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## **Avoiding War on the Waters: Why U.S. Naval Strategy Towards Iran Must Change**

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he United States has maintained a naval force posture in the Persian Gulf that has not significantly changed over at least the past two decades despite the seismic changes the region has experienced in that same span of time. Advocates of this posture claim the regular deployment of carrier strike groups to the Gulf provides an effective deterrent to Iranian aggression. This has not been borne out in reality while the posture incurs high resource costs and poses a significant risk of instigating an avoidable conflict with Iran. This paper argues that the U.S. should change this posture by refraining from sending carriers into the Gulf which would also have the ancillary effects of reducing the need for certain onshore facilities and compelling a shift in the Navy's strategic messaging.

# Introduction

The recent years of heightened tensions in the Persian Gulf between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially in the wake of the American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 have underscored the importance of several “flashpoints” in the relationship where war could possibly be instigated. Among these are the battlefields of Syria, Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Balkanized power politics of Iraq and the ongoing conflagration in Yemen. One of the Gulf region’s key flashpoints that scholars and popular commentators have focused less on, however, is the Gulf itself. It is likely that this domain in fact represents the most fertile ground for an unplanned war between the U.S. and Iran should the wrong circumstances prevail. Much of this has to do with America’s overbearing and misapplied naval posture in the Gulf that is more likely to spark conflict rather than deter it.

This paper argues that the present U.S. naval strategy in the Persian Gulf poses greater strategic risks than the benefits its advocates purport it affords. This paper advances the proposition that it is in the national interests of the U.S. to pursue a significant drawdown and reorientation of its forward deployed naval assets in the Gulf. Such an augmentation of policy is intended to alter the following three policy domains:

1. ***Policy of posture:*** ending the regular deployment of U.S. carrier strike groups in the Gulf to defray the operational costs they incur, to end an ineffectual policy and to reduce the unnecessary risk of conflict.
2. ***Policy of presence:*** the above augmentation of posture should lead to a reduction in the permanent present of support personnel at naval bases in the Gulf with the eventual objective of ending the U.S. presence at Fujairah Naval Base, UAE and potentially implementing significant drawdowns at other facilities.
3. ***Policy of vision:*** redirecting the Navy’s strategic outlook away from a mission of Iranian “containment” and toward providing protection for U.S. diplomatic missions in the region.

## U.S. Gulf Operations: 1987-1988

The U.S. and Iran have been at maritime loggerheads since the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. During the conflict, tensions between the two belligerents on the waters devolved into the so-called “Tanker War,” a campaign of anti-surface warfare targeting each side’s oil freight traffic. The conflict escalated to the point that neutral traffic came under threat.

In response, the U.S. launched Operation Earnest Will in 1987 to safeguard oil freighters passing in and out of the Gulf from Iranian threats despite the fact that the first and thereafter most strikes on

oil tankers were carried out by Iraqi forces nominally aligned with the West.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. often took the added step of either deploying surface forces to protect neutral ships or even flagging neutral tankers, mostly Kuwaiti ones, as American.<sup>2</sup> Iraqi strikes continued to most of the dominate the Gulf battlespace while Iranian strikes were primarily concentrated around the strait of Hormuz and the mouth of the Gulf between the islands of Tunb and Abu Musa.<sup>3</sup> As it happened, this space captured American attention the most due to its geographical characteristic as a natural bottle-neck. Here, U.S. policymakers assumed particularly malign intent. In truth, it was the relative deficiency of Iranian power projection that confined their operations to that manageable corridor.

As U.S. involvement in the conflict grew and pressure on Tehran mounted, Iranian helicopters began laying depth mines in the Gulf in the spring of 1987. Again, the U.S. assumed this was anti-American blow-back. The conversations in Tehran, however, indicate the target of minelaying to be Kuwait, assumed to be the “weakest link” in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the state whose Emir Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah was considered most likely to put pressure on Iraq’s Saddam Hussein to end the war.<sup>4</sup> The conflict boiled over in April 1988 when the American frigate U.S.S. *Samuel B. Roberts* (FFG-58) struck an Iranian mine while conducting operations in the Gulf. President Reagan ordered immediate retaliation in the form of Operation Praying Mantis,

a daylong campaign against Iranian surface forces, shore emplacements and oil platforms which resulted in heavy Iranian casualties.<sup>5</sup>

A critical study from the Naval War College in 1997 charged that though Earnest Will was deemed successful by most U.S. policymakers, “the attacks on the Gulf shipping ended in 1988 not as a result of American military action, but as a byproduct of Iran and Iraq’s acceptance of a UN negotiated cease fire.”<sup>6</sup>

Only three months after Praying Mantis, the U.S. Navy missile cruiser USS *Vincennes* (CG-49), perceiving an inbound Iranian air attack, would mistakenly shoot down Iran Air Flight 655 resulting in the deaths of 290 noncombatants and further drawing out U.S.-Iranian tensions in the Gulf until the Iran-Iraq War was finally brought to a formal close in August 1988.

The lessons of Operations Earnest Will and Praying Mantis illustrate a concerted pattern of misapprehending Iran’s strategic motives and structures on the part of U.S. policymakers which has dictated American naval posture in the Gulf toward Iran ever since to the detriment of sound policy. The 1988 flare up remains to date the only large-scale military conflict between American and Iranian conventional forces. It occurred precisely because a misunderstanding of Iranian grand strategic aims – as well as a lack of appreciation for Tehran’s anxieties – impelled the U.S. to put its sailors and Marines in a situation

that was more likely than not to result in their being involved in open conflict with Iran. This paper argues that U.S. naval strategy in the Gulf today is similarly out-of-step with Iranian intentions and American needs thus posing a realistic risk of war.

In more recent years, the Gulf domain has continued to be fertile ground for tension and conflict. In 2016, two U.S. Navy riverine command boats (RCB) and their crews were seized and detained by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps forces while sailing off Iran's Farsi Island.<sup>7</sup> In less than a day, the ten Navy personnel were released unharmed after a brief period of diplomatic exchanges between the U.S. State Department and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, the incident, while comparatively mild, illustrated clearly that the Persian Gulf remains a significantly dangerous flashpoint of U.S.-Iranian relations. Considering this took place after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), even major momentum towards diplomatic détente are shown to be vulnerable to upsets that can occur in the Gulf well beyond the direct oversight of operational commanders let alone statespersons.

## **The Policy of Posture: Three Key Problems**

### **The Origins of “Dual Containment”**

U.S. Naval posture in the Persian Gulf has not changed substantially since the American presence in the region was made effectively permanent after the 1991 Gulf War. Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent U.S.-led international military response demanded, in the minds of American policymakers, a constant forward deployed presence in the Gulf to curtail any further Iraqi aggression. The Iran question also still loomed large enough to justify a new dual-fronted strategic orientation. The implementation of the policy of “dual containment” during the Clinton administration was the product of this thinking; U.S. strategy would aim not to balance Iraq and Iran against one another but rather employ the full might of its forward deployed assets to “contain” both. In Iraq, this took the form of two no fly zones administered by the U.S. and its Coalition partners, one in Iraqi Kurdistan and the other in the Shia-dominated south.<sup>8</sup>

The U.S. posture towards Iran was in the interwar years was relatively less kinetic but still relied heavily on the historical precedent established in 1988 – the need for a capacity to strike swiftly if required. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 revived the specter of Iranian aggression, a fear that was not

entirely unfounded given Tehran's exploitation of the sudden demise of its Iraqi nemesis to support Shia special groups in Iraq and add to U.S. casualties. U.S. policymakers additionally had a persistent fear that Tehran might export the Islamic Revolution to Baghdad, an anxiety that added to the imperative to keep a U.S. surface presence on station in the Gulf not only to support Operation Iraqi Freedom but also to keep Iran at bay.

As its role in the Gulf theater was amplified, the U.S. Navy began a gradual restructuring of its forward deployed forces. By 2004, the carrier strike group (CSG) had replaced the carrier battle group (CVBG) with a renewed focus on shoreward power projection and strike capacity reflecting the new priorities of a naval force dedicated to occupying the Gulf domain for the purposes of staging combat operations against land-based targets, i.e. Iraq and potentially Iran as well.<sup>9</sup>

Over the course of the Iraq War, the U.S. would deploy four carrier strike groups to the Gulf all with this dual objective. Indeed, operational support for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan could be counted as a third "front" for the already heavily taxed U.S. naval presence in the Gulf, though the establishment of NATO's Bagram Air Base would alleviate that need somewhat.

Today, that same long-held dictum that U.S. carrier strike groups ought to retain a constant pres-

ence in the Persian Gulf still holds sway. Despite the neutralization of the threat from Saddam's Hussein, the nature of America's naval presence in the region did not fundamentally change. Containment, however, has continued, now directed monoscopically at Iran.

## A Costly Posture

The utilization of CSGs have consistently incurred a significant cost in money, matériel, logistical energy and man hours. A forward deployed CSG typically consists of one fleet carrier, two destroyers, one cruiser, one supply vessel and one attack submarine. The carrier alone comprises the bulk of the CSG's assets fielding a carrier air wing (CVW) of 75 aircraft (both fixed-wing and rotary) and a crew of around 6,700.<sup>10</sup> The operational cost of a forward deployed CSG is about \$6.5 million per day with the potential added costs of combat operations which has seen a given carrier's daily sorties surge from a standard 120 to 200 per day.<sup>11</sup>

These metrics are standard across most theaters, but the Gulf has acted as the epicenter of concerted CSG operations for the past three decades. Indeed, Gulf theater operations are far more at the mercy of the volatility of regional crises than others. Fluctuations in the geopolitics of the region frequently impel force surges to meet the perceived needs of U.S. strategic interests.

In late 2010 during the Obama administration's negotiations over the JCPOA, the Navy implemented a surge deployment of two aircraft carriers simultaneously in the Gulf in an effort to maximize pressure on the government in Tehran to adopt a diplomatic resolution, something that would not formally occur for another five years. The two-carrier deployment phase lasted two years and incurred a detrimental effect on the Navy's readiness.

David B. Larter at *Defense News* reported that, "The two-carrier presence nearly broke the Navy's ability to project power with its carriers and sent deployments skyrocketing to nine months and more as the readiness accounts depleted to dangerous levels."<sup>12</sup>

Abnormally long deployments have become something of a hallmark of U.S. naval operations in recent years given the general status quo of a Navy that is tasked with a series of worldwide missions from policing the global commons to providing force protection for ongoing military efforts in the Middle East and Central Asia. The Gulf strategy as it is risks stretching the Navy even thinner. In a renewed effort to provide a check on Iran, the Navy announced earlier this year that the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN-69), fresh from its record-breaking seven-month deployment, would be redeployed sometime in early 2021. Despite real concerns about crew burnout, equipment degradation and the fact

that the *Eisenhower* and her sister ships are reaching the twilight of their hull life, the supposed strategic imperative to sustain an Iran-facing carrier presence in the Gulf was still deemed a worthwhile tradeoff.<sup>13</sup>

Even 19 years after the start of the War on Terror, the Gulf domain continues to drive spikes in the Navy's CSG costs borne principally by a bloated Pentagon budget, the personnel (and their families) and the vessels themselves.



The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) and the Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruiser USS Bunker Hill (CG 52) conduct a replenishment at sea with the Military Sealift Command fast combat support ship USNS Bridge (T-AOE 10). No changes were made to this photo.

## An Ineffective Posture

With these substantial operational costs in mind, one must question how effective the posture is at its primary stated goal: deterring Iranian aggression and checking its regional influence. It is clear that for the price paid, the benefit incurred from a retention of the present Gulf naval posture is minimal.

Carrier strike groups comprise the backbone of U.S. naval strategy in the region and the assets they bring to bear are often argued to provide effec-



tive deterrence against Iranian aggression by many flag officers and other advocates of the posture. One such advocate is Marine Corps General Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the current head of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) who testified before the House of Representatives that the deployment of CSGs to the Persian Gulf “has a profound deterring affect principally upon Iran,” going on to say, “They know what the carrier is. They track the presence of the carrier and I view a carrier as a critical part of a deterrent posture effective against Iran.”<sup>14</sup>

However, recent events have not borne out the viability of this claim. In fact, Iranian operations in the Gulf have continued largely unabated despite the U.S. naval presence there and blatantly aggressive, even risky moves by Tehran have been undertaken with seemingly very little thought given to the U.S. strike groups that have established themselves just offshore. In September 2019, a drone strike claimed by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels was conducted against the oil facilities of Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Arabia though U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo fingered Iran as the true culprit. Regardless of the extent of Iran’s involvement in the strikes, it is clear that the potential for American retaliation was not sufficient to deter this aggressive move.

Despite the gradual amplification of the U.S. naval presence in the Gulf over time, Iran has also managed to deepen its ties to its manifold proxy

networks in the region. As many as half a million personnel may comprise Iran-backed proxies across Central Asia and the Levant, an array of forces built up primarily over the length of time that the U.S. has retained a consistent carrier presence in the Gulf.<sup>15</sup> Iran’s proxies have largely grown in capacity and recent spikes in their activity have demonstrated that there are limited external constraints on actions that U.S. naval power lacks the ability to curtail.<sup>16</sup>

Even directly confrontational Iranian surface actions against U.S. Navy personnel, as we have seen in the aforementioned capture of two American riverine craft in 2016, constitute a degree of unconstrained action on which the presence of CSGs in the Gulf have little impact.

The 2016 episode also gets to the heart of another difficulty in establishing deterrence against Iranian aggression: U.S. policymakers must determine whom they wish to deter. Iranian “aggression” can come from two rather different directions. One is the Islamic Republic of Iran Army, also known as the Artesh, which comprises the Iranian Navy.

The other is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a parallel military arm that answers to the Islamic Republic’s Supreme Leader. Both have varying motivations and are often at odds. One does not subsume or even necessarily act in accordance with the other leaving ample space for confusion on the international scene. Indeed, the Iranian military as

a whole essentially operates by two distinct doctrines.

<sup>17</sup> Often, the Iranian activities that the U.S. and its partners often decry as “malign” originate not in the Artesh but the IRGC who were incidentally the perpetrators of the 2016 confrontation. With an estimated active force of about 190,000 personnel, it is roughly half the size of the Artesh, a formidable presence in Iranian military affairs.<sup>18</sup> Such a kinetic posture as the one on which the U.S. relies runs a grave risk of incurring kinetic results, a possibility that becomes more likely with more aggressive IRGC involvement. An unwanted conflagration with Iran is most likely where IRGC operations, undaunted by U.S. the naval presence, adopt an aggressive line.

## A Risky Posture

There are very real risks associated with the retention of such a substantial, carrier-reliant presence in the Gulf. In recent years, much discussion has been had over the questionable future of the aircraft carrier as a viable combat platform given the advent of longer range, more sophisticated and more widely available anti-surface missiles such as China’s vaunted DF-21 or Iran’s Noor.<sup>19</sup> This brings the relatively easy sinking of a fleet carrier and the resulting heavy loss of life in a conventional war with Iran into the realm of military reality with which U.S. planners need to contend. Such a tragedy would have all of the obvious negative impacts stemming from the potentially high casualties and loss of a valuable vessel in combat

but also bears an added escalatory danger. The loss of a U.S. fleet carrier in battle for the first time since the Second World War would certainly burden U.S. leaders with a pressure for large-scale retaliation – regardless of the circumstances – to which the bloodless seizure of two riverine boats does not compare.

This serious potential for escalation was tasted in October of 2016 when Iran-backed Houthi forces launched two Iranian Noor missiles at the American destroyer USS *Mason* (DDG-87). Though the missiles failed to hit their target and the *Mason* elected not to return fire, the potential for an unexpected ground-launched anti-surface missile strike was made plain.<sup>20</sup> The more tempting target a carrier makes to more aggressive, less predictable U.S. adversaries like the IRGC as well as the potential limitations introduced by the finite mission radii of the carrier’s aircraft (which would compel the ship to maneuver closer to shore) mean that this risk is substantial and must be addressed realistically by U.S. planners.

## Keeping the CSGs at Bay

Instead of ensuring its surface forces are not unnecessarily put in harm’s way, U.S. policymakers have doubled down on the Navy’s Gulf posture. This should change. The core policy remedy is to simply refrain from sending CSGs into the Persian Gulf proper unless to address a direct and sizable threat to U.S. national security.



It has already been demonstrated that the forward deployment of CSGs is both highly costly and ineffectual. Given this, the potential of drawing down the U.S. surface presence in the Persian Gulf can be adopted safely without significant fear of consequences that would be more adverse than the penalties America's present policy either already incurs or threatens to incur. This has the potential of driving down the heavy costs of operations and cutting down on the long duration deployments that deplete the ships and their crews to the detriment of naval readiness. It would also be a rational policy choice for U.S. leadership to take a safer, less confrontational posture in the Gulf that does not risk the lives of U.S. personnel in what could potentially be a major conflagration.

## The Policy of Presence

### Un-basing America's Navy in the Gulf

A start to the reduction of America's permanent onshore presence in the Gulf region offers the potential for a significant development that should result from the above reorientation of U.S. naval posture. While U.S. installations are scattered across the Middle East, the Navy presently utilizes three major bases in the Gulf:

- Naval Support Activity (NSA) Bahrain which acts as headquarters U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and the U.S. Navy's 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet

- Port of Jebel Ali, UAE which is the busiest port of call for U.S. Navy vessels in the world and frequently berths U.S. aircraft carriers
- Fujairah Naval Base, UAE which is situated on the Strait of Hormuz and acts as a "land link" to Jebel Ali should the Strait get closed

U.S. forward deployed bases present some of the same challenges that were initially outlined in the above discussion on force posture. These onshore bases incur great costs, fail to adequately deter Iranian aggression and even present Iran and its proxies with tempting potential targets should a conflict arise. With a cost to the Pentagon of nearly \$20 billion to operate and maintain military installations worldwide, it is in America's strategic interest to initiate the difficult, politically fraught process of drawdown in its most conflicted and arguably least fruitful theater.<sup>21</sup>

### Fujairah Naval Base

The potential for drawdown, should it be undertaken by U.S. policymakers, would be a challenging one, even when referring only to Gulf installations. Indeed, the topic demands a paper all its own. However, the primary policy assessment of this paper, that of posture, leads to a realistic roadmap toward the eventual reduction of the U.S. naval footprint in the Gulf.

The significant reduction of a regular surface presence and the lack of regular traffic from U.S. surface forces should mean a reevaluation of one base in particular, the small U.S. Navy base at Fujairah.

The deep-water Port of Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates hosts a small U.S. Navy facility and a larger UAE facility both meant to not only provide a deterrent to Iranian operations near the mouth of the Gulf but also to provide a secure link to the massive port at Jebel Ali where U.S. naval vessels frequently call.<sup>22</sup>

The UAE offers potentially fertile ground for the beginning stages of base taking the U.S. footprint offshore. The country hosts some 5,000 U.S. military personnel, most of whom do not reside at Fujairah.<sup>23</sup> The closing of the Fujairah base would thus test the waters of political palatability while also comporting with a newly reoriented force posture that would make its existence less justifiable.

The closure of the base at Fujairah coupled with the vast reduction of the U.S. carrier presence in the Gulf could potentially lead to significant draw-downs at other Gulf facilities and would make the Jebel Ali's status as a major U.S. Navy port of call largely obsolete since its chief American clientele would be provided by the very CVGs that now frequent the region far less.

## The Policy of Vision

### Abandoning Containment

The most ephemeral of the three policy domains this paper discusses concerns how the U.S. Navy conceives of and expresses its role in the Persian Gulf. As has already been demonstrated with General McKenzie's statements to Congress, the mission of containing Iran has wide purchase among the U.S. military's flag officers and indeed has wide purchase in the national discourse as well. The notion that the inherent mission of U.S. forces in the Gulf toward Iran was its confrontation and containment is nothing new, however the Pompeo State Department in recent years has instituted with renewed vigor President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign to force the Islamic Republic to accept a new joint nuclear agreement.

This strategic outlook is thus characterized as "leadership" which "begins with recognizing the Islamic Republic of Iran for what it truly is: a theocratic, revolutionary, brutish regime that will not voluntarily seek peace or make life better for the Iranian people."<sup>24</sup> Taken as gospel by the civilian leadership of the nation, it is understandable that the U.S. Navy and CENTCOM have developed U.S. naval policy along that same strategic vein. This should be reconsidered. The immense power of signaling in international affairs means that such a reorientation of

verbiage and rhetoric could carry significant weight and can make strides toward cooling down diplomatic temperatures in dangerous security environments like the Gulf.

Additionally, an alteration of messaging has the added effect of refocusing the mission in the field. Persian Gulf operations are conducted with the containment mission in mind from the deck of a vessel to the level of operational command. Amending the Navy's vision for its Iran strategy in the Gulf curtails the instinct to regress into modes of thinking and behavior that could lead to a relapse of poor policy.

Ultimately, a new vision for the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf should shift the messaging of the mission away from "containment" language. U.S. surface forces should be made to understand that a new force posture which keeps CSGs out of harm's way is well within the national interest and that the core mission of the U.S. Navy in the region is the protection of American lives and assets there. Anything else would be beyond its strategic preview.

## Conclusion

U.S. involvement in the affairs of the Persian Gulf are manifold and fraught with flashpoints that drive up the risk of otherwise avoidable conflicts. While many reforms to this challenging landscape have been posited over the years, the reorientation of the U.S. Navy's surface force posture in the Gulf, the

closure of the naval base at Fujairah and the development of a new vision for Gulf strategy are all sensible, realistic and actionable ways by which the U.S. could avoid a potential conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Among the general public, there is a genuine appetite for reform of this scale if not greater. Despite the heightened U.S.-Iranian tension that have characterized much of the Trump administration's Gulf strategy, Americans have consistently, on a bipartisan basis, disapproved of initiating a conflict with Iran. One Gallup poll from 2019 showed that 78% of Americans favor reliance on nonmilitary measures of engagement with Iran while only 42% would approve of military action should the former fail.<sup>25</sup>

The true test for any such policy alteration would come from policymakers and planners who have become accustomed to the reality of an American force posture in the Gulf that has not changed and yet has not proven itself strategically successful. Acknowledging the reality that neither the present posture nor the deadly conflict it could potentially instigate serves the national interests of the U.S. will require a significant restructuring of the way U.S. leadership approach Iran on the waters of the Gulf.

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