

# Connecting the Dots: Gulf-Based Naval Overwatch Helps Secure 'A to B' Commercial Shipping Transits



Sailors assigned to the guided-missile destroyer USS Winston S. Churchill (DDG 81) wave to the Royal Saudi Naval Force frigate Makkah (814) as the ships transit the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Nov. 20. The International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) maintains the freedom of navigation, international law and free flow of commerce to support regional stability and security of the maritime commons. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Louis Thompson Staats IV*

The Northern Indian Ocean region hosts some of the world's most critical maritime trade routes. Sea lines of communication (SLOCs) crisscross the region, connecting East and West and linking key energy supplies from the Persian Gulf.

The SLOCs pass through two vital maritime choke points: the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea, and the Strait of Hormuz, which connect the Northern Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf via the Gulf of Oman. Currently, an average of 17,000 ships per year pass through the Bab-el-Mandeb, with 42,000 transiting the Strait of Hormuz. While international focus returns to high-end, great power rivalry, these two choke points – and the SLOCs connecting them – have continued to face emerging and enduring low-end asymmetric maritime security threats, posed by both non-state and state actors.

In and around the Bab-el-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden region, the piracy threat of the early 2000s has been replaced by maritime security risks spilling over from the civil war ashore in

Yemen. Naval and merchant ships have been attacked with missiles and improvised explosive devices. In and around the Strait of Hormuz, the state-based threat to commercial shipping has persisted for some time, with malign activity continuing today. For example, on Aug. 4 the Panama-flagged MV Asphalt Princess was boarded, reportedly by armed men, in what was believed to have been an attempted hijacking.

The persistent maritime security risks across the region have prompted the establishment of several navy-led maritime security constructs, designed to secure the maritime choke points and waters across the region from the Gulf to the southern Red Sea. The Combined Maritime Forces, led by the U.S. Navy and based in Bahrain, runs three combined task forces (CTFs) that tackle various regional risks. The U.K. Royal Navy's Bahrain-based U.K. Maritime Component Command (UKMCC) supports U.K. maritime interests in the region, including providing Royal Navy ships for maritime security presence.

Both the U.S. and U.K. also have long-established constructs set up to provide primary points of contact with the merchant shipping community – the Naval Cooperation and Guidance for Shipping (NCAGS) for the U.S. and the U.K. Maritime Trade Organisation (UKMTO) for the U.K.

Following a spate of attacks on merchant shipping in and around the Strait of Hormuz in mid-2019, the U.S. Navy moved to establish a multinational organization to provide a security link between the naval and merchant communities. The International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) is the strategic-level organization; its at-sea operational task force is CTF Sentinel.

“The phrase ‘international solution to an international problem’ is quite a good one because it does involve a lot of countries,” Chief Lynn Cook, a Royal Navy chief petty officer posted to UKMTO but also sitting on IMSC's watchfloor, told

*Seapower.*



A U.S. Marine Corps CH-53E Super Stallion attached to Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 (Reinforced), 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), embarked aboard the amphibious transport dock ship USS San Diego (LPD 22), conducts a routine transit patrol in support of the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) in the Arabian Gulf, March 21. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Sgt. Desiree King*

### **Primary Purpose**

A primary purpose of NCAGS, UKMTO, IMSC and other maritime security organizations is to connect merchant shipping transiting the region with multinational security forces that can provide assistance if needed. This communications link between the military and merchant marine stakeholders has always been vital. However, as threats to commercial shipping security endure and increase – challenging the ability to keep the SLOCs open, ensure freedom of navigation and maintain international law at sea – so the importance of improving such communication and enhancing the strategic relationship between these two stakeholders endures and increases as well.

“The crux of commercial shipping is ‘time is money’ and getting from point A to point B,” Lt. Cmdr. Adena Grundy, a merchant mariner and former subject-matter expert and maritime domain analyst with NCAGS, told *Seapower*. “Any time there’s a [security] concern that could delay the shipping, it’s ... a concern for the companies. It goes back to ensuring freedom of navigation, and that commerce can keep moving back and forth.”

The 2019 attacks – which prompted not only the establishment of IMSC/CTF Sentinel, but also a significant international crisis (even in a region where tensions traditionally run high) – underlined the importance of maintaining regional maritime security for both global maritime trade and wider international stability.

For IMSC/CTF Sentinel, which currently numbers eight member countries, its mission has three main pillars, Lt. j.g. Jennifer Bowman, the U.S. Navy public affairs officer for IMSC/CTF Sentinel, told *Seapower*. These pillars are reassurance, deterrence and partnership. "Our mission is ever vital in this region – to help reassure and stabilize the global economy," Bowman said.

"Our main mission on the operational side is being able to deter and expose malign activities, both state and state-sponsored," said Lt. George Gagnon, a U.S. Navy warfare officer posted to IMSC/CTF Sentinel as a lead watchstander and responsible for military staffs/task force coordination.

"We've also got the other side, where we want to reassure the shipping community that we're here, we're visible, and we're going to do what we can both to provide that deterrence and try and expose the malign activities to the world, so we can keep the waterways safer," Gagnon said. "We do that in a lot of different ways. We are maintaining contact, through the ships that work for us, via maritime safety calls on bridge-to-bridge, and by sharing maritime domain awareness [MDA] information."

"As we've seen, incidents have happened recently," Bowman said. "It's about being vigilant, it's about making sure we are out there watching, taking calls, communicating, picking up the phone, [being] available via email and chat, so [the shipping community] knows we're here."

As regards understanding what the commercial stakeholders need from their military counterparts, "I think the reassurance piece of the mission is so paramount," Grundy said.

As a business, the shipping community faces multiple pressures.

"If you're delayed for the port, that delays the next guy. ... It's like a domino effect. It really is just A to B, in-out."

While the shipping community wants to retain its autonomy to maximize efficiency in moving between points A and B, it also retains anxiety over whether help will be there if needed, Grundy said.

“It’s like a policeman,” Grundy said. “You don’t necessarily want the officer living in your house or hanging out in the yard, but you want to know they’re going to show up if somebody is breaking into the house. ... The shipping community just want that reassurance that they can operate freely.”



The Royal Bahrain Naval Force coalition ship, RBNS Al Muharraq, operates in the Arabian Gulf during a sentry patrol as part of the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). The IMSC maintains the freedom of navigation, international law, and free flow of commerce to support regional stability and security of the maritime commons. *U.S. NAVAL FORCES CENTRAL COMMAND*

### **Presence and Partnership**

There are several strands to how the naval community offers such reassurance.

There is simple presence at sea and communicating that presence to both the shipping community and any would-be malign actor.

“Our mission at IMSC is providing overwatch, providing detection. We want to try to de-escalate and deter,” Gagnon said. “Being able to have that transparent messaging and exposure on our side and having our ships out there so the merchant community sees them and hears them, so they can have that reassurance, means we can say, ‘Hey, we’re here, we’re doing our job, and you can continue to navigate these waters safely and freely to get to wherever your point of destination is.’”

As to building communication, reassurance and wider

partnerships, organizations like IMSC and UKMTO act broadly as middlemen between the military and shipping communities, said Cook. “[IMSC’s] job is to monitor the traffic and keep an eye on the shipping. [We] advise and guide and reassure so they are more likely to follow what we’re asking them to do.

“We give them reasons, ‘don’t go there because,’ rather than just a direct order to not go somewhere,” Cook said.

UKMTO also acts as an initial contact hub for ships with security concerns. “If an incident does happen, first point of contact for a merchantman is UKMTO,” Cook said. UKMTO’s contact telephone number can be found on every ship’s bridge.

“UKMTO tends to act like a directory inquiries service,” Cook said. “UKMTO will get calls for every type of incident – an attack, a medical emergency or just a general breakdown. It then decides who to direct the call to. For instance, if it’s a U.S. ship it will go to NCAGS, if it’s a U.K. ship it will go to UKMCC.”

From NCAGS’ perspective, “We’re keeping constant communication on a daily level with the ships. We keep that line of communication open; we also extend it to company security officers. ... It’s a reassurance piece,” Grundy said. “It’s a mutual relationship because they can benefit from that constant update. They know a watchstander answers that phone.”



HMS Montrose shepherds a container vessel in the Strait of Hormuz. *U.K. ROYAL NAVY*

### **Information Sharing**

A central element of this effective communication is information sharing between the military and merchant marine stakeholders. This is a two-way, mutually beneficial process, Gagnon said.

“It’s being able to connect the dots on the information

sharing ... understanding what avenues we can utilize right now.”

He pointed to Sea Vision, a Navy-designed, ship automatic identification system (AIS)-based software product NCAGS uses to monitor shipping. “Sea Vision displays AIS and that’s about as up-to-date as we can get on where merchant shipping is,” he said.

“From an IMSC/CTF Sentinel perspective, we have a 24/7 watchfloor, we’re constantly monitoring systems, but we really are only as good as the communication we get from the ships,” Gagnon said. “Ships being able to do the little things like keeping their AIS up to date and communicating with UKMT0, NCAGS, or whomever if they’re seeing things, and being able to continue to build that trust between the merchant industry and us, is going to be crucial as we move forward.”

The military community also continually looks at new ways of getting messages out to the shipping community. One route, Gagnon said, is “staying up to date on how we can utilize open-source information opportunities to expose malign activity when it happens,” for example, via social media channels like Twitter. “As technology changes, as the avenues of communication change, being able to stay on top of that, which we are, and being aware of how we can get the word out is really important,” Gagnon said.

### **Broadening the Base**

While the IMSC, NCAGS and UKMT0 representatives all viewed the military-merchant marine stakeholder partnership as strong and effective, they said there are ways to make it stronger still: broadening the stakeholder base to include port owners and others, and improving communications between stakeholders.

“At the end of the day, we’re all trying to achieve the same endgame,” Cook said. “What we’re trying to do is increase MDA and ensure the shipping lanes stay open and the merchantmen

have the freedom of navigation that they're entitled to."