

Trigger Happy US Navy brings Wild West to the Persian Gulf

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The US navy's fatal shooting of a small fishing boat in the Persian Gulf this week killing one of its crew not only raises questions about criminal disregard for civilian life and international law, it also points up the Pentagon's reckless militarization of the strategic waterway.

Given that Washington has doubled its warship presence in one of the world's busiest commercial sea routes over the past few months, and given the Western escalation of war tensions with sanctions and threats of military attack on Iran, it is inevitable that such policies now result in death. It may be "only one death". But it reveals a lot about the perpetrators.

Will the US and its propaganda press put up their hands? Yes, they have, but the fingers of blame are, perversely, pointing at the victims.

In the latest incident, American military officials were quick to claim that navy personnel onboard the 677-foot supply ship, USNS Rappahannock, were acting in self-defence when they opened fire with a heavy machine gun on a 30-foot civilian boat killing one man and seriously wounding four others, all of them Indian nationals. Self-defence? Against a vessel 20 times smaller than the warship?

The civilian nature of the smaller vessel, which turned out to be a fishing boat, was never in dispute, even according to the Pentagon spokesmen. What alarmed the US navy, it is claimed, is that the motorized vessel was apparently sailing towards them and got to within 90 yards (100 metres) of the Rappahannock.

Somewhat ludicrously, the American news media amplified the US navy's supposed defence by trying to blame the deadly incident on Iran. The New York Times, among others, pointed out that Iran has been stoking tensions in the Gulf with threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. Note how Iran's legitimate defensive response to war threats and embargos is turned on its head to be presented as a provocation. Also the Western media noted that the Iranian navy specializes in the use of small speed boats to mount attacks.

The Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations twisted the absurd logic even further: "While much of the world's attention focuses on Iran's nuclear program, Tehran has made considerable progress on another security front in recent years - steadily increasing the reach and lethality of its naval forces." So Iran can't even have a navy now without that being seen as a threat to world peace?

US officials are claiming that the fishing vessel ignored repeated warning signals and shots.

Lieutenant Greg Raelson, a spokesman for the US navy's Bahrain-based 5th Fleet, added: "US ships have an inherent right to self-defence against potential threats... The safety of our vessels and our personnel is of the utmost priority."

But these appeals indicate either an appalling ignorance of Persian Gulf geography or a strained attempt to cover up for wanton lethal force. Either way, Washington's militarization of the Gulf is directly responsible for the homicidal shooting of a fishing crew.

First, let's look at the notion of US navy apprehensions that the vessel presented an Iranian threat. The incident occurred some 16 kilometres off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, 35km southwest from the city of Dubai. The location of the shooting is approximately 150 km from the southern-most Iranian coast, and some 100 km from Iranian territorial waters.

The Strait of Hormuz, where tensions are running high, is up to 200km northeast from where the fishing boat was shot at.

In other words, the US warship was nowhere near - not even close - to where an Iranian threat could possibly have been perceived.

What the US navy and media appear to be contriving is that the shooting occurred in a scenario similar, if not identical, to the Strait of Hormuz where shipping is fraught with bellicose tensions between Tehran and Washington and where mistakes, however unfortunate, could happen.

But the fact is that the incident occurred at least 100km from Iranian waters. Sandwiched between is another 50km stretch of international waters. US officials and media are postulating, either ignorantly or deceitfully, that an Iranian navy assault vessel on the fuel capacity of a speed-boat engine could have breached first its own 50km territorial limit, then 50km of international waters and finally the territorial waters of the United Arab Emirates. And that's even before the return journey back to Iran.

Furthermore, and more damning, is that surviving crew from the fishing boat say that "no warning shots or signals" were given by the USNS Rappahannock.

"We had no warning at all from the ship. We were speeding up to try and go around them and then suddenly we got fired at," 28-year-old Muthu Muniraj told Reuters from a hospital in Dubai. "We know warning signs and sounds and there were none; it was very sudden. My friend was killed, he's gone. I don't understand what happened," said Muniraj, whose legs were punctured by the rounds of the US ship's .50-caliber gun.

His colleague, 35-year-old Muthu Kannan, who received a gunshot wound to the abdomen, said: "We were fishing and then on the way back they started shooting at us, so many shots, like a storm."

Also, the survivors say, the American warship turned away immediately after firing, leaving the machine-gun raked fishing boat and those fatally wounded unaided. The vessel had to limp its own way back to port near Dubai where the injured were hastily treated. In this account, the US navy fired gratuitously on a civilian vessel.

The .50 calibre machine gun used is capable of firing 60 rounds per minute that can pierce armoured steel plating up to 100 metres away - the distance that the civilian vessel is said to

have gained on the American warship. The machine gun has such firepower that it can be used as an anti-aircraft weapon with a lethal range of up to 2km. Is this credibly a reasonable use of force on a tiny vessel that comes within 100m of a warship?

US navy spokesmen categorically described the approaching vessel as a “civilian, white-coloured pleasure boat”. In the highly unlikely scenario where the US personnel suspected that an Iranian Revolutionary Guard speed boat would have ventured more than 100km into the territorial waters of the United Arab Emirates it would have been obvious to the American crew that at the stated distance the vessel was unarmed, and therefore not a threat.

Why would the fishing boat have appeared to be approaching the US warship? The location was at the mouth of Jebel Ali Port, the seventh busiest port in the world behind Rotterdam. Reports say that the fishing skiff was turning towards Jebel Ali. In this dense sea lane, any number of vessels could be construed as approaching the American warship if it positions itself there.

Again, the evidence is looking like a trigger happy US navy crew opened fire on civilians with cavalier disregard. Such criminal conduct should not come as a surprise considering the countless incidents of “Wild West” gratuitous shootings of civilians by American military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What makes the latest Wild West behaviour in the Persian Gulf particularly disturbing is that the waterway has become one of the most militarised areas of the world alongside dense commercial and civilian shipping. Washington has plans to bring a third aircraft carrier, the USS John C Stennis, into the Gulf to join the USS Enterprise and Abraham Lincoln. A fourth aircraft carrier, the USS Eisenhower, is also en route, officially to relieve the Enterprise, however, an overlap period could result in four such vessels out of the US navy’s global total of 11 being stationed in the Gulf.

This naval firepower is in addition to American minesweepers and destroyers, and supply ships such as the USNS Rappahannock, that have been brought into augment the US 5th Fleet stationed at Bahrain.

Just like the recent fatal shooting up of a fishing boat, but on a larger scale, the US is engaging in gratuitous militarization of an international shipping route which sees some 20 per cent of the world’s crude oil pass every day. And this reckless militarization is on the back of unfounded allegations against Iran’s legally entitled development of civilian nuclear energy.

The death of one poor Indian fisherman at the hands of the US superpower may seem an insignificant occurrence. But in that one death lies a grim warning: the world is being turned into the Wild West where US self-styled marshals on land and on sea impose their will on every one else down the barrel of a gun. And when they are caught out, they just lie through their teeth and try to lay the blame on the victims of their rough justice.

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