



The Cambridge Security Initiative

IRANIAN MILITARY ADVERTISES IMPROVED DEFENSIVE AND OFFENSIVE CAPABILITIES, THREATENS SHIPPING

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The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Navy (IRGCN) late July “Great Prophet XIV” exercise, including attacks against [a mock aircraft carrier](#), was only the latest in a series of military evolutions that underscore Tehran’s intent to develop a credible anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability.¹ IRGCN leadership asserted on 22 June that the IRGC will establish [a new permanent base](#) to “increase security” in the Gulf of Oman and the entry to the Indian Ocean. In mid-June, the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) conducted an exercise codenamed [‘Ramadan Martyrs’](#) in the northern Indian Ocean. Combined with consistent calls for the U.S. to withdraw its forces from the region, these actions demonstrate Tehran is attempting to achieve its long-term strategic objective of regional dominance.

As part of the “Great Prophet XIV” training, a mock aircraft carrier resembling the U.S. *Nimitz*-class was used as a target in the Strait of Hormuz. The exercise reportedly included the launching of missiles from ships, underground silos, drones, helicopters, and mobile platforms against fictitious enemy positions, including the mock carrier. In the context of the simulated attack on the mock aircraft carrier, IRGC leadership reiterated that the IRGC is “defensive” at the strategic level, but would rapidly go on the offensive if attacked.

During exercise “Ramadan Martyrs”, the IRIN reportedly tested new, domestically produced short-range and long-range cruise missiles from coastal launchers and the deck of naval vessels, including the modified Ghadir naval cruise missile, which reportedly hit targets at 280 kilometres. In April, the IRGCN indicated Iran had [increased the range of its naval missiles to 700 kilometres](#).

These exercises to some extent improve Iran’s military capabilities but they are also large-scale propaganda events aimed at demonstrating Iran’s military prowess to both a domestic and foreign audience, particularly U.S. and Western forces operating in the Gulf. Tehran’s military activities are, however, a threat to the robust commercial maritime traffic in the region; about 20 per cent of the world’s oil supply transits the [Strait of Hormuz](#) daily. During the “Great Prophet XIV” exercise, Iran launched numerous weapons in the vicinity of the Strait, potentially

¹ The [Rand Corporation](#) defines anti-access (A2) is defined as the capacity to limit the ability of opposing forces to enter an operational area, whereas area denial (AD) is the ability to degrade opposing air and naval forces’ ability to operate freely.

endangering shipping; the U.S. Navy called the move "[irresponsible and reckless.](#)" Underscoring the Iranian threat to maritime traffic, Iran has attacked six tankers and seized two since May 2019, including as recently as 13 August, when Iranian forces boarded and briefly detained a [Liberian-flagged oil tanker.](#)

OUTLOOK

Iranian leaders assert the [U.S. military presence](#) in the region is the primary source of instability and have called for U.S. forces to be replaced by a regional security architecture led by Iran. Tehran's strategic objective remains dominance of the Gulf region; it sees the U.S. force presence along with its close ties to the Gulf Arab states as the primary impediment. While Iran's military remains vastly inferior to the U.S., it has progressed substantially over the past several years, improving its A2/AD and power projection capabilities with new, precision-guided weapons that improve the range, accuracy, and lethality of its weapons systems.

Indeed, the Iranian military has the ability to damage critical infrastructure and adversary military forces in the region – the September 2019 attack on Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities using precision-guided weapons (probably drones and cruise missiles) demonstrated this capability – but it cannot achieve any measure of air superiority and sea control/sea denial, essential elements of a viable A2/AD strategy. Indeed, Iran's military exercises are often propaganda events meant to deter adversaries and demonstrate to the Iranian people that the regime can defend the realm.

Competing with U.S. conventional capabilities will remain Iran's biggest challenge, but advanced weapons will theoretically soon become available when the arms embargo expires in October. Both Russia and China oppose any extension to the embargo and appear keen to sell Iran advanced weapons. The addition of new, advanced conventional weapons will eventually expand and extend Iran's A2/AD capabilities further, potentially into the Indian Ocean, increasing the threat to U.S. and Gulf military forces while assisting Tehran in achieving its objective of becoming the dominant regional power.