A dangerous game

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Iran this week played a very dangerous game of chicken with the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf. Five small boats of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard harassed and provoked three U.S. warships in the Strait of Hormuz on Sunday morning. The boats swarmed the U.S. ships and engaged in threatening behavior. And they almost paid a high price for the stunt.

And it's still not clear what the Iranians were up to.

Was this an attempt to lure the United States into attacking the boats, and thus creating an international incident? If so, it was a suicide mission. U.S. Navy warships are not to be toyed with.

Or was this more of a probing exercise, an attempt by the Iranians to see how far they could push the Americans? If that's the case, then the Iranians almost learned what it feels like when the Americans push back.

This much is clear: Whoever manned those boats were minutes away from being blown to oblivion - and with justification. This incident took place in international waters, which are open to all countries. And the Strait of Hormuz carries extra importance because it's one of the most important shipping channels in the world, with a sea of oil flowing through it.

Some of the Iranian boats came within a few hundred yards of the U.S. Navy guided missile destroyer Hopper. Let's remember that it was just this sort of small boat that put a hole in the side of the destroyer Cole in Yemen in October 2000, in a suicide attack that killed 17 sailors and injured 39 others.

The U.S. naval officers who patrol the Persian Gulf know that tragic story, which is why they went to battle stations when they intercepted a threatening radio transmission which seemed to come from the Iranian boats. "I am coming at you," the message said. "You will explode in a couple of minutes." Then, one of the boats dropped white boxes into the water in front of the U.S. ships. In the end, no shots were fired, but only because the Iranians came to their senses and turned away.

It is easy to imagine a much different ending to this story - one that potentially might have started a full-out war. And speaking of wars, the fact that there is currently a military conflict raging in Iraq seems to be making some Americans extremely leery of what they see as saber-rattling by the Bush administration against Iran. Because of mistakes in Iraq, the Bush administration is low on credibility. In fact, many Americans don't believe anything that comes out of this White House.

But will they believe their own eyes? Iran is up to no good. And before long, the United States may have to resort to stronger defensive measures in the waters of the Persian Gulf.

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