



Is Iran Ready to Send Its Navy to Japan?

OE Watch Commentary: The Iranian Navy has for the past decade been at the forefront of Iranian force projection. In February 2013 Iran dispatched its first naval flotilla to the Pacific Ocean since the tenth century, docking at Zhanjiang, north of Shanghai. The Iranian Navy has not revisited the Pacific since that time, but it has made multiple port calls in the Indian Ocean basin, including Colombo, Sri Lanka; Cochin, Vishakhapatnam and Mumbai, India; Karachi, Pakistan; and Salalah, Oman.

While the Iranian Navy often publicizes its deployments to depict Iran as a pan-regional power on the rise, it has had consistent problems sustaining or repeating them. While Iranian and Egyptian relations flourished during the short reign of President Mohamed Morsi, who allowed Iranian ships to transit the Suez Canal, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's ouster of Morsi ended that opportunity as Egyptian Suez pilots have placed multiple impediments in the way of further Iranian transits. Saudi Arabia has also apparently tied aid to the government of Sudan as a way to end Sudan's willingness to provide logistical support. When Iranian ships tried to enter the Atlantic around the Cape of Good Hope, they ended up floundering and having to make an emergency port call in Durban, South Africa in January 2017, unable to continue on their journey or, for months, to return to Iran.

It is against this backdrop that Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, for years the commander of the Iranian Navy, apparently surprised Rear Admiral Hiroshi Yamamura, the vice chief of staff of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force, at a naval symposium in Tehran, with a proposal to exchange naval flotillas as reported by the *Fars News Agency* in the accompanying excerpted article. While Japan has little reason to send ships to Iran, an Iranian dispatch of ships to Japan would be a major propaganda coup for Tehran.

While Sayyari's proposal might have seemingly come out of the blue, it also represents an Iranian fascination with Japan as an independent power and a source of technology, which began after the Japanese victory in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. The Japanese government would likely not allow an Iranian visit, despite the growing Japanese reliance on Persian Gulf oil after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Indeed, none of the other Iranian press accounts mention a positive Japanese response. Should the Iranian Navy, however, be able to reach Japan, then it could also reach North Korea, which may be less reticent to deny Iran access. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

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Source: “Amadeh ‘Azam Nav Garuheha-ye Irani beh Zhapan Hastim” (“We are ready to Send an Iranian Naval Flotilla to Japan”), *Fars News Agency*, 24 April 2018. <http://www.farsnews.com/13970204000667>

Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, deputy chief of Iran's army for coordination, this morning met with Rear Admiral Hiroshi Yamamura, the vice chief of staff of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force, on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Sayyari, in reference to Iran's very special strategic position, said, “We are always looking for cooperation and we are able to make progress based on our different capacities. Therefore, we want to develop relations with friendly countries.”

He added, “Japan has a very sensitive position in East Asia and we are inclined to have relations with this independent state and have relations at different levels but certainly this will be without the intervention of foreigners.”

The deputy for coordination said, “Japan is a maritime country and we are willing to do more with you, especially with ties between the navies, but also cooperation with air and ground forces would also be welcome. Of course, in the field of naval exercises, joint exercises between the two countries are also possible.”

Sayyari said, “In the field of technology, both Iran and Japan are in good shape, but we can also bolster cooperation in this regard and certainly it is also possible to increase cooperation in the field of maritime exercises and perhaps joint exercises can be held between the two countries.”



An Iranian Naval Flotilla in the northern Indian Ocean.

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