

# Carrier admirals spoiling for a fight

**T**he Iranians have lately installed anti-ship missiles along the coast of the narrow Strait of Hormuz, an act that has produced some angry roars from Washington and not a few fearful squeaks from the Arab oil-producing states.

In the nearby Gulf of Oman, a powerful American carrier battle group is assembling, ready to attack the Iranian missile batteries and Iranian naval and air bases around the port of Bandar Abbas.

Even though the Iranians have not fired any of their new missiles at tankers carrying oil from Kuwait, the Gulf Emirates or Saudi Arabia, this latest escalation in the region's "tanker war" has raised the risk of U.S. involvement in the eight-year-old Gulf war between Iran and Iraq. Both sides, it should be noted, have taken to shooting up tankers. Iranian and Iraqi oil sales pay the bills for the Gulf war so stopping your enemy's exports makes good sense.

Except to Washington. The Americans have long followed a policy of freedom of navigation at all times, even though international law clearly allows nations at war to declare bodies of water to be restricted zones.

Last week the Pentagon threatened to attack Iran if the missiles were used. This warning no doubt helped reassure the frightened Kuwaitis and Saudis but it also brought the U.S. one perilous step closer to direct involvement in the Gulf war.

This latest example of harebrained American policy in the Mideast comes, I suspect, from the politically powerful U.S. Navy. Here's why. The Navy is now promoting its "Maritime Strategy" as a rationale for building new, huge attack carriers and their fleets of escorts. According to this strategy, in wartime U.S. carrier battle groups



will sail far north into the Barents and Norwegian Seas to attack Soviet home ports, naval and air bases and "bases" for missile-carrying submarines.

The Maritime Strategy comes in response to critics who say the U.S. does not need so many hugely expensive carrier battle groups but should build more submarines and convoy escorts. The Navy, run as it is by carrier admirals, greets such heresy with horror. Showing just how useful carriers are is now a high priority. So is demonstrating the utility of the Navy as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy.

That's why the U.S. Navy pushed so hard to attack Lebanon and Libya. Bombing Tripoli was a godsend for the carrier admirals. Now, they want to use their air-power against Iran—another low-risk, low-cost way of showing Congress what the Navy can do.

There is also talk of sending destroyers and frigates directly into the Strait of Hormuz where they will come into range of the Iranian missiles. Sailors, as Nelson showed at Copenhagen, love to blast shore batteries, thus proving their superiority over landlubbers. The Iranian missiles in question are Chinese HY-2s, slightly upgraded

versions of the Soviet Styx system that dates from the 1960s.

Critics of the Navy have been claiming that its ships cannot withstand heavy attack by missiles. The Navy retorts that its layered gun and missile defence can stop almost anything. Going against the adolescent Chinese anti-ship missiles will allow the Navy to prove its point. Shooting down the large, slow-moving HY-2s, or jamming them, will be duck soup. Not so, though, for state-of-the-art Soviet missiles.

Try as it may, the Navy cannot quite escape the growing realization that fleets cannot influence what goes on ashore. The days of Leyte Gulf and Normandy are over. Naval air strikes against Third World nations are of marginal value. Even if the U.S. fleet could lie off the Kola Peninsula—or even Leningrad, for that matter, it could not prevent the Red Army from marching into Paris or Madrid. A U.S. fleet in the Gulf of Oman will not stop Iran's army from marching into Baghdad.

But try telling the carrier admirals that their main mission is to safely escort convoys carrying the U.S. Army and its equipment across the North Atlantic.

So the Navy, I suspect, wants to score some cheap points and show that its carrier force is still viable in the missile age.

But after bombing and rocketing Iranian missiles, what next? Suppose the Iranians keep shooting back and hit an American ship. Will the U.S. then bomb Tehran or Shiraz? Will Marines land on the Iranian coast?

It seems the most important lesson of the Vietnam war has been forgotten: Don't use force unless you are ready to fight and win a war. Pinpricks make enemies even angrier.