

Iran staged at least three confrontations with U.S. Navy

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WASHINGTON — Security officials said Iran set up a series of naval confrontations with the United States in the Gulf in recent weeks.

Officials said Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy sought to provoke the U.S. Navy at least three times in less than a month. They said the incidents appeared to establish an aggressive IRGC policy in the Gulf.

"They are testing our responses and measuring our defenses for their new swarm strategy," an official said. "I wouldn't say they want a fight, but they appear to be ready for one."

So far, the Defense Department has only detailed the U.S. Navy encounter with five IRGC fast attack craft in the Strait of Hormuz on Jan. 6.

Officials said this was the most serious of the three Iranian provocations even though no shots were fired.

"This is one of these moments where there's no time to be spending a lot time on the phone trying to figure out what to do," President George Bush said on Jan. 15. "These are highly trained professionals who I thought dealt with it in a very professional way."

On Dec. 16, the U.S. Navy fired warning shots toward an IRGC speedboat. Officials said the USS Whidbey Island, an amphibious warship, had been approached by an IRGC vessel in the Strait of Hormuz, the passage for about 30 percent of global oil shipments.

Officials said the IRGC speedboat veered away when shots were fired by Whidbey Island. They said the IRGC vessel did not return fire.

Another IRGC confrontation also took place in December 2007. Officials said the USS Carr, a guided missile frigate, was confronted by three IRGC speedboats in the Strait of Hormuz.

The USS Carr blew its ship whistles to scare off the Iranian vessels, which came within 500 meters. Officials said no clash was reported.

Officials linked the three incidents and said the Jan. 6 confrontation was the first in which IRGC simulated the laying of mines in the Strait of Hormuz. The mock mines turned out to be white boxes.

"We had not seen Revolutionary Guard boats behave in this aggressive a manner in this number before, in combination with all the other things I just outlined — ignoring warnings, dropping the boxes and of course the fact that there was a threat simultaneous to that added to the tension," Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said on Jan. 15. "The combination of all those things is what differentiates this incident from previous incidents."

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