

Iran: A Bridge too Far?

The weapon that could defeat the US in the Gulf

A word to the reader: The following paper is so shocking that, after preparing the initial draft, I didn't want to believe it myself, and resolved to disprove it with more research. However, I only succeeded in turning up more evidence in support of my thesis. And I repeated this cycle of discovery and denial several more times before finally deciding to go with the article. I believe that a serious writer must follow the trail of evidence, no matter where it leads, and report back. So here is my story. Don't be surprised if it causes you to squirm. Its purpose is not to make predictions — history makes fools of those who claim to know the future — but simply to describe the peril that awaits us in the Persian Gulf. By awakening to the extent of that danger, perhaps we can still find a way to save our nation and the world from disaster. If we are very lucky, we might even create an alternative future that holds some promise of resolving the monumental conflicts of our time. MG

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by Mark Gaffney

10/26/04 "ICH" -- Last July, they dubbed it operation Summer Pulse: a simultaneous mustering of US Naval forces, world wide, that was unprecedented. According to the Navy, it was the first exercise of its new Fleet Response Plan (FRP), the purpose of which was to enable the Navy to respond quickly to an international crisis. The Navy wanted to show its increased force readiness, that is, its capacity to rapidly move combat power to any global hot spot. Never in the history of the US Navy had so many carrier battle groups been involved in a single operation. Even the US fleet massed in the Gulf and eastern Mediterranean during operation Desert Storm in 1991, and in the recent invasion of Iraq, never exceeded six battle groups. But last July and August there were seven of them on the move, each battle group consisting of a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier with its full complement of 7-8 supporting ships, and 70 or more assorted aircraft. Most of the activity, according to various reports, was in the Pacific, where the fleet participated in joint exercises with the Taiwanese navy.

But why so much naval power underway at the same time? What potential world crisis could possibly require more battle groups than were deployed during the recent invasion of Iraq? In past years, when the US has seen fit to “show the flag” or flex its naval muscle, one or two carrier groups have sufficed. Why this global show of power?

The news headlines about the joint-maneuvers in the South China Sea read: “Saber Rattling Unnerves China”, and: “Huge Show of Force Worries Chinese.” But the reality was quite different, and, as we shall see, has grave ramifications for the continuing US military presence in the Persian Gulf; because operation Summer Pulse reflected a high-level Pentagon decision that an unprecedented show of strength was needed to counter what is viewed as a growing threat — in the particular case of China, because of Peking's newest Sovremenny-class destroyers recently acquired from Russia.

“Nonsense!” you are probably thinking. That's impossible. How could a few picayune destroyers threaten the US Pacific fleet?”

Here is where the story thickens: Summer Pulse amounted to a tacit acknowledgement, obvious to anyone paying attention, that the United States has been eclipsed in an important area of military technology, and that this *qualitative* edge is now being wielded by others, including the Chinese;

because those otherwise very ordinary destroyers were, in fact, launching platforms for Russian-made 3M-82 Moskit anti-ship cruise missiles (NATO designation: SS-N-22 Sunburn), a weapon for which the US Navy currently has no defense. Here I am not suggesting that the US status of lone world Superpower has been surpassed. I am simply saying that a new global balance of power is emerging, in which other individual states may, on occasion, achieve “an asymmetric advantage” over the US. And this, in my view, explains the immense scale of Summer Pulse. The US show last summer of overwhelming strength was calculated to send a message.

The Sunburn Missile

I was shocked when I learned the facts about these Russian-made cruise missiles. The problem is that so many of us suffer from two common misperceptions. The first follows from our assumption that Russia is militarily weak, as a result of the breakup of the old Soviet system. Actually, this is accurate, but it does not reflect the complexities. Although the Russian navy continues to rust in port, and the Russian army is in disarray, in certain key areas Russian technology is actually superior to our own. And nowhere is this truer than in the vital area of anti-ship cruise missile technology, where the Russians hold at least a ten-year lead over the US. The second misperception has to do with our complacency in general about missiles-as-weapons — probably attributable to the pathetic performance of Saddam Hussein’s Scuds during the first Gulf war: a dangerous illusion that I will now attempt to rectify.

Many years ago, Soviet planners gave up trying to match the US Navy ship for ship, gun for gun, and dollar for dollar. The Soviets simply could not compete with the high levels of US spending required to build up and maintain a huge naval armada. They shrewdly adopted an alternative approach based on strategic defense. They searched for weaknesses, and sought relatively inexpensive ways to exploit those weaknesses. The Soviets succeeded: by developing several supersonic anti-ship missiles, one of which, the SS-N-22 Sunburn, has been called “the most lethal missile in the world today.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the old military establishment fell upon hard times. But in the late 1990s Moscow awakened to the under-utilized potential of its missile technology to generate desperately needed foreign exchange. A decision was made to resuscitate selected programs, and, very soon, Russian missile technology became a hot export commodity. Today, Russian missiles are a growth industry generating much-needed cash for Russia, with many billions in combined sales to India, China, Viet Nam, Cuba, and also Iran. In the near future this dissemination of advanced technology is likely to present serious challenges to the US. Some have even warned that the US Navy’s largest ships, the massive carriers, have now become floating death traps, and should for this reason be mothballed.

The Sunburn missile has never seen use in combat, to my knowledge, which probably explains why its fearsome capabilities are not more widely recognized. Other cruise missiles *have* been used, of course, on several occasions, and with devastating results. During the Falklands War, French-made Exocet missiles, fired from Argentine fighters, sunk the HMS Sheffield and another ship. And, in 1987, during the Iran-Iraq war, the USS Stark was nearly cut in half by a pair of Exocets while on patrol in the Persian Gulf. On that occasion US Aegis radar picked up the incoming Iraqi fighter (a French-made Mirage), and tracked its approach to within 50 miles. The radar also “saw” the Iraqi plane turn about and return to its base. But radar never detected the pilot launch his weapons. The sea-skimming Exocets came smoking in under radar and were only sighted by human eyes moments before they ripped into the Stark, crippling the ship and killing 37 US sailors.

The 1987 surprise attack on the Stark exemplifies the dangers posed by anti-ship cruise missiles. And the dangers are much more serious in the case of the Sunburn, whose specs leave the sub-sonic Exocet in the dust. Not only is the Sunburn much larger and faster, it has far greater range and a superior guidance system. Those who have witnessed its performance trials invariably come away stunned. According to one report, when the Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani visited Moscow in October 2001 he requested a test firing of the Sunburn, which the Russians were only too happy to arrange. So impressed was Ali Shamkhani that he placed an order for an undisclosed number of the missiles.

The Sunburn can deliver a 200-kiloton nuclear payload, or: a 750-pound conventional warhead, within a range of 100 miles, more than twice the range of the Exocet. The Sunburn combines a Mach 2.1 speed (two times the speed of sound) with a flight pattern that hugs the deck and includes “violent end

maneuvers” to elude enemy defenses. The missile was specifically designed to defeat the US Aegis radar defense system. Should a US Navy Phalanx point defense somehow manage to detect an incoming Sunburn missile, the system has only seconds to calculate a fire solution — not enough time to take out the intruding missile. The US Phalanx defense employs a six-barreled gun that fires 3,000 depleted-uranium rounds a minute, but the gun must have precise coordinates to destroy an intruder “just in time.”

The Sunburn’s combined supersonic speed and payload size produce tremendous kinetic energy on impact, with devastating consequences for ship and crew. A single one of these missiles can sink a large warship, yet costs considerably less than a fighter jet. Although the Navy has been phasing out the older Phalanx defense system, its replacement, known as the Rolling Action Missile (RAM) has never been tested against the weapon it seems destined to one day face in combat.

Implications For US Forces in the Gulf

The US Navy’s only plausible defense against a robust weapon like the Sunburn missile is to detect the enemy’s approach well ahead of time, whether destroyers, subs, or fighter-bombers, and defeat them *before* they can get in range and launch their deadly cargo. For this purpose US AWACs radar planes assigned to each naval battle group are kept aloft on a rotating schedule. The planes “see” everything within two hundred miles of the fleet, and are complemented with intelligence from orbiting satellites.

But US naval commanders operating in the Persian Gulf face serious challenges that are unique to the littoral, i.e., coastal, environment. A glance at a map shows why: The Gulf is nothing but a large lake, with one narrow outlet, and most of its northern shore, i.e., Iran, consists of mountainous terrain that affords a commanding tactical advantage over ships operating in Gulf waters. The rugged northern shore makes for easy concealment of coastal defenses, such as mobile missile launchers, and also makes their detection problematic. Although it was not widely reported, the US actually *lost* the battle of the Scuds in the first Gulf War — termed “the great Scud hunt” — and for similar reasons. Saddam Hussein’s mobile Scud launchers proved so difficult to detect and destroy — over and over again the Iraqis fooled allied reconnaissance with decoys — that during the course of Desert Storm the US was unable to confirm even a single kill. This proved such an embarrassment to the Pentagon, afterwards, that the unpleasant stats were buried in official reports. But the blunt fact is that the US failed to stop the Scud attacks. The launches continued until the last few days of the conflict. Luckily, the Scud’s inaccuracy made it an almost useless weapon. At one point General Norman Schwarzkopf quipped dismissively to the press that his soldiers had a greater chance of being struck by lightning in Georgia than by a Scud in Kuwait.

But that was *then*, and it would be a grave error to allow the Scud’s ineffectiveness to blur the facts concerning this *other* missile. The Sunburn’s amazing accuracy was demonstrated not long ago in a live test staged at sea by the Chinese — and observed by US spy planes. Not only did the Sunburn missile destroy the dummy target ship, it scored a perfect bull’s eye, hitting the crosshairs of a large “X” mounted on the ship’s bridge. The only word that does it justice, awesome, has become a cliché, hackneyed from hyperbolic excess.

The US Navy has never faced anything in combat as formidable as the Sunburn missile. But this will surely change if the US and Israel decide to wage a so-called preventive war against Iran to destroy its nuclear infrastructure. Storm clouds have been darkening over the Gulf for many months. In recent years Israel upgraded its air force with a new fleet of long-range F-15 fighter-bombers, and even more recently took delivery of 5,000 bunker-buster bombs from the US — weapons that many observers think are intended for use against Iran.

The arming for war has been matched by threats. Israeli officials have declared repeatedly that they will not allow the Mullahs to develop nuclear power, not even reactors to generate electricity for peaceful use. Their threats are particularly worrisome, because Israel has a long history of pre-emptive war. (See my 1989 book *Dimona: the Third Temple?* and also my 2003 article *Will Iran Be Next?* posted at < <http://www.InformationClearingHouse.info/article3288.htm> >)

Never mind that such a determination is not Israel’s to make, and belongs instead to the international community, as codified in the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). With regard to Iran, the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA’s) recent report (September 2004) is well worth a look, as it

repudiates facile claims by the US and Israel that Iran is building bombs. While the report is highly critical of Tehran for its ambiguities and its grudging release of documents, it affirms that IAEA inspectors have been admitted to every nuclear site in the country to which they have sought access, without exception. Last year Iran signed the strengthened IAEA inspection protocol, which until then had been voluntary. And the IAEA has found no hard evidence, to date, either that bombs exist or that Iran has made a decision to build them. (The latest IAEA report can be downloaded at: www.GlobalSecurity.org)

In a talk on October 3, 2004, IAEA Director General Mohamed El Baradei made the clearest statement yet: "Iran has no nuclear weapons program", he said, and then repeated himself for emphasis: "Iran has no nuclear weapons program, but I personally don't rush to conclusions before all the realities are clarified. So far I see nothing that could be called an imminent danger. I have seen no nuclear weapons program in Iran. What I have seen is that Iran is trying to gain access to nuclear enrichment technology, and so far there is no danger from Iran. Therefore, we should make use of political and diplomatic means before thinking of resorting to other alternatives."

(http://www.aljazeera.com/cgi-bin/news_service/middle_east_full_story.asp?service_id=5051)

No one disputes that Tehran is pursuing a dangerous path, but with 200 or more Israeli nukes targeted upon them the Iranians' insistence on keeping their options open is understandable. Clearly, the nuclear nonproliferation regime today hangs by the slenderest of threads. The world has arrived at a fateful crossroads.

A Fearful Symmetry?

If a showdown over Iran develops in the coming months, the man who could hold the outcome in his hands will be thrust upon the world stage. That man, like him or hate him, is Russian President Vladimir Putin. He has been castigated severely in recent months for gathering too much political power to himself. But according to former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who was interviewed on US television recently by David Brokaw, Putin has *not* imposed a tyranny upon Russia — *yet*. Gorbachev thinks the jury is still out on Putin.

Perhaps, with this in mind, we should be asking whether Vladimir Putin is a serious student of history. If he is, then he surely recognizes that the deepening crisis in the Persian Gulf presents not only manifold dangers, but also opportunities. Be assured that the Russian leader has not forgotten the humiliating defeat Ronald Reagan inflicted upon the old Soviet state. (*Have we Americans forgotten?*) By the mid-1980s the Soviets were in Kabul, and had all but defeated the Mujahedeen. The Soviet Union appeared secure in its military occupation of Afghanistan. But then, in 1986, the first US Stinger missiles reached the hands of the Afghani resistance; and, quite suddenly, Soviet helicopter gunships and MiGs began dropping out of the skies like flaming stones. The tide swiftly turned, and by 1989 it was all over but the hand wringing and gnashing of teeth in the Kremlin. Defeated, the Soviets slunk back across the frontier. The whole world cheered the American Stingers, which had carried the day.

This very night, as he sips his cognac, what is Vladimir Putin thinking? Is he perhaps thinking about the perverse symmetries of history? If so, he may also be wondering (and discussing with his closest aides) how a truly great nation like the United States could be so blind and so stupid as to allow another state, i.e., Israel, to control its foreign policy, especially in a region as vital (and volatile) as the Mid-East. One can almost hear the Russians' animated conversation:

"The Americans! What is the matter with them?"

"They simply cannot help themselves."

"What idiots!"

"A nation as foolish as this deserves to be taught a lesson..."

"Yes! For their own good."

"It must be a painful lesson, one they will never forget..."

"Are we agreed, then, comrades?"

"Let us teach our American friends a lesson about the limits of military power!"

Does anyone really believe that Vladimir Putin will hesitate to seize a most rare opportunity to change the course of history and, in the bargain, take his sweet revenge? Surely Putin understands the terrible

dimensions of the trap into which the US has blundered, thanks to the Israelis and their neo-con supporters in Washington who lobbied so vociferously for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, against all friendly and expert advice, and who even now beat the drums of war against Iran. Would Putin be wrong to conclude that the US will never leave the region unless it is first defeated militarily? Should we blame him for deciding that Iran is “one bridge too far”?

If the US and Israel overreach, and the Iranians close the net with Russian anti-ship missiles, it will be a fearful symmetry, indeed...

Springing the Trap

At the battle of Cannae in 216 BC the great Carthaginian general, Hannibal, tempted a much larger Roman army into a fateful advance, and then enveloped and annihilated it with a smaller force. Out of a Roman army of 70,000 men, no more than a few thousand escaped. It was said that after many hours of dispatching the Romans Hannibal's soldiers grew so tired that the fight went out of them. In their weariness they granted the last broken and bedraggled Romans their lives...

Let us pray that the US sailors who are unlucky enough to be on duty in the Persian Gulf when the shooting starts can escape the fate of the Roman army at Cannae. The odds will be heavily against them, however, because they will face the same type of danger, tantamount to envelopment. *The US ships in the Gulf will already have come within range* of the Sunburn missiles and the even more-advanced SS-NX-26 Yakhonts missiles, also Russian-made (speed: Mach 2.9; range: 180 miles) deployed by the Iranians along the Gulf's northern shore. Every US ship will be exposed and vulnerable. When the Iranians spring the trap, the entire lake will become a killing field.

Anti-ship cruise missiles are not new, as I've mentioned. Nor have they yet determined the outcome in a conflict. But this is probably only because these horrible weapons have never been deployed in sufficient numbers. At the time of the Falklands war the Argentine air force possessed only five Exocets, yet managed to sink two ships. With enough of them, the Argentineans might have sunk the entire British fleet, and won the war. Although we've never seen a massed attack of cruise missiles, this is exactly what the US Navy could face in the next war in the Gulf. Try and imagine it if you can: barrage after barrage of Exocet-class missiles, which the Iranians are known to possess in the hundreds, as well as the unstoppable Sunburn and Yakhonts missiles. The questions that our purblind government leaders should be asking themselves, today, if they value what historians will one day write about them, are two: how many of the Russian anti-ship missiles has Putin already supplied to Iran? And: How many more are currently in the pipeline? In 2001 Jane's Defense Weekly reported that Iran was attempting to acquire anti-ship missiles from Russia. Ominously, the same report also mentioned that the more advanced Yakhonts missile was “optimized for attacks against carrier task forces.” Apparently its guidance system is “able to distinguish an aircraft carrier from its escorts.” The numbers were not disclosed...

The US Navy will come under fire even if the US does *not* participate in the first so-called surgical raids on Iran's nuclear sites, that is, even if Israel goes it alone. Israel's brand-new fleet of 25 F-15s (paid for by American taxpayers) has sufficient range to target Iran, but the Israelis cannot mount an attack without crossing US-occupied Iraqi air space. It will hardly matter if Washington gives the green light, or is dragged into the conflict by a recalcitrant Israel. Either way, the result will be the same. The Iranians will interpret US acquiescence as complicity, and, in any event, they will understand that the *real* fight is with the Americans. The Iranians will be entirely within their rights to counter-attack in self-defense. Most of the world will see it this way, and will support *them*, not America. The US and Israel will be viewed as the aggressors, even as the unfortunate US sailors in harm's way become cannon fodder. In the Gulf's shallow and confined waters evasive maneuvers will be difficult, at best, and escape impossible. Even if US planes control of the skies over the battlefield, the sailors caught in the net below will be hard-pressed to survive. The Gulf will run red with American blood...

From here, it only gets worse. Armed with their Russian-supplied cruise missiles, the Iranians will close the lake's only outlet, the strategic Strait of Hormuz, cutting off the trapped and dying Americans from help and rescue. The US fleet massing in the Indian Ocean will stand by helplessly, unable to enter the Gulf to assist the survivors or bring logistical support to the other US forces on duty in Iraq. Couple this with a major new ground offensive by the Iraqi insurgents, and, quite suddenly, the tables

could turn against the Americans in Baghdad. As supplies and ammunition begin to run out, the status of US forces in the region will become precarious. The occupiers will become the besieged...

With enough anti-ship missiles, the Iranians can halt tanker traffic through Hormuz for weeks, even months. With the flow of oil from the Gulf curtailed, the price of a barrel of crude will skyrocket on the world market. Within days the global economy will begin to grind to a halt. Tempers at an emergency round-the-clock session of the UN Security Council will flare and likely explode into shouting and recriminations as French, German, Chinese and even British ambassadors angrily accuse the US of allowing Israel to threaten world order. But, as always, because of the US veto the world body will be powerless to act...

America will stand alone, completely isolated. Yet, despite the increasingly hostile international mood, elements of the US media will spin the crisis very differently here at home, in a way that is sympathetic to Israel. Members of Congress will rise to speak in the House and Senate, and rally to Israel's defense, while blaming the victim of the attack, Iran. Fundamentalist Christian talk show hosts will proclaim the historic fulfillment of biblical prophecy in our time, and will call upon the Jews of Israel to accept Jesus into their hearts; meanwhile, urging the president to nuke the evil empire of Islam. From across America will be heard histrionic cries for fresh reinforcements, even a military draft. Patriots will demand victory at any cost. Pundits will scream for an escalation of the conflict.

A war that ostensibly began as an attempt to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons will teeter on the brink of their use...

Conclusion

Friends, we must work together to prevent such a catastrophe. We must stop the next Middle East war *before* it starts. The US government must turn over to the United Nations the primary responsibility for resolving the deepening crisis in Iraq, and, immediately thereafter, withdraw US forces from the country. We must also prevail upon the Israelis to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and open all of their nuclear sites to IAEA inspectors. Only then can serious talks begin with Iran and other states to establish a nuclear weapon free zone (NWFZ) in the Mid East — so essential to the region's long-term peace and security.

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Mark Gaffney's first book, [Dimona the Third Temple? \(1989\)](#), was a pioneering study of Israel's nuclear weapons program. Mark's articles about the Mid-East and proliferation issues have appeared in the [Middle East Policy Journal](#), [Washington Report On Middle East Affairs](#), the [Earth Island Journal](#), [The Oregonian](#), the [Daily Californian](#), and have been posted on numerous web sites, especially [Counterpunch.org](#). Mark's 2003 paper [Will Iran Be Next?](#) can be viewed at <www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iran.htm> Mark's newest book, [Gnostic Secrets of the Naassenes](#), was released by Inner Traditions Press in May 2003. Email <Mhgaffney@aol.com> For more information go to www.GnosticSecrets.com

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