

U.S. plans naval buildup in Gulf

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U.S. plans naval buildup in Gulf to counter Iran

CENTCOM plans to use 'gunboat diplomacy,' officials tell NBC News

NBC News and news services

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Central Command is aggressively planning a naval buildup in the Persian Gulf, including the addition of a second aircraft carrier, in response to a series of aggressive actions by Iran, U.S. military officials told NBC News on Tuesday.

The officials pointed to Iran's interference in Iraq — including its support for Shiite militants and shipments of improvised explosive devices into the country — recent military naval exercises in the Gulf, and its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The attempt at "gunboat diplomacy" is in its final planning stages. Although it has not been approved yet, it appears likely the increase in U.S. warships into the Gulf could come as early as January, the officials said.

U.S.: Iran making headway on weapons

On Monday, the Bush administration said Iran was making headway in building nuclear weapons as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tried to iron out differences with Russia over a U.N. resolution designed to stop the program with economic sanctions.

While not predicting when Iran would join the nuclear club, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said the Iranians were trying to perfect technology to enrich uranium. Iran has denied an effort to build nuclear weapons and says its work is for energy development.

"It's a very tricky matter of perfecting centrifuge technology so you can actually enrich all the uranium," McCormack said. "So, yes, they are going along their way in trying to go down the various pathways."

The spokesman provided no details of Rice's telephone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. "They went over some of the outstanding issues," McCormack said.

'Time for a vote'

Russia, which has close economic ties with Iran, has favored diplomacy over punitive sanctions, but the Bush administration is hoping Moscow may be prepared to approve a

watered-down resolution at the U.N. Security Council.

“We are hopeful that we can get a vote in the very near future. It is time for a vote,” McCormack said. “I think we need to see a vote on this in a matter of days.”

The United States and its European allies have proposed offering Iran economic concessions in exchange for halting its enrichment of uranium, a key part of the process of building nuclear weapons.

NBC News’ Jim Miklaszewski and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

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