

Expanding Partnership Shields Shipping in Critical Persian Gulf Region



The aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower transits the Persian Gulf alongside the former Royal Navy ship HMS Ocean during a Combined Task Force ceremony in 2016. The U.S. Navy is slowly building a coalition of countries to help maintain security in the region for commercial shippers, relying on 33 member nations, including the United Kingdom. U.S. Navy/Petty Officer 1st Class Rafael Martie

The Persian Gulf is one of the most important commercial shipping regions in the world – and also one of the most fraught with danger for shippers in recent years.

While most people think of the U.S. Navy alone in patrolling the Gulf, the sea service is slowly building a coalition of countries to help maintain security for shippers, relying on allies with shared interests to help them keep a sharp eye on the region and any problems that may arise.

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Australia reportedly became the latest to join a U.S.-led naval group to protect commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman in the wake of alleged attacks by Iran against vessels in those waters – allegations that Iran denies. But even before recent tensions with the Iranians, the two gulfs have been important choke points for shipping, making the area of high interest to commercial shipping and the nations who rely on the cargo that travels through it.

“The United States believes that the freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce are important principles based upon

international law that should be preserved by a collective effort of the international community,” Lt. Pete Pagano, spokesman for Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. 5th Fleet, based in Bahrain, said via email. “As such, the recent attacks on international shipping that threaten the freedom of navigation in the region require an international solution.”



An unclassified slide shows the damage from a June 13 explosion and a likely limpet mine on the hull of the M/V Kokuka Courageous in the Gulf of Oman. Australia became the latest to join a U.S.-led naval group to protect commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman in the wake of alleged attacks by Iran. U.S. Navy

The U.S. 5th Fleet-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) includes international partners Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Australia and the United Kingdom. This group conducts maritime domain awareness and surveillance of the region to create a common operational picture that helps the partners protect maritime shipping there.

“The operation is designed to preserve the free flow of commerce and deescalate regional tensions,” Pagano said. “The IMSC is active and engaged in this vital mission with each partner nation determining their own level of participation.”

The group was created in recognition of just how critical it is that the maritime domain be secure for commerce, especially in this region.

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“As we join together with other concerned nations, our posture and patrols increase our surveillance of the maritime transit lanes – it is purely preventive and defensive in nature – nonprovocative and de-escalatory,” Pagano said. “With that said, recent aggressive attacks on Saudi infrastructure and international tankers at sea provide great impetus for all forces in this region to be prepared to defend themselves. The IMSC allows for, augments and synchronizes that defensive posture and readiness of partner nations as a prudent precaution.”

Nations Committed to Joint Shipping Lane Defense

In mid-September, Vice Adm. Jim Malloy, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), kicked off the opening ceremony for the IMSC main planning conference aboard the HMS Cardigan Bay.

“In light of recent threats to international shipping, representatives reaffirmed their nations’ continued commitment to safeguarding freedom of navigation in the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea, and the Straits of Hormuz and Bab al Mandeb and discussed multinational efforts aimed at enhancing maritime security throughout key waterways in the region,” according to a U.S. Central Command statement.

The 5th Fleet also leads the CMF, which focuses on illegal trafficking, terrorism and smuggling – and it includes one task force, CTF-150, that is keenly focused on keeping the maritime domain secure.

CMF covers about 3.2 million square miles of international waters and includes 33 member nations: Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Republic of Korea, Kuwait, Malaysia, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, The Philippines, Portugal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Singapore, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, UAE, United Kingdom,

United States and Yemen.

“The 33 nations that comprise CMF are not bound by either a political or military mandate,” U.S. Naval Forces Central Command says on its website. “CMF is a flexible organization. Contributions can vary from the provision of a liaison officer at CMF HQ in Bahrain to the supply of warships or support vessels in task forces, and maritime reconnaissance aircraft based on land. We can also call on warships not explicitly assigned to CMF to give associated support, which is assistance they can offer if they have the time and capacity to do so whilst undertaking national tasking.”

CMF started about a decade ago as a mechanism to bring Gulf countries into a joint group with the United States to tackle challenges in that region, said Bryan Clark, a senior fellow for the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

“They identify threats, share information and coordinate activities to intercept bad actors in the Persian Gulf,” Clark said. “CTF-150, which is a coalition or combined task force run by 5th Fleet, draws more broadly from countries that have an interest in keeping Persian Gulf waterways safe and free from threats. It’s more focused on protecting shipping lanes than strictly counter-trafficking or counter-terror efforts.”

As a result, CTF-150 includes countries from outside the Gulf that have a vested interest in keeping the shipping lanes there open, which means countries such as Turkey, Pakistan or even Japan. Even European countries provide some help occasionally.

The CMF and CTF-150 “have been pretty successful in terms of maintaining situational awareness, because you have a like-minded group of countries, giving you more eyes,” Clark said.

That said, the presence of other countries is nowhere near as ubiquitous as that of the United States. The CMF is successful more in terms of situational awareness and increasing

collaboration between nations – the U.S. Navy still is doing most of the heavy lifting, Clark noted.

“Thus far, it’s been more of a messaging success than an operational one,” he said. “The countries that have come [into CMF] have been major players, but haven’t necessarily sent over lot of ships, and maybe ships they sent over would have been sent to CTF-150 anyway.”

Either way, one could argue that the CMF and CTF-150 have led to a reduced threat of terrorist attacks on the waterways, Clark said.