



## **Does the US need two carriers in the Arabian sea? Part 1: Deterring Iran**

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The last time the US had two carriers in the Arabian Sea was 2010 as the Obama administration pursued a carrot-and-stick approach to force Iran to the negotiating table over its nuclear program.

The two-carrier presence requirement in place for more than two years exacted an enormous toll on the service, with Navy leaders warning it was unsustainable. Despite this, the Navy has once again been tasked with maintaining a two-carrier presence in the gulf all with the goal of deterring Iranian aggression during heightened tensions in the region and perhaps pressuring them to the negotiating table.

This strategy has two key issues, firstly there is no evidence that such force posturing has any effect on Iranian strategy or actions in the region, and secondly, it takes focus away from new goals expressed within the National Defense Strategy, specifically stretching resources and capability and drawing them away from operations aimed at deterring China and Russia.

US Central Command is committed to the double aircraft carrier deployment. Central Command head General Kenneth McKenzie told House representatives that the aircraft carrier “has a profound deterring effect principally upon Iran”.

“They know what the carrier is. They track the presence of the carrier. And I view a carrier as a critical part of a deterrent posture effective against Iran,” he said.

“It is my best judgment that we have re-established a form of rough deterrence — what I would call contested deterrence — with Iran in the wake of the striking of Qasem Soleimani and the attack on our bases.

“And part of that is based, and part of that deterrence is obtained by our obvious force presence in the theatre — force presence that was not there in the spring of 2019 that led them to undertake the cycle of violence that culminated in January.”

### **Do aircraft carriers deter Iranian actions?**

Since the US withdrew from the nuclear deal, tensions with Iran have continued to escalate, culminating in the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and the retaliatory strikes on US bases in Iraq by Iran and Iranian supported militia groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah. This has all occurred with at least one carrier in the region.

Conventionally, the use of heavy naval presence in the gulf is often framed around ensuring Iran does not make any attempts to close the Straits of Hormuz to oil tanker traffic that could place pressure on oil supply around the world. However, this is a strategy that would be highly sacrificial for Iran as it would also have a huge effect on its economic interest. Along with this, this kind of deterrence is surely possible with one aircraft carrier and the power it projects, leaving the question of why a second would make any difference.

"What does a second carrier give you that one carrier does not? One carrier gives you an immense capability. Having a second carrier — maybe you double the firepower, but for what? If one carrier doesn't deter Iran, I'm not sure two does," said former navy secretary Ray Mabus to *Defense News*.

The trouble with any attempts to deter Iran's behaviour lies in the way the Islamic republic projects its power. when it comes to power Iran operates in the grey zone. It will still often use its conventional military power to inflict one-off acts of retaliation such as the missile strikes on US bases in Iraq or through the direct action of forces within Iraq and Syria including the training or leadership of local groups. However, this is not where a majority of its power projection lies, this it does with its extensive web of proxy forces throughout the Middle East including groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militia groups in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen which it supports materially. this grey area is much harder to fight with an Aircraft carrier than conventional military power and forces.

Bryan Clark, a former senior aide to the chief of naval operations and now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, has stated the two-carrier option is an asinine strategy.

“The Iranians don’t perceive carriers [as] a threat to their ability to project power because they project power through grey zone activities and terrorism — the kinds of things that carriers aren’t very good at dealing with,” said Clarke.

“And when they are inside the Persian Gulf, the Iranians perceive them as being an easy target. They can range the entire gulf with shore batteries along the coast in caves and other terrain where it’s hard to root them out.

“So, the Iranians see the carrier as a way to get the Americans to spend a lot of money on a show of force that doesn’t really impact their strategic calculation.”

Kaleigh Thomas, an analyst with the Center for a New American Security who focuses on Iran, has also agreed by identifying the limited results from the presence on one carrier.

“It adds little value, especially if you look at just the slice of history that is this past year,” Thomas said in an interview with *Defense News*.

“The US already sent a carrier group, and if that wasn’t a deterrent against Iran given the escalatory actions taken by Iran over the past couple of months, I don’t see how maintaining those carriers there for an indefinite period of time is somehow the defining feature of a successful deterrent strategy.”

Thomas goes on to say that the strategy is not in line with the stated claims of the US.

It also undercuts the message that the Trump administration has tried to send — that the US is serious about getting Iran to the table to hash out a new deal, though the White House is undercutting major foreign policy objectives that go back several administrations.

“It goes against this whole narrative that we are serious about negotiating with Iran and that we truly want a diplomatic solution, so our allies inside Iran begin to question our intentions,” she said.

John Glaser, the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, also believes the two-carrier strategy is detrimental to US aims in the region.

“If you’re Iran right now, you are incredibly confused as to what the US administration even wants,” Glaser said.

“Trump has repeatedly sent the message that he would like to meet face-to-face with Iran’s leaders and hash out a new deal. At other times, he threatens to flatten the country with bombs. Many other principals in his administration are set on regime change.

“Iran’s response to maximum pressure has so far been to rebuild some of its nuclear infrastructures and to lash out with increased violence in the region. The tit-for-tat we have seen is Iran reacting to aggressive US policies, and the US not acknowledging the failure of the approach.

“They always say it’s a problem of ‘not enough deterrence.’ ”

### **Your thoughts**

It is clear that tightening sanctions and increased military presence and power projection by the US including the assassination of Soleimani have done little to deter Iranian activities both through its military actions in Iraq and through continued rocket attacks on US bases by its proxy forces. The addition of a second carrier group may ensure that the unlikely scenario of an Iranian shut down of the Straits of Hormuz cannot occur and help deter attacks against commercial shipping, but it is unlikely to affect Iranian grey zone tactics in the Middle East or its foreign policy.

The second part of this series will explore the impacts of the two-carrier strategy in the Arabian Sea on the greater strategic defence goals of the US, most notably actions to counter China and Russia.