bid to counter the sanctions imposed by it.

Aside from the economic interest in the Strait that the United States also recognizes, Iran also has a particular interest in the Strait as it plays a role in its pursuit of regional hegemony. According to author Suzanne Maloney, since the Islamic Republic of Iran consolidated in 1979 after the revolution, it has pursued a strategy of "Extending its influence throughout the broader Middle East" (Maloney, 2017, p.26). This strategy for influence over the region can be traced back to Iran's imperial legacy: even before taking the form of a modern State, it strived to position itself as a dominant regional power. In the aftermath of the revolution, this endeavor to become a regional power became influenced by a new religious factor, whereby "the Islamic Republic cast itself as the inspiration and model for the broader Muslim world"

(Maloney, 2017, p.26). In recent times, Iran's strategy to achieve the regional hegemony it desires has taken the form of financial and military support for proxies to continue to destabilize countries such as Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq.

This religious regional hegemon role that Iran intends to fulfill is also accompanied by a strong anti-imperial approach, which came as a result of the disastrous effect that the great powers of the twentieth century wrought in its territory. The Strait of Hormuz as well as the Persian Gulf play a pivotal role in its anti-imperialist perspective, by means of which it has sternly rejected the influence of other powers in the gulf, especially that of the United States, as having a security role in region (Maloney, 2017). Therefore, counterbalancing the United States and its allies' presence in the Gulf as well as the Strait of Hormuz is part of a larger, inherited, and religious strategy for hegemony in the region and the U.S' aspiration to provide security for the Strait, as stated in the Carter Doctrine, or recent attempts at building a coalition for the protection of the Strait, directly challenge Iran's claim to regional hegemony.

In terms of power and resources, as previously stated Iran has a GDP of 454 billion dollars, and due to the importance that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps plays in its domestic and foreign policy as declared by its constitution (Maloney, 2017), it has the 14<sup>th</sup> largest military in the world (Loanes, 2019). Likewise, through its proxies in the region, it has the resources to indirectly influence conflicts throughout the Middle East and maintains support in several countries of the region.

Furthermore, although Iran possesses a much smaller military than the United States, the way it has constructed its naval forces to be able to efficiently operate in the Strait provide it with considerable capacity to affect the conflict in the Strait. As explained by Jonathan Schroden "Iran has constructed a navy with considerable asymmetric and other capabilities designed specifically to be used in an integrated way to conduct area denial operations in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, and they routinely exercise these capabilities and issue statements of intent to use them" (Schroden, 2011, p.36).

Lastly, there are a series of incentives for Iran to continue the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. First, the GSDRC framework for conflict analysis highlights the importance of history as an incentive for actors to continue in conflict, specifically retribution for historical grievances (Herbert, 2017). In addition to the historical endeavor undertaken by Iran to become a regional hegemon and to oppose influence from the great powers in the region, the memory of the humiliating defeat suffered at the hands of the United States during the Tanker War, which resulted in the sinking of most of the Iranian navy (Crist, 2009) could be considered an incentive for Iran to continue in the conflict. Second, without having built nuclear weapons, the only trump card that Iran can make use of to counter the sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies is the threat of blocking the Strait of Hormuz (Thompson, 2011).

On the other hand, there are also a few disincentives for Iran to continue its current course in the conflict. The actions undertaken by the Tehran in the Strait, such as the seizing of oil tankers and the attack on transiting ships affect not only the United States but a myriad of other countries too. For example, the *Stena Impero*, a ship seized by the Iranian navy in 2019 flew the flag of the United Kingdom and prompted a response by it (Al Jazeera, 2019). These acts put Iran in a tough position in the regional and international scene, where it holds a negative perception on several fronts, causing it to become increasingly isolated. Finally, the incidents that have taken place in and around the Strait have led to an increase of tensions between itself and the United States. The escalation of conflict between the two represents a dangerous scenario to the Islamic Republic of Iran, which would not be able to militarily face the U.S and come out on top, i.e., Tanker War would repeat itself.

## Profile

The profile of a conflict refers to the history and the political, social, economic, and environmental contexts that have shaped the conflict (Herbert, 2017). The profile of the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz will be constructed on the basis of the recent history of the

Strait, starting in the second half of the twentieth century up to the triggers and current dynamics.

The Strait of Hormuz has a long history of conflict, which can be attributed to the long-lasting rivalry between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which have long contended against each other over the control of the Strait. The starting point of the feud between the United States and Iran can be traced back to the Iranian revolution that took place in 1979 after a series of demonstration and revolts against the United States-backed, secular government of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi led to the collapse of the government and the founding of a new Islamic Republic, “a theocracy built on ideological choices inspired to a great extent by Ayatollah Khomeini” (Erdbrink, 2019). Following the ascent of a new form of government headed by Ayatollah Khomeini, a series of incidents such as the hostage crisis at the U.S Embassy in Tehran in 1981 and the Iran-Contra scandal (BBC, 2020) soured relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This tense relation, in turn, affected the stability of the Strait, a region that in the years to follow would become plagued by conflict.

The first conflict that would affect the Strait was the Iran-Iraq War. This conflict began when Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, crossed the border into southern Iran with the intent to capture oil resources in the neighboring country, and escalated as the Gulf Cooperation Council, a pro-Western organization, got involved to support Iraq. Although it began as a war fought on land, it soon spilled into the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, as Iraq began targeting Iranian oil tankers in the Gulf and the Strait and set in motion what would become the Tanker War of the 1980s. In retaliation for the attacks on its ships, Iran started targeting both Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil tankers transiting through the Strait, which lead to a hike in oil prices and the direct involvement of the United States (Crist, 2009).

In response to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan as well as the nascent and hostile Iranian regime that bordered the Persian Gulf, the President of the United States Jimmy Carter introduced the Carter Doctrine in his State of the Union message in 1980, by stating



that “an attempt by any force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force (as cited in Kuniholm, 1986, p.343). The Carter Doctrine highlighted the importance that the Persian Gulf played to the United States’ interests, called for continued U.S presence in the region, and, by the end of the Carter presidency, resulted in the establishment of U.S military bases in Oman and the formation of the Rapid Deployment Force, a contingent tasked with the security of the Strait and the Persian Gulf (Kuniholm, 1986).

Following the guidelines set by the Carter Doctrine and the Reagan Corollary, which affirmed the U.S’ ties with Saudi Arabia, and due to the need to protect oil tankers transiting through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, the United States got directly involved in the conflict in the all-important passageway. Formal/direct intervention in the Strait began via Operation Earnest Will in 1987, in which the United States escorted Kuwaiti ships through the Strait and started a deterrence and counterinsurgency campaign by positioning unconventional naval forces such as small patrol craft, boats, helicopters, and floating patrol bases to provide surveillance in the passageway and to prevent the Iranian forces from attacking or placing mines. However, Iran did not cease its activities in the gulf, and, following a series of incidents in which the U.S directly confronted the IRGCN, President Ronald Reagan initiated a more aggressive strategy to face Iran’s hostile activities, which took the form of Operation Praying Mantis. During the operation, the U.S destroyed two Iranian oil facilities and a number of the IRGCN’s ships and aircraft. The operation was a success for the United States, and Iran was left severely weakened and unable to face the U.S navy in the Strait (Crist, 2009).

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, the next conflict to affect the region was looming on the horizon, in the form of the Gulf War. In 1991, Iraq led an invasion into Kuwait in response to the emirate’s refusal to forgo the loans made to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war (Ibrahim, 2020). Following the invasion of Kuwait, the United States led a military intervention by a coalition of 33 countries that resulted in the reestablishment of Kuwaiti sovereignty and an

overwhelming defeat of the Iraqi military (Taylor, 2016). Although this conflict did not directly affect the Strait of Hormuz, the operations conducted in Iraqi and Kuwaiti territory were backed by naval operations in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Oman. The staggering defeat of the Iraqi army through the combined air, ground, and naval forces speaks to the United States' capacity to affect conflict in the region and to maintain control over the Strait.

## Dynamics

The GSDRC topic guide describes the dynamics of a conflict as the analysis of current conflict trends, such as escalation or de-escalation of conflict, what factors reinforce or undermine each other and what are the triggers of the conflict (Herbert, 2017). In the case of the Strait of Hormuz the current trend is one of escalation of conflict, in which the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran have responded to the actions of the other through aggressive acts in a self-reinforcing cycle that has led both States close to an open confrontation in the Strait and the greater region. Likewise, since 2011, there have been a few triggers that have led to the escalation of conflict and the souring of the relation between the U.S and Iran.

The first trigger that can be identified in the recent history of the conflict took place in 2011, when Iran threatened to completely shut down the Strait in response to the United States and its European allies' sanctions on its economy (Haynes, 2011). During this incident, a few of Iran's top military officials stated that "not a drop of oil will pass through the Strait of Hormuz" (Rahimi, 2011), and that it would be very easy for Iran to shut down the choke point as its navy had complete control over the Strait. Furthermore, Iran carried out a series of wargames in the Strait during this period of time, to show its neighbors as well as the U.S. the might of its military (BBC, 2011). In response to the threat, the United States Defense Department stated that it would use the fifth fleet, which was stationed in Bahrain to stop Iran's advances, and that no action that impeded the freedom of navigation through the Strait would be tolerated (Gladstone, 2011)

There on out, the relations between the United States and Iran entered a more peaceful phase and a trend of de-escalation of conflict, until 2018, when the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal which had been negotiated and implemented with Iran in 2015 and put a stop to the friendly relation between both states. Shortly after withdrawing from the JCPOA, arguing that some of the requirements of the deal were not being met, the U.S once again imposed sanctions on Iran's oil-based economy. This led to the enrichment of nuclear material by Iran, to which the United States responded with a "maximum pressure campaign" in order to force Iran to stop supporting its proxies in the region and to limit Iran's advances on nuclear and missile technology (Hennigan and Walcott, 2019). This was the beginning of the current trend of contention and strife between both countries.

Following these events and amid an atmosphere of tension, another trigger can be identified: the seizing of the cargo ship *Stena Impero* and the assassination of General Qassim Soleimani, which opened the gate to an escalation of conflict. In 2019, the oil tanker *Stena Impero* which was flying the flag of the United Kingdom was seized by the Iranian navy. Shortly thereafter, the U.S conducted a drone strike in the Bagdad International Airport in Iraq which resulted in the assassination of General Qassim Soleimani. The Iranian government responded stating that severe revenge awaited the criminal behind the assassination of Soleimani, who was considered a national hero and a very important figure in the country, second only to Ayatollah Khamenei (BBC, 2019).

This event marked the most prominent escalation of conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran in recent history. In retaliation for the assassination of Soleimani Iran launched a missile attack on two U.S military bases in Iraq, Ain Al Assad military base and Erbil military base in January of 2020. Although the attacks did not result in any casualties, it prompted a response from NATO, which stated that Iran should "refrain from further violence" (Stoltenberg, 2020). In March of the same year, Iran launched another attack on the U.S base Camp Taji in Iraq, which housed U.S and coalition troops. The 18 ballistic missiles that hit the base were launched by Iran-sponsored militias and resulted in

the deaths of three coalition personnel and 12 wounded (Pickrell, 2020). The conflict is currently on a trend of escalation and has affected the stability of the Strait of Hormuz.

## Conclusion

The application of the GSDRC conflict analysis framework to the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz allows for a thorough understanding of the importance of the Strait to both the United States and Iran, and it underscores a variety of factors that will become important in the following chapters. In the first place, the profile of the conflict provides the reader with the overarching history of the Strait of Hormuz, especially with regards to the contention over control of the Strait between the United States and Iran. In addition to this historical overview, the dynamics of the conflict pinpoints specific triggers in the last decade that have caused the Strait to regain relevance in the international scene, and highlights the trends of escalation of conflict that are currently taking place in the Strait as well as in the larger relation between the U.S and Iran. Lastly, the in depth analysis of the actors that play a role in the conflict, namely the U.S and Iran, elucidates the reasons as to why both actors are interested in the control over the Strait, but most importantly, it shines light upon the capacities of both actors to affect the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz, information that will become important in the las chapter, where the U.S' capability to provide security to the Strait will be analyzed.

## CHAPTER 2: UNITED STATES' FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES REGARDING THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ

To ascertain the U.S' foreign policy objectives with regard to the Strait of Hormuz a series of primary sources from the United States' government will be taken into account. The primary sources that will be used for this section are the Quadrennial Defense Review of 2014, the National Security Strategy for 2017, the National Defense Strategy for 2018, the press briefings of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, and White House Press Briefings. These are the fundamental documents that define the current U.S foreign policy, security

concerns and objectives, and that when taken into consideration enables the study to identify the way in which the United States has approached the problem of the Gulf. Likewise, the press briefings provide the most updated information with regards to the matter at hand, as well as current policies and objectives for the Biden administration.

### Quadrennial Defense Review 2014

The Quadrennial Defense Review was the last of its kind since it was replaced in 2018 by the National Defense Strategy. Although outdated, by the year 2014 the QDR recognized Iran as one of the most important threats to U.S national security, as it “remains a destabilizing actor that threatens security by defying international law and pursuing capabilities that would allow it to develop nuclear weapons” (Quadrennial Defense Review, 2014, p.5). Even though in the year 2014 the nuclear deal was still being negotiated and was shaping up to be able to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons, Iran’s other activities in the region were found to be destabilizing and threatening to U.S allies. Likewise, the QDR highlighted the importance of staying on top of the threat that ballistic missile technology posed to U.S security, an issue that has become even more relevant since the year 2014 and that is noted in the National Security Strategy of 2017 as well as the National Defense Strategy of 2018 (Quadrennial Defense Review, 2014).

With regards to the Middle East as a whole, the QDR calls on the U.S and its allies in the region to maintain their capabilities so as to being able to respond to aggression in what it described as a volatile region. Therefore, maintaining a strong military posture that enables the U.S. to respond to crises, deter aggression, and assure its allies is the main strategy to build security in the region. The QDR also points out the existence of threats of different nature, such as conventional threats, and terrorist and paramilitary challenges (Quadrennial Defense Review, 2014).

Although the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review does not directly mention the Strait of Hormuz, it does highlight the importance of the Gulf Region in the wider context of the

Middle East. Furthermore, it states that the Department of Defense will “develop new or expanded forums to exchange views with allies and partners on the threats and opportunities facing the Gulf, particularly through the multilateral forum of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)” (Quadrennial Defense Review, 2014) a regional intergovernmental union formed in 1981 that includes all the Arab States of the Persian Gulf (GCC, nd).

### National Security Strategy 2017

The National Security Strategy of 2017 specifically refers to the Middle East as one of the regions in which the United States must tailor an approach to be able to protect its national interests. It calls for a Middle East “that is not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists, not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to a stable global energy market” (United States White House, 2017, p.48).

Among the threats that the strategy identifies in the Middle East region are State collapse, Jihadist ideology, socio economic stagnation, and regional rivalries, it also refers repeatedly to Iran as a destabilizing factor to the region. Iran’s role in the region is highlighted as a state that sponsors terrorism, that has taken advantage of the unstable situation of the Middle East to expand its influence, and as one that uses proxies and partners to carry out its interest in the region. It also recognizes the growing threat that it poses to the U.S. as it has continued to develop ballistic missiles and intelligence capabilities. Lastly, with regards to Iran, it underscores Tehran can resume its work on the development of nuclear weapons at any moment, since the 2015 nuclear deal proved to be flawed and insufficient. To face Iranian aggression, the Strategy claims it will deny all paths for nuclear weapons for Iran and neutralize its malign influence in the region. (United States White House, 2017)

Although the 2017 National Security Strategy does not explicitly refer to the Strait of Hormuz, it can be inferred by the claim that the Middle East must contribute to a “stable global market” (United States White House, 2017, p.48), that the stability of the Strait and

the Gulfs that surround it, which are waterways through which oil is transported to the rest of the globe, is important to the United States' foreign policy objectives.

### National Defense Strategy 2018

The National Defense strategy of 2018, or rather, the summary of the document provided by the U.S. government since official document is classified, designates Iran as the most significant challenge to the Middle East's stability, due to its pursuit of nuclear weapons as well as its sponsorship of terrorism. It claims that Iran is moving to create an "arc of influence and instability" (Mattis, 2018, p.2) over the region while vying to achieve hegemony. In the section titled *Strengthen Alliances and Attract New Partners*, the National Defense Strategy calls for the creation of enduring coalitions in the Middle East that are not dominated by any hostile power to the United States and that work as a counterbalance to Iran (Mattis, 2018).

With regards to the Strait of Hormuz, the National Defense Strategy does not directly mention it, and neither does it mention the surrounding Gulfs; however, similarly to the National Security Strategy of 2017, it highlights the importance of a Middle East that "contributes to stable global energy markets and secure trade routes" (Mattis, 2018, p.9).

### Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs

The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs is in charge of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and the North African region. It operates in several countries throughout the Middle East, and uses diplomacy as its main tool, which it utilizes to "end conflict, highlight the value of education, and enhance respect for democratic institutions" (Hood, nd).

Since January of 2021 when President Joe Biden was sworn into office, the Bureau has released a variety of press statements concerning the security of the Middle East. In February, department spokesperson Ned Price issued a press release condemning the Houthi attacks impacting civilians in Yemen and Saudi Arabia (Price, 2021). In the same month Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken made a press statement expressing outrage by the rocket attacks

conducted by Iran on the U.S.-led coalition base near Erbil airport in Iraq (Blinken, 2021). At the beginning of March, Ned Price led a press briefing in which he stated, “we continue to believe that diplomacy is the most effective means to ensure that Iran is permanently and verifiably prevented from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon” (Price, 2021).

These press briefings underline that Iran continues to be at the center of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East as the most prominent destabilizing factor in the region, whether by direct attacks, or through its proxies and their hostile actions in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Likewise, there is also mention of the desire to continue a diplomatic approach to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. However, there is no mention of the security of the Strait of Hormuz.

### White House Press Briefings

White House press briefings are conducted by White Press Secretary Jen Psaki on a daily basis. The function of the press briefings is to create a direct channel of communication between the executive branch of the federal government and civil society through the media, which then conveys the information to the public.

Since President Joe Biden was sworn into office, White House press briefings have addressed the Middle East several times. The first press briefing carried out by Press Secretary Jen Psaki took place on January 20, 2021, and it addressed the issue of Iran. After being asked about next steps when it comes to Iran, Psaki answered, “the President has made clear that he believes that through follow-on diplomacy, the United States should seek to lengthen and strengthen nuclear constraints on Iran and address other issues of concern. Iran must resume compliance with significant nuclear constraints under the deal in order for that to proceed.” (Psaki, 2021). In the following months, this issue was touched upon several times, with a focus on the nuclear negotiations and the possibility of a new nuclear deal.



In these press briefings Press Secretary Psaki stated that “if Iran comes back into full compliance with the obligations under the JCPOA... the United States would do the same, and then use that as a platform to build a longer and stronger agreement that also addresses other areas of concern” (Psaki, 2021), and that “it’s really up to Iran to come back into full compliance and — with its obligations under the JCPOA” (Psaki, 2021). From these statements it is possible to infer that the Biden administration does consider Iran as a very important matter in its foreign policy, and that the focus is on the nuclear deal and stopping Iran from continuing the development of nuclear weapons. Likewise, as opposed to its predecessor, the new administration is more willing to negotiate with the Iranian regime under the condition that Iran comes into full compliance with what was agreed upon in the JCPOA.

Apart from the nuclear deal, the press briefings have also focused on Iran’s role in the Houthi attacks that took place at the beginning of 2021. Secretary Psaki referred several times to the attacks that took place in Saudi Arabia, stating that the government condemned those attacks and that the group “continually demonstrates a desire to prolong the war by attacking Saudi Arabia, including attacks on citizens” (Psaki, 2021)

However, the press briefings have not touched upon the Strait of Hormuz since the beginning of the Biden presidency. This could be due to the decline in tensions in the Strait on account of no further incidents having taken place, and a focus on the nuclear deal with Iran. Nonetheless, it is important to call attention to the Press Secretary’s repeated emphasis on diplomacy with regard to the United States’ approach to the issue of Iran. Psaki stated that “we’ve been clear that we feel the best path forward is a diplomatic path. And that’s why we are working with our European partners to see what is possible along that front” (Psaki, 2021). The Press Secretary also maintained that the United States is adamant in its effort to address the issues with Iran through indirect diplomacy to achieve its interests in the area of nuclear weapons with Iran:

Diplomacy with Iran is ongoing, just not in a direct fashion at the moment. There are communications through the Europeans and through others that enable us to explain to the Iranians what our position is, with respect to the compliance-for-compliance approach, and to hear what their position is. (Psaki, 2021)

This emphasis on diplomacy provides an insight into the U.S.' preferred foreign policy tool at the current moment.

## Conclusion

From the primary sources previously consulted, it can be concluded that the United States has a regionwide approach to the Middle East, with an emphasis on Iran as the primary threat to its interest. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review as well as the 2017 National Security Strategy single out the Middle East as a region that the U.S. must pay special attention to, as it is plagued with instability, conflict, terrorism, and hostile powers to the U.S. The foreign policy strategy chosen to deal with such instability is the creation of coalitions with U.S. allies and partners in the regions to face challenges that might arise in the future, as well as the maintenance of a strong military presence that is capable of adapting to the aggression of hostile regimes and future threats.

All of the sources consulted pinpoint Iran as the main threat to the U.S.'s interests in the region as a destabilizing factor due to its ties to several terrorist groups that it uses to expand its influence, its development of ballistic missile capabilities, and its perseverance in the development on nuclear weapons. The National Defense Strategy of 2018, the 2014 QDR and the 2017 National Security Strategy state that to deal with this threat the United States must form enduring coalitions in the Middle East, strengthen alliances, and attract new partners to counterbalance Iranian influence. It is also clear from the White House press briefings, that a salient foreign policy objective of the United States is to reestablish negotiations with Iran to prevent the Islamic regime from attaining nuclear weapons.

With regards to the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait is not explicitly mentioned in any of the primary sources consulted, however, both the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy highlight the importance of the Middle East that “contributes to stable global energy markets and secure trade routes” (Mattis, 2018, p.9). From this quote, it is possible to infer that the Strait of Hormuz as well as the surrounding gulfs are a priority of the United States, whose goal is to ensure its stability and security to guarantee a stable global energy market. Furthermore, in accordance with the distinguishing of Iran as the most prominent threat to the United States’ interests in the region, Iran is also a destabilizing factor when it comes to the Strait of Hormuz, so the attention paid to the Islamic regime on other matters also applies to its influence over the security of the Strait.

### CHAPTER 3: FOREIGN POLICY ALTERNATIVES AT THE UNITED STATES’ DISPOSAL

In light of the previously stated importance of the Strait of Hormuz due to it being one of the most important shipping routes worldwide, which serves as a passageway for twenty percent of the oil that is traded daily, and that sits at the entry point to the Persian Gulf where important allies of the U.S are located, it is imperative that the United States be ready to respond in case of future incidents in the Strait.

Bearing in mind that the recent incidents that took place are the result of Iranian aggression, future hostilities on the part of Iran that threaten the stability of the Strait should be met by the comprehensive use of foreign policy tools by the United States. These foreign policy tools at the U.S’s disposal can be divided into two different types, diplomacy, through direct or indirect negotiation with Iran to establish an agreement or deal that stops Iranian aggression in the passageway and hard power: (i) through the threat of the use of military force; (ii) through military intervention, by escalation or by replicating the U.S’s response in the Tanker War; (iii) or through the imposition of sanctions on the Iranian economy so as to elevate the costs of carrying out certain disruptive activities.

## Diplomacy

### Direct Diplomacy

Diplomacy has been the lasting way in which States have conducted relations with one another. It emphasizes peaceful means to the resolution of disputes and the relations between States. As stated by Hedley Bull, diplomacy allows for the negotiation between States through communication, persuasion and identifying the areas where the interests of the parties overlap.

Considering that Iran is the most prominent threat to the stability of the Strait of Hormuz, direct diplomacy would entail the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Tehran to conduct a negotiation with regards to the functioning of the Strait. Inspired by the concept of “managed strategic competition,” in which Kevin Rudd holds that a rules-based system to manage the competition between the United States and China will keep the developing rivalry between those two States in check and prevent a direct confrontation (Rudd, 2021), the negotiation between Iran and the United States would be carried out with the objective of creating a system of rules by which both countries are willing to play; one that accommodates both Iranian and U.S interests in the Strait. This negotiation could result in Iran’s compliance with UNCLOS, which, in articles 37 and 38, states that “in straits which are used for international navigation between one part of the high seas or an exclusive economic zone and another part of the high seas or an exclusive economic zone [...] all ships and aircraft enjoy the right of transit passage, which shall not be impeded” (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1994). Another possible outcome of this negotiation would be the creation of a new international institution such as UNCLOS that would ensure the security of the Strait, or a political commitment such as the one produced by the P5+1 in the nuclear deal (Frifield, 2015, p.1) that would translate into rights but also limitations on what Iran can and cannot do in the Strait.

Nevertheless, the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Tehran is an unlikely precondition that must be fulfilled before negotiation can begin through direct

diplomacy. Diplomatic relations between the U.S and Iran were severed on April of 1980 after the Iran hostage crisis of 1979 due to the Iranian government's failure to act in favor of the release of the hostages taken by militant students who took control of the American embassy in Tehran (U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran, nd). Since that event, the U.S has not had a physical embassy in the Islamic Republic of Iran and has instead conducted relations with Iran through the mediation of Switzerland as a protecting power, where Switzerland has acted as a mediator between the U.S and Iran (Swiss Community, 2014). Furthermore, due to the decision of former president Trump to abandon the JCPOA and reinstate sanctions against the Iranian regime, the recent events that have taken place in the Strait of Hormuz as well as the larger region of the Middle East such as the attack on U.S bases by Iran's proxies, tensions between the U.S and Iran are at an all-time high with no possibility or will to reestablish diplomatic relations in sight.

### Indirect Diplomacy

Although diplomacy in its classic sense is understood as the bilateral and direct communication between two States, Hedley Bull also highlights that diplomacy and negotiation need not be direct; it can occur multilaterally through the communication between several States or through international institutions.

The case of the Strait of Hormuz is one especially suited for the United States to engage in indirect diplomacy and negotiation with Iran due to two main reasons: First, the widespread importance that the Strait has for other countries around the world which would be affected by the fluctuation of oil prices or whose oil tankers and cargo ships have been targeted by Iranian aggression. Second, the precedent of indirect diplomacy in the nuclear deal with Iran that came into effect in 2016.

In the first place, the Strait of Hormuz is a passageway of great importance to a number of countries. Due to its role in the transit and export of oil the Middle Eastern to the rest of the world, the incidents that take place in the Strait can affect the price of oil and the stability of

global energy markets. According to the U.S Energy Information Administration, “more than 85% of these crude oil exports went to Asian markets, with Japan, India, South Korea, and China representing the largest destinations.” (EIA, nd). This explains why these countries among many others would be interested in safeguarding the right of transit passage that is stipulated in article 38 of the UNCLOS. Likewise, exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia, which “moves the most crude oil and condensate through the Strait of Hormuz” (EIA, nd) and whose economy largely depend on their oil exports also have an interests in maintaining the Strait open.

In addition to the oil tankers that transit through the Strait, of which 11,000 crossed in the year 2018 (Refinitiv, 2018), a large amount of cargo ships and natural gas tankers cross the daily as well. The substantial number of ships crossing the Strait increases the possibility that ships from different countries become the target of future attacks or seizures, such as the British *Stena Impero*, the Japanese *M Star* that was attacked in 2010 (The Economic Times, 2019), or the Singapore-flagged *Alpine Eternity* which came under fire by the IRGC in 2015 (Martinez, 2015). These occurrences can lead to international disputes involving not only the country whose flag the ship flies, but also the countries where the crew is from, such as the case of a South Korean tanker seized in April of 2021, whose crew consisted of “11 Myanmar nationals, five South Koreans, two Vietnamese and two Indonesians” (BBC, 2021). Ensuring the security of the Strait can prevent such international disputes, which can come to involve several countries at once and have lasting effects on their relations.

Aside from the widespread interest in maintaining the security and stability of the Strait, the nuclear deal or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that came into effect in 2016 after years of multilateral negotiation, sets the precedent that a negotiated solution to an issue of international importance is a viable alternative. The negotiation process of the JCPOA can be traced back to the year 2006, when the P5+1 group found the common interest to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The negotiations themselves began in the year 2013 when, in exchange for a reduction of sanctions imposed on the Iranian economy, Tehran agreed to halt the development of certain key components of its nuclear program (Washington Post,

2013). The agreement came into effect in 2016. It called for a series of limitations on the Iranian nuclear program that would preclude the Islamic regime from being able to develop nuclear weapons, in exchange for the lifting of the sanctions imposed on its economy, which had caused an economic recession and the reduction of its GDP by 9% between 2012 and 2013, and again in 2015 (BBC, 2019). Despite the U.S having pulled out of the deal in 2018, the agreement could be considered to have been a success in the first years after its implementation, since the United States managed to stop Iran from continuing the development of nuclear weapons, and the Iranian economy was able to recover from the recession (BBC, 2019).

The JCPOA was the result of a multilateral negotiation between the P5+1 and Iran, and in spite of not being a treaty, it did “reflect political commitments between Iran, the P5+1 and the European Union” (Frifield, 2015, p.1). Therefore, building on the success of the multilateral negotiation that led to the signing and implementation of the JCPOA, preventing further hostile incidents and ensuring the stability of the Strait of Hormuz could potentially be achieved through multilateral negotiations with Iran led by the United States and its allies.

In addition, there are several international institutions that operate inside and outside the Gulfs that the United States could cooperate with to carry out the multilateral negotiation. In the first place, the P5+1 was successful in negotiating the JCPOA and therefore has the requisite knowledge to conduct a negotiation with Iran and to represent the wishes and interests of the wider international community. Secondly, the GCC, comprising the Arab States of the Gulf, is an international organization dedicated to increasing the cooperation, integration and coordination of the Arab States regarding economic, financial, and customs affairs among many others (GCC, nd). This organization is likely to be especially interested in finding a solution to Iranian aggression in the Strait, due to the close geographical proximity between the member States, the Strait, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, the U.S and the GCC have a history of cooperation in the region, with a mutually beneficial relationship in which the GCC depends on the U.S’ political and military support, and the U.S finds in the GCC a powerful counterbalance to Iranian expansion in the Gulf Region (El-

Katiri, 2014). Therefore, the United States could count on the GCC as another partner with which to carry out a multilateral negotiation with Iran. Finally, the States that are members of the IMSC have also demonstrated an interest in ensuring the right of passage through the Strait of Hormuz. Although the coalition is currently focused on reassurance and deterrence to achieve this goal, a paradigm shift on behalf of the U.S. in favor of a negotiated solution could propel the IMSC toward a different approach to the security of the Strait.

These negotiations would be carried out with the intention of producing a rules-based system like the one mentioned in the section of direct diplomacy, in which the parties involved would impose a set of limits on Iran with regards to what it can and cannot do in the Strait of Hormuz, in order to ensure the Straits' security and stability.

## Hard power

### Threat of use of force

Threat of the use of military force is a foreign policy tool at the United States' disposal that has been used especially in the period following the Vietnam war, due to the difficulty that policy makers have faced in gaining domestic support for military action in the wake of the controversial results of that conflict (Blechman and Wittes, 1999). Some policy makers believe that threat of use of force is a valuable tool at the U.S.' disposal, one that should be used "in support of diplomacy to achieve limited ends without resorting to all-out contests of arms" (Blechman and Wittes, 1999, p.2). According to author Romana Sadurska, the threat of the use of force will "erode the target's resistance to change or will pressure it toward preserving the status quo" (Sadurska, 1988, p.241). This threat of use of force takes the form of a message, one that can be explicit or implicit, and that indicates that force will be used in the case a rule or demand is not complied with by the target of the threat (Sadurska, 1988).

In the case of the Strait of Hormuz, the U.S would be threatening the use of force against the Islamic Republic of Iran, most likely through an implicit message cautioning Iranian officials against further actions in the Strait. This implicit threat would take the form of what Sadurska



refers to as positive actions: “moving army units into proximity with the target audience, engaging in military maneuvers, increasing a military budget, or deploying certain weapons” (Sadurska, 1988, p.243). As previously stated, the United States has a great capacity to affect the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz or the surrounding gulfs, with a sizable military presence in the region exemplified by the over 36 military bases (ASP, 2021) as well as a host of allies willing to support its operations.

In the event of further incidents in the Strait, or other forms of aggression on the part of Iran or its proxies, the United States could engage in positive actions to give Iran a clear warning. There is precedence for the United States ramping up its military presence throughout the Middle East in the face of Iranian aggression. In 2019, former U.S president Donald Trump moved army units into the region, by deploying over 1500 additional troops to military bases in the Middle East, sent weapons such as bombers and patriot missiles to U.S. allies and threatened to send additional weapons to Saudi Arabia by declaring a national security related emergency that would allow him to bypass Congress in the sale of billions of dollars’ worth of weapons to the Middle Eastern ally (Stewart et al, 2019). Likewise, the U.S deployed one of its most powerful deterrents, a carrier strike group led by aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* (Johnson and Williams, 2019). Furthermore, throughout 2020 and more recently in 2021, the U.S has engaged in military maneuvers and drills in the Arabian Sea, with the most recent taking place in March of 2021, when the United States, together with Belgium, France and Japan, initiated a major naval exercise in the Persian Gulf, bringing together the militaries from all of the countries participating in the exercise (AP, 2021).

Taking this precedent into account, future positive actions on behalf of the U.S would likely consist of an increase in military presence in the region, the sales of arms to its closest allies such as Saudi Arabia, and depending on the gravity of the hostility by the Islamic Republic of Iran, even the deployment of a carrier strike group to the region. This is a staple method of the United States to project power around the globe, as becomes evident in other regions such as the South China Sea, where the U.S deployed the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* aircraft carrier at the beginning of 2021 (Lendon, 2021). Nevertheless, as opposed to Donald Trump’s

clearly articulated threat of potential consequences aimed at Iran, President Biden is likely to take a more cautious approach.

In spite of the effectiveness of the threat of the use of force through positive actions or public declarations against Iran in the past, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Collin Powell cautions against threatening the use of force without giving it the importance it deserves, he states that “the threat and use of force must be a last resort and must be used decisively” and that it must be used “only when U.S. leaders actually have decided that they are prepared to use force” (as cited in Blechman and Wittes, 1999) This warning is especially important when one considers the tense relation between the United States and Iran, and the latter’s willingness to respond to U.S military action in the past, such as the direct attacks on U.S military bases in Iraq in 2020. Threat of use of force by the U.S. in the Strait of Hormuz is unlikely to be ignored by Iran, and could cause an escalation of tensions, bringing both States closer to an armed conflict.

### Intervention

Although a very unlikely scenario, if Tehran actually carried out the threats it made in the past, and decided to block the Strait either through military action or by the laying of mines throughout the chokepoint, there exists the possibility that the United States could set in motion a strategy of escalation in the region, and possibly lead a military intervention into the Strait in order to reestablish the right of transit passage through the corridor. Historical precedent exists for U.S. military action in the Gulfs and the Strait of Hormuz. The Carter Doctrine was enunciated by President Jimmy Carter in 1980 and stated that any bid to gain control of the Gulf region by any force opposed to the United States would be met by any means necessary, not excluding military action (Kuniholm, 1986). It came into practice during the previously discussed Tanker War, in which the U.S. utilized military means to ensure the stability of the Strait. Moreover, the influence of the Carter Doctrine can be perceived in the Quadrennial Defense Review of 2014, which states that in order to counter

the threats that Iran might pose to the region “the Department will maintain all options on the table” (Quadrennial Defense Review, 2014).

In the first place, intervention in the Strait of Hormuz could take the form of a strategy of escalation by the United States. Escalation refers to the intensification of conflict, and is defined as “an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants” (Morgan et al, 2008, p.8). Escalation takes place when one of the parties involved in the conflict considers that a qualitative change has occurred as a result of a new development, and it can occur as an interactive process between the actors involved in the conflict, where one actor responds to the other actor’s actions by escalating the use of force or threat of the use of force and transgressing certain escalation thresholds (Morgan et al, 2008). In the recent history of the Strait of Hormuz and the broader relations between the United States and Iran, the clearest example of the escalation of conflict between the two nations is that of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, an escalation threshold transgressed by the United States to which Tehran responded with a direct ballistic missile attack on U.S. bases in Iraq.

Although escalation thresholds are socially constructed and subjective (Morgan et al, 2008), and cannot therefore be accurately ascertained, two escalation thresholds the United States is likely to respond to, were Iran to engage in them, would be the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz or an increase in the intensity of attacks by Iran’s proxies in the region. A strategy of escalation by the U.S would entail a response, with the objective of achieving a position defined as *escalation dominance*, “a condition in which a combatant has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary while the adversary cannot do the same in return, either because it has no escalation options or because the available options would not improve the adversary's situation” (Morgan et al, 2008, p.15). In the past, former National Security Advisor to the Trump administration John Bolton recommended preemptive strikes against Teheran in order to destroy its nuclear program (Al Jazeera, 2019). This is an example of a strategy of escalation, one to which Iran would not be able to produce a symmetrical response.

Secondly, a strategy of intervention that the United States could undertake in order to guarantee the stability of the Strait is that of escorting ships through the chokepoint, a strategy already utilized in the Tanker War, when the U.S. escorted Kuwaiti ships (Eisenstadt, 2019). Furthermore, escorting tankers and cargo ships is a strategy already utilized by the United Kingdom after the seizing of the British-flagged oil tanker *Stena Impero* in 2019. In response to that incident perpetrated by Iranian forces, the Royal Navy was tasked by Britain's Defense Ministry with escorting British-flagged ships through the Strait of Hormuz (Taylor, 2019). Taking this into account, the United States Navy on its own or with support of the IMSC could provide escort to U.S.- flagged ships, as well as its allies' ships that it deems important, presenting a potent deterrent to further seizures and attacks by Iran or its proxies in the region.

Although escalation of the conflict is a strategy the United States has engaged in with regard to Iran in recent times, it is important to highlight that escalation, even when initiated as a policy, can occur quickly and lead to unintended consequences, such as an open conflict. Likewise, due to its subjective nature (Morgan et al, 2005), the transgression of an escalation threshold that the United States could consider insignificant and an appropriate incremental step, could be perceived by Iran as a drastic move and trigger a correspondingly drastic response, possibly leading to an enduring conflict. Conflict with Iran is a very costly possibility, to which the American public has expressed opposition. According to Shibley Telhami, by 2020 a "majority of Americans blame[d] Trump's policies for heightened tensions with Iran" (Telhami, 2020), and a 2019 University of Maryland poll showed that "[t]hree-quarters of Americans, including a majority of Republicans, sa[id] that war with Iran would be unwarranted" (Telhami, 2020). Likewise, a Gallup poll conducted in the same year showed that 78% of respondents favored reliance on nonmilitary efforts to stop Iran's nuclear program, and 65% expressed concern that the U.S. would be too quick to use military force (Younis, 2019). In sum, a strategy of escalation that could lead to a slippery slope and eventually a war with Iran is a possibility to which the American public has shown opposition, and one which would need the support of the American public to succeed.

On the other hand, the escorting of ships that transit the Strait is a cost-effective measure that would ensure the safety of the oil tankers and cargo ships crossing the chokepoint, and it would provide an effective deterrent against Iranian aggression. Nevertheless, it is important to call attention to the fact that attacks on U.S. ships in the past served as the trigger to a variety of conflicts including the Tanker War, and an attack by Iran on one of the escorting vessels could mean the transgression of an escalation threshold in the eyes of the United States.

### Sanctions

One of the most effective strategies the United States has employed against the Islamic Republic of Iran is the imposition of sanctions against its economy. Economic sanctions are defined by Jonathan Masters as the “withdrawal of customary trade and financial relations for foreign- and security-policy purposes” (Masters, 2019). They can be comprehensive, by directing the sanctions against the economic activity of an entire country, or more targeted, aimed at specific individuals, groups, or businesses (Masters, 2019). Economic sanctions are seen as a measure in between war and words, through which policy makers can respond to what they perceive as problematic or inadmissible behavior in international politics (Brzoska, 2014). They are a tool utilized by States and international organizations with a variety of objectives, such as deterrence, subversion, coercion, international/domestic symbolism, and message sending (as cited in Lumen, 2018).

The United States used economic sanctions against Iran in the past and has recently reinstated them in the aftermath of the Trump administration’s abandonment of the JCPOA. Beginning in 2010 the Obama administration together with its European allies imposed economic sanctions on Iran’s oil-based economy, in what was called a two-track strategy: the imposition of sanctions to inflict damage on the Iranian economy coupled with the offer of lifting the sanctions if an agreement was made with regards to Iran’s development of a nuclear program that could eventually lead to nuclear weapons (Fernandez, 2018). These sanctions had a significant effect upon the Iranian economy, causing its GDP to shrink

through the years 2012, 2013 and 2015 (BBC, 2019). The two-track strategy could be considered a success insofar as the pressure put on the Iranian economy forced its government to come to the negotiation table, and the so-called nuclear deal was developed between Rouhani's government and the P5+1 that came into effect in 2016. In spite of the success of the JCPOA, after the Trump administration decided to abandon the nuclear deal in 2018, it reinstated sanctions on the Iranian economy shortly thereafter, with the objective of compelling "Iran to permanently abandon its well-documented outlaw activities and behave as a normal country" (Pompeo as cited in Dwyer and Kaplow, 2018).

The imposition of sanctions on Iran to ensure the stability of the Strait of Hormuz would be done with the objective of deterrence in mind. According to Christine Lumen, sanctions "allow ... to take non-military actions in cases where military force, where the cost of using force is too high, but a strong response is required" (as cited in Lumen, 2018). The U.S. would apply sanctions to deter Iran from blocking or destabilizing the Strait, applying economic pressure to Iran as a way to punish it for aggressive behavior.

Although generally considered effective, it is important to point out that the United States is currently employing sanctions against Iran, and that, as stated above, Iran has threatened to shut down the Strait of Hormuz in response to the sanctions imposed on its economy in 2011. Further sanctions on the Iranian economy could have the opposite effect of that intended: it could force Tehran to use the bargaining chip of its purported control over the Strait and shut down the waterway, affecting the global energy market and forcing a response on the part of the United States, a worst-case scenario for the Biden administration. Additionally, economic sanctions have been criticized by the collateral effect they have on the larger population. Gordon and Lopez point out that "the sanctions against Iraq between 1991 and 2003 clearly had major humanitarian consequences, but even in sanction regimes targeting decision-makers, side effects are likely to occur" (as cited in Brzoska, 2014).

## Conclusion

Having broken down the foreign policy alternatives at the United States' disposal into several strategies that it can use in order to ensure the stability of the Strait, as well as their inherent benefits and disadvantages, it becomes clear that no one strategy on its own will be enough to safeguard the security of the Strait and keep Iranian aggression at bay. On that account, the U.S. can combine several of these strategies into a two-pronged approach: a proactive long-term strategy using multilateral negotiation, and a reactive strategy in case Iran continues to vie for control over the Strait through belligerent actions that are hostile to U.S. interests. This reactive strategy can combine the different hard power foreign policy tools previously analyzed, framed within the escalation approach, the United States can engage in threat of use of force, escorting and further military action depending on the gravity of the activities that Iran conducts in the Strait.

In the first place, diplomacy through multilateral negotiation is the most viable soft power approach to the situation of the Strait of Hormuz. Indeed, the United States has extensive experience in multilateral negotiation with Iran due to the nuclear deal, and the success of that deal sets the precedent that a negotiation with Iran is possible. Therefore, a multilateral negotiation between the U.S. and its allies and Iran that brings Iran into a rules-based system such as UNCLOS should be the long-term proactive strategy for the U.S. Secondly, in the case that Iran continues to seize cargo ships and oil tankers, threatens the closing of the Strait, and uses its proxies to conduct attacks on U.S. allies in the region, it is necessary for the United States to respond accordingly. Framed within the escalation approach, additional incidents in the Strait should be responded to accordingly by the United States, beginning by the threat of use of force, then the escorting of ships by the U.S. navy as a cost-effective measure to provide security and lastly, through additional and progressively escalating forms of military intervention, matching or outdoing Iran's activities.

## Conclusions

This study was conducted with the objective of understanding the importance that the Strait of Hormuz has for the United States, the history of the conflict that plagues the region, how

recent incidents in the Strait have reignited its importance both for the international community and for the United States, and to what extent the latter will be able to ensure the security of the Strait with the purpose of vindicating its interests and those of its allies. Having concluded the investigation, several conclusions can be drawn.

First, by applying the GSDRC analytical framework to the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz, it was made clear that the control of the Strait has long been the subject of competition between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Conflict in the Strait can be traced back to the Iran-Iraq war and the Tanker War that both took place in the 1980s. From that moment on, the United States has given great importance to the Strait of Hormuz and the surrounding Gulfs, importance which is clearly stated in the Carter Doctrine. Fast forwarding to the last decade, a series of events have revitalized the importance of the Strait to the United States and its allies, as Iran's aggression has caused its vulnerability to come to light once again. From the analysis of the actors involved, it is clear that both the United States and Iran are especially interested in exercising control over the Strait, both have the capability to affect the conflict in the waterway, and both are unlikely to seize their efforts to achieve their objectives.

From the analysis of the primary sources such as the National Security Strategy of 2018 that contain the foreign policy and security concerns and objectives of the United States, as well as White House and Bureau of Eastern Affairs press briefings that incorporate the U.S.' most current attitudes and policies towards the Strait and the Middle East, a few findings come to light. Firstly, the United States confers special importance to the Middle East, as an unstable region in which continued presence is a priority. Secondly, the competition over the control of the Strait with Iran is part of a larger framework of animosity between the United States and Iran, an enmity that can be traced back decades and is currently on the rise as the U.S considers Iran the most prominent threat to its interests in the region. And lastly, although the Strait of Hormuz is not directly mentioned, several sources highlight the significance of a stable global energy market, as well as of secure trade routes, all of which directly relate to



the Strait, it being the passageway through which over 20% of the oil trade transits daily, and one of the most important shipping routes worldwide.

Lastly, the exploration of the foreign policy alternatives at the United States' disposal makes it clear that it is very capable of providing security in the Strait of Hormuz through a wide range of options. The most viable foreign policy tool available to the United States in terms of soft power is that of indirect diplomacy, through multilateral negotiations with Iran to establish a rules-based system that limits the Middle Eastern country's ability to destabilize the Strait. Furthermore, the Biden administration has shown a strong inclination towards multilateralism that is clearly stated in the White Press Briefings consulted, so indirect diplomacy is likely to be the U.S.' current preferred approach to the situation. Together with this strategy, hard power tools such as intervention and threat of use of force can also be used by the U.S to keep Iran in check, and to maintain the stability and security of the Strait of Hormuz in pragmatic terms.

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