

Should the world be worried about a war in the Strait of Hormuz?

By PS Rajeev

Introduction

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani hinted at a possible [intervention in the Strait of Hormuz](#) in the Gulf waters if the US continues to impose pressure that could potentially take away crude oil revenue from Iran. He made this statement during his European tour to salvage the nuclear deal that has come under existential threat after the USA withdrew from it. The leader's words aired a possibility of another offensive in the Middle East, but this time, a direct confrontation potentially involving state actors - Iran and the US.

President Trump's order on May 8, 2018 to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal has cast serious concerns over the longevity of the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA), signed in 2015 between Iran and the permanent members of United Nations Security Council along with Germany (P5+1). The [EU condemned](#) the US decision and European leaders have since been scrambling to ensure that Iran gets sufficient economic frills to stay with the deal. However, EU firms are alarmed by the latent implications of the sanctions. They could lose their market and assets in the US if they continue to run their businesses in Iran.

Although Europe stands firmly with Iran, many believe that the [scope for salvaging the deal is limited](#) and Rouhani understands this. This might have prompted a moderate politician like him into making an aggressive statement. The vague but strong statement potentially warned of an Iranian aggression to disrupt the oil supply from the Gulf region. To be precise, Iran will block the Strait of Hormuz to seal the global oil supply if they are not allowed to sell their oil. In that case, will the US forces initiate offensive action that could muddle the Gulf waters and beyond? What could possibly be the outcome of that adventure?

The Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz is the gateway to the Gulf oil fields and a pathway for oil ships (*Figure 1*). One-fifth of the world's oil supply passes through the strait. Blocking this path will spark a severe shortage of oil and a sharp rise in oil prices.



Figure 1: The Strait of Hormuz

This is not the first time that Iranian leaders have resorted to using the Strait of Hormuz to mount pressure on their enemies as a means of deterrence. Hardline politicians and military leaders in Iran had hinted at shutting down the shipping lane if the US or Israel try to attack them.

Indeed, the Strait of Hormuz has so far provided a natural shield to Iran. Nobody dared attack the country, even when Iranian proxies aggressively disturbed and effectively altered the security environment in the region. All parties including the US knew that closing down the strait will definitely have a negative impact across the world, triggering an unwelcome chain of events such as a sharp increase in oil prices, subsequent rise in commodity and food prices, downturn of currencies and decline of economies.

The power calculus

The US has the largest defence budget in the world and several military bases across the globe, of which over a dozen are in the Middle East, with 54,000 troops under the US Central Command (CENTCOM). American military installations and regional footprints clearly show that Iran has been encircled.

Two aircraft carriers, 20 ships and 100 aircraft, along with thousands of soldiers in the US Navy's [Fifth Fleet](#) based in Bahrain will respond to any aggression in the Persian Gulf. The Fleet's [Area of Responsibility](#) (AOR) includes 2.5 million square miles in the waters and three

major choke points including the Strait of Hormuz. The Fleet comprises various Specialized Task Forces making it especially agile.

Undoubtedly, the Iranian military is no match for US forces. Their conventional military power is inferior with unsophisticated military hardware and [lacks technical modernization](#). What is it then that encourages Iran to stand upright against all the odds? The answer could lie in their forward planning, resource mobilization abilities and their heightened political will.

In the past few years, the Iranian army has been conducting [cross-training exercises](#) and demonstrating its [hybrid warfare capabilities](#). Besides, the Islamic Republic has purchased a series of Scud and No-Dong ballistic missiles from North Korea and used this technology to develop their own 'Shahab' series of [missiles](#), of which Shahab 3 has a range arguably up to Israel and beyond. Additionally, they also accelerated a [next generation intermediate-range missile](#) program targeting Saudi in 2015-2016. Iran thus has the [largest missile inventory](#) in the Gulf region which compensates for their conventional military shortcomings. Although Iranian missiles are infamous for their [inaccuracy](#), evaluative [studies](#) show that they are efficient in retaliating against any offensive action.

Most importantly, Iran has been refurbishing their navy for quick response. They are upgrading Kilo class submarines and several outdated ships¹. They are also developing midget submarines and [fast boats with guided missiles, and indigenous UAVs](#). Certain [studies](#) conclude that even the US warships would find it difficult to defend themselves if surrounded by a swarm of fast and small Iranian vessels loaded with missiles.

Moreover, the proximity factor favours Iran further. They can continue to put pressure on the US and allied forces by mounting an offensive on the strait's shipway. Harassment of oil ships will likely become the order of the day and the US may have to use much of its forces for surveillance and securitization.

The Balance Sheet

Unambiguously, the US has a clear edge over Iran in hard power parameters. However, the hybrid warfare capabilities and terrain friendly military hardware, proximity and a well thought out military doctrine make Iran a tough opponent to contain. Moreover, even if the US succeeds in regaining control of the strait, they may have to subsequently pour in extra efforts in men and money to defend the waterways.

Besides, an offensive against Iran is likely to help politically unify Iran. Currently, Iran is witnessing internal unrest with [protests](#) looming over rising inflation and unemployment rates. Such anti-government sentiment would give way to patriotism when the nation faces an external threat. The fact that Rouhani's statement was widely [welcomed](#) by his political rivals and hardliners vouches for the nation's ability to rally behind the flag at the time of crisis.

Additionally, Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), along with their external intelligence agency - Quds Forces - are effectively waging [asymmetric wars](#) across the region. Any offensive action against Iran would most likely trigger severe [proxy wars](#) and ballistic missile attacks which would destroy an already unstable region. Even with increased troop presence, the US has been struggling to articulate a strategy in Syria and to find a way out in Afghanistan, will likely find it difficult to navigate through the Strait, fighting Iran. All of these could have been the reason for President Trump's [toned down statement](#) where he made it clear that he is ready for dialogues without any pre-conditions.

On the other hand, shutting down the Strait of Hormuz will prove to be detrimental to Iran's development aspirations as Iranian economic and naval activity depend upon the free movement of goods through it. A war with the US would be counterproductive as a clear victory is unrealistic, and the disruption of oil supply will [drain wealth](#) from many other countries including Iran's trade allies such as EU, China and India, making the move unfavourable.

Therefore, an offensive in the Strait of Hormuz is highly unattractive, as it will prove to be damaging to both sides. Hence, it is important to stop the rhetoric from turning into action which will inevitably endanger the world at large and create an endless security dilemma in the region.

ⁱ IISS (2013) *The Military Balance 2013*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Routledge, pp. 377-381