Calculating Victory: How Iran Views Confronting the United States

by Patrick Clawson **(/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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Brief Analysis

If Washington does not demonstrate through both word and deed the risks that Tehran faces, overly optimistic Iranian hardliners may wrongly decide that the benefits of a confrontation in the Strait of Hormuz outweigh the costs.

Victory in war means accomplishing one's political objectives, and some Iranian leaders seem to believe they could advance four of their main goals through armed conflict with the United States: namely, resisting "global arrogance," creating disorder in the oil markets, justifying nuclear breakout, and rallying the nation. If Iran were to make significant progress toward these objectives via hostilities against American forces, some in Tehran might conclude that they had won. More likely, however, the optimistic expectations of these overly confident, risktaking Iranian hardliners would not be realized, and war could turn out badly for the regime. Washington can do much to shape the perceptions of both Iranian leaders and world opinion regarding the risks Iran would face from such a conflict.

Resisting Global Arrogance

The Iranian doctrine of resistance assigns primary importance to psychological effects. In assuming that victory is achieved by demoralizing the enemy, it emphasizes the moral and spiritual dimensions of war over the physical and technological. From this viewpoint, how an action appears is the key test of its success. This fits well with a twenty-four-hour-news world in which image often matters more than reality.

The United States presents itself as, and is seen to be, a great military power. Standing up to U.S. forces could therefore be a great propaganda coup for Tehran. Consider that the Iranian navy still regards its 1988 confrontation with the United States -- sparked by the mining of a U.S. warship -- as a great victory that it studies closely, despite the sinking of several Iranian vessels. A new confrontation in the Strait of Hormuz and nearby Persian Gulf waters might play to Iran's greatest naval strength and the U.S. Navy's greatest weakness -- though of course even at its

strongest, Iran's navy is still much weaker than the U.S. Navy at its weakest.

Iran has invested heavily to create a multilayered system for sinking ships: mines, missiles from fast craft, missiles from bunkers hidden in the hills along the strait, and submarines. In the most realistic U.S. Navy simulation of what war with Iran might be like -- the $250 million Millennium Challenge exercise conducted in 2002 -- a similar array of forces sank sixteen American ships and might have done even more damage had the Navy not stopped the game to change the rules. If Iran got lucky and sank a U.S. warship during an actual conflict, television viewers around the world might conclude that the Navy had lost the war no matter what happened next, since the destruction of a U.S. ship could define the conflict's public image. The Navy has not lost a ship since 1968, and its leaders rarely if ever mention the possibility that it might lose one in any war, much less one with Iran. Washington would therefore be prudent to shape expectations, frequently pointing out that while Iran might get in a few blows during a conflict, the more relevant measure of success would be whose forces are left standing at the end of the day, which would most assuredly be the U.S. military.

Iranian leaders might also decide that the U.S. and European strategy of escalating pressure leaves them with few options, in which case resistance may offer the best prospects. After all, when the United States got its nose bloodied by the 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing and the 1993 Somali "Black Hawk down" incident, Washington withdrew its forces from both countries. Iran may hope for the same result via confrontation in the Gulf. Demonstrated U.S. commitment to continuing America's seventy-year military presence in the Gulf is the best way to disabuse Tehran of this notion.

The threat of fierce U.S. retaliation to any Iranian attack may not matter to some Iranian hardliners as much as one might think. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's most powerful political force, does not necessarily care so much about the regular navy's large ships. The IRGC navy's swarming approach relies instead on hundreds of small boats that could mix in with the thousands of civilian dhows and other small craft in the Gulf. The U.S. Navy could face something akin to guerrilla warfare at sea, not the conflict-at-a-distance it prefers. Defeating such an opponent would take time, during which U.S. forces might appear tied down and not necessarily winning. The best way to forestall this line of Iranian propaganda is shaping expectations with statements -- such as those recently made by U.S. military leaders -- pointing out that fully halting Iranian attacks on shipping could take many weeks.

The United States should also carefully consider its escalation options, because each approach to broadening the fight could pose problems that must be prepared for in advance. For instance, attacks on Iran's oil infrastructure might drive prices up and invite Iranian retaliation against critical infrastructure in frightened Gulf monarchies -- a scenario that lends heightened importance to those countries' recent efforts to step up infrastructure protection. And ground operations, even by Special Forces, could prove controversial among Americans, most of whom would presumably not welcome perceptions of another land war. Any such actions should therefore be preceded by careful explanation of the underlying U.S. strategy.

Creating Disorder in Oil Markets

Iranian leaders may hope that attacks in the Gulf, especially if sustained for weeks, might create disorder in world oil markets. That would have two important benefits for Tehran. First, shortages could allow Iran to sell its oil at high prices despite U.S. and European pressure. The 1979 revolution, for example, cut Iran's oil exports in half but doubled world prices. Yet that outcome seems less likely today if plans are put in place to release strategic reserves and expand use of pipelines that bypass the Strait of Hormuz during the weeks-long process of halting Iran's attacks.

Second, Iranian hardliners may hope that chaotic oil markets -- with their attendant high gas prices hurting the American and European economies and U.S. Gulf allies becoming nervous -- might pressure Washington into ending

the conflict even without securing Iranian concessions. Were that to happen, Tehran could conclude that U.S. military power is unable to stop it from doing as it pleases. Hardliners might see this as confirming Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's saying, "The United States cannot do a damn thing." Continuing consultation with potentially nervous allies will be needed to counter this problem.

Justifying the Nuclear Program

A military conflict might also provide an opportunity for Iran to declare that the United States and Europe are hostile powers with which it cannot negotiate regarding the nuclear impasse, especially if European forces joined in the protection of shipping against Iranian attacks. Tehran could also claim that it needs a powerful deterrent against future U.S. or European action, namely, the capability to acquire nuclear arms in extreme circumstances if it exercised its claimed right to leave the Nonproliferation Treaty. If the United States were seen as the aggressor, that argument might win much sympathy around the world, possibly undermining the vigor with which UN sanctions were enforced. Hence the importance of emphasizing that Washington and its allies seek a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear impasse and have turned to sanctions only because Iran refuses to follow Security Council orders and engage directly with the United States.

Rallying the Nation

Some Iranian leaders might welcome war with America in the hope of rekindling the revolutionary spirit and rallying nationalist sentiment. As described above, the most important factor in predicting Iranian actions is the leadership's perceptions of what will happen, not what is actually most likely to occur. In fact, an Iranian public already unhappy at privations due to hardline policies could well blame their leaders for starting a conflict. Iranians have already gone through one protracted, bloody war under the Islamic Republic, and there are few indications they would welcome another, this time against any enemy much more powerful than Iraq.

Would the United States Lose, or Would Both Sides Win?

Just because one side wins a war does not mean the other side loses. If both sides advance their political objectives, then both sides win. For the United States, a key test of any conflict with Iran is how it affects the nuclear impasse. In that sense, a war might work out well for the United States -- damage inflicted during the conflict could overcome Iran's factional infighting on the nuclear issue and force a dramatic reversal, as happened in 1988 to end the Iran-Iraq War. Yet war is a risky business, and naval conflicts could instead stiffen Tehran's resolve to acquire dangerous nuclear capabilities as quickly as possible in order to deter further U.S. attacks. In that case, further pressure might be needed to induce Iran to seek a diplomatic solution.

Nor is it clear what war would do to Iran's nuclear capabilities, as distinct from its intentions. In the event of a naval conflict in the Gulf, the United States might debate whether to attack Iran's nuclear facilities as well. If so, the challenge for the United States would be to ensure that such strikes significantly affect Iran's ability to reconstitute the nuclear program, and that the existing UN sanctions against dual-use items would hold after a strike.

Will War Come?

Because it is by no means clear that war with Iran would advance U.S. interests, Washington is unlikely to start a conflict except in the most dire circumstances. The more likely scenario is Iran inadvertently stepping over a U.S. red line, and Washington reacting more vigorously than Tehran expects. Much as the Korean War began in no small part because of mistaken North Korean and Soviet assumptions about U.S. red lines, so too might Iran blunder

into a conflict with the United States.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was cautious for years, but he has made several risky decisions of late, such as rigging the 2009 presidential election. In his view, refusing to compromise and hitting back hard were the keys to victory over the mass protests that followed the disputed vote. Over the past few months, Tehran has at times applied that same principle abroad: when slapped, slap back harder. For example, when Tehran plotted to kill the Saudi ambassador to Washington, it may have been responding to Riyadh's prior intervention in Bahrain, which had prevented Iran from aiding the island's Shiites. Afterward, the UN General Assembly voted 106 to 9 to remind Iran of its obligations to protect diplomats (not one Muslim-majority country stood with Tehran), while Britain and other countries imposed financial sanctions. Tehran responded by orchestrating the ransacking of the British embassy the next week. Both the assassination plot and the embassy attack hurt Iran's interests, but the regime ordered them anyway. That is not reassuring when considering whether Iran might attack in the Strait of Hormuz.

Indeed, the recent record suggests that Iranian leaders have become less cautious about taking aggressive gambles and more confident that the United States will not react. Washington should vigorously remind them how such over-optimism has repeatedly misled them. For example, they apparently -- and wrongly -- believed that the United States and Europe would not apply pressure against Iran's Central Bank, and that Europe would not boycott Iranian oil.

Tehran's chances of achieving its objectives through war presumably look much better if it can convincingly portray itself as the victim rather than the aggressor. Iranian officials may therefore do their best to paint U.S. and European actions as an attack that justifies a response. Tehran is less likely to carry out that threat if Western allies and Iran's neighbors vigorously counter the "victim" claim and loudly repeat their calls for engagement with Iran and negotiation of all outstanding differences.

For Washington's part, the proverb "if you want peace, prepare for war" holds true: the best prospect for persuading Khamenei to revert to his past cautiousness is to clearly lay out that the United States has red lines which, if crossed, will cost Iran dearly. Declaratory policy, such as President Obama's recent letter to Iran about red lines, helps. But Iran may be more impressed by deeds that back up those words. Peace is more likely to be preserved if the United States marshals its allies and demonstrates its power -- hopefully through military exercises alone, but also by vigorous response to any Iranian aggression if necessary.

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