

The Dangerous Chess Match... Between Iran and the US

In the arena of international diplomacy, words can be as explosive as bombs. A misspoken word or even a mistranslation can enrage a nation and even spark wars. In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a proud land with a fragile national ego perched upon the most strategic sea trade choke point in the world, there was no mistake in their recent deliberate and provocative verbal threat aimed at the nations they see as responsible for the downturn in their economy.

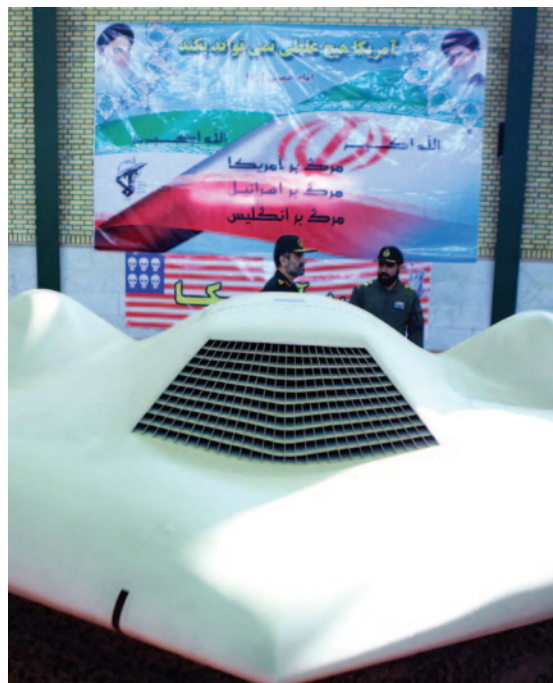
Who are those nations? The United States and the European Union, who together import 30% of the world's oil. These strong-arm tactics against the "Western infidels" can send world stock and futures markets into a frenzy, and the price of oil and gas at the pump skyrocketing. Therefore, the Western powers view threats to this strategic trade route as a matter of national and global security and will not sit idly by if the strait is closed.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf has catapulted this tiny strip of water to the forefront of world news in the last two months.



It's Saturday, December 24, 2011. Under the intense heat of the Arabian sun, dozens of ships flagged with the banner of the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy begin to fan out across the choppy waters of the Persian Gulf. A handful of large frigates are flanked by numerous smaller craft armed with Russian and Chinese anti-ship missiles and other heavy artillery. Iranian aircraft whiz by overhead in various formations, engaging in mock preparatory battles. The war games have begun.

Iranian naval vessels spread out in various exercises varying from the Persian Gulf all the way down to the Gulf of Aden, sandwiched between Yemen in the north and Somalia to the south. Simultaneously, Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, head of the navy, appears on state-controlled television. Iran, he explains, is beginning a 10-day-long military exercise called Velayat (Supreme) 90, a reference to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. "To show off its might, the navy needs to be present in international waters. It is necessary to demonstrate the navy's defense capabilities," he declared pompously.



Iran proudly trumpeted its success when it managed to capture an American spy drone.

Relations between Iran and the West have been simmering for a long time now. Iran stubbornly persists with its nuclear program in spite of the sharp condemnation and threats from Western leaders. Now, though, Iran has carried the struggle to a new level of provocation.

On November 29, 2011, furious Iranian demonstrators surrounded the British Embassy in Tehran. In the attack, Iranian protestors smashed windows of the embassy building, set fires and destroyed the British flag. The assault was in retaliation for sanctions imposed by the American, British and Canadian governments against Iran's oil exportation. Obviously no demonstration can take place in the tightly government-controlled atmosphere of modern-day Iran, so the incident was clearly sanctioned by Iran's highest leaders. The British government responded accordingly by immediately terminating diplomatic relations with Iran and deporting all Iranian diplomats from Great Britain.

For all its bravado, Iran's military maneuvers near the Strait of Hormuz were laughable since its motley band of naval vessels, ranging in age from 15 to 50 years, do not really intimidate anyone. Accordingly, the matter did not draw much serious comment from the West... until three days later when Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi came on the air and declared, "If they [the Western powers] impose sanctions on Iran's oil exports, then not even one drop of oil will flow through the Strait of Hormuz."

This announcement triggered fears across the globe and oil prices quickly began to rise. Closing the Strait of Hormuz has the potential to result in a worldwide economic crisis worse than the Arab oil embargo of 1973.

Pentagon spokesman George Little said in response to Rahimi's message, "Any attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz will not be tolerated. [The Strait is] an economic lifeline for countries in the Gulf region."

A spokesman for the Obama administration declared, "[We have been] committed to Gulf security for decades and it should come as no surprise to anyone that we'll do what we must to ensure the strait remains open."

Iran remains irritatingly stubborn though. Iranian Brigadier General Hossein Salami declared, "We ask for no other country's permission for the implementation of our defense strategies.... Our response to threats is threats."

The Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz is a passageway that connects the Persian Gulf on the west with the Gulf of Oman in the east. The waterway between them is bounded by Iran in the north and Oman in the south and is so narrow that it is barely observable on a globe. At its narrowest the strait is only 21 miles wide, but in fact the area that is navigable to shipping traffic is much smaller. There is only a two-mile strip available for ships traveling in each direction with a two-mile divide between the two lanes.

From a strictly legal standpoint the Strait of Hormuz should be controlled by its two neighbors, Iran and Oman, but under a UN agreement (which was not ratified by all involved countries but is recognized by the US and other Western nations) all shipping must be allowed to pass through the strait without any limitations being imposed.

The 615-mile-long Persian Gulf is enclosed on all sides with the exception of this narrow strait that leads into the Gulf of Oman. From there shipping can continue on to the Arabian Sea and eventually to the Indian Ocean. Because of the geographical qualities of the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz has always played a key role in Middle Eastern politics. Besides Iran, there are seven countries that border the Gulf—Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)



Iran test-fired nine long- and medium-range missiles during the war games that Iranian officials said aimed to show the country can retaliate against any US or Israeli attack.



Iran tests a medium-range surface-to-air missile during their navy war games near the strategic Strait of Hormuz.



Iran's naval commander Habibollah Sayyari gestures as he speaks with the media during the Velayat-90 exercise.

— representing some of the world's largest producers of oil, the number one source of heat and power in modern times; the status of the narrow strait significantly affects the politics of the entire world. The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) declares it to be "by