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Persian Gulf primed to explode

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"US navy fires on Emirate boat out of fear of Iran" - headline in Kayhan Newspaper, Tehran.

The Persian Gulf powder keg may soon explode if the current cycle of mounting tensions continues unabated. Two days ago, a minor incident involving a US refueling warship and an Indian fishing boat off the coast of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) resulted in one fatality and three wounded. That the fishermen insist they were fired on without a warning - contrary to the US navy's assertion - gives us a prelude to more ominous developments on the horizon. It seems trigger-happy American sailors see gathering clouds of conflict and are taking preemptive measures that, in this particular case, made a small dent in otherwise amicable US-India relations.

In a sign of New Delhi's unwillingness to call for an inquiry into the incident, however, it has not voiced even a whisper of criticism of the US. Initially, US media reported that the incident was a US warning to "Iran and al-Qaeda" to stay away from US warships, in light of Iran's renewed threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. This reflects a US siege mentality that also underscores the Persian Gulf region's growing volatility and potential for imminent maritime tensions.

This spike in tensions is also partly due to the US navy's bulked up presence in the region. The Pentagon on July 16 deployed an extra aircraft carrier there months ahead of schedule. It is also organizing unprecedented mine-sweeping exercise in the area - this month it deployed four additional minesweepers and additional fighter jets to the region.

The resulting overcrowding of Persian Gulf waters with the US fleet is an invitation for similar incidents to this week's fatal encounter. Accidental confrontations could easily escalate into something bigger in coming weeks and months, particularly if the US and Iran bump into each other.

There is no guarantee that a US-Iran war would not be triggered by such incidents, since there is no military-to-military hotline or similar communications to handle such emergencies. In spite of some US overtures toward such a preventive mechanism, Iran refuses to consider it, as well as any other "incident at sea" protocols, since it regards the US presence in the Persian Gulf as fundamentally illegitimate.

The thickening fog of suspicion and mutual distrust is growing more dangerous, with the US pondering the possibility of an Iranian provocation and Tehran studying the US's inclination to resort to shows of force to assert its hegemony. Beyond such tactical questions, the larger strategic question is what is Washington's ultimate aim?

From Tehran's vantage point, it scored big points in recent drills that convinced the West of its vastly improved missile capability, contrary to various US expert studies that have painted a different picture, citing the Iranian missiles' lack of precision and relatively low payload. Confronted by a more lethal adversary than previously thought, the US is now treading a fine line by relying on its military muscle to deter any Iranian "asymmetrical" provocation that could see oil prices soar. The US containment strategy may not work, however, if Tehran decides to up the ante against the US over the sanctions that are hurting the Iranian economy.

This is unlikely to happen, however, as major US exemptions for the Iran oil sanctions will, at least for the next five months, give the green light for business to continue mostly as usual with regards to Iran's oil shipments. Should the US choose to remove those exemptions when they are up for review, Iran may opt for more direct action in the Persian Gulf.

In this rapidly evolving milieu, the Persian Gulf is hostage to the geostrategic calculations of, on the one hand, a Western superpower and its local client states and, on the other, a traditional regional power with growing military prowess. What makes the scenario more dangerous is that the whole picture is moving in the direction of a zero-sum game of strategy, that is, a win-lose scenario, increasingly bereft of prior shades of grey indicating "shared" or "parallel" interests. This sharpening of conflicting interests is ready-made fuel for open conflict in the Persian Gulf.

In the assortment of available remedies, one can easily point to the on-going multilateral nuclear talks between Iran and the "5 +1" nations (the United Nations Security Council permanent five members plus Germany) that have now been degraded to the level of experts. If the Western nations headed by the United States decide to continue with the uncompromising approach already seen at Iran Six meetings in Baghdad and Moscow, however, the nuclear standoff will linger and possibly worsen.

To de-escalate tensions with Iran, the West will need to take a vastly different negotiation

strategy, one that is willing to trade sanctions for concessions. However, in a US election year, this is unlikely to happen.