

## The complexity of the maritime realm in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**I**n the first decade of the 21st Century, the world is witnessing high levels of complexity in the realm of maritime security.

The emergence of non-state entities as important actors in international security dynamics has created various challenges and threats to states, especially those with significant maritime interests. Less clear in their intentions than traditional state-centered actors, non-state entities are difficult to bring to heel by the most basic norms of behavior in the maritime space. Yet, they have access to resources that make them powerful and threatening from an asymmetric perspective.

While states maintain a dominant presence at the maritime level, this dominance is increasingly challenged. The states' margins of maneuver in this realm are being narrowed by growing complexities that emerging non-state actors have an apparent facility to exploit and an interest to deepen. Among these complexities we shall mention state failure and the erosion of state sovereignty in several parts of the world, the unequal geographic distribution of strategic natural resources, the rise of ethnic and religious

extremism, the revolution in information and communication technologies, the transnationalization of conflicts and criminal activities, as well as the rapid growth in the illegal trafficking of drugs, weapons and human beings. To this, one needs to add the rising regional ambitions of a handful of states willing to contest the dominance of the United States in the global maritime space. The Chinese Navy is the clearest example in this regard, but we can also note the increasing naval ambitions of India in the wider Indian Ocean, and attempts by Russia to spread out its naval reach in the Middle East and the Caribbean.

To varying degrees, all states in the international community are affected by this net of crosscutting challenges. However, there are some cases where dependence on maritime trade and exposure to maritime security threats are higher than the average. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), given its geographical position and economic characteristics, is one of these countries.

The UAE's extensive shoreline on the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman has enabled the exploitation of natural resources (such as oil, gas, and fisheries) and the opening towards the global trade markets. However, this geographical characteristic has in recent years engendered unquestionable security challenges: incidents of maritime terrorism in its regional

vicinity, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), maritime asymmetric warfare, piracy, drug smuggling and human trafficking, just to mention the most relevant ones. The list can be expanded if non-security challenges with eventual repercussions on national security are taken into account, such as pollution, depletion of fisheries, disruption of natural eco-systems, climate change and so forth.

Yet, despite the emergence of new actors in the maritime realm, state navies maintain a central role in defining maritime security dynamics, not only by preventing the development of threats, but also, by originating them. Prospects of classical naval warfare have not disappeared. Indeed, today we are witnessing a resurgence in naval frictions and competition across the globe, both among well-established naval powers themselves, and among these and emerging ‘middle powers’ that aim to affirm a regional footprint. The Gulf region, sitting at the strategic crossroads between Africa, Europe and Asia, is not unfamiliar with these trends and, as a matter of fact, is increasingly affected by them. Current developments indicate that Iran is backing its regional ambitions and national security interests with greater reliance on naval assets.

Iran has been traditionally wary of Western-backed multinational maritime security initiatives in the Gulf region, as its own national

security objectives are perceived to be considerably undermined by the presence of foreign navies in Gulf waters, particularly since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. This has led to frontal rejection of, and resistance to, the deployment of naval assets by the United States, the United Kingdom and France.

During the Tanker War (1987), Iran staged attacks on American warships and merchant vessels alike in an attempt to disrupt the foreign naval presence and normalcy of maritime trade in the Arabian Gulf. Ever since naval incidents involving Iran have continued to take place in these waters, and despite being of minor caliber, they have featured a similarly aggressive stance and rhetoric from the Iranian regime.



The latest incidents, namely the arrest of British naval personnel in disputed territorial waters between Iran and Iraq in March 2007, and the harassment of an American naval vessel by a number of Iranian speed boats in January 2008, did not escalate to an irreversible point. Nonetheless, they reminded observers of the potential for limited and even open all-out

conflict between Iran and Western states over small naval disturbances.

In all likelihood, such disturbances will continue to take place as long as core geopolitical divergences are not mended between both sides. Indeed, the current state of US-Iranian relations (or Western-Iranian relations more broadly) points to continuing mutual distrust and risks of military escalation in connection to naval incidents. A review of Iran's behavior in Gulf waters, especially by the naval branch of the Revolutionary Guard, indicates that provocation of rival navies is a dear tactic within its broader national security strategy.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*

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Image of US Navy on patrol:  
[http://www.visualintel.net/WallpaperCollections/Navy-Wallpapers/050315-N-5345W-190/385656237\\_jp9xZ-S.jpg](http://www.visualintel.net/WallpaperCollections/Navy-Wallpapers/050315-N-5345W-190/385656237_jp9xZ-S.jpg)

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