



How To Turn Iran's Tanker Mischief Against The Islamic Republic

June 19, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman** *USA Today*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Middle East; Iran

By now, there is ample evidence that last week's attack on two oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz was the work of the Iranian regime, as the Trump administration has alleged. A video released by the U.S. military in the aftermath of the incident documents Iranian sailors removing what appears to be an unexploded mine from one of the tankers, the Japanese-owned *Kokura Courageous*. This, coupled with assessments from the U.S. intelligence community, have forced even President Trump's fiercest critics to concede that Tehran was the likely culprit.

But what, exactly, should Washington do in response? Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has made clear that the United States is not seeking conflict with Iran, despite the provocation. Yet some sort of American response is clearly required, lest the Iranian regime be emboldened to carry out additional acts of sabotage in one of the world's most vital commercial waterways, through which a fifth of world oil transits.

Iran's goal

Here, it's necessary to understand what Iran is seeking to achieve. The answer, in a nutshell, is dissuasion. The massive campaign of economic and political pressure that has been erected by the Trump administration over the past year has proven to be remarkably effective, sending Iran's oil exports plummeting and its national economy into a tailspin.

But it is also deeply unpopular. Numerous countries in Europe and Asia, which have enjoyed reinvigorated trade with the Islamic Republic since the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal, have been loathe to sign on to America's campaign of "maximum pressure," and some have even been actively working to dilute its effectiveness. By disrupting oil traffic in the Strait — and simultaneously threatening to abandon limits on nuclear development imposed by the 2015 agreement — the Iranian regime is now trying to energize foreign nations to intercede on its behalf and force the United States to back down.

This strategy, however, is fraught with peril for the Islamic Republic. Tehran's signals could indeed cause its skittish international clients to lobby Washington to dial back its pressure on the ayatollahs. But if it overplays its hand, Iran's machinations in the gulf could end up convincing its commercial partners that it isn't a reliable custodian of security and stability in the strait.

Persian Gulf strategy

That, in turn, presents a strategic opportunity for the Trump administration. The White House can use Iran's latest provocation (and widespread fears of additional ones to come) to erect a multilateral security architecture to police the strait and ensure that the free flow of global energy commerce continues. Such a structure — involving regional oil exporters like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as European and Asian energy clients — would effectively internationalize security in the strait, thereby robbing the Iranian regime of one of its most important assets: its ability to manipulate global oil traffic (and therefore world energy prices).

With this sort of mechanism in place, any further disruption of regional energy traffic by Iran or its proxies would galvanize world opinion against Tehran, and nudge foreign powers toward the conclusion that the Iranian regime needs to be curtailed and contained.

The Trump administration already appears to be inching in this direction. Over the weekend, Secretary of State Pompeo told reporters that the U.S. was committed to taking "all actions necessary, diplomatic and otherwise" to preserve the integrity of the strait. That's an objective that Washington shares with Iran's jittery neighbors, as well as the multitude of nations that rely on energy exports from the Persian Gulf for their prosperity.

Uniting them into an arrangement that constrains Iran in the Strait will dramatically increase the effectiveness of America's efforts to roll back Iranian regional influence. And, if done properly, it just might end up expanding the popularity of the Trump administration's Iran policy, too.

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.