

Future of Arabian Gulf Security amidst New Naval Coalitions

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Three multi-nation naval coalitions are being constituted for the Arabian Gulf waters with a common stated aim of ensuring safe and secure movement of international shipping operating in the Gulf waters. These groupings are driven by a number of competitive political and strategic variables and necessitate an assessment of the future of Gulf security dynamics.

First is the US-led [International Maritime Security Construct](#) (IMSC-Op Sentinel) to “promote maritime stability, ensure safe passage, and deescalate tensions in international waters throughout the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Oman”, after tankers belonging to Japan, Norway, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia were attacked in May and June 2019. Some nations have committed to join Operation Sentinel, while others have conveyed a ‘lukewarm’ support. The current list supporting the IMSC includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and non-Arabian Gulf states such as Albania, Australia, the Republic of Korea and the UK. Meanwhile, France and Japan refused to be part of the IMSC and have expressed preference for an alternate security initiative to avoid being involved in any military confrontation between Washington and Tehran; and Germany prefers diplomacy. However, for the UK, the IMSC will reduce risks to British flagged ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz without a Royal Navy escort.

The second coalition is a European initiative (including 10 European and non-European nations) planned to be operational by early 2020. It would be based out of the French military and naval facility in Abu Dhabi and would complement the IMSC. The Netherlands has announced plans to deploy a ship for a six-month period beginning January next year.

The third is the China-Iran-Russia coalition which emerges as a response to the IMSC and the European initiative. China is a long-standing friend of Iran and its engagements span politico-diplomatic, economic, trade and energy relations. China imports large volumes of oil from Iran and Russia is a major supplier of military hardware. Their navies are programmed to conduct joint naval exercises ‘Marine Security Belt’ in the northern Indian Ocean. According to Iranian flotilla admiral Gholamreza Tahani, “The message of this exercise is peace, friendship and lasting security through cooperation and unity... and its result will be to show that Iran cannot be

isolated.” The initiative is also being perceived as the beginning of the end of “the long-standing Western maritime hegemony” in the Arabian Gulf.

The China-Iran-Russia coalition had invited Pakistan to join, and for the latter it was welcome opportunity. It is a potent regional naval power with significant conventional capability and evolving naval nuclear plans. The Pakistan Navy possesses enormous operational knowledge of northern Indian Ocean (Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and the Suez Canal). Furthermore, it has rich experience of operating as part of the Combined Task Force (CTF) 152 since 2013 and commanded it at least eight times. The Pakistan Navy also conducts joint exercises with Chinese and Russian navies in the Arabian Sea as part of the Aman series, which makes it a natural partner and a significant contributor to ‘Marine Security Belt’ exercises.

After withdrawing from the CTF 152 due to operational, administrative and political tensions with the administration of the US President Donald Trump, Pakistan had given consideration to set up an independent Regional Maritime Security Patrol (RMSP) covering a very large area encompassing the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Strait of Hormuz and as far south as Maldivian waters.

Although the US and the European coalitions possess an overwhelming naval superiority and dwarf the combined Iranian, Russian and Chinese naval power given that they have very few vessels deployed in the region, they must contend with Iran which possesses an array of short and medium range missiles that are capable of hitting ships at sea, and destroy/damage majority of land, littoral and offshore installations, particularly the oil and gas infrastructure. Its inventory of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and drones can potentially cripple critical energy infrastructure as also water plants. During 2019, Iran was at the centre of several incidents involving attacks against commercial vessels; downing of the US Navy’s remotely piloted aircraft over international waters; and had attempted interdiction, seizure and detention of merchant vessels.

However, the introduction of another possible coalition, Israel-US-UK, could potentially aggravate the regional security. This could be the likely combination of a pre-emptive and coercive strategy against Iran on account of its nuclear programme. Although the P5+1 and the international community had hailed the historic and a successful nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, Israel believes that the agreement threatens its security and survival. Israel has identified Iran as

the primary threat, and apparently in 2009, an Israeli Dolphin class conventional submarine with land attack cruise missiles (LACM) had conducted exercises in the Indian Ocean.

Finally, the Iranian nuclear ambitions and its aggressive posturing loom large in the region despite the presence of the US. The US is a factor of stability in the Arabian Gulf and is critical for protecting the national interests of the majority of regional countries. Likewise, the evolving European coalition would complement the US and this should be a much needed stabiliser and should be welcomed by the other regional powers. However, the Gulf States, particularly Oman, is now confronted with a dilemma, given that Iran is pushing for a new regional framework called 'Hormuz Peace Endeavor' or HOPE under which Tehran is encouraging Muscat to partner as it enjoys good relations with many of the stakeholders such as Israel, Iran and the US.

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