

Iran's swarm strategy, tested on Jan. 6, has long been on U.S. radar screen

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. military has concluded that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was testing its new naval capabilities in the Gulf.

U.S. officials said IRGC demonstrated its new swarm strategy during a confrontation with U.S. Navy vessels in the Strait of Hormuz on Jan. 6. They said the 20-minute incident reflected an aggressive policy by IRGC, which in August 2007 took over responsibility from the Iranian Navy for Gulf operations.

"There have been other situations where certainly ships transiting the Straits of Hormuz have been approached," Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, said. "To my knowledge, I have not seen one as both provocative and dramatic as this."

In a Jan. 11 briefing Mullen reviewed the encounter by five IRGC speedboats against three U.S. Navy vessels. The incident was said to have marked an IRGC probe of U.S. Navy defenses.

"Now, we have been focused on this small fast boat concern for several years," Mullen said. "It's clearly strategically where the Iranian military has gone. I think there's been a strategic shift in terms of the IRGCN [IRGC Navy] versus the Iranian navy, the IRIN, in terms of assuming operational command and control for the Gulf. There's a projection they were going to do that over a number of years."

Officials said the U.S. military has assessed that Iran would employ its swarm strategy against U.S. Navy aircraft carriers and destroyers in the Gulf. The swarm strategy stipulated the use of scores of armed speedboats that attack much larger enemy ships from all directions.

"This fit that mold, as far as I was concerned," Mullen said. "There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that it was five boats, it was pretty dramatic maneuvering."

Officials said the U.S. Navy envisioned Iran's swarm strategy as early as 2002. During that year, the military conducted a \$250 million simulation in which Iranian Navy speedboats attacked the U.S. Navy in the Gulf. The wargame concluded with the loss of 16 U.S. warships.

At one point, the Defense Department said an IRGC commander relayed a message that indicated that his boat was going to explode against a U.S. Navy vessel. Later, the Pentagon withdrew the claim and said the Iranian message did not constitute an open threat.

Officials also said the message was transmitted from another spot, perhaps an Iranian ground station. Mullen said any Iranian ground station that coordinated the IRGC boats would mark a new Iranian capability.

Mullen said IRGC, in its Jan. 6 encounter, had sought to elicit a U.S. response. He expressed concern over Teheran's demonstration of its ability to rapidly sow mines — albeit a mock version — in the Gulf.

"We've been concerned for years about the threat of mining those straits, and sometimes at sea it can be pretty difficult about what they really did put in the water, depending on the range and the other kinds of conditions," Mullen said. "So we've learned from them, they've clearly learned some things from us, and to me, it is in execution of a strategy we believe they've had for some time."

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