

U.S. NAVAL OPTIONS FOR INFLUENCING IRAN

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This article is intended to explore the range of options the U.S. Navy can provide to policy makers in developing a strategic approach to Iran. The Barack Obama administration has taken power just as a delicate change is beginning in the region. The American land, air, and naval presence in the Persian Gulf will diminish as forces return from Iraq. Simultaneously, the Obama administration will be trying to elicit from Iran an agreement not to develop a nuclear weapons program. At the same time, the new administration is committed to restructuring significantly U.S. armed forces. Changes in the naval presence in the region need to be considered not only with respect to domestic constituencies but also in light of the nation's security interests in the region.

The subsequent analysis focuses on the range of policy-relevant options the U.S. Navy can provide, short of war, that could help shape Iran's behavior. "Shaping" as a strategy can be defined as the performance of a set of continuous, long-term, integrated actions—with a broad spectrum of governmental, nongovernmental, and international partners—that seeks to influence the behavior of target nations and thereby maintain or enhance stability, prevent or mitigate crises, and enable other operations when crises occur. Actions short of war designed to influence the behavior of another nation fall under the rubric of shaping operations. With the end of the Cold War, shaping operations became a more important part of the Navy's array of activities.

The Navy's 2007 *Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* identified shaping as one of the critical element of naval operations.

This strategy reaffirms the use of seapower to influence actions and activities at sea and ashore. The expeditionary character and versatility of maritime forces provide

the United States the asymmetric advantage of enlarging or contracting its military footprint in areas where access is denied or limited. Permanent or prolonged basing of our military forces overseas often has unintended economic, social or political repercussions. The sea is a vast maneuver space, where the presence of maritime forces can be adjusted as conditions dictate to enable flexible approaches to escalation, de-escalation and deterrence of conflicts.¹

Navy leaders have never been shy about extolling the ability of maritime forces to shape behavior and influence events. “The Navy’s role in global influence and deterrence will grow significantly in the future,” Admiral John Nathman, former Commander, Fleet Forces Command, has said. “You can go up to 12 nautical miles [to a country’s shoreline] without asking permission. You come with no footprint. And you deliver a message that can be broad, subtle, persistent, credible or powerful. The Navy can do that.”²

Demand for Navy shaping operations has risen steadily over the past several years. All joint forces are engaged in shaping actions, which range from theater security cooperation and shaping to more elaborate options to deter and seize the initiative.

When thinking about deterring Iran, one thinks quickly of Navy options. In fact, there is both a valuable historical legacy and an important niche role for the Navy in operations to counter Iran at various levels of engagement. The same warships on scheduled deployment rotation can shift from presence to deterrence to the countering of aggression. Day in and day out, Navy forces help set the limits of Iranian military action in the Gulf.

Few question the idea that unique Navy capabilities to shape and deter have special strategic significance. Yet there is little awareness in the broader policy community of the impact that naval presence can have on the situation in the Persian Gulf over the longer term and during crises. Nor has it been made clear to decision makers that Iran’s leadership is aware of our naval actions and factors the presence and operations of the U.S. Navy into its strategic calculations.

U.S. POLICY TOWARD IRAN

The United States has struggled to manage the dangers posed by the revolutionary regime in Tehran for nearly thirty years. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the central policy objective of the United States has been to change the behavior of the regime. It has sought to do so by a combination of means, including a larger military presence in the region, enhanced support for regional allies (including, for a time, Iran’s principal adversary, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq), economic leverage, targeted sanctions, and limited engagement.

The George W. Bush administration was very clear about its security issues with Iran:

The behavior of the Iranian regime poses as serious a set of challenges to the international community as any problem we face today. Iran's nuclear ambitions; its support for terrorism; and its efforts to undermine hopes for stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, including lethal backing for groups attacking American troops, are all deeply troubling. So are its destructive actions in Lebanon, its longstanding rejection of a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians, and the profoundly repugnant rhetoric of its leaders about Israel, the Holocaust, and so much else. Compounding these concerns is Iran's deteriorating record on human rights.³

The approach the Bush administration took, like that of its predecessors for the past thirty years, was largely focused on shaping Iranian behavior.

Our policy toward Iran is clear and focused. First and foremost, we have demonstrated to the Iranian regime that its provocative and destabilizing policies will entail painful costs for Iran, including financial hardship, diplomatic isolation, and long-term detriment to Iran's prestige and fundamental national interests. Secondly, and equally importantly, we are working to convince the regime that another, more constructive course is available to it.⁴

Even though only recently in office, the Obama administration has made it clear that Iran will be a principal focus of its foreign policy. The Obama administration appears to hold objectives with respect to Iran very similar to those of the Bush administration. Foremost on its list of objectives is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. In a recent television interview President Obama said, "Iran is going to be one of our biggest challenges." He specifically mentioned that country's support for Lebanese Shia party Hizballah and its nuclear enrichment program.⁵

While current U.S. intelligence estimates assert that Iran currently does not have an active nuclear weapons program, they suggest that this situation could change rapidly. According to retired admiral Dennis Blair, "We assess Iran has the scientific, technical and industrial capacity eventually to produce nuclear weapons. In our judgment, only an Iranian political decision to abandon a nuclear weapons objective would plausibly keep Iran from eventually producing nuclear weapons—and such a decision is inherently reversible."⁶

Current American policy has three basic threads: more negotiations (including direct talks), tougher sanctions, and the threat of military action. The goal is to shape Iranian behavior so as to make a resort to direct military force unnecessary. In particular, this means encouraging Iran to enter into direct talks with the United States and its allies. Ultimately, it is hoped, the diplomatic process will see Iran moderate its revolutionary stance, forgo the development of nuclear weapons, and integrate itself into the community of nations. President Obama is seeking what he terms "a new beginning" with Iran, one that emphasizes diplomacy. At the same time, the administration has sought to reinforce the

international coalition against Iran's nuclear program. According to recent press reports, the new administration has sent a secret letter to the Russian government offering to halt development of a ballistic-missile interceptor system in Eastern Europe, provided that Russia assist in halting Iran's effort to build nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles.⁷ The president has said that no option, including the use of force, is off the table with respect to halting the Iranian nuclear program.

Supporting the policy threads is an important factor in the operation of U.S. military forces. American military forces can play a large role in shaping Iranian

The utility of naval forces comes from their ability to exert control through presence and to dominate but contain conflict.

behavior. Given their inherent flexibility, sovereign basing, and tremendous mobility, U.S. naval forces are particularly well suited to contributing to shaping activi-

ties. Equally important, the same forces engaged in shaping operations can rapidly shift into combat mode, providing high-value military resources to the theater commander.

Iran's long-standing foreign-policy goals are to preserve the Islamic regime, safeguard Iran's sovereignty, defend its nuclear ambitions, and expand its influence in the region and the Islamic world. Iranian leaders perceive that regional developments—including the removal of Saddam and the Taliban, challenges facing the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, the increased influence of Hamas and Hizballah, and, until recently, higher oil revenues—have given Tehran more opportunities and freedom to pursue its objective of becoming a regional power. This perception has produced a more assertive Iranian foreign policy, in which Tehran has focused on expanding ties in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Levant to influence and exploit more effectively regional political, economic, and security developments. Iran's pursuit of nuclear-weapon capability is another element in its more assertive foreign policy.⁸

In pursuing its policy objectives vis-à-vis Iran, Washington clearly prefers to rely on a shaping strategy over the direct use of military force. But such a strategy presupposes that Iran is amenable to being shaped. There are some who argue that the Iranian leadership is not susceptible to influence, whether by "carrots" or "sticks." This would mean that there is no hope of shaping Iranian behavior in general or, more specifically, of influencing Iran's decisions on matters of security and defense.

There, however, is no evidence to support this contention. According to one leading American authority,

Although the specifics of Iran's policies vary considerably, in almost all cases there has been a shift toward prudence. Particularly near Iran's own borders, the Islamic regime has tended to support the status quo with regard to territorial integrity and has shown a preference for working with governments over substate movements. Moreover, Iran has tried to contain unrest abroad and has tacitly supported repression by Turkey and Russia, even when this involved suppressing Muslims. Tehran has also curtailed ties to most Islamist movements, keeping its network intact but not pushing for the overthrow of governments.

Iran has also shown prudence in its military posture, including its quest for WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. Iran's military budgets have been modest, focused more on defense than on offense. Despite the geostrategic and other imperatives driving Iran to acquire WMD, it has done so in a quiet and deliberate manner, avoiding alarm and preventing the United States from developing a strong coalition to stop its acquisition.⁹

In fact, Iran has demonstrated a rather nuanced approach to dealing with its neighbors and with states involved in the region, including the United States. This suggests that the leadership in Tehran can be influenced and that a process of shaping its behavior through a mixture of carrots and sticks could be effective in moderating the regime's behavior.¹⁰

The challenge for the Obama administration will be to find the right kind of shaping strategy, one that provides signals that Iranian leaders will understand. As will be discussed below, the U.S. Navy provides a range of options, with varying degrees of visibility that can contribute to American efforts to shape Iranian behavior in peacetime or in crisis.

NAVAL OPTIONS FOR INFLUENCING IRAN

The U.S. Navy can be an enormously powerful instrument of policy. There is no question that in the event of conflict with Iran, the Navy could exert tremendous pressure through its ability to contest and counter Iranian military moves in the waters around the Strait of Hormuz. Equally important, it has many potential opportunities to influence Iran during peacetime and in a crisis. The utility of naval forces comes from their ability to exert control through Phase 0* presence and to dominate but contain conflict in Phase II actions. As joint doctrine makes clear, phases III and beyond require a joint approach. However, as case studies demonstrate, the Navy has a powerful role in options just short of major conflict. The ensuing discussion will examine naval options for influencing Iran short of

* U.S. joint doctrine envisages campaigns as having six phases: 0 (that is, zero), preconflict "Shape"; I, "Deter"; II, "Seize Initiative"; III, "Dominate"; IV, "Stabilize"; and V, "Enable Civil Authority." U.S. Defense Dept., *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-0 (Washington, D.C.: 17 September 2006, rev. 13 February 2008), fig. IV-7.

those involving a deliberate conflict. Prospective options are grouped by joint-campaign “phase.” Under each phase, a number of prospective options are identified.

Shaping the Regional Environment (Phase 0)

Unlike the other services, the Navy has extensive direct experience with the Iranian military and the Revolutionary Guard. American and Iranian warships pass in close proximity on a regular basis. When operating in the enclosed environment of the Persian Gulf, it is necessary to interact with other parties using the same space, including potential adversaries. This is an important base on which to develop influence or shaping options. At the same time, all parties in the region are quite sensitive to changes in that presence. Changes in the number and types of naval vessels deployed inevitably send messages to friends and foes alike.

American diplomats view the deployment of naval forces as adding to the effectiveness of political actions. These forces provide for reassurance of allies, act as a warning to would-be aggressors, and serve as clear evidence of U.S. interest in and commitment to the region. One senior diplomat makes the point very succinctly: “We have stationed two carrier battle groups in the Gulf to reassure our friends in the Arab world that it remains an area of vital importance to us.”¹¹

Friends and allies of the United States in the Persian Gulf clearly perceive the presence of its naval forces as deterring potential aggressors. They are not above using that presence for their own purposes. “Do you think those U.S. warships are out there on vacation?” Saudi king Abdullah is said to have asked Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during a March 2007 summit meeting.¹²

The presence of U.S. naval force can shape the regional environment in many ways. One that is often overlooked is the ability of naval assets to collect intelligence on a wide range of activities. “Maritime domain awareness,” the development of a “common operating picture” of the movement of ships and aircraft, is a critical tool supporting both national and homeland security. Intelligence can provide warning of emerging dangers, allowing the United States to act to head them off. The presence of Navy platforms may, in some instances, engender restraint on the part of adversaries out of a fear of detection. The U.S. Navy uses a wide range of assets, including surface vessels, manned and unmanned aerial platforms, and submarines, to collect intelligence.

Managing the Balance of Forces. The most straightforward way in which the U.S. Navy can shape the regional environment in the Persian Gulf is by altering its dispositions in that area. Both the quantity and quality of deployed forces can be adjusted in response to circumstances. In effect, force deployments can be treated as a political-military “rheostat” to help establish a more stable

environment. A change in naval force levels or the character of deployed forces can communicate a number of messages simultaneously. The most obvious change in force posture is associated with the movement of carrier battle groups. With respect to deployment of two carriers to the Persian Gulf in April 2008, Lieutenant General Carter Ham, Director for Operations, Joint Chiefs of Staff, said:

It allows us to do a couple of things, by doing that. First, it provides some additional capability to our commanders in the region for additional air power, which is always a good thing. It allows us also to demonstrate to our friends and allies in the region a commitment to security in the region. And importantly, from a military—from a tactical standpoint, operating two carriers in the same maritime and same airspace simultaneously allows us to practice some tactics, techniques and procedures which are very, very useful to us in a relatively constrained area.¹³

The U.S. Navy has a range of other assets that it can deploy in the Persian Gulf to ensure an adequate balance of forces. These include both SSNs and SSGNs (respectively, nuclear-powered attack and cruise missile-armed submarines). Also, expeditionary strike groups could provide a responsive land-attack capability, something particularly valuable during the latter stages of an exit from Iraq.

As U.S. forces are withdrawn from Iraq and the region, in fact, Washington may see it as advisable to increase its naval presence in the region in order to maintain a stable level of military power. Such force deployments can be calibrated to provide additional sea-control, land-attack, and amphibious capabilities as needed. The United States has plans to maintain land-based rapid response forces in Kuwait for the duration of the mission in Iraq and probably thereafter. Sea-based forces could complement those deployed on land.

It is important that the U.S. government articulate the general strategy and purpose behind its long-term force deployment plans. Also, the United States should make explicit the kinds of conditions that would alter these plans. In the past, the routine reliefs on station of one carrier strike group for another have been exaggerated in the media as preparations for an attack on Iran. There is some value in uncertainty. But there is also a value in clarity.

U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and the Office of the Secretary of Defense need to consider what would constitute a stable and robust presence in the Gulf area, and they should consider making the general character of that capability known publicly. Changes in naval force deployments could be identified as contributing to the maintenance of a stable balance of forces in the region. Moreover, in the event Iran seeks to increase its military capabilities, additional naval forces could be deployed to counterbalance them and

maintain overall stability. At the same time, not all deployments should be “telegraphed” to Tehran. Altering deployments to the Gulf region on a somewhat unpredictable schedule provides CENTCOM another tool with which to “communicate” with Iran and potentially deter it by maintaining an element of tactical and operational uncertainty, while at same time demonstrating strategic (that is, naval) depth.

The new administration is currently developing its own national security strategy and related force posture requirements, and associated defense budgets. It is likely that tightening budgets will force reductions in current force levels. In making choices of where to reduce forces, it will be important that the administration recognize two facts. First, the U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf is one way by which the United States exerts influence over the states in the region; a robust naval presence in the region is required if the Navy is to perform the multitude of missions it has been assigned. In addition, the character of the naval forces deployed is important in American efforts to signal Iran that Tehran does not have a free hand in the region and that its options for using force to achieve its regional objectives are quite limited: “The Middle East isn’t a region to be dominated by Iran. The [Persian] Gulf isn’t a body of water to be controlled by Iran. That’s why we’ve seen the United States station two carrier battle groups in the region.”¹⁴

Second, because of the distances involved, for every ship deployed in the Persian Gulf, the Navy needs at least three more in the fleet to allow for rotation, steaming time, and maintenance. Even seemingly small reductions in the size of the fleet can have enormous consequences for the U.S. Navy’s presence in the Persian Gulf.

Confidence-Building Measures. Since the late 1970s, the Persian Gulf has been an arena of extraordinary tensions. Since that time the U.S. Navy has been engaged in two declared conflicts—DESERT SHIELD/STORM and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM—several individual military engagements, and a host of other military operations. In addition, the region has seen internal conflicts, such as the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War. American naval forces and those of some two dozen navies have continually navigated the congested waters of the Gulf. It is no surprise that incidents involving military forces, such as the Exocet missile strike on the USS *Stark* (FFG 31) in May 1987 and the January 2008 confrontation between Iranian patrol boats and U.S. Navy warships, continue to occur.

It is all too easy to think that the only U.S. naval options for influencing Iran are those intended to counter the latter’s negative behavior. Far more intriguing is the possibility of employing the American naval presence in the region in ways that might encourage positive behavior. Given the parlous state of the current

relationship between Washington and Tehran, efforts to develop a more positive relationship should start with small, concrete steps that benefit both sides and demonstrate the potential for cooperative endeavors.

Iran and the United States have been in a state of nearly unrelieved confrontation for almost thirty years. Since the Iranian revolution, the United States and

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the Islamic Republic of Iran have had virtually no direct communications. Even their indirect engagements have been limited. This lack of communications is dangerous for all parties. The U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Gary Roughead, observes, “I do not have a direct link with my counterpart in the Iranian Navy. I don’t have a way to communicate directly with the Iranian Navy or Guard.”¹⁵ Even more challenging is the gulf that exists between the U.S. Navy and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which also maintains a significant naval force. Recent incidents involving U.S. naval vessels in the Persian Gulf have involved IRGC units, not forces of the Iranian navy.

The reality is, however, that Iran and the United States do talk to one another constantly. They do so in the context of the day-to-day operations in the Persian Gulf that both refuse to talk about. These are not formal communications but rather the tactical exchanges necessitated by the operation of ships in close proximity; in the cramped waters of the Persian Gulf, American and Iranian military forces communicate daily. As one senior U.S. naval officer has pointed out, “We are operating very close to their territorial waters in a very confined space with a tremendous amount of traffic, be it the small dhows, be it the supertankers going up to the oil platforms. . . . The margin of error is smaller in that the space is more confined. That would be the case even if anyone was your ally, just because of the sheer small size of the Arabian Gulf.”¹⁶

One approach that can be employed to shape the region’s political environment and, at the same time, address specific issues is the development of confidence-building measures (CBMs). These measures are intended to reduce fear and suspicion and to make the behavior of states more predictable. Typically, CBMs involve the exchange of information, particularly regarding the status and activities of armed forces, and the creation of agreed mechanisms to verify this information.

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A recent study by a reputable nonprofit institution identified naval CBMs as one avenue for establishing at some level official communications between Iran and the United States and at the same time addressing immediate, practical security issues. The study proposed an effort to articulate CBMs related to major

security issues. Related to this proposal was another that CBMs start with practical and operational challenges in areas of common interest, such as incidents at sea, drug trafficking, and border control.¹⁷ Success in these areas would result in a number of benefits for U.S. security and that of the region. Agreed-upon “rules of the road” and communications channels for dealing with incidents at sea or interdiction of drug trafficking would benefit U.S. naval operations in the Persian Gulf.

The United States could also seek to cooperate with Iran on a limited basis in carefully selected areas. It would be unwise to push immediately for an “incidents at sea” agreement between the United States and Iran. Instead, the United States should explore the possibility of a series of more limited measures to build up a history of cooperative activities with Iran. One of these might be counternarcotics and countersmuggling. Such cooperation could begin most simply with the U.S. Navy or Coast Guard offering to keep the Iranian navy apprised of American patrol activities. This could then be expanded to exchanges of information on illicit activities and possibly by a U.S. offer to provide Iran with data from tactical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms. This type of cooperation was successfully undertaken by Great Britain in the 1990s.¹⁸

The United States could pursue discussions with Iran on CBMs not directly but through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Although the GCC states and Iran have often been in opposition, they share a common interest in safe passage through the Gulf. In addition, by leading any discussions with Iran the GCC would provide something of a buffer to the low-level U.S.-Iranian dialogue that would naturally occur. The focus should be on engaging the Iranian navy and not the IRGC. Discussions should be very low-key and designed to address issues of mutual interest.

Operate with Allies. As discussed above, the new American naval strategy places great emphasis on cooperation with allies and the development of indigenous naval capabilities. This is an area that has seen tremendous progress since 2001, driven by the demands of the war on terror. The U.S. Navy has conducted numerous exercises involving global allies as well as nations in the Middle East. Many of these exercises are focused on operations other than war, such as humanitarian assistance and civil support.

Effective Theater Security Cooperation activities are a form of extended deterrence, creating security and removing conditions for conflict. Maritime ballistic missile defense will enhance deterrence by providing an umbrella of protection to forward-deployed forces and friends and allies, while contributing to the larger architecture planned for defense of the United States. Our advantage in space—upon which much

of our ability to operate in a networked, dispersed fashion depends—must be protected and extended. We will use forward based and forward deployed forces, space-based assets, sea-based strategic deterrence and other initiatives to deter those who wish us harm.¹⁹

Numerous examples of what the Navy has been doing to improve cooperation with U.S. allies could be mentioned. In November 2007 it began a series of exercises in the Gulf and nearby waters with a five-day crisis-response exercise involving an aircraft carrier, two assault ships, and other amphibious ships, as well as air and medical forces. The start of the exercises coincided with an agreement of world powers in London to move ahead with a third round of sanctions against Iran. Tehran tried to address their concerns about its nuclear program. The purposes of the exercises were described by a Navy spokesman: “Our primary goal is to enforce maritime security including the free flow of commerce through the Gulf for all regional partners. . . . We are committed to keeping the Strait of Hormuz open to ensure that there is a free flow of commerce throughout the region.”²⁰

Cooperative activities and exercises can also be conducted to address scenarios other than potential conflicts. In 2007 the U.S. Navy participated in a disaster-response exercise in the region. The first phase was a tabletop discussion that focused on planning, after which operational assets moved into action and USS *Wasp* (LHD 1) transported relief supplies and equipment ashore to a staging base in Bahrain. The exercise scenario involved a tropical cyclone striking a notional regional nation, destroying its critical infrastructure, shutting down its international airport and desalination and electrical plants, and displacing thousands of citizens. The scenario also included an oil spill from a damaged tanker at sea. According to Rear Admiral Terence E. McKnight, Combined Task Force (CTF) 59 commander, “One cannot predict when or where a natural disaster is going to take place. But we can train to improve our response when a host nation requests our assistance. Coalition forces are committed to helping a host nation that requests our assistance by providing support, security and stability to the region.”²¹

The Navy is aggressively conducting maritime security operations in the region, evolutions intended to combat sea-based and other illegal activities, such as hijacking, piracy, and human trafficking. The CENTCOM Coalition Maritime Forces Component and its subordinate combined task forces (150, 152, and 158) are designed to conduct multinational coalition security activities. Creating combined maritime forces is important in signaling to adversaries the United States is not acting alone. CTF 150, established near the beginning of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, with logistics facilities at Djibouti, is tasked to monitor, inspect, board, and stop suspect shipping off the Horn of Africa.

Countries recently contributing to CTF 150 include Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, aside from the United States; other nations that have participated are Australia, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, and Turkey. The command of the task force rotates among the participating navies, usually between four to six months at a time. The task force usually comprises fourteen or fifteen vessels.

CTF 152, established in March 2004, is responsible for conducting maritime security operations in the central and southern Persian Gulf. CTF 158 is an international naval task group set up to operate in Iraqi waters. It consists of assets from the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, the Royal Australian Navy, and the Singaporean navy working alongside elements of the Iraqi navy and the Iraqi marines.

Cooperation involves far more than simply hosting American forces. A wide range of advisory, training, and exercise activity takes place with southern Gulf states, as well as British and sometimes French forces, at the multilateral level.²² Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) conducts maritime security conferences and symposiums in its area of responsibility, such as the Maritime Infrastructure Protection Symposium, in Bahrain 26–28 February 2008. NAVCENT's deployed forces are operationally assigned to the Fifth Fleet, units of which conduct mine-hunting and sweeping exercises and live operations, mine-countermeasures surveys, and explosive ordnance disposal. These activities help ensure the sea lines of communication remain open, guaranteeing the free flow of commerce into and out of the region.

A lack of interoperability, specialization, and orientation around key missions leaves most southern Gulf navies with only limited ability to cooperate in these activities. So does a lack of effective airborne surveillance and of modern mine and antisubmarine warfare capabilities.²³ Saudi Arabia is planning a major modernization program for its Eastern, or Persian Gulf, Fleet that would include surface combatants, helicopters, seagoing tugs, and unmanned aerial vehicles. The Littoral Combat Ship would be an excellent candidate for this program, and its sale would help achieve interoperability. To achieve interoperability, an increase in the number of training exercises with regional navies, either at the bilateral or multilateral level, is needed. Also required will be standard operating procedures, doctrine, and a common data link for shared and improved situational awareness.²⁴

Maritime Domain Awareness. While the U.S. Navy has many options for Phase 0, some gaps have been identified. An important policy recommendation would be to consider improvements that would enhance shaping operations. One of these is to boost surveillance capabilities and improve allied participation to

establish and maintain maritime domain awareness. Such tasks as maintaining tracks on nonemitting vessels that do not respond to hails can make a major difference in the maritime environment. Data for the maritime picture can be fed by many types of surveillance sensors and platforms. What is needed is a careful fusion of information into a common picture, followed by dissemination to those who need it.

One of the most powerful tools available to the United States in shaping regional security environments and empowering local allies is its ability to provide “enablers” that enhance the operational effectiveness of friendly forces. Examples include sensors and surveillance systems, communications capabilities, engineering and logistics functions, simulators, and mission planning. Among the most important enablers are the ISR systems that contribute to maritime domain awareness.

Detering Hostile Actions (Phase I)

A central focus of U.S. military deployments in the Persian Gulf is to deter Iran from taking actions deemed inimical to American interests. The presence of U.S. naval forces in the Gulf, and since 1991 in Kuwait, is a visible demonstration of the interest of the United States in the region and of commitment to secure its national interests and defend allies.

Iran’s actions of principal concern to the United States include its nuclear program, support for extremist groups in the region, assistance to anti-U.S. forces in Iraq, and efforts to undermine U.S. allies. In addition, Iran’s efforts to develop asymmetric capabilities designed to hold U.S. forces and allies in the region at risk or to contest movement in the Gulf must also be considered as potentially destabilizing. American planners must consider the possibility that Iran may threaten to resort to military force should the pressures on Tehran to change its behaviors become intolerable.

Deterrence must include a clear message to Iran that it cannot alter the strategic situation in the region through the use of force, however much it may try. In recent years, Iran has engaged in a series of information operations intended to create the impression that it is capable of exerting its military power in the Persian Gulf. Iranian sources claim that the Islamic Republic’s navy can close the Gulf. To accomplish this, Iran is relying on a strategy of asymmetric warfare—in essence, guerrilla warfare at sea.²⁵

The United States, together with its allies, needs to conduct its own information campaign. This campaign should be accompanied by clear demonstrations—through exercises, fleet deployments, and cooperative activities with allies—that the United States can rapidly defeat Iran’s asymmetric warfare strategy.

The heart of deterrence and dissuasion is the promise of unacceptable consequences. The recipient of the deterrent/dissuasion message must consider either his fate too painful or his gain too small to justify his current behavior. In other words, he must be confronted by the likelihood that the opponent will impose unacceptable costs or negate the effects of his actions. Deterrence theory suggests a number of potential options: preemption/first strike, retaliation, and defenses, either alone or in combination. It may be possible to threaten preemption or retaliation with conventional forces even against a nuclear-armed adversary, although the persuasiveness of a nonnuclear response to a nuclear threat is uncertain.

It is important that a deterrence/dissuasion strategy be, to the greatest extent possible, collective in nature, involving U.S. allies in the region. Obviously, the support of allies would be important to the implementation of most deterrent threats. Equally important, there should be no doubt in the minds of Iran's leaders that the United States and its allies are in agreement regarding responses to Iranian actions. In 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called for greater cooperation among the Gulf nations in the areas of air and missile defense and the monitoring of local waters as a means of deterring Iran.²⁶ The fact that the United States and its allies, particularly the GCC states, are undertaking serious contingency planning should be part of the deterrent message to Iran.

Offensive Deterrent Options. What kinds of offensive military options might the United States need either to supplement its economic, diplomatic, and other tools to dissuade Iran from resorting to military force? Options for the use of force must be credible and appropriate to the nature of the activities to be deterred. At the same time, the United States must indicate that it can escalate beyond the ability of the Iranian military to respond. Speaking to the idea of using the threat of disproportionate military action to dissuade hostile Iranian actions, defense analyst Anthony Cordesman suggests that

this could mean at least demonstrating U.S. capability to carry out far more punitive strikes. Iran is vulnerable in other areas. The U.S. has no interest in the survival of its gas facilities, power grid, or refineries. It may have underground nuclear facilities, but its reactor facility is vulnerable and so are its military production facilities. Asymmetric warfare is not simply the province of the weak; it is also the province of the strong.²⁷

Deterrent options often require visibility or public disclosure that are not always consonant with the secrecy and surprise that operational consideration would ordinarily warrant. It is reported that most U.S. Navy ships transit the Strait of Hormuz at night, so as not to attract attention, and rarely in large numbers. On at least one occasion, however, a daylight transit was conducted.

Depending on specific circumstances, one relatively straightforward option available to the Navy would be to make certain transits during the day or in relatively large numbers.

Without question, naval forces would play a prominent part in any strike option against Iran. As noted above, the United States has periodically deployed carrier battle groups to the Gulf as a reminder of its offensive and defensive capabilities. The Navy has the option under its Fleet Response Plan to surge carrier forces to the Gulf. This would be a highly visible and potentially provocative action, one that should only be taken when there is a requirement to send the strongest signal to Tehran.

A possible alternative deterrent option could be to deploy one or more of the Navy's four cruise missile-armed submarines to the Gulf region. Unlike the carrier option, this would not be a visible deterrent, but it could be accompanied with an information campaign making clear that the United States was deploying assets of this type to the region.

Defensive Deterrent Options. Iran has repeatedly sought to pursue its own deterrence strategy. This has centered on the threat to contest transit of the Persian Gulf or otherwise interfere with the flow of oil. The Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has warned, "If the Americans make a wrong move toward Iran, the shipment of energy will definitely face danger, and the Americans would not be able to protect energy supply in the region."²⁸

Iran has deployed a broad range of capabilities to threaten both civilian and military shipping in the Gulf. This includes a large number of small surface vessels, submarines, sea mines, shore-based antishipping cruise missiles, and manned aircraft.²⁹ This capability is intended to support an antiaccess strategy. The former commander of CENTCOM, Admiral William Fallon, has described Iran's increasing military capabilities as focused on blocking U.S. military operations: "Based on my read of their military hardware acquisitions and development of tactics . . . they are posturing themselves with the capability to attempt to deny us the ability to operate in this vicinity."³⁰

The U.S. Navy could counter Iranian threats to itself or commercial shipping in the Gulf, thereby potentially deterring not only such attacks but undercutting a main pillar of Iran's effort to create its own asymmetric threat. The principal deterrent the Navy can provide is the capability to surge large and capable forces into the Gulf region. Such a force must be able to conduct a wide range of missions, strike a broad range of sea- and land-based targets, conduct antimine and antisubmarine operations, and engage in comprehensive ISR.

As the Navy surges into the Gulf, it would have to deal with a number of Iranian antiaccess threats. But in order to cope with some threats, such as sea mines

and small boats, it would be necessary to establish air dominance. The combination of F/A-18E/Fs, F-18 Growler electronic-warfare aircraft, and, when they are deployed, F-35 Joint Strike Fighters will give the Navy a powerful contribution to what will be a joint fight.

Successful air dominance will include area air and missile defense. The defense against cruise missiles is a challenge the Navy is preparing to address. Its Naval Integrated Fire Control–Counter Air (NIFC-CA) program is a “system of systems” that will link sensors, aircraft, ships, and even land-based air-defense missiles to neutralize large numbers of targets at long ranges and all altitudes. This improvement is essential, because missile defense has become a multilayered problem. Threats come from short-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and combinations of them. Cruise missiles can be launched from land or sea, further complicating the problem. The Navy needs to improve its capabilities continuously if it is to maintain unfettered access near Iran.

For example, central to NIFC-CA is the new E-2D Advanced Hawkeye. The E-2D will not only expand the Navy’s surveillance capability but also, for the first time, enable naval and joint forces to conduct effective defenses against cruise missiles. The E-2D will be able to draw threat data from its own sensors and other ISR systems, establish engagement priorities, and match available weapons to targets. Demonstrating this capability in the Gulf could be a significant deterrent to Iranian aggression.

Iran has an inventory of 195 patrol boats and small surface combatants. Most of these are armed with, at best, machine guns and small-caliber cannons. Iran also has three frigates, ten fast attack craft, and another dozen patrol boats armed with antiship cruise missiles. In a 6 January 2008 incident, five Iranian high-speed boats reportedly charged U.S. warships and perhaps even threatened to blow them up. In mid-December 2007, an American warship fired a warning shot at a small Iranian boat that came too close, causing the Iranians to pull back.

One experienced naval officer referred to incidents like these as evincing an Iranian desire to “scrape paint” with a U.S. warship. They convey the determined, committed face of Iran’s navy. Professional as Iranian naval personnel are on most occasions, the clear impression conveyed is that Iranian crews can be very determined and ready to seize opportunities to “shape back,” with posturing activities directed at the United States and other nations.

Navy surface combatants and rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft all can be deployed against the Iranian surface threat generally. The United States has a range of options for dealing with the small-boat threat specifically. In the near future, the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), equipped with the antiship module, will be an extremely effective means of countering limited Iranian small-boat operations.

One deterrent option that falls in the U.S. Navy's domain of expertise is antisubmarine warfare (ASW). Iran has three Russian-built Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines, armed with advanced torpedoes and mines. More than half of Iran's inventory of modern mines is deployable only by the Kilos. The U.S. Navy is seeking to rehone skills in ASW lost after the end of the Cold War; it will need them if it is to find and neutralize rapidly Iran's submarines. Here the LCS, employing ASW modules, will be extremely effective. So too would be the *Virginia*-class SSN, with its improved sonar, mast-mounted sensors, and weapons systems.

Iran also is seeking to develop a credible missile threat against its neighbors and to American military bases in the region.³¹ The deployment of effective mis-

When thinking about deterring Iran, one thinks quickly of Navy options.

sile defenses could dissuade Iran from pursuing this option or, at the very least, reduce its effectiveness. The United States maintains at least one Patriot Advanced Ca-

pability 3 (PAC-3) battery in Kuwait and is assisting Israel (which Iran has long threatened to target) in the development and operation of its long-range missile defenses.

The U.S. Navy is planning to deploy the Aegis ballistic missile-defense (BMD) system on dozens of surface combatants. This capability could add immeasurably to U.S. capabilities to defeat the threat and hence to dissuade Iran from pursuing a very expensive military program. This effort could begin with a series of exercises and demonstrations in the Gulf. In June 2008 the U.S. Navy conducted a coordinated naval missile-defense exercise in the eastern Mediterranean and northern Persian Gulf. This exercise demonstrated the ability to share data and track ballistic missiles along multiple flight trajectories.³²

Missile defenses can also serve to reassure allies, such as Israel, making it potentially less likely that they would react to a perceived threat from Iran with offensive action. But for this assurance to be credible, the United States would have to station several Aegis-capable ships permanently in the Persian Gulf and possibly also in the Black Sea. In addition, the Navy would need to increase the number of Aegis warships equipped with the new antimissile-capable Standard Missile 2. It has today too few Aegis BMD-capable ships, armed with too few missiles.

The U.S. Navy can provide deterrence options in addition to sea-based forces. Navy aerial assets can be deployed from land bases in the region in a display of American engagement, cooperation with allies, and ability to oppose Iranian threats. The Navy's E-2 Hawkeye air-surveillance/command-and-control and EP-3 intelligence-collection aircraft provide critical support not only to naval

operations but to CENTCOM's overall plans and activities. Deploying these aircraft as early as possible to the Gulf region could demonstrate to Iran the futility of its strategy of deploying antishipping cruise missiles.

The United States can also contribute to its deterrence objectives by improving the capabilities of its allies. Washington needs to press the GCC countries to increase their ability to operate as a combined force both among themselves and with U.S. forces. Given their small populations, their militaries need to focus on quality—in other words, technology—over quantity. These nations should be convinced to invest in air and missile defense capabilities, ISR, mine warfare, and even ASW. Saudi Arabia is pursuing a modernization program for its Eastern Fleet that could see acquisition of ten to twelve Littoral Combat Ships plus helicopters, support ships, and naval tugs. In addition, passive defenses, including hardening of critical facilities, communications, command and control infrastructure, and airfields, should be encouraged.³³

Seize the Initiative/Containing Aggression (Phase II)

The overriding focus of Phase II operations is ensuring the free flow of traffic in the Persian Gulf. This responsibility was made clear by Admiral Kevin Cosgriff, former commander of the Fifth Fleet, when in response to reporters' questions regarding the possibility that Iran might seek to close the Strait of Hormuz he declared that this would be equivalent to "saying to the world that 40 percent of oil is now held hostage by a single country." Cosgriff went on to declare, "We will not allow Iran to close it."³⁴

The primary focus of naval options in Phase II must be preventing Iran from controlling access to the Persian Gulf and from interfering with the flow of oil. A secondary focus is to deny Iran the ability to escalate conflict. In order to achieve both of these objectives, the U.S. Navy must be able to seize the initiative rapidly.

Although a shift from Phase I to Phase II operations would mean that deterrence has failed, it is unlikely to have failed completely. As has been seen in the past, Iranian aggression may be limited. The IRGC may conduct hostile acts but not the Iranian military. Aggression may take the form of deployment of sea mines but not of direct attacks on commercial or military vessels. Iran may take action at sea but not threaten U.S. bases or allies in the region. By ensuring that it is able to respond at the level of aggression demonstrated by Iran, the U.S. Navy can help to limit its scope without offering a provocation that could lead to escalation.

Crisis Communications. One of the important considerations as a crisis evolves into a confrontation or even outright hostilities is the need to avoid conflict by mistake or miscommunications. This would be particularly important in the crowded and often confusing environment of the Persian Gulf. Good crisis

communication is also important in complex humanitarian situations, where the movement of U.S. naval forces might be misinterpreted. For that reason, the U.S. Navy has practiced crisis communications as part of its exercise program in the region, as well as globally.³⁵

An outbreak of hostilities in the Persian Gulf would take place in the context of transformed international news media, which would affect how the entire world responded to the situation. Iran would undertake its own information campaign to influence the behavior of regional parties and world public opinion. As suggested above, it is important for the U.S. Navy to pursue in peacetime options to develop better communications with elements of the Iranian military. Such options might bear remarkable fruit when it comes to the opening of hostilities.

Crisis communications must be part of the Navy's information operations plan. The most likely scenarios involving an outbreak of hostilities should be identified and war-gamed. The Navy can provide CENTCOM and the national command authorities (i.e., the president and secretary of defense) with communications options to support theater operations and global outreach. It is likely that the U.S. Navy and Fifth Fleet have developed options for use in an escalating crisis.

Mine Clearance. One characteristic of past confrontations with Iran has been that nation's indirect use of military means. During the so-called Tanker War of the 1980s, the Iranians engaged in limited operations in the Gulf, using mines deployed from civilian vessels. Iran could again seek to deploy mines surreptitiously.

The ability to neutralize rapidly the Iranian air and naval threats in the Persian Gulf would also be critical to efforts by American naval forces to counter the Iranian sea-mining capability. The Navy has been conducting mine warfare exercises in the Gulf primarily using aging *Avenger*-class mine-countermeasures ships. The Navy is moving to modular counter-mine systems embedded on destroyers, submarines, helicopters, and the new Littoral Combat Ship. Additional exercises using more modern systems would be a valuable demonstration of U.S. capability.

Rapid deployment of minesweeping systems would provide an option for countering a major Iranian threat. The Navy needs to make it easier to surge minesweeping capabilities—both the existing vessels and newer, more capable remote de-mining systems—to the Gulf. The U.S. Navy also should encourage the GCC to acquire advanced minesweeping capabilities.

Antisubmarine Warfare. Over the longer term, one of the more potent threats available to Iran, as noted, is its fleet of Russian-built Kilo-class attack

submarines, armed with antiship cruise missiles and mines. The U.S. Navy would have to move extremely rapidly to neutralize this threat, particularly before the Kilos could lay mines to impede the Persian Gulf shipping channels.³⁶

One possible option would be to destroy the Kilos before they could be deployed. Such a preemptive action could be made conditional on intelligence that they were preparing to deploy. Precision strikes against Iran's submarine platforms could be carried out by Navy strike aircraft and cruise missile-armed ships and submarines.

It would also be possible, albeit more difficult, to find, track, and engage the Kilos under way. To be successful, the U.S. Navy would have to deploy a significant number of airborne, surface, and subsurface ASW platforms and defend these against Iranian air defense and antiship capabilities.

Missile Defense. The Iranian use of ballistic or cruise missiles could be central to the move from Phase I to Phase II. The ability to deploy theater missile defenses rapidly to protect American facilities and forces and allied territory could help control the level of violence and deny Iran the initiative.

Sea-based missile defenses are currently the most widely available, deployable, and flexible capability available to a theater commander. Aegis BMD-capable ships could be deployed to provide effective missile defenses of the Gulf region. One or more ships could be routinely deployed in anticipation of an escalating crisis, providing defense against Iranian preemption. If ships needed to be deployed to the Gulf after hostilities had started, they would be made part of a task force, for protection against other Iranian threats. Of course, any ships deployed would have to be on constant guard for such threats as antiship cruise missiles. A robust, credible ability to deal with the most sophisticated antiship cruise missiles on the market is vital for maintaining shaping options.

For the longer term, the Navy could have additional missile defense capabilities such as a replacement for the cancelled Kinetic Energy Interceptor or a marinized version of the Theater High-Altitude Air Defense System. Such a system could be deployed in the Black Sea or eastern Mediterranean to defend Europe and the United States against long-range Iranian ballistic missiles.

Blockade. What might be done short of war were Iran to move aggressively to acquire a nuclear weapons capability? One of the most powerful (yet potentially dangerous) options is a blockade. In 2008, resolutions were introduced in both houses of Congress calling for increased pressure on the government of Iran by, among other means, prohibiting the import of refined petroleum products.³⁷ Such a blockade would be an obvious possibility should Iran attempt to interfere with the flow of oil or seek to close the Persian Gulf entirely.

But it would also be a potential “weapon of last resort,” for use if nonmilitary efforts to halt Iran’s nuclear program failed.

Once Iran actually built nuclear weapons, a blockade would be a riskier option. Nevertheless, as in the case of the Cuban missile crisis, a blockade might still be a useful option should Iran seek to use its nascent nuclear capability as a shield behind which to attack its neighbors or interfere with the free flow of commerce in the Gulf. The recent United Nations resolution allowing members states to halt and even board North Korean ships suspected of carrying contraband materials is an example of a “blockadelike” action taken against a state that has demonstrated some nuclear-weapons capabilities.

Operationally, such an effort would be well within the capacity of the U.S. Navy. It would involve continuing global surveillance to identify cargoes and ships bound for Iran. Halting and inspecting ships is something at which the Navy is very good.

HOLDING FAST TO MARITIME OPTIONS

It is clear that the U.S. Navy has already made and continues to make a significant contribution to shaping the strategic behavior of Iran. The Navy can provide options for the theater commander and the national authorities across the spectrum of conflict. What is particularly important is the number and variety of options available to support early shaping activities.

In Phase 0 the Navy can take a leading role in providing means for opening communications with elements of the Iranian military. The development of confidence-building measures would both reduce risks inherent in conducting day-to-day operations in the Gulf and provide an opening for improved communications. The Navy can also have a major positive impact on the security of allies in the region through cooperative exercises, educational activities, and the extension of maritime domain awareness. Enhanced cooperation with allies would appear to be the most important option in both Phase 0 and Phase I. In these phases naval forces would be expected to operate in conjunction with other elements of U.S. power, such as the State Department. In the event of conflict with Iran, the Navy—though it would operate with joint and combined forces—would have perhaps the most important strategic role of all U.S. forces. It will be required to ensure that the Gulf remains open to friendly military and commercial traffic and that the movement of oil is not interdicted. The Navy needs to focus on ensuring that it can deal with the most stressing threats to movement in and through the Gulf, specifically sea mines, Iranian submarines and missile-armed patrol craft, and nuisance (even suicide) attacks by small, high-speed boats. An additional important role for the Navy is

the provision of effective missile defense; the ability to neutralize that threat will contribute significantly to deterrence of Iranian aggression.

If the adversarial situation between the United States and Iran persists, the United States will have to address the potential improvements that Iran is likely to make in its military capabilities. Among these would be “triple-digit” surface-to-air missiles, advanced sea-skimming cruise missiles with passive radar seekers, and more capable ballistic missiles. The counter to these threats would be more and better air and missile defenses.

Cynics often point out that military power is a blunt instrument. In the case of Navy shaping operations short of war, recent experience shows the set of tools to be in fact remarkably fine and well adapted to their tasks. Keeping the Strait of Hormuz open, providing an operational architecture for allies, and hemming in Iranian military options constitute major roles for today’s U.S. Navy. Given the high-stakes diplomacy under way now, holding fast to maritime options is indispensable.

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