A Volatile Persian Gulf: US-Iran tensions have spiked. Their conflict is being closely watched by Russia and China

Following attacks on a US tanker and a drone, President Trump nearly ordered a surgical strike on Iran. As the region stands at the brink of escalation, some are watching with great interest.

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Iran’s move to begin pulling back from its commitments under the nuclear deal, and the US announcement that a further 1,000 troops are to be sent to the Middle East, mark yet another escalation in tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the US.

After the recent attacks against the two oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, it seems as if the Trump administration is stepping beyond what it calls “maximum pressure” on Tehran.

What is clear to everyone watching, though afraid of a future war, is that both Tehran and Washington have failed miserably in making their cases to the world — the attacks on the two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman put aside, what remains as a great danger is that the war of words between the hawks of Tehran and those of Washington could spill over into an outright conflict.

There is a real danger that Iran, if attacked even surgically, could launch a kind of proxy war against American interests in Jordan, Egypt — and even in Central Asia — while carrying out sporadic attacks on ships and tankers sailing in the Persian Gulf.

Let us not forget that some of the hawkish voices in Iran, including the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), believe profoundly in launching some kind of military response against the diplomatic, economic and eventually, military pressures of the US and its allies.
Signals of War? If the US surgically struck Iranian sites, Iran could launch a proxy war in Jordan, where America is heavily invested. (Photo: Reuters)

The irony of the story is that despite the fact that both administrations declare in words that they are not ready for war, they send multiple signals to each other that war might be around the corner.

The attack against the two tankers shows us that signals are very often misunderstood — while sometimes, bellicose rhetoric might turn into military adventure.

Worried by the turn of the situation, many powerful countries like Russia, China, France and Germany are already urging caution. The European Union’s call for de-escalation of the situation, especially in the past ten days, is mainly due to the fact that they have a distrust of the Trump administration’s exaggerations and its misrepresentations of the facts. But, at the same time, they feel fully concerned by Tehran’s non-predictable reactions against the US sanctions and the weakening of moderates in Iran.

As for the Russians, they are quite confident that they will be the true winners of any kind of military or non-military tension between Iran and the US, since the official line
of thought in the Kremlin is that by trying to isolate Iran, the United States is only isolating itself. According to the Kremlin, war threats coming out of Washington reflect a fundamental weakness in the Trump administration. But all in all, what is important for Russia is maintaining its hegemony in the Middle East, either with Iran or with another allied nation in the region. This desire for hegemony limits the level of support of Russia for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Also, the more economic, financial and military problems faced by Iran, the lower the chances that it will be able to prevent Russian dominance in a post-war Syria.

Interestingly, the crisis in the Persian Gulf is also giving a new hegemonic role to China — China’s influence in the Middle East has expanded significantly over the last decade, and its power will likely grow further and faster in the case of a rise of tensions between Iran and the US. The expansion of Chinese power and influence in the region needs to be tracked closely in its relations with Iran. Though Iran’s relationship with China is one-sided, and in favour of Chinese geopolitics, yet China has been providing Iran with great material support — according to a report by Jonathan Fulton at the Atlantic Council, “in 2017 China’s CITIC Group, a state-owned investment firm, provided a $10 billion line of credit to the Iranian government, knowing that it could again face US sanctions.”

Chinese Chequers: Given its strategic importance, the Middle East has seen China’s role in its economy only grow. (Photo: Reuters)
There is a divergence in how China and the United States approach the Iran problem. Certainly, they both want a stable Iran and Middle East, which support their strategic and economic concerns, but both nations have different modes of approach to the problem. That Iran is geo-strategically situated in the Persian Gulf and the Near East provides some leverage for China, but all depends how things are handled in the near future by Tehran and Washington.

Unfortunately, things are much more complicated both inside Iran and among the hawkish elements of the US administration. It is no secret that some powerful factions in the Trump administration advocate war as a means to overthrow the Iranian government.

For example, the National Security Advisor, John Bolton, announced a short while ago that Washington would send an aircraft carrier group to the Persian Gulf. As a result, Pentagon officials planned to deploy Patriot missile batteries and the Defense Department considered sending up to 1,20,000 troops to the region.

As for Iranians officials, they have made it clear that they will not negotiate while bearing the sanctions of the Trump administration’s pressure campaign.

*War? Status Quo? Which way will Donald Trump go? (Photo: AP)*

Last but not least, the current situation has reduced Iran’s financial resources and the country’s ability to devote them to foreign operations, including in Syria, Lebanon and
Yemen, which are considered as the chains of resistance against Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE.

But, on the whole, the atmosphere of crisis and uncertainty in the Middle East is good for no one, because it creates a number of negative consequences, including lower investment, weak tourism and rising economic distress. The Middle Easterners, Iranian, Arab, Israeli or Turk, are the real victims of any future conflict in the region.

As for the superpowers, any future confrontation with Iran would help maximize the possibility of a Middle East that could become a focus of superpower competition in the coming decades.

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