

## International Naval Activity and Developments in the Indian Ocean Region in Q1 2012

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This brief offers a review of key naval developments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) during the first quarter of 2012. Events have been dominated by extensive Iranian naval manoeuvres and deployments out of area, the US Navy's force surge in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, and the expansion of EU coalition forces' counter-piracy strategy to include potential land attacks against pirate targets on the Somali coast.

Separately, though the long-term pace of growth and modernization of the Indian navy is difficult to forecast (particularly the sustained development of its aircraft carrier program), the addition of a leased Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine into the fleet armed with land-attack cruise missiles now provides India with a step-change in maritime power-projection capability.



*An Iranian battleship transits through the Suez Canal near Ismailia, Egypt, in this 2012 photo.*



*The USS Carl Vinson conducting joint exercises with the Indian navy in the Indian Ocean.*

## **Iranian Naval Activity**

On 04 February, the Iranian Navy and Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Navy (IRGCN) launched the second of its naval exercises and drills of 2012. This exercise was intended to build upon the work conducted during the ‘Velayat 90’ exercises in December 2011 and January 2012 - one of the most comprehensive series of naval drills conducted by Iran in many years.

These naval exercises essentially have three aims: to test the readiness, effectiveness, and interoperability of Iran’s naval and IRGCN units; to test-fire some key missile systems, notably its most effective anti-shipping missile, the Noor (the Iranian variant of the Chinese C-802); and, most importantly, to send an unambiguous political message to the international community. Indeed, the exercises are a sign of Iran’s continued defiance in the face of sanctions designed to compel the government to reverse the development of its nuclear program. Iran’s most potent message has been its repeated threats to close the Strait of Hormuz should the country be attacked by Israel or its Western allies, or should Iranian crude exports be embargoed.

To date, the exercises have been largely effective in achieving all of their aims. However, these displays have also had the inevitable effect of increasing tensions in the Persian Gulf region, and have triggered the expected counter-increase in deployments of naval power by the US and its major allies.

In addition to the maneuvers in the Straits of Hormuz and northern Gulf of Oman during February 2012, Iran also deployed a warship and a naval replenishment tanker to the Mediterranean for the second time in a year, marking only the second time an Iranian warship has entered the Mediterranean since 1979. After leaving Iran in late January, the frigate ALVAND (71) and the replenishment tanker KHARG (431) made a port call in Jeddah on Saudi Arabia’s Red Sea coast before transiting the Suez Canal. The two ships, closely monitored by Western and Israeli militaries, eventually docked at the Syrian port of Tartous. Though listed as a training visit, the action was effectively a demonstration of political solidarity for Assad’s beleaguered regime by the Iranian government.

Though this modest task force represented no significant military threat to any of Iran's opponents - nor was it intended to - it did send an important message regarding Iran's growing geopolitical confidence. Not only is Iran prepared to demonstrate considerable will in its own immediate region, but it is also willing to send its navy several thousand miles into a strategic theater firmly under the control of the West. Despite Iran's domestic political turbulence at this time, the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is clearly aware of how to employ gunboat diplomacy and military deployment as part of the strategic tools available to him during this geopolitically brittle period in the country's history.

## **US Navy and Allied Deployments in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea**

The escalation of Iranian military presence and professionally-executed exercises in the Persian Gulf, Straits of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman from late 2011 into 2012 has been taken very seriously by the US and its closest allies. The 'surge' in US Navy presence in the region was initiated not only in response to the escalation in Iranian military activity, but also in response to increasingly troubling political statements from Iran, particularly its threats to blockade the Straits of Hormuz. While security and military experts view this scenario as unlikely given Iran's inescapable reliance on the Straits for its own economic survival, it was vital to demonstrate resolve to Iran on this matter. In sobering terms, the global economy cannot afford to have this oil export route and chokepoint compromised, and thus its long-term closure cannot be permitted under any circumstances.

In March 2012, CENTCOM accelerated the deployment of key assets into the region to deter any possible Iranian misadventure and to deal with the consequences should deterrence fail. The US Navy sent four more mine-sweeping ships, four CH-53 Sea Stallion mine-detection helicopters, and underwater unmanned mine-neutralization units to augment similar assets already in the region. Increased numbers of fast patrol craft will also be able to patrol closer to the Iranian shore. These forces are better suited than large conventional warships to confront asymmetric forces such as swarming high-speed gunboats used by the IRGCN, particularly in littoral spaces. Meanwhile, dedicated platforms for special warfare groups have also been prepared for deployment. CENTCOM has also asked the US Navy to maintain two carrier strike groups in the region as a clear demonstration of conventional strike capability in the event of any Iranian aggression. Not surprisingly, the naval surge, and the need for specialist platforms and weapons in the region, has also necessitated requests to Congress for emergency budget allocations to fund the deployments.

The positioning of specialist assets such as minesweepers, small patrol craft, and special forces is revealing because it shows that military planners at CENTCOM are preparing to counter the Iranians in a non-conventional, asymmetric engagement, as this is where Iran's strength lies. During the Tanker War in the 1980s, the IRGCN Pasadran units were particularly effective in harassing shipping, and Iranian sea mines crippled some tankers and a US frigate during the war.

American allies have also been increasing their force posture in the region in tandem with active diplomatic and political exchanges with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The British Royal Navy currently has four frigates and destroyers (including the new Type 45 area defence destroyer HMS DARING), two minesweepers, and some replenishment vessels 'east of Suez', several of which are stationed inside the Persian Gulf.



*An EUNAVFOR patrol boat off the Somali coast.*

## **Counter-Piracy Operations: EUNAVFOR and NATO**

The international effort to disrupt and deter Somali piracy activity in the Indian Ocean continues to be centred on CTF-151, EUNAVFOR's Operation Atalanta, and NATO's operation OCEAN SHIELD.

Despite the reduction in piracy attacks and hijackings compared to the same period in 2011, on 23 March 2012 the European Union confirmed its intention to extend the EUNAVFOR mission (Operation ATLANATA) until December 2014. Four days earlier, NATO allies had agreed to extend its counter-piracy mission (Operation OCEAN SHIELD) until the end of 2014. And in a very significant (if long overdue) development, the EU also extended the area and scope of its counter-piracy operations to include Somali coastal territory and internal waters.

EU officials deliberately did not specify what the precise extent of "coastal territory and internal waters," means; however, in practice, the strategy means that warships deployed off the Somali coast will be able to use their helicopters and any embarked forces and fast-pursuit craft to target PAG boats moored off beaches and harbors and any pirate vehicles and fuel dumps detected on land. Diplomatic efforts to build greater ties with the transitional federal government and other Somali entities have been pivotal in enabling this more aggressive strategy. Interestingly, it has previously been the EU states that have been far more cautious than other countries in the application of more permissive rules of engagement and assertive tactics in the fight against Somali piracy.

This is a very significant development because for some time now security and naval experts have been arguing that one of the most effective ways to meaningfully throttle the ability of PAGs to sortie into the HRA was to destroy their boats that are moored on the shoreline or pulled up on the expansive Somali beaches, and destroy their vehicles and fuel dumps. It is arguable that this strategy was not possible until now as the risk of pirates exacting revenge by killing or harming hostage crews was too great. Though there are seafarers still in captivity, currently their numbers as of March 2012 are greatly reduced.

It is still far too early to determine with any certainty whether levels of piracy attacks will remain low compared to 2011. However, what is clear is that the extensive number of ships transiting the HRA with embarked armed security teams and the more assertive strategy of naval forces in the Gulf of Aden and off the eastern Somali coast are having a discernible deterrent and preventive effect on PAGs' attacking tempo and effectiveness.

## Commissioning of a New Indian Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarine

In late March 2012, the Indian navy took control of its first nuclear powered attack submarine, the INS CHAKRA - a Russian-built AKULA-II class submarine that is on a 10-year lease to India. This means that India will become the sixth country in the world to operate an SSN after the US, Russia, the UK, France, and China. The CHAKRA will be armed with conventionally-tipped Klub-S land attack cruise missiles.

Though India does not currently have a large, modern submarine fleet, this is a major evolution of India's maritime power projection capability, particularly given its ability to fire cruise missiles against land targets.

In 2013, India's first ballistic missile submarine, the INS ARIHANT, armed with K-15 (750 km range) and K-4 (3,500 km range) nuclear missiles will become fully operational, thereby completing India's triad nuclear weapon delivery capability. With the deployment of these new nuclear submarines, the Indian Ocean will be for the first time in its history a maritime arena with regionally-produced nuclear-powered warships and strategic nuclear weapons.

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