

Strait of Hormuz History: How Strait of Hormuz History Shaped Global Power

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Strait of Hormuz History Latest News

- The Strait of Hormuz has emerged as the central flashpoint in the ongoing West Asia conflict, with Iran restricting passage after US-Israeli strikes and the Donald Trump administration responding with a naval blockade.
- However, the strait's importance is not new.
- Owing to its strategic location controlling global energy flows, it has **historically been a site of intense imperial competition**, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries when colonial powers like United Kingdom used naval strength and diplomacy to dominate trade routes through the region.

16th Century: Portuguese Conquest and Control

- The Strait of Hormuz was originally controlled by the wealthy Kingdom of Hormuz, a major trade hub linking India, Persia, Arabia, and East Africa.

- In **1515**, the Portuguese Empire seized Hormuz Island and transformed it into a fortified toll point, dominating and taxing lucrative spice and silk trade routes throughout the 16th century.
- By the early 17th century, rising competition led the **English East India Company** to challenge Portuguese control.
- In 1622, a strategic alliance between the **British**, the **Dutch East India Company**, and the **Safavid ruler Shah Abbas I** successfully defeated the Portuguese, ending nearly a century of Iberian dominance over the strait.

7th-18th Century Rivalry in the Strait of Hormuz

- After the fall of Portuguese control, the Strait of Hormuz entered a phase of **intense rivalry** between the English East India Company and the Dutch East India Company.
- The Dutch, operating as a quasi-sovereign power with military authority, dominated the region during much of the **17th century** from their base in **Bandar Abbas**, leveraging a strong navy and aggressive trade practices to control the spice trade.
- By the **18th century**, the Dutch East India Company weakened due to overextension, internal corruption, and high administrative costs in its Asian territories.
- The situation worsened after the **Fourth Anglo-Dutch War**, which pushed the company into financial collapse.
- Its eventual withdrawal from the Persian Gulf created a power vacuum, enabling the **British** to expand their influence and establish dominance in the region.

British Hegemony in the Strait of Hormuz

- After the exit of European rivals, the United Kingdom focused on controlling the **Strait of Hormuz** to safeguard maritime routes to British India.
- To ensure safe passage to Bombay, Britain launched naval campaigns in 1809 and 1819 against the **Al Qawasim confederation**, accusing them of piracy and destroying their fleets.
 - The Al Qawasim (also known as Al Qasimi) was a powerful 18th-century maritime confederation of Sunni tribes based in the southern Gulf.

Treaty System and Indirect Control

- Rather than direct rule, Britain established control through **treaties with local Arab rulers**, restricting their foreign relations and trade while allowing internal autonomy.
- These arrangements effectively turned the region into British protectorates.
- The treaty-bound Sheikdoms came to be known as the **Trucial States**, which later **evolved into the United Arab Emirates**.
- This system ensured long-term British dominance over the strait without heavy administrative costs.

Models of Control in the Strait of Hormuz

- The Portuguese Empire relied on **direct military dominance** over the Strait of Hormuz, constructing large fortifications like the Castelo de Nossa Senhora da Conceição and imposing taxes on passing trade.
- However, this heavily militarised system proved costly and unsustainable over time.
- In contrast, the United Kingdom adopted a more cost-effective and strategic approach, combining **naval power with diplomacy**.
- By integrating local rulers into the Trucial system, Britain allowed internal autonomy while controlling foreign policy, defence, and trade.
- This indirect model enabled Britain to secure the strait efficiently, ensuring control over a key global chokepoint.
- It facilitated **the flow of resources from India** while promoting the export of British goods, consolidating long-term economic and geopolitical dominance.

20th Century Shift: Oil and Strategic Control in the Strait of Hormuz

- At the turn of the 20th century, British priorities in the Strait of Hormuz shifted **from trade protection to energy security**.
- In 1901, financier William Knox D'Arcy secured oil exploration rights in Persia, leading to a major breakthrough in 1908 when George Bernard Reynolds discovered oil at Masjed Soleyman—the first large commercial strike in the region.

Formation of Anglo-Persian Oil Company and State Control

- Following this discovery, the **Anglo-Persian Oil Company** was established in 1909.
- Recognising oil's strategic importance, especially after Winston Churchill shifted the navy from coal to oil, the British government acquired a 51% stake in the company by 1914, ensuring direct control over energy resources.

Transformation of the Strait's Role

- The strait evolved from a trade chokepoint into a critical energy corridor, facilitating the transport of West Asian oil to Britain.
- This marked a major shift in global geopolitics, aligning with the growing importance of petroleum during and after the First World War.
- Through treaty-based control over Gulf states, **Britain maintained its dominance in the region until 1971**, when it formally withdrew its military presence, marking the end of the Trucial States era.

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