



On a mission to ‘protect navigation’



Agencies | Manama

With over 5,000 personnel, 40 vessels and 17 aircraft from 50 countries, nations in the GCC are witnessing the formation of an unprecedented global alliance, determined to ‘protect navigation’ in the world’s most important oil artery.

The move, spearheaded by Washington, aims to ensure freedom of maritime navigation and international trade follows the recent attacks on commercial shipping vessels in the region from May, ratcheting up tensions.

Bahrain, which hosts the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, joined the US-led naval coalition in August. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates followed suit in September.

Three-week exercise

Hosted by the US Naval Forces Central Command at NSA Bahrain in Manama, the three-week International Maritime Exercise (IMX) is also the second-largest of its kind event.

The exercise, which started on October 21, demonstrates global resolve in maintaining regional stability and free flow of commerce from Suez Canal south to the Bab-el-Mandeb through the Strait of Hormuz to the Northern Arabian Gulf.

This iteration of IMX, the sixth of its kind, also serves as a strong deterrent to Iran which has resorted to feeding its centrifuges with uranium gas furthering itself from the 2015 nuclear agreement with major powers. IMX first edition was conducted in 2012 and the most recent in 2017.

The US invited media to see part of the IMX, held in four



British forces are taking part in the IMX along with 49 other countries



Mine-clearing teams have been used “more than in the past” amid tensions between Iran and the US

phases for staff build-up and training, seminars and table-top discussions, At-sea Fleet Training Exercise and hot-wash and redeployment of forces.

Vice Adm. Jim Malloy, commander, US Naval Forces Central Command, US 5th Fleet, Combined Maritime Forces earlier said, “This year’s iteration is the largest yet, expanding in size and geography; including all essential elements of maritime security operations.”

Phase 1 Manama

During Phase 1 of International Mine Countermeasures Exercise (IMCMEX), a visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) seminar was conducted in Manama. This phase included up to 60 members who were broken into four teams for further hand-on exercises as well as role-play during practical exercises to learn from one another.

“Previous exercises relied solely on the surface, air, and undersea mine countermeasures (MCM) operations. Though this year’s focus has broadened, the three areas of MCM operations are as vital as ever to the mission of keeping international sea lanes clear of mines and sea-borne improvised explosives,” according to US Naval Forces Central Command statement.

Naval coalition

Washington floated the idea of a naval coalition in June, after multiple attacks on ships in the Gulf. The plan was to have each country providing a military escort for their ships, with the US military providing a security backstop, monitoring the zone of operations and providing command and control.

“This is the first time we are

taking part in the IMX,” the head of a Saudi naval de-mining team, Ali Bin Shreidi, said aboard the Cardigan Bay, a British Royal Fleet Auxillary landing ship 40 miles (65 kilometres) off Bahrain’s coast.

The officer and his three-member team were taking part in order “to increase our capabilities and share our expertise in fighting mines, to protect navigation,” he said.

Iranian mines?

The US Navy alleged that a mine resembling Iranian weaponry was used in an attack on the Japanese-owned Kokuka Courageous tanker, targeted as it passed through the Gulf of Oman.

Then in July, Iranian Revolutionary Guards seized a British-flagged oil tanker, holding it for more than two months before releasing it.

“One of the biggest reasons for us being out here is to build international relations,” said US Navy lieutenant Jonathan Phares who was among 300 personnel from the US, France and the Gulf on the Cardigan Bay.

Those aboard showed off diving gear, underwater imaging kit and speed boats during a tour of the gun-metal grey vessel, while others demonstrated mine detection equipment.

The United Kingdom and Australia are the main Western countries to have agreed to send warships to escort commercial shipping in the Gulf.

The US held a three-week-long International Maritime Exercise with 50 countries in strategic Gulf waterways

Royal Bahrain Naval Force



Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigate

The Royal Bahrain Naval Force (RBNF) reportedly have 11 combat vessels, 31 patrol craft, 10 landing ships and over 700 personnel, with RBNS Sabha missile frigate as its flagship vessel.

Besides, Bahrain has approved the refurbishment of the former Robert G. Bradley, an Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigate. The ship was sold to Bahrain earlier this year for \$80 million.

The vessel is intended to protect amphibious landing forces, supply and replenishment groups, and merchant convoys from aircraft and submarines.



2.5m square miles The US 5th Fleet area of operations encompasses nearly 2.5 million square miles of water area and includes the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea and parts of the Indian Ocean.

20 countries

US Navy operational area is comprised of 20 countries and includes three critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb at the southern tip of Yemen.

What is IMX 2019?

IMX 2019 is a multinational engagement involving partners and allies from around the world sharing knowledge and experiences across the full spectrum of defensive maritime operations. The exercise serves to demonstrate global resolve in maintaining regional security and stability, freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce from the Suez Canal south to the Bab-el-Mandeb through the Strait of Hormuz to the Northern Arabian Gulf.