



The Influence of Sea Power in Iran's Proxy War Part 2: US Navy Operations and Options

by CDR. David Levy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In response to the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, the United States has deployed significant naval forces to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian Sea. This strategic display of sea power aims to deter regional escalation and address unexpected challenges, such as the Yemeni Houthi pirate and missile offensive in the Red Sea. The US Navy presence, which features advanced aircraft, destroyers, and a Marine Expeditionary Unit, demonstrates a commitment to regional stability and the readiness for significant combat operations, if necessary, while also highlighting the need for a more durable solution to the ongoing conflict.

Following the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, the United States deployed major naval forces to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian Sea in a strategic show of sea power aimed at deterring regional escalation. At the beginning of the conflict, the US directed the USS GERALD R. FORD Carrier Strike Group to the Eastern Mediterranean. Soon after, two other task forces, the USS DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER Carrier Strike Group and the USS BATAAN Amphibious Ready Group, were deployed to the region, and a US Ohio-Class guided-missile submarine is also now operating in the area (though these ship movements may have been scheduled before the conflict). France and the UK have also sent warships to the region.

With presumed sea dominance by Israel over Gaza, the US Navy was not expecting to be in the region to ensure control of the seas. The primary mission of the task force is to deter other regional players from participating in the conflict with the threat of air strikes and, if things get "really bad, " the entry of the Marines.

The conflict took an unexpected turn in the Red Sea with a Yemeni Houthi pirate and missile offensive against commercial shipping. Fortunately, the US Navy presence can address this provocation. Spearheaded by several ARLEIGH BURKE class destroyers normally escorting the carriers, these warships are the perfect platform for addressing this additional threat. However, military action by the Navy, while a viable expedient, would be only temporary. Ultimately, the US must seek a more durable solution.

Three US Navy task groups are operating in the area of the conflict. The USS GERALD R. FORD CARRIER Strike Group is in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the USS DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER Carrier Strike Group and the USS BATAAN Amphibious Ready Group frequently transit back and forth from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea.

For decades, the US has had a consistent 1.0 policy in the area. That's Pentagon-speak for at least one aircraft carrier in the area throughout the year. A 1.5 presence would be one carrier in the area and one additional carrier in the area for a total combined time of half the year. A 2.0 presence would mean two carriers and would represent a "plus up" from the current force level. And so on.

Two carrier strike groups (CSG) and an amphibious readiness group (ARG) are more than just a large show of force; a single carrier could be used to show force. There are many costs associated with the operation and sustainment of ships. Logistics and fuel, changing operational schedules, and fees for delaying shipyard arrivals are just some of the expenses incurred by maintaining this force at sea. This is in addition to the personal cost of sailors having to extend their deployments by weeks or months. Clearly, the Biden administration is thinking beyond a "show of force" and has provided enough assets to conduct prolonged combat operations if necessary.

Aboard the carrier is the air wing (CVW, Carrier Air Wing). This is the heart of the offensive power of the task group. A wing has 60-70 aircraft and can conduct

several missions. CVW-8 on FORD and CVW-3 on EISENHOWER have nearly the same disposition of aircraft: four squadrons of F/A-18 Super Hornets and one squadron each of E-2C Hawkeyes, EA-18G Growlers and C-2A Greyhounds. The Super Hornets are multimission-capable. Some of the missions include air superiority (engaging and defeating hostile planes) and strike (bombing runs). The Hawkeyes provide early warning (airborne radars with long-range capability). The Growlers conduct electronic warfare (jamming), and the Greyhounds deliver logistical support. The wing also has MH-60 series helicopters that can engage in anti-submarine warfare and rescue operations, among other missions.

The USS BATAAN is the command ship of an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG). An ARG is a task group consisting of amphibious warfare ships primarily designed to support Marine Corps operations at sea and on land. The BATAAN ARG is composed of USS BATAAN (LHD 5), USS CARTER HALL (LSD-50), and USS MESA VERDE (LPD-19). BATAAN is a WASP-class amphibious assault ship and would be classified as an aircraft carrier in any navy other than that of the US. CARTER HALL and MESA VERDE are landing ships, each with a dock and a well deck in which they can sortie landing craft – most notably the fast hovercraft known as the Landing Craft Air Cushion (LCAC), which can rapidly move Marines or 60 tons of equipment from ship to shore.

Embarked on the ships throughout the ARG is the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The MEU is a rapid-response force typically composed of about 2,200 personnel. It's a self-sufficient unit that combines air, ground, and logistical elements. The ground force includes infantry, artillery, and armored vehicles, while the air component is V-22 Ospreys and helicopters for transport and close air support. The logistics group provides support, supply, and medical capabilities.

The 26th MEU is an enhanced MEU with a special operations-capable (SOC) element. While a regular MEU is already a highly capable and versatile force, an MEU(SOC) undergoes specialized training to perform tasks that include direct action, special reconnaissance, counterterrorism, and hostage rescue.

Aircraft carriers and amphibious Marine-carrying ships are considered "high-value" and require escorts to protect them. These three task groups have the

Arleigh Burke class of guided-missile destroyers (DDGs) as escorts. The DDG is the perfect platform for an air and missile defense mission. They not only protect the "high value" ships but can also protect commercial shipping, as is now required in the Red Sea due to Houthi provocation.

The DDG employs the advanced Aegis Combat System, which integrates detection systems (like radars) with fire-control systems (like missiles) for rapid and reliable engagements. The primary tool for detection is the SPY-1 radar, which is the foremost air and missile defense radar system employed at sea. It's a phased radar (i.e., it doesn't spin) that can simultaneously surveil vast airspace, track multiple suspect targets, and provide fire-control solutions for engagements.

The US has also announced the arrival of a "nuclear submarine" in the Middle East, an Ohio class SSGN. All US submarines are nuclear-powered. The SSGNs are older submarines that were used to carry submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) like the Trident that were mounted with thermonuclear warheads. However, the SSGNs have been refitted to carry (non-nuclear) Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAMs), not ICBMs. They can hold around 150 TLAMs. The Navy describes the SSGN as "providing the Navy with unprecedented strike and special operation mission capabilities from a stealthy, clandestine platform."

The extensive deployment of US Navy assets signifies a strategic posture that extends beyond a mere show of force, indicating a preparedness for significant combat operations. This force posture underscores the Biden administration's commitment to regional stability and the prevention of an escalation.

For now, Washington has chosen a measured response to Houthi maritime aggression. There is little appetite in the Biden administration to enlarge the current conflict. And it's not only the US administration that is reluctant. Reuters reports that Riyadh has asked the US for "restraint" to avoid "spillover." The *Wall Street Journal* is also reporting that Washington has asked Jerusalem not to attack the Houthis and let the US handle that portion of the conflict.

This will be difficult, as American deterrence has already failed. Routinely, ever since the onset of hostilities, Iran's proxies have been harassing US forces in Syria and Iraq with rocket and drone attacks. Despite US airstrikes against weapons magazines and other facilities operated by these proxies, the attacks continue.

Houthi piracy is just another Iranian provocation that Washington has not yet adequately addressed.

The US has put forward the creation of an international task force to counter Houthi piracy. This approach worked to nearly eliminate Somali piracy by 2017. In the early 2000s, local piracy evolved into a lucrative criminal enterprise. Pirates, often heavily armed, targeted commercial vessels for ransom, leading to numerous hijackings. This surge in piracy peaked around 2011, causing international concern and leading to a robust response from the global community. Led by the US, a maritime coalition of 34 states was established, the Combined Task Force (CTF) 150. Headquartered at US Naval Forces Central Command in Bahrain, CTF-150 patrols the Horn of Africa, interdicting attempts and acts of piracy. The Biden administration is proposing a similar coalition effort for the Red Sea.

Additionally, the ships making up this new task force would provide escort protection, as did the US in the 1980s "Tanker War." The Tanker War was a critical maritime phase of the Iran-Iraq War. Each side targeted the oil tankers and merchant ships of the other, aiming to cripple each other's economies. Initiated by Iraq in 1984, this strategy was an attempt to cut off Iran's main source of revenue, its oil exports, by attacking tankers carrying Iranian oil and, later, ships of other nations trading with Iran. Iran responded by targeting the maritime interests of Iraq and its Gulf Arab allies. The conflict escalated, involving hundreds of attacks on civilian shipping. It eventually drew in the US, which launched Operation Earnest Will to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers by flagging them as US ships. This culminated in 1988 with Operation Praying Mantis in which, in retaliation for a mine that damaged the guided missile frigate USS SAMUEL B. ROBERTS, the US Navy conducted multiple surface and air strikes against Iranian naval forces and oil platforms that were being used for military purposes.

Outwardly, the Houthi and Somali pirate problems seem comparable enough that a similar solution should work. However, there are crucial differences. Unlike the Somalis, who were individual actors or small criminal organizations seeking ransoms, the Houthis are a proxy, and the motivation for their attacks is ideological as well as patronized. A task force is as unlikely to deter Houthi piracy as the current two US destroyers in the area have been.

Other responses that have been suggested range from moderately to highly aggressive. On the more moderate side, the US could target military sites in Yemen. The US has already used this tactic over 70 times since October in Iraq and Syria in response to attacks by Iranian proxies. A more aggressive option is to target Iran directly. This option could entail a package of limited strikes on, for example, Kharg Island, which is Iran's main oil export facility, or Iran's "secret" nuclear weapons development facilities.

As of today, Iran is not deterred, and proxy attacks, like Houthi piracy, continue apace. So far, the situation has not escalated due to a combination of US patience and the extraordinary performance of the crew of the USS CARNEY in limiting the damage of incoming attacks. However, if one of these ongoing attacks breaches the CARNEY's defense, it will cascade into a calamitous result.

Hostile maritime incidents have a history of raising American ire, with a few leading to major conflicts: the Barbary Corsairs, the 1812 Merchantman Impression, the USS MAINE explosion, the sinking of the RMS LUSITANIA, and the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, to name a few. That said, not all maritime incidents trigger a militarized US response. The capture of the USS PUEBLO by North Korea and the bombing of the USS COLE incurred only modest responses. Still, the potential for a major US response remains.

Tehran is playing with fire.

For more background, see part one of this report on Houthi Aggression in the Red Sea.

CDR. David Levy, a retired US Navy Commander and former US diplomat, is a senior research fellow at the BESA Center. He was Director of Theater Security Cooperation for US Naval Forces Central Command and was US Air and Naval Attaché in Tunis. CDR. Levy is a former RAND Corp. Federal Executive Fellow and a Ph.D. candidate at Bar-Ilan University in the Politics Department.