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## **Can Lessons from the “Tanker War” Address the Crisis in the Strait of Hormuz?**

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Since the attack on Iran by the United States and Israel on February 28, the situation in the Middle East has rapidly destabilized. Of particular concern for Japan is the declaration on March 2 by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that it would block the Strait of Hormuz, a vital maritime chokepoint for global shipping. In practice, many vessels that had been scheduled to transit the strait have suspended their voyages due to soaring insurance premiums as well as risk-avoidance considerations, leaving the strait effectively in a state of closure.

Japan possesses domestic crude oil reserves exceeding 200 days of consumption, and the majority of its LNG supplies are procured through long-term contracts with gas-producing countries outside the Middle East. For this reason, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz does not immediately pose a severe threat to Japan’s energy supply. However, although Japan’s petroleum reserves are maintained at a sufficiently high level, they are nonetheless finite. Moreover, even if the direct impact on Japan were limited, a prolonged halt in LNG supplies from the Middle East—one of the world’s major gas-producing regions—would likely cause significant impacts on global supply–demand balances and the level of spot prices in the international market. Therefore, from the perspective not only of Japan’s energy security but also of global energy security, the current situation—where the Strait of Hormuz is effectively blocked—should be resolved as swiftly as possible.

The Strait of Hormuz has long been recognized as a critical chokepoint in the international energy market, and ensuring the safety of navigation through the strait has been regarded as a key condition for global energy security. Although this is the first time Iran has explicitly declared a blockade of the strait, there have been previous instances in which navigation there was exposed to military threats. Earlier this year, for example, Iran conducted large-scale military exercises in the strait on February 17, during which navigation reportedly came to a de facto halt for several hours.

Among past periods of military tension, the most prominent example in which vessels navigating the region faced persistent risks of armed attack was the “Tanker War” of the 1980s. The term refers to a series of incidents during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), when both countries

repeatedly targeted tankers calling at their opponent's ports. In 1981, Iraq began attacking tankers calling at Kharg Island, Iran's main oil export terminal, in an effort to undermine Iran's ability to sustain the war. Iran initially refrained from attacking tankers calling at Iraqi ports, but the conflict escalated when Iran launched full-scale retaliatory attacks in 1984. The tanker war continued until the end of the Iran–Iraq War in August 1988. During this period, tankers from various countries navigating from the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf were exposed to the threat of armed attack. According to data compiled by the U.S. Naval Institute, more than 400 vessels were actually attacked between 1984 and 1987, including six Japanese-flagged ships. Methods of attack included the laying of naval mines along shipping routes and missile strikes launched from naval vessels and helicopters. Historically, this period represents one of the most severe threats ever faced by the security of sea lanes from the Middle East.

A country that played an active role in the tanker war and made a significant contribution to ensuring safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz was the United States under the Reagan administration. Initially, the administration was cautious about direct involvement, but the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and its apparent intention to expand influence into the Persian Gulf region are said to have encouraged the Reagan administration to decide in favor of engagement. The most well-known U.S. response at that time was Operation Earnest Will, conducted in 1987. Under this operation, Kuwaiti tankers—which had been targeted by Iran because Kuwait was financially supporting Iraq—were reflagged under the U.S. flag and escorted by the U.S. Navy.

Following this, other Western countries—including the United Kingdom, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium—also dispatched minesweepers to remove naval mines from shipping routes. The United Kingdom, France, and Italy also deployed their naval vessels to the Persian Gulf to escort merchant ships, including those flying their national flags. Although Japan, due to constitutional constraints, was unable to dispatch minesweepers or other military vessels, it contributed through financial support and diplomatic efforts. Through such cooperation and coordination among the countries involved, oil exports from the Persian Gulf were maintained despite the continued attacks on tankers.

That said, the current situation surrounding the Strait of Hormuz is not identical to the tanker war of the 1980s. In particular, whereas the Iran–Iraq War that formed the backdrop to the tanker war was a conflict fought by states within the Middle East, the present situation is more complex because the United States itself is now a direct party to the conflict. Nevertheless, given that the strait has already been effectively closed and maritime traffic between the Persian Gulf and the outside world has been disrupted, restoring navigation may require security involvement under a framework of international cooperation centered on the United States, similar to the arrangements seen at that time.

Of course, in order to restore stable navigation, the highest priority should be diplomatic efforts to bring the current armed confrontation to an end. However, if a rapid resolution proves difficult and restrictions on maritime traffic become prolonged, the international community will need to pursue a multifaceted response. A coordinated release of strategic petroleum reserves would be one viable option, and responses to the currently soaring insurance premiums should also be considered. Nevertheless, these measures are essentially emergency or supplementary in nature; the fundamental challenge lies in how to restore the safety of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. If an early end to the armed conflict proves difficult, countries concerned may need to cooperate to ensure the safety of maritime traffic, as was done during the tanker war. Indeed, on March 3, President Trump indicated that, as one possible measure to restore navigation, the U.S. military could escort vessels if necessary. Going forward, it will be essential to advance international discussions on coordination and the division of roles among countries to ensure safe passage through the strait.

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