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In responding to West, Iran stresses its naval abilities in Persian Gulf

By Thomas Erdbrink

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TEHRAN -- Inspections of Iranian vessels by the United States and its allies in accordance with a [new U.N. sanctions regime](#) could worsen tensions in the Persian Gulf, Iranian leaders and commanders have warned in recent days.

"Anybody who insists on implementing [searches] will regret them very harshly," President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said June 28, echoing avowals by other senior Iranian officials that inspections would not go unanswered.

The resolution adopted last month by the U.N. Security Council calls on states to allow inspections of ships on the high seas if there "are reasonable grounds" to believe they are carrying weapons or other banned materials, a request [Iran](#) would reject as a violation of its sovereignty, analysts said. A [similar U.N. provision that was passed last year](#) to encourage the boarding of North Korean vessels has not led to a single interdiction of banned cargo on the high seas. But it has led to the seizure of North Korean weapons at foreign ports, according to a U.N. monitoring panel.

The prospect of inspections has led several key Iranian officials to emphasize their country's growing clout in the Persian Gulf -- the likeliest theater for countermeasures, Iranian commanders say.

"The Guard's navy has the capacity to respond appropriately and adequately to actions against Iranian ships," Revolutionary Guard Corps Rear Adm. Ali Fadavi said June 26, according to the government newspaper Iran. "The Persian Gulf is the center and most sensitive point of the world. . . . At any time, we can exert as much pressure in this strait as we may wish to."

Iran has threatened for years to choke off the Hormuz Strait, the narrow passage at the entrance to the gulf through which a daily caravan of tankers transports nearly 30 percent of the world's oil and gas. Recently, though, current and retired military officers have been touting what they call an overhaul of military doctrine with respect to the Persian Gulf: preparing the naval arm of the Revolutionary Guard to carry out the kind of unconventional attacks known as asymmetrical warfare.

In 2007, command over the strategic body of water was given to the Guard, and the regular navy was banished to the open seas. At the same time, the country has invested heavily in an ever-growing fleet of small, high-speed vessels armed with missiles and torpedoes and capable of laying mines and even semi-submerging, according to a [fall 2009 report](#) by the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence.

"They're doing things differently than 10 or 15 years ago," said a U.S. intelligence official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. He noted that, in addition to upgraded speedboats and more aggressive training exercises, Iran has "a cruise missile capability that certainly is a threat to any ship in the gulf."

"They have the ability to do some harm to us or any other ships," the official said. "Would they be able to totally disrupt us? Probably not. They have the ability to do damage. I wouldn't call it sustained. I wouldn't call it overwhelming."

Iranian commanders say they have been studying the only real sea battle between Iran and the United States in the Persian Gulf, which took place in April 1988.

"What we learned from that fight was that the American Navy could easily take on our regular navy when they attacked by surprise, but they couldn't get anywhere with the Guards on their fast boats," retired Guard Navy Adm. Hossein Alaei said in an interview.

"In classical warfare, normally the stronger side wins," said Alaei, who teaches strategic sciences at the Guard's Imam Hussein University in Tehran. "Our forces are now much better prepared for any conflict in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. Navy is highly vulnerable to our kind of warfare."

U.S. military officials said they have long taken seriously the threat of asymmetrical attacks by Iranian naval forces in the Persian Gulf. But they were dismissive of assertions that the Revolutionary Guard has developed new methods of attack that the U.S. Navy could not defend against.

"The U.S. does not share the same assessment and remains ready for every contingency," Cmdr. Amy Derrick-Frost, spokeswoman for the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, said in an e-mail.

While Iran has been closely studying the 1988 naval conflict with the United States, the U.S. military has been examining the results of [a 2005 war game](#) it staged to simulate an attack by Iranian forces in the Persian Gulf. That war game, which alarmed commanders at the Pentagon, showed that it would be relatively easy for the Iranians to paralyze the Fifth Fleet by using a combination of high-speed gunboats and airborne suicide attacks.

Since then, according to analysts, the Navy has further developed the MK-182, essentially a giant shotgun shell packed with 9,000 tungsten pellets that can be aimed at Iranian speedboats or other small craft. It has also equipped its ships with what it calls ["close-in weapons systems,"](#) guns that can target anti-ship cruise missiles or suicide pilots at short range.

In February, U.S. officials also said that the United States had expanded its missile defense systems in Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to counter what it sees as Iran's growing missile threat.

Daniel Byman, director of the security studies program at Georgetown University, said that Iran's asymmetrical capabilities on the water are "not a hollow threat" and could succeed in damaging or disabling U.S. vessels.

"But let's not overblow it, either," Byman said. "If the [U.S.] Navy is prepared and goes in right, the Iranian navy would be on the bottom of the gulf pretty quickly."