# CARRIER, CHOKEPOINT, AND COERCION: THE DYNAMICS OF IRAN-US CONFLICT

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*(Editor's Note: This article was submitted before the U.S.-Iran conflict began. We intentionally left the article as "forward looking" to signify the value of the analysis.)*

After successful US regime-change operations in Venezuela, Washington is aiming for similar endeavor again, this time in Middle East against Iran. Mass mobilization of US military assets—most notably the deployment of naval armada in the Arabia Sea, the forward deployment of Patriot air-defense system and THAAD missile defense systems, and the sudden evacuation of non-essential personnel from regional military bases, were among advanced preparatory measures by Washington for kinetic action against Iran. Amid heightening tension, few incidents preceded US military actions. Iran seized two foreign oil-tankers allegedly smuggling oil and had attempted to approach US flagged tankers. And a US Navy F-35C shot down a Shahed-139 MALE UAV in the Arabian Sea.

Amid growing tensions, hurried to leave the Persian Gulf. The US Department of Transportation Maritime Administration issued guidelines to US flagged commercial ships to keep distance from Iran's territorial waters and reject Iranian forces permission to board ship.

It is apparent that Trump Administration does not want a prolonged war, rather a quick precise and decisive operation to facilitate regime change. The US Navy was expected to take the lead using carrier-based airpower and cruise-missile strikes from guided missile destroyers (DDGs) and nuclear guided missile attack submarines (SSGNs), followed by bombardment by US Air Force bombers flying from US mainland or from Diego Garcia.

But unlike the Venezuela operation, which was conducted in American backyard, Washington has limited territorial room available for military action against Tehran given limited territorial support by Gulf nations. Therefore, it is likely kinetic operations will be highly dependent on naval forces.

This makes complete sense. At sea, the US enjoys overwhelming technological superiority. The US Navy has an estimated nine warships in the region. Three Independence class Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) stationed in the Persian Gulf but of limited value as these vessels have little offensive capability.

The Most prominent formation is the Carrier Battle Group led by the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72), with embarked Carrier Air-Wing Nine (CVW-9). CVW-9 boasts F-35C Lightening-II stealth fighters, F/A-18 E/F Super Hornets attack aircraft, E/A-18G "Growler" electronic warfare jets, E-2D "Hawkeye" Airborne Early Warning Aircraft and MH-60R Sea Hawk Anti-Submarine Warfare helicopters. The Lincoln is accompanied by

three Aegis-equipped Arleigh Burke class DDGs - each armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles for offensive missions and an arsenal of air-defense missiles for multi-layer defense.

Two additional Arleigh Burke class DDGs are deployed in Strait of Hormuz. Besides surface combatants, an unknown number of Ohio class SSGNs –equipped with a formidable payload of 154 land attack Tomahawk cruise missiles – are also patrolling in the area.

In theory, this naval armada is an instrument of coercion at sea, capable of projecting power against Iran and establishing local sea-control in the Arabian Sea. The employment of force through the maritime domain against various types of targets including: military targets like air-defense systems, nuclear enrichment facilities, and missile sites; high visibility targets like economic infrastructure; and high value targets like Iran's political leadership itself, complicate Iran's defensive measures as US Navy can launch from multiple vectors and over vast oceanic distances.

Any Iranian retaliation will mirror this logic. In a low-level response, Tehran has in the past attempted assertive signaling in the maritime domain, i.e., harassing merchant shipping and conducting naval exercises with Russian and Chinese partners.

A mid-level escalation includes counterstrikes on military assets of US and its allies in the Gulf. Facing an existential threat Iran is attempting maritime escalation, such as closing the Strait of Hormuz. Such a move represents a strategic gamble with global consequences and risks overwhelming US retaliation.

Iran, for its part, understands this asymmetry well. Iranian Navy, with obsolete surface and sub-surface fleet, stands no chance against US Navy in a traditional conflict. However, Iran has structured its naval strategy on sea denial rather than sea control. Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC-N) operates hundreds of fast-attack crafts (FACs) equipped with missiles and rockets for saturated strikes against surface vessels. In addition, hundreds of coastal missiles and suicide drones have been dispersed and concealed along the Iranian coast.

Additionally, Iran has commissioned rudimentary specialized vessels, like *Shahid Bagheri*, *Shahid Roudaki* and *Shahid Mahdavi*, which have the capability to launch swarms of drones and containerized missiles at floating targets. Together, these assets manifest Iran's asymmetrical warfare strategy in the maritime domain through which it seeks to overcome US defenses through overwhelming numbers.

Geography facilitates Iran's strategy. The Strait of Hormuz remains Tehran's most potent political leverage. At its narrowest point between the Omani Musandam Peninsula and Iran, merely 33 kms wide with the shipping lane just 3 kms wide in either direction. Iran's ability to block this channel using coastal missile batteries, FACs, naval mines, midget submarines, and unmanned systems provide its greatest capability to counter any major aggression.

The US understands this very well. Therefore, instead of venturing in close waters, the US Navy is likely to operate mostly outside the Persian Gulf while relying on Over-The-Horizon (OTH) precision strikes using distance as a buffer.

A blockade of Strait of Hormuz, by Iran will have immediate ramifications at the global scale. Oil tankers carry more than 17 million barrels of oil each day through this strait which accounts for approximately 20% of global net oil consumption. Saudi Arabia and UAE have alterative pipelines operational which can transit about 2.6 million barrels per day. However, compared to the net volume passing through Start of Hormuz, these pipelines can carry 15.29% at maximum capacity and cannot overcome the economic spillover of any disruption at the Strait of Hormuz.

Yet, for Iran this leverage of Strait of Hormuz is fragile and unsustainable in longer run. Israel's comprehensive air-campaign against Iranian high value assets and subsequent Operations Epic Fury and Midnight Hammer have already exposed major capability voids in Iranian air-defense capability. The Iranian Air Force is obsolete, and its air-defense systems – including domestic as well as Russian and Chinese systems – are mediocre at best.

Against a well-coordinated multi-domain offense, Iran lacks a credible and workable retaliatory option at its disposal. Yes, a large stockpile of short-range ballistic missiles and drones pose a threat, but again, Israel's precise targeting of Iran's ballistic missile launchers during Iran-Israel conflict indicates that US can also undertake a similar campaign at a much greater scale employing far more robust options.

But the central question remains: what is Washington's endgame with Iran? Can limited air strikes realistically cripple the Iranian political regime or permanently degrade its nuclear ambitions, or are they more likely to reinforce the regime's ideological narrative and deepen Tehran's perceived necessity for a nuclear deterrent? There are no clear answers.

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