

# US military operation against Iran would be a grave mistake

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*The Iran controversy is heating up. Writer and political analyst Igor Panarin believes the US should heed the reasoning of Russia, China and Turkey and refrain from going to war with Iran.*

The government of Iran has already accused Israel of being behind the assassination of Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, the Iranian nuclear scientist who was killed in Tehran earlier this month. Iran has also announced that Roshan's death will not hinder its nuclear program.

Roshan's assassination came at the height of the renewed tension between Washington and Tehran over Iran's nuclear program. Threatened with ramped-up economic sanctions by the United States, Iran has declared that it may respond by sealing the Strait of Hormuz with its navy. This brings the longstanding stand-off between the US and Iran to a probable theater of operations for first time in many years in the Strait of Hormuz.

Following Tehran's warning, the US Navy promptly sent its Fifth Fleet aircraft carrier group to the Persian Gulf, with British naval elements hurrying to join their American allies.

Meanwhile, Iran held a naval exercise titled Velayat-90 (Supremacy-90) between 24 December 2011 and 2 January 2012. The war game covered a vast area from the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. The scale of the exercise served to display Iran's readiness to engage in naval warfare outside the Persian Gulf. The Iranian Navy also used the war game to test-fire its new long-range cruise missiles, demonstrating its capability to hit US Gulf bases, Israel, and America's Arab allies in the region.

Tehran declared the drill a huge success, announcing that Stage Two of the naval exercise will follow in February. The situation is obviously developing very fast.

The Iranian exercise was promptly followed by an exchange in media assaults and aggressive rhetoric between Washington and Tehran. The two latest developments - Roshan's murder and Iran's announcement regarding its 20 per cent uranium enrichment capabilities - have propelled their already heated stand-off to the point of highly flammable. Threats of new sanctions by the West merely contribute to aggravating the situation. As the European Union stated its intention to decide on banning crude-oil imports from Iran during its coming Foreign Affairs Committee meeting on 23 January this year, Tehran announced it would respond by shutting down marine traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, which accommodates almost 40 per cent of global seaborne oil shipments, putting through some 15-17 million barrels a day. This would effectively bar about 90 per cent of aggregate oil exports by all

Gulf nations from the global market.

The Iranian naval forces, which consist of the regular navy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards' Navy, have always been a vital stakeholder for seaborne trade through the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has allowed international commercial traffic through its territorial waters voluntarily, based on the UN Law of the Sea Convention III, which stipulates the right of "innocent passage" through any territorial waters for vessels to ensure fast and unimpeded transit between open ports and the high sea. Although Iran has not ratified the convention and is therefore not bound to comply with it, it has nonetheless abided by its provisions in good faith for the most part.

Russia expressed its attitude on the issue on 12 January through a public statement by deputy foreign minister, Sergey Ryabkov, who called upon both Iran and the West to abstain from any action that may aggravate the situation in the Strait of Hormuz.

China maintains a largely similar stance, having just rejected US secretary of the treasury Timothy Geithner's call for a significant reduction in Iranian oil imports by China. Geithner addressed the People's Republic with this appeal during his visit to Beijing last week.

Russia's National Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev also made an appearance to address the issue on 12 January this year. He warned of a possible military escalation of the conflict, claiming that Israel was egging on Washington for aggressive military action.

Despite the US Navy's formidable power, the Persian Gulf's narrow inlet makes it highly vulnerable for a ground-to-ship missile strike from Iran. Even Iranian speedboats can pose a serious threat to American carriers and destroyers due to their small size coupled with their high speed, which makes them difficult to spot before they get within killing range of large US battleships. Iran can also target the Fifth Fleet with its cruise missiles from the Gulf's northern shore. Its other military assets include midget submarines, aerial drones, air-cushion vehicles, frogman squads and floating mines. Therefore, even though a military showdown between the US Navy and Iranian armed forces is likely to be a case of asymmetric warfare, Iran would have both a variety of lethal military capabilities and geography on its side.

In the words of Russia's deputy foreign minister, Sergey Ryabko, *"a military operation against Iran would be a most grave mistake, a very crude miscalculation. The consequences of such a hypothetical development of events would be most far-reaching for regional and global security."*

Russia's opposition to a Western military operation against Iran was made most explicit recently as Moscow sent its own aircraft carrier group to the port of Tartus in Syria. China has been similarly opposed to any military action against either Syria or Iran, warning that an armed conflict in the Gulf would be disastrous for the global economy and result in a humanitarian crisis.

Turkey's reluctance to back a war on Iran also poses a significant constraint for a Western military gamble. Ankara has insisted on staying within diplomatic boundaries in addressing the Iranian nuclear controversy. Foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu recently tabled Turkey's proposal to host an international conference on the Iranian nuclear issue.

The attitude of powerful regional and global actors such as Russia, China and Turkey

suggests that it would be rather prudent of Washington to follow their advice and resort to renewed diplomatic effort vis-à-vis Iran rather than enter into yet another Middle-Eastern quagmire with a highly unpredictable outcome.

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