Middle East war

Ships in Gulf declare themselves Chinese to dodge attack

At least 10 vessels have changed transponder messages in apparent attempt to avoid becoming targets

About 1,000 ships are shut inside the Gulf and its immediate surroundings © Amr Alfiky/Reuters

Nassos Stylianou and **Malcolm Moore** in London

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A clutch of vessels trapped in the Gulf under enemy fire are adopting a tried-and-tested ruse to avoid attack: using transponders to declare themselves to be Chinese.

At least 10 ships over the past week have altered their destination signal to read "Chinese Owner", "All Chinese Crew" or "Chinese Crew Onboard", according to data from MarineTraffic analysed by the FT.

About 1,000 ships are currently shut inside the Gulf and its immediate surroundings, with a cumulative value of some $25bn, according to Lloyd's Market Association. Iran continues to fire on vessels not just trying to cross the narrow Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Gulf, but even as far north as Kuwait, where an empty fuel tanker was hit by a drone on Wednesday.

In another tactic to avoid being targeted, some ships are manipulating their GPS signals to misdirect guided weapons. These vessels are showing up on shipping data platforms as clustered on top of one another, noted TankerTrackers.com, a research agency.

RESUME

© FT • Source: MarineTraffic • 4-5 March 2026, colours represent vessel type

The ships that are changing their transponder signals vary in type from container vessels to oil tankers. Some are loaded and others are empty.

Most remain inside the Gulf. But one vessel, the Iron Maiden, made a dash through the Strait of Hormuz on Wednesday, briefly changing its signal to "China Owner" until it reached waters off Oman.

A smaller number of ships have chosen a different identity. Last Saturday, the first day of the conflict with Iran, a fuel tanker called Bogazici crossed the strait while identifying itself as "Muslim Vsl Turkish" before reverting to its original name once clear.

A ship's master is responsible for the vessel's transponder signal, which is used primarily to communicate with nearby traffic and prevent collisions. But the destination field can easily be altered.

"They can change anything really, you can put whatever you want there," said Matthew Wright, an analyst at shipping data platform Kpler.

"There's an element of subterfuge as crews try to mask their links to particular ports, destinations or nationalities."

Wright said the practice first appeared in the Red Sea in 2023, when Yemen's Houthi rebels began attacking commercial vessels.

While it remains unclear whether Iranian forces or their proxies treat ships differently if they claim Chinese links, he said crews appeared willing to try anything that might reduce the risk of being targeted.

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