

Nine US warships in Gulf for show of force

By [Global Research](#)

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Ships packed with 17,000 sailors and Marines moved into the Arabian Gulf yesterday as the US Navy staged another show of military force off Iran's coast just days before direct US-Iran talks in Baghdad. US Navy officials said Iran was not notified of plans to sail nine ships, including two aircraft carriers, through the Straits of Hormuz, a narrow channel in international waters off Iran's coast and a major artery for global oil shipments.

The carrier strike groups led by the USS John C Stennis and USS Nimitz were joined by the amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard and its own strike group, which includes two landing ships carrying 2,100 members of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit. Aircraft aboard the two carriers and the Bonhomme Richard were to conduct air training while the ships ran submarine, mine and other exercises. The Navy has maintained its two-carrier presence since February when the Stennis arrived in the Mideast waters.

Both carriers, with about 80 warplanes apiece, are expected to remain in the region through the summer, as part of the Bush administration's stepped-up military presence off Iranian shores. The war games - which culminate in an amphibious landing exercise in Kuwait, just a few miles from Iran - are a clear warning to Tehran, coming just ahead of Iran's talks with Washington and also at a time when the United Nations contemplates tightening its sanctions further against Iran for its failure to halt nuclear enrichment.

"There's a link to both events," said Mustafa Alani of the Dubai-based Gulf Research Center. "The Americans are sending a message to Iran that they are not coming to the negotiating table weak, but with their military at Tehran's doorstep." Washington is also showing Iran that the US military will act to defeat any Iranian war strategy of closing the straits, which Iran shares with Oman, Alani said. US and Iranian ambassadors are to meet Monday in Baghdad to discuss Iraq's security issues.

Rear Admiral Kevin Quinn, who is leading the group, said the ships would conduct exercises as part of a long-planned effort to reassure regional allies of US commitment to Gulf security. "There's always the threat of any state or non-state actor that might decide to close one of the international straits, and the biggest one is the Straits of Hormuz," he told reporters on board the USS John C Stennis.

Highlighting the dangers of accidental escalation, a Navy official said the Stennis had received nine enquiries from nearby countries, two from Oman and seven from Iran, including one from an Iranian vessel that sailed close by. An Iranian aircraft had also flown nearby, but was part of normal traffic. Iran's Defence Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar said Tehran would resist any threat and give a "powerful answer" to enemies. Most US ships pass through the straits at night so as not to attract attention, and rarely move in such large

numbers. Navy officials said the decision to send a second aircraft carrier was made at the last minute, without giving a reason.

On the way to the straits, a public announcement called on crew to witness “some of the most powerful ships in the world”, whose tight formation against a backdrop of the setting sun created a dramatic image of American naval might. Naval officials said the latest training would include air defence exercises and boarding ships posing as suspect vessels. “If the Straits of Hormuz were to be closed or there were to be some conflict there, the shipping rates would go sky high,” Quinn said.

Alani said he doubted the United States is planning an all-out war with Iran, but is rather gathering its forces in the Gulf in the event of a sudden outbreak of conflict. “The Americans are convinced they must assemble a certain amount of power to deal with a surprise conflict, even though in my view a decision to go to war has not been taken,” he said. A sudden, unexpected outbreak of hostilities between the United States and Iran could be triggered by events in Iraq, where both states have competing interests, Alani added.

Tehran has objected to US claims that Iran is supplying Iraqi Shiite militias with deadly roadside bombs that kill American troops in Iraq. The US has also accused Iran of covertly developing nuclear weapons, but Iran has denied the charge, saying its nuclear program is peaceful. The nine ships taking part in the manoeuvres were already on patrol in Mideast waters outside the Gulf when they passed through the narrow Strait of Hormuz yesterday and began air and sea manoeuvres in the Gulf. Two-fifths of the world’s oil is transported through the busy straits. US warships under 5th Fleet command patrol the Gulf, Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

“This training demonstrates our commitment to security and stability in the Gulf area and our commitment to regional partners,” said Vice Admiral Kevin J Cosgriff, commander of the Bahrain-based US 5th Fleet. Besides the Stennis, Nimitz and Bonhomme Richard, the war games bring together the guided-missile cruiser USS Antietam and USS Princeton, the destroyers USS O’Kane and USS Higgins, and the landing ships USS Denver and USS Rushmore.

The Nimitz arrived in the region from its homeport in San Diego, California, earlier this month, replacing the departing USS Dwight D Eisenhower. Publicly, at least, the Navy isn’t saying the maneuvers are directed at Iran. “The timing of the exercise was determined by the availability of forces in the area of operations,” said 5th Fleet spokesman Lt John Gay.

Yesterday’s drill was the latest in a series of American and Iranian war games. Iran conducted naval manoeuvres in November and April 2006, while the US Navy held a two-carrier exercise in March and a training operation in October. America’s Gulf Arab allies have grown increasingly uneasy with the tough US stance against Iran, fearing any outbreak of hostilities could bring Iranian retaliation. All lie within range of Iranian missiles.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, a loose alliance of Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, has called on all its members not to support any US action against Iran, while Qatar and the Emirates have publicly prohibited the US military from launching strikes on Iran from US bases on their soil. On a landmark visit to the Emirates this month, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad warned of a tough retaliation if the United States attacked Iran. He also called on Gulf Arab states to eject the US military and form a regional alliance with Iran – an offer that met no response.

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