

MARITIME ADVISORY: STRAIT OF HORMUZ

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 23 September 2020, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) unveiled a new naval base, which according to state media aims to project "dominance" over the strategic Strait of Hormuz. This comes after months of escalating tensions with the United States.

The Shaheed Rahbarid base is located near the port of Sirik, on the eastern side of the Strait of Hormuz. According to IRGC commander Major General Hossein Salami, "this base has been built with the purpose of total dominance over the entry and exit of extraterritorial aircraft and naval vessels" at the entrance of the Gulf, adding that "this location is one of the country's most strategic defensive points." He further disclosed that the Guards' navy, which operates separately from Iran's armed forces, "now has a very power naval base." The base, which took six years to construct and, will give Iran "full control" of various vessels that use the Channel.



The opening of the base comes just days after a US aircraft carrier passed the waterway to enter the Gulf. On 23 September, the IRGC disclosed that it had flown a surveillance drone over a US aircraft carrier, the USS Nimitz, as it transited through the Strait of Hormuz in mid-September. The semi-official Tasnim news agency has published images of the USS Nimitz, stating that the photographs were taken by Iranian-made drones. The move appears to be an apparent boast at Iran's capabilities to get close to one of the US warships. The opening of Iran's new base also comes after the United Arab Emirates normalized relations with Israel, opening the way for it to have an official presence in the waterway for the first time, and coincides with Iran marking the 40th anniversary of Sacred Defence Week, an annual commemoration of the 1980 - 1988 Iran-Iraq War.

Earlier this year, Iran also announced plans to open a permanent base in the Indian Ocean, as the country continues to pursue an expansion of its influence in the region. In late June, the IRGC's top admiral disclosed that Iran is seeking to establish a permanent base to increase security in the Gulf of Oman and the entry to the Indian Ocean. Commodore Alireza Tangsiri disclosed that the base would help counter pirates and foreign vessels, and could be completed by the end of March 2021. Officials however have not disclosed the exact location of the new base.

ESCALATING TENSIONS

Tensions between Iran and the United States have significantly escalated since US President Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal in 2018 and reimposed stringent sanctions on Iran, a move that triggered a security crisis in the region.

In late 2019, tensions rapidly rose between Iran and the US when vessels were mysteriously attacked, drones were downed and oil tankers were seized. In June 2019, Iran shot down a US Global Hawk drone over the Strait

after it allegedly violated the Islamic Republic's airspace, a claim that has been denied by US officials. Since then, the two states have twice come to the brink of direct confrontation. Washington has also blamed Tehran for last year's mysterious attacks against oil tankers in the nearby Gulf of Oman as well as an attack on Saudi oil facilities, both of which have been denied by Iran. In January 2020, the United States' assassination of General Qassem Soleimani heightened security concerns about shipping in the Gulf region, notably the Strait of Hormuz, with the killing of the military commander effectively marking a significant escalation in tensions between Washington and Tehran. Days later, on 8 January, Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 crashed shortly after taking off from Tehran, killing all 176 passengers and crewmembers on board. While initially, Iranian authorities blamed the crash on technical issues, Iran's military announced on 11 January that it had accidentally shot down the passenger jet, blaming human error because of what it called the plane's sharp, unexpected turn towards a sensitive military base. In April 2020, Guard Corps gunboats approached American vessels at close range, prompting President Trump to order the US Navy to open fire in any repeat confrontation.

More recently, in mid-September Washington announced that it was preparing to enforce United Nations sanctions on Iran, in a move that other world powers have already dismissed. With just weeks away from the US presidential election, the Trump administration claimed that as an original participant in the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, it has the legal right to force reimposed sanctions over the objections of the other countries that negotiated the agreement. The US case however was rebuffed during a UN Security Council meeting in August, as every member with the exception of the Dominican Republic argued that the US gave up the authority to do so when it left the deal. While US officials continue to make plans to impose sanctions on countries and banks that facilitate trading with Iran when an arms embargo expires next months, most countries at the UN are treating this as a non-event.

IMPLICATIONS

As the Trump administration has focused on imposing sanctions on Iran, the Islamic Republic has turned its attention to the Persian Gulf region. With the opening of the new Shaheed Rahbarid base, and with plans to open a permanent base in the Indian Ocean, Iran is pursuing a policy that aims to further expand its influence and control over the region, notably the strategic waterways.

Historically, Iran has used the Strait of Hormuz to pressure regional and international rivals. In the past, the Iranian regime has harassed American and British naval vessels, attacked international shipping, and has on numerous occasions threatened to close the Strait to maritime traffic. By expanding its military footprint and building key infrastructure in the area, Iran has effectively put in place the groundwork for greater influence around the Strait of Hormuz.

While the UN arms embargo on Iran is set to expire on 18 October 2020, despite repeated efforts by the US to extend the moratorium as part of President Trump's strategy to maintain maximum pressure on Tehran, the Trump administration is likely to go it alone in its pursuit to impose further sanctions on the Islamic Republic. On 8 October, the US unilaterally imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran's financial sector in a move that has already been criticized as potentially having unintended consequences, including a detrimental impact on the ability of the Iranian people to access humanitarian resources. The sanctions come less than a month before the US presidential election and have left America largely isolated from key European allies. Nevertheless, Tehran could use the latest sanctions as a trigger to further aggravate the US by targeting American vessels in the region and threatening international maritime shipping. The upcoming US election on 3 November is also likely to have an impact on the future of US - Iran relations. While over the past four years, Trump has pursued a reckless and erratic policy towards Iran and in large part has worsened the threat, democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, who in the latest national polls has a lead of 52% to Trump's 42%, has promised a "better deal" to constrain Iran's nuclear programme and has pledged to pressure Tehran into curbing its aggressive behaviour across the Middle East. Should the democratic party win the presidential election, it is evident that Biden will pursue a more diplomatic approach, one that could potentially diffuse the heightened tensions.

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