

Iran's Small Boats Are a Big Problem

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The confrontation this month in the Persian Gulf between Navy warships and small boats of Iran's Revolutionary Guard may have come as a surprise to the public at large, but not to me.

I witnessed a very similar event five years ago during the invasion of Iraq. It was April 4, 2003, and in support of the British assault on the city of Basra in southern Iraq, four Navy patrol boats, under a Navy command in which I served, were dispatched up the Shatt al Arab, the waterway marking the Iran-Iraq border. The senior officer present -- a Navy captain -- was an experienced Seal who was fluent in Persian, having lived in Tehran as a teenager. We took great pains to avoid a confrontation, staying well within Iraqi territorial waters and even erecting a makeshift Iranian flag on one of the boats, which our captain felt would display our peaceful intentions.

The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responded by sending four small boats toward us at high speed, the largest being a fast Swedish-built Boghammer, which resembles a cigarette boat, outfitted with a twin-barrel machine gun on its bow. With rooster-tails of white water, the boats came barreling over to the Iraqi side of the Shatt al Arab, surrounded us, and took the tarp off of at least one multiple-rocket launcher and pointed it directly at our lead boat.

Our captain tried to defuse the situation by telling the Iranians over the normal commercial radio channel that we were simply exercising our right to navigate Iraqi waters, had no intention of entering Iranian territory and did not seek a confrontation. The Iranians responded by a string of obscenities in heavily accented, broken English. After several tense minutes, we were ordered by our superiors to withdraw; the Iranian boats followed us a considerable distance before breaking off and heading back to their side of the waterway.

This was not the end of it, however. In the two weeks after this incident, American and coalition forces stationed on the Iraqi bank of the Shatt al Arab came under repeated, harassing small-arms fire from the Iranian mainland.

Now we seem to be seeing a similar period of Iranian truculence. In December, the Whidbey Island, a Navy dock-landing ship, fired warning shots at small Iranian craft that came too close. Three days later the frigate Carr was forced to use its ship's horn to ward off three Iranian small boats, two of which were armed, according to Navy spokesmen.

While these incidents may not seem alarming to those who've never served on a potentially vulnerable modern warship, they fit into a worrisome pattern, a two-decade-old military strategy by Iran intended to counter the United States presence in the Persian Gulf. As a professional military historian (I work for the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon -- these views are my own and do not represent those of the Department of Defense), I feel that a careful look at a few events from the past will shed some light.

In the 1980s the Navy had to counter a broad effort by Revolutionary Guard forces, then at war with Iraq, to set mines and otherwise hamper and damage American-flagged oil carriers in the gulf. The conflict heated up in the summer of 1987, when an American-flagged tanker hit an Iranian mine. That fall, Army helicopters fired on and Seals boarded an Iranian ship laying mines in international waters. The Seals confirmed the presence of mines, detained the crew and scuttled the ship.

The following April, the frigate Samuel B. Roberts was blown nearly in half by an Iranian mine, leading American forces to retaliate by attacking two Iranian oil platforms that had been used as staging areas. The Navy destroyed nearly half the Iranian Navy and put a temporary end to the Revolutionary Guards' waterborne presence.

Despite that humiliation, some in Tehran came away believing that a combination of mines, missiles and the fervor of the Revolutionary Guard members manning small boats could compete with the might of the United States Navy in the confined waters of the Persian Gulf. So, off and on for 20 years, the Iranians have been initiating small incidents, testing the limits of what America will accept.

While the events earlier this month were ambiguous, there can be little doubt that the Iranian actions were part of this continuing pattern. Even if one believes Tehran's explanation that the interaction was routine and harmless, the fact is that Iranian small ships came within 500 yards of American warships. At this range, our sailors would be well within the effective range of rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns, thus neutralizing the range

advantage of our more advanced weapons.

This is why President Bush was correct in calling Iran's actions "provocative" and having the State Department place Tehran on official notice that there will be serious consequences should the small boats continue their actions.

To forestall another confrontation or prevent an escalation, which would not be in our interests, the United States needs to do more. Washington should begin by marshaling the support of its allies that already have ships in the gulf and might find themselves in an equally dangerous confrontation. After the 9/11 attacks, several European navies (as well as Australia's and Canada's) sent large forces to augment the United States effort in safeguarding the sea lanes of the Middle East from terrorism. The Bush administration should harness this coalition by asking them to let Tehran know through their own diplomatic channels that any attempt by the Revolutionary Guards to interfere with the free navigation of international waters will be treated no differently from a terrorist attack.

Iran's motivations are not entirely clear. It may be that this systematic harassment is an attempt to ascertain the American rules of engagement. It may also reflect increased Iranian hubris. Or it may be an initiative of local commanders acting without permission from the Tehran government, which would appear to have little to gain by blatantly threatening the United States. While the Revolutionary Guard's orders originate from the central government, its commanders are given considerable autonomy. Still, whatever the motivations, the United States and its allies must make clear that it is Tehran's responsibility to control all its forces and that it will be held accountable for their actions.

If Iran is determined to have a clash at sea, our military response should be forceful and precise, one that would remove the threat to the sea lanes while reducing the chance of escalation and minimizing the chances of a wider war. History -- the events of 1988 -- suggests that such a measured use of force is not only possible but can be effective.

If, say, the current quarrel escalated into isolated firefights, the Iranian-held Abu Musa Island, near the Strait of Hormuz, and Farsi Island, near Kuwait, would be logical targets for a measured American military response. Both have Revolutionary Guard Corps bases and have long been key cogs in the Iranian military machine in the Persian Gulf. (And in the case of Abu Musa, Iran's ownership is disputed by the United Arab Emirates.)

While some Americans may fear limited military action would bring about Iranian escalation or terrorist attacks, in the past, Iran has tended to respond to direct action by modifying its actions and bending to American pressure. Because the American military refrained from attacking the Iranian mainland in 1988, Iran understood the limited nature of the war and acted with similar restraint. In fact, the episode seemed to do us political good within the Islamic regime, as some of the hawks who had initially advocated the military confrontation soon found themselves out of favor.

A full-scale war with Iran would not be in America's interests. But there is a world of difference between reacting to provocation by Revolutionary Guard boats and bombing sovereign territory. History shows that a tough but measured military response to Iranian harassment may lessen the odds of a much bigger clash down the road.

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