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The Hormuz Trap: Why Indonesia Should Not Simply Copy Iran

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Iran's ability to disrupt one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints has attracted attention in Indonesia. An increasing number of observers in the country, including those in uniform, argue that Iran's asymmetric anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) strategy could serve as a model for defending Indonesia's vast maritime territory.

Indonesia can, indeed, learn many lessons from Iran, especially regarding force dispersion, mobile missile systems, magazine depth, and the use of relatively affordable weapons to impose high costs on a stronger adversary.

Nonetheless, learning from Iran is not the same as copying its strategy. Before applying the 'Hormuz model' to Indonesia, it is critical to consider its limitations and differences in strategic needs and dependence on maritime access between the two nations.

A strategy designed to disrupt or close a strategic strait that the world depends on may not suit an archipelagic country that must defend multiple sea lanes while keeping them open for its own military, commercial, and civilian use.

Indonesia Needs Sea Control, Not Only Sea Denial

Iran's experience shows the limits of relying only on sea denial. Yes, Tehran demonstrated that it could disrupt maritime traffic through the Hormuz and raise the cost of operating there. However, making a strait dangerous is not the same as controlling it. While it managed to threaten foreign shipping, it failed to protect its own ports, vessels, and shipping lanes from U.S. attacks, maritime interdiction, and blockade, which greatly harmed its economy.¹

This distinction is even more important for Indonesia. As an archipelagic country, Indonesia depends on the sea to connect thousands of islands and move troops, fuel, food, and other essential goods across its territory. Consequently, Indonesia must not only prevent hostile forces from using its sea lanes; it must also keep those routes open for its own navy, merchant ships, and inter-island transport.

Indonesia's dependence on imported energy makes this challenge more serious. The country imported almost 60 percent² of the oil and around 72 percent³ of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) needed to meet domestic demand. This means that any prolonged disruption at sea could quickly affect military operations, transportation, and the wider economy.

Iran, by comparison, is largely self-sufficient in primary energy and is a net energy exporter, making it far less dependent on maritime energy imports than Indonesia. It is also a continental country well connected by roads and railways to neighboring countries, providing Tehran with overland trade routes. Furthermore, it uses Caspian Sea trade routes⁴ and its

¹ Miad Maleki, "What the US Naval Blockade Would Mean for Iran's Economy," Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), April 13, 2026, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2026/04/13/what-the-us-naval-blockade-would-mean-for-irans-economy/>.

² CNN Indonesia, "Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources Reveals 59 Percent of Indonesia's Gasoline Demand Met by Imports," April 9, 2026, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20260409045114-85-1345827/esdm-ungkap-59-persen-kebutuhan-bensin-ri-dipenuhi-oleh-impor>.

³ Kumparan New, "Qodari: Expansion of Household Gas Networks Reduces LPG Imports," August 5, 2026, <https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/qodari-pengembangan-jaringan-gas-rumah-tangga-kurangi-impor-lpg-27vVNVQzs8L/1>.

⁴ Nicholas Kulish, Neil MacFarquhar, and Julian E. Barnes, "Long Overlooked, Caspian Sea Provides Strategic Trade Route for Iran," *New York Times*, May 9, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/09/world/middleeast/caspian-sea-iran-russia.html>

northern ports to offset the U.S. naval blockade in the south.⁵ Of course, these corridors could only substitute for a fraction of the massive trade losses from maritime disruptions in the Hormuz. Still, it provides Iran with secondary lifelines that Indonesia lacks.

Given this reality, Indonesia needs a more balanced strategy that combines sea denial with—at minimum—local sea control, convoy protection, and resilient maritime logistics. Simply copying Iran’s ability to close a chokepoint would ignore Indonesia’s greater need to continue using the sea during a conflict.

Disrupting Shipping Is Not Defeating a Fleet

Another fundamental problem with calls for Indonesia to copy Iran’s strategy is that they often treat the disruption of commercial shipping as proof that the same strategy can stop a modern naval fleet.

Iran has certainly demonstrated that missiles, drones, mines, small attack boats, and other relatively inexpensive weapons can cause major disruption to the global economy and complicate U.S. military operations. Nevertheless, Tehran’s clearest successes have been against merchant vessels, which are generally slow, predictable, and unprotected. Given how narrow the Strait of Hormuz is, these vessels are also highly concentrated, making them even easier to target.

Meanwhile, so far neither Iran nor its proxy groups such as the Houthis have managed to sink or even hit U.S., European, or Gulf countries’ warships. Even during intense fighting, U.S. warships were able to transit the Hormuz safely despite Iranian attempts to attack them.⁶ In fact, it is Iran that lost most of its naval capability in the first two weeks of the war.⁷

Some may contend that Iran does not need to sink American warships because the risk created by its asymmetric assets already provides sufficient deterrence. This is highly debatable. Despite the danger, U.S. warships continued operating in and around the strait, and Washington still managed to attack Iran from the sea and continued to impose a naval blockade on Iranian ports and ships.

Hence, unless disrupting international navigation and threatening the global economy are themselves part of Indonesia’s strategy, Iran’s ability to threaten commercial shipping should not automatically be treated as a model of successful archipelagic defense. Moreover, as analysts have warned in recent discussions of Indonesia’s sea denial discourse, if Jakarta

⁵ Institute for the Study of War, “Iran Update Special Report, May 31, 2026,” *Institute for the Study of War*, May 31, 2026, <https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/iran-update-special-report-may-31-2026/>.

⁶ James LaPorta, “2 U.S. Navy Destroyers Transit Strait of Hormuz after Dodging Iranian Onslaught,” CBS News, May 4, 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/2-us-navy-destroyers-transit-strait-of-hormuz-after-dodging-iranian-onslaught/>.

⁷ Benjamin Jensen, “How to Lose a Navy in 10 Days,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 12, 2026

deliberately closes or indiscriminately obstructs global shipping passing through its archipelagic sea lanes, it risks violating and undermining UNCLOS, the very treaty that legally validates Indonesia's status as an archipelagic state.⁸

Low-Cost Capabilities Work Both Ways

Another lesson Indonesia should draw from Iran is that low-cost capabilities are not an advantage enjoyed exclusively by the weaker side. Discussions about Indonesia's A2/AD strategy often focus on how relatively inexpensive drones, midget submarines, Unmanned Surface Vehicles (USVs), and Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs) could threaten a stronger adversary's high-end platforms. But a technologically superior opponent can employ the same logic and possibly do so on a much larger scale.

The United States demonstrated this by deploying the FLM 136 Low-cost Unmanned Combat Attack System (LUCAS) during the opening salvo of Operation Epic Fury.⁹ More recently, on July 12, three Corsair unmanned surface vessels conducted one-way attacks against Iran's Bandar Abbas Naval Base, striking a submarine and a ship-maintenance facility. This marked the first U.S. combat employment of sea drones.¹⁰ The U.S. military is also rapidly scaling up to field thousands of low-cost AI-enabled drones through initiatives like the Drone Dominance Program.¹¹

Those advocating for Indonesia to acquire these capabilities should therefore devote equal attention to how to counter them. Investments in drones, for example, should be matched by counter-drone capabilities to protect Indonesia's sea lanes, fleet, and maritime infrastructure.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Indonesia can learn much from Iran. The use of relatively low-cost capabilities shows how a weaker military can impose high costs on a stronger opponent. Indonesia should study these experiences closely, particularly in developing affordable ways to strengthen deterrence and complicate an adversary's operations. These lessons are particularly relevant for Indonesia as it looks for affordable ways to strengthen deterrence across its vast maritime territory.

⁸ Robert C. Beckman and Tommy Koh, "A Response to Arif Havas Oegroseno," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, June 26, 2026, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/a-response-to-arif-havas-oegroseno/>.

⁹ J. D. Simkins, "US Confirms First Combat Use of LUCAS One-Way Attack Drone in Iran Strikes," *Military Times*, February 28, 2026, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2026/02/28/us-confirms-first-combat-use-of-lucas-one-way-attack-drone-in-iran-strikes/>.

¹⁰ Duarte Dias, "U.S. Uses Sea Drones in Combat for First Time to Attack Iranian Naval Base, CENTCOM Says," *CBS News*, July 14, 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-iran-war-first-sea-drone-attack-bandar-abbas-naval-base/>.

¹¹ U.S. Department of War, "Drone Dominance Program Receives First Order, Gauntlet II Gets Underway," June 17, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4520698/drone-dominance-program-receives-first-order-gauntlet-ii-gets-underway/>.

However, these lessons should be adapted, not copied. The Hormuz model has clear limitations: Iran has been more successful at disrupting commercial shipping than at stopping modern naval forces, and its ability to deny the sea to others has not ensured the safety of its own maritime trade.

For an archipelagic country that depends heavily on maritime connectivity, Indonesia must combine sea denial with the ability to keep critical waters open for its own use. Jakarta must also prepare for the possibility that stronger, equal, or even weaker adversaries will employ the same low-cost systems against it.

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