



GABELLI

# Aerospace in Focus: 2026

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Over the past few weeks, the market's attention has been pulled back toward the Middle East, particularly Iran, not just because of the political situation itself, but because it highlights how quickly geopolitical risk can translate into real-world operational and budget implications.

## A CARRIER GAP AND THE IRAN SITUATION

No U.S. aircraft carrier has been stationed in the Middle East since October 2025 - a notable departure from years of continuous carrier presence in the region. The USS Gerald R. Ford, one of the Navy's most advanced carriers, remains deployed in the Caribbean and Atlantic under Operation Southern Spear, focused on Venezuela-related operations including tanker seizures and drug interdiction. Meanwhile, the USS Abraham Lincoln was operating in the South China Sea as recently as early January 2026 and has only recently been redirected toward the Middle East, leaving an estimated week-long transit gap.

This temporary absence of carrier-based power projection comes at a particularly tense moment. Iran closed its airspace on January 14, 2026, amid heightened security concerns, domestic protests, and explicit threats from President Trump.

While the U.S. maintains over 100 strike aircraft in the region (primarily F-16s, F-15Es, F-22s, and F-35s) distributed across at least 19 sites including eight permanent bases, the lack of immediate carrier presence highlights the strain on American military resources across global commitments.

The strategic bomber fleet provides a crucial backstop: B-2 Spirit stealth bombers remain capable of delivering the GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator, the "bunker buster" weapon used in 2025 strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. Yet air superiority alone cannot address one of Iran's most potent asymmetric weapons: its naval mining capability.

## THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ: A CHOKEPOINT VULNERABILITY

Iran possesses an estimated 5,000 - 6,000 naval mines that can be deployed by submarines, high-speed boats, small craft, and even commercial vessels. This arsenal gives Tehran the capability to disrupt or potentially close the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of global oil supplies transit, within hours to days.

Iran could effectively mine the strait using anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand mines. Historical precedent from the 1980s Tanker War showed that even hundreds created serious hazards.

Clearing these mines would be massive. Establishing a safe corridor could require one to four weeks of intensive operations, while complete demining might take one to three months or longer. The main shipping lanes are roughly two to three miles wide in each direction, meaning clearing two safe transit lanes over the 90 to 100-mile critical area would require sweeping approximately 200 to 500 square miles, with full safety assurance potentially involving several thousand square miles.

Could the U.S. prevent mining? While the Navy could significantly disrupt large-scale mining through preemptive strikes, patrols, and direct action, completely preventing Tehran from laying any mines is extremely difficult. The likely outcome is the eventual reopening of the strait, but not prevention of initial mining.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR DEFENSE

This situation reveals critical realities about modern defense. The U.S. military faces competing demands across the Middle East, Indo-Pacific, and Latin America that strain even America's formidable capabilities. Adversaries have developed asymmetric capabilities that impose significant costs even against superior forces. Specialized capabilities like minesweeping remain critically important in high-intensity scenarios.

The implications are clear: sustained need for U.S. defense capabilities across air, sea, and unmanned domains. Near-term operational requirements will drive immediate demand for munitions, surveillance assets, and rapid-response systems. Longer-term, elevated geopolitical risk should accelerate procurement toward capabilities addressing great power competition: advanced stealth platforms, long-range strike weapons, autonomous systems, and mine warfare equipment.

The aerospace and defense industry stands at an inflection point where both immediate operational tempo and strategic recapitalization are converging with elevated threat perceptions. This represents a fundamental reassessment of capabilities required to maintain security in an increasingly contested world.

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