

The Ceasefire, the Strait, and the Real Reason Trump Stopped — Until He Didn't

Dr. Julio C. Spinelli

An analytical essay based on ship traffic, public reporting, and the strategic logic of the April 2026 pause and its collapse

My thesis is that the April 2026 ceasefire between the United States and Iran was not primarily the result of a sudden diplomatic breakthrough. It was, rather, a forced pause under severe strategic pressure. My reading was that the public formula of the deal was simple: the United States would suspend bombing, and Iran would reopen the Strait of Hormuz. But the deeper reason for stopping was that the next available steps were becoming economically catastrophic, militarily costly, and morally darker by the hour.

What has changed since the first version of this essay is not the underlying strategic logic but the diplomatic outcome. The negotiations in Islamabad failed on the only issue that Trump publicly said really mattered: Iran's nuclear ambitions. He then announced that the United States Navy would begin blockading ships trying to enter or leave the Strait of Hormuz, would interdict vessels that had paid tolls to Iran, and would begin destroying Iranian mines. In practical terms, the ceasefire did not ripen into peace. It became a temporary off-ramp before a new form of escalation.

That development does not invalidate the original thesis. It sharpens it. My argument was never that the ceasefire represented a stable settlement. It was that the ceasefire functioned as an excuse to stop at a moment when the available alternatives were becoming intolerably dangerous. Once talks collapsed, Trump was pushed back toward the same underlying decision tree that had been visible all along.

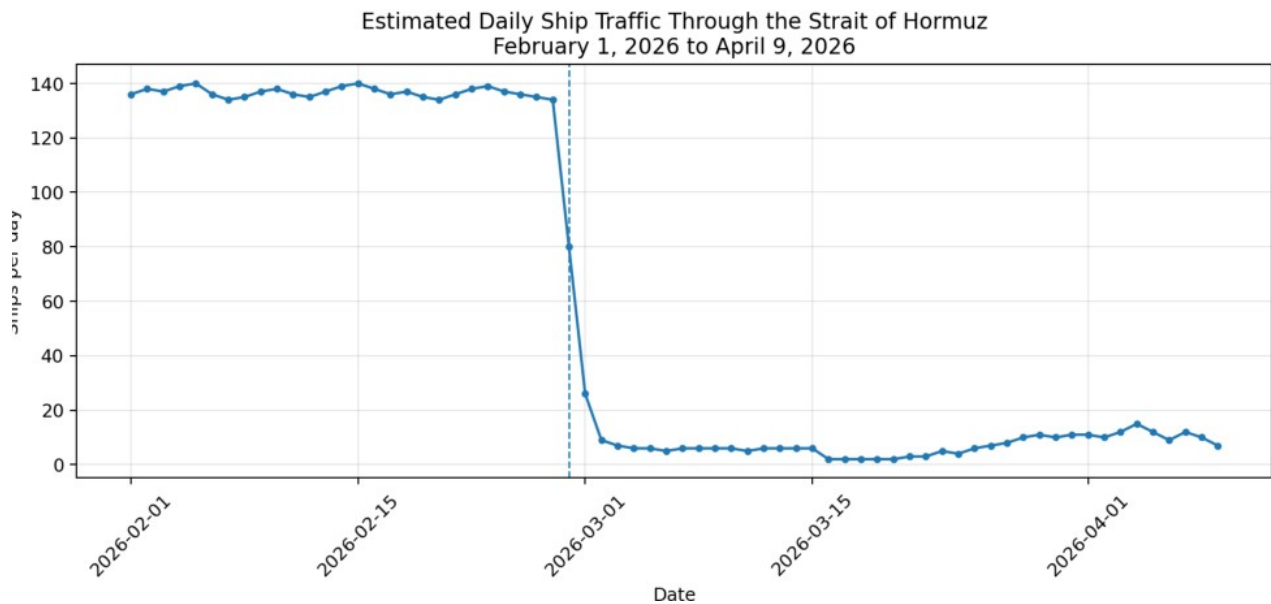


Figure 1. Reconstructed daily Strait of Hormuz ship traffic from February 1 through April 9, 2026. February values are a baseline estimate around normal pre-war levels; the post-February 28 collapse is anchored to public reporting and AIS-based tracker summaries.

That chart still matters. It makes visually clear that Iran did not restore normal commercial passage through the strait during the ceasefire window. The visible collapse in traffic is too severe to dismiss as noise. Public reporting provided anchor points such as a baseline near 140 ships per day and a seven-ship level on April 9. The WTO Strait of Hormuz Trade Tracker also reported that AIS-observed outbound movement nearly halted after Iran’s closure announcement, while the IMF’s PortWatch warned that wartime GPS jamming, AIS spoofing, and vessels going dark can cause open-source tracking to understate actual movement. Even with those cautions, the strategic signal is unmistakable: the strait did not function normally, and that makes it harder to argue that the pause was fundamentally about successful reopening.

The economic point remains the same. This was never only about oil in the ground. It was about oil that could not move. The U.S. Energy Information Administration says roughly 20 million barrels per day moved through Hormuz in 2024, about one fifth of the world’s petroleum liquids consumption. Modern economies do not fail only when resources disappear. They fail when delivery systems break. Tanker owners do not need certainty of danger to freeze movement. They need only enough mines, insurance stress, legal ambiguity, and navigational risk to make transit commercially irrational.

Three painful options

A. Send U.S. forces to force the strait open.

This would mean more than a symbolic naval gesture. It would mean a sustained combat operation in one of the most dangerous maritime chokepoints in the world, against mines, drones, missiles, coastal batteries, swarming tactics, and the constant possibility of horizontal escalation. In my judgment, that path carries a large implied probability of U.S. casualties and a substantial risk of a wider war.

B. Destroy Iranian infrastructure on a much larger scale.

This would mean escalating from coercive strikes into broader degradation of the physical systems that sustain modern civilian life. Once a campaign moves decisively toward bridges, power plants, transport nodes, and other dual-use systems, the implied civilian cost rises dramatically. The casualties are not only those killed directly in strikes. They include those harmed by cascading failures in water, refrigeration, hospitals, communications, transport, and fuel distribution. That remains, in my view, the darkest path.

C. Impose a U.S.-enforced blockade and managed reopening of Hormuz.

This is now the announced policy. It is less immediately dramatic than a direct battle to clear the strait at full commercial scale, and less openly destructive than a systematic infrastructure war, but it is not clean, cheap, or strategically reassuring. It still requires prolonged U.S. naval exposure in a mined and militarized corridor. It still risks U.S. losses, miscalculation, and escalation. And it still does not quickly restore the commercial normality that the world economy needs. A blockade can be a military answer to extortion. It is not an economic substitute for peace.

Why the oil arithmetic still does not work quickly

Even if one widens the analysis to include all major non-Hormuz producers, including the United States, Canada, Brazil, Guyana, Venezuela, Nigeria, and Russia, the replacement arithmetic remains unfavorable in the short run. The fastest mitigation is not a miraculous surge from new wells. It is existing bypass infrastructure, stock releases, rerouting, and demand destruction.

Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline has now been restored to 7 million barrels per day of capacity, which matters greatly because it bypasses Hormuz. But that figure is still far below the roughly 20 million barrels per day that normally moved through the strait. Even before accounting for refinery fit, tanker positioning, insurance, and loading schedules, a very large gap remains if Hormuz does not function normally.

The United States is a major producer, but current production is not the same thing as instant surge capacity. Canada can help at the margin but is not a rapid swing producer either. Brazil and Guyana are meaningful growth stories, yet they add barrels on project timelines, not overnight. Venezuela can rise somewhat under favorable conditions, but not enough and not fast enough to neutralize a Hormuz-scale disruption. Nigeria and other African producers have upside, but much of it is constrained by security, infrastructure, and investment limits. Russia is already one of the world's largest producers, but it is not a reserve tap waiting unused; it is an already operating system constrained by sanctions, war risk, shipping patterns, and export logistics.

My judgment, therefore, is that even an aggressive global response would only replace part of a Hormuz outage in the first several months, not all of it. The market can cushion a large share of the shock through bypass routes, inventories, and altered trade flows. It cannot painlessly outrun a full Hormuz loss in weeks, and probably not in a few months either.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that the ceasefire functioned first as an excuse to stop. Publicly, it could be framed as a transactional success: Iran opens the strait, the United States pauses bombing, diplomacy gets a window, and the White House can claim leverage rather than retreat. But the chart, the traffic collapse, and the failure to restore normal passage strongly suggest that the reopening rationale was never securely achieved in practice.

The negotiations have now failed, and Trump has chosen the third path, at least for now. In that sense, the blockade is not a contradiction of the original thesis. It is its continuation by other means. It appears to be the politically more defensible way to resume pressure while still avoiding, at least temporarily, the even worse optics and consequences of the other two choices.

In short, my thesis remains that Trump did not want to own the consequences of an infrastructure war against Iran and did not want the United States trapped in the blood and uncertainty of a direct effort to reopen Hormuz at full commercial scale by force. Faced first with the risk of global economic dislocation and then with the failure of negotiations, he used the ceasefire as the politically acceptable reason to stop and has now turned to blockade as the politically more defensible way to resume pressure. The problem is that blockade does not solve the underlying economic reality. It may buy time. It may impose leverage. It may partially restore movement. But it does not erase the fact that the world remains exposed to a profound oil-distribution shock until truly normal passage is restored.

Source notes

- Reuters, April 11, 2026: talks in Islamabad ended without agreement; Trump announced a U.S. naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, interdiction of vessels that paid tolls to Iran, and destruction of Iranian mines.
- Associated Press, April 11–12, 2026: the talks lasted about twenty-one hours, ended without agreement, and were followed by Trump's announcement of blockade measures and renewed threats.
- U.S. Energy Information Administration, June 17, 2025 updated reference page: about 20 million barrels per day moved through Hormuz in 2024, equal to roughly 20% of global petroleum liquids consumption.
- Reuters, April 12, 2026: Saudi Arabia restored full capacity on its East-West oil pipeline to 7 million barrels per day.