

LARGE-SCALE INTERNATIONAL DEPLOYMENT OF MILITARY FORCES OFF IRAN

The largest naval exercise ever organized in the Middle East began on Monday September 17 in the Gulf of Aden and the Sea of Oman. The IMCMEX 12 (International Mine Countermeasures Exercise) mobilizes the navies of some thirty countries around a scenario envisaging a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz by a terrorist organization. According to the American military command in Bahrain, the exercise will be held up to 27 September and comprise both theoretical seminars and practical training in hunting down and neutralizing explosive devices. Such maneuvers are expected to be held on an annual basis.

Lieutenant Greg Raelson, spokesman of America's Fifth Fleet, has indicated that the objectives of the exercise are "totally defensive". However, the size and the nature of the deployment reflect the concerns of Western nations that a conflict between Iran and Israel would threaten naval traffic in the region. Indeed, Europe and the United States fear that Tehran might seek to block access to the Persian Gulf and to mine the Strait of Hormuz in reprisal against an Israeli strike against its nuclear installations. Such a strategy would directly threaten Western and Japanese petroleum supplies, which remain very dependent on production from this region.

Growing pressure on Tehran

Despite the repeated denials of many American senior officials, one cannot separate this exercise from mounting tension over the Iranian nuclear program. In the midst of the electoral campaign in the United States, President Obama has set a new series of economic sanctions directed against the energy exports and financial relations of Iran. Nonetheless, Washington would examine the military option only as a last recourse and believes that a diplomatic solution is still possible. For his part, the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, has called for the implementation of a still tougher policy, going so far as to bring up the risk that terrorist groups might explode a "dirty bomb" in a major American city. Mitt Romney considers that the case of the Iranian nuclear program is the "biggest failure" of the Obama administration in foreign policy and has promised to impose "crippling sanctions" against Iran.

Israel has also hardened its tone in dealing with the Islamic Republic. On the occasion of the opening of the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 17 September, Benjamin Netanyahu stated before American television cameras that Iran had already gone "90% of the way" in acquiring the enriched uranium necessary to produce an atomic bomb. He also called upon the United States to set a "red line" beyond which a military operation would be unleashed. In his view, only a cut-off date might still prevent Iran from acquiring the capability to build a nuclear arsenal. Up to now, the American president has refused to agree with the demands of the Israeli Prime Minister, whose radical speech is provoking perceptible tensions in relations with Washington. However, one notes

that Barack Obama himself said in March that any decision taken by Israel to ensure its security would be perfectly “appropriate”.

Risks for regional security

Large-scale action would be indispensable to totally eliminate the Iranian nuclear program, due both to the geographic features of the country and to uncertainty over the exact whereabouts of these installations, as well as over the conventional or nonconventional military resources that they may possess. At the present time, only the United States has the offensive and defensive capabilities necessary to carry out a decisive action. According to the *Sunday Times*, Israel might consider using an Electromagnetic Impulse Attack to bring about the collapse of the Iranian economy. However, this option, which would require a high altitude nuclear explosion, remains theoretical and should probably be interpreted as an episode of the psychological warfare which Tel Aviv and Tehran are currently waging.

A new war in the Middle East would have catastrophic consequences for regional security and for the entire world economy. Should there be a strike against its nuclear installations; Iran would certainly respond by firing ballistic missiles against the Jewish state whether or not Israel actually participated in the attack. Tehran would also ask its Shiite allies of the Lebanese Hezbollah to carry out incursions across the northern border of Israel. Another target would be oil production of member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. As it did during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Iranian navy could also lay mine fields in the Persian Gulf and block the Strait of Hormuz. In this context, the IMCMEX exercise would clearly appear to be an element in preparations by the United States and its allies for a possible conflict.

Near-term Prospects

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the “guide” of the Iranian Revolution, responded to these new pressures during a sermon delivered to members of its top military leadership. The statement subsequently published on his official site stressed that Iran will never tolerate bellicose threats from “angry” big powers. He also accused the Western and Israeli media of lying about the real consequences of economic sanctions on the daily life of Iranians. We note in this regard that while Tehran has certainly developed numerous strategies for circumventing the sanctions, they have not prevented a reduction in the sale of hydrocarbons to many important clients including Turkey and India, which recently announced an 11% reduction in its imports of Iranian oil.

The economic sanctions presently in force are the most severe ever instituted by the United States and Europe against the Islamic Republic. They attest to the determination of Barack Obama to continue to demonstrate firmness while favoring a diplomatic approach. In this context, while the international naval deployment of the IMCMEX exercise can appear to be training for conditions of a war in the region, it should first of all be seen as a resolute warning to Tehran. Less than two months before the presidential elections, Washington has in fact brought into play all the available tools of pressure to avoid a conflict whose consequences remain largely unpredictable for most of the regional actors.