



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

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RESPONDING TO TEHRAN'S TANKER MISCHIEF

Last week's attack on two oil tankers - the Norwegian-flagged *Front Altair* and the Japanese-flagged *Kokura Courageous* - in the Strait of Hormuz has been conclusively tied to Iran. 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. In response to the provocation, the Trump administration is mulling "a full range of options," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said. These appear to include both economic and military responses; acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan announced that the U.S. is preparing to deploy 1,000 additional troops to the Middle East in order to counter Iranian activism and malign activities there. (*CNN*, June 14, 2019; *CNN*, June 16, 2019; *Daily Caller*, June 17, 2019)

PLAYING GOOD COP/BAD COP WITH TEHRAN

Just over a year ago, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo outlined twelve preconditions for normalized relations with Iran at a speech before the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC. Now, however, the Trump administration appears to be adopting a more flexible view regarding possible negotiations with the Islamic Republic. On June 2nd, Pompeo himself confirmed something that President Trump has said for some time: that the United States is prepared to sit down for diplomatic talks with Iran's leadership with "no preconditions." "We're prepared to engage in a conversation with no preconditions," Pompeo told reporters during a news conference in Switzerland.

This, however, does not mark a fundamental reversal of the Trump administration's campaign of "maximum pressure" against Tehran, which has ramped up in earnest in recent weeks. "We're ready to sit down with them," Pompeo has emphasized. "But the American effort to fundamentally reverse the malign activity of the Islamic Republic, this revolutionary force, is going to continue." (*New York Times*, June 2, 2019)

A DEAL WITH RUSSIA OVER IRAN?

In its first half-year in office, the Trump administration flirted with the idea that it might be possible to convince the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin to support American efforts to pressure Tehran. That effort was derailed by the close cooperation between Moscow and Tehran during the Syrian civil war, which saw both countries entrench themselves on Syrian soil in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. But the idea may be resurfacing once more. The White House appears to believe that - now that the Syrian civil war is effectively over - Moscow might be more inclined to help Washington curb Iran's malign activities than it was before. Administration officials, including National Security Advisor John Bolton, are reportedly planning to reopen the conversation during trilateral meetings in Israel later this month - using discussions over Syria as an opening to talk about the larger Russo-Iranian relationship. (*The Moscow Times*, June 5, 2019)

TAJIKISTAN TILTS BACK TOWARD THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Are relations between Dushanbe and Tehran beginning to thaw? Tajikistan's foreign minister, Sirodjidin Muhridin, recently opted to skip the latest summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in favor of a state visit to Iran. The move is being read as a public diplomatic overture by Dushanbe, whose relations with the Islamic Republic have remained frosty since 2015. Back then, Iran's regime invited the head of the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan to visit the country and participate in a religious conference there - an invitation that Tajik officials vociferously opposed, due to the country's prior designation of the IRPT as a terrorist group. The resulting consequences were profound, with bilateral trade dropping from \$165 million in 2015 to \$92 million in 2018.

Now, however, Tajikistan seems eager to turn the page. "We demand an increase in the volume of trade exchanges, especially the strengthening of investments and presence of Iran in the agricultural, energy, industry and tourism sectors of Tajikistan," Tajik Prime Minister Kokhir Rasulzoda has been cited as telling the outgoing Iranian envoy to Dushanbe recently. (*Eurasianet*, June 5, 2019)