

REPORT



**Islamabad
Policy Institute**

Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Implications of Military Flare-up in the Persian Gulf

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Roundtable Report

Implications of Military Flare-up in the Persian Gulf



Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan

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Introduction:

The United States assassinated a serving Iranian military commander, Gen Qassem Soleimani, on January 3, 2020 in a drone strike at Baghdad International Airport shortly after he had arrived there on a diplomatic mission carrying Tehran's response to a Saudi proposal for peace.

The repercussions of the illegal action ordered by US President Donald Trump to appease his neoconservative constituency can be extremely detrimental for the regional peace and stability. It has, indubitably, brought two arch-foes, US and Iran, face to face in an intensely volatile Middle East. Any flare-up of conflict in the region can wreak havoc on the global oil supply, which, ultimately, can disturb the global economic order.

It is feared that US under excessive pressure from Israeli lobby can push Iran towards low-intensity crisis, thus making an environment ripe for continued instability in the region. Such a scenario would also suit American defense contractors and military hardware industry. Russia, meanwhile, could expand its footprint in the region.

The US act has also set an ominous precedent of attacking a government official on the pretext of self-defense. As per the media reports the intelligence about Gen Soleimani planning attacks against US interests, on the basis of which President Trump decided to assassinate him, was "razor thin". It was an act of war that was certain to evoke reprisal, which Iran did on Jan 8, 2019 by targeting US bases in (Ain-Al-Assad) Anbar Province of Iraq and Erbil in Kurdistan. The US action proved beyond any doubt the blatant immorality of U.S. policy and its contemptuous disregard for international law.

Pakistan avoided directly reacting to the incident, but expressed concern over "the recent developments in the Middle East". It worried that those 'developments' could imperil peace and stability in the region. Pakistan also called for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, being fundamental principles of the UN Charter, and avoidance of unilateral actions and use of force.

Pakistan further emphasized restraint, constructive engagement for de-escalating the situation, and diplomatically resolving issues.

Prime Minister Imran Khan in a policy statement later clarified that Pakistan would not become part of the conflict and was ready to contribute to peace. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi was dispatched to Iran, Saudi Arabia and US to offer Pakistan's help for de-escalation. It is, however, feared that Pakistan may not have enough diplomatic and political capital to undertake such a peace exercise. The no-show at the Kuala Lumpur Summit and the ambivalent stance on the assassination of General Soleimani in particularly undermined Pakistan's credibility as a neutral mediator.

As expected both Tehran and Riyadh welcomed foreign minister's visit for offering facilitation in defusing the tensions in Persian Gulf, but there was nothing to suggest that they accepted Islamabad as a mediator on the issue.

It's feared that a conflict in Middle East could adversely impact the nascent Afghan Peace Process, take the focus away from uprising in Occupied Kashmir, affect oil supplies, and disturb sectarian fault lines of the country. Advancing Afghan peace process and maintaining the spotlight on Kashmir are foreign policy priorities, but a prospective conflict can have a direct bearing on the national economy, because

of which economic hardships of the commoners could increase. Meanwhile, the internal security situation could worsen if sectarian rupture occurs. Addressing these imminent challenges demands wise foreign policy choices.

KEY POINTS OF PRESENTATIONS

Prof. Sajjad Bokhari

Executive Director Islamabad Policy Institute



- The Middle East region is of deep interest to Pakistan and has a special significance for the world peace. Unfortunately, the region has been suffering from turmoil and instability for decades. However, it witnessed the worst upheaval in 2019 with protests in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Algeria and Sudan that were likened to Arab Spring; and the ongoing conflict in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Meanwhile, Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates remained pitted against Iran.

- Nevertheless, by the end of 2019 there were also signs of hope that the trajectory of the happenings in the Middle East would change soon.

- The New Year, however, started on a greater turbulent note with the United States assassinating the Commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps General Qassem Soleimani for which it had no legal or moral grounds. It is very obvious that President Donald Trump took this very dangerous decision in view of his growing domestic problems as he faces impeachment

proceedings. He, moreover, had to appease his neoconservative base that was unhappy with him over the failure of his 'maximum pressure policy' against Iran.

- General Soleimani's assassination has kicked off a major crisis, which would have wide ranging and long lasting consequences for the region and beyond. Iran has retaliated with precision strikes against two American bases in Iraq. The strikes carried lot of symbolism even though America did not suffer any casualties. The subsequent American reaction suggested that it had decided to back down and allow things to settle.

- Suggesting that the situation has eased off may be an overly optimistic reading of the ground situation. There is still a very real possibility of eruption of a low-intensity US – Iran conflict in the region. In other words, the likes of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and former American national security adviser John Bolton, who have long sought a war with Iran, will get one. This would sound good for the US defense industry as well.

- It would be important to watch the opportunities this crisis would bring for

Russia to expand its footprint in the Middle East.

- Pakistan undertook yet another mediation effort despite not getting much success in earlier endeavours. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was in Tehran yesterday. He is today visiting Riyadh and would later this week go to Washington as well. At one of our earlier roundtables, the speakers noted that Pakistan was an ideal candidate for mediating in the Persian Gulf. However, recent decisions including the no show at Kuala Lumpur Summit and the ambivalent stance on the assassination of General Soleimani suggest that Pakistan may have to a certain extent diminished its credibility as a neutral mediator.

AMB [R] Riaz H. Bokhari Former Ambassador of Pakistan

- Assassination of General Soleimani is yet another aggressive US act against Iran. Since coming to power, President Trump has not spared any opportunity of blaming Iran for regional instability.

- President Trump took full responsibility for ordering the assassination to, what he claims 'Stop a War'.

- Iran reacted in strong terms since General Soleimani was not an ordinary military general firing 22 Ballistic Missiles against two US bases (Zubail and Ainul Asad) in Iraq.

- Foreign Minister of Iran Jawad Zarif termed it a calculated and proportional measure in self defence saying Iran does not see escalation. Firing of 22 Ballistic Missiles demonstrated the Iranian capability. Iran announced withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran nuclear deal signed in 2015. US had already withdrawn from the nuclear accord in 2018.



- President Trump called for de-escalation saying Iran was standing down. He also called for unconditional dialogue, but at the same time also ordered additional sanctions against Iran. The House of Representatives, meanwhile, called for restrictions on President's powers.

- Although the tragedy unified the nation of Iran, with all directing their anger at the US, yet a human error causing destruction of a Ukrainian flight in Tehran resulting in human losses was a tragedy which could have been avoided with better military communication and effective coordination.

- The reaction in the Gulf was also perplexing. Gulf Arabs realized they were vulnerable to foreign attacks. It also dampened Arab trust in Western allies keeping in view the erratic behavior of

President Trump who termed the attack against oil installations in the Kingdom last year, an attack on KSA and not on the US.

- Gulf States were not reportedly informed about the attack on General Soleimani, so their reaction remained mostly muted. The unilateral decision of US assassinating Iranian general certainly widened the chasm of mistrust between the Gulf States and US, thus propelling Deputy Defense Minister of Saudi Arabia Khalid bin Salman Prince Khalid to pay an abrupt visit to Washington and London advising restraint. Foreign Minister and Amir of Qatar Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani also visited Tehran.

- Similarly, the reaction of Iraq was equally surprising. The Iraqi parliament adopted a resolution to initiate talks for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. US President Trump in return threatened to impose crippling sanctions on Iraq for favouring Iranian agenda. The incident also incalculably jeopardized future of joint operations against Daish in the region. Mahdi Force Chief Muqta al Sadr has vowed to revenge. Resultantly, Iraq may face more violent agitation; divide the country further with the help from outsiders. Militias in Iraq may continue attacks against US interests.

- Reaction of Major Powers, excluding US and Israel, was both timely and welcoming. Russia, UK, France and China called for restraint. However, Russian and Chinese influence may further grow in the region. Israel supported the US action and also reportedly extended intelligence to

assassinate General Soleimani. US sanctions on Chinese firm will put hold on investments of US \$400 billion in the energy and infrastructure sector of Iran.

- There are a number of practical options For Pakistan to stave off possible fallout of the simmering tensions in the Middle East. On 3 January, Pakistan expressed deep concern and urged the parties involved to exercise maximum restraint, engage constructively to de-escalate the situation and resolve issues through diplomatic means. Foreign Minister of Pakistan Shah Mehmood Qureshi consulted his counterparts from the friendly countries. Military diplomatic channels were also activated.

- Peace in the region is important for Pakistan. Pakistan needs uninterrupted supply of oil, remittances from the GCC countries where around 4 million Pakistanis are gainfully employed. The families of expats are dependent upon their earnings and the country is also reliant upon their remittances. Pakistan cannot afford their repatriation in a war like situation. Further, finding job opportunities for them would be a big challenge.

- The situation is still fluid. The current 'Tactical Pause' has offered a good opportunity to cool down the situation. By successful mediation, Pakistan would be able to ensure peace on our western border, success of peace talks in Afghanistan, maintain sectarian harmony and keeping Kashmir on the international agenda.

- India may use TTP elements against the US interests in Afghanistan in order to blame Pakistan for such actions.
- Pakistan may also work on the Conflict Prevention option with the help of friends at the UN.
- The most important thing is: Iran and the Arab countries should realize to solve their problems themselves. They need to reach a Modus Vivendi to assure each other of mutual security and respect their red lines.
- The US need to lift the sanctions, shed plans of regime change in Tehran in order to initiate a meaningful dialogue with Iran.

Amb (R) Ali Sarwar Naqvi (Session Chair)

Executive Director, Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS)



- Latest flare up in the Middle East needs to be studied in the historic context, which dates back to the end of World War I, when new countries were born and borders were redrawn in the region.

- The controversies generated by the division of the Middle East meant that there would be no peace in the region.
- US – Iran rivalry got intensified after President Trump’s arrival in the White House in January 2017. Trump threw out the structure of settlement that had been put in place by his predecessor President Obama in the shape of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the nuclear deal.
- Assassination of Gen Qassem Soleimani marks sad progression of the events. The whole scenario is taking a drastic and grim turn.
- A conflict in the Middle East would serve the interests of Israel.
- Outbreak of war would mean a major disruption in commercial traffic especially sea-borne oil supplies passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

Dr. Nazir Hussain

Director & Professor, School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.



- US policy to squeeze Iran is manifest from Washington’s regime change agenda.
- President Trump reinvigorated US – Iran rivalry after coming to office.

- Assassination of General Soleimani is possibly the last of the violent acts by the hyper-super power. There were very few people, even in US, who approved General Soleimani's assassination.

- The events in the Middle East are a result of power politics between the global hegemon and the regional hegemon.

- Iran could have reacted more forcefully by withdrawing from NPT, attacking the Bahrain based 5th Fleet or through a high profile assassination.

- We need to be vigilant about the fallout of the evolving situation on Pakistan. Iran is our neighbor, while Saudi Arabia is a geo-economic reality. We, therefore, cannot choose sides and would rather have to balance between the two.

- An emotional foreign policy response would not be good for Pakistan.

- Pakistan's major concerns are that Afghan peace talks could suffer as a result of a new crisis and Kashmir uprising could lose international attention. Moreover, a conflict could affect Pakistan's tense sectarian balance.

- Pakistan's diplomatic effort should focus on preventing eruption of a regional conflict. There are real chances of a regional conflict as opposed to a major war as proxies are likely to continue.

- It is interesting to note that nobody has taken General Soleimani's assassination and subsequent developments to the Security

Council. The world is instead quite watching the situation evolve.

Mr. Masoud Zamani Counselor Iran Embassy



- We are gathering here just a few days after having lost, to the criminal and murderous state terrorism of the United States, a courageous and wise, General Qassem Soleimani. A great man who embarked on a life-long struggle to make the world a better and safer place. The Iranian people, along with every other independence-seeking in the region, are mourning this huge loss. The United States' terroristic assassination of one of the Iranian top military commanders has in fact opened the gates to an action which might, sooner or later, come to haunt itself across the globe.

- The U.S. has once again proved to everybody its total, blatant disregard for the jus cogens of international law as well as of universally-recognized rights and immunities.

- Martyr General Qassem Soleimani represented the voice of independence-

seeking struggles of a region that has been afflicted with the unfortunate accumulation of multi-layered problems. General Qassem Soleimani, a proud Iranian general, was brutally assassinated by the US. In fact, one of the pillars striving for security in this area, fraught with various plots, was targeted. Terroristic and extremist groups, from Al-Qaida to ISIS and Al-Nusra Front, are those who view commanders like Soleimani as their greatest enemy.

- It comes as no surprise that the unmannered and tactless US committed a strategic blunder, driven by folly and arrogance, in ordering the assassination of the great conqueror of battles against terrorism and extremism, and the most successful “peace-making general” of the region in recent decades. But they must know that the Divine promise is true; that the ultimate victor, and that “Allah is dominant in His affairs.”

- One the most important problems in the region surrounding us comes from the misconceptions and miscalculations that have profoundly impacted the regional equations.

- The U.S. has demonstrated, for the many times, how it can take dangerous steps, from its miscalculations and misperceptions of the domestic situation in Iran and of the region, to wreak insecurity in the world and, ultimately in their own country. The depth of grief among the nations in the region and the Muslim world at large, and in particular the unprecedented popular funeral processions held in both Iraq and Iran for Martyr General Soleimani and his life-long comrades,

including Martyr Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, are telling signs of the profundity of the U.S. wrong perceptions and calculations vis-à-vis Iran and the region.

- Our region has been embroiled in endless wars, extremism and violence caused by the US continuous aggressions as well as by the conflicts in recent years. Resort to war, considered an exception in international relations, has unfortunately become a norm and rule in the region due to the attitude and conduct of the U.S. and its followers. This is a vicious circle that must be broken by the regional actors and all those committed to peace, quiet, and stability.

- Some of the like-minded states in the region, due to their absolute dependence on foreigners and purchasing legitimacy and security from without, have also adopted and pursued the same wrong path; a path that has led to divisions and conflicts more visible today than ever before – from battle of norms to the clash of strategies.

- What is more deplorable is that these ongoing regional divisions and conflicts have in fact created the breathing space for malignant forces within and without the region to strengthen and expand their illegitimate and illegal military presence in the region through fabricating threats and artificial securitization scenarios. The most important and visible consequence of such ploys is to be seen in the endless pain and suffering the oppressed nations in the region from Afghanistan and Iraq to Syria and Libya.

- We are today witnessing in the region a shift from a lack of “inter-regional dialogue” to a want for institutionalized and structural interactions.

- We deeply believe that although solutions to the current crises might far-fetched, they are, in actual fact, “within reach and accessible.” To bring what appears to be “far” close and make it “accessible,” we, in addition to requisite political will and mustering of regional capabilities, need a paradigm shift. The needed shift requires both courage as well as collective efforts.

- What this region needs now, more than ever before, is inclusive, comprehensive intra-regional dialogue. This lies at the foundation of the initiative Iran has been pursuing for years within the UN framework. This initiative, currently known as HOPE - Hormuz Peace Endeavor – was introduced at the UN General Assembly last year by the honorable President of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

- This initiative, took into account the regional realities and is based on the solid belief that building of a new, inclusive architecture free from the language of aggression and threat is not only “viable,” but it is in fact the “most imperative” task everyone in the region should undertake.

- The path chosen by the U.S. for itself and the region is characterized by insecurity, war and bloodshed. But, Iran heralds peace and calm for the region.

- Iran will continue to serve as the anchor of peace and security and also as the axis of regional development. The Islamic Republic of Iran pursues a proactive and solution-oriented regional approach and policy. All regional countries should also serve as an axis of solution to various regional cases and situations.

- It goes without saying that this path requires the partnership of all neighbors and the imperative of taking clear steps by everybody in the region. Security cannot be realized through “hurling stones at the neighbor’s house.” We believe in security for all.

- As countries situated around the Strait of Hormuz, we – all of us should instead opt for and subscribe to a paradigm of regional inclusivity and synergy – as the only realistic way out of the current cycle of crises – so that we can proceed towards a thriving, prosperous future with promising prospects for future generations.

- And to conclude, let me say, that this will indeed be the actual realization of the greatest wish and aspiration of, General Qassem Soleimani.

Mr. Tauqeer Ahmed
Strategic and Security Analyst



- It is very clear to me that US will not directly use military force to attack Iran despite the Israeli and Zionist lobby's pressure as they are well aware of the consequences. Iran has enough assets in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and around the globe to harm US and Israeli interests.

- US, however, can continue to threaten Iran and portray Iran as an imminent threat for Arab countries, particularly KSA, in order to send more troops and sell more weapons which consequently can lead to a full control in the Middle East. The attack on Saudi oil refinery was also a false flag operation and part of this plan.

- Similarly, US, KSA and UAE, will keep pressurizing Pakistan for support against Iran, but we need to shape our own destiny rather it to be shaped by other's which is against our national interests. Unfortunately, there is no such thing, like 'Muslim Ummah'

or 'Islamic Brotherhood' as every country protects her national interests.

- We should be aware of the fact that Israel has leased almost all the coastal area of Muscat/Oman which is a part of nefarious plan for 'Greater Israel'. Israel, by doing so, wants to establish a control on the Strait of Hormuz to block the oil tankers in order to cut the oil supply to Pakistan and China when required. The plan is not only against Iran but also designed to target Pakistan and China as One Belt One Road (OBOR), and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of its primary targets.

- The US always creates enemies to be defeated even they are ghost to achieve the set objectives therefore we need to be very careful and not fall once again in a trap, such as military training aid program which is recently offered by US. We should seriously think about the next enemy of US once Iran is "theoretically" defeated.

- We have to learn from our past to set our future direction by presenting our narrative in an effective and efficient manner in order to stay neutral in this conflict. We should remove our trust deficit and strengthen our relationship with Russia, China, Malaysia, Turkey, Iran, Qatar, Afghanistan and five SAARC countries. We must not act like a puppet whose strings are in other hands, therefore the first step in this regard is to concentrate on our economic stability and stop borrowing money as the "Beggars cannot be choosers."

Syed Baqir Sajjad Journalist

- US assassinated Gen Soleimani because of his profile as the architect of Iran's expanded influence in the Middle East and his closeness with the top Iranian leadership. Trump's Domestic compulsions also contributed towards this decision.

- The assassination of Gen Soleimani and Iraqi PMF Deputy Commander Abu Mohandis represents a change in US position on the para-military groups in Iraq, which go by the name of Hashd-el-Shabi. There appears to be a conscious decision on part of the US administration, which sees them as extension of Iranian influence, to take them on.

- The strike also marks the US shift from economic warfare against Iran to militarily challenging it in the Middle East.

- Trump's response to retaliatory strikes by Iran reveal that he lacks a strategy for a prolonged confrontation with Iran despite all those "beautiful weapons" that Trump boasts about.

- The message to the Americans through the reprisal strikes was that Trump's actions have put the lives of thousands of soldiers in the Middle East at risk instead of making US and its interests any safer. Selection of Erbil also sent a clear message that in case it concentrates its military in Erbil, it would not

be still out of the reach of Iranian missiles. It is clear there is no longer any safe place for US forces in Iraq.

- Gen Soleimani's assassination closed all roads of this US administration to possible negotiation with Iran.



- Pakistan is in a tight spot.

- It is firmly in the Saudi camp, yet it professes neutrality because of its geo-strategic location and domestic social fabric, which has deep sectarian fault lines. Pakistan, on one hand, has to remain loyal to its alignment in the Middle East and protect its economic interests, but at the same time is cautious of avoiding upheaval at home.

- Pakistan has at the same time not been very good at exhibiting that balance either. The Pakistani reaction to the assassination and the statements of the foreign minister in the parliament avoided even naming the incident. They just referred to some random escalation in the Middle East. Moreover, there was no denunciation of the incident although there

was little doubt about the illegality of the attack.

- It is important that while maintaining the balance of interests, it does not ignore the principles of international law that were trampled by US. For a country like Pakistan that has weak economy and is not a major military power, these principles are the last resort in difficult times.

Analysis

Assassination of Gen Soleimani has sparked off massive escalation in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East region. The escalation by US was deliberate for mostly domestic reasons. The illegal action has, however, upended the fragile security situation in the region.

Iran retaliated to the US action by hitting two bases in Iraq used by the American forces. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, in his comments after the missile strikes, stated that the “proportionate” response has been “concluded”. He further declared that Iran does not “seek escalation or war”, but will defend against any aggression.

US, meanwhile, took contradictory steps by offering Iran unconditional dialogue, but at the same time brought in new sanctions to further tighten the economic squeeze against Tehran. The sanctions part was apparently meant for the domestic audience, where Mr Trump had to show to his neoconservative base that he was unrelenting against Iran.

Currently a sort of uneasy calm is prevailing in the region. It is, however, feared that the conflict would now transition from the direct face-off to an asymmetric one as several non-state actors operating in the region have vowed to exact harsh revenge from US. Any such action/s could take the

region to the brink of a catastrophe.

Therefore, there is urgent need for de-escalation at this stage and all countries, in the region, would have to contribute to it depending on how much would be at stake for them if the conflict breaks out.

As mentioned by the speakers, conflict would have both economic and security consequences for Pakistan. There are millions of Pakistanis living and working in the Middle East and very high numbers of Pakistanis travel to the region mostly for pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Pakistan cannot afford to lose their remittances. Moreover, any increase in oil prices could derail the journey towards economic recovery. A conflict can also set off sectarian clash here.

The Arab countries too would not be having much appetite for conflict because of low oil revenues, budget deficits, divisions within the Arab world, and domestic problems. A conflict would add to their problems by affecting oil sales as well as the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI). Saudi Arabia cannot afford anything that could impede Vision 2030. UAE is even more vulnerable because of its huge expat population, which may leave in the event of a conflict. The situation of smaller countries in the region is even more precarious.

Therefore, conflict is in no one's interest. Everyone needs to contribute towards peace and try to grasp every possible opportunity. For this Saudi Arabia and UAE would need to look beyond their narrow interests. A cost benefit analysis on the basis of recent developments could help them in revisiting their policy towards Iran. Sooner or later all countries in the region would come to the conclusion that US cannot guarantee their security and only mutual cooperation with neighbours would secure them from threats.

Iran's call for an inclusive regional architecture, where all countries of the region could address their security reservations, is a good opportunity for ending the misgivings.

It isn't a difficult goal to achieve. Saudi Arabia has lately been exploring the possibility of improving ties with Iran through various countries in the neighbourhood. Its reserved reaction to Gen Soleimani's assassination was helpful to the extent that it did not add to the existing acrimony between the two rivals in the Gulf.

UAE too has maintained covert contacts with Iran. Dubai has, moreover, remained a major business center for the Iranians. But, for a regional dialogue to happen and get institutionalized a lot of effort would be required. The biggest impediment in its way would be the deep mistrust between Iran and Arab world. The peace efforts, whether by Pakistan or any other regional country, should therefore emphasize on steps for confidence building in the shape of conciliatory gestures. Moreover, a political engagement between Saudi Arabia/UAE and Iran can provide the perfect door opener.