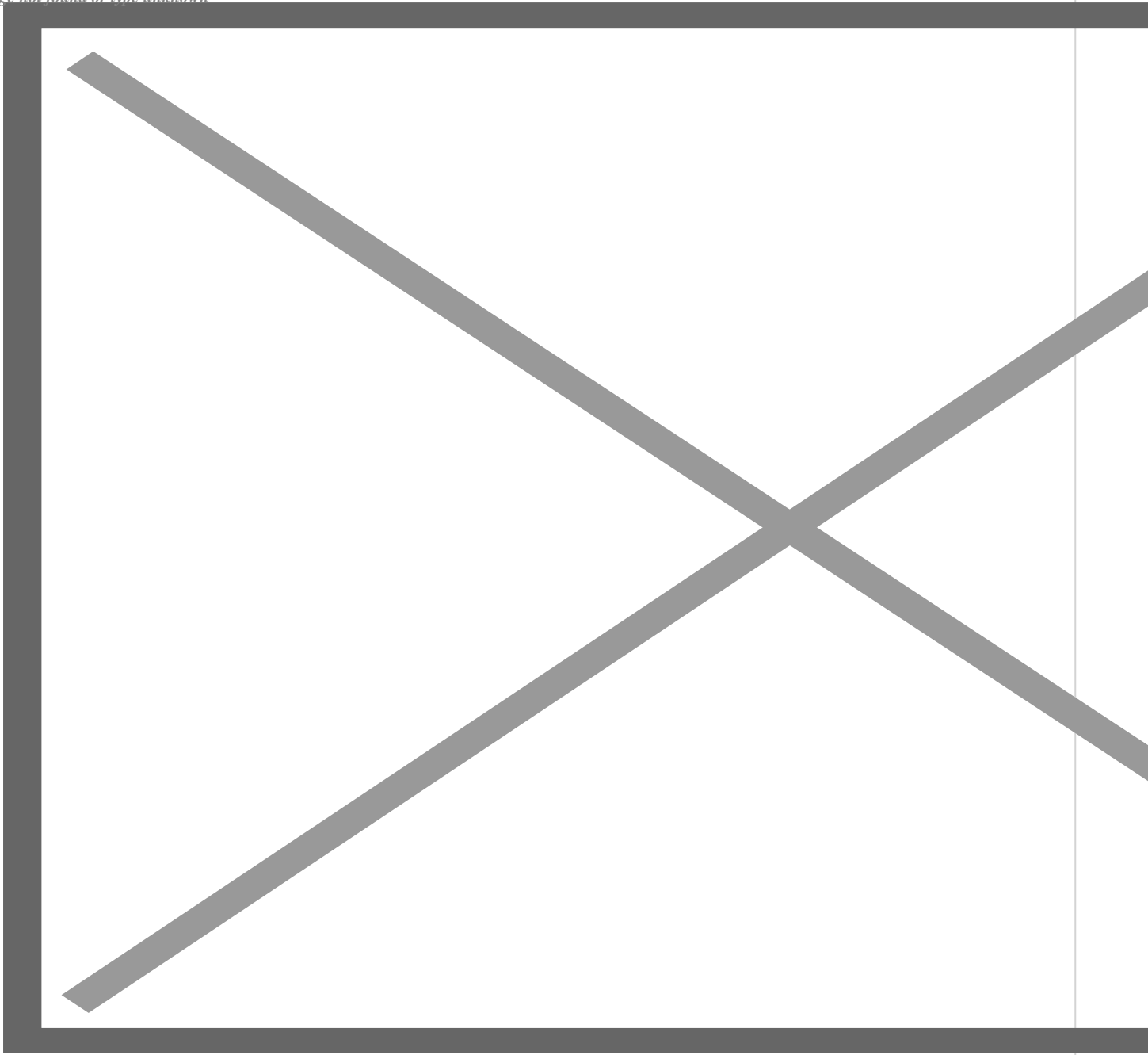


U.S. bombers fly over the Gulf amid tensions with Iran

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Tehran, December 30 (RHC)-- The United States flew strategic bombers over the Gulf on Wednesday for the second time this month, in what Washington says is a show of force meant to deter Iran from attacking American or allied targets in the Middle East.

One senior U.S. military officer said the flight by two Air Force B-52 bombers was in response to signals that Iran may be planning attacks against US allied targets in neighboring Iraq or elsewhere in the region in the coming days, even as President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office. The officer was not authorized to publicly discuss internal assessments based on sensitive intelligence and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The B-52 bomber mission, flown round trip from an Air Force base in North Dakota, reflects growing concern in Washington, in the final weeks of President Donald Trump's administration, that Iran will order further military retaliation for the U.S. killing last January 3rd of top Iranian military commander General Qassem Soleimani.

Iran's initial response, five days after the deadly U.S. drone strike, was a ballistic missile attack on a military base in Iraq that caused brain concussion injuries to about 100 American troops.

Adding to the tension was a rocket attack last week on the U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad by Iranian-supported Shia armed groups. No one was killed, but Trump tweeted afterwards that Iran was on notice.

"Some friendly health advice to Iran: If one American is killed, I will hold Iran responsible. Think it over," Trump wrote on December 23rd. In announcing Wednesday's bomber flight, the head of U.S. Central Command claimed it was a "defensive" move.

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