

Is the West destined for war with Iran?

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The Sydney Morning Herald

25 February 2012

P. 14

THE ANALYST RODGER SHANAHAN

Iran is already at war, but it is one that is played out in the shadows.

Nuclear scientists are assassinated in Tehran while Israeli diplomats are targeted in Delhi and Tbilisi. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard conducts naval manoeuvres in the Straits of Hormuz and a US carrier battle group then exercises its right of free passage. An Iranian naval convoy enters the Mediterranean allegedly bound for Syria.

But this war represents the limit to military confrontation between Iran and the West because neither the decision-makers in Tehran nor in the West believe the risks of military action are worth the returns.

The likelihood of states going to war is predicated on their capability and intent. While the opaque, centralised nature of Iranian decision-making means that intent can be hard to determine and can change rapidly, capabilities take a long time to develop.

Years of sanctions and international isolation have taken their toll on Iranian military capabilities - the naval convoy in the Mediterranean consisted of a 40-year-old destroyer and a supply ship, while Iran's ability to close the Straits of Hormuz for even a short period is questionable.

Iran's missiles lack precision and, in many cases, range, meaning they would be of most use against targets in the Gulf - hardly the armoury of a country seeking an effective "first-strike" capability. Put simply, while Tehran has some regionally effective defensive military forces, it has limited offensive capabilities.

For the West, the challenges of a military strike against Iran's nuclear sites are great because of the uncertain outcomes. The Iranian sites are dispersed, defended and in some cases well dug in. To inflict long-term damage would require a medium-term military campaign rather than a single strike. The US has the capability to do it but not the intent, while the Israelis may have the intent but lack the capability.

Iran is under pressure. Its nuclear program has isolated it internationally, its regional influence is threatened as its pivotal Arab ally fights for survival, economic sanctions inflict damage on the

economy and reform movements in the region make its revolutionary Islamic government appear increasingly anachronistic.

Despite this, the regime remains secure and to those with the authority to use military force in Iran there is no reason to provoke military action against it. The likelihood of a shooting war with the West is remote, but the information and espionage wars will continue unabated.

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