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No Exit in the Persian Gulf?

By Tom Engelhardt

January 31, 2012

When it comes to U.S. policy toward Iran, irony is the name of the game. Where to begin? The increasingly fierce sanctions that the Obama administration is seeking to impose on that country's oil business will undoubtedly cause further problems for its economy and [further pain](#) to ordinary Iranians. But they are likely to be splendid news for a few other countries that Washington might not be quite so eager to favor.

Take China, which already buys 22% of Iran's oil. With its energy-ravenous economy, it is likely, in the long run, to buy more, not less Iranian oil, and — thanks to the new sanctions — at what might [turn out](#) to be [bargain basement prices](#). Or consider Russia once the Eurozone is without Iranian oil. That giant energy producer is likely to find itself with a [larger market share](#) of European energy needs at higher prices. The Saudis, who [want high oil prices](#) to fund an expensive payoff to their people to avoid an Arab Spring, are likely to be delighted. And [Iraq](#), with its porous border, its thriving black market in Iranian oil, and its Shi'ite government in Baghdad, will be pleased to help Iran avoid sanctions. (And thank you, America, for that invasion!)

Who may suffer, other than Iranians? In the long run, the [shaky economies](#) of Italy, Greece, and Spain, long dependent on Iranian oil, potentially raising [further problems](#) for an already roiling Eurozone. And don't forget the U.S. economy, or your own pocketbook, if gas prices [go up](#), or

even President Obama, if his bet on oil sanctions turns out to be an economic disaster in an election year.

In other words, [once again](#) Washington's (and Tel Aviv's) carefully calculated plans for Iran may go seriously, painfully awry. Now, in all honesty, wouldn't you call that Kafkaesque? Or perhaps that's a question for the Pentagon, where, it turns out, Kafka is in residence. I'm talking, of course, about Lieutenant Commander Mike Kafka. He's a spokesman for the Navy's Fleet Forces Command — believe me, you can't make this stuff up — and just the other day he was over at the old five-sided [castle](#) being [relatively close-mouthed](#) about the retrofitting of a Navy amphibious transport docking ship as a special operations “mothership” (a term until now reserved for sci-fi novels and [Somali pirates](#)). It's soon to be dispatched to somewhere in or near the Persian Gulf to be a floating base for Navy SEAL covert actions of unspecified sorts, guaranteed *not* to bring down the price of oil.

Certainly, the dispatch of that ship in July will only ratchet up tensions in the Gulf, a place that already, according to Michael Klare, [TomDispatch regular](#) and author of the upcoming book [The Race for What's Left: The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources](#), is the most potentially explosive spot on the planet. *Tom*

Hormuz-Mania

Why closure of the Strait of Hormuz could ignite a war and a global depression
by Michael T. Klare

Ever since Dec. 27, war clouds have been gathering over the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow body of water connecting the Persian Gulf with the Indian Ocean and the seas beyond. On that day, Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi warned that Tehran would block the strait and create havoc in international oil markets if the West placed new economic sanctions on his country.

“If they impose sanctions on Iran's oil exports,” Rahimi [declared](#), “then even one drop of oil cannot flow from the Strait of Hormuz.” Claiming that such a move would constitute an assault on America's vital interests, President Obama reportedly [informed](#) Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that Washington would use force to keep the strait open. To back up their threats, both sides have been [bolstering](#) their forces in the area and each has [conducted](#) a series of provocative military exercises.

All of a sudden, the Strait of Hormuz has become the most combustible spot on the planet, the most likely place to witness a major conflict between well-armed adversaries. Why, of all locales, has it become so explosive?

Oil, of course, is a major part of the answer, but — and this may surprise you — only a part.

Petroleum remains the world's most crucial source of energy, and about one-fifth of the planet's oil supply travels by tanker through the strait. “Hormuz is the world's most important oil choke point due to its daily oil flow of almost 17 million barrels in 2011,” the U.S. Department of

Energy [noted](#) as last year ended. Because no other area is capable of replacing these 17 million barrels, any extended closure would produce a global shortage of oil, a price spike, and undoubtedly attendant economic panic and disorder.

No one knows just how high oil prices would go under such circumstances, but many energy analysts believe that the price of a barrel might immediately leap by \$50 or more. “You would get an international reaction that would not only be high, but irrationally high,” [says](#) Lawrence J. Goldstein, a director of the Energy Policy Research Foundation. Even though military experts assume the U.S. will use its overwhelming might to clear the strait of Iranian mines and obstructions in a few days or weeks, the chaos to follow in the region might not end quickly, keeping oil prices elevated for a long time. Indeed, some analysts fear that oil prices, already hovering around \$100 per barrel, would quickly double to more than \$200, erasing any prospect of economic recovery in the United States and Western Europe, and possibly plunging the planet into a renewed Great Recession.

The Iranians are well aware of all this, and it is with such a nightmare scenario that they seek to deter Western leaders from further economic sanctions and other more covert acts when they threaten to close the strait. To calm such fears, U.S. officials have been equally adamant in stressing their determination to keep the strait open. In such circumstances of heightened tension, one misstep by either side might prove calamitous and turn mutual rhetorical belligerence into actual conflict.

Military Overlord of the Persian Gulf

In other words, oil, which makes the global economy hum, is the most obvious factor in the eruption of war talk, if not war. Of at least equal significance are allied political factors, which may have their roots in the geopolitics of oil but have acquired a life of their own.

Because so much of the world’s most accessible oil is concentrated in the Persian Gulf region, and because a steady stream of oil is absolutely essential to the well-being of the U.S. and the global economy, it has long been American policy to prevent potentially hostile powers from acquiring the capacity to dominate the Gulf or block the Strait of Hormuz. President Jimmy Carter first articulated this position in January 1980, following the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. “Any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America,” he [told](#) a joint session of Congress, “and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”

In accordance with this precept, Washington designated itself the military overlord of the Persian Gulf, equipped with the military might to overpower any potential challenger. At the time, however, the U.S. military was not well organized to implement the president’s initiative, known ever since as the [Carter Doctrine](#). In response, the Pentagon created a new organization, the [U.S. Central Command](#) (CENTCOM), and quickly endowed it with the wherewithal to crush any rival power or powers in the region and keep the sea lanes under American control.

CENTCOM first went into action in 1987-1988, when Iranian forces attacked Kuwaiti and Saudi oil tankers during the Iran-Iraq War, threatening the flow of oil supplies through the strait. To protect the tankers, President Reagan ordered that they be “reflagged” as American vessels and escorted by U.S. warships, putting the Navy into potential conflict with the Iranians for the first time. Out of this action came the disaster of [Iran Air Flight 655](#), a civilian airliner carrying 290 passengers and crew members, all of whom died when the plane was hit by a missile from the USS *Vincennes*, which mistook it for a hostile fighter plane — a tragedy long forgotten in the United States but still deeply resented in Iran.

Iraq was America’s de facto ally in the Iran-Iraq war, but when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 — posing a direct threat to Washington’s dominance of the Gulf — the first President Bush ordered CENTCOM to protect Saudi Arabia and drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. And when Saddam rebuilt his forces, and his very existence again came to pose a latent threat to America’s dominance in the region, the second President Bush ordered CENTCOM to invade Iraq and eliminate his regime altogether (which, as no one is likely to forget, resulted in a string of disasters).

If oil lay at the root of Washington’s domineering role in the Gulf, over time that role evolved into something else: a powerful expression of America’s status as a global superpower. By becoming the military overlord of the Gulf and the self-appointed guardian of oil traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, Washington said to the world: “We, and we alone, are the ones who can ensure the safety of your daily oil supply and thereby prevent global economic collapse.” Indeed, when the Cold War ended — and with it an American sense of pride and identity as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism in Europe and Asia — protection of the flow of Persian Gulf oil became America’s greatest claim to superpowerdom, and it remains so today.

Every Option on Every Table

With the ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the one potential threat to U.S. domination of the Persian Gulf was, of course, [Iran](#). Even under the U.S.-backed shah, long Washington’s man in the Gulf, the Iranians had sought to be the paramount power in the region. Now, under a militant Shi’ite Islamic regime, they have proven no less determined and — call it irony — thanks to Saddam’s overthrow and the rise of a Shi’ite-dominated government in Baghdad, they have managed to extend their political reach in the region. With Saddam’s fate in mind, they have also built up their defensive military capabilities and — in the view of many Western analysts — embarked on a [uranium-enrichment program](#) with the potential to supply fissile material for a nuclear weapon, should the Iranian leadership choose someday to take such a fateful step.

Iran thus poses a double challenge to Washington’s professed status in the Gulf. It is not only a reasonably well-armed country with significant influence in Iraq and elsewhere, but by promoting its nuclear program, it threatens to vastly complicate America’s future capacity to pull off punishing attacks like those launched against Iraqi forces in 1991 and 2003.

While Iran’s military budget is modest-sized at best and its [conventional military capabilities](#) will never come close to matching CENTCOM’s superior forces in a direct confrontation, its potential pursuit of nuclear-arms capabilities greatly complicates the strategic calculus in the

region. Even without taking the final steps of manufacturing actual bomb components — and no evidence [has yet surfaced](#) that the Iranians have proceeded to this critical stage — the Iranian nuclear effort has greatly alarmed other countries in the Middle East and called into question the continued robustness of America’s regional dominance. From Washington’s perspective, an Iranian bomb — whether real or not — poses an existential threat to America’s continued superpower status.

How to prevent Iran not just from going nuclear but from maintaining the threat to go nuclear has, in recent years, become an obsessional focus of American foreign and military policy. Over and over again, U.S. leaders have considered plans for using military force to cripple the Iranian program through air and missile strikes on known and suspected nuclear facilities. Presidents Bush and Obama have both refused to take such action “off the table,” as Obama made clear most recently in his [State of the Union address](#). (The Israelis have also repeatedly [indicated](#) their desire to take such action, possibly as a prod to Washington to get the job done.)

Most serious analysts have concluded that military action would prove [extremely risky](#), probably causing numerous civilian casualties and inviting fierce Iranian retaliation. It might not even achieve the intended goal of halting the Iranian nuclear program, much of which is now being conducted [deep underground](#). Hence, the consensus view among American and European leaders has been that economic sanctions should instead be employed to force the Iranians to the negotiating table, where they could be induced to abandon their nuclear ambitions in return for various economic benefits. But those escalating sanctions, which appear to be causing [increasing economic pain](#) for ordinary Iranians, have been described by that country’s leaders as an “[act of war](#),” justifying their threats to block the Strait of Hormuz.

To add to tensions, the leaders of both countries are under extreme pressure to vigorously counter the threats of the opposing side. President Obama, up for re-election, has come under fierce, even hair-raising, [attack](#) from the contending Republican presidential candidates (except, of course, [Ron Paul](#)) for failing to halt the Iranian nuclear program, though none of them have a credible plan to do so. He, in turn, has been taking an ever-harsher stance on the issue. Iranian leaders, for their part, appear increasingly [concerned](#) over the deteriorating economic conditions in their country and, no doubt fearing an Arab Spring–like popular upheaval, are becoming more bellicose in their rhetoric.

So oil, the prestige of global dominance, Iran’s urge to be a regional power, and domestic political factors are all converging in a combustible mix to make the Strait of Hormuz the most dangerous place on the planet. For both Tehran and Washington, events seem to be moving inexorably toward a situation in which mistakes and miscalculations could become inevitable. Neither side can appear to give ground without losing prestige and possibly even their jobs. In other words, an existential test of wills is now under way over geopolitical dominance in a critical part of the globe, and on both sides there seem to be ever fewer doors marked “EXIT.”

As a result, the Strait of Hormuz will undoubtedly remain the ground zero of potential global conflict in the months ahead.