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Iran's Doctrine of Asymmetric Naval Warfare

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Brief Analysis

For more than a decade, Iran has lavished a considerable share of its defense budget on its naval forces (which consist of both regular and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps units), believing that the Persian Gulf will be its front line in the event of a confrontation with the United States. Following a naval war-fighting doctrine that suits its revolutionary ethos, Iran has developed innovative, asymmetric naval warfare tactics that exploit its favorable geographic situation, build on its strengths, and target the vulnerabilities of its enemies.

Revolutionary Naval Warfare

During the Iran-Iraq War, the armed forces of Iran—particularly the Revolutionary Guards (or Pasdaran)—developed a war-fighting doctrine in accord with the country's revolutionary ideology. Based on Shiite religious concepts, the doctrine reflects Iran's Alavi and Ashurai heritage. It draws inspiration from Ali (cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad), who chose to avoid confrontation when challenged by Arab rulers of his time, and waited for twenty-four years before assuming the caliphate, as well as from the devotion of his son Hussein, who faced a superior enemy and died in battle on the plains of Karbala on the tenth day of Muharram in the year 680 (Ashura).

Revolutionary Shiite values such as stoic endurance and devotion to the cause are granted equal, if not superior, status to the traditional military principles of mission accomplishment and the achievement of a military objective. According to this doctrine, the mere act of fighting, exerting maximum effort, and fulfilling one's religious (and national) duty to the fullest is an end in itself. The result or outcome is of secondary importance. For adherents, martyrdom is a welcome prospect. A readiness to die, however, is not considered a substitute for lethality and effectiveness. On the contrary, the Iranian concept of Alavi/Ashurai warfare relies not just on spiritual commitment, but also on high-tech weaponry and innovative tactics—a combination employed to great effect on the ground in southern Lebanon by Iran's protegee, the Lebanese Shiite Hizballah, in its war with Israel this summer.

The most prominent expression of this doctrine was a series of naval battles with the U.S. Navy in April 1988. These took place during the final phases of the Iran-Iraq War, when hopelessly outclassed Iranian forces battled U.S. naval units in the Persian Gulf. Iran incurred heavy losses in the process. The experience taught Iran that large naval vessels are vulnerable to air and missile attacks, confirmed the efficacy of small boat operations, and spurred interest in missile-armed fast-attack craft. It also allowed Iran to expand the use of swarming tactics that form the foundation of its current approach to asymmetric naval warfare.

Naval Swarming Tactics

Swarming tactics are not new; they have been practiced by land armies for thousands of years. Such tactics require light, mobile forces with substantial striking power, capable of rapidly concentrating to attack an enemy from multiple directions and then rapidly dispersing.

Iranian naval swarming tactics focus on surprising and isolating the enemy's forces and preventing their reinforcement or resupply, thereby shattering the enemy's morale and will to fight. Iran has practiced both mass and dispersed swarming tactics. The former employs mass formations of hundreds of lightly armed and agile small boats that set off from different bases, then converge from different directions to attack a target or group of targets. The latter uses a small number of highly agile missile or torpedo attack craft that set off on their own, from geographically dispersed and concealed locations, and then converge to attack a single target or set of targets (such as a tanker convoy). The dispersed swarming tactic is much more difficult to detect and repel because the attacker never operates in mass formations.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the Pasdaran navy used mass swarming tactics; as a result, its forces proved vulnerable to attack by U.S. naval and air power. Because of this, it is unlikely that such tactics would be used for anything but diversionary attacks in the future. In today's Iranian naval forces, mass swarming tactics have largely given way to dispersed swarming.

Dispersed swarming tactics are most successful when attackers can elude detection through concealment and mobility, employ stand-off firepower, and use superior situational awareness (intelligence), enabling them to find and engage the enemy first. This accounts for a number of trends in Iranian naval force development in the past two decades. The first is the acquisition and development of small, fast weapons platforms—particularly lightly armed small boats and missile-armed fast-attack craft; extended- and long-range shore- and sea-based antiship missiles; midget and diesel attack submarines (for intelligence gathering, covert mine laying, naval special warfare, and conventional combat operations); low-signature reconnaissance and combat unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs); and the adaptation of the Shahab-3 medium-range surface-to-surface missile armed with a cluster warhead reportedly carrying 1,400 bomblets, for use against enemy naval bases and carrier battle groups.

Iran has also sought to improve its ability to achieve surprise by employing low-observable technologies (such as radar-absorbent paints), strict communications discipline, stringent emissions control measures, passively or autonomously guided weapons systems (such as the Kowsar series of television-guided antiship missiles), and sophisticated command-and-control arrangements. To support its naval swarm tactics, Iran has encouraged decentralized decisionmaking and initiative, as well as autonomy and self-sufficiency among naval combat elements.

Wartime Operations

In wartime, Iranian naval forces would seek to close the Strait of Hormuz and destroy enemy forces bottled up in the Persian Gulf; therefore speed and surprise would be key. Iranian naval forces would seek to identify and attack the enemy's centers of gravity as quickly as possible and inflict maximum losses before contact with subordinate units were lost as a result of enemy counterattacks. Geography is Iran's ally. Because of the proximity of major

shipping routes to the country's largely mountainous 2,000-kilometer coastline, Iranian naval elements can sortie from their bases and attack enemy ships with little advance warning. Meanwhile, shore-based antiship missiles can engage targets almost anywhere in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. To achieve the latter capability, and to improve the survivability of its shore-based missile force, Iran has devoted significant efforts to extending the range of locally produced variants of a number of Chinese shore-based antiship missiles such as the HY-2 Silkworm and the C-802 (from 50 to 300 kilometers and from 120 to 170 kilometers, respectively). It has also introduced the use of helicopter-borne long-range antiship missiles.

To ensure that it can achieve surprise in the event of a crisis or war, Iran's naval forces keep U.S. warships in the region under close visual, acoustic, and radar observation. The Iranian navy commander—Rear Adm. Sajad Kouchaki, one of the architects of the country's naval doctrine—recently claimed that Iranian submarines continually monitor U.S. naval movements, frequently at close range, and have even passed underneath American aircraft carriers and other warships undetected. Iranian UAVs also frequently shadow U.S. carrier battle groups in the area.

Conclusion

Current Iranian naval deployments are aimed at deterring an American attack and—in the event of hostilities—entraping and destroying U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf, at which time U.S. regional bases would be targeted with rocket and missile strikes as well. Iranian naval forces would conduct simultaneous close-in and stand-off attacks, relying on swarming tactics developed and refined during the Iran-Iraq War and highlighted in recent naval exercises in the Persian Gulf. The performance of Lebanese Hizballah guerrillas, who used similar tactics against much larger and more powerful Israeli ground forces in southern Lebanon last summer, provides some insight into what the U.S. Navy should expect in the event of a confrontation with Iran in the Persian Gulf.

Farzin Nadimi is an expert on the Iranian military. ❖



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