New US provocation in Persian Gulf as Washington expands Iran sanctions

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US warships staged another provocation against Iranian patrol boats in the Persian Gulf Saturday, amid a flurry of new unilateral US sanctions imposed against Tehran. Both are expressions of an increasingly aggressive US policy toward Iran, which is seen by the US ruling establishment as a principal obstacle to Washington's protracted and bloody military campaign to establish its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

The latest action was launched by a naval battle group led by the super carrier USS Nimitz, which confronted vessels of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) near Iran's Resalat oil and gas platform. During the Iran-Iraq war in 1987, the same platform was attacked by US destroyers and put out of operation for several years.

In a statement published by the IRGC's official news site Sepah, the Iranian military unit charged: "The Americans made a provocative and unprofessional move by issuing a warning and shooting flares at vessels." It added that its patrol boats, "without paying attention to this unconventional and unusual behavior from the American vessels, continued their mission in the area and the aircraft carrier and accompanying battleship left the area."

The US Navy issued its own statement claiming that it had deployed a helicopter to fire flares toward the Iranian patrol boats after they had approached the US battle group "at a high rate of speed."

This marked the second such confrontation in less than a week. Last Tuesday, a US Navy patrol boat fired warning shots toward an Iranian vessel that the Pentagon claimed had come within 150 yards of the American boat.

The action, denounced by Iran as an act of "provocation and intimidation," was another indication of the explosive potential of the increasingly aggressive US military buildup on the edge of Iran's territorial waters. According to the Pentagon's tally, there were 35 similar encounters last year and 23 in 2015.

US President Donald Trump, during his presidential campaign last September, called for the Pentagon to adopt a policy that any Iranian vessels harassing US Navy ships would be "shot out of the water."

The tensions in the Persian Gulf were accompanied last week by the ratcheting up of US sanctions against Iran in two separate actions taken by the US Congress and the Trump administration.

Last Thursday, the US Senate, by a vote of 97-2, approved a new round of sanctions against Iran as part of sweeping legislation that also targets North Korea, but which received the most attention for its imposition of new sanctions against Russia.

The Iranian portion of the measure imposes mandatory penalties on individuals involved in Iran's ballistic missile program and anyone who does business with them. It also targets the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, a major component of the country's military, with terrorism sanctions and calls for enforcement of an arms embargo.

The same day that the Senate carried out its near unanimous vote, Iran launched a rocket capable of putting a satellite into orbit. The launch marked the inauguration of Iran's Imam Khomeini space center, which officials have said will be dedicated to sending satellites into space for peaceful purposes.

The US State Department called the launch a "provocative action" aimed at "ballistic missile development," in violation of United Nations resolutions, a charge denied by Tehran. In retaliation, Washington imposed still more sanctions on Friday against six subsidiaries of a company linked to Iran's ballistic missile program.

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Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said in a statement: “The US government will continue to aggressively counter Iran’s ballistic missile-related activity, whether it be a provocative space launch ... or likely support to Yemeni Houthi missile attacks on Saudi Arabia such as occurred this past weekend.”

Under the Trump administration, Washington has stepped up its support to Saudi Arabia’s brutal war against Yemen, which has killed over 12,000, brought millions to the brink of famine and led to the outbreak of the world’s worst cholera epidemic, claiming thousands more lives.

In his trip to Riyadh in May, Trump threw US support behind a Saudi-led bloc of Sunni monarchies seeking to counter Iranian influence in the region by means of military buildup and sectarian warfare. Trump also backed the Saudi monarchy in its confrontation with its erstwhile ally, Qatar, which it accused of support for terrorism, while demanding that Qatari rulers break all relations with Iran. Others within the administration have sought to rein in the conflict, out of concern that it could jeopardize the Pentagon’s giant military bases in Qatar and US plans for wider war in the region.

Meanwhile, in Syria, the US and Iran are increasingly on a collision course as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is losing ground in the east of the country and the US and its proxy forces are vying with the Syrian government forces and Iranian-backed militias to fill the vacuum. The US military has shot down an Iranian drone and repeatedly struck Iranian-backed militias near the base established by American special forces at al-Tanf, near Syria’s borders with Iraq and Jordan.

The latest military provocations in the Gulf and the escalating sanctions are designed to upend the 2015 nuclear agreement reached between Iran and the so-called P5+1, the five permanent members of the United Nations—the US, Britain, France, China and Russia—plus Germany.

During his presidential campaign, Trump denounced the agreement as the worst deal ever made, and he reportedly chafed at having to issue a statement to Congress acknowledging the fact that Iran is in full compliance with the agreement. Such a verification is required every 90 days under US law that otherwise provides for the “snap-back” of a full range of punishing US sanctions. The White House claimed that Tehran was violating the “spirit” of the agreement, which presumably means that Iran has failed to submit to US dominance in the Middle East.

In an ominous statement delivered last week before a campaign-style rally in Ohio, Trump threatened that Iran would face “big, big problems” if it failed to adhere to the terms of the nuclear accord as interpreted by Washington. He went on to charge that the agreement had “emboldened,” Iran, adding “that won’t take place much longer.”

The implication is that when the next verification of Iranian compliance is due in October, Trump will withhold it, effectively repudiating the deal and setting the US on course toward a war with Iran that could eclipse the massive violence already wrought by US imperialism in the Middle East.

Tehran has accused the US of violating the nuclear agreement by imposing the new sanctions. Part of the agreement included a pledge by signatories not to block the normalization of Iran’s international economic relations.

Washington has no interest in furthering such a normalization, which is benefiting its economic rivals in both Europe and Asia, which are attempting to tap into potentially lucrative Iranian markets and resources. The French oil giant Total, for example, has struck a $1 billion deal to develop a gas field operated jointly by Iran and Qatar.

Responding to Washington’s latest actions, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stated, “If the enemy breaches parts of the deal, we will breach parts of it. If they breach the entire deal, we will breach it in its entirety. We will reinforce our whole defensive weapons without paying attention to what others say.”

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