

The Australian

Warships 'to remind Iran of US power'

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MEXICO CITY: The decision to send a second US aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf should be a "reminder" to Iran of Washington's military might but was not an escalation of force in the region, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said yesterday.

Mr Gates flatly denied that the US was preparing the way to commence military attacks against Iran.

"I don't think we'll have two carriers for a protracted period of time. So I don't see it as an escalation. I think it could be seen, though, as a reminder," he told reporters during a visit to Mexico City to brief officials there.

A US Navy spokesman, Jeff Davis, said the USS Abraham Lincoln would overlap with the departing aircraft carrier USS Harry Truman by "no more than a day or two".

The arrival of the formidable warship in the Gulf follows a noticeable hardening of US rhetoric against Iran, accusing Tehran of meddling in Iraq and destabilising the region.

The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Michael Mullen, said last week he was increasingly concerned about Iran's behaviour, and he pointedly warned Tehran: "It would be a mistake to think we are out of combat power."

Admiral Mullen acknowledged that a third US conflict in the Middle East would be "very stressing for us".

However, CBS News reported that the Pentagon has ordered new options to be drawn up for attacking Iran, and said the State Department has begun drafting an ultimatum that would tell Iran to stop meddling in Iraq and the region or else.

But when asked whether the Pentagon was preparing for military strikes against Iran, Mr Gates said flatly, "No".

The stepped-up US rhetoric against Tehran comes against the backdrop of intensifying violence in Iraq as US forces clash with Shia militia groups that the US military says are being backed by Iran.

Forty-four US soldiers have been killed in Iraq so far this month, a grim rebound in the death toll that comes as the US surge brigades are withdrawing from the country.

Mr Gates said a number of the latest casualties had come from rocket attacks on the fortified Green Zone and the joint Iraqi security stations, carried out from Sadr City, a stronghold of followers of radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

"We just haven't seen that for some period of time. So I think that's the reason for the spike in casualties, sad to say," he said.

"Clearly we are watching it very closely."

The top US commander in Iraq, David Petraeus, has charged that the Quds Force, a covert branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, was funding, training and arming Shia militants to kill US troops.

General Petraeus and other US military leaders have said the extent of the Iranian involvement became apparent last month after an Iraqi government crackdown in the southern port city of Basra on armed gangs exploded into violence.

General Petraeus told Congress this month that Iranian-backed Shia "special groups" were the greatest threat to a viable democratic Iraq.