

18 October 2012

The 'Third Track': US Military Moves in Persian Gulf

The United States continues to pursue a 'dual track' strategy in order to thwart Iran's nuclear program. Although it has increased its military presence in the Persian Gulf, the build-up has failed to ease regional tensions or prevent continued demands for a more robust Israeli response, or so argues Sam Rajiv.

By S Samuel C Rajiv for ISN

Iran and the US 'Dual-Track' Approach

Obama administration officials have been highlighting the '[dual-track](#)' approach that currently guides the United States' policies towards Iran. According to Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, 'dual track' entails 'applying pressure in pursuit of constructive engagement, and a negotiated solution'. To date, 'pressure' has come in the shape of multilateral UN Security Council (UNSC) imposed sanctions as well as increasingly tougher unilateral non-proliferation and economic measures. These measures target Iran's ability to source materials for its alleged nuclear weapons program like solid propellants. They have also sought to compromise Tehran's ability to fund related activities via revenues generated through its energy sector.

The United States (and the European Union (EU)) claim that Iran's return to the negotiating table with the P5+1 group of countries in April 2012 after a gap of 15 months [is proof of the success](#) of their 'dual-track' approach. However, the reengagement has yet to translate into a 'negotiated solution', the ideal end-state that 'dual track' envisions.

Strengthening the 'Third Track'

While pursuing this 'dual-track' strategy, the Obama administration, like its predecessor, has insisted that '[no options were off the table](#)'. Throughout 2012, senior US officials have continued to insist that '[there is still time and space](#)' for diplomacy to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. In support, Obama has sent a steady stream of senior US officials to Israel urging the Netanyahu government to allow sanctions to achieve their objectives. In March, Obama also urged Israel to look beyond the military option to deal with Iran's nuclear program by claiming that there had been '[too much loose talk of war](#)'.

Accordingly, 'dual track' is regarded in US policy circles as a flexible strategy that could be adapted to counter Iran's nuclear intransigence and brinkmanship. Moreover, the strategy is complemented by

reports and recommendations such as those made by [the Bipartisan Policy Center](#). This organization has urged the Obama administration to not only pursue the dual-track approach but also make ‘[visible, credible preparations for a military option](#)’, in case the two tracks failed.

Indeed, since January 2012, there has been a greater sense of urgency by the Obama administration to strengthen elements of the ‘third track’. Despite continued efforts to prevent Israel from pursuing the military option, the United States has also taken significant steps to prevent possible Iranian brinkmanship. These have included threats to close the all-important energy transportation routes of the Straits of Hormuz and threats to retaliate against attacks to American assets and interests in the Middle East region. The threat to retaliate is also extended to attacks made on Washington’s allies.

However, Washington’s primary response has been to strengthen its military profile in the Persian Gulf. Since January 2012, the waters in and around Persian Gulf have played host to five US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier strike groups. These have included the *USS Carl Vinson*, *Abraham Lincoln*, *Enterprise*, *Eisenhower*, and the *John Stennis*. At least two of these strike groups (*Stennis* and *Eisenhower* as of September 2012) have been ‘on-station’ in the Fifth Fleet area of operations (AOR), which is based in Manama, Bahrain. For its part, the Pentagon has insisted that such force deployments were not related to Iran, but were instead ‘[prudent force posture requirements set by the combatant commander](#)’.

The formidable assets that these two aircraft carrier strike groups bring to the table include more than 100 F-18 Hornet and Super Hornet fighter jets, destroyers, surveillance aircraft, nuclear-powered attack submarines, missile cruisers, logistics ships and other vessels. Reports also note that the United States has deployed [unspecified numbers of advanced F-22 Raptors and F-15C fighter jets](#) at Al Udeid and Al Dhafra in Abu Dhabi and Qatar respectively. Mine counter measure (MCM) ships (8 currently), coastal patrol vessels (5 currently, to double by 2013), amphibious troop carrying platforms and innovative assets like underwater robots have also been deployed by the United States near Iranian waters.

Apart from the abovementioned force deployments, United States has also carried out a wide-range of military exercises with its allies in the region, including on land (in Jordan) and at sea. Joint US-Israeli missile defense exercises are also slated to be held in October. A third X-band radar site (apart from two such sites in Israel and Turkey) is being built in Qatar and the United States has maintained a BMD-capable ship presence in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea as well since March 2011.

Enhanced US Military Profile: Responses and Consequences

In the face of Washington’s increasing presence in the Persian Gulf and tightening of economic sanctions, Iranian officials have issued increasingly belligerent threats to not only close the Straits of Hormuz but also retaliate against Israel and American interests in the region. To back up such claims, the Iranians have recently highlighted their ability to counter specific military tactics. During the ‘Great Prophet-VII’ exercises conducted in July 2012, for example, Iran demonstrated ‘[high firing density](#)’ missile maneuvers aimed at penetrating US missile defense systems. These relate to its demonstrated ability to fire multiple missiles from different directions at a single target. Iran has continued to advertise its expertise in short- and medium-range missiles, specifically cruise missiles like the radar-evading 200-km range *Ghader* and short-range surface-to-air missiles like the *Mehrab*. Iran may also even indulge in ‘[swarming](#)’ tactics through its fleet of fast attack boats.

Yet, despite the mounting challenge posed by Iran’s armed forces to the security of the Persian Gulf, the United States’ decision to increase its naval presence within the region has not been without its fair share of controversy. In Bahrain, for example, there have been a number of debates regarding the

presence of US forces on the island. The debates come two years after Washington's decision to [expand its naval facilities at Manama](#) by 2015 in response to the likely difficulties in developing equivalent facilities in nearby ports.

There have also been the first civilian casualties of the United States' increased military presence in the Persian Gulf. In July, an Indian mariner was killed and three others were injured after the *USS Rappahannock* fired on a vessel that ignored 'a series of non-lethal pre-planned responses' aimed at guiding the ship away from the fleet replenishment craft. The incident, which occurred near the port of Jebel Ali, Dubai, served to underscore the state of anxiety that currently grips the Persian Gulf region.

Looking Ahead

While the United States' increased presence has largely been driven by the need to counter and/or contain possible Iranian brinkmanship, at another level, it has showcased Washington's efforts to assure Israel that its Iranian strategy is also committed to the 'third track' approach. However, the Obama administration's commitment to its key Middle East ally has done little to reduce the domestic clamor for a more robust response from Israel against Iran's nuclear program. Meanwhile, Tehran's engagement with the international community over its nuclear program remains locked in stalemate. As a result, the Persian Gulf seems to be entering even choppiest waters, which does not bode well for regional security and stability.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Sabre-Rattling in the Persian Gulf](#)
[The Implications of US and EU Economic Sanctions Against Iran](#)
[Can a Red Line be Drawn on Iran?](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's featured [editorial content](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

S Samuel C Rajiv is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. The views expressed are his own.

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=153582&lng=en>

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland