

HT EDITORIAL

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Jan 04, 2020-Saturday

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The United States and Iran once again totter on the precipice as the world holds its breath. But even by the hard-nosed standards of West Asia, the US's assassination of the Iranian Al Quds Force commander, Qasem Soleimani, was unusually public. The Donald Trump administration has given Tehran no space for manoeuvre or chance for de-escalation by killing a man who was central to the Iranian regime. Iran has a policy of retribution for lesser slights and will strike back. And that is exactly why the rest of the world is watching to see what happens next. Iran may avoid a direct military confrontation, but it has a smorgasbord of options, including using Shia proxies to hit US assets in West Asia or using cyber weapons to cripple networks in mainland America.

Unlike previous confrontations over the past four decades of the US-Iranian rivalry, however, regional circumstances are different today. Oil is no longer the weapon it once was. Iran cannot afford to shut down the Straits of Hormuz even if it had the ability to do so. Its primary customer is its ally, China, while an oil-exporting US would financially benefit from such a move. Washington is all-powerful but its interest in the Persian Gulf is dipping. Mr Trump remains a reluctant warrior. If Tehran had not surrounded the US embassy in Iraq, a red line for a president whose generation was scarred by the 1979 hostage crisis, it is likely the present tit-for-tat round would have simply petered out. Iran, on its part, may have assembled an informal empire of influence extending to the Mediterranean but its economy is shrinking and it struggles with rising social unrest. A warrior without will versus another without a way complicates the matrix.

Iran will use Soleimani's death to shore up support for the regime. Retaliation will probably happen in due course, but with care to avoid pushing Mr Trump's buttons and focus on signalling Iranian resolve to the region. Tehran can afford to be restrained. The US continues to slowly lose influence in West Asia. Saudi attempts to push back Iran in Yemen and elsewhere have failed. Both the US and Iran have elections coming up and a full-scale conflict is not a winning gambit in either of the campaigns. What the immediate future holds is hard to predict. But the long-term will remain a tale of regional disequilibrium, with mid-level powers like Iran and Russia struggling to replace the vacuum left by a US whose interests are shifting eastward.

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