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A Europe-Iran War

By MARK A. HELLER

TEL AVIV — This week, the European Union went to war against Iran. There was no formal declaration, of course, nor even any undeclared use of military force. But the E.U. decision to place an embargo on Iranian oil imports, ban new contracts, and freeze Iranian Central Bank assets is effectively an act of war and may very well result in the military hostilities that sanctions are meant to forestall.

Oil exports account for over 50 percent of Iranian government revenue and about 80 percent of its hard currency earnings. And the E.U., as a bloc, is Iran's second-largest customer, taking about a quarter of Iranian exports. Consequently, unless other customers neutralize E.U. actions by stepping up their own purchases from Iran — and indications from China, Japan and South Korea suggest that this is unlikely to be the case — the E.U. decision, coupled with existing American measures, will come close to imposing the “crippling sanctions” that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton threatened but could not deliver without European cooperation.

If that turns out to be the case, then the Iranian regime, already coping with high inflation and a rapidly depreciating currency, will feel constrained to react. One possibility is that it will capitulate and essentially dismantle its nuclear weapons program. That is obviously the outcome that Europeans and others hope sanctions (or even the credible threat of sanctions) will bring about.

But it is at least as likely that Iran, feeling trapped, will lash out in a desperate attempt to frighten the Europeans into backing down or at least introduce so much hysteria into the oil market that price spikes will allow it to earn the same revenue from a reduced volume of exports.

One form this might take would be an attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has already threatened to do. But that is probably beyond Iran's capacity for very long and

would in any case also shut down Iran's own ability to export to whatever markets it manages to retain.

Far less complicated would be sabotage or rocket attacks on refineries, pipelines and other facilities in places like Abqaiq and Ras Tanura in Saudi Arabia. These might be carried out as "false flag" operations by local Shiite insurgents concentrated in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, but nobody would be fooled and the risks of escalation to large-scale conflict with Iran would be significant.

In this scenario, the military confrontation that many Europeans have sought to avoid will become unavoidable, even if Iranian decision makers do not delude themselves into thinking that they would ultimately prevail.

Before such courses of action are discounted as unrealistic scare-mongering or dismissed on grounds that they would be self-defeating, it might be worth recalling that Imperial Japan did not attack the United States because it was physically attacked by the United States but rather because it was being economically squeezed (as Iran may well be squeezed now) to the point where it felt that war was preferable to slow-motion strangulation. And it made no difference that many Japanese military leaders, including Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, chief planner of the attack on Pearl Harbor, believed that Japan's ultimate defeat was foreordained.

It is difficult to imagine that the E.U. members who adopted the decision on sanctions are unaware of this possible dynamic. Indeed, the very fact that British and French warships accompanied the U.S. aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln on its passage through the Straits and back into the Gulf — in brazen defiance of Iranian warnings — imply the opposite: that E.U. governments, especially the two with the greatest force projection capabilities, are perfectly cognizant of the possible consequences and are prepared to deal with them.

And that suggests that the European Union, notwithstanding its economic travails, is experiencing its own "spring" in foreign and defense policy and that those who tended in the past to dismiss it as a flaccid talking shop capable of little more than vacuous posturing now need to carry out a fundamental reassessment.

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