The United States is planning to substantially expand its forward-deployed minesweeping presence in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee last week, stating that four minesweepers would be moved to Bahrain, joining eight others, including four UK Royal Navy minesweepers. The current detachment of four minesweeping helicopterswill be increased to eight.

The paperwork, published in February, calls for the mine countermeasures (MCM) ships to transported to their destination onboard a larger civilian vessel. In January it was announced that the USS Ponce (LPD 15) would undergo a conversion to an afloat staging base for MCMs -- essentially a mothership that can facilitate and coordinate at-sea and aerial operations. The USS Ponce is expected to arrive in region this summer and should represent an important expansion of capability and capacity above the simple doubling of the U.S. MCM presence discussed in the CNO'stestimony.

This expansion is fairly rapid and is notably the first substantive change in the MCM presence in the Persian Gulf since the mid-2000s. The lack of change thus far is a stark contrast to tensions and war-like rhetoric that have routinely characterized the Strait of Hormuz and the wider Persian Gulf. Recent months have seen signs of a renewed tension between Washington and Tehran, which reflects a cyclical crisis of escalation and de-escalation that can be a hallmark of political manipulation. North Korea has made it an art for two decades.

Yet through it all, the American forward-deployed MCM presence has remained largely constant. The sudden doubling of that presence after years of tension and rhetoric is inherently noteworthy. Stratfor has long argued that the military question is only part of the equation, and that no military force can control the markets' reaction to even limited action in the Strait.

During Iranian naval exercises in the Strait in late December and early January, Brent crude rose 4 per cent. A rapid and proficient military response to Iranian attacks in the Strait -- whether naval mines, anti-ship missiles or small-boat swarm tactics -- can attempt to mitigate but not manage market reaction. Given the global economic crisis -- including the ongoing European economic crisis and the fragile beginnings of an American recovery-- even the threat of a temporary disruption has taken on new credibility in recent years.

This is the essence of Iran's military deterrent, by which it has protected not only its nuclear efforts but also the larger resurgence of its power and influence throughout the region from military reprisal in the form of an American-led air campaign. (Stratfor has long held that while Israel maintains plans to act independently, the geographic realities, sheer scale of the necessary target set and the hardening of key Iranian facilities simply exceeds the capacity of the Israeli air force.)

But Iran's deterrent is inherently indirect and blunt. While a third of traded crude passes through the Strait, less than a quarter of American consumption is transported through the Strait. So by threatening the Strait and the flow of oil, Tehran has been threatening more than just Washington. This has often included not only close allies of the United States, but also those that have provided support or remained neutral on Iran and other issues important to Washington. For many years, this was sufficiently balanced by Iran's ability to threaten a large and tenuous U.S. military presence in Iraq. But while a substantial U.S.diplomatic presence remains even today, that deterrent has now significantly declined.

And while recent years saw the Iranian deterrent in the Strait become more compelling in accordance with the deepening global economic crisis, it also probably reached its peak effectiveness, particularly as the United States begins to recover vis a vis Europe and East Asia. That is the heart of the issue for Iran. The United States is now more than doubling its MCM presence in the Gulf, thereby creating new uncertainty for the efficacy of the Iranian deterrent and making Iran's challenge of maintaining a credible deterrent more difficult.

But more important, other countries - including India and China, that are more sensitive to the economic nature of Iran's deterrent - face the prospect of being hurt considerably more than the United States, both in terms of wider economic vulnerability and the physical flows of oil. Perhaps most notable, earlier this year Tokyo stated that should there be an attempt to close the Strait, the Japan Self-Defense Forces would consider deploying its own MCM assets (Japan's MCM fleet is larger than that of the United States and the United Kingdom combined).

This serves as a reminder that threatening the global economy and the flow of crude oil is not simply a threat to the United States: it inherently threatens other countries more opposed to conflict in the Strait than even the United States. Any increase in Washington's confidence and willingness to engage in an attack against Iran actually increases American leverage over Iran and those who have so far resisted more aggressive non-military action against Iran.