



## US-IRAN DEADLOCK: REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR PAKISTAN



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## US-IRAN DEADLOCK: REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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The geopolitical shift in the region has increased Iran's role in the global world politics. The geo-strategic position of Iran has made her the regional hot spot especially for the United States, as the sole superpower power with global hegemonic reach, and vast engagement in Middle Eastern affairs and the Persian Gulf politics. The US has adopted a continued policy of refusing Iran's regional power status aimed to contain and constrain Iran's influential role in regional stratagem. The US and Iran have long rooted political, ideological, and strategic clash but the recent development has made the situation worse.

### Recent Stand-off between Arch-rivals

The US-Iran conflict has taken a new disturbing turn after the assassination of Iranian top military commander Qassem Soleimani. In reaction, Iran has fired ballistic missiles on the US Ain al-Assad airbase base in Iraq approximately, 100 miles northwest of Baghdad on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2020, labeled it as a conclusive action. The US withdrawal from its nuclear-deal obligations and announcement of the "maximum pressure" campaign at the end of 2018 shaped the initial period of escalation. Furthermore, the US revocation of the final waiver on oil sanctions in May 2019 worsens the situation.

The US President, Donald Trump ordered an airstrike that killed Iran's most powerful general on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, in a dramatic escalation of an already bloody struggle between Washington and Tehran for their objectives. The renowned commander of the Iranian military operations in the Middle East as head of Iran's Quds Force an elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Qassem Soleiman was hit by a drone strike. The de-facto leader of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was also killed in the attack. Soleimani's killing marks a major acceleration in tensions between Washington and Tehran. Under his leadership, Iran had bolstered Hezbollah in Lebanon and other pro-Iranian militant groups expanded its military presence in Iraq and Syria and orchestrated Syria's offensive strike against rebel groups in the country's long civil war. President Trump took a stance on this assassination incident and avowed that the general was "directly and indirectly responsible for the deaths of millions of people". The drone strike came days after protesters attacked the US embassy in Baghdad, clashing with US forces at the scene. The Pentagon alleged that Soleimani approved the attacks on the embassy. The strike derived at such a time when Iraq was already on the brink of an all-out proxy war.

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## Tension Escalation in the Middle East

In recent years, Soleimani directed such successful Iranian military operations as the campaign to drive ISIS out of western Iraq in 2015 and to crush the jihadist forces opposed to Syria's Bashar al-Assad. The United States and Israel accused Iran's role but could not inflict restrictions. Soleimani had assumed a prominent role in Iraqi politics in the past year. The anti-ISIS campaign relied on Iraqi militias, which the Iranians supported with money, weapons, and training. After ISIS was defeated, these militias maintained a prominent role in Iraq that many resented, leading to demonstrations and rioting. Soleimani was seeking to stabilize the reconciliation process between the KSA and Tehran government and wanted to channelize the protests against the United States when he was killed.

In the same period, Israel has been pursuing its program of target assassination. In the past decade, Mossad slew at least five Iranian nuclear scientists to thwart Iran's nuclear program. Iran, a major backer of the Assad regime sent Soleimani in Syria several times to lead attacks against ISIS and other hostile segments. One of the Islamic Republic's major regional intentions is to drive the US forces out of neighboring Iraq.

## Washington's Attack

As the tension between the U.S. and Iran increased after Trump pulled out of Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers, Iranian officials quickly vowed to retaliate. While Soleimani and many others in its ranks have experience in pursuing the asymmetrical proxy war attacks. The Pentagon professed that the strike was aimed at deterring future Iranian attack strategies and Soleimani was alleged for handling overseas operations against Islamic State. According to the International Law, what the Americans did on January 3, 2020, was legally an act of international terrorism against another state and the breach of territorial sovereignty of Iraq. Politically, it was a desperate attempt on the part of the United States backed by Israel to start a war with Iran. The US has been trying to get Iran into war for a long time. This time again the US provoked Iran unilaterally and illegally.

## US Middle East Agenda and Election Tactics

- a) Although, the US and Iran both have their vested interest in the Middle East and have been engaged in proxy wars in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine to counter the rival with all their possible potential.
- b) The year 2020 is an election year in the US and most likely Mr. Trump wanted to express his potential use of tactics against his major opponent in the Middle East to convince his nation especially Jew voters that he is the only person who can tackle Iran's military threat upfront in the Middle East region. Trump is already under pressure for his role in the Ukrainian aid issue for which the impeachment process is in motion.

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- c) The US thus has tried to gain many benefits out of this bold action, even gave a lesson to opponents that if they intend to take a step forward like Saudi-Iran rapprochement they will ultimately face US aggressiveness.
- d) The US has its clear agenda to divide Muslim Ummah on Shia-Sunni ranks to tackle Iran militarily and curb its nuclear ambitions.
- e) At the same time, it is evident that the US wants to preserve the threat of the environment in the Middle East for its arms sale as well as to limit the role of China and Russia in regional politics. US has sold arms and ammo worth billions of dollars in M.E in the last four decades, which will be used against Iran, carrying destruction, human loss and massive financial damage in the Muslim hemisphere to considerably reduce the military and economic strength of Iran and its allies, by addressing the security concerns of Israel in the long run.

### War Possibilities and Powers Politics

The geopolitical, economic and strategic significance of the Middle East strangled the region from attaining perpetual and durable peace, due to conflict of interest among the regional and international actors. This stressed scenario will not be limited to US-Iran but may engulf the entire globe. As far as, military escalation is concerned, it can be observed that the US and Iran both will not go for full-spectrum warfare. However, the situation will remain tensed and confrontation will likely to continue. Iran while pursuing an anti-status quo agenda that has often brought it into conflict with Israel and the United States, has shown that it seeks to avoid conventional wars and consequent heavy damages to its forces. Instead, it relies on proxy operations, terrorism, and non-lethal shaping activities. Yet it has occasionally been willing to venture high-risk activities that entail a potential for escalation. Though, Iran lacks the capacity and capability to fight a conventional war and due to its stagnant economy restricted by US sanctions.

If war erupts there is a huge possibility of an increase in oil prices as Iran being an oil exporter to the region may impose restraints in the Strait of Hormuz along with the possibilities of proxy war in the Gulf region which will further worsen the situation. Israel also seems intent on avoiding war, though its actions show that it is willing to accept the risk of escalation to counter these emerging threats. Indeed, since 2013 it has carried out more than 130 strikes in Syria on arms shipments destined for Hezbollah, and since late 2017 it has expanded this campaign between the wars to target Iranian military facilitators in Syria, thus far, sparking a wider confrontation though unwarranted.

The next war will likely involve many more actors on multiple fronts, unprecedented challenges for escalation management, war-fighting, and the possibility of a regional conflagration. China's role is decisive in current escalation as China fulfill its oil demand from Middle East countries and imports approximately 60% of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. If tension further rises Iran would retaliate by blocking free shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and this will be damaging for China's economic growth. If there is one player in the

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dangerous drama unfolding in the Middle East with the ability to flip the script, it's Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin was in Damascus to meet Syrian President Bashar al-Assad just before Iran retaliated for Soleimani's killing, and launched ballistic missile strikes on two US military bases in Iraq. Although Russia may benefit economically if security deteriorates in the Gulf, with a spike in oil prices providing a much-needed windfall to the Russian energy industry, such instability also poses risks to Moscow as well. Moreover, Russia could exploit it to strengthen its influence in Damascus. Syria's al-Assad regime may become even more dependent on Russia's support to avoid further tension.

### **Pakistan's Response as Significant Regional Player**

The geo-strategic location of Pakistan plays a very significant role in influencing and shaping the dynamics of the region. Therefore, the neighboring countries find themselves compelled to rely on Pakistan for their vital interests. Pakistan feels the heat of the conflict because of the sectarian nature of the conflict and political exploitation of sectarian elements by the regional powers, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran. For decades, Pakistan has hewed closer to Saudi Arabia, the US strategically in the Middle East, than to Iran, but successive Pakistani civilian and military leaders have pursued a more even-keeled foreign policy to avoid being perceived as pro-Saudi and anti-Iranian. In 2015, Pakistan remained neutral as a Saudi-led coalition embarked on a military campaign in Yemen against Iran-aligned Houthis. Pakistan's attempts at shuttle diplomacy and mediation is the clear evidence of its interest in avoiding a regional cold war in the Middle East.

The US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA agreement threatens to destabilize the Iran-Pakistan relationship. As much as Pakistan's civilian leaders have tried to avoid an overtly public tilt in the country's foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia, close military and economic ties ensure that Pakistan likely would choose a natural stance should it be forced to prioritize between both the States. Despite Iran-Pakistan border linkages, their total trade volumes are a fraction of that between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. While, Saudi Arabia is Pakistan's top source of oil, and almost 2.5 million Pakistani Diasporas exist there for work purposes. As total overseas remittances comprise around \$2.53 billion. Pakistan has the potential to turn its strategic location into an asset. Any progress in the US-Iran context will impact the future policy framework of Pakistan as well as the entire globe. Moreover, regional and global powers cannot ignore the substantial role of Pakistan in the de-escalation process and combating war threats.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan offered to mediate between Tehran and Washington, stressing the need for precautionary measures, through a diplomatic solution. Pakistan as a prominent actor in US –Taliban peace talks, the current scenario could cause a breakdown in the Afghan reconciliation process if Iran starts using its influence. In case of war or turmoil in Iran, there could be an influx of refugees to the relatively unstable Pakistani province of Baluchistan. To maintain peace at home between Sunnis and Shiites, Pakistan gives top priority to mediate between Iran and Saudi-Arabia.

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## Possible Implications for Pakistan and Regional Stability

- The US expects Pakistanis to remain complicit to the American attack on Iran just like their attack on Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Pakistan's statement expressed neutrality but an overwhelming majority of Pakistanis want to show full support to Iran against the US. Furthermore, Pakistan should remain neutral and ensure that its territory must not be used for the interest of any other state. Violence cannot be escaped whether one is with Iran or against it.
- US is trying to give the impression that Iran is a close ally of Russia which can be a threat to the US and Saudi Arabia as well. It is the need of the hour that global powers must use their influence to de-escalate the situation.
- China has offered military assistance to Iraq and Russia is already involved in Syria and Iraq. The US is losing its global allies and is now isolated in the international arena. Amongst the Muslim countries in Middle-East, only Iran has the capable potential to fight against the US. Qasem Soleimani's assassination is the violation of international law and violation of Iraq's territorial sovereignty.
- In the case of a full-fledge war scenario, Pakistan will have to decide its stance and has to come up with a policy. India can also benefit from such a situation and can create further tensions at the eastern border of Pakistan. Pakistan must adopt a pragmatic foreign policy to tackle this situation and adopt a management strategy.
- The leadership of Pakistan must engage in the mediation process through bilateral visits to Iran, the US, and other major players. Pakistan must call a Parliamentary Session to discuss National Security and create consensus. In the past, Pakistan has successfully maintained its neutral stance on various global issues including the Iran-Iraq war and the Yemen crisis. However, it is the time that Pakistan must frame a policy to come up with a comprehensive strategy.
- It is an excellent opportunity to further strengthen relations with Iran. Any armed conflict in Pakistan's neighbourhood will bring instability to the region. There could be two possibilities of armed conflict in Iran. The US and Iran get directly involved in an armed confrontation, in which case anti-US sentiments could erupt and sectarian issues could emerge in Pakistan. The region of Baluchistan has a history of sectarian issues and proxy conflicts.
- On the role of Pakistan it is stated that Pakistan should not jump in anyone's war and should play a role similar to the one it played in the Yemen conflict. Pakistan cannot afford to be in a cross-fire between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, Pakistan can also not afford instability on three of its borders.
- Although the US-Iran standoff is alarming, the US will not engage in a new front as it is already losing its war in Afghanistan. The war between the US

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- and Iran could only be the last resort and it is not a viable option as of now. Ever since the end of the cold war, the US considers itself a hyper superpower and wants to maintain this status. The US main agenda is to contain the rising economic status of China. As a result, the US aims to spoil CPEC and other projects of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI).
- Reviewing the rising tensions between the US and Iran, the US will not apply direct force on Iran but will attempt to coerce Iran through a collaborative front of Arab countries and Israel. The US also supports India to play the role of a policeman in the region.
  - Pakistan needs a balanced approach towards Saudi Arabia and Iran. The US wants Iran to implode from inside. However, it is a clear fact that Pakistan cannot be a party to any American efforts of a regime change in Iran. Russia and China are observing the situation and have extended their support to Iran. India has been successful in keeping its economic and diplomatic relations intact with both Iran and the Arab world. This situation will not impact Indo-Iran relations to a great extent. Moreover, armed conflict will de-stabilize China's economy and prove a hurdle in China's oil import from Middle East countries through the Strait of Hormoz.
  - Furthermore, US core ally Israel has revealed its support to the recent US. Other US allies in the Middle East containing Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt are also silent as they fully understand the outcome of the war.
  - Russia's role in escalation and de-escalation will be decisive, Although Russia may benefit economically if security deteriorates in the Gulf, with a spike in oil prices providing a much-needed windfall to the Russian energy industry, and such instability also poses risks to Moscow as well. Russia may emerge as a power broker in the Middle East.

Pakistan needs a basic framework and a long-term perspective to act accordingly in any situation. Nevertheless, Pakistan cannot ignore any potential conflict in its immediate vicinity. Chances of a direct US armed conflict with Iran are less as Iran is different than Iraq and Afghanistan. In the backdrop of the existing situation, Pakistan does not have a variety of policy options, but it should keep on promoting peace in the region.

## Conclusion

The situation though de-escalated for the time being, is far from over. It is critical for the US to maintain pressure in the Middle East, due to which Iran has to be seen to be a threat not only to US interests but to the Arab world itself. Iran is perceived to be the only threat to Israel, and the security of Israel is a cornerstone of the US Middle East policy. Therefore, till the time, the so-called threat is present, the US policy will remain the same. The downing of the Ukrainian airline under suspicious circumstances may prove to be the incident that may have been engineered by hostile agencies, as is being discussed in a certain quarter.

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