

Maximum Pressure in the Strait of Hormuz: The US-Iran Standoff

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Hegemons are never going to sound too sensible when they lock horns or joust in spats of childish anger. Power corrupts, not merely in terms of perspective but language, and making sense about the next move, the next statement, is bound to be challenging. Otherwise justified behaviour can be read as provocative; retaliatory moves duly rattle and disturb.

The Iran-US standoff is finding a surge of increments, provocations and howlers. Since the Trump administration withdrew from the 2015 Iran Nuclear deal (the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#)) last year, Tehran has gnawed and scratched at the arrangements. Threats to close the Strait of Hormuz as a retaliation for frustrating Iranian oil sales have been made. President Hassan Rouhani last week made it clear that the Islamic republic [would scale back](#) on certain JCPOA commitments. Limits on building up stockpiles of low-enriched uranium and heavy water would be abandoned. A 60-day period has been stipulated in the hope that the E3 (Britain, France and Germany), China and Russia provide relief for the Iranian oil and banking sector. More suspensions of compliance orders threaten to follow if the powers do not muck in.

Despite not being part of the JCPOA anymore, the Trump administration persists in sticking its oar in the matter. In May 3, the State Department [explicitly warned](#) it would sanction individuals and entities involved in swapping permitted uranium (enriched or natural) with Iran. Nor would excess heavy water limits be permitted.

With such moves to strangle Iran's economic feelers, it is little wonder that Rouhani has [called](#) on "surgery" to be performed on the JCPOA, one far more effectual than "the painkiller pills of the last year". Such a process, he promised, was "for saving the deal, not destroying it."

News this week that Saudi Arabian oil tankers had been sabotaged near the Strait of Hormuz had its effect, even if the Trump administration has yet to pin its colours to the claim that Iran is responsible. Give it time, and not much at that. As the [Wall Street Journal](#) put it,

"The assessment, while not conclusive, was the first suggestion by any nation that Iran was responsible for the attack".

To reporters in the Oval Office, [Trump was keen](#) to make his usual remarks about happiness, or its absence, if things turned out to be darker than he thought. "It's going to be a bad problem for Iran if something happens, I can tell you that." What, pressed reporters, did the

president mean by a “bad problem”? “You can figure it out for yourself. They know what I mean by it.”

Brian Hook, the US State Department’s special envoy on Iran, has been doing the circuit in Europe with Washington’s allies, hoping to stir some action against the meddling mullahs in a campaign of “maximum pressure”. “Everything we are doing,” Hook [tried to reason](#) with the *Sunday Times*, “is defensive.” Secretary of State Mark Pompeo also journeyed to Brussels to stir the matter. According to Hook,

“The secretary shared information and intelligence with allies and discussed the multiple plot vectors emerging from Iran.”

What a boon Iran is proving to be for the parched hawks, an endless well of threat, much of it imaginary, to draw upon in the hope of actual military engagement.

National Security Advisor John Bolton is making do with the situation, creating much mischief, turning the furniture and belongings of the entire diplomatic stable inside out like a brat in search of attention. He [blames](#) Iran, naturally, for “a number of troubling and escalatory indications and warnings”. As is the manner with all chicken hawks, he craves the blood of others and is not shy pushing it. The problem with this attitude is that having a playmate such as Iran is bound to get you, and your fellow playmates, hurt on the way. The school mistress should intervene, but her sense, and sensibility, is yet to be found.

Washington is certainly keen to make it a bad problem, a habit it has fallen into during stretches of its violent and imperial history. At Bolton’s instigation, an aircraft carrier and B-52 bombers are [being deployed](#) to the Persian Gulf on the supposedly clear grounds that Iran and its proxies are readying themselves for a strike on US forces in the region, bringing to mind similar provocations sought to stoke a potential conflict.

The planning of Operation Prairie Fire was one such ignominious example, designed to provoke Muammar Qaddafi’s Libya into a military incident in 1986. In what seemed to be a true overegging of the pudding, US Navy Task Force 60 involved three aircraft carriers operating in the Mediterranean off the Libyan coast. They were involved in exercises falling within that most stretched of terms: freedom-of-navigation. Prairie Fire turned out to be a bellicose affair, with Task Force 60 put on essentially a wartime footing. Military exercises were duly conducted to stir the beast; patrols along the coast were conducted. The beast responded with some six surface-to-air missiles. A Libyan patrol boat was duly obliterated with some satisfaction, along with two more naval vessels and a missile site in Sirte.

“We now consider all approaching Libyan forces,” [claimed](#) the White House note with some smugness, “to have hostile intent.”

US-Iran encounters in the Strait of Hormuz are also not new: the Iran-Iraq War, one which saw the US throw in its lot with Saddam Hussein’s invading armies against the Iranian Republic, featured a fair share of attacks on merchant shipping. The importance of the Strait to shipping and international traffic is again coming into play.

Trump has remained inflexible and obstinate regarding Iran. (In his wheeler-dealer world, every crook with a silver lining must be matched by a Lucifer who will be given no quarter.)

In these calculations, the silver lining of North Korea's Kim Jong-un shines far brighter than any the Islamic Republic of Iran might have. But by any referee's estimate of recent conduct by Trump and company, Washington must be seen as responsible for the most aggravating fouls.

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