

Gulf tensions

Mr Hunt tells us we need more warships. He needs to concentrate on our relationship with Iran. UK forces helped the Gibraltar authorities seize an Iranian tanker on the grounds that it was taking oil to Syria against EU and US sanctions. In response Iran threatened to take a UK tanker. Iran or associated groups had already made unprovoked attacks on other tankers in the area. This week we saw a possible threat to a UK tanker in the Straits of Hormuz, repelled by HMS Montrose.

The first thing we need is the evidence from the Iranian tanker to demonstrate the legitimacy of the seizure, with appropriate treatment of the Captain who has been detained. Presumably a case will be brought against him. The second thing we need is confirmation of the arrangements for future UK tanker security near to Iran. The US is indicating their forces might be part of a general response to any Iranian threats. The UK normally has four minesweepers and an amphibious landing ship based at Bahrain, and clearly the frigate HMS Montrose is also available. All these ships have weaponry that could warn off smaller Iranian naval vessels of the types being deployed. If the UK works with other allies led by the USA, then there is the Abraham Lincoln carrier group in the area as well.

As the USA and the UK says, defending the rights of all to passage in international shipping lanes is important to world trade and to peaceful co existence between countries. Oil sanctions have helped drive up the price of oil internationally, but not excessively. The rapid expansion of US oil and gas output continues to offset the losses of OPEC production through sanctions against Iran and through governmental incompetence in Venezuela. We need to hear more from Mr Hunt of how the UK is going to seek resolution of this conflict in the context of the Iranian nuclear agreement and the division between the EU and the USA on this matter.

The US strategy is to force policy change on Iran by sanctions. Iran responds with military provocation. The UK should do what it needs to do to defend our shipping, seeking to avoid being drawn into any wider military conflict.