

# Assessing the U.S. Aircraft Carrier Gap in the Gulf

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Brief Analysis

**An uninterrupted regional carrier presence would be preferable, given the host of threats, but these heavily used warships must undergo maintenance now to stay effective.**

For the first time since 2007, the United States will have no carrier presence in the Persian Gulf region, an absence that will span a few months over the next year. The USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, currently striking ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, is scheduled to soon sail home after completing a lengthy deployment, and the USS *Harry S. Truman* will not arrive in the region until early winter. Although the Middle East is rarely quiet, it is difficult to imagine a more uncertain time than now, considering the complex conflicts in Syria -- and the Russian intervention there -- Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, along with concerns about U.S. resolve following the nuclear deal with Iran. This begs the question, why now?

In recommending the removal of the nation's capital seagoing asset, the U.S. Navy is making a serious statement about the degraded readiness of its carrier force. While this so-called carrier gap will be partially mitigated by other U.S. and allied military forces in the region, its occurrence should alert policymakers of the need to consider carefully the strategic value of a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Gulf, namely as a diplomatic tool to provide stability, reassure allies, deter threats, and launch strikes, if necessary without the approval of regional partners or allies.

Despite the evident risks, removing the Middle East carrier presence now will allow for recovery from years of overextension, exploit the near-term reduced risk of nuclear tension provided by the Iran deal, and yield a stronger carrier presence in coming years, when it may have an even greater strategic value.

## Why the Gap?

While some may see the *Roosevelt's* return to home port as a subtle signal to Iran's leadership aimed at building bilateral trust following the nuclear deal, or another indication of U.S. intentions to gradually extricate itself

from the Middle East, a much simpler reason exists: the navy's current force of ten aircraft carriers must undergo maintenance after heavy use in recent years.

Indeed, these national assets have routinely left early for deployments and then extended their stay to engage in important missions aimed at projecting power against adversaries, conducting international exercises with partner nations, ensuring sea access, as well as conducting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in Japan, Nepal, Haiti, and the Philippines. For example, from 2010 to 2013, strikes on inland Islamic extremist targets in the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Southwest Asia required two carriers stationed in the region.

As a result, while carrier deployments from fiscal year 2008/09 to fiscal year 2011/12 averaged only 6.5 months, deployments since then have averaged 8.2 months. All these contingency extensions compressed the time available to conduct carrier maintenance and training for the six-thousand-plus sailors who man the carrier and supporting ships. Unfortunately, more costly and lengthy maintenance is now required owing to the ships' extended stays away.

To keep a carrier operational for its customary half-century, the maintenance period after extended deployments must last about fourteen months. These periods include, among many other items, resurfacing the thousand-foot-long flight deck, replacing miles of electrical and fiber-optic cabling, overhauling electrical generators, upgrading outdated command-and-control hardware and software, and, of course, removing the rust that accumulates on every seagoing vessel.

Thus, following back-to-back deployments in 2012 and 2013, the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* left port August 28 after a maintenance period lasting twenty-three months, almost 65 percent longer than planned. Further complicating matters was the enactment of Budget Control Act caps (a.k.a. sequestration), which delayed the maintenance effort for the *Eisenhower* and other ships. Such maintenance delays have inevitably had a domino effect on the remaining carriers' deployments.

All these delays have forced the navy to make difficult choices. Given increasing deployment lengths and maintenance periods, the predeployment training period has been cut by more than 70 percent, according to Chief of Naval Air Forces Vice Adm. Mike Shoemaker. This is the bare minimum needed for carrier strike group personnel to safely and effectively operate their ships and aircraft.

With these variables in mind, the navy has developed a schedule whereby increased carrier availability will begin later in 2016. An eleventh carrier now under construction, the USS *Gerald Ford*, should improve the situation significantly upon entering the rotation in 2019. Considering these developments, the navy should be able to reach its long-term goal of having two continuously deployed carriers, with another three ready to surge worldwide, around FY 20/21.

Should the navy again take a "bandage" approach by extending the *Roosevelt* for two months, it will only postpone even greater maintenance needs, further disrupting the schedule and reducing both the future predictability and availability of the carrier force.

## Regional Impact of a Carrier

**T**he autumn absence of the *Roosevelt*'s 44 F/A-18 Hornet strike aircraft will be offset by several other assets capable of attacking ISIS. The French carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, which struck ISIS targets this spring before conducting exercises in the Indian Ocean, will soon have another opportunity. This smaller French warship possesses twelve Rafale and nine Super Etendard aircraft; these are very capable but amount to only half the strikers on the U.S. flattop.

A U.S. Amphibious Ready Group will also be in the region, comprising three amphibious warships, led by the mini-carrier USS *Essex*, and their complement of six AV-8B Harriers, twelve attack and assault support helicopters, four

MV-22 Ospreys, and the 1,100 Marines of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit.

Finally, land-based manned and unmanned air force strike aircraft -- including six F-16s recently deployed to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey -- as well as navy maritime patrol/reconnaissance aircraft will remain deployed to the region. In terms of raw combat power against ISIS, these assets adequately fill the loss in capability created by the *Roosevelt's* departure, and airstrikes in support of Operation Inherent Resolve will continue without pause.

But the impact of a carrier strike group in the Middle East is also psychological and political: as a diplomatic tool to deter Iran, to reassure our regional allies of our commitment, and to provide the president with decision space during regional contingencies. Carriers symbolize U.S. diplomacy while projecting a hard power image and capability. While they can effectively strike targets day or night, they can also convey strong messages rapidly without force.

Carriers are also hard to miss, unlike stealthy or long-range platforms from which other equally capable U.S. strike weapons are fired (e.g., B-2 bombers, submarine-launched cruise missiles). Earlier this year, the *Roosevelt* sailed into the Arabian Sea to stop a merchant ship, escorted by several Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps warships, from allegedly ferrying arms to Houthi rebels in Yemen. The mere presence of the carrier caused the Iranian flotilla to turn around and return to port. Arguably, the carrier's absence might embolden Iran to further deepen its involvement in the regional conflicts in which it is now engaged. Likewise, it could embolden Russia to intensify its effort to bolster the Assad regime and gain regional influence.

Additionally -- and probably more important in this case -- a carrier strike group provides reassurance to regional allies questioning U.S. intentions. Removing a carrier following the Iran nuclear deal, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, and the decision not to support the Syrian opposition more strongly may exacerbate a growing concern among regional allies that the United States is implementing its long-advertised "rebalance to Asia," stoking fears about a broader-scale U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East. Finally, while a French carrier and the use of a Turkish air base allow for significant combat power, they also will limit the decision space the president enjoys with a U.S. carrier. According to Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus, "The Navy demonstrated the significance of [the carrier] capability when the only strikes for the first fifty-four days of the air campaign against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria came from Navy F/A-18 Hornets off the USS *George H. W. Bush* in the Arabian Gulf. Land-based fighters could not participate until host nations approved."

No doubt, a decision to use force in the Middle East is difficult enough without additional coordination with allies, however friendly. For example, should efforts to deconflict airspace with the Russian aircraft in Syria fail, a president's options to push back against Moscow will be far more limited without a carrier strike group.

## Impacts of the Nuclear Deal

**T**he Iran nuclear deal constitutes a major consideration affecting current regional stability. Because sanctions will not be lifted until the International Atomic Energy Agency verifies the key nuclear actions, Iran has incentive to behave well at least until next spring or summer, when it will receive long-awaited access to international markets and billions of dollars in frozen assets. Viewed through this lens, the nuclear deal offers a window of opportunity during which the carrier's absence might hold less risk. If Iran cheats, as many predict it will, this will most likely happen after it has reaped the promised economic benefits from the deal. At that point, a carrier will likely be back in the region, and the president will have better options to deter and counter destabilizing activities.

The United States should take advantage of the temporary absence of a carrier to revise its emphasis toward maneuver, rather than mere static presence; this change should be communicated to allies and potential foes alike. If a carrier always remains in the same place, it is no longer exploiting the concept of maneuver, which is its principal advantage over other types of power projection and contributes to its survivability. Unpredictability also

complicates an adversary's diplomatic and military decision calculus. This is even more important when dealing with competitors possessing advanced anti-access/area denial capabilities, such as over-the-horizon radar and advanced antiship missiles. Likewise, the commitment of a carrier to support allies is more encouraging than a continual presence, which provides diminishing reassurance over time. If, as the navy says, presence is about being "where it matters, when it matters," the operational construct for employing carriers should be based on maneuver.

Because carriers are such flexible, strategic assets, there is never a good time to remove them from the commander-in-chief's range of options. At this particular moment in the Middle East, having a carrier strike group would unquestionably be preferable, given its value for deterrence, reassurance, and decision space. However, future carrier availability will only continue to decrease unless the force can be maintained and revitalized. Precisely because carriers are such valuable instruments of national power, decisionmakers should resist the temptation to order another deployment extension. They should take advantage of the temporarily reduced risk provided by the Iran nuclear deal to prepare the carrier fleet for even greater future threats.

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