

Too Many Fronts, Too Few Fleets.

America's Maritime Dilemma and the Price of Strategic Distraction

Allied Burden-Sharing, Escalation in the Middle East, and the Limits of Naval Power in an Era of Concurrent Crises

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Abstract

The growing number of simultaneous security challenges has exposed a fundamental weakness in Western strategic planning. Military commitments are expanding faster than the resources available to sustain them. Tensions involving Iran, threats to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, renewed Houthi pressure on Saudi Arabia, and Russia's continuing war against Ukraine have brought this problem into sharper focus. The central question is not whether Western powers possess sufficient military strength, but whether they can employ it selectively without weakening their position elsewhere.

Diverting naval assets to protect maritime trade, for example, may address an immediate threat while reducing operational flexibility in other theatres. At the same time, relatively inexpensive forms of maritime disruption can impose disproportionately high financial and military costs on their opponents. These pressures make allied burden-sharing more than a

diplomatic aspiration; it must translate into clearly defined responsibilities and deployable capabilities. In Ukraine, the effectiveness of limited ceasefire arrangements likewise depends on their relationship to sanctions, intelligence cooperation, and the preservation of negotiating leverage. Taken together, these challenges suggest that Western security will depend on the ability to establish strategic priorities, distinguish achievable objectives from open-ended commitments, and combine credible deterrence with diplomacy that limits the risk of escalation.

Keywords: Maritime Strategy; Strategic Overstretch; Allied Burden-Sharing; Escalation Management; Coercive Diplomacy.

Introduction

The United States and its European allies face a strategic problem that extends beyond any single regional conflict. Military commitments are multiplying, economic vulnerabilities remain significant, and decisions taken in one theatre increasingly constrain the options available in another. The confrontation with Iran, Houthi threats to Saudi Arabia and maritime commerce, and Russia's continuing war against Ukraine reveal the difficulty of managing immediate security demands without losing sight of broader political priorities.

The issue is not simply one of military capacity. Western powers retain considerable resources, but their strategic value depends on where, when, and for what purpose they are employed. A response that appears justified in isolation may prove costly when measured against competing commitments.

This dilemma is particularly evident in the maritime domain. U.S. naval forces committed to operations involving Iran and the protection of major shipping routes cannot be treated as an inexhaustible reserve for every emerging regional contingency. Additional deployments may offer short-term reassurance while reducing operational flexibility elsewhere. Such decisions therefore require a clear assessment of the political interests at stake and the military resources that can realistically be sustained.

European allies and regional partners have an important role in reducing these pressures. Yet burden-sharing has little strategic value unless political commitments are matched by operational responsibility. Defined missions, reliable intelligence exchange, interoperable

command structures, and adequate defensive capabilities are necessary if allied contributions are to relieve pressure on U.S. forces rather than merely supplement their presence.

A similar distinction between immediate action and longer-term political purpose is necessary in Ukraine. Limited diplomatic arrangements may help contain humanitarian suffering and economic disruption, but their value depends on enforceable conditions and the preservation of negotiating leverage. Premature concessions, particularly where compliance remains uncertain, could weaken the basis for a more durable settlement.

The broader lesson is that military activity and strategic effectiveness are not synonymous. Western governments must decide which objectives are essential, which commitments can be delegated, and where additional involvement is unlikely to produce corresponding political gains. Preserving that distinction is central to maintaining freedom of action while limiting the risks of an increasingly interconnected security environment.

1. Strategic Overstretch: The Problem of Simultaneous Commitments

Great-power strategy has always required governments to reconcile political ambitions with the resources available to pursue them. For maritime powers, this problem is especially demanding. Naval forces operate across considerable distances, and their effectiveness depends not only on the number of ships and aircraft available, but also on maintenance schedules, logistical support, crew readiness, and the ability to sustain deployments over time.

Naval forces offer governments a considerable range of options. A carrier strike group can provide deterrence and strike capabilities, while surface combatants and surveillance platforms support maritime security, intelligence collection, and defensive operations. Yet these capabilities are neither interchangeable nor continuously available. Assigning a vessel to one mission may prevent its employment elsewhere, and prolonged deployments eventually affect readiness.

The confrontation involving Iran brings these constraints into focus. American naval forces may be required to conduct maritime interdiction, protect commercial shipping, gather intelligence, deter further attacks, and defend deployed units. Although these activities support overlapping political objectives, they place different demands on ships, aircraft, personnel, and command

arrangements. The difficulty becomes greater when additional regional contingencies emerge without a corresponding increase in available forces.

U.S. military descriptions of a blockade against Iran raise a separate set of legal and strategic concerns [1]. Interdicting maritime traffic in the context of armed hostilities carries legal and political implications that differ substantially from routine shipping protection. Questions concerning the legal basis for interdiction, proportionality, neutral shipping, and the management of escalation cannot be treated as secondary operational details. They influence both the legitimacy of the operation and the range of responses available to Iran and other regional actors.

Three objectives must be distinguished, the imposing costs on Iran, the maintaining lawful commercial navigation, and the preventing the conflict from spreading. Pursuing one may complicate another. Restrictions on Iranian maritime activity, for instance, could encourage retaliation against merchant vessels or regional infrastructure. A resulting increase in escort requirements might draw additional warships into the area, reducing their availability for other commitments and increasing their exposure to attack or miscalculation.

Such an outcome is not inevitable. Its likelihood depends on the scale of interdiction, Iran's response, the availability of allied forces, and the effectiveness of diplomatic communication. Nevertheless, it illustrates a problem that maritime strategists cannot ignore. Goercive operations can create demands for further military protection, potentially increasing the resources required to sustain the original policy.

The question, therefore, is not simply whether a naval operation can achieve its immediate objectives. Governments must also consider what commitments may follow, how long those commitments can be maintained, and whether the likely political gains justify the resulting constraints on military flexibility. A successful maritime strategy requires these judgments before operational expansion, rather than after new obligations have already accumulated.

2. The Maritime Geography of Concurrent Crises

Two of the world's most strategically important maritime passages lie at opposite ends of the Arabian Peninsula. The Strait of Hormuz connects Gulf energy producers with international markets, while Bab el-Mandeb provides access between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea,

forming a critical link in the shipping route to the Suez Canal and Europe. Their geographical separation should not obscure their economic and strategic interdependence.

Disruption in either passage affects shipping patterns, insurance premiums, transport costs, and energy markets. When both are threatened, the consequences become more difficult to contain. Shipping companies have fewer reliable routing options, commercial uncertainty increases, and naval forces face competing demands across a wider geographical area. For European economies, whose trade and energy security depend partly on these routes, the implications extend well beyond the immediate conflicts.

Developments reported in October 2026 have brought these vulnerabilities into sharper focus [1, 2]. American interdiction operations involving Iran, attacks on commercial shipping in the Gulf, and renewed fighting in Yemen have placed additional pressure on an already strained maritime environment. Although these developments are connected through their effects on regional security and international trade, the military challenges associated with each passage require different responses.

In the Strait of Hormuz, the restricted operating environment exposes naval forces to threats from coastal missile systems, naval mines, unmanned platforms, and other forms of attack that can be launched with limited warning. The proximity of commercial traffic to potential areas of engagement further complicates defensive operations and escalation management.

The situation around Bab el-Mandeb presents a somewhat different problem. Naval forces must monitor a larger maritime area, protect commercial routes against threats launched from dispersed locations, and operate amid Yemen's fragmented political and military landscape. Persistent surveillance, reliable intelligence, electronic warfare capabilities, and coordination with commercial shipping operators are therefore as important as the deployment of major surface combatants.

The economics of maritime defence add another dimension to the problem. Relatively inexpensive drones and missiles can force defending navies to expend costly interceptors, sustain high levels of readiness, and assign sophisticated warships to prolonged defensive missions. Even when individual attacks are successfully defeated, the cumulative burden on ammunition stocks, maintenance cycles, personnel, and operational availability may be considerable.

This imbalance helps explain why an adversary does not need to establish command of the sea to disrupt maritime commerce. Intermittent attacks, credible threats, or uncertainty about safe passage may be sufficient to alter shipping decisions and impose costs on governments and commercial operators. Sea denial can thus produce significant strategic effects without requiring the sustained military presence normally associated with sea control.

For the United States and its allies, the implications are both operational and political. The number of missiles intercepted or attacks prevented remains an important measure of defensive performance, but it offers only a partial picture of maritime security. A broader assessment must consider whether merchant shipping can operate with reasonable predictability, whether commercial confidence is recovering, and whether defensive commitments can be sustained without weakening other strategic priorities.

Ultimately, the protection of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb cannot be judged solely by tactical results. Its effectiveness depends on restoring reliable maritime access at a military and economic cost that the defending states can sustain.

3. Yemen and the Risk of Strategic Diversion

The renewed Houthi campaign against Saudi Arabia raises questions that go beyond the immediate defence of Saudi territory. Attacks on major infrastructure, including the October 2026 attacks on King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh [2], have exposed vulnerabilities in existing air-defence arrangements and increased pressure for a more forceful response. They also confront Washington with a difficult choice over the extent of its military involvement in another regional confrontation.

Additional American deployments or offensive operations against Houthi missile and drone capabilities might offer immediate defensive advantages. Their wider strategic consequences, however, require careful consideration. Forces assigned to operations in Yemen may become unavailable for other missions, while an expanded campaign could generate further demands for intelligence, logistics, force protection, and maritime security. These costs matter particularly when American military resources are already committed to the confrontation involving Iran.

The risk is one of strategic diversion. A militarily weaker actor can impose disproportionate demands on a stronger opponent by creating security problems that are politically difficult to ignore. Attacks need not produce a decisive battlefield result to have strategic consequences. They may be sufficient to alter deployment priorities, increase operational expenditure, or draw a stronger power into commitments whose political benefits remain uncertain.

The Houthis, however, should not be understood solely through their relationship with Iran. Their military activities are shaped by domestic political objectives, territorial interests, rivalry with the internationally recognized Yemeni government, and calculations concerning Saudi Arabia's role in the conflict. Iranian assistance and overlapping regional interests form part of this environment, but they do not establish that Tehran directs every Houthi operation. The distinction between material support, political alignment, operational coordination, and direct command is essential when assessing responsibility and determining an appropriate response.

For the United States, this complicates both deterrence and escalation management. Failing to respond to major attacks on Saudi infrastructure may weaken confidence in regional security arrangements. Conversely, treating each Houthi attack as grounds for expanded American military action could deepen U.S. involvement in Yemen without addressing the political conditions sustaining the conflict. Neither consequence can be evaluated independently of Washington's other commitments in the region.

A more durable security arrangement would require Saudi Arabia and other regional partners to assume greater responsibility for territorial defence, supported where appropriate by intelligence cooperation, defensive capabilities, and coordinated maritime surveillance. Diplomatic engagement would remain necessary, particularly where local ceasefire arrangements, humanitarian access, and negotiations among Yemeni actors could reduce the incentives for renewed violence.

Such an approach would not eliminate the possibility of further attacks or remove the need for military responses in particular circumstances. Its purpose would be to reduce the extent to which every regional escalation creates an automatic demand for additional American forces.

The longer-term question is whether the security of Saudi Arabia and the surrounding maritime environment can be maintained through increasingly frequent U.S. intervention, or

whether regional institutions and defensive capabilities can gradually assume a greater share of that responsibility. The answer will affect not only the course of the conflict in Yemen, but also Washington's ability to preserve military flexibility across its wider strategic commitments.

4. Allied Burden-Sharing: From Political Solidarity to Operational Responsibility

The sustainability of Western maritime security depends increasingly on how effectively the United States and its allies distribute operational responsibilities. American naval power has long provided much of the security infrastructure supporting international commerce, particularly across strategically important maritime routes. European states have benefited substantially from this arrangement, although their contributions have varied in scale, capability, and political commitment.

The growing demands placed on naval forces make this distribution of responsibilities more consequential. For Europe, security in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the approaches to the Suez Canal is not merely an American strategic concern. These waterways support European commercial access to Asian markets and influence the resilience of supply chains and energy transportation. Greater European involvement therefore follows from interests that are directly European, rather than simply from expectations of transatlantic solidarity.

The European Union already has a framework for such involvement. Established in February 2024 and subsequently renewed, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES provides a defensive naval presence intended to safeguard freedom of navigation and protect commercial vessels against threats at sea. Its mandate includes accompanying merchant shipping, maintaining maritime situational awareness, and providing protection within the geographical and operational limits established by the European Union. In March 2026, the Council expanded selected information-sharing and regional cooperation tasks, subject to the operation's available means and capabilities [3].

ASPIDES demonstrates that European governments can organize a multinational naval response to a shared security problem. Its existence, however, should not be confused with the capacity to undertake every demanding maritime mission across the region. Sustained escort operations, integrated air and missile defence, surveillance, replenishment, and the protection of high-value naval assets require capabilities that are not evenly distributed among European fleets.

The availability of suitable warships at any given moment is further constrained by maintenance requirements, deployment cycles, ammunition stocks, and national decisions concerning acceptable operational risk.

These limitations suggest that allied burden-sharing should be evaluated primarily through the capabilities delivered and the responsibilities actually assumed. The number of participating governments is relevant politically, but provides an incomplete measure of operational effectiveness. A multinational formation may demonstrate considerable diplomatic support while still lacking sufficient ships, defensive systems, or logistical capacity to maintain its assigned mission over an extended period.

A more workable division of responsibilities would take account of these differences. The United States could retain primary responsibility for operations requiring advanced strike capabilities, high-end deterrence, and the integration of strategic intelligence. European navies could assume a larger share of defensive escort missions, commercial shipping protection, maritime surveillance, and coordination with civilian maritime authorities. Regional partners, meanwhile, could concentrate on the defence of national infrastructure, territorial waters, and nearby maritime approaches, supported by appropriate intelligence and capability-development arrangements.

Such an allocation would need to reflect actual force availability and political authorization rather than assumptions about what allied navies might theoretically provide. It would also require compatible communications, shared maritime situational awareness, reliable intelligence exchange, and command arrangements capable of supporting operations involving several national contingents. Long-term sustainability would depend on deployment rotations, maintenance support, replenishment capacity, and adequate stocks of defensive interceptors.

Existing institutions provide a basis for developing these arrangements. The Combined Maritime Forces and their constituent task forces possess experience in multinational maritime cooperation, while European Union operations offer a separate institutional framework with their own mandates and political oversight. Closer coordination between these structures could reduce duplication and improve operational coverage, provided that their distinct legal authorities and command relationships are respected.

The distinction between defensive maritime security and coercive military operations is especially important. Participation in the protection of commercial navigation does not imply authorization to enforce a blockade or conduct offensive operations against Iran. European governments may support defensive action to preserve freedom of navigation while maintaining different positions on the use of force in the wider confrontation. An effective coalition must accommodate these differences rather than obscure them.

Four considerations should guide the practical allocation of responsibilities. First, the precise scope and legal authority of each mission, second the interoperability of participating forces, third the capacity to sustain deployments and defensive operations over time and forth agreement on political objectives, acceptable risks, and conditions for disengagement. These are not simply administrative requirements. They determine whether allied contributions can function as a coherent operational effort under pressure.

The strategic value of burden-sharing ultimately lies in reducing dependence on the repeated diversion of American naval assets whenever a regional security incident occurs. A stronger European contribution could improve maritime protection while allowing Washington to preserve forces for missions that cannot readily be transferred to other partners. It could also give European governments greater influence over security arrangements affecting their own economic interests.

Achieving this outcome does not require the creation of additional institutions for their own sake. It requires existing organizations to translate political commitments into sustainable military capabilities, clearly assigned missions, and operational cooperation that remains effective when regional conditions deteriorate.

5. Maritime Intelligence as the Foundation of Strategic Economy

The increasing use of unmanned systems, precision-guided weapons, and commercially available maritime data has changed the intelligence requirements of naval operations. Effective maritime security now depends as much on the ability to identify, interpret, and share information as it does on the number of ships and aircraft deployed. For forces operating across several contested maritime areas, intelligence integration can help reduce unnecessary deployments and direct limited resources toward threats that warrant closer attention.

Maritime surveillance draws on a wide range of sources, including satellites, patrol aircraft, unmanned platforms, coastal sensors, commercial vessel-tracking systems, signals intelligence, and reporting from regional partners. Each contributes a different part of the operational picture. Satellite imagery may reveal changes in maritime activity, while airborne surveillance and coastal systems can provide more immediate observations. Commercial shipping data offers valuable context, although its reliability varies and vessels may transmit incomplete, inaccurate, or deliberately misleading information.

Combining these sources presents difficulties that cannot be resolved simply by collecting more data. National systems differ in their technical standards, reporting procedures, classification requirements, and assessments of reliability. Information may arrive at different times or contain conflicting indications. Commanders therefore need more than a shared display of maritime activity. They require assessments that distinguish confirmed observations from analytical judgments and identify where uncertainty remains.

The practical value of intelligence integration lies in connecting three stages of decision-making. First, establishing what is happening, second assessing its significance for the mission, and third determining what response is justified. The distinction becomes particularly important when attacks involve non-state armed groups operating within complex regional networks. Identifying the origin of a weapon or the source of technical assistance does not necessarily establish who authorized a particular operation.

Evidence of material support, operational cooperation, and direct command responsibility must consequently be assessed separately. In a period of heightened regional tension, an attribution error could have consequences well beyond the immediate incident. A response based on an overstated assessment of responsibility might transform a localized confrontation into a broader interstate crisis. Equally, excessive uncertainty or delays in sharing relevant intelligence can leave defensive forces unable to respond effectively to emerging threats.

Multinational intelligence cooperation introduces further constraints. Governments retain control over sensitive sources, collection methods, and the disclosure of classified information. Political trust, national legislation, and technical compatibility influence what can be shared, with whom, and under which conditions. A workable intelligence framework should therefore allow

participants to exchange operationally useful assessments without requiring unrestricted access to national intelligence holdings.

Existing European initiatives provide a basis for developing this capability. The European Defence Agency's Maritime Surveillance network, MARSUR, supports information exchange among participating navies. In September 2026, the agency reported live data exchange with national command systems and NATO during the REPMUS exercise [4]. Its development illustrates the practical importance of connecting national surveillance systems and improving the common recognised maritime picture. Nevertheless, interoperability between technical networks does not, by itself, resolve differences in intelligence classification, analytical confidence, or national authority over operational decisions.

For European and regional maritime forces, the priority should be to improve the reliability and usefulness of shared information rather than create additional reporting structures. Better integration could reduce duplication, support earlier warning, and allow defensive deployments to reflect assessed operational requirements. It may also help participating governments determine when additional military presence is necessary and when existing capabilities are sufficient.

These advantages should not be overstated. Improved maritime awareness cannot eliminate the need for persistent surveillance or guarantee that every threat will be detected in time. Nor does greater access to intelligence automatically produce agreement about the appropriate military response. Intelligence remains valuable only when its limitations are understood and its assessments are connected to clearly defined political and operational objectives.

In strategic terms, the contribution of intelligence integration is its potential to improve decisions while limiting avoidable commitments. Its effectiveness should be assessed through the quality and timeliness of warning, the reliability of threat attribution, the coordination of defensive responses, and the extent to which shared information helps forces operate without unnecessary duplication. These measures offer a more meaningful indication of intelligence value than the volume of information collected or distributed.

6. Escalation Control and the Limits of Naval Coercion

The ability to achieve military superiority does not necessarily give a state control over the political consequences of employing force. This limitation is particularly relevant in confrontations involving Iran and armed non-state actors, where military operations in one area may provoke responses elsewhere in the region.

Naval power provides governments with several instruments of coercion, including maritime interdiction, restrictions on commercial access, strikes against military targets, and the deployment of forces intended to deter further attacks. These measures can impose tangible costs on an adversary. Their political effects, however, depend partly on how the opposing side interprets the operation and what options it believes remain available.

A state facing superior conventional forces may choose to respond through means that avoid direct military confrontation. Attacks on commercial shipping, cyber operations, disruption of critical infrastructure, or the use of allied armed groups can create pressure without requiring conventional military parity. Such responses may also occur beyond the geographical area in which the original coercive action was undertaken, complicating efforts to contain the conflict.

This creates an important asymmetry in escalation management. An operation regarded by Washington as limited in scope may be interpreted in Tehran as threatening a substantially wider set of interests. The two sides may consequently assess the same military action against different political thresholds. Even where neither intends a broader confrontation, these differences can increase the likelihood of further escalation.

The risks are not confined to deliberate retaliation. Naval operations take place in environments where incomplete intelligence, technical failures, mistaken identification, and communication difficulties can influence decisions made under considerable time pressure. The presence of civilian shipping and vessels associated with neutral states introduces additional uncertainty, particularly when military activity occurs along heavily used commercial routes.

The reported incident involving the Panama-flagged M/V Ocean Molica in the Gulf of Oman on 10 October 2026 illustrates these difficulties [1]. According to U.S. Central Command, an American aircraft disabled the vessel's propulsion after it allegedly ignored warnings and

attempted to breach the naval blockade against Iran. CENTCOM reported that the crew was unharmed. The episode nevertheless raises wider questions concerning target identification, the treatment of commercial vessels, the interpretation of warnings, and the potential diplomatic consequences of using force against ships operating under third-country flags.

These considerations are closely connected to the legal framework governing naval warfare. Maritime interdiction and blockade operations are subject to different legal conditions depending on their character and the circumstances in which they occur. The non-binding San Remo Manual, widely used as a restatement of the law applicable to naval warfare, identifies requirements concerning the declaration, effectiveness, and impartial application of blockades, together with restrictions intended to protect civilian populations and neutral maritime interests [5]. Assessing the legality of a particular operation requires examination of the applicable legal framework, the available facts, and the conduct of the forces involved. A military designation of an operation as blockade enforcement does not, by itself, establish that every action undertaken pursuant to it is lawful.

Legal constraints also influence the strategic environment. Operations perceived as exceeding their lawful scope may complicate relations with allies, weaken cooperation with neutral shipping states, and impose diplomatic costs that were not anticipated during military planning. Conversely, clearly communicated procedures and consistent adherence to applicable legal standards can reduce uncertainty, although they cannot eliminate the possibility of confrontation.

Effective escalation management therefore requires an assessment of both immediate military effects and the political reactions that an operation may generate. Before expanding coercive measures, decision-makers need to establish their intended political outcome, examine whether the required military commitments can be sustained, consider the legal and diplomatic consequences, and identify conditions under which military pressure could be reduced.

These judgments are particularly important when an operation begins to generate additional obligations. Increased interdiction may lead to retaliation against shipping, which in turn creates demands for escort missions, surveillance, and force protection. Without periodic

reassessment, the resources required to maintain a coercive policy may grow beyond those originally considered necessary.

Escalation cannot be controlled with certainty, and the complete elimination of operational risk is neither realistic nor compatible with every legitimate military objective. What governments can control more directly is the process through which decisions to expand, sustain, or reduce military operations are made.

7. Ukraine and the Strategic Value of Negotiating Leverage

The war in Ukraine presents operational challenges quite different from those confronting Western naval forces in the Middle East. Nevertheless, decisions in both regions are shaped by competing commitments, economic pressures, and the difficulty of aligning immediate policy responses with longer-term political objectives. In Ukraine, this relationship is particularly evident in the interaction between limited ceasefire proposals, sanctions policy, and intelligence cooperation.

A negotiated suspension of attacks on energy infrastructure could provide meaningful humanitarian relief. Reducing damage to electricity generation, transmission networks, and other essential facilities would help protect civilian populations and limit disruptions to heating, water supplies, and industrial activity. Such an arrangement might also provide an opportunity to establish procedures for monitoring compliance before attempting more extensive negotiations.

Recent developments illustrate the difficulties involved. On 11 October 2026, President Donald Trump announced what he described as an energy ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine [6]. The announcement was not immediately accompanied by confirmed agreement from both parties on its scope or implementation. Ukrainian officials subsequently reported continued Russian attacks on energy facilities. As of 13 October, the Kremlin described contacts as ongoing, without clarifying agreed terms; accordingly, the announcement cannot be treated as a verified bilateral ceasefire [6, 7].

The distinction between a diplomatic announcement and an operationally meaningful agreement is central to assessing such initiatives. A limited ceasefire would require agreed definitions of protected infrastructure, clearly established obligations, procedures for monitoring

compliance, and a process for investigating alleged violations. These arrangements would need to account for the difficulty of attributing some attacks and the possibility of disagreement over whether particular facilities fall within the agreed restrictions.

Even if implemented, an energy ceasefire would address only one aspect of the conflict. Military operations against other categories of targets could continue, while questions concerning territory, security guarantees, civilian protection, and the conditions for a wider settlement would remain unresolved. Both sides might also seek to preserve or improve their military positions in areas not covered by the agreement.

The political value of a limited ceasefire would therefore depend on its implementation and its contribution to a broader negotiating process. Observable restraint could establish a basis for further discussions, whereas repeated violations without effective consequences would weaken confidence in subsequent commitments.

a. Sanctions and the Preservation of Negotiating Leverage

Economic sanctions are another instrument through which Western governments seek to influence Russia's strategic calculations. By restricting access to financial resources, technology, export markets, and other economic opportunities, sanctions can increase the costs associated with continued military operations. Their effects depend on enforcement, international coordination, the availability of alternative commercial channels, and Russia's capacity to adapt.

The relationship between sanctions and negotiation is consequently more complex than a direct exchange of economic pressure for political concessions. Restrictions may impose substantial costs without producing immediate policy changes, while poorly coordinated relief can reduce pressure before the conditions associated with it have been fulfilled.

The reported U.S. decision in October 2026 to ease certain restrictions affecting Russian diesel supplies highlights this difficulty [8]. Intended to address pressures in energy markets, the measure raised concerns about its implications for the broader sanctions framework. The scale of any price effect remains uncertain; contemporaneous reporting questioned whether the limited volumes involved would materially affect the market [8].

Its strategic significance extends beyond the immediate commercial transaction. Governments facing higher energy prices may have incentives to adjust policies originally adopted for security purposes. A measure intended to ease domestic economic pressures can consequently affect bargaining positions in an unrelated diplomatic negotiation.

This interaction is especially relevant when instability in the Gulf influences international fuel markets. Disruption to energy transportation or heightened concern about supply security can increase pressure on importing states to seek alternative sources. Decisions taken in response may then influence the economic restrictions applied to Russia, even though the conflicts themselves involve different actors, objectives, and military circumstances.

Sanctions policy needs to account for these connections without assuming that all forms of commercial adjustment carry the same political consequences. Humanitarian exceptions, narrowly defined market-stabilization measures, and relief linked to negotiated concessions should be assessed separately.

Where sanctions relief forms part of a diplomatic arrangement, its conditions should be explicit and its implementation coordinated with Ukraine and relevant allies. Verification procedures and legally feasible mechanisms for restoring restrictions would help preserve leverage if agreed commitments are not fulfilled. Periodic assessment would also be necessary to determine whether the measures continue to support identifiable strategic objectives.

b. Intelligence Cooperation and Diplomatic Credibility

Intelligence support contributes to Ukraine's defensive capabilities and to the practical assessment of diplomatic arrangements. Early warning of missile and drone attacks, information concerning threats to critical infrastructure, and reliable assessment of military activity can improve defensive preparedness. These capabilities are also relevant when determining whether restrictions established under a ceasefire are being respected.

The importance of timely intelligence has become particularly visible during the October 2026 developments. Disputes over the scope and continuity of external intelligence assistance illustrate the sensitivity of such cooperation. Individual incidents, however, cannot establish a broader policy shift without corroborating evidence.

Monitoring a ceasefire presents a related challenge. Reports of violations may depend on classified sources, technical observations, or information collected by the parties themselves. A credible assessment process must distinguish between confirmed incidents, plausible but unresolved allegations, and claims that cannot be independently corroborated.

Intelligence cooperation can reduce uncertainty, although it cannot eliminate political disagreement over the meaning of particular events. National disclosure restrictions, the protection of collection capabilities, and the legal implications of different forms of assistance must remain part of the arrangements governing such cooperation.

For Ukraine, access to reliable warning and assessment capabilities also affects its ability to evaluate the risks associated with proposed diplomatic concessions. Negotiations conducted under conditions of significant informational uncertainty may make it more difficult to assess compliance, anticipate renewed attacks, or determine whether military restraint is being reciprocated.

c. Strategic Implications

The relationship between maritime insecurity in the Middle East and negotiations over Ukraine is primarily one of resource allocation, economic exposure, and competing political priorities. Instability affecting energy markets can influence domestic policy choices and sanctions enforcement, while commitments in one region may constrain the military and intelligence resources available elsewhere.

These connections do not imply that the two conflicts share a single strategic logic. Their causes, participants, and possible political settlements remain distinct. They do, however, require governments to consider how short-term measures adopted in response to one crisis may affect their objectives in another.

For Ukraine, the immediate challenge is to translate diplomatic proposals into arrangements that can be implemented, monitored, and sustained. Limited ceasefires may contribute to this process, particularly where they reduce civilian suffering, but their political value depends on clearly defined obligations and credible verification.

Sanctions and intelligence cooperation remain relevant to the negotiating environment because they influence the costs of continued hostilities, the capacity to assess compliance, and the ability of the parties to evaluate their security positions.

A durable diplomatic process will ultimately require a closer relationship between negotiated commitments, practical verification, and the political consequences of non-compliance. Without that connection, announcements intended to signal progress may produce little change in the conditions sustaining the war.

8. The European Strategic Dimension: From Dependency to Responsibility

Europe's security interests extend well beyond its immediate geographical boundaries. The continuing war in Ukraine has reinforced the importance of territorial defence and deterrence, while instability in the Middle East has demonstrated how developments along distant maritime routes can affect European trade, energy costs, and economic resilience. Together, these pressures place increasing demands on military capabilities that remain unevenly distributed among European states.

The difficulty is not confined to defence expenditure. European governments must reconcile commitments to collective defence, support for Ukraine, maritime security, and other international operations with limitations in force availability, procurement coordination, industrial production, and military readiness. Increasing budgets may help address these constraints, but the results will depend on whether additional investment produces forces and equipment that can be deployed, maintained, and replenished when required.

This distinction is reflected in the European Union's Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030, which identifies capability shortfalls and promotes coordinated procurement and industrial development. NATO's 2025 Hague commitments likewise link investment targets to capabilities, readiness, infrastructure, and resilience [9, 10]. These initiatives establish political and institutional objectives, although their implementation will depend on national procurement decisions, industrial delivery schedules, and the ability of armed forces to absorb new capabilities.

Maritime security deserves particular attention within this wider effort. European economies depend on commercial routes connecting the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and Asian markets, yet protecting these routes requires assets that are also needed for national and collective defence. Air-defence-equipped warships, maritime patrol aircraft, replenishment vessels, surveillance systems, and trained personnel cannot be deployed indefinitely without consequences for maintenance and readiness.

A sustained European maritime role would therefore require greater predictability in force generation. Governments need to determine which missions they are prepared to support over extended periods, what capabilities they can provide, and how deployment cycles will be maintained. Greater cooperation in procurement and logistical support could help, particularly where fragmented national programmes produce unnecessary duplication or limit interoperability.

The relationship with the United States forms an important part of these decisions. European strategic autonomy has often been discussed in terms of dependence on American military capabilities, but the practical question concerns the distribution of responsibilities within an existing alliance framework. Some capabilities, particularly strategic intelligence, advanced command systems, and high-end military enablers, remain difficult for European states to reproduce independently at scale. Other missions may offer greater scope for European leadership, provided that the necessary resources and political authorization are available.

In the Middle East, defensive maritime security presents one such area. European governments have direct interests in protecting commercial navigation, and the EU's ASPIDES operation demonstrates an existing institutional basis for coordinated naval activity. Expanded European responsibility would nevertheless require careful attention to operational limits and the distinction between protecting merchant shipping and participating in offensive campaigns. The political willingness to undertake the former should not be assumed to extend automatically to the latter.

Ukraine presents a different set of responsibilities. European governments must balance the requirements of supporting Ukraine with their own defence readiness and industrial needs. Ammunition production, air-defence capacity, equipment maintenance, and the ability to sustain assistance over time are directly relevant. Diplomatic coordination also matters, particularly where

negotiations could affect European security arrangements and the longer-term conditions of deterrence.

a. Greece and the Requirements of Selective Maritime Engagement

For Greece, these issues have a distinctive economic and geographical significance. According to the Union of Greek Shipowners' 2025–26 annual report, the Greek-owned merchant fleet accounts for 19.1% of global carrying capacity measured in deadweight tonnage [11], giving Greek maritime interests substantial exposure to developments along international trade routes. Disruptions in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, or the Strait of Hormuz can affect vessels and commercial networks closely associated with the Greek shipping sector, even when the immediate security incidents occur far from Greek territorial waters.

Greece also occupies an important position within the Eastern Mediterranean, where maritime transport, energy connections, alliance obligations, and national defence requirements intersect. Its contribution to wider maritime security therefore involves a continuing balance between participation in multinational operations and the preservation of forces required for national and regional commitments.

The EU's ASPIDES operation provides a practical example of this relationship. With its operational headquarters located in Larissa, Greece has a direct institutional role in a European mission designed to protect maritime navigation. This involvement offers opportunities to contribute command experience, operational expertise, and regional understanding to a wider European effort.

Such participation also involves choices about available resources. Naval units assigned to distant operations remain subject to deployment and maintenance cycles, while personnel, air-defence capabilities, and logistical support must be considered alongside other national requirements. Decisions concerning future contributions should therefore reflect both the strategic importance of secure maritime commerce and the operational consequences of sustained deployments.

The distinction between the interests of the Greek-owned merchant fleet and the responsibilities of the Hellenic Navy is important. The global scale of Greek commercial shipping

does not imply that Greece possesses, or should independently provide, military protection across every route used by Greek-owned vessels. The challenge is to determine how national contributions can complement European and multinational arrangements while remaining consistent with available capabilities and defence priorities.

This suggests a role built around selective participation, operational expertise, and cooperation within existing institutions. Maritime surveillance, command coordination, defensive escort activities, and the exchange of information with commercial operators are among the areas where national experience can contribute to broader security objectives. The appropriate scale of involvement would depend on the mission, the prevailing threat environment, and the requirement to preserve adequate forces for other commitments.

b. Implications for European Strategic Responsibility

European governments will continue to differ in their geographical priorities, strategic cultures, and willingness to participate in particular operations. These differences need not prevent cooperation, provided that responsibilities are defined realistically and institutional arrangements accommodate national constraints.

For Greece, as for other European maritime states, the central consideration is how to contribute to collective security without compromising essential national commitments. A durable European maritime posture will depend on the ability to make such choices consistently, sustain the forces assigned to them, and connect operational contributions to clearly identified security interests.

9. Strategic Choices: Three Possible Courses of Action

The preceding analysis points to three broad approaches available to the United States and its allies. Each involves different assumptions about the use of military power, the responsibilities of regional partners, and the relationship between immediate security requirements and longer-term strategic commitments.

The first approach would rely on continued American military concentration across the principal areas of confrontation. Washington would retain primary responsibility for maritime protection, deterrence, and responses to regional escalation, supported by allied contributions

where available. This arrangement could provide relatively unified command and rapid access to advanced military capabilities. Its principal limitation is the pressure it would place on force availability, deployment cycles, and the capacity to respond to developments elsewhere.

A second approach would transfer a substantially greater share of regional security responsibilities to European allies and regional partners. American involvement would become more selective, with local and allied forces assuming larger roles in maritime protection, territorial defence, and surveillance. The feasibility of this option would depend on capabilities that are not uniformly available. Differences in readiness, command arrangements, defensive systems, and political authorization could leave significant gaps, particularly during a period of rapid escalation.

The third approach would combine continued American involvement in missions requiring capabilities that are difficult to replace with a more deliberate allocation of other responsibilities among participating states. Under such an arrangement, the United States could concentrate on high-end deterrence, strategic intelligence, and selected military operations, while European and regional partners assumed defined defensive and maritime security tasks.

This model would require more than a general commitment to cooperation. Participating governments would need to agree on mission boundaries, operational authority, force contributions, and arrangements for sustaining deployments. Responsibilities would have to reflect available capabilities, while decisions involving escalation or changes in mission scope would remain subject to clearly established political control.

The three approaches involve different trade-offs. Concentrating responsibility in American forces may simplify certain operational decisions but increase the demands placed on limited assets. Greater delegation could reduce those demands, although its effectiveness would depend on the readiness and coordination of partner forces. A differentiated division of responsibilities offers another possibility, but introduces its own challenges of command, interoperability, and political agreement.

The choice among these approaches should therefore be assessed against identifiable requirements, the ability to maintain maritime security, preserve forces for other strategic commitments, manage escalation risks, and sustain coalition participation over time. These criteria

provide a basis for evaluating alternative arrangements without assuming that any single model will remain appropriate under all regional conditions.

10. Policy Recommendations: Translating Strategic Priorities into Practice

The preceding analysis suggests that managing simultaneous security challenges requires a more deliberate relationship between political objectives, military commitments, and allied responsibilities. This has practical implications for force allocation, maritime security, regional defence, intelligence cooperation, and diplomacy. Eight measures deserve particular consideration.

a. Establish Criteria for Expanding Naval Commitments

Washington should introduce a systematic assessment of proposals to deploy additional major naval assets. Decisions should reflect the importance of the mission, the political outcome being sought, the availability of alternative forces, and the effect on commitments elsewhere.

Such assessments should also consider how long a deployment can be sustained and what circumstances would justify its reduction or termination. This would help distinguish short-term operational requirements from commitments likely to become prolonged.

b. Strengthen European Contributions to Defensive Maritime Security

European governments should focus on improving the operational capabilities available through existing multinational arrangements. Greater contributions to vessel protection, maritime surveillance, defensive escort, and logistical support could reduce pressure on American naval forces, provided that participating states possess the necessary equipment and political authorization.

The EU's ASPIDES operation offers an established framework for defensive maritime cooperation. Its existing mandate and command arrangements provide a basis for further coordination without requiring the creation of additional institutions. Any expansion of responsibilities would nevertheless need to respect the operation's legal authority and the availability of participating forces.

c. Improve Regional Defensive Capabilities

Saudi Arabia and neighbouring states have a direct interest in strengthening the protection of critical infrastructure, territorial approaches, and commercial facilities. More effective cooperation in air and missile defence, early warning, surveillance, and defensive response could improve regional resilience.

Developing these capabilities would require sustained investment, training, compatible systems, and procedures for coordination across national boundaries. External assistance may remain necessary, particularly for intelligence and advanced defensive technologies, but its contribution should be assessed partly by whether it enables regional forces to assume responsibilities over time.

d. Improve Intelligence Integration and Attribution Standards

Western and regional partners should prioritize the timely exchange of information that can support operational decisions while preserving appropriate safeguards for sensitive sources.

Common procedures for assessing intelligence reliability would be particularly valuable when attacks involve non-state armed groups and regional support networks. Evidence of weapons transfers or material assistance should be distinguished from evidence of operational coordination or direct command.

These distinctions are relevant to decisions concerning retaliation, escalation, and the geographical scope of military responses. They can also help participating governments identify where additional information is required before responsibility is assigned.

e. Maintain Clear Legal and Political Boundaries Between Missions

Defensive maritime protection, blockade enforcement, interdiction, and offensive military operations involve different legal authorities and political considerations. Coalition arrangements should make these distinctions explicit.

Participating governments need a common understanding of mission objectives, rules of engagement, command responsibilities, and the circumstances under which the scope of an operation may change.

Such clarity can support cooperation among states that share an interest in freedom of navigation but differ in their willingness or authority to participate in wider military campaigns.

6. Link Diplomatic Progress in Ukraine to Verifiable Commitments

Limited ceasefire arrangements concerning energy infrastructure could offer humanitarian benefits and create opportunities for further negotiation. Their value would depend on clearly defined obligations, mutually understood restrictions, and procedures capable of assessing compliance.

Any significant concessions associated with such arrangements should be considered in consultation with Ukraine and relevant allies. Decisions concerning sanctions relief or other policy adjustments would require assessment of implementation, reciprocity, and the implications for Ukraine's security.

Negotiating frameworks should also identify how alleged violations would be investigated and what procedures would apply if agreed restrictions were not respected.

7. Coordinate Sanctions Policy with Wider Economic and Security Objectives

Economic measures adopted in response to one crisis may affect the instruments available in another. Energy-market instability, for example, can create pressure for commercial adjustments that may alter the effects of sanctions directed at Russia.

Governments should assess these interactions before introducing significant exemptions or changes to existing restrictions. The distinction between humanitarian exceptions, temporary market-stabilization measures, and sanctions relief linked to diplomatic concessions should remain clear.

Regular coordination among relevant governments would help identify unintended consequences and determine whether sanctions continue to support their stated objectives.

8. Introduce Regular Reviews of Strategic Commitments

Military operations should be reassessed at defined intervals against their original political purpose, operational requirements, and accumulated costs.

Such reviews would consider whether the threat environment has changed, whether assigned forces remain necessary, whether responsibilities can be transferred to partners, and whether the operation continues to produce benefits proportionate to its demands.

A review process should also identify conditions for modifying or ending commitments. Without these mechanisms, temporary deployments may persist because withdrawal becomes politically difficult rather than because the original strategic requirement remains unchanged.

The Strategic Test: Preserving Freedom of Action

The combined purpose of these measures is to preserve the ability of the United States and its allies to respond to changing circumstances without allowing each new crisis to determine the allocation of their remaining resources.

Freedom of action has an operational dimension, reflected in available forces, readiness, and logistical capacity. It also has a political dimension, because governments must retain the ability to reconsider commitments, negotiate adjustments, and establish priorities when security conditions change.

These dimensions are closely connected. Naval forces tied to prolonged deployments may be unavailable for emerging requirements, while poorly defined coalition responsibilities can limit the options available to participating governments. Conversely, sustainable force allocation and credible allied contributions may provide greater flexibility in responding to new threats.

The relevant measure of strategic performance is therefore whether security commitments remain manageable while essential political and military options are preserved. This requires attention not only to immediate operational achievements but also to the cumulative effects of successive decisions.

Conclusion: Strategic Discipline in an Interconnected Security Environment

The confrontation involving Iran, renewed violence around Yemen, insecurity along major maritime routes, and Russia's war against Ukraine pose different political and operational problems. Their effects nevertheless intersect. Naval deployments compete for scarce high-end assets; disruption to energy markets influences economic policy; and allied commitments are constrained by national readiness and political authorization.

The analysis has identified a recurring mechanism through which strategic overstretch can develop. A limited operation creates protective or logistical requirements that were not fully anticipated when the original decision was made. As these follow-on commitments accumulate, governments may find themselves maintaining a military presence whose costs and risks have become detached from its initial political purpose. Maritime interdiction and the protection of commercial shipping illustrate this dynamic particularly clearly.

Three practical implications follow. Force-allocation decisions need to account for the commitments an operation may generate, rather than only its initial demands. Allied burden-sharing should be measured through sustainable operational contributions and clear political authority. Diplomatic initiatives—whether concerned with regional de-escalation or Ukraine—need defined terms, credible verification, and an explicit understanding of the leverage that negotiations may consume or preserve.

These measures do not eliminate uncertainty. Opponents can adapt, allies may disagree, and events can undermine even carefully designed plans. They do, however, create opportunities for political leaders to reassess commitments before operational momentum determines policy. Strategic freedom of action rests on that continuing ability to choose, to reinforce an essential mission, transfer a task to an equipped partner, pursue a negotiated restraint, or conclude that a deployment no longer merits its cost.

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