

Red Lines at Sea: A Strategic Review of U.S. Navy Ship Interdictions Since World War II

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In July 2025, reports emerged of a U.S. Navy destroyer—USS *Fitzgerald*—being confronted by Iranian forces in the Gulf of Oman. Allegedly encircled and warned by aerial and surface threats, the incident raised alarms across global media and defense circles. While such engagements remain relatively rare, they signal profound shifts in maritime strategy and geopolitical posturing. Historically, the interdiction of U.S. naval vessels has served as a flashpoint—from the capture of the *USS Pueblo* in 1968 to the Black Sea “bumping” by Soviet ships in 1988. These moments are not just naval encounters; they are acts of theater, warnings, and sometimes preludes to war. This paper reviews all major interdictions involving U.S. Navy ships since World War II, analyzes the strategic patterns behind such confrontations, and asks whether we are witnessing a return to Cold War-style brinkmanship in modern seas. With emerging technologies, ambiguous rules of engagement, and contested waters growing in number, every confrontation carries the potential to redraw the boundaries of conflict—or to expose just how blurred those boundaries have become.

Keywords: USS *Fitzgerald*, Gulf of Oman, naval interdiction, maritime conflict, Iran Navy, U.S. Navy history, Cold War naval incidents, Operation Praying Mantis, *USS Pueblo*, Black Sea bumping, freedom of navigation, strategic chokepoints, Strait of Hormuz, asymmetric warfare, naval escalation, rules of engagement, modern naval warfare, U.S.–Iran tensions, maritime lawfare, deterrence at sea. A collaboration with GPT-4o. C4.0.

Abstract

This paper examines the historical and strategic landscape of U.S. Navy ship interdictions since the conclusion of World War II, tracing a trajectory from Cold War provocations to contemporary flashpoints. The study culminates in the July 2025 confrontation in the Gulf of Oman, where the USS *Fitzgerald* was reportedly engaged by Iranian forces—an event that reignited questions about escalation, deterrence, and freedom of navigation in strategically vital waters. By analyzing key incidents such as the 1968 seizure of the USS *Pueblo* by North Korea, the 1988 Black Sea bumping of U.S. warships by Soviet vessels, and the surface combat of Operation Praying Mantis against Iran, we identify recurring strategic themes: the use of maritime confrontation as geopolitical signaling, the manipulation of legal ambiguity under international maritime law, and the calibration of aggression just below the threshold of open war. Through this historical lens, the paper investigates whether these incidents represent isolated events or an emerging doctrine of contested sea control. In an era defined by multipolar rivalry, hybrid warfare, and technological asymmetries, naval interdiction is no longer merely a tactical act—it is a stage for projecting will, testing resolve, and redrawing geopolitical boundaries.

I. Introduction

In July 2025, reports surfaced of an unusual and potentially dangerous maritime encounter in the Gulf of Oman: the U.S. Navy destroyer USS *Fitzgerald* was allegedly confronted and warned by Iranian military forces, including aerial units and armed surface vessels. Initial coverage suggested the event approached the threshold of a formal interdiction, with verbal demands and maneuvers implying that the U.S. warship should alter its course or withdraw. Although the details remain contested and downplayed by official sources, the symbolic weight of such a confrontation cannot be overstated. In one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime corridors, a declared or implied interdiction of a U.S. Navy

warship signifies a profound challenge to international norms and a potential recalibration of deterrence.

Naval interdictions—especially those involving state actors—strike at the core of sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and power projection. They are rarely about the tactical moment alone; rather, they represent a nation’s willingness to signal resolve, test geopolitical red lines, or provoke escalation within calculated bounds. The high-risk, high-stakes nature of such events makes them uniquely potent tools in both peacetime signaling and pre-war positioning.

This paper situates the 2025 Gulf of Oman incident within a broader historical context, reviewing all known major U.S. Navy interdictions and confrontations since World War II. Through detailed case analysis, we assess the strategic logic behind these engagements and explore their implications for current naval doctrine, international maritime law, and the stability of key chokepoints. The scope includes not only direct interdictions but also deliberate acts of harassment, physical obstruction, and quasi-legal challenges to U.S. naval operations by adversaries such as North Korea, the former Soviet Union, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

By analyzing these incidents through the lenses of escalation theory, asymmetric strategy, and legal ambiguity, the paper seeks to answer a pressing question: are these confrontations merely echoes of past Cold War encounters, or do they signal the emergence of a new paradigm in naval conflict—one shaped by multipolar friction, decentralized threats, and algorithmic warfare?

II. The July 2025 Incident: Gulf of Oman

In early July 2025, unconfirmed but widely circulated reports indicated that the U.S. Navy destroyer USS *Fitzgerald* (DDG-62) was subjected to a confrontation in the Gulf of Oman, an area of elevated strategic concern near the Strait of Hormuz. According to initial regional and international media outlets, the vessel was allegedly approached by multiple Iranian naval and aerial units, including at least one military helicopter and several Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy

(IRGCN) fast-attack craft. The reports claimed that the Iranian forces issued verbal warnings via radio communication, demanding the destroyer alter its course or vacate the area. At no point was direct fire reported, but the implied threat posture—combined with persistent surveillance and encirclement tactics—suggested a quasi-interdiction event that skirted the boundaries of formal confrontation.

The nature of the threat was multidimensional. Aerial overflight by rotary-wing aircraft—potentially armed—combined with maritime shadowing by maneuverable IRGCN units, created a pincer effect, placing psychological and operational pressure on the *Fitzgerald*. The Gulf of Oman, while not enclosed like the Persian Gulf, is nonetheless viewed by Iran as part of its broader regional sphere of influence. Its location adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz, through which nearly 20% of the world's petroleum passes, gives the region both economic leverage and military sensitivity. Iran's strategic positioning in the area allows it to project power asymmetrically, using layered threat vectors such as drones, speedboats, submarines, and mines.

The international response was fragmented. Official statements from U.S. defense officials were muted, describing the situation as a “routine encounter” under observation. However, unnamed Pentagon sources and allied defense analysts characterized the event as a test of resolve—a probing action designed to measure how far Iran could push without triggering retaliation. NATO members expressed concern, particularly the United Kingdom and France, both of which maintain naval presences in the broader CENTCOM theater. Gulf Arab states, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia, reportedly increased their readiness levels, viewing the incident as a reminder of Iranian ambition and potential instability in maritime transit corridors.

Media coverage ranged from alarmist to cautiously analytical. Outlets such as the *Daily Express* emphasized the near-miss quality of the encounter, framing it as a humiliation of the U.S. Navy and a dangerous precedent for unchecked Iranian aggression. More restrained sources framed the incident within the context of maritime signaling, drawing parallels to earlier U.S.–Iran confrontations. The

ambiguity surrounding the event—exacerbated by the lack of released video or satellite confirmation—has left the public narrative suspended between speculation and strategic concern.

This incident, regardless of its operational details, serves as a potent symbol: it suggests that the U.S. Navy is no longer immune to coercive deterrence efforts, especially in waters where regional powers believe they hold tactical superiority. The episode raises critical questions about freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), rules of engagement, and the credibility of deterrence in an increasingly multipolar naval environment.

III. Defining Interdiction and Maritime Provocation

In assessing incidents such as the July 2025 confrontation involving the USS *Fitzgerald*, it is essential to clarify the terminological and legal distinctions between various forms of naval engagement. Terms like “interdiction,” “harassment,” and “inspection” are often used interchangeably in media narratives, but each carries specific legal and operational implications under international maritime law and military doctrine.

1. Interdiction vs. Harassment vs. Lawful Inspection

- Interdiction, in the military and legal sense, refers to the deliberate and often forcible action intended to prevent or alter the movement of a vessel. This can include blocking a ship's path, issuing coercive warnings, or threatening or employing force to compel redirection or compliance. In peacetime, interdiction without legal authority may be considered an act of aggression.
- Harassment is a lower-threshold behavior, often involving aggressive but non-lethal tactics such as close-in maneuvering, shadowing, radio jamming, or provocative signaling. These actions fall into a gray area—intended to

intimidate, signal displeasure, or test reactions without breaching the threshold of overt conflict.

- Lawful inspection occurs within legally sanctioned frameworks, such as boarding operations in territorial waters, embargo enforcement, piracy suppression, or under UN Security Council Resolutions. Naval forces conducting inspections under these circumstances must operate in accordance with flag state consent, or with established multilateral rules of engagement (e.g., Combined Maritime Forces protocols).
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2. Legal Definitions Under UNCLOS and Customary Law

Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—the foundational legal framework governing maritime conduct—vessels enjoy different degrees of navigational freedom depending on maritime zones:

- In international waters (high seas), all ships, including warships, enjoy freedom of navigation. Any attempt to interfere with a foreign-flagged vessel absent an explicit legal justification (e.g., piracy, slave trade, stateless status) is prohibited.
- In a territorial sea (within 12 nautical miles of a state's coast), foreign warships may pass through under the doctrine of innocent passage, so long as they refrain from activities threatening the security of the coastal state. Attempts to interdict such passage must be narrowly defined and justified under national security exceptions.
- In an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), extending 200 nautical miles, coastal states have rights over economic resources but not over navigation. Military operations—including surveillance and warship transit—are permitted under most interpretations of UNCLOS.

The United States, though not a formal party to UNCLOS, recognizes it as customary international law and adheres to its core tenets. Iran, however, has its own interpretation of maritime zones and frequently contests the legality of U.S.

warship presence in its EEZ and adjacent waters, creating a fertile ground for friction.

3. Conceptual Framework: Symbolic vs. Kinetic Engagement

Understanding interdiction also requires recognizing the spectrum between symbolic and kinetic engagement. Maritime confrontations are often strategically choreographed performances, where the use of force is deliberately withheld but the message is unambiguous.

- Symbolic engagements involve visible but non-lethal shows of force: overflights, radar locks, formation positioning, or coordinated maneuvers. Their purpose is psychological—signaling resolve, asserting territorial claims, or provoking diplomatic consequences without triggering war.
- Kinetic engagements involve the actual use of weapons, physical damage, or capture, as seen in historical cases like the seizure of the USS *Pueblo* or the U.S. Navy’s retaliatory strikes during Operation Praying Mantis. These actions move past signaling into open conflict, albeit often still constrained in scope.

The July 2025 incident appears to fall squarely within the symbolic domain, yet it illustrates how even symbolic interdictions, when repeated or escalated, can erode the boundary between peace and conflict. As military doctrines evolve to accommodate hybrid warfare and legal gray zones, the ability to distinguish interdiction from mere harassment becomes increasingly critical—both for policymakers seeking to avoid miscalculation and for naval commanders managing the real-time pressures of contested waters.

IV. Historical Case Studies of Major U.S. Navy Interdictions

This section surveys a series of pivotal maritime confrontations involving the U.S. Navy from the Cold War to the present day. Each case highlights distinct legal,

strategic, and operational features that collectively shape the modern doctrine of naval interdiction and power projection.

A. USS *Pueblo* (1968) – Capture by North Korea

Context: On January 23, 1968, the U.S. Navy intelligence vessel *USS Pueblo* was conducting surveillance in international waters off the coast of North Korea when it was surrounded by North Korean patrol boats and forcibly boarded. One crew member was killed, and the remaining 82 were taken prisoner.

Outcome: The seizure marked the first capture of a U.S. Navy ship since the War of 1812. The crew was held and subjected to harsh treatment for 11 months. Despite public outrage in the U.S., the Johnson administration pursued a diplomatic resolution rather than military retaliation.

Diplomatic Aftermath: The U.S. ultimately signed a coerced apology (which it simultaneously disavowed) to secure the crew's release. The *Pueblo* remains in North Korean custody as a museum ship—a continuing symbol of unresolved Cold War tension.

B. Black Sea Bumping (1988) – USSR Physical Interference

Context: On February 12, 1988, U.S. Navy vessels *USS Yorktown* (CG-48) and *USS Caron* (DD-970) exercised innocent passage near Crimea within Soviet-claimed territorial waters. Soviet frigates *Bezzavetnyy* and *SKR-6* intentionally collided with the U.S. ships in a calculated effort to push them out.

Legal Doctrine: The U.S. maintained its right to innocent passage under UNCLOS principles, while the USSR argued the U.S. had failed to seek prior notification, which it considered mandatory under its domestic laws.

Significance: The incident tested Cold War naval diplomacy and revealed how conflicting interpretations of maritime law could lead to intentional collisions

without escalation to open conflict. It remains a textbook example of non-kinetic deterrence at sea.

C. Operation Praying Mantis (1988) – U.S.–Iran Naval Combat

Trigger: On April 14, 1988, the U.S. Navy frigate *USS Samuel B. Roberts* struck an Iranian mine in the Persian Gulf during Operation Earnest Will, part of a convoy escort mission for reflagged Kuwaiti tankers.

Response: In retaliation, the U.S. launched Operation Praying Mantis on April 18, 1988. U.S. forces destroyed two Iranian oil platforms used for surveillance and coordination, sank the Iranian frigate *Sahand*, severely damaged *Sabalan*, and crippled several other assets.

Outcome: This was the largest U.S. surface naval engagement since WWII. It demonstrated overwhelming U.S. superiority while avoiding escalation into a full-scale war. The operation reasserted American dominance in the Gulf and served as a deterrent for years to come.

D. Strait of Hormuz Incidents (2007–2008) – IRGC Harassment

Context: In late 2007 and early 2008, a series of encounters occurred between U.S. Navy ships—such as *USS Hopper*, *USS Port Royal*, and *USS Ingraham*—and Iranian IRGCN fast-attack craft in the Strait of Hormuz.

Tactics: Iranian vessels engaged in swarm maneuvers, approached within firing range, dropped suspicious objects into the water, and issued radio threats (“You will explode in a few minutes”) in distorted English. No shots were fired.

Significance: These events highlighted Iran’s evolving strategy of asymmetric naval pressure, designed to exploit geographic constraints and political ambiguity. The incidents fueled debate over rules of engagement and highlighted vulnerabilities in narrow maritime chokepoints.

E. Piracy and Smuggling Interdictions (Ongoing)

Context: Throughout the 21st century, the U.S. Navy has played a key role in global maritime security, especially in the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean. Operations target piracy (e.g., Somali pirates) and weapons smuggling (notably Iranian arms to Houthi forces in Yemen).

Example: In January 2022, *USS Cole* and *USS Chinook* interdicted a stateless dhow carrying thousands of AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades, and missile components linked to Iranian supply chains.

Operational Framework: These interdictions are conducted under the legal authority of UN resolutions, Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) mandates, and counter-piracy coalitions. They represent a form of tactical interdiction without geopolitical provocation, often framed as international law enforcement.

F. 2022–2025: Red Sea and Missile Interceptions

Context: As regional conflict intensified, particularly in Yemen and Gaza, U.S. Navy destroyers equipped with Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) systems began intercepting missiles and drones launched by Houthi and Iranian forces—often aimed at Israel or Saudi Arabia.

Notable Incidents:

- In 2023–2025, Arleigh Burke-class destroyers (*USS Carney*, *USS Laboon*, *USS Mason*) intercepted dozens of inbound threats in the Red Sea and eastern Mediterranean.
- These operations blurred the line between naval self-defense and strategic air defense, especially when attacks crossed sovereign airspace boundaries or targeted civilian shipping.

Strategic Implication: Although not "interdictions" in the traditional maritime sense, these engagements constitute aerial interdiction through maritime

platforms. They reflect a transforming battlespace, where naval vessels increasingly serve as mobile missile shields in regional conflicts.

Together, these case studies illustrate the evolution of naval interdiction from clear-cut Cold War provocations to today's hybrid maritime confrontations, where legal ambiguity, tactical restraint, and symbolic power plays dominate. They also demonstrate the increasing risk of miscalculation in a world where strategic deterrence is tested at sea more than ever before.

V. Strategic Patterns and Escalation Thresholds

The pattern of U.S. Navy interdictions and maritime confrontations since World War II reveals a distinct logic rooted in geography, adversary behavior, and calculated U.S. responses. These engagements are not random; they tend to emerge where national interests, international law, and geopolitical posturing intersect. Understanding these strategic patterns and escalation thresholds provides a critical framework for interpreting current and future naval incidents—particularly in an era defined by multipolar friction and asymmetric tactics.

1. Trends in Location: Chokepoints, International Waters, and EEZs

Most major confrontations occur in or near strategic maritime chokepoints, including:

- The Strait of Hormuz (Iran–UAE/Oman)
- The Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Red Sea–Gulf of Aden)
- The South China Sea (contested by China, Philippines, Vietnam, et al.)
- The Black Sea (Russia and NATO access friction)
- The Sea of Japan and Yellow Sea (North Korea proximity)

These regions are not only commercial arteries but also military corridors. Their narrowness, surveillance saturation, and high traffic density amplify the risks of close encounters and rapid escalation.

Equally important are Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and international waters near contentious boundaries. While UNCLOS permits military activity in EEZs, states like China and Iran reject this interpretation, leading to repeated friction over U.S. intelligence-gathering and freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). These waters form a legal gray zone where perception, not precedent, often drives confrontation.

2. Adversary Typologies: State Actors, Proxy Forces, and Pirates

The U.S. Navy has faced a diverse set of adversaries, each with unique motivations and methods:

- **State Actors (e.g., USSR, North Korea, Iran)**
These confrontations tend to be deliberate and strategic, aimed at testing U.S. resolve, defending sovereignty claims, or deterring influence projection. They often carry explicit political messaging and are carefully calibrated to avoid full-scale war.
- **Proxy Forces (e.g., Iranian-backed Houthis)**
These actors operate under plausible deniability. Their actions may include missile launches, drone swarms, and sea mine deployments, creating escalation pathways that shield the sponsoring state from direct responsibility while raising regional tensions.
- **Non-State Actors (e.g., Somali Pirates)**
While apolitical in intent, these encounters nonetheless affect global maritime stability. U.S. interdictions here emphasize international policing and coalition enforcement rather than geopolitical signaling.

The blurring of lines between state and proxy behavior—especially through cyber-enabled coordination, smuggling routes, and unflagged naval units—complicates attribution and response planning.

3. U.S. Response Spectrum: Restraint, Signaling, and Retaliation

The United States has generally followed a measured escalation doctrine in maritime confrontations, deploying force across a calibrated spectrum:

- **Restraint**
The default posture in ambiguous or politically sensitive situations. Restraint involves non-engagement, evasive maneuvers, and public understatements to de-escalate the situation—seen in the U.S. response to the 1968 *Pueblo* incident and various IRGCN harassments.
- **Signaling**
Mid-spectrum actions include freedom of navigation patrols, naval exercises, or transits near contested areas, combined with diplomatic warnings or media releases. These are meant to reaffirm U.S. presence and uphold international norms without triggering kinetic conflict.
- **Retaliation**
Reserved for direct attacks or severe provocations. Retaliatory actions—such as Operation Praying Mantis—demonstrate overwhelming military capability and convey red-line enforcement. However, the risk of miscalculation or regional war often limits their use.

This spectrum reflects a consistent U.S. strategy of maintaining escalation dominance while avoiding the political and humanitarian costs of sustained naval warfare. However, it also creates opportunities for adversaries to exploit ambiguity—pushing boundaries just short of triggering a decisive response.

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The patterns emerging across these dimensions—location, adversary type, and calibrated response—reveal a layered strategic architecture governing U.S. naval behavior. Incidents such as the 2025 Gulf of Oman confrontation are thus not isolated anomalies but part of a broader system of deterrence testing, geopolitical signaling, and contested norm enforcement. As adversaries become more agile and the rules of engagement more opaque, the potential for escalation through misunderstanding or provocation grows—demanding a renewed doctrinal clarity and operational foresight from naval planners and policymakers alike.

VI. Naval Interdiction as Political Theater

Naval interdictions rarely occur in a vacuum. Though defined by geographic proximity and tactical engagement, their true function is often strategic, symbolic, and performative. These encounters play out before multiple audiences: the opposing military force, domestic populations, international allies, and the global media landscape. They are thus best understood not only as military incidents but also as acts of political theater—where projection, posturing, and perception matter as much as firepower. In an era of instantaneous media transmission and highly curated official narratives, the interpretation of an interdiction can carry greater weight than the event itself.

1. Media Amplification and Information Warfare

In the modern information environment, even minor maritime confrontations can become global spectacles within hours. Military interactions are increasingly designed with media impact in mind—recorded from multiple angles, edited into strategic soundbites, and disseminated for maximum psychological and diplomatic effect.

For authoritarian regimes, such as Iran or North Korea, the presentation of naval interdictions as triumphs over Western aggression plays a crucial role in bolstering

domestic legitimacy. A brief standoff with a U.S. destroyer, if spun correctly, becomes a display of sovereignty and courage in the face of imperialism.

For the United States, however, managing the narrative risk of being seen as either too passive or too aggressive is a delicate balance. Incidents such as the *USS Pueblo* capture or the Strait of Hormuz boat swarm are often amplified by adversarial propaganda, framing the U.S. Navy as vulnerable or hesitant.

Conversely, U.S. successes—such as Operation Praying Mantis or recent missile interceptions—are carefully publicized to reassert deterrence and operational competence.

At the same time, these narratives can backfire. Overexposure of minor incidents, or disinformation campaigns that exaggerate U.S. actions, can inadvertently escalate tensions and trigger a response based on public outrage rather than strategic necessity.

2. Deterrence, Provocation, and Miscalculation

Naval interdiction functions on a tightrope between deterrence and provocation. The goal is often to signal strength and resolve without inciting direct conflict. However, the fine line between psychological dominance and tactical overreach is inherently unstable.

A warship navigating contested waters is both a tool of deterrence and a potential tripwire. If intercepted, the U.S. must weigh the cost of response against the cost of appearing weak. If it responds too forcefully, it risks transforming a localized skirmish into a regional war.

This balance is further complicated by the fog of war in near-peer and asymmetric environments. An intercepted warning might be misheard as a threat. A radar lock might be interpreted as a prelude to attack. A deliberate ramming, as in the Black Sea incident of 1988, might provoke retaliatory fire under slightly different leadership.

In such scenarios, miscalculation is not only possible but structurally embedded in the logic of interdiction. The presence of multiple actors—state, proxy, and non-state—further clouds the chain of command and intention.

3. Psychological Effect on Allies and Adversaries

Every act of interdiction or successful navigation sends a signal to more than just the direct participants. Allied nations look to U.S. responses as a measure of credibility and protection. A perceived failure to confront aggression could weaken alliances or embolden adversaries. This is particularly critical in regions like the South China Sea, where U.S. Navy operations are seen as symbolic guarantees of freedom of navigation and regional order.

Conversely, overly aggressive U.S. responses can alienate neutral actors or moderate states, particularly if framed as disproportionate or escalatory. In sensitive contexts—such as the Gulf of Oman—Arab Gulf states often find themselves torn between economic ties to Iran and security reliance on the U.S., making them highly attuned to the optics of maritime incidents.

For adversaries, naval confrontations are equally rich in meaning. A measured U.S. withdrawal might be interpreted as weakness—or as strategic maturity. A decisive counterstrike may deter further challenges—or trigger asymmetric retaliation elsewhere. In either case, interdictions serve as real-time feedback loops, shaping the strategic calculus of both state and non-state actors.

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In this theater of steel and symbolism, ships are not only platforms of firepower, but stages of political performance. Cameras, press releases, social media posts, and state propaganda have become as central to the outcome of an interdiction as radar locks and sonar pings. Recognizing naval confrontation as a narrative operation as much as a military one is essential for crafting effective strategy in

the 21st century. Failing to manage the story is, in many cases, as costly as losing the engagement itself.

VII. Contemporary Risk Assessment

Naval interdiction in the 21st century must be understood not only through historical precedent, but through the lens of rapidly evolving technologies, multipolar strategic competition, and deteriorating consensus on maritime norms. While previous episodes of confrontation operated within relatively stable bipolar or unipolar world orders, today's environment is far more complex. Three major trends define this new era of risk: the growing danger of escalation in key maritime theaters, the introduction of destabilizing technologies such as AI and hypersonic weapons, and the decline of shared rules in favor of unilateral maritime claims and strategic ambiguity.

1. Escalation Scenarios in the Gulf, Taiwan Strait, and South China Sea

The Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz remain flashpoints where U.S. naval presence collides with Iran's doctrine of asymmetric harassment and strategic ambiguity. Iran routinely uses small boats, drone swarms, mines, and armed helicopters to pressure U.S. and allied vessels in the region. The July 2025 confrontation with the *USS Fitzgerald* is emblematic of this sub-threshold warfare—designed to test red lines without inviting overwhelming U.S. retaliation. However, the growing complexity of these engagements increases the likelihood of tactical misjudgment triggering strategic escalation, especially in the absence of reliable backchannels between Tehran and Washington.

In the Taiwan Strait, the risk of escalation is more acute. China views U.S. naval transits through the strait as deliberate provocations and challenges to its sovereignty. As China continues to modernize its navy and expand its “gray zone” tactics—including unmarked militia vessels and coast guard ships with naval-grade weapons—the probability of an interdiction involving a U.S. warship is rising sharply. A miscalculation in these narrow waters, particularly during a period of

domestic political tension in Beijing or Taipei, could trigger a spiraling conflict with global ramifications.

The South China Sea presents a subtler but persistent risk. Here, the contest is not over individual ships, but over the control of navigational norms and legal precedent. China's construction of artificial islands and their militarization has already altered the strategic balance. U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) are increasingly met with aggressive intercepts, radio challenges, and near-collisions. As ASEAN states weigh alignment between China and the U.S., every interdiction becomes a litmus test of regional will, credibility, and alignment.

2. Role of AI, ISR, and Hypersonic Missiles in Modern Interdiction

Emerging technologies have introduced both opportunities and risks in naval operations. Among the most consequential are Artificial Intelligence (AI), Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance (ISR) networks, and hypersonic weapons systems.

- AI and autonomous systems are now embedded in threat detection, targeting, and decision-making pipelines. While this may increase reaction speed and reduce human error, it also creates a black-box escalation risk: when AI systems interpret ambiguous actions as hostile, commanders may be forced to react on limited understanding and compressed timelines. An AI-managed fire-control system might classify a fast-approaching vessel or drone swarm as an imminent threat, leaving only seconds for human override.
- ISR networks, including real-time satellite tracking, unmanned aerial surveillance, and undersea sensors, allow for precise monitoring of naval movements. While this enhances situational awareness, it also exposes vessels to preemptive strikes, especially when combined with long-range stand-off weapons.
- Hypersonic missiles further compress the decision loop. Capable of striking a moving warship with little to no warning, these systems shift the balance

from deterrence to first-mover advantage. In a crisis, the temptation to strike first rather than risk being disabled may override traditional rules of engagement.

In this context, interdictions are no longer slow-motion confrontations. They may unfold in minutes or seconds, with strategic consequences triggered by algorithmic judgments or weapon system autonomies beyond political control.

3. Multipolar Naval Diplomacy and the Erosion of Maritime Norms

The post-World War II maritime order was defined by U.S. naval supremacy and a broad adherence to UNCLOS principles, even among non-signatories. That order is now under severe strain.

- China, Iran, and Russia are pursuing maritime doctrines that reject or reinterpret UNCLOS to suit their regional ambitions. Claims over “historic waters,” expanded territorial seas, and sovereign control of EEZs are being enforced through coercive presence rather than legal arbitration.
- The U.S. and its allies continue to advocate for freedom of navigation, but the erosion of international consensus—combined with domestic political divisions—has reduced the coherence and deterrent value of this position.
- Non-aligned states increasingly hedge between maritime powers, choosing not to enforce or support maritime law for fear of economic or security retaliation. This has created a legal vacuum, particularly in areas like the Red Sea and South China Sea, where sovereignty, piracy, and geopolitics overlap.
- Meanwhile, naval diplomacy itself is fraying. Multinational exercises, hotlines, and maritime confidence-building measures are deteriorating. Even traditional safety mechanisms, such as the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), are now frequently ignored or selectively applied.

In such an environment, interdiction is less a regulated exception and more a strategic tool in an unregulated game. Maritime interactions that once would have

provoked diplomatic crisis now pass with muted protest, normalizing a higher baseline of risk.

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The contemporary risk landscape is defined by compressed timelines, ambiguous legality, and technologically destabilized deterrence structures. As naval interdictions evolve into faster, smarter, and more ambiguous confrontations, the potential for crisis escalation grows in parallel. The challenge ahead is not merely to avoid war, but to reestablish a credible framework—legal, technological, and diplomatic—within which naval power can operate without constant risk of misinterpretation or catastrophe.

VIII. Conclusion

Naval interdictions have long served as fault lines where global power dynamics, international law, and military doctrine converge. From the Cold War-era seizure of the *USS Pueblo* to the recent Gulf of Oman confrontation with the *USS Fitzgerald*, a throughline emerges: interdictions reflect not just tactical decisions, but strategic messages—statements about who controls the sea, and on what terms.

Historically, interdictions involving U.S. Navy vessels were rare and exceptional, each one triggering diplomatic upheaval, redefinitions of engagement protocols, or even open conflict. However, the evolving character of modern naval engagements—defined by asymmetric tactics, blurred legal boundaries, and technologically accelerated decision-making—suggests a fundamental shift. What was once considered a crisis trigger is increasingly being normalized as a tool of hybrid warfare and geopolitical assertion.

The July 2025 encounter in the Gulf of Oman may not have involved direct fire, but it was nonetheless a symbolic interdiction, testing both U.S. resolve and international tolerance for coercive maritime behavior. When combined with

similar incidents in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and Red Sea, it signals a transition toward a new maritime equilibrium—one in which routine confrontation is the baseline, and ambiguity is weaponized.

This normalization is dangerous. In the absence of clear rules of engagement (ROE), shared definitions of provocation, or robust diplomatic backchannels, the risk of escalation by miscalculation or automated response is growing rapidly. Therefore, a renewed policy framework is urgently required.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Clarity of Intent in Maritime Operations

U.S. and allied naval forces must communicate the purpose of their presence unambiguously, especially in contested zones. Freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), intelligence gathering, and presence patrols should be accompanied by clear strategic messaging to avoid misinterpretation by adversaries or proxies.

2. Refinement of Rules of Engagement (ROE)

ROEs must account for autonomous threats, swarm tactics, and AI-assisted decision loops. Commanders should be given ROEs that allow flexibility without ambiguity, especially when operating in zones where escalation can unfold in seconds. This includes clear protocols for responses to radar locks, radio threats, and drone incursions.

3. Reinvigoration of Multilateral Maritime Norms

The U.S. should lead efforts to revive and expand international maritime governance mechanisms, including promoting adherence to UNCLOS principles, updating the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), and establishing new cyber and AI norms for naval operations. Inclusion of regional actors—even adversarial ones—can help reduce the probability of unintentional conflict.

4. Proactive Naval Diplomacy

Regular naval-to-naval communications, regional de-escalation protocols,

and transparency in military exercises should be prioritized. Naval diplomacy, often underutilized, may be the most effective counterweight to rising strategic ambiguity.

Final Reflection

In a maritime environment increasingly shaped by multipolar contestation, technological acceleration, and normative erosion, the role of naval interdiction is no longer exceptional—it is evolving into a central feature of 21st-century strategic interaction. The challenge is not merely to prevent confrontation, but to reassert the boundary between deliberate signaling and uncontrolled escalation. Whether the world’s navies will meet this challenge with prudence or drift toward catastrophe remains one of the defining questions of our time.

IX. Epilogue: The Strait as a Symbol

From the Tonkin Gulf to the Strait of Hormuz: where history repeats

Straits are more than geographical chokepoints; they are symbolic thresholds, narrow places where great powers project will, test nerves, and stake claims to influence. From the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, where a disputed naval incident catalyzed full-scale American entry into the Vietnam War, to the Strait of Hormuz in 2025, where the U.S. Navy now maneuvers amid layered threats from Iran, these maritime corridors have consistently served as crucibles of historical momentum.

The repetition is striking: a confined waterway, a heavily armed destroyer, an ambiguous provocation, and a wider geopolitical context brimming with unresolved tensions. Each confrontation carries the weight of earlier ones, refracted through new technologies and actors, yet always returning to the same underlying question: Who controls the passage? And at what cost?

The Strait, in this sense, is never just about shipping lanes or fuel transit. It is about the assertion of narratives—sovereignty versus openness, restraint versus

retaliation, and law versus power. It is the place where international norms are either upheld or eroded, where silence can signal discipline or decay, and where hesitation can be as impactful as fire.

As the naval balance shifts toward contested multipolarity, straits will continue to be where symbolic defiance and strategic messaging intersect. They are geographic anomalies that become political accelerants. Whether in the Taiwan Strait, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Bosphorus, or the South China Sea, the pattern is already evident: the narrowest waters produce the widest consequences.

“Every flashpoint begins as a line crossed at sea.”

This final thought captures the essence of maritime brinkmanship. Before missiles fly, before ambassadors are recalled, and before alliances are tested, a ship crosses a line—visible to some, invisible to others. And in that act, history begins again.

Appendix A: Table – Major U.S. Navy Interdictions Since WWII

Date	Vessel(s) Involved	Location	Adversary	Nature of Incident	Outcome
Jan 1968	USS Pueblo (AGER-2)	Sea of Japan	North Korea	Surveillance ship seized, crew captured	Diplomatic release of crew after 11 months
May 1975	USS Henry B. Wilson, others	Gulf of Thailand	Khmer Rouge (Cambodia)	Rescue mission after seizure of SS <i>Mayaguez</i>	U.S. Marines recover hostages; 41 killed
Feb 1988	USS Yorktown, USS Caron	Black Sea (near Crimea)	USSR	Deliberate ramming by Soviet frigates	No escalation; both sides claimed legal basis
Apr 1988	USS Samuel B. Roberts, others	Persian Gulf	Iran	Mine strike followed by U.S. retaliation	Operation Praying Mantis: Iranian losses
Jan 2008	USS Hopper, others	Strait of Hormuz	Iran (IRGCN)	Speedboat swarm, radio threats	De-escalation; increased U.S. naval alertness
2016–2023	Various Arleigh Burke destroyers	Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea	Pirates / IRGC proxies	Dhow interdictions, arms seizures	Dozens of smuggling routes disrupted
2022–2025	USS Carney, USS Laboon, others	Red Sea, Eastern Med.	Iran-backed Houthis, Iran	Missile/drone interceptions from sea	Multiple successful BMD events
July 2025	USS Fitzgerald	Gulf of Oman	Iran	Aerial and surface encirclement, verbal warning	No shots fired; symbolic interdiction

Appendices

Appendix B: Legal Status of Interdicted U.S. Vessels

Vessel	Year	Maritime Zone	Legal Claim by U.S.	Adversary's Position	International Law Context
<i>USS Pueblo</i>	1968	Claimed international	Freedom of navigation in high seas	Claimed incursion into territorial waters	UNCLOS not yet codified; Geneva Conventions cited
<i>USS Yorktown / Caron</i>	1988	Claimed Soviet waters	Innocent passage under UNCLOS	Required prior permission	UNCLOS Article 19 disputed by USSR
<i>USS Samuel B. Roberts</i>	1988	Persian Gulf (EEZ)	Legitimate convoy escort	Accidental contact denied	Mine warfare a violation of law of armed conflict
<i>USS Hopper</i>	2008	Strait of Hormuz (int'l)	Right of transit passage	IRGC challenged legality of U.S. presence	Strait under UNCLOS Part III; transit protected
<i>USS Fitzgerald</i>	2025	Gulf of Oman (EEZ)	Freedom of navigation	Iran asserted regional control	UNCLOS supports U.S. position; contested by Iran

Appendix C: Timeline of Iran–U.S. Maritime Clashes (1980–2025)

- 1980–1988 – *Tanker War* during Iran–Iraq conflict; U.S. escorts Kuwaiti tankers under Operation Earnest Will.
- April 1988 – *USS Samuel B. Roberts* strikes Iranian mine; U.S. retaliates with Operation Praying Mantis.
- 2004–2007 – Periodic harassment by IRGCN speedboats increases in frequency.
- Jan 2008 – U.S. warships threatened via radio; aggressive maneuvers by Iranian vessels in Strait of Hormuz.
- June 2019 – U.S. Navy drone shot down by Iran over Strait of Hormuz; U.S. nearly launches retaliatory strike.
- 2020–2021 – Regular interdictions of smuggling vessels by U.S. 5th Fleet; uptick in weapons trafficking.
- 2022–2023 – Arleigh Burke destroyers intercept Houthi missile barrages in Red Sea.
- Dec 2023 – U.S. Navy conducts joint operations with Israel following increased Iranian proxy attacks.
- July 2025 – *USS Fitzgerald* surrounded by IRGCN and helicopter overflight in Gulf of Oman; U.S. avoids escalation.

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MAJOR U.S. NAVY INTERDICTIONS SINCE WORLD WAR II



**USS PUEBLO
1968**

**BLACK SEA
1988**

**GULF OF OMAN
2025**