

American armada prepares to take on Iran

By Damien McElroy aboard USS Eisenhower

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It is four and a half acres of American power in the middle of the Arabian Sea but the influence of USS Dwight D Eisenhower stretches for hundreds of miles.



Crew on board the aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower are on alert in the Arabian Sea

The aircraft carrier, backed by its sister vessel, a handful of destroyers and a shoal of support ships, has placed a maritime ring of steel around an increasingly unstable region.

While the Eisenhower is ostensibly assisting US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is [the looming threat of Iran](#) that increasingly occupies its attention.

Recent tensions between America and Iran over Teheran's attempts to develop a nuclear weapon have raised the prospect of its third regional war in a decade.

The addition of a second aircraft carrier to its strike groups has fuelled the belief that America is gearing up for a fight with Iran. Not since the Iraq war in 2003 has America amassed so much fire power around the Gulf.

advertisement As flagship of the Fifth Fleet, the Eisenhower welcomed the arrival of a second Nimitz class nuclear powered aircraft carrier, the USS John C. Stennis, and its accompanying destroyers on Tuesday.

Captain Dan Cloyd, the Eisenhower's commanding officer, compared the situation with the international tension of the Cold War.

"There was a time when we had two aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean," he told The Daily Telegraph. "The world changes and we adapt."

The quiet-spoken Capt Cloyd embraced the suggestion that the dual deployment is at the forefront of efforts to stop Iran getting a nuclear bomb, pointing out that his maritime assets have been tasked to quash any challenge to global security.

"Our presence here is an affirmation of our resolve in this area to engage with the nations of the region either where we share common goals or where we face challenges."

Every hour and fifteen minutes a handful of jets scream north across the ocean. The range of missions an aircraft carrier as big as the Eisenhower - it has more than 5,000 people onboard - can carry out is virtually limitless.

The Eisenhower is not only the flagship of the carrier group that protects The Gulf through which one-fifth of the world's oil is shipped. It has also helped overthrow a hard-line Islamic regime in Somalia during a stint off the Horn of Africa.

Its fighter jets now offer close support to Nato and US forces in Afghanistan.

Lieutenant Commander Matt Pothier returned yesterday from Afghanistan having delivered air support to British soldiers. He said: "Right now I have more opportunities than I've ever had to use weapons where we know there aren't any friendly people. In combat that's very rewarding."

In the carrier's Combat Direction Centre, Warrant Officer Michael Myers can spot anything untoward in a 256 mile radius from his radar screen. He can identify objects as small as wooden boats on the open sea and small aircraft in a swathe of countries from the Arabian peninsula to the northern shore of the Sea of Arabia.

Should Lieutenant Commander Craig Stapleton, the tactical operations officer, give the order, WO Myers can put up Hawkeye, an EP2 surveillance plane with massive radar capable of establishing American air traffic control across half a continent. "Those planes alone extend our radar horizon to a huge circle of the sky. I could see for 1,000 miles if I wanted to."

As it patrols the shipping lanes of the Strait of Hormuz, the Eisenhower ensures the safe passage of oil tankers. It also prevents the trading routes being used to transport materials that would help rogue nations build a nuclear weapon.

Capt Cloyd said: "Our maritime security mission is about denying the use of the seas to any potential spread of weapons of mass destruction."

Iran's belligerent posture has increased the challenges facing the Eisenhower since it deployed to the Middle East last October. Vice Admiral Patrick Walsh, the commander of the Fifth Fleet, issued a stark warning that Iran risks triggering an "accidental war" during aggressive military manoeuvres.

During the Great Prophet 2 missile test in November, the Islamic Republic fired a Shabab missile into the six mile corridor of shipping lanes in the Straits of Hormuz. In such a constricted corridor, the results could have been disastrous.

With Teheran's real strategic intentions unclear, the US takes the threats it has made very seriously.

"They threaten to use oil as a weapon. They threaten to close the Strait of Hormuz," Adml Walsh said.

"And so it is the combination of the rhetoric, the tone, and the aggressive exercises in very constrained waters that gives us concern."

US commanders ascribe the increase in instability to increasingly aggressive actions by Teheran. For that reason the deployment of the carriers in the region is designed to intensify the pressure on Iran to step back from the brink.

"In the past year and a half it [Iran] has become much more strident, more vocal and in your face," said Walsh. "What concerns me is miscalculation."

Capt Cloyd said his personnel, 70 per cent of whom have never participated in a long term mission before, are aware that the workload could grow more intense before the deployment is over.

"We're aware of the environment and the need to respond to the environment so that we can protect regional security and stability.

We're aware of what other countries could do.

"We're busy but we would move to a higher tempo if need be."

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