

Another Gulf War? End the US Blockade of Iran

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On June 13, two tankers, the Japanese owned Kokuka Courageous and the Norwegian-owned Front Altair, were struck by explosions while sailing through the Gulf of Oman, close to the coast of Iran. The incident comes after attacks in May on two Saudi tankers, an Emirati vessel and a Norwegian tanker.

The United States has issued a grainy monochrome video, taken at night from a US helicopter, plus some colour photographs. They appear to show black clad figures from a boat pulling alongside the Japanese ship and removing an object from its side that could be a mine. On this basis, Trump and the Saudi Crown Prince have threatened Iran with retaliation and the US has drafted another 1,000 troops to the Gulf Region.

All sides have hastened to say they do not want war and, indeed, that would have incalculable consequences for the fragile world economy, not to mention relations between the 'great powers'. The two gulfs, the Persian and Omani, are joined by the 21 nautical miles of the Straits of Hormuz, through which 35 percent of the world's crude oil and 20 percent of the global oil trade passes. In addition, the countries around the Gulf still contain over 50 percent of the world's proven oil reserves.

In 2010, Iran was the second largest exporter in OPEC but has been subjected to a US embargo on its exports since Trump unilaterally ripped up the internationally agreed Iran Nuclear Deal. At the end of April, the White House announced that the exemptions on trade with Iran "granted" to China, India, Japan, South Korea and Turkey would expire in May, after which they would themselves become the target of US sanctions.

As a result, thousands of Iranian workers in both private and public sectors have gone on strike against delays and non-payment of wages and rampant inflation which devalues their wages. The Iranian clerical regime replied by arresting hundreds of teachers, bus and truck drivers and factory workers. Worker militants have been sentenced to prison terms including for organising peaceful protests. Clearly, the American blockade is having a destabilising effect internally and it is no wonder Iran has threatened to close the Straits if this continues.

To ward off this threat, the US has recently deployed an aircraft carrier battle group, a B-52 bomber strike force, Phineas assault ships, Patriot missile batteries and additional ground troops to the region. There can be no doubt that an attack on Iran is a real possibility. Although US military authorities appear to have warned against such action, over the last year or so, Trump has removed the clutch of generals from his team who liberal journalists fondly imagined would keep him under control.

Who Did It?

So, was Iran responsible for the attack? If it was, would that justify US (and likely UK) military action against Iran?

Almost immediately after the news came through, Trump told Fox TV: "Iran did do it". "You know they did it because you saw the boat", Trump said. "I guess one of the mines didn't explode and it's probably got essentially Iran written all over it." "You saw the boat at night, successfully trying to take the mine off, and that was exposed", he added.

Well, despite the video (and who today believes a video clip cannot lie) there are conflicting descriptions of the attack. One of the Japanese owners said the ship was hit by two "flying objects", not by limpet mines attached to it.

When there is an attack that might lead to the outbreak of war, it is wise to remember the Latin legal principle, *cui prodest*, essentially meaning "who benefits from the crime, did it?".

It is certainly hard to imagine Iran as the front line beneficiary and it should not be forgotten that the US has a history of starting wars on the basis of false claims of attacks on its naval vessels. The Spanish-American War was triggered by the alleged sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbour while US escalation of the Vietnam War was triggered by the equally false Gulf of Tonkin incident. "We have been attacked" is thus a time-honoured way of winning popular support for a war for plunder and domination.

In this case, however, the US does not have to dirty its own hands. There are other regional powers, close US allies, that have consistently urged the US to punish Iran militarily. Both Saudi Arabia, under its fiery Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and the Kingdom's Emirati clients, have plenty of reasons.

The Crown Prince, expensively armed by the USA and Britain, is embroiled in a barbaric, albeit unwinnable, "civil war" in Yemen and is presently encouraging a vicious counterrevolution against the democratic uprising of the Sudanese people. He has been relentlessly stoking up the tensions with Iran to encourage the US to deploy more and more naval and air power to the region.

Then there is Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu who has frequently urged, and even threatened, attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities. Last, but not least, non-state actors are perfectly capable of such acts as with the al-Qaeda attack on USS Cole in 2000.

All these are perfectly capable of carrying out false flag attacks.

Another reason for scepticism is that, in the days just before the latest attacks, Iran's President Rouhani and supreme leader Khamenei were meeting with the Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, in Iran on a mission to ease the country's growing tensions with the USA. Japan has maintained reasonably good relations with the country from which it receives a substantial amount of its oil. Why should Iran seek to sabotage Abe's mission?

Apart from Trump himself, the campaign was instantly taken up by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, followed by the notorious neocon warmonger National Security Adviser John Bolton, both of whom have repeatedly called for regime change in Iran. A few years back, Pompeo called for airstrikes to take out Iran's nuclear facilities.

He now claimed the attacks were part of "40 years of unprovoked aggression against freedom loving nations" and declared that Iran is "lashing out because the regime wants our successful maximum pressure campaign lifted" adding that "no economic sanctions entitle the Islamic Republic to attack innocent civilians, disrupt global oil markets and engage in nuclear blackmail".

In other words, the US can wreck and ruin another country's economy, simply by using its huge control over the world's trade and finance, even coercing unwilling European allies to support it, but the victims must not resort to armed force to combat this. If they do, Washington will rain hellfire down on them.

In fact, "40 years of unprovoked aggression" accurately sums up the policy of the US and its allies against Iran, pursued ever since the humiliation of President Carter by the 1979 revolution against Washington's stooge, the autocratic Shah. The US then encouraged Iraq's Saddam Hussein to attack Iran, starting a war that lasted until 1988 and caused ruin and huge loss of life in both countries. In that year, the US battle cruiser Vincennes, in the Persian Gulf, fired missiles that brought down an Iranian passenger jet, killing its 290 passengers and crew.

An equally cynical invention is Trump's statement that "the Iranians are taking over Iraq". The truth is that, under Republican President George W Bush and his Democrat successor, the US helped install and support an Iranian-backed, Shia party-dominated government in Iraq in order to crush the uprising by Sunni forces, ex-Saddam army elements and then ISIS. The US could hardly have stayed in Iraq as long as it did without scarcely covert Iranian support.

Britain

Enter Britain's little shield bearer for the American Goliath, Jeremy Hunt. Even before seeing the video, the UK foreign secretary rushed to give full backing to Trump's and Pompeo's claims:

"We have no reason not to believe the American assessment and our instinct is to believe it, because they are our closest ally."

Read this as "because we are totally militarily dependent on the US (and with Brexit would become so economically) we believe whatever they say, full stop". For Hunt and his like, anything else would be unpatriotic, if not downright treasonous. Thus, when Jeremy Corbyn dared to criticise his response, saying; "Without credible evidence about the tanker attacks, the government's rhetoric will only increase the threat of war", Hunt immediately shot back, "Why can he never bring himself to back British allies, British intelligence or British interests?"

Despite all this bluster, however, it is difficult to imagine the House of Commons backing British involvement in an attack on Iran, any more than it backed David Cameron's attempt to join in the bombing of Syria. Britain's support is likely to remain verbal, whilst continuing to sell arms to the Saudis.

Meanwhile, the European Union has taken a line very similar to Corbyn's. Its foreign policy representative, Federica Mogherini, urged countries not to jump to conclusions: "The maximum restraint and wisdom should be applied", she said. Germany's Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, said his country hadn't yet made up its mind about who was behind the alleged attacks in the Gulf.

He added that US and British intelligence needed to be compared to material from other allies, noting the evidence provided so far "comes from one side in particular". Plainly the Europeans are deeply unhappy with, and opposed to, Trump's Iranian policy. Indeed, they have tried to keep the Nuclear Deal alive by finding ways to evade the US oil embargo, which conflicts with their major oil corporations' interests.

Although the demand for independent evidence (independent of the Trump Administration and the Saudi Crown Prince, that is) is perfectly rational, to concentrate on that risks avoiding the real issue; should a US-Saudi attack on Iran be opposed or not. Real opposition to the embargos, threats and even "limited" air strikes on Iranian military installations, needs to take the form of mass action on the streets. Diplomatic statements dispatched from the chancelleries in Berlin, Paris or Brussels, will have no effect.

Whoever did it, Iran must not be attacked.

In the final analysis, whether Iran was responsible for the most recent attacks is not the crucial issue. The tightening US stranglehold, like its 50 year blockade of Cuba and its recent one aimed at achieving regime

change in Venezuela, would entirely justify a victim taking military action against it or its allies. Of course, what is justified is not always what is expedient.

To provoke a military attack from what is still the world's only military hyper-power would be, to put it mildly, a risk. Even if the Iraqi occupation, like the Vietnam war, led to an economic and military debacle for the USA, the destruction visited on the peoples of those countries means that such a risk should not be courted.

Of course, it is possible that the repressive regime of the Iranian Ayatollahs, whose popularity has been further eroded by the sanctions and their anti-worker repression, might decide that the risk of a 'terrible end' would be preferable to an 'endless terror'. Conflict with the US might rally the patriotism of their country behind them once again. Iran has few real allies beyond the Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad, who owes his survival to Iran, and the Lebanese Hezbollah and neither they, nor Russia nor China, are likely to go beyond formal condemnations of the US actions.

Nevertheless, any sort of war in the Gulf would lead to an oil crisis and could tip the world economy into recession, the first signs of which are already on the horizon. Last, but not least, it would cement Russia and China's alliance and convince Beijing that it might be the Straits of Hormuz today but it could be the Straits of Malacca tomorrow. That is a vital interest to Beijing because 80 percent of its energy supplies and a large part of its manufactured export pass through those Straits. There, too, the US is asserting its maritime supremacy.

It becomes ever clearer that 'Making America Great Again' means making the other imperialist countries, and the more independently minded regional powers, smaller and weaker. The win-win scenario of the Obama rhetoric has given way to the win-lose Trump twitter storm. For now, this is being pursued by means of US control of economic institutions, the capital and commodity markets and the globalised economy but, if resisted, it can, speedily if need be, resort to brute force.

Even though the warnings by Russia and China to the United States not to intervene militarily against Iran are unlikely to lead to any actions, once again we have an international incident which threatens the vital interests of nuclear-armed imperialist powers. This confirms what the League for the Fifth International has been saying for some time; that we have entered a period of renewed inter-imperialist conflict, which threatens regional wars, interventions and, ultimately, a world war which could destroy humanity.

Today, the first priority is to mobilise the working class movements of the USA and its allies to stop any attack on Iran, to halt all arms supplies to Saudi Arabia, to oppose Trump's Deal of the Century, which he is planning to impose on the Palestinians, and to support the beleaguered Sudanese revolution.

The condemnations of Trump's warmongering by figures like Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders are all well and good but their focus on 'who really did it?' contains the dangerous implication that, if it proves to be Iran, then action would be justified. Their constant calls for the UN to intervene are likewise useless. The UN is a thieves' kitchen for the major imperialist powers, with the others there to pick up a few crumbs and to give the illusion that it is a world parliament.

We must oppose the actions of the US, the UK and their Gulf allies but without sowing the illusion that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", in this case that either the Iranian regime or its imperialist backers, Russia and China, could be our allies. Whilst resisting US aggression against Iran, whether economic or military, we must support the country's workers and the secular-minded democratic youth who want to rid their country of its misogynistic, homophobic and dictatorial rulers. In the end, it is only the revolutionary

struggle of the workers and youth, like that ongoing in Sudan, and in the Arab world, aided by the workers of the whole world, that can impede and prevent all imperialist wars, economic melt-down, and climate catastrophe, too.

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