

Trump Authorizes Navy to Fire on Harassing Iranian Craft



Iranian vessels harass a U.S. ship by crossing its bow and stern. U.S. forces are conducting joint interoperability operations in the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations in the northern Persian Gulf. U.S. Navy

ARLINGTON,

Va.

– President Trump has authorized the U.S. Navy to fire on Iranian boats that harass American ships, following a recent episode where armed Iranian craft came dangerously close to and harassed Navy and U.S. Coast Guard vessels engaged in an exercise in the northern Persian Gulf.

“I have instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea,” Trump said in an April 22 tweet.

Under routine rules of engagement, U.S. ships are inherently authorized to fire in self-defense, but this new authority gives the ships’ commanders permission to fire if they are being harassed by the Iranian craft.

“If we see a hostile act, if we see hostile intent, we have

the right to respond up to and including lethal force and, if it happens in the Gulf, if it happens in any way, we will respond with overwhelming lethal force, if necessary, to defend ourselves. It's really that simple."

Air Force Gen. John Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

"On April 15, 11 Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) vessels repeatedly conducted dangerous and harassing approaches of the USS Lewis B. Puller, USS Paul Hamilton, USS Firebolt, USS Sirocco, USCGC Wrangell and USCGC Maui while the U.S. vessels were conducting joint integration operations with U.S. Army AH-64E Apache attack helicopters in the international waters of the North Arabian Gulf," the U.S. 5th Fleet said in a release.

"The IRGCN vessels repeatedly crossed the bows and sterns of the U.S. vessels at extremely close range and high speeds, including multiple crossings of the Puller with a 50-yard closest point of approach and within 10 yards of Maui's bow," the release added.

"The U.S. crews issued multiple warnings via bridge-to-bridge radio, five short blasts from the ships' horns and long-range acoustic noise maker devices but received no response from the IRGCN. After approximately one hour, the IRGCN vessels responded to the bridge-to-bridge radio queries, then maneuvered away from the U.S. ships and opened distance between them."

The Iranians occasionally have used their small, fast, armed and highly maneuverable boats in swarms to harass naval and merchant ships in the Persian Gulf and last year captured merchant ships flagged in the United Kingdom and other nations.

Many U.S. ships are armed with Mk38 25 mm chain guns and M2

.50-caliber machine guns – in addition to larger-caliber guns on some ships – for countering fast attack craft, while many helicopters based on U.S. ships are armed with Hellfire and Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System guided missiles that are effective against such craft.

In January 2016, Iranian boats seized two U.S. Navy riverine command boats and detained the crews after the U.S. boats strayed into Iranian waters off Farsi Island in the Persian Gulf. The crews and boats later were released.

“The IRGCN’s dangerous and provocative actions increased the risk of miscalculation and collision, were not in accordance with the internationally recognized Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea ‘rules of the road’ or internationally recognized maritime customs and were not in accordance with the obligation under international law to act with due regard for the safety of other vessels in the area,” according to the 5th Fleet release.

Questioned at an April 22 Pentagon news conference, Deputy Defense Secretary David L. Norquist said that “all of our ships retain the right of self-defense and people need to be very careful in their interactions to understand the inherent right of self-defense.”

“Every capability that we deploy – every ship that deploys into harm’s way – has the inherent right of self-defense, as the secretary just described,” said Air Force Gen. John Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who also spoke at the news conference.

“What that means: if we see a hostile act, if we see hostile intent, we have the right to respond up to and including lethal force and, if it happens in the Gulf, if it happens in any way, we will respond with overwhelming lethal force, if necessary, to defend ourselves. It’s really that simple.

Nobody should doubt that the commanders have the authority right now to respond to any hostile act or hostile intent.”

“I like that the president warned an adversary,” Hyten said. “That’s what he’s doing – he’s providing a warning. ‘If you want to go down that path, we will come, and we will come large, so don’t go down that path.’ He’s saying it in clear, certain terms. We understand that direction, and every commander that is deployed has the ability to execute that.”

Norquist said he thought the intent of the president’s tweet was clear. “When you talk about harassment, you’re talking about actions designed to provoke, actions designed to threaten. It’s a very clear message that the Iranians should understand.”

Hyten added: “You can’t let a fast boat get into a position where they can threaten your ship. We have very specific guidance on how we can use lethal force.”