

Australia to send naval and air assistance to protect Middle East sea lanes: Morrison

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Australia will commit a frigate, an aircraft and some headquarters staff to an American-led freedom of navigation operation in the Middle East.

Scott Morrison, announcing the long-expected commitment at a Canberra news conference on Wednesday, stressed this was an international mission, but so far the United Kingdom is the only other country to have signed up.

Under questioning, the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, General Angus Campbell, said the operation would be United States-led. But Campbell avoided spelling out in detail the rules of engagement in the event of being involved in an incident, other than referring to legal obligations.

Iran has seized ships in recent months, amid escalating tensions.

This week, an Iranian oil tanker was released after being detained by the British overseas territory of Gibraltar on suspicion of taking oil to Syria. The US tried unsuccessfully to have Gibraltar extend the vessel's detention.

Morrison said Australia had made very clear both to the US and the UK "that we are here as part of a multinational effort".

"This is a modest, meaningful and time-limited contribution ...to this international effort to ensure we maintain free-flow of commerce and of navigation," he said.

"Australia will defend our interests, wherever they may be under threat, we will always work closely with our international allies and partners."

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Morrison emphasised that the safety of shipping lanes was vital to Australia's economic interests.

The government had been concerned over incidents in the Strait of Hormuz, he said. "30% of refined oil destined for Australia travels through the Strait. It is a threat to our economy."

The Australian contribution will be

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a P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft for one month before the end of 2019;

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an Australian frigate in January 2020 for six months; and

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ADF personnel to the International Maritime Security Construct headquarters in Bahrain.

One complication for Australia in finalising the commitment was the fact there was no Australian frigate in the area, with the next deployment not due until January.

Australian ships participate in counter-piracy and counter-terrorism operations in the Middle East.

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The Americans were very pressing in their request to Australia to join the force, including in public statements during the recent AUSMIN talks.

Morrison has emphasised Australia wants to see the de-escalation of tensions in the area and separates its commitment to the freedom of navigation operation from America's other activities in relation to Iran.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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