

How does the US protect the Persian Gulf?

Tensions between the United States and Iran are rising due to a recent rash of attacks on a half-dozen oil tankers traveling through the Persian Gulf.

On June 13, two tankers in the Gulf of Oman were struck by explosions. President Donald Trump has blamed Iran for the incidents, and the Pentagon released video footage it says shows Iranian forces removing a limpet mine from the side of one of the ships. Iran denies any role in those attacks or those on four other ships in May. Iran did admit to downing a U.S. drone June 20, saying it was in its airspace. The U.S. disagrees.

The exchanges come amid the standoff over the United States' withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal – the landmark 2015 pact between Iran and six world powers that curtailed Iran's nuclear program in exchange for lifting sanctions. Mr. Trump, who had been very critical of the deal, unilaterally pulled the U.S. out in May 2018. He then began a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, imposing crippling sanctions in a long-shot bid to force Iran into a more restrictive nuclear deal with the U.S.

Q: What makes ships vulnerable in the Gulf?

The key factor is the narrow confines of the Strait of Hormuz, an ocean chokepoint that connects the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean. About one-fifth of the world's oil is transported through the strait, which is bordered by Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

The strait tapers to only 21 miles across at the slimmest point, where shipping lanes in both directions shrink to just two miles wide, largely because the water is too shallow for ships with deep drafts. The V-shaped strait requires tankers to make a sharp turn at a predictable point – making them easy to target with mines, small surface ships, or shore-based missiles or aircraft.

Q: How does the U.S. patrol the Gulf?

The U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain, maintains a constant presence in the Persian Gulf using patrol vessels, guid-

ed-missile destroyers, and mine countermeasures vessels. It is part of a combined maritime force that brings together Gulf partners as well as European and Asian allies. The U.S. also monitors the region with satellites and aerial drones.

Yet despite the continual U.S. and allied patrols, more precise reconnaissance is required to prevent what experts view as the main threat to the shipping lanes: mines.

“The biggest threat is the mine threat.



Not the limpet mines, but distributing mines in the water. Countermine operations are very difficult for any navy. It's a painstaking process,” says Dr. Mike Connell, an expert on Iran and the Middle East at CNA, a research organization in Arlington, Virginia.

Q: How might the U.S. protect the tankers?

One option is for the U.S. Navy to escort convoys of merchant ships to help defend them from attack. From its current fleet, the U.S. Navy would employ destroyers or cruisers for this job. The warships would provide protection against gunfire and missiles aimed at the tankers.

However, the U.S. Navy has only a limited number of suitable warships available for such escort duty, making it difficult to sustain for long periods.

For their part, shippers do not always view convoys and naval escorts as the best solution to the security threats. Convoys cause delays, inefficiencies, and transaction costs for their business. As a result, shipping firms have taken unilateral steps to bolster their self-defense capabilities. Some are employing armed guards.

Q: How could Iran disrupt Gulf shipping?

Since it is no match for a direct confrontation with U.S. military forces, Iran has developed a strategy of asymmetric warfare and spent years practicing closing the strait.

In the Persian Gulf, that means using everything from swarm attacks with hundreds of speedboats to anti-ship missiles, submarines, and underwater drones.

Such tactics are effective. In a classified \$250 million U.S. war game in 2002,

a coordinated assault with swarming boats and missiles resulted in the “enemy” team “sinking” 16 American ships, including an aircraft carrier, before the exercise was halted.

U.S. strategists have since updated their tactics. But Iran, too, has stepped up its capability, proclaiming the use of high-speed torpedoes and stealth technologies. Yet the core of its tactics in the Persian Gulf is mines, speedboats, and missiles, one official Iranian news agency reported last September.

Q: How far can this brinkmanship go?

Both the U.S. and Iran explicitly state that they don't want war. But the White House portrayed the deployment of a carrier group to the Middle East in May as push-back against Iran and vowed “unrelenting force” should Iran attack.

Likewise, after adhering to the terms of the nuclear deal for a year after the U.S. withdrew, Iran has increased its rate of uranium enrichment and declared it will breach agreed limits on June 27 if nothing changes.

Another part of Iran's reaction will take place in the Persian Gulf, says Nasser Hadian, a political scientist at Tehran University.

“Tension is going to rise,” says Mr. Hadian. “Iran is certainly not going to close down the Strait of Hormuz; they will ... concentrate on oil and petrochemical ships. They are going to stop them. They are going to inspect them. They are going to create all sorts of problems, and that's in response to the U.S. policy of sanctions.”

— Ann Scott Tyson and Scott Peterson,
Staff writers