

Iran To Hold Largest-Ever Naval Drills Near Strait Of Hormuz

May coincide with US-Israeli major naval exercises in the Persian Gulf

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Moscow: Iran is planning to hold new “massive” naval exercises near the strategic Strait of Hormuz within the next few weeks, the country’s Fars news agency has said, as Tehran’s tensions with the West continue to escalate following threats of new sanctions against the Islamic Republic over its controversial nuclear program.

Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi was quoted in the Fars report as saying the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps was planning to conduct “its greatest naval war games” near the Strait of Hormuz in the near future.

The announcement came just days after the Iranian navy completed its 10-day naval exercises near the Strait of Hormuz. The drills were held after the Islamic Republic threatened to block the waterway, where an estimated 40 percent of the world’s seaborne oil passes, in response to Western plans to ban oil imports from Iran. The Islamic Republic derives some 60 percent of its budget revenues from oil exports.

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The exercises, called Austere Challenge 12, which both Israeli and U.S. officials have described as the largest-ever joint drills by the two countries, are designed to improve missile defense systems and co-operation between the U.S. and Israeli forces.

The United States on Saturday approved sanctions targeting Iran’s oil industry, and the European Union will consider banning Iranian oil imports during a meeting of EU foreign ministers in late January.

The sanctions are designed to persuade Iran to drop what Western powers believe is a secret nuclear weapons program developed by Tehran.

Iran denies the claims, saying its nuclear program is for purely civilian purposes.

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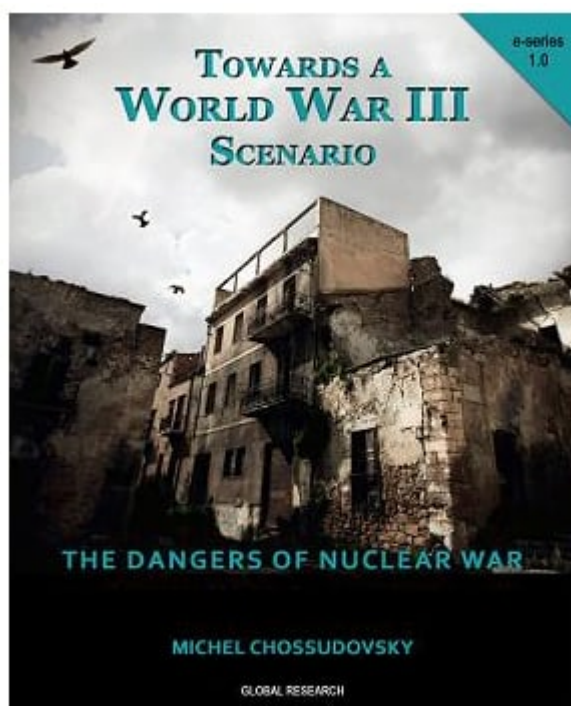
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