

Britain to join US naval blockade of Iran

By Jean Shaoul
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The UK is set to join the US “international maritime security mission” in the strategic Strait of Hormuz. It has already deployed a destroyer, the HMS Duncan, and a frigate, the HMS Montrose, to the Persian Gulf to escort UK-flagged vessels—some 47 to date—through the Strait.

The decision reverses Britain’s earlier proposal to launch a European-led operation supposedly to protect tankers in the Gulf. It signifies a further intensification of the drive to war against Iran, carried out behind the backs of the British people, who are deeply hostile to another war of imperialist plunder in the Middle East.

Announcing the decision, Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said the UK wanted to build “the broadest international support to uphold freedom of navigation in the region.” He continued: “The deployment of Royal Navy assets is a sign of our commitment to our UK-flagged vessels and we look forward to working alongside the US and others to find an international solution to the problems in the Strait of Hormuz.”

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said Britain’s “approach to Iran hasn’t changed. We remain committed to working with Iran and our international partners to de-escalate the situation and maintain the nuclear deal.”

Both statements are a pack of lies. They come amid a US-led war drive targeting Iran after Washington unilaterally suspended the 2015 Iranian nuclear accord, launched a major military buildup in the region and demanded that US allies support it.

The Trump administration’s provocative move, in the guise of “protecting shipping lanes” through the crowded 21-mile-wide sea lane through which one-fifth of the world’s oil supplies passes, establishes a patrol of warships aimed at blockading Iran.

General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, first announced the mission early last month when he called on US military allies worldwide

to join a US-led battle fleet that would surround Iran. The Pentagon would provide “command and control” ships to direct operations, he stressed, while America’s allies would provide escort vessels to follow US orders.

The purpose of this US campaign of “maximum pressure” is to secure complete control not only over Iran’s economy, but also over the oil supply of Washington’s main imperialist rivals in Europe and East Asia, and of Asia’s two most populous countries, China and India. Far from seeking an international “solution” to the escalating conflict between the US and Iran, Washington is seeking Tehran’s total submission to its dictates.

Commander Rebecca Rebarich of the US Department of Defense welcomed the British decision, saying, “This is an international challenge and we look forward to the opportunity to work together with the Royal Navy and with additional partners and allies who share the common goal of ensuring the free flow of commerce.”

The decision of Britain’s newly appointed prime minister, Boris Johnson, to join the US war fleet flows from his close relations with the Trump administration and his advocacy of deepening ties with the US, based on securing a post-Brexit free trade deal with the anti-European Union president. It represents a shift in Britain’s position from initially seeking to de-escalate the Strait of Hormuz crisis and reflects its increasing isolation from its former European partners.

Just two weeks ago Britain balked at joining a US-led mission, calling instead for a “European-led maritime protection mission” in the region. Jeremy Hunt, Britain’s then-foreign secretary and challenger to Johnson for the premiership, said at the time that the European-led force would “not be part of the US maximum pressure policy on Iran, as we remain committed to preserving the Iran nuclear agreement.”

But London, which has long served as Washington’s

bridgehead to Europe, was unable to convince Berlin and Paris, co-signatories along with the US, Britain, China and Russia to the nuclear deal, to sign up to Trump's flotilla. This was not because France and Germany are any more pacifist than the US and Britain. Rather, they view Washington's unilateral torpedoing of the nuclear deal, its re-imposition of sanctions against Iran, Trump's statement that he had been 10 minutes away from bombing Iran, Britain's illegal seizure of an Iranian tanker off Gibraltar on US orders, and Iran's seizure of a UK-flagged tanker, the Stena Impero, as cutting across their own geostrategic and commercial interests in the energy-rich region.

While they recognize there is now little chance of rescuing the nuclear accord and their commercial relations with Iran, they are keenly aware that joining the US military coalition against Iran, given their own limited military resources vis a vis the US, would mean submitting to the Pentagon's command and ceding the political initiative to Washington.

Speaking on television last week, Olaf Scholz, Germany's vice chancellor and finance minister, said, "I'm very skeptical about that [US-led mission], and I think that's a skepticism that many others share." It was important to avoid a military escalation in the region, and "That's why I think this is not a good idea."

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas insisted that Germany would not join the US task force, saying, "Germany will not take part in the naval mission proposed and planned by the United States. We are in close coordination with our French partners. We consider the 'maximum pressure' strategy to be wrong." He warned that while Berlin favoured a European mission, it was difficult to make progress on that. On Monday, he told reporters, "At the moment, the Britons would rather join an American mission. We won't do that."

France's foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, said that Paris was pursuing the possibility of a European "mission for monitoring and observing maritime security in the gulf" that was "the opposite of the American initiative, which is the choice of maximum pressure to make Iran go back on a certain number of its objectives."

Far from easing tensions, such a "monitoring" operation in one of the world's most incendiary

flashpoints would serve to escalate the crisis. It is a bid by the European powers to grab a share of oil and gas resources in the strategic Persian Gulf region.

Deputy government spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer left the door open for possible German participation in a US mission in the future. Nevertheless, the EU continues to distance itself from the US, saying it will continue working with Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, despite the Trump administration's decision to impose sanctions and freeze assets he holds in the US.

Britain's decision has prompted a furious response from Iran. President Hassan Rouhani has warned that the Anglo-American task force risks "the mother of all wars." He added, "A strait for a strait. It can't be that the Strait of Hormuz is free for you and the Strait of Gibraltar is not free for us."

This was a reference to Iran's seizure of the Stena Impero near Hormuz in retaliation for the Royal Navy's seizure of an Iranian oil tanker off Gibraltar, which it is still holding after more than a month. Rouhani insisted that the US lift all sanctions, which he called an act of "economic terrorism," if it wants to have negotiations.

His remarks mark a recognition that the Strait of Hormuz crisis could lead to an open-ended war with catastrophic consequences. As the US and Britain move closer to war, all the major powers are seeking to expand their military forces.

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