

US stokes war danger in Middle East following alleged downing of Iranian drone

By Jordan Shilton
19 July 2019

In a further ratcheting up of tensions in the Middle East, US President Donald Trump alleged Thursday that a warship destroyed an Iranian drone in the Strait of Hormuz. The latest alleged clash comes in the wake of a long list of provocations over recent months, including last week's supposed confrontation between a British frigate and an Iranian patrol boat.

The regularity of these incidents underscores how great is the danger of a military conflagration in the region, which would quickly draw in the major powers and endanger the entire planet.

Principal responsibility for this rests with US imperialism, which is engaged in a reckless war drive against Iran. Since unilaterally abrogating the 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran in May 2018, Trump, with bipartisan support, has engaged in one provocation after another, including the imposition of punishing economic sanctions and the launching of a major military build-up in the region.

Trump asserted that the USS Boxer was in international waters Thursday morning when it was approached by the Iranian drone. Despite several warnings from the crew, the Pentagon claimed that the drone came within a "threatening range" of the ship before it was downed through the use of counter-drone jamming technology.

"This is the latest of many provocative and hostile actions by Iran against vessels operating in international waters," Trump declared at the White House. "The United States reserves the right to defend our personnel, our facilities and interest and calls upon all nations to condemn Iran's attempts to disrupt freedom of navigation and global commerce."

No evidence has been presented to back up Trump and the Pentagon's claims, which follow a similar pattern to the previous incidents that have taken place.

Trump or other US officials make wild accusations against Iran without presenting a shred of evidence, and then seize on Tehran's alleged "aggressive activity" to justify a renewed round of military threats.

This was the case with the unproven allegations in June that Iran was responsible for damaging oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, which was exploited by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to threaten Iran with military attack.

Barely two weeks later, the region teetered on the brink of war as the US responded to Iran's shooting down of a \$200 million spy drone that was flying in Iranian territory by planning a devastating military strike on Iranian air defense systems and radar facilities. Trump called off the strikes ten minutes prior to their launch, reflecting concerns in the military establishment that Iran could inflict major losses on US forces.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohamed Javad Zarif denied Tehran's involvement in Thursday's incident, saying there were no reports of a drone being lost.

The alleged incident has all the hallmarks of a deliberate provocation. It came just 24 hours after it was revealed that 500 US troops will be deployed to the Saudi Prince Sultan air base east of Riyadh, where the US military plans to establish a Patriot missile defense battery and improve the runways to facilitate higher levels of air traffic.

The troop deployment is part of the Pentagon's planned increase of US forces across the Middle East by 1,500 troops, announced in May. This is a mere down payment, with the Pentagon having already drawn up plans to send an additional 120,000 soldiers to the Middle East in the event of a military conflict with Iran.

Moreover, Washington is seeking a pretext to

convince the European imperialist powers to back its plans for an escalation of military operations in the region. According to DPA news agency, US officials visited Brussels Wednesday to seek European support for naval patrols in the Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf to step up pressure on Tehran.

Additionally, the report noted that a closed-door meeting between US and European diplomats is scheduled for today in Washington to discuss the proposal. The Trump administration is seeking to bring into line the European imperialist powers, which have resisted Washington's abandonment of the nuclear accord and sought to advance their own predatory economic ambitions by refusing to reimpose sanctions.

Following last week's alleged incident involving the British tanker, calls grew in the European media for Britain, France and Germany to support the creation of an international flotilla. (See "After alleged UK tanker incident in Persian Gulf, EU powers threaten Iran")

With its bullying war threats, the US ruling elite is seeking to consolidate its dominance over the energy-rich and strategically crucial Middle East. Washington is not prepared to accept any challenge to its economic and geopolitical interests, whether it comes from Iran, Russia or China.

Trump gave voice to these sentiments in remarks on Iran Tuesday, when he claimed that progress had been made in diplomatic initiatives. Speaking like a colonial overlord, the US president declared, "We want to help them, we'll be good to them. We'll help them in any way we can. But they can't have a nuclear weapon."

The immediate goal of Washington's bullying of Iran is the installation of a puppet regime in Tehran, through the use of military force if necessary. The ruling elite fears that the bourgeois-clerical regime in Tehran could use its strategic position and control over the Strait of Hormuz to block a significant portion of global oil shipments, fully one fifth of which are carried through this waterway.

Shortly after the alleged incident yesterday, Iran's Revolutionary Guards announced that they had detained the crew of the tanker Riah, which was sailing under a Panamanian flag. The Revolutionary Guards accused the tanker of smuggling oil and "piracy."

News reports indicate that it is unclear who the vessel was operating for, and that it may have been used to refuel other tankers in the region. Iranian state

television claimed that the Riah was supplying Iranian oil to foreign customers.

The US State Department and top military personnel predictably responded with aggressive threats. A State Department statement read, "The United States strongly condemns the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy's continued harassment of vessels and interference with safe passage in and around the Strait of Hormuz."

US Central Command Chief Kenneth McKenzie, the commander of US forces throughout the region, raised the prospect of a military intervention under the guise of securing "freedom of navigation" in remarks made at a Saudi airbase yesterday. "We are going to work very aggressively with our partners ... to come to a solution that will enable the free passage of critical oil and other commodities ... through the region," he told reporters.

Under the guise of securing "freedom of navigation," the US and its imperialist allies have organized massive naval provocations against China in the South China Sea, including the sailing of aircraft carriers and the flying of nuclear-capable aircraft through the region. In the highly volatile Middle East, a similarly brazen provocation could provide the trigger for a major war that would escalate into a regionwide and global bloodbath.

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