PEOPLE
INTERESTS
RISKS
CHOICES
CONSEQUENCES

A MATRIX GAME ON ESCALATION, DETERRENCE AND THE SEARCH FOR A MORE STABLE MIDDLE EAST

NARROW WATERS

THE U.S.–IRAN CONFLICT

HORMUZ • NUCLEAR ISSUES • A MORE DANGEROUS REGION



UNITED STATES	IRAN	ISRAEL	GULF ARAB STATES	CHINA & RUSSIA
DETER DEFEND SHAPE	SURVIVE DETER ENDURE	PREVENT PROTECT PRESERVE	SECURE STABILIZE PROSPER	EXTEND BALANCE LEVERAGE

A MORE STABLE MIDDLE EAST IS A CHOICE

STRATEGY
DIPLOMACY
MILITARY POWER
ECONOMIC PRESSURE
POLITICAL WILL

SIX TURNS
FIVE ACTORS
HIGH STAKES
REAL TRADE-OFFS
ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

Narrow Waters: The U.S.–Iran Conflict

A Matrix Game about the Strait of Hormuz

By John F. Schmitt

Overview

The February 2026 U.S.-Israeli attacks on Iran shattered the previous strategic equilibrium. Large-scale combat subsequently subsided, but it did not produce a stable peace. Instead, the conflict has migrated into an unstable mixture of blockade, maritime coercion, limited strikes, sanctions, diplomacy, and nuclear brinkmanship.

The Strait of Hormuz is now the principal arena.

Iran is attempting to establish practical control over which vessels may use the Strait. It has blacklisted dozens of vessels and threatened detention or attack against ships violating its restrictions. The United States is simultaneously attempting to demonstrate that Iran cannot dictate passage through an international waterway. Commercial shipping is caught between them.

The confrontation has recently become more dangerous. U.S. forces have attacked Iranian minelaying capabilities and Iranian tankers; Iran has attacked or claimed attacks against U.S. naval forces and commercial shipping. Commodity-vessel traffic through Hormuz is now substantially below normal levels.

Meanwhile, the nuclear issue has become both more important and less transparent. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has lost continuity of knowledge over Iran's declared nuclear material and cannot reliably account for Iran's enriched-uranium stockpile. The latest reported figure before verification deteriorated was **440.9 kg of uranium enriched to 60 percent**, while inspectors lack access to important facilities damaged in previous strikes.

The central strategic question of the game therefore is not simply:

Who controls the Strait?

It is: **Can any actor create a new political order linking freedom of navigation, sanctions, Iran's nuclear program, and regional security—or will coercion produce an uncontrolled escalation?**

What Is a Matrix Game?

A matrix game is a facilitated discussion game used to explore complex situations involving multiple actors with competing interests. Unlike traditional board wargames, matrix games do not attempt to model every detail through extensive rules. Instead, they rely on structured argument and adjudication to represent decisions, actions, and events.

The purpose of a matrix game is not merely to determine a winner. It is also to develop a deeper understanding of the problem, identify opportunities and risks, test assumptions, and explore how different actors might interact. Matrix games encourage creative thinking, critical analysis, and collaboration while preserving competition among the players.

At its heart, a matrix game is a conversation disciplined by logic and evidence. Players propose actions, explain their expected effects, and defend their reasoning. Other players challenge, refine, support, or complicate those arguments. The immediate purpose of this process is to determine what happens in the game. Its broader purpose is to expose assumptions, reveal different perspectives, and generate insights. In this sense, argument is both the engine that drives the game and the principal learning mechanism of the game itself.

If an action is not explicitly prohibited by the scenario, it is generally open to argument. Players are therefore free to pursue military, political, diplomatic, economic, informational, or other approaches as appropriate to their objectives.

The Spirit of the Game

A matrix game operates on two levels simultaneously.

At one level, players are competing to achieve their objectives and influence events in their favor. They seek advantages, exploit opportunities, overcome obstacles, and shape the course of events.

At another level, the group is collectively exploring a complex problem or issue. Every argument forces participants to explain their reasoning, confront competing interpretations, and consider factors they may not previously have recognized. The result is that even unsuccessful arguments often contribute valuable understanding. A good matrix game therefore measures success not only by the quality of decisions made within the game, but also by the quality of the discussion and insights generated around the table.

The argument process is how events are created, how uncertainty is explored, and how participants learn. And through those arguments, the players collectively build both the narrative of the game and a richer understanding of the situation being explored. By the end of a successful matrix game, players should not only understand what happened in the

game world; they should also understand the real-world problem more deeply than they did when they began.

Purpose and Logic of Matrix Games

Unlike traditional board wargames, a matrix game does not rely on detailed combat tables or exhaustive rules to determine what players may do. Instead, players use informed argument to describe actions their actor could reasonably undertake and explain why those actions are likely to succeed. The game therefore emphasizes creative thinking, persuasion, and the exploration of complex decision-making rather than the optimization of predefined mechanics.

Every player represents an actor with distinct interests, objectives, and capabilities. Because those interests only partially overlap, players must constantly balance cooperation with competition. These shifting relationships create the dynamic interactions that drive the game.

The objective is not simply to "win." The discussion itself is a form of analysis. By debating courses of action, challenging assumptions, and considering second- and third-order effects, players collectively develop a deeper understanding of the situation being explored. In this sense, argument is both the mechanism by which the game advances and one of its principal educational outcomes.

How the Game Works

The game is played in turns. Each turn lasts **2 weeks**. During each turn, every actor has an opportunity to make one argument describing something that happens in the game world. An action may be military, political, diplomatic, economic, informational, or any reasonable combination of these. Players are encouraged to pursue creative approaches consistent with their actor's capabilities and historical context.

An argument consists of three elements:

1. **An Action or Event**
    - Something your actor does, causes, or attempts.
    - Something that occurs because of your actor's decisions.
2. **A Measurable Result**
    - A specific outcome that would occur if the action succeeds.
    - The result should be stated in concrete game terms.
3. **Reasons Why It Is Likely to Succeed**
    - Evidence, logic, capabilities, circumstances, or precedents that support the argument.
    - These reasons should explain why the proposed outcome is plausible.

Examples:

Iran — Controlled Opening of Hormuz

1. **Action:** Iran announces that it will suspend interference with commercial vessels that comply with basic notification procedures, while quietly reducing Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) maritime activity in the Strait.
2. **Measurable Result:** Freedom of navigation +1; Iranian Strategic Autonomy +1.
3. **Reasons Why It Is Likely to Succeed:** Iran retains the ability to threaten shipping but demonstrates that it can turn maritime pressure on and off; commercial operators have strong incentives to resume profitable Gulf transit once immediate risks decline; and Tehran can portray improved navigation as the result of an Iranian decision rather than submission to U.S. military pressure.

United States — Suppress the Coastal Surveillance Network

1. **Action:** U.S. forces conduct a concentrated campaign against Iranian coastal radars, surveillance drones, communications nodes, and other systems supporting Iranian monitoring of the Strait.
2. **Measurable Result:** For the next turn, Iran cannot reliably identify and track commercial vessels approaching Hormuz without exposing additional surveillance assets to U.S. attack. Any Iranian argument for military action against commercial or military shipping in the Strait receives an additional –1 modifier on the 2D6 roll.
3. **Reasons:** U.S. Intelligence, Surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) has spent months identifying the Iranian surveillance architecture; American air and naval forces can attack exposed sensors and communications nodes from outside the most dangerous portions of Iran's coastal defenses; and destroying or suppressing the surveillance network is substantially easier than eliminating Iran's dispersed missile, drone, and mine capabilities.

Random Events

Introduce a random event at the beginning of each turn by rolling 2D6 dice. Any random event should occur only once. Once an event occurs, cross it out. If that number is rolled again, move one number toward 7 until reaching an event that has not occurred. If 7 has already occurred, reroll.

2D6	Event	Situation
2	Nuclear Surprise	New intelligence indicates previously unknown Iranian nuclear activity or material. The facilitator determines the precise revelation based on the current game state: a concealed enrichment site, movement of enriched

		uranium, weaponization-related activity, or evidence that previous estimates were substantially wrong.
3	Blood in the Water	A major commercial vessel is struck in or near Hormuz. The attacker is initially uncertain. There are casualties, dramatic imagery, and immediate pressure on shipping companies and governments to respond.
4	Second Chokepoint	The Houthis significantly increase operations around Bab el-Mandeb, threatening shipping or Gulf energy infrastructure. If the Axis of Resistance is a player, that player determines how to exploit the opportunity; otherwise the facilitator establishes the Houthi action.
5	Gulf Initiative	Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or the UAE launches an unexpected diplomatic initiative. It may concern maritime passage, a temporary ceasefire, prisoner exchanges, nuclear talks, or another issue appropriate to the game state. The Gulf player defines the proposal.
6	Shadow Fleet	Iran demonstrates an unexpectedly effective means of circumventing part of the blockade and sanctions regime through clandestine shipping, transshipment, alternative payment mechanisms, or willing trading partners.
7	Quiet Channels	Back-channel U.S.–Iranian contacts produce a potentially useful opening. Neither side has agreed to anything, but each privately receives indications that the other may be prepared to compromise on one significant issue. The U.S. and Iranian players may privately determine what each is willing to explore.
8	Insurance Shock	Major insurers and shipping companies independently reassess Gulf risk. Commercial operators announce that their willingness to transit Hormuz will depend upon demonstrable improvements in security rather than political assurances alone.
9	Iranian Attack	Iran launches a limited attack against a U.S., Israeli, or Gulf military target. The facilitator determines the target according to the current situation. The attack may have been deliberate retaliation, a local commander's action, or part of an established campaign; intent is initially uncertain.
10	IAEA Revelation	New inspection, intelligence, or technical evidence clarifies one important aspect of Iran's nuclear program. The news may be reassuring or alarming. The facilitator determines what has been learned based on the existing nuclear situation.

11	Americans Killed	An attack kills multiple U.S. military personnel. Attribution points toward Iran or an Iran-aligned organization, although the degree of Iranian direction may be disputed. Washington faces immediate domestic pressure to respond.
12	Strategic Miscalculation	A major military incident occurs that none of the principal actors appears to have intended: a warship is sunk or badly damaged, an aircraft is shot down, a strike hits an unintended high-value target, or a missile causes mass casualties. The facilitator selects an incident appropriate to the current situation.

NARROW WATERS: The U.S.–Iran Conflict

Crisis, Coercion, and the Bomb in the Strait of Hormuz

A Contemporary Matrix Game

Scenario Introduction (Common to All Players)

The war between Iran and the United States and Israel has not ended. It has changed form.

Months after the initial U.S.-Israeli attacks on Iran, the Middle East remains caught between war and an uneasy, incomplete peace. Large-scale attacks have given way to maritime interdiction, limited strikes, missile and drone attacks, economic coercion, and diplomatic maneuvering. Yet in recent days the confrontation has again intensified. U.S. attacks on Iranian shipping have prompted Iranian attacks against vessels near Hormuz and missile attacks against U.S. facilities. Commercial traffic through the Strait remains far below normal.

The **Strait of Hormuz** has become the focal point of the conflict.

Iran cannot completely close the Strait without imposing enormous costs on itself and risking overwhelming retaliation. The United States can prevent Iran from exercising uncontested military control of the waterway, but it cannot guarantee normal commercial shipping merely by possessing naval superiority. Mines, missiles, drones, attacks on tankers, insurance costs, and uncertainty can disrupt commerce without physically closing the Strait.

The result is an increasingly ambiguous maritime regime. Some vessels transit under Iranian restrictions. Others attempt covert "dark crossings." The United States seeks to preserve freedom of navigation while economically isolating Iran. Gulf exporters seek above all to keep energy moving. Despite clandestine crossings, Gulf oil exports remain substantially disrupted.

Meanwhile, the **nuclear question remains unresolved**.

Previous attacks badly damaged Iranian nuclear infrastructure but did not eliminate Iran's nuclear knowledge or settle the status of its enriched uranium. Iran has restricted international access to damaged facilities, and the IAEA cannot fully verify its nuclear material. The United States and European powers are pressing the IAEA Board to refer Iran again to the UN Security Council. Before the attacks, the IAEA estimated Iran possessed 440.9 kg of uranium enriched to 60 percent.

Every actor therefore confronts the same dilemma: **coercion may improve its bargaining position while simultaneously making an acceptable settlement harder to reach.**

The crisis is occurring under severe economic and military pressure. Iran faces sanctions, blockade, disrupted exports, and growing economic hardship. The United States possesses overwhelming aggregate military power but must husband scarce high-end munitions and consider competing global commitments. Israel remains determined to prevent restoration of an Iranian nuclear weapons option. Gulf governments fear both Iranian domination and a war fought across their territory. China and Russia see opportunities to weaken American influence but have little interest in an uncontrolled conflict that devastates Gulf energy exports.

There is no agreed end state. Players must create one.

Adjudication

The purpose of adjudication is not merely to determine winners and losers. Rather, it disciplines the discussion by requiring players to make plausible, evidence-based arguments. A weak argument supported by little evidence should be less likely to succeed than a strong argument grounded in facts, capabilities, and logic.

Once adjudicated, the result becomes part of the game reality. Future arguments must be based on what has already happened. Players may not argue against established facts unless they are specifically attempting to reverse or change them through new actions. The bar for reversing an established fact by argument should be high because merely returning the game to an earlier state does not advance the storyline.

There are several ways of adjudicating the outcome of arguments, ranging from having a subject-matter expert judge the arguments to having the entire group vote. Some methods use a dice roll to add a probabilistic element.

One of the simplest adjudication methods is to determine success by rolling 2D6 based on the facilitator's assessment of the strength of the proposed argument.

- A strong argument requires a roll of 5 or higher.
- An average argument requires a roll of 7 or higher. This should be the norm.
- A weak argument requires a roll of 9 or higher.

When judging the arguments, the facilitator evaluates each based on its plausibility rather than on rigid rules. The facilitator should consider questions such as:

- Is the action consistent with the actor's capabilities?
- Are the proposed effects proportional to the effort?
- Are the stated reasons historically and logically persuasive?

- Have previous events in the game made the action easier or more difficult?
- Would success create unintended consequences elsewhere?

The facilitator should also account for cumulative effects. Repeated success in one area may make future actions easier, while earlier failures may impose lasting constraints. Likewise, players should be rewarded for building upon previous actions rather than treating each turn as an isolated event.

Actors

Actor	Fundamental problem
United States	Compel freedom of navigation and nuclear concessions without becoming trapped in an open-ended regional war
Islamic Republic of Iran	Preserve the regime, nuclear leverage, and meaningful control over Hormuz while breaking U.S. economic pressure
Israel	Prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon and restoration of Iranian strategic power, even if Washington prefers accommodation
Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait)	Keep Hormuz open and prevent either Iran or the U.S.-Israel coalition from turning the Gulf into a battlefield
China & Russia	Exploit the crisis to weaken U.S. influence while preventing a war that seriously damages their economic and strategic interests
Optional: International Community (E3, IAEA, maritime powers, commercial shipping interests)	Restore freedom of navigation and credible nuclear verification without possessing the coercive power to compel the principal belligerents to cooperate
Optional: Axis of Resistance (Houthis, Hamas, Hezbollah)	Preserve the network as a viable regional force and impose costs on its enemies without provoking retaliation that destroys its weakened members

The core strategic triangle

The core of the game is the interaction among: **Hormuz — Iranian Nuclear Ambitions — Sanctions.**

Each affects the others.

- Iran can offer greater freedom of navigation in return for sanctions relief.

- The U.S. can offer sanctions relief in return for inspections or nuclear restrictions.
- Iran can escalate against shipping to increase the economic cost of sanctions.
- Israel can attack nuclear infrastructure and inadvertently undermine negotiations over Hormuz.
- The Gulf states can offer economic inducements in return for Iranian restraint.
- China can purchase Iranian oil and thereby weaken U.S. economic coercion.

That interaction should be the game's engine.

Measuring Success and Change

One challenge in matrix gaming is translating narrative arguments into meaningful results. Players may argue about abstract concepts such as legitimacy, influence, stability, morale, or economic health. While discussion remains central to the game, facilitators often use **metrics** to track how the situation evolves over time.

Metrics provide a simple way to quantify the cumulative effects of arguments. They help players understand whether conditions are improving or deteriorating and provide a common reference point for judging success.

Some metrics apply to the situation overall. Shared metrics in this game are Freedom of Navigation, Military Escalation, Nuclear Transparency, Iranian Nuclear Capability, and Iranian Economic Resilience. Actions by any player may increase or decrease these metrics.

Other metrics are **actor-specific** and reflect the unique concerns of a particular actor. For example, the United States might track Deterrence Credibility while Iran tracks Regime Stability.

Metrics should support the narrative rather than dominate it. Their purpose is not to reduce a complex situation to numbers, but to help players think more rigorously about cause and effect while keeping the focus on argument, discussion, and learning.

Most arguments will affect 1 or 2 metrics; ambitious arguments may target 3, but the bar for success should be higher. Gray cells marked with an * indicate the level of that metric at the start of the game. Red cells indicate crisis thresholds described below.

COMMON METRICS

Shared Metrics						
Freedom of Navigation—Actual commercial usability of Hormuz: traffic, insurance, mines, escorts, Iranian interference						
-3	-2*	-1	0	1	2	3

Military Escalation—Degree of regional warfare						
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2*	3
Nuclear Transparency—How confidently outsiders understand Iran's nuclear status						
-3*	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Iranian Nuclear Capability—Iran's practical ability to approach/build a weapon						
-3	-2	-1	0*	1	2	3
Iranian Economic Resilience - Ability of Iran to withstand blockade, sanctions and disruption						
-3	-2*	-1	0	1	2	3

ACTOR-SPECIFIC METRICS

United States						
Deterrence Credibility						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3
Domestic/Alliance Support						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3

Iran						
Regime Stability						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3
Strategic Autonomy						
-3	-2	-1	0	1*	2	3

Israel						
Iranian Nuclear Threat						
-3	-2	-1	0*	1	2	3
Strategic Autonomy						
-3	-2	-1	0	1*	2	3

Gulf States						
Energy Export Security						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3
Strategic Independence						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3

China & Russia						
U.S. Regional Influence						
-3	-2	-1	0	1*	2	3
Eurasian Economic Access						

-3	-2	-1	0*	1	2	3

International Community *(optional)*						
Non-Proliferation Credibility						
-3	-2*	-1	0	1	2	3
Commercial Confidence						
-3	-2*	-1	0	1	2	3

Axis of Resistance *(optional)*						
Axis Cohesion						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3
Resistance Viability						
-3	-2	-1	0*	1	2	3

U.S. Magazine Depth (Optional)

The state of the U.S. ammunition supply, especially with respect to expensive "smart" munitions could be an important factor in this scenario. U.S. magazine depth is represented by a simple **U.S. Munitions Supply** resource track with three states:

U.S. Munitions Supply		
Adequate	Strained*	Critical

The U.S. **starts at STRAINED**. Changes to the ammunition status are subject to argument or are at the discretion of the facilitator.

Only a genuinely major expenditure **totaling 2 or more turns**—such as a sustained strike campaign, intensive missile-defense effort, or prolonged suppression of Iranian defenses—moves the track downward. Routine operations, occasional interceptions, and limited strikes normally do not.

At **CRITICAL**, the U.S. is not "out of missiles." Rather, further high-intensity operations impose serious strategic opportunity costs, which could constrain future operations or be exploited by other actors. The depleted stock becomes a strong reason against ambitious U.S. military arguments, particularly because Washington must preserve high-end weapons for other contingencies.

The U.S. can improve its position through arguments that plausibly conserve or restore capacity—for example, reducing expenditure through a ceasefire, shifting missions to allies or alternative systems, or mobilizing additional production and stocks (with arguably delayed effects).

2026 U.S. Midterm Elections (Optional)

If the U.S. midterm elections occur during the game and it is desirable to add that variable, introduce it in the appropriate turn based on the 2-week turn length. The facilitator adjudicates whether the administration emerges politically strengthened, weakened, or essentially unchanged. Move Domestic/Alliance Support one step accordingly. The result becomes a factor in subsequent arguments.





ACTOR 1: UNITED STATES

Strategic Situation

You possess more military power than any other actor in the crisis, but military superiority has not produced a satisfactory political outcome.

Washington's immediate objectives are straightforward: Iran must not dictate passage through the Strait of Hormuz, commercial shipping must resume, and Iran must not acquire a nuclear weapon. Accomplishing all three simultaneously is considerably harder.

Iranian attacks on commercial shipping have made freedom of navigation the immediate issue. The United States has responded with blockade, interdiction and strikes, while maintaining a substantial regional military presence. Washington believes growing economic pressure is weakening Tehran's position. Iran nevertheless retains enough maritime, missile and drone capability to make continued confrontation expensive.

Your greatest military advantage is also a potential trap. You can destroy Iranian forces and infrastructure, but sustained operations consume scarce high-end munitions and expose regional bases and partners to retaliation. Your **Strategic Munitions Supply begins STRAINED**.

U.S. Munitions Supply		
Adequate	Strained*	Critical

A major expenditure—such as a sustained strike campaign, intensive missile-defense effort, or prolonged suppression of Iranian defenses lasting 2 or more turns—moves the track downward, subject to argument or the facilitator's discretion. Routine operations, occasional interceptions, and limited strikes normally do not.

At **CRITICAL**, the U.S. is not "out of missiles." Rather, further high-intensity operations impose serious strategic opportunity costs, which could constrain future operations in this or other theaters or which other actors might exploit.

Diplomatically, you need Gulf cooperation but cannot assume Gulf governments share all your objectives. Israel may escalate independently if it believes Iran is rebuilding its nuclear capability. China and Russia will exploit any perception that American power is overextended.

Major Objectives

- Restore meaningful freedom of navigation through Hormuz.
- Prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapon or credible rapid breakout capability.

- End the conflict on terms that demonstrate the effectiveness of U.S. power and deterrence.

Secondary Objectives

- Preserve Gulf cooperation.
- Prevent attacks on U.S. forces and bases.
- Reduce Iranian ability to threaten regional commerce.
- Avoid an indefinite high-cost military commitment.
- Maintain sufficient strategic munitions for other global contingencies.

Actor Metrics

United States						
Deterrence Credibility						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3
Domestic/Alliance Support						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3

Key Resources

Regional naval and air forces; long-range strike; ISR; submarines; regional bases; sanctions and financial power; diplomatic influence; coalition partners.

Constraints

Strategic munitions reserve; domestic political tolerance; vulnerable regional bases; dependence on Gulf access; competing global commitments.

Typical Actions

Escort shipping; suppress Iranian maritime threats; interdict Iranian oil; conduct limited strikes; strengthen missile defense; mobilize allied support; intensify sanctions; offer conditional sanctions relief; negotiate maritime arrangements; seek renewed nuclear inspections.

ACTOR 2: ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Strategic Situation

You have survived.

That fact matters.

The United States and Israel possess vastly greater conventional striking power, and attacks have inflicted severe damage on Iran's military and nuclear infrastructure. Yet neither military attack nor economic pressure has forced the Islamic Republic to capitulate.

Hormuz is now your greatest remaining source of leverage.

You cannot permanently seal the Strait without damaging your own economy and risking devastating retaliation. You do not need to. If shipping companies, insurers and Gulf governments believe passage requires Iranian acquiescence, Tehran possesses something approaching practical control without having to defeat the U.S. Navy.

But the strategy is costly. Sanctions and the American blockade are biting. Oil exports and imports are constrained, shortages are worsening, and economic pressure threatens eventually to become political pressure.

Your nuclear program provides another source of leverage. Physical infrastructure has been damaged, but Iranian expertise survives, and uncertainty concerning surviving enriched material complicates enemy planning. Full transparency could reduce the danger of another attack—but surrendering nuclear leverage without meaningful concessions would represent a major strategic defeat.

You therefore need an outcome Iran can portray as resistance rather than surrender.

Major Objectives

- Preserve the Islamic Republic and its freedom of strategic action.
- Force meaningful relief from U.S. economic pressure.
- Preserve a substantial nuclear capability or obtain equivalent political/security concessions.

Secondary Objectives

- Establish recognition of Iran as an indispensable power in Gulf security.
- Preserve meaningful influence over navigation through Hormuz.
- Divide the United States from Gulf states and Israel.

- Maintain relations with China and Russia.
- Avoid catastrophic destruction of Iranian military and economic infrastructure.

Actor Metrics

Iran						
Regime Stability						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3
Strategic Autonomy						
-3	-2	-1	0	1*	2	3

Key Resources

IRGC maritime forces; mines; coastal missiles; ballistic missiles; UAV/USV capabilities; nuclear expertise and material; geography; proxy relationships; oil; capacity to threaten regional infrastructure.

Constraints

Economic isolation; damaged infrastructure; conventional military inferiority; vulnerability to air attack; dependence on Hormuz; domestic economic pressure.

Typical Actions

Threaten or restrict shipping; employ mines or unmanned systems; conduct calibrated missile attacks; disperse forces; conceal or rebuild nuclear capabilities; offer inspections; negotiate maritime access; demand sanctions relief; exploit divisions among opponents; mobilize regional partners and proxies.

ACTOR 3: ISRAEL

Strategic Situation

The central issue is not Hormuz. It is Iran. Israel regards the maritime crisis primarily through the larger question of whether the war ultimately leaves Iran weaker—or merely gives Tehran time to recover.

Previous strikes inflicted major damage on Iran's nuclear infrastructure, but destruction of facilities is not equivalent to destruction of nuclear knowledge. The uncertain location and condition of enriched uranium and reduced international visibility create a particularly difficult problem. Iran could conceivably emerge from the crisis economically weakened but with a more secretive nuclear program.

You cannot assume Washington will share your assessment indefinitely. The United States wants freedom of navigation, lower energy prices and an end to costly regional military operations. Washington might therefore accept an agreement that Israel regards as insufficient.

Your challenge is to retain the ability to act without becoming the actor blamed for destroying a potentially viable settlement.

Major Objectives

- Prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon or credible rapid breakout capability.
- Prevent reconstruction of Iranian capabilities capable of posing an intolerable strategic threat to Israel.
- Preserve Israeli freedom to act against emerging threats.

Secondary Objectives

- Maintain U.S. political and military support.
- Weaken Iranian regional networks.
- Improve nuclear intelligence and transparency.
- Encourage effective international pressure on Iran.
- Avoid unnecessary rupture with Gulf states.

Actor Metrics

Israel						
Iranian Nuclear Threat						
-3	-2	-1	0*	1	2	3
Strategic Autonomy						
-3	-2	-1	0	1*	2	3

Key Resources

Long-range strike; intelligence; covert capabilities; missile defense; cyber capabilities; U.S. relationship; regional intelligence relationships.

Constraints

Distance; dependence upon U.S. support and resupply; vulnerability to missile attack; international legitimacy; risk that unilateral action fractures the anti-Iran coalition.

Typical Actions

Collect intelligence; conduct covert operations; attack emerging threats; pressure Washington; support stronger inspections; strengthen missile defense; disrupt Iranian reconstruction; cultivate Gulf cooperation; threaten unilateral action to influence negotiations.

ACTOR 4: GULF ARAB STATES

Strategic Situation

Everyone else's strategy runs through your neighborhood.

You represent primarily Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. These governments differ significantly, but they share a basic interest: **the Gulf must remain commercially usable and their states must not become battlefields.**

You depend upon the United States for important elements of regional security but do not want permanent confrontation with Iran. You fear Iranian coercion, but you also fear being used as bases for attacks that invite Iranian retaliation against your cities, ports, refineries and desalination plants.

Hormuz therefore looks different from Riyadh, Abu Dhabi or Muscat than it does from Washington.

You care less about whether passage occurs under an American or Iranian political narrative than whether ships actually move safely.

This makes you potentially the game's most important diplomatic actor.

Major Objectives

- Restore reliable energy exports and commercial navigation.
- Prevent attacks on Gulf territory and infrastructure.
- Produce a sustainable regional security arrangement.

Secondary Objectives

- Prevent Iranian domination of the Gulf.
- Retain credible U.S. security support.
- Preserve working relations with Tehran.
- Prevent Iranian nuclear weapons acquisition and a regional nuclear arms race.
- Increase Gulf strategic independence.

Actor Metrics

Gulf States						
Energy Export Security						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3
Strategic Independence						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3

Key Resources

Energy production; ports; air forces; financial resources; U.S. basing access; diplomatic relationships; investment; Omani/Qatari mediation channels.

Constraints

Vulnerable infrastructure; internal differences; dependence upon exports; exposure to Iranian missiles and drones; security dependence on outside powers.

Typical Actions

Mediate; offer economic incentives; provide or deny basing access; support maritime security; negotiate informal arrangements with Iran; increase alternative export routes; strengthen air defense; pressure Washington or Tehran; finance reconstruction or stabilization arrangements.

ACTOR 5: CHINA & RUSSIA

Strategic Situation

American difficulty creates opportunity—but American disaster does not necessarily serve your interests.

The conflict consumes U.S. military resources, exposes limits to American coercive power, complicates Washington's relationships with Gulf governments and distracts U.S. attention from other theaters. All of this potentially benefits Beijing and Moscow. But there are limits.

China depends heavily upon stable global commerce and energy supplies. Russia benefits from high energy prices and American distraction but does not benefit from uncontrolled proliferation or complete regional collapse. Neither wants Iran decisively defeated and returned to a U.S.-dominated regional order.

You therefore seek influence without assuming responsibility for solving the crisis.

Iran needs diplomatic cover, markets, technology and political support. Gulf states want alternatives to exclusive dependence on Washington. The United States may eventually need your cooperation to produce an enforceable nuclear settlement.

That gives you leverage.

Major Objectives

- Reduce U.S. ability to dominate the regional order.
- Preserve Iran as an independent strategic actor.
- Protect critical Eurasian economic and energy interests.

Secondary Objectives

- Prevent uncontrolled regional war.
- Expand political and economic relationships with Gulf states.
- Prevent a destabilizing nuclear arms race.
- Preserve access to Iranian energy and markets.
- Exploit U.S. depletion and overextension elsewhere.

Actor Metrics

China & Russia						
U.S. Regional Influence						
-3	-2	-1	0	1*	2	3

Eurasian Economic Access						
-3	-2	-1	0*	1	2	3

Key Resources

UN Security Council vetoes; diplomatic support; energy purchases; trade and finance; technology; arms relationships; relationships with Iran and Gulf governments.

Constraints

Chinese dependence on Gulf commerce; Russian resource limitations; limited ability to protect Iran militarily; differing Chinese and Russian interests; danger of secondary sanctions.

Typical Actions

Provide diplomatic cover; purchase Iranian oil; mediate; propose Security Council initiatives; provide economic assistance; pressure Iran privately; cultivate Gulf governments; obstruct Western diplomatic initiatives; offer nuclear compromises; exploit U.S. military distraction.

OPTIONAL ACTOR: INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Strategic Situation

You represent the network of international institutions, European governments, maritime states, commercial interests, and diplomatic actors attempting to prevent the U.S.–Iran confrontation from becoming a wider regional catastrophe.

Your principal components include the **E3—Britain, France, and Germany—the European Union, the IAEA, the United Nations system, major nonbelligerent maritime states, international shipping and insurance interests, and other governments willing to support diplomatic initiatives**. You do not "command" all these organizations. Rather, you represent their collective capacity to shape international legitimacy, commercial behavior, nuclear verification, and diplomatic outcomes.

This gives you considerable influence but relatively little coercive power.

The Strait of Hormuz is an immediate concern. Your objective is not an American-controlled Strait or an Iranian-controlled Strait, but a **predictable international waterway through which commercial shipping can operate without coercion**. Shipping companies and insurers are especially important. A Strait that is technically navigable but commercially unacceptable because of mines, missiles, seizures, insurance costs, or uncertainty is not genuinely open.

The nuclear issue presents an even greater challenge. International inspectors lack adequate visibility into important portions of Iran's nuclear program. Restoring credible verification is therefore essential, but inspections cannot simply be imposed by declaring them necessary. Tehran must cooperate, inspectors must be able to operate safely, and the United States and Israel must have sufficient confidence in the process to refrain from destroying the facilities being inspected.

You possess something the military actors cannot easily manufacture: **international legitimacy**. You can help turn a bilateral bargain into an internationally recognized settlement, mobilize diplomatic and economic pressure, establish verification arrangements, influence maritime commerce, and provide face-saving mechanisms through which adversaries can compromise without appearing to capitulate.

Your weakness is fragmentation. Europe, the IAEA, the UN, commercial shipping interests, and nonaligned governments do not necessarily agree. If the major powers disregard international institutions or the international community repeatedly proves unable to enforce its decisions, your influence deteriorates.

Your task is therefore not merely to stop the fighting. It is to demonstrate that international mechanisms can produce a durable order after the fighting stops.

Major Objectives

- Restore safe, predictable, non-discriminatory commercial navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.
- Restore credible international verification of Iran's nuclear program.
- Prevent the confrontation from escalating into a major regional or nuclear war.

Secondary Objectives

- Establish an internationally recognized framework governing navigation through Hormuz.
- Preserve the credibility and independence of the IAEA.
- Prevent Iranian nuclear weapons acquisition while preserving a viable peaceful nuclear framework.
- Protect civilian shipping and reduce commercial and insurance disruption.
- Encourage negotiated sanctions relief in exchange for verifiable Iranian concessions.
- Preserve international unity sufficiently to enforce any eventual agreement.
- Prevent unilateral actions by any belligerent from destroying a viable diplomatic settlement.

Actor-Specific Metrics

International Community *(optional)*						
Non-Proliferation Credibility						
-3	-2*	-1	0	1	2	3
Commercial Confidence						
-3	-2*	-1	0	1	2	3

Non-Proliferation Credibility measures whether international inspection, verification, and diplomatic mechanisms are regarded as meaningful. It begins at **–2**. The Iranian nuclear program is highly opaque, military attacks have supplanted verification as a means of controlling proliferation risk, and the IAEA's inability to account confidently for important nuclear material represents a serious challenge to the regime.

Commercial Confidence measures the willingness of international shipping, insurance, finance, and energy markets to behave as though the Gulf is commercially reliable. It begins at **–2**. This is broader than the Hormuz Condition

Key Resources

- **Diplomatic Legitimacy:** Ability to confer—or withhold—international recognition of proposed settlements and actions.
- **IAEA Expertise and Inspectors:** The principal means of converting Iranian nuclear claims into independently verified facts.
- **UN/E3 Diplomatic Machinery:** Resolutions, negotiations, mediation, condemnation, investigative mechanisms, and multilateral agreements.
- **Economic Leverage:** European markets, sanctions participation, sanctions relief, frozen assets, financial access, and reconstruction incentives.
- **Maritime Influence:** Relationships with flag states, shipping companies, insurers, port authorities, and international maritime organizations.
- **Neutral Intermediaries:** Governments and institutions capable of transmitting proposals between actors that cannot or will not negotiate directly.
- **International Opinion:** Limited as a coercive instrument but potentially powerful in determining which actor bears responsibility for escalation or diplomatic failure.

Constraints

You possess no unified military force and cannot compel the principal belligerents to obey.

Your component organizations have different interests. European governments may support U.S. objectives while opposing particular American methods. The IAEA must maintain institutional neutrality. Commercial actors care primarily about risk. Nonaligned governments may resist Western sanctions even while opposing Iranian nuclear proliferation.

Your influence therefore depends heavily upon **credibility and consensus**.

You are also vulnerable to being bypassed. A direct U.S.–Iran agreement could marginalize you; unilateral Israeli military action could destroy an inspection initiative; Iranian obstruction could render verification meaningless; and great-power disagreement could paralyze the UN.

Typical Actions

Broker a ceasefire; propose maritime confidence-building measures; negotiate protected shipping arrangements; organize an international maritime monitoring mechanism; coordinate insurers and flag states; establish an incident-investigation mechanism; dispatch IAEA inspection teams; negotiate access to nuclear sites or material; propose monitored enrichment arrangements; certify Iranian compliance or noncompliance; organize multilateral sanctions or sanctions relief; establish escrow arrangements for Iranian oil revenues; mediate between Washington and Tehran; mobilize diplomatic condemnation of attacks on commercial shipping; offer reconstruction or economic incentives; establish verification mechanisms for a comprehensive settlement.

OPTIONAL ACTOR: AXIS OF RESISTANCE

Strategic Situation

The regional war has battered the network Iran spent decades building, but it has not destroyed it.

You represent three movements with different circumstances, objectives, and capabilities: **Hamas, Hezbollah, and Ansar Allah—the Houthis**. All have received Iranian support and all oppose Israel and American regional dominance, but none is simply an Iranian military unit. Your interests overlap with Tehran's without being identical to them.

The balance within the Axis has changed dramatically. Hamas and Hezbollah have suffered severe military and leadership losses. Hezbollah faces continuing Israeli pressure and demands for disarmament in Lebanon. Hamas remains committed to preserving its movement and Palestinian resistance but possesses far less conventional military capability than before the Gaza war.

The Houthis, by contrast, have emerged as the network's most powerful active component. Their forces have expanded along Yemen's Red Sea coast, seized positions affecting the **Bab el-Mandeb**, attacked Saudi infrastructure, and demonstrated the ability to threaten shipping with missiles and drones. The Houthis therefore provide the Axis with something Iran itself cannot easily replicate: the ability to pressure a **second maritime chokepoint** while Tehran contests Hormuz.

That creates enormous leverage. It also creates danger.

Iran may want you to escalate to increase pressure on Washington and the Gulf states—or restrain yourselves because Tehran is negotiating. Your organizations may disagree. The Houthis have Yemeni territorial ambitions and grievances against Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah must consider its position inside Lebanon. Hamas must preserve its political relevance and Palestinian identity.

You must therefore cooperate with Iran **without allowing Iranian strategy to consume your organizations**.

Your greatest weapon may be neither missiles nor drones but **strategic dispersion**. Every front you activate forces opponents to divide attention, defenses, munitions, and political capital. Yet excessive escalation may produce exactly the concentrated military response your organizations cannot withstand.

Major Objectives

- Preserve the Axis of Resistance as a viable regional political and military force.

- Impose costs on Israel and the United States sufficient to constrain their freedom of action.
- Prevent an Iran-U.S. settlement that sacrifices the interests or survival of the Axis movements.

Secondary Objectives

- Preserve each movement's political and organizational survival.
- Maintain Iranian material, financial, and political support.
- Exploit pressure on U.S. and allied missile-defense inventories.
- Strengthen Houthi control and influence around Bab el-Mandeb.
- Preserve Hezbollah's meaningful military and political position in Lebanon.
- Preserve Hamas as an important Palestinian political and resistance movement.
- Increase pressure on Israel without inviting decisive destruction.
- Exploit disagreements among the United States, Israel, Gulf states, and International Community.

Actor-Specific Metrics

Axis of Resistance *(optional)*						
Axis Cohesion						
-3	-2	-1*	0	1	2	3
Resistance Viability						
-3	-2	-1	0*	1	2	3

Key Resources

- **Hamas:** underground networks; remaining armed cadres; Palestinian political constituency; information and symbolic influence; hostages/prisoner issues where applicable.
- **Hezbollah:** surviving missile and drone capability; experienced cadres; underground infrastructure; Lebanese political networks; intelligence; Iranian connections.
- **Houthis:** substantial armed forces; ballistic and cruise missiles; drones; coastal systems; mines; Yemeni territory; positions threatening Bab el-Mandeb; ability to threaten Saudi and maritime targets. Recent Houthi gains have made this component especially important to the game.
- **Shared:** Iranian support; dispersed geography; ideological legitimacy among sympathetic constituencies; ability to force opponents to defend several theaters simultaneously.

Constraints

The Axis is **not a unified command**. Each component has its own leadership, constituency, territorial interests, risk tolerance, and survival requirements.

- Hamas and Hezbollah have suffered major losses. Hezbollah must operate within Lebanon's political environment and faces pressure for disarmament. Hamas has limited ability to project conventional power beyond its immediate theater.
- The Houthis possess greater current freedom of action but risk renewed large-scale war with Saudi Arabia and attacks by the United States or other outside powers. Their recent territorial gains are already generating major humanitarian and military consequences inside Yemen.
- Iranian support is valuable but creates dependency. Tehran may attempt to restrain the Axis when doing so serves Iranian interests. China is already pressuring Iran to reduce Houthi attacks affecting Saudi energy infrastructure, demonstrating how proxy behavior can complicate Iran's broader diplomacy.

Typical Actions

Threaten or attack shipping; pressure Bab el-Mandeb; attack Israeli or Gulf military targets; threaten energy infrastructure; launch limited missile or drone attacks; disperse and conceal forces; rebuild weapons networks; coordinate operations across theaters; mobilize political support; negotiate local ceasefires; resist disarmament; exchange prisoners or hostages; seek Iranian resupply; cultivate other external sponsors; exploit civilian casualties politically; support one another with technology, intelligence, training, or propaganda; deliberately refrain from escalation to preserve forces.

NARROW WATERS: Game Maps





DISCLAIMER

This exercise was developed with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence, which was used to support research, scenario development, editing, and game design. AI-generated material was selected, reviewed and revised by the author, who retains responsibility for the exercise's content, assumptions, and judgments. The scenario is intended for educational and analytical purposes and should not be interpreted as an intelligence assessment, prediction, or statement of official policy.