

Why the United States is playing rope-a-dope with Iran in the Persian Gulf

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The British-flagged tanker Stena Impero anchored in Bandar Abbas in southern Iran. (Tasnim News/AFP) (-/AFP/Getty Images)

KABUL — Iran’s biggest frustration right now may be that despite its escalating tactics in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. military is refusing to be provoked — denying Tehran for now the showdown it seems to want.

The latest evidence of the United States’ seeming “rope-a-dope” strategy toward a flailing Iran came Friday, when the [Iranians seized](#) a British-flagged tanker and boarded and then released a second British-owned tanker. The United States has not taken any visible retaliatory action, in what seemed a calculated nonresponse.

Iran’s Revolutionary Guards posted video July 20 claiming to show the moment a British-flagged oil tanker was seized in the Gulf. (Reuters)

[Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr.](#), the U.S. Central Command commander, gave a clear explanation of this measured U.S. approach in an early-morning interview here Saturday in Kabul, the latest stop on his tour of the region. McKenzie had closely monitored Friday’s events from his mobile command post and directed U.S. military actions.

“We need to be the calm and steady part of the equation,” McKenzie told CBS News’s David Martin and me, the two journalists who are traveling with him. “We don’t need to overreact to what the Iranians do.”

“Clearly this [Iranian] action is irresponsible,” McKenzie continued. “But merely because they’re being irresponsible, we shouldn’t fall into the trap of some form of overreaction. So our response is going to be very calm, taken in concert with the international community.”

McKenzie said that, about three hours after Iran seized the British ship, Centcom had affirmed freedom of navigation in the gulf by sending a U.S.-flagged cargo ship, the Maersk Chicago, through the Strait of Hormuz. U.S. drones and fighter jets flew above the freighter to protect it in case the Iranians tried to interfere, but the Iranians stayed away.

The next step is a collective maritime-security plan. Two U.S. destroyers are now positioned at the ends of the Strait of Hormuz, in what McKenzie calls a “sentinel” operation, coordinating U.S. surveillance of the strait. The United States expects that soon, nations whose ships transit the strait into the gulf will begin escorting them with their own warships, aided by U.S. surveillance and other intelligence and military support.

Sometimes U.S. military advice conflicts with President Trump’s impulses. But that doesn’t seem to be the case in the confrontation with Iran. Trump is conducting an economic war against Iran, through his “maximum pressure” campaign of sanctions to cripple Iranian oil exports. But Trump clearly wants to avoid a shooting war, especially as he heads into an election year.

Iran continues to escalate its tactics, shooting down a U.S. surveillance drone last month, attaching mines to tankers and now seizing ships in the Strait of Hormuz. I asked McKenzie what might lead the United States to abandon its cautious approach, given that it doesn’t seem to be curbing Iranian actions. McKenzie made clear that his advice as military commander will be to continue maintaining the low profile.

“The policy that we’re going to carry out is one of being calm and steady, not doing anything needlessly provocative,” he said. “The Iranians are going to do what they’re going to do,” he continued, but “I don’t see that we’re going off” the restrained approach. “Any further decision would not be a military decision.”

The U.S. strategy of measured response makes sense, but it doesn’t answer the question of how this confrontation will end. Iran feels it’s being strangled by U.S. sanctions. When a regime feels it’s choking to death, it has two choice — capitulation or fighting back hard. The Trump administration has been betting on capitulation, but there’s no sign that bet will pay off.

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