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Iran's agitation in the Gulf hides defeat at home

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Tensions in the Gulf are increasing. In the past two months alone, several incidents have been reported of Iran "harassing" foreign navy ships.

On March 25, United States Navy commanders accused Iran of harassing warships going through the Strait of Hormuz. Two weeks earlier, several Iranian assault craft came dangerously close to both a US and a British navy ship. A similar incident occurred earlier that same month.

Commanders of Iran's armed forces have had mixed reactions. They have variously rejected some accusations, thrown the blame on to the other side or issued warnings. In the latest statements, Brig Gen Masoud Jazayeri, deputy chief of staff of Iran's armed forces, said: "We emphasise that the Americans would be responsible for any unrest in the Gulf and again warn that the US military must change its behaviour."

All this may lead to the belief that there is going to be a direct armed confrontation between Iran and the US in the Gulf. However, it is extremely unlikely that these minor clashes and rhetoric would lead to what would be a grave military miscalculation that would turn Gulf tensions into a regional conflagration.

The major reasons for my argument are anchored in the history of Iran-US relations in the Gulf, as well as the fact that it is not in the political interests of Iran's ruling clerics to engage in a war with the US, despite the rhetoric.

First, America's military capabilities are much superior to those of Iran. The US military could single-handedly destroy, or significantly damage, Iran's conventional armed forces and military infrastructure in a matter of weeks. In any hypothetical war other global and regional powers are more likely to ally with the US because Tehran has repeatedly threatened to shut the Strait of Hormuz, which is vital to the oil trade, and inflict damage on other Gulf states. Such a war would significantly damage Iran's economy because nearly 70 per cent of its revenues originate from oil exports passing through the strait. Moreover, Iran's leaders are aware that a large number of their own people are disenchanted and disaffected with the government. An external war might offer a ripe environment for civil unrest.

Tehran might employ its asymmetric warfare capabilities; it may sporadically hit some targets in the Gulf with its missiles, or affect the global oil market by causing prices to rocket. But all these consequences are temporary and can be contained.

We should remember that the key objective of Iran's ruling political establishment is to hold on to power. A Gulf war would be suicidal and have devastating strategic, political and economic consequences for Tehran.

So why does Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps provoke and make dangerous military manoeuvres in the Gulf?

First of all, Iranian leaders are attempting to set the tone with the Trump administration by resorting to the classic tactic of rhetoric and showing off.

In the past four decades, Iran has learnt that tactics such as harassing US ships or taking American navy hostages have always made the US back away.

Tehran is also attempting to show how strategically important it is. For Iran, projecting power over the Strait of Hormuz and reminding the world of its nuclear programme are the way to ensure the survival of the Islamic Republic's political establishment from foreign threats.

Finally, Iranian leaders are attempting to appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of their own population. Broadcasting Iranian generals bragging about Iran's power and how they forced the US to retreat is a powerful domestic tool.

Since 1979, Iranian media has directed headlines towards its "enemies" in the Gulf and beyond, and it has created a state of constant emergency regarding national security to divert attention from domestic problems such as economic mismanagement, poverty, corruption and unemployment.