

How to Prevent an Accidental War With Iran, *Foreign Policy*

With the dangers of miscalculation or misunderstanding high, Trump should act now to make sure the only wars the United States enters are the ones it really wants to.

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Iranian President Hassan Rouhani attends a military parade marking the country's annual Army Day in Tehran on April 18. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

White House spin notwithstanding, it has become increasingly clear in recent days that the Trump administration is divided over the objectives of its Iran policy and the role that military threats or force should play in achieving them. The national security advisor and secretary of state seem to be spoiling for a fight and baiting Tehran into taking an action that would provide a pretext for a military strike. But the president keeps saying he wants to talk to the Iranians and get them back to the negotiating table to cut a better nuclear deal and to force Iranian concessions on its regional behavior and ballistic missile program. The secretary of defense and

chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, meanwhile, seem worried that the United States is on a path toward war with Iran and skeptical that additional U.S. deployments to the Persian Gulf are warranted.

As with most foreign-policy issues, it's hard to know exactly what the policy is and who's in charge. It is possible, of course, that all the chest-thumping and force movements within the past week are designed to either deter Iranian provocations or pressure the country into capitulating to U.S. demands.

Whatever the administration actually wants, there is one thing that the war avoiders and the warmongers should be able to agree on: the need to prevent an accidental or unintended conflict between the United States and Iran. But the administration's actions are increasing rather than lowering the risks that the two countries will stumble into a conflict as a result of a miscalculation, misunderstanding, or miscommunication. And that is extremely dangerous since Iran and the United States have no channels for direct and regular communication or mechanisms to defuse a crisis or control escalation once an incident occurs.

Trump does not appear to have an appetite for war with Iran, and he is reportedly **miffed** that National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have gotten ahead of him in planning a military conflict with Iran. But war is not off the table. The president is notoriously mercurial. He approved all of the steps his hawkish advisors have taken that have brought the United States and Iran closer to the brink of war, and he presides over a totally broken interagency decision-making process that does not expose him to alternative views and options. Meanwhile, the Saudis appear to be egging him on to conduct surgical strikes on Iran.

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Even if the administration has no desire for war, moreover, with tensions so high, Iranian uncertainty and confusion about American motives so great, and U.S. forces in such close proximity to Iranian forces and proxies, it wouldn't take much to ignite a conflict, with disastrous consequences for America and the region.

If the administration plans to provoke a war with Iran, it should want to do so at a time and place of its choosing and only after it has shaped the battlefield—diplomatically, politically, and militarily—to its advantage. It does the United States no good to stumble into a conflict. And even if the president wants to avoid a war with Iran but sustain military pressure, he should still want to find ways to reduce the chances of an inadvertent conflict with Iran.

There are numerous ways to do so. In Syria, the United States could tighten the rules of engagement under which U.S. forces would be authorized to fire on Iranian forces or proxies. These changes could work to prevent an unintended clash provoked by command and control

problems or rogue operations conducted outside the Iranian chain of command. In addition, the two countries could enhance their military deconfliction procedures. For example, in southwestern Syria, the current buffer zone between U.S.- and Iranian-backed forces could be expanded, although such a move would require the approval of Russia and Bashar al-Assad's government. The Trump administration should also press Moscow to continue to encourage Tehran to avoid contact with U.S. forces in Syria, and it should probe Russian interest in a new trilateral U.S.-Russian-Iranian mechanism to avoid an incident. Finally, U.S. and Iranian commanders in the field could establish real-time channels to communicate intentions in the event that a local incident threatens to spiral out of control.

In Iraq, it would make more sense for the United States to establish communications and crisis management procedures that are mediated by Iraqi security forces with Iranian military forces and the Shi'ite militias aligned with Iran. It would be worthwhile, too, for the United States to explore the creation of a tripartite U.S.-Iraq-Iran conflict resolution commission that could contain and mitigate any incident that threatens to get out of hand.

There are also several potential flash points in and around the Arabian Peninsula. These include harassment of U.S. Navy or Coast Guard vessels by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that leads to an exchange of fire; a U.S. Navy attempt to board an Iranian merchant ship suspected of carrying contraband to the Houthi rebels in Yemen that results in casualties; or the inadvertent entry of a U.S. naval vessel into Iranian waters, resulting in the crew's capture and detention (as occurred in 2016). In addition, the Houthis have launched Iranian-supplied missiles and drones deep into Saudi territory. Should a strike damage an important Saudi asset or a major city, the Saudis would almost certainly escalate attacks in Yemen and might strike Iran directly, drawing the United States into the conflict.

Beyond the routine U.S. and Iranian use of bridge-to-bridge radio communications to ensure the safe conduct of ships, no formal or informal mechanisms exist to prevent a collision between U.S. and Iranian vessels. Such arrangements could be put in place relatively quickly if the Iranians are prepared to cooperate. And to prevent the risk of escalation in Yemen between the Saudis and Houthis, the United States—along with European partners—could encourage Saudi Arabia and Iran to establish a channel to negotiate and enforce rules of the road or, at a minimum, communicate in the event of a crisis.