



Travel

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JAN
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Persian Gulf Alert (UPDATE): South Korean-vessel detained by Iran in Strait of Hormuz on January 4 due to alleged violation of marine environmental laws; potentially politically-motivated move by Tehran

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Please be advised:

- According to an Iranian semi-official state news agency report, the South Korean-vessel was detained in the Persian Gulf due to “repeated violations of marine environmental laws.”
- The report further indicated that the ship was docked at the port of Bandar Abbas and “will be handed over to judicial authorities for further proceedings.”
- The vessel’s crew members are reportedly from South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar.
- Reports indicated that the ship was carrying chemical and petroleum products from Saudi Arabia’s Jubail to the UAE’s Fujairah.
- Reports indicate that South Korea has sent its Cheonghae Unit, Seoul’s overseas anti-piracy unit that was deployed to the Middle East, to the Strait of Hormuz following the incident.

Assessments & Forecast:

1. The incident comes amid occasional detentions of foreign naval vessels in the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Hormuz by Iranian naval forces over the past year, amid heightened tensions between Iran and the US. Most recently, on [November 20, 2020](#), Iran detained a Panama-flagged vessel off the coast of Iran’s Hormozgan Province in the Persian Gulf, which Iranian authorities claimed was engaged in smuggling. During the overnight hours of [August 12-13, 2020](#), Iranian forces boarded and temporarily detained a Liberian-flagged tanker in the international waters of the Gulf of Oman. Thus, regardless of the reason for the current detention, the latest incident highlights the remaining risk of detentions posed to commercial vessels traveling in international waters in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman.
2. The current incident specifically comes amid significantly [heightened tensions](#) between Iran and its allies, on the one side, and the US and its allies, on the other, as January 3 marked the first anniversary of the [January 3, 2020](#), killing of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) General Qassem Soleimani, by the US. On [January 1, 2021](#), Iraqi security forces defused a naval mine attached to an oil tanker offshore Basra in the Persian Gulf. More broadly, a growing number of security incidents involving naval mines and explosive-laden vessels launched by Iran-backed Houthis have also been recorded in the Red Sea over the past weeks. While a direct connection between these incidents and Iran is not confirmed, these attacks may have been

encouraged by the latter, as it serves to project that “crimes against Iran”, such as the killing of Soleimani, will result in greater regional security volatility, thus adversely impacting the strategic maritime trading routes in the region.

3. Tensions have also specifically grown between South Korea and Iran in the past two years over Seoul’s reported freeze of an estimated seven billion USD of Iranian funds in two South Korean banks, since September 2019. Seoul reportedly maintained that the freeze was undertaken in compliance with the US-imposed sanctions on Iran, prompting Iranian officials to state that the relationship between Seoul and Washington is a “master-servant” relationship. Under these circumstances, while the reason provided by Iranian authorities for the current detention implies that it revolves around a technical legal basis, the possibility that the vessel was detained for political reasons cannot be ruled out. In this case, Tehran may have detained the ship under the pretext that it will provide Iran with leverage over Seoul in its efforts to prompt the release of funds by the latter. Alternatively, the move may also be intended to extract greater concessions from the US in future negotiations, in light of Washington’s strong relationship with Seoul.
4. Meanwhile, Tehran’s official stance of detaining the vessel on pollution-related charges is likely aimed to mitigate international criticism, while projecting itself as the security regulator of the Persian Gulf, including in areas that are not within Iranian territorial waters. Seoul’s decision to dispatch its Cheonghae Unit to the region likely constitutes a symbolic measure aimed at securing the release of the vessel. **FORECAST:** Nevertheless, the incident will likely lead to heightened diplomatic tensions between Seoul and Tehran over the coming hours and days. This may also lead to the bolstering of naval military assets in the region by Seoul, and potentially the US, with the overall aim of pushing Iranian authorities to release the vessel and deterring the detention of additional vessels in the Persian Gulf. Regardless, given the elevated tensions between Tehran on one side, and the US and its allies, on the other, further seizures of foreign commercial vessels by Iran and attacks on such vessels throughout the Gulf region, cannot be ruled out over the coming days and weeks.

Recommendations:

1. Those managing or operating vessels in the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Hormuz are advised to take necessary precautions, including reviewing security protocols and adhering to international instructions, in light of the general threat in the area.
2. Be aware of NATO Shipping Center alerts and keep watch for suspicious vessels.