

Global Security Briefing – October 2018

Iran, the US and the Risk of Accidental War

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Summary

The volatility of political and security conditions in the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the wider Middle East has significantly raised the potential for armed clashes between these parties. While neither the United States nor Iran is likely to be actively seeking a war at this point, the potential for accidental escalation is very high. This has important consequences for the United Kingdom given the heavy deployment of British forces across the Middle East and their symbiotic relationship with US forces there.

Introduction

Two recent briefings in this series discussed the risks and consequences of an Israel/Iran conflict ([May 2018](#)) and the outcome of the US/North Korea summit in terms of US relations with Iran ([June 2018](#)). The first updated a 2010 ORG analysis of a war with Iran following the repudiation of the Joint Comprehensive Programme of Action (JCPOA) multilateral agreement by President Trump and the announcement of his intention to impose major sanctions on Iran unless it agreed to a range of US demands that extended beyond its nuclear programmes. The briefing concentrated on the manner in which Trump's decision might embolden Israel. Finding that, "The risk of war is currently higher than in 2006 or 2010," it concluded that:

"Apart from Iranian involvement in Syria, the key difference between 2010 and the present is the attitude of the United States towards Iran, Mr Pompeo's recent speech demonstrating that it is singularly uncompromising, to the extent that the United States would be likely to become directly involved in a war between Israel and Iran."

The second briefing pointed to an unexpected decision by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to refrain from extending the range of its surface-to-surface missiles beyond the immediate Middle East, concluding that:

"The political symbolism of the IRGC decision, even if it can easily be changed, is that Iran is prepared to engage in discussions on the JCPOA and its future, knowing that any concessions will be welcomed by the other parties to the agreement. This, in turn, will make it more difficult for the United States and Israel to engage in any direct use of force.

It is by no means impossible that we may yet see Tehran as effective as Pyongyang in dealing with the Trump administration, with President Trump, "the great deal-maker", finding it less easy to handle the world of international diplomacy than he might have expected."

This briefing updates these earlier analyses and discusses political developments in Europe, the United States and Iran. It examines the risk that markedly rising tensions in the coming months pose a significant risk of an unintended escalation to violent conflict, especially between the United States and Iran, prompted by an event or events in one of several flashpoint zones, an escalation that might be due to any one of accidents, incidents or mavericks (AIM).

While the Strait of Hormuz may be the most serious area for concern, there are other points for potential escalation, especially in Syria and Lebanon and around Yemen. There is, in addition, the specific issue of the United Kingdom's role given the steady expansion of the British military presence in the Gulf and sea lanes between the Eastern Mediterranean and Hormuz.

Political context

When President Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA agreement earlier this year it began the process of erecting sanctions against Iran, demanding a much tougher control regime for its nuclear activities and missile development programmes as well as withdrawal of Iranian units from Syria and the curbing of support for Hezbollah. The sanctions were in two phases with the second and tougher phase due to come into force on 4 November and aimed at Iran's finance system and its oil and gas industries.

The US policy change is opposed by all the other JCPOA members (UK, Germany, France, China, Russia and Iran), and the three Western European states have been working together to try and devise means of protecting Europe-based companies from the side-effects of the US sanctions regime. This difference in policy is deep-rooted and is despised by some of Trump's most influential aides, not least his National Security Advisor, John Bolton who [recently mocked Europe](#) for being "strong on rhetoric and weak on follow-through", adding "we do not intend our sanctions to be evaded by Europe or anyone else".

European financial and trade interactions with Iran are commonly conducted by companies that are also heavily engaged with the United States and the alternative arrangements being discussed in the EU may not be particularly effective. It therefore seems probable that the phase two sanctions will come into force next month and will have a substantial if progressive impact on the Iranian economy.

In Iran itself, domestic politics is complicated by three centres of power. The civil government under President Rouhani has lost much of its popularity since his election to a second term, because of an economic downturn exacerbated by widespread issues of maladministration and corruption. His administration is seeking to avoid confrontation with the United States, but phase two sanctions may well mean that the second centre of power, the Supreme Leader and the clergy, may prefer a degree of confrontation.

Finally, answerable to the Supreme Leader but powerful in its own right, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) retains considerable military power and influence and has been especially active in Syria and Iran. It sees itself as the one true guardian of the

revolution and there is a risk that some of its leaders may welcome confrontation with the United States as a means of justifying its dominance of the domestic security discourse.

The choke point risk

If there was to be a dangerous escalation then the most likely area of concern would be the Strait of Hormuz. This is the narrow entrance to the Gulf from the Indian Ocean between Iran to the north and Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the south. Through this passage move not only huge shipments of oil, gas and other goods but also substantial military forces. In the twelve months to 30 June of this year, there were 42,544 transits by oil and gas tankers, bulk carriers and dry cargo or passenger vessels, not counting fishing and other vessels below 300 tonnes. During this period the majority of all the oil and liquified natural gas exports from six countries (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE) passed through the strait. Alternative routes such as pipelines do exist but would not remotely be able to cope with the closure of the strait.

Total movement of oil and gas through the strait varies but has been reliably estimated at between 15 and 17 million barrels per day (mbd), with liquefied natural gas (LNG) transits amounting to 30% of global LNG trade. For oil and gas as a whole, in the event of the closure of the strait such alternative routes will not be able to handle more than 5 mbd, thus limiting trade by around 12 mbd.

The rapid expansion of oil and gas fracking in the United States has greatly reduced US dependence on fossil carbon imports, whereas the Gulf states have become far more important to South and East Asian states, not least India and China. Even a few days restriction of transit through the strait would lead to an immediate increase in world oil and gas prices and a longer restriction would have a world-wide impact especially on rapidly growing Asian economies, if less so on the United States.

Although the Strait of Hormuz may pose the greatest risk, it is far from being the only area of concern. Also of note is the Bab al-Mandab, the 20 km-wide strait between Djibouti and Yemen linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. The risk here is of a spill-over of the long-running and disastrous conflict in Yemen between the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and the Saudi/UAE coalition. Several ships, civilian and military, have been attacked this year by missiles fired from the Yemeni shore. As UAE-led forces close in on al-Houdeidah, the main Houthi-controlled Red Sea port, the incentive for the Houthis to fire on Western or Gulf State vessels increases.

Further elements of concern relate to the complex force dispositions in Syria, including the substantial US military base at al-Tanf, over 20 km west of the border with Iraq, as well as the largely unreported but repeated Israeli military actions against Hezbollah, Iranian and Syrian government units.

Military issues

The last major US conflict with Iran was during the “tanker war” in the closing years of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, when the US arranged for the “reflagging” of tankers at risk to enable the US to provide protection. That confrontation culminated in 1988 in Operation Praying Mantis, when the US Navy took direct action against Iranian Navy units, including the sinking of a frigate with substantial loss of life, in retaliation for a US Navy escort frigate striking an Iranian mine.

Although Iran has greatly increased its capabilities to interdict shipping should that be desired, there is little doubt that US military responses would be devastating. Even so, a combination of Iranian land-based anti-ship missiles, conventional and miniature submarine units and swarm tactics employing numerous small speed boats could initially be effective sufficient to impact on oil and gas prices and to maintain a sense of economic insecurity for weeks or even months.

It is unlikely, however, that even under conditions of serious sanction effects the Iranians would seek a major escalation and, similarly, the US Department of Defence is not looking for a war with Iran. Even if it could clearly demonstrate military dominance in the short term, the longer-term stand-off consequences could be unpredictable, as seen after offensive operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. The one caveat is that the Trump administration’s desire to punish Iran is considerable and there is concern that the current Secretary of Defence, James Mattis, may soon be replaced. This former US Marine Corps commander has turned out to be rather less hawkish than expected, his relative moderation not going down well with John Bolton and others.

The British dimension

In addition to the extensive British involvement in the US-led coalition against the so-called Islamic State (IS), focused mainly on RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus and also al-Udeid in Qatar, the Royal Navy has its Operation Kipion, a 38-year continuous naval presence operating out of Bahrain to protect international shipping and hunt for mines. This sees six British vessels constantly on patrol in the Gulf. There is also a heavy investment in facilities in Oman and use of air bases in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

In the past three years there has been a concerted effort in UK defence circles to [expand the British military presence](#) in the Indian Ocean and beyond, especially in these Gulf States. The Bahrain base has recently been expanded and will in the future host major surface vessels including the new *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers. HMS Monmouth, the first British frigate to be long-term based in Bahrain, departed Devonport this week. A large further facility is now being developed at Duqm in central Oman to support Royal Navy aircraft carriers and submarines. Indeed, two Royal Navy armed helicopters are indefinitely deployed in Oman to patrol Hormuz and the Sultanate has this month hosted the United Kingdom’s largest all-arms training exercise since 2002, Exercise Saif Sareea III.

Both RAF and Royal Navy missions in the Middle East are closely linked to larger US missions and headquarters in Qatar and Bahrain. Naval operations under Operation

Kipion contribute to three multinational maritime security missions coordinated by the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a US-commanded coalition of two dozen navies in which the United Kingdom permanently fills the deputy commander post. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that an attack on a US ship or aircraft would fail to meet with a combined response.

The AIM concern

It is probably still the case that neither side is looking for a war at present, but there remains the risk of unintended escalation through accidents, incidents or mavericks (AIM). This is frequently a problem with any potential belligerents in a crisis environment but the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandab, with their very busy shipping lanes and proximity to numerous naval bases, do raise the potential for unforeseen escalation. An accident or an otherwise routine incident such as a training exercise that might appear as the onset of aggression are both possible, as is the idea that an individual or small group might deliberately incite a conflict for their own ends while disobeying orders. What should be of considerable concern here is the sheer proximity of forces in the overcrowded and unpredictable environments of the Persian Gulf, Red Sea/Gulf of Aden and Syria.

Conclusion

Given the uncertainties in US and Iranian politics, the potential for leadership instability in Saudi Arabia after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and the volatile situation between Israel and surrounding territories, it must be recognised that we are in a period of considerable unpredictability which could lead to a sudden crisis escalation. This should be of wider international concern than at present.

There is also a more immediate issue for the United Kingdom. This is because the UK defence posture in the region is predicated on joint operations with coalition partners, with the United States as the lead partner. This raises the key question of how far the British government would go in supporting the United States should a sudden escalation in military confrontation emerge. The nature and unpredictability of the Trump administration makes it even more necessary for there to be full parliamentary scrutiny and public debate of any British involvement in further confrontation with Iran. Under present circumstances, the minority government would seem unlikely either to embrace such scrutiny or to assert its autonomy from its principal non-European partner should push come to shove.

About the Author

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