

Will US attack Iran?

Russia has reported increased US military activity in and around the strategic Gulf for the first time in four years after the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has declared that its territories are off limits to anyone for staging military or intelligence operations against Iran.

In a week of ominous developments, the most serious being the Iranian seizure of 15 British Navy personnel near the Shatt al Arab waterway that divides Iran and Iraq, a statement by UAE President Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan that his country would not allow its territories for operations against Iran assumes high significance.

US U-2 spy planes and F-16 and other fighter jets have been based in the UAE ever since the 1990 Gulf crisis over Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. Due to its strategic locations and ports within the Gulf as well as in the Arabian Sea, the use of UAE land, air and waters would have been of immense value to any strike force.

Actually, the US has used bases in all the six Arab Gulf states for operations in Iraq and, to some extent, also to support its and coalition troops in Afghanistan.

Although, all the six states -- Oman, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait -- have expressed unwillingness in the past for a military engagement with their immediate Shia neighbour Iran, this is the first time that one of them, the UAE, has flatly denied its territories to the US for military and intelligence operations against Iran.

In a major policy statement on the eve of Arab summit in Riyadh, Shaikh Khalifa disclosed that the UAE had sent a written communication to Iran to assure that 'we shall never allow the use of our soil for any military, security or intelligence activities against them'.

'We have reiterated to our Iranian brothers, in a letter delivered recently by the Foreign Minister (Shaikh Abdullah), that we are not a party to the conflict between Iran and the US and that we shall never allow the use of our soil for any military, security or intelligence activities against them,' he was quoted as saying in an interview with the London-based Arabic daily Al Hayat, a report on which was made available through the state-run Emirates News Agency WAM.

It may be noted that the US and allied navy vessels primarily take their oil, food and other supplies from ports in the UAE as also from the five other Arab states in the strategic Gulf.

The UAE itself has a dispute with Iran, stemming from the occupation of three of its islands by the Shah of Iran on the eve of its independence from Britain Dec 2, 1971. All other Gulf countries, tied by the 1981 regional security and economic pact of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have extended UAE support. But Teheran insists that the islands are part of the Iranian territory.

The UAE has offered to settle the issue bilaterally or through international mediation, saying any outcome would be binding. Iran has refused.

Two of these islands are at the narrow Strait of Hormuz, the mouth of the strategic Gulf waterway, from which nearly half the world oil supplies pass through for international consumption.

On his part, the UAE president also explained that his country's method to regain control of its three islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa 'is not subject to any regional or international political agenda. We shall never strengthen our position with any foreign stance to solve the issue of the occupied islands'.

But that the US is in a buildup mode is also evident from the entry of its aircraft carrier, USS John C Stennis (CVN 74), in the Gulf Tuesday.

In an official statement, Washington announced: 'While in the Gulf, the flagship of the USS John C Stennis Carrier Strike Group (JCSSG) and its air wing, Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 9, will conduct a dual-carrier exercise with the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group (IKE CSG). This marks the first time the Stennis and Eisenhower strike groups have operated together in a joint exercise while deployed to the US Fifth Fleet area of responsibility.

'This exercise demonstrates the importance of both strike groups' ability to plan and conduct dual task force operations as part of the US long-standing commitment to maintaining maritime security and stability in this region.

'Two air wings from the aircraft carriers will conduct air warfare exercises while the surface components will conduct exercises in three general disciplines: anti-submarine, anti-surface and mine warfare.'

The US never discloses the location of its nuclear capable submarines but some of them have routinely surfaced in the Gulf waters for a show of force or replenishment over the past 15 years. One, two, or more of them, should likely be in the vicinity.

Their main nearby base is Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, strengthened and enlarged during the 1980s by importing stones from the barren coastal hills in Oman and the UAE.

But will there be a war? Will Iran budge from its insistence on allegedly building nuclear capability and will it release the British personnel?

Former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami, who was in [New Delhi](#) last week, categorically restated his government's stand that Iran will never build nuclear weapons although no one could deny it the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

The heart of the problem lies in the fact that the Iranian programme is largely based on proliferated nuclear technology from Pakistan, and the US and other countries are not willing to give Teheran the allowance that it will not misuse this technology. Iran is also a signatory to non-proliferation, and bound by this treaty under international law.

But will there be a war?

Both in 1990-91 and March 2003, this writer was present in Abu Dhabi. Both times there were clear indications that war was imminent. There were hush-hush talks of an asylum for the late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein a month or so before the second US offensive on Iraq. One day before the operations were actually launched on a Wednesday-Thursday night, there were tell tale signals that the negotiations had failed and an attack was imminent.

There was actually a large US contingent at the International Defence Exhibition (IDEX) 2003. One day before the operations began, all the top US participants suddenly left for home, including a Boeing vice president with whom this writer had a scheduled appointment for a discussion on 'Networking and Technology in Future Wars'.

Back to the question of war, President George W. Bush is having a tough time with the Democratic majority Congress. But as the Supreme Commander of the US armed forces, he would continue a gradual build up and place his assets in the region. It's better if some nearby land bases are available. But the US forces can comfortably operate from ships, including commercial platforms, as well as Diego Garcia, at least for distant standoff bombing from aircraft and naval vessels.

The immediate stated target nonetheless should not be more than securing the Gulf waterway. And that's exactly where the problem lies.

The Iranian coast spans nearly all the 989-km length of the waterway, facing all the Arab Gulf states from Oman to Kuwait, and touching Iraq. At its narrowest point, the Strait of Hormuz, the waterway is only 56 km wide and, at many points, shallow.

Iran could block the waterway, simply by sinking a few ships or placing sea mines, as it demonstrated during the Iran-Iraq war.

The resulting energy crisis would cripple the world economy, and that's a nightmare even for the US. It may be noted that even after the crisis over the US hostages taken by Iranians during the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Iranian oil never went out of the international market and that the US companies continued to be among its buyers.

So while a limited engagement cannot be ruled out, particularly as incidents like the seizure of naval personnel provide instant triggers for skirmishes, an actual outbreak of war between Iran and the US and its allies seems unlikely.

For the time being at least.

(Gulshan Luthra has been associated with the Middle East region for nearly 25 years.)

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