



# The Strategic Implications of Chinese-Iranian-Russian Naval Drills in the Indian Ocean

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**OE Watch Commentary:** A series of unprecedented joint naval drills between China, Iran, and Russia were held in the Indian Ocean and the Sea of Oman from December 27–29. The drills took place just as escalating tensions between the United States and Iran reached a crisis point. The exercise signified a deepening relationship between Iran and the PRC in economics, diplomacy, and security affairs. In addition, it provided a symbolic military and political show of support from Russia and China for Iran—and reflected a strategic alignment in the making between the three countries, with an aim to protect their shared strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Such a powerful trio would be able to exercise greater influence in the Middle East, and could present a challenge to the US-led IMSC maritime coalition force.

China and Russia have both increased military and economic cooperation with Iran in the year and a half since the US government pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, while Iran’s government has repeatedly touted its deepening relations with China and Russia as a show of diplomatic strength, its allies have been less public about the growing relationship. In December, Iranian officials lauded the trilateral exercises—titled “Marine Security Belt”—as proof that Iran can outlast crippling sanctions with aid from its non-Western allies, and declared that the drills signaled a new triple alliance in the Middle East. By contrast, Russian and PRC officials framed the joint exercises as part of routine anti-piracy operations, highlighting their peacekeeping priorities and seeking to depoliticize the drills.

Video and photos of the exercise indicated simple tactical operations, including: live fire drills; an anti-piracy exercise involving Iranian commandos fast-roping onto a surface vessel; a drill to extinguish flames on a burning ship; and a pass-in review of participating naval vessels on the final day. The major naval units participating in the exercise were:

- China: Type-052D (Luyang III)-class guided missile destroyer Xining (DDG-117).
- Russia: Neustrashimy-class frigate Yaroslav Mudry (FF-777) was the lead Russian unit. It was accompanied by two smaller auxiliary vessels—the tanker Elnya and the tugboat Viktor Konetsky—from Russia’s Baltic Fleet.
- Iran: Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) frigate Alborz (FF-72) was the most prominent Iranian surface unit involved in the exercise. Secondary roles were played by the frigate Sahand; the corvette Bayandor; the hovercraft Tondar; and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) vessels Shahid Naserinejad and the catamaran Shahid Nazeri.

## Iran and China Report Mixed Messages on the Trilateral Exercises

The Iranian Armed Forces (IAF) flotilla commander in charge of the exercises, Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani, said after the drills “the message of this exercise is peace, friendship and lasting security through cooperation and unity...[and] to show that Iran cannot be isolated.” An Iranian state television report heralded the drills as signaling a “new triangle of sea power” in the region, and quoted IAF Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi’s bold declaration: “Today, the era of American free action in the region is over, and [US forces] must leave the region gradually.”

Notably, Rear Admiral Tahani also discussed collective naval security arrangements, asserting that countries that share security, economic, and political interests should cooperate to restore collective security in the region. He described this as particularly important for what he termed the Indian Ocean’s “Golden Triangle” of strategic straits (the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and the Bab al-Mandeb), saying: “[N]o single country can guarantee the security of the oceans. For this purpose, a collective effort is needed. To secure the ocean, countries are seeking synergy and convergence while holding joint naval exercises in oceanic waters.”

This language contrasted with the more muted tone offered by PRC officials. PRC Ministry of Defense spokesperson Wu Qian said just ahead of the drills, “The joint exercise is a normal military exchange arrangement of the three countries. It is in line with related international laws and practices and has no connection with [the] regional situation.” PRC officials also did not explicitly endorse the “Golden Triangle” concept, but they did endorse the idea of new alignments for collective maritime security. In the same press conference, Spokesperson Wu said, “The naval drills aim to deepen exchange and cooperation among the navies of the three countries, and display their strong will and capability to jointly maintain world peace and maritime security, while actively building a maritime community with a shared future.”

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# ***Continued: The Strategic Implications of Chinese-Iranian-Russian Naval Drills in the Indian Ocean***

## **The Deepening Strategic Relationship Between China and Iran**

The trilateral drills could be viewed as a step towards Iran's deepening strategic relationship with China, which until now has been predicated primarily on economic ties. After China's secondary sanctions waiver expired in May 2019, it continued to buy Iranian oil in defiance of the United States. In July, the United States sanctioned the Chinese oil processing company Zhuhai Zhenrong and its chief executive Youmin Li, and in late September imposed sanctions on other Chinese nationals and entities accused of flouting secondary sanctions on Iran—including two subsidiaries of the Chinese giant COSCO Shipping Corporation.

China faced a difficult challenge in balancing its Iranian trade alongside contentious economic relations with the United States, and some Chinese companies decreased their business with Iran after sanctions were reimposed rather than risk blowback (total Chinese exports to Iran declined by close to 40 percent at the end of 2019). However, the activities of some of China's largest state-owned enterprises indicated Beijing's intent to continue purchasing Iranian oil. The PRC made promises in the second half of 2019 to dramatically step up its Iranian investments. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif and his PRC counterpart Wang Li reportedly signed memoranda this past August in which Iran granted the state-owned China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) advantageous contracts to develop controlling stakes in some of its largest oil reserves (to include the North and South Azadegan oil fields and the supergiant South Pars gas field), and Chinese dealmakers were able to lock in promises for cheap crude oil and liquid natural gas (LNG) for years to come. Nevertheless, Chinese diplomats have balanced their continuing engagement with Iran alongside the need to manage a complex Sino-American relationship. While China needs Iranian oil to enable Beijing's key political priorities of economic growth and domestic stability, the bilateral dynamic is asymmetric: China supplies nearly a quarter of Iran's foreign trade, while Iranian trade represents only one percent of Chinese imports. China has taken advantage of recent opportunities to invest heavily in strategic projects within Iran, but it has also hedged its bets by engaging with other regional powers, as it does not need Iran in the same way that Iran needs it.

China has also long sought to increase its arms sales to the Middle East, and the current situation provides many opportunities to do so. While it is nowhere close to supplanting the United States or Russia (the region's first and second-largest arms providers, respectively), China has increasingly become an alternative to US arms for many states in the Middle East. During a mid-September visit to Beijing last year, IAF Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Baqeri said "Iran attaches great significance to its relations with the People's Republic of China in all areas. We have long-standing ties in the military sector as well, and hope this visit can be a turning point in the development and reinforcement of [our] relations."

## **Trilateral Drills Reveal the Possibility of Competing Collective Security Pacts**

A continuing program of Chinese-Iranian-Russian collective maritime security cooperation could pose a challenge to existing US-led initiatives in the Gulf Region. In November 2019, the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) began stability and peacekeeping operations in the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Oman. IMSC was formed in the wake of a series of suspected Iranian attacks (or seizures) directed against oil tankers—as well as two September 2019 attacks on Saudi oil refineries.

Russia had introduced a separate concept for collective security for the Persian Gulf just months before the formation of the IMSC, proposing an international conference that would lead to the creation of a cooperative security organization in the region. Moscow's proposal included establishing military hotlines for communication, and rejecting the permanent deployment of military forces from states outside the region. Beijing endorsed Moscow's vision two days after it was presented, stating that such a proposal would benefit "peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region [which] are of utmost importance to ensure safety and development of the region and the world as a whole." If the joint military drills by Iran, Russia, and China signal a nascent maritime cooperative entity in the making, it could create another vector for naval competition between the United States and China in the Indian Ocean.

Under the pressure of sanctions since 2018, Iran has refused to back down in the face of rapidly escalating tensions with the United States, its confidence bolstered in large part by continued economic support from China and Russia. In early December, President Rouhani announced Iran's 2020 "budget of resistance," which was predicated on a \$5 billion loan from Russia and Chinese promises to massively increase the total oil output of Iran's energy reserves. Iran has repeatedly and overtly framed its deepening relations with China and Russia as the beginnings of a non-Western alliance system that could challenge the US-led international order. **End OE Watch Commentary (Haider)**