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HOW TO PREVENT WAR AT THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ?

The recent naval encounter between the US and Iran extended their cold war for the first time to the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Such incidents could escalate into armed conflict, with catastrophic consequences for the world economy, especially the price of oil. To prevent such escalation, Washington and Tehran should establish a "hot line" and an Incident-at-Sea agreement as Washington and Moscow did during the Cold War.

However, instead of calming down the situation and seeking a creative way of preventing such encounters from escalating into confrontation in the future, the Bush administration increased tensions by exaggerating the episode as if it were a real crisis.

President Bush depicted the maneuver of the Iranian speed boats as "a provocative act," linked it to America's dispute with Iran over the nuclear issue, and declared that Iran was, is and continues to be a threat if it is "allowed to learn how to

enrich uranium." Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates categorically dismissed the view that the Iranian sailors had behaved in a fully proper manner, and the State Department formally protested the actions of the Iranian patrol boats.

Such hyperbolic charges reveal a dismal lack of understanding of Iran's unmatched geo-strategic position at the Strait, and of the conception held by the Iranian leaders about the Strait's security in times of peace and war. Recognizing Iran's vital interest in the Strait is a crucial first step to establishing a hot line between Washington and Tehran.

Geo-strategically, the narrow and shallow Strait of Hormuz constitutes, as I coined it in 1979, the world's "global chokepoint." Oil tankers carrying Gulf oil exports must pass through the Strait before traversing the Bab al-Mandab and Suez Canal waterways to the Eastern Mediterranean or the

sea lanes of the Strait of Malacca in the Pacific Ocean. As the dominant Persian Gulf power at this "chokepoint," Iran stands as the "global gatekeeper" for world oil markets. Iran's territorial water abuts the entire eastern shore of the Strait, and numerous Iranian islands dot the sea lanes of the Strait.

Iran considers the safe passage of all ships through the international waters of the Strait as inseparable from its vital interest in the security of the Persian Gulf. Iran's oil, the backbone of its economy, needs to be exported through the Strait. Ideologically Iranian policy makers view the Strait as a "divine blessing" and strategically they see it as Iran's "key asset" in any "defensive war."

Tehran is committed to the right of transit passage for all ships through the Strait. Yet any prolonged obstruction of Iran's oil exports by perceived enemies such as the United

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States could prompt Iran to retaliate by blocking the Strait. This guiding principle was set by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini during the Iraq-Iran war. He warned that if Iran's oil exports through the Strait were interrupted by hostile acts, Iran would prevent "the passage of a single drop of petroleum from there" to world markets.

Hojatolislam Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the Speaker of the Iranian parliament during the Iraq-Iran war, considered "such an eventuality unlikely." But he warned those Americans who doubted Iran's capability that Iran could effectively close the Strait by creating "a wall of fire" over it, firing its guns from Qeshm and Lark islands near the Strait, and launching air-to-sea missiles from planes, and from underground depots.

The danger of an escalating incident at the Strait has expanded exponentially in recent years. Iran's military capabilities have increased dramatically, rendering it more able than ever to close the Strait, if at all necessary. On the American side, the Bush administration has massively expanded the presence of American warships in the Persian Gulf, in the wake of war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Whether or not the recent maneuvers of Iranian speed boats were timed to occur just before the anti-Iranian Bush visit to the Middle East, the fact re-

mains that the risk of an "accidental war" has grown considerably. Bush's efforts to rally Sunni Arab states against Shia Iran meet with disbelief, as these countries recognize all too well that Bush's threat of "serious consequences" against Iran, if effected, will harm them and the international community as well.

The creation of a hot line between Washington and Tehran therefore will help prevent future incidents from turning into armed hostilities. Beyond the immediate goal of preventing the outbreak of a potential war in the Strait, a U.S.-Iran hot line could serve four additional important goals.

First, this can be a catalyst for a broader Incidents-at-Sea agreement between the two countries encompassing the entire Persian Gulf. During the Cold War, the U.S. signed an Incidents-at-Sea agreement with the Soviet Union to avoid accidental warfare by deepening the military-to-military communication between the various parties. The agreement was successful in minimizing the number of incidents between ships and aircraft of the two navies, thus reducing the danger of the inadvertent escalation of a minor incident at sea into something far more serious.

Second, it could aid the establishment of a collective regional

security system in the Persian Gulf, including, I propose, neutral patrol boats under the flag of the United Nations.

Third, it could help restore Iran-U.S. diplomatic relations in the long run. Contrary to widely held myths, Iran has never closed its door to diplomatic relations with the United States. Khomeini left the door ajar "if America behaves itself," that is, if the United States refrains from imposing its will on Iran. His successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, subscribes to the Khomeini line, saying that Iran's lack of contacts with the United States "does not mean that we will not have relations indefinitely."

Fourth, the increased hostilities between Iran and America redounds to the benefit of Iran's hawks. Conversely, the reduction of such animosity by any means, including a U.S.-Iran hot line, could help Iran's doves who want relations with the United States. More importantly, it could aid their struggle, in spite of all acts of repression, to advance democracy and human rights in Iran.

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