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Iran's Persian Gulf gambit takes shape

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Responding to the onset of the European Union's oil embargo with a defiant show of military strength and renewed threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, Iran has signaled to the West that it won't be a passive victim of economic warfare.

Iranian officials this week made defiant remarks over a United States build up of forces in the Persian Gulf after a three-day missile drill concluded on Wednesday. The commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' aerospace division, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, said that all US bases in the region are within the reach of Iran's missiles.

The Great Prophet 7 exercise concluded a day after a "technical meeting" between Iran and the Iran "5 +1" on Tuesday that, as expected, failed to produce any meaningful results.

The US had dispatched two of its top proliferation experts, Gary Samore and Robert Einhorn, to the meeting in Istanbul, likely to indicate its commitment to the "diplomatic channel". However, few Iranians are convinced that the US and its Western allies are serious about reaching a compromise. As was noted by Iran's envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Ali Asghar Soltanieh, "some countries are not serious about negotiation".

Even in the US there is a rising chorus of disapproval over the Western approach toward Iran, with US commentators criticizing Western governments for failing to offer Iran any tangible rewards in exchange for concessions Tehran is willing to offer on the issue of its enriched uranium.

The international relations theorist Kenneth Waltz has also openly defended Iran's legitimate right to develop a nuclear arsenal to balance against Israel's destabilizing nuclear monopoly. (See [Why Iran does not want the bomb](#), Asia Times Online, July 4, 2012).

The credibility of the West's coercive approach to Iran has been undermined and no amount of US or Israeli propaganda can hide the fact. It is also growing harder to obscure that the rigid and inflexible Western strategy vis-a-vis Iran has put the world on the brink of a disastrous war, in light of rising temperatures in Persian Gulf.

The battle over Hormuz

Concerned over pending legislation in the Iranian *Majlis* (parliament) calling for a closure of the Strait of Hormuz - at least to oil tankers en route to countries that have accepted US sanctions - the US Navy has beefed up its presence in Persian Gulf.

The US has doubled its number of minesweepers in the regional waters to eight in recent weeks, and several squadrons of F-22s and F-15s have been relocated to nearby US base. These forces would be tasked with keeping the Strait open in the event of an Iranian attempt to close it or interfere in oil transport.

The legislation on closing the Strait, prepared by the Majlis's national security and foreign affairs committee, has already been signed by 100 deputies (from a total 290 members) and is on the verge of being sent to the floor for voting. If passed as expected, this will spur Iran's military commanders to rely more forcefully on "hard power" to respond to US sanctions.

A militarization of the Iran nuclear crisis seems likelier now than ever before, portending a volatile scenario that will impact on oil prices and the health of the world economy.

The US and its allies are gambling that Iran will refrain from disruptive behavior in Persian Gulf waters simply due to the asymmetry of any conflict. However, this rests on the erroneous assumption that Iran will bear the crippling brunt of sanctions without striking back. This is exactly what Iraq under Saddam Hussein did for a decade and half before his country - weakened considerably by the punitive measures - was subjected to a brutal, illegal invasion.

A number of Iranian pundits say the US and its allies have already declared "economic warfare" against Iran and therefore should expect stern reactions. This may come in the form of targeting Western interests in the region, undermining Persian Gulf stability, or supporting anti-North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Afghanistan.

Tehran may decide to target foreign tankers in a strategy tantamount to maritime guerrilla warfare, while playing a game of brinksmanship with the superior US military power. Other steps would be accelerating Iran's enrichment program possibly even beyond the limit of 20% to achieve weapons grade plutonium, reducing cooperation with the IAEA and even exiting the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Far from being irrational and or suicidal, Iran has calculated is that the US, economically

bleeding from military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, is ill-prepared for a war would instantly hit the American consumers in the pocket in the form of heightened oil prices, particularly in an election year.

"Iran's message to [US President Barack] Obama is very clear: we are not another Iraq and have learned the right lesson from America's invasion of Iraq after bleeding it for years," says a Tehran University political science professor who spoke on the condition of anonymity. He adds that most Iranians are "nationalistic" and will support the government in case of a military confrontation "with Uncle Sam".

For now, however, the long list of 20 nations granted exemptions from the oil embargo, covering some 80% of Iran's oil market, represent a major barrier to the war scenario, by giving Iran temporary assurance that its economic lifeline is not cut off. These exemptions by the Obama administration are subject to review in six months - after the November US presidential elections - with a view towards containing the Iran crisis. Should the US determine that most if not all of the present exemptions need to be overturned, that would be an invitation for some serious blowback.

Defying the hawkish maneuvers by the US, Iran's response is tempered by the belief that there are significant loopholes in the sanctions that give the countries breathing space. Without doubt, unless the West makes a U-turn in its present diplomatic charade the stage will be set for that eventuality sooner rather than later.