

# INDIA CANNOT AFFORD TO TAKE SIDES IN US-IRAN TENSIONS. BUT NEW DELHI MUST ACTIVATE ITS REGIONAL DIPLOMACY

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

The tensions between the US and Iran peaked following the killing of the head of Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), [General Qassem Soleimani](#), in a drone attack in Iraq on January 3. But war clouds seem to have dispersed for now after Iran retaliated with several missile attacks in the early hours of January 8 on two US bases in Iraq at Al Asad and Irbil. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US, General Mark Milley, said that the missiles were intended to cause structural damage, destroy vehicles and aircraft and also kill personnel. The US denied any casualties even as Iran claimed that 80 people had died.

Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, tweeted that Iran "took and concluded proportionate measures in self-defence". He added that "we do not seek escalation or war". President Trump gave a much-awaited statement later that day to announce that the US "suffered no casualties" and its military bases sustained only "minimal damage" and that "Iran appears to be standing down which is a good thing for all parties concerned and a very good thing for the world".

Taken together, it is clear that both parties have stepped back from the brink. It appeared that the US had advance warning and took necessary precautions to avert loss of lives, while allowing Iran to vent its spleen. On its part, Iran's claim to have avenged the killing of a national hero was aimed at placating the deep public sentiment that had built up. That Iran had "concluded" its retaliation clearly indicated that Tehran had no intention of escalating matters beyond the symbolic strikes.

Reports suggest Soleimani was on a mission for reconciliatory talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia. His killing seems a well-calculated move given that he was a long-standing thorn in the US's side in the region. It is not inconceivable that the US had hoped to capitalise on mounting domestic discontent and demonstrations after the fuel price hike in recent months against the regime in Iran, which reportedly resulted in the deaths of a large number of protestors. For a brief while, it seemed that Soleimani's death and tensions with the US had united the Iranian people behind the regime. But the fresh outbreak of anti-regime demonstrations in the wake of Iran admitting that it "unintentionally" downed a Ukrainian airliner on January 8 suggests that the internal situation remains incendiary.

Iran had a range of options at its disposal, but stopped at retaliatory strikes on US bases in Iraq. The use of regional proxies in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen would have been risky and could have enlarged the conflict, leading to entirely unpredictable consequences for Iran.

On the escalation ladder, the US could have resorted to further attacks on select military and other targets if Iran's retaliation had resulted in US casualties. Trump had earlier warned Iran that the US would target 52 sites in Iran. That number was a symbolic reminder of the 52 US hostages taken by Iran during the siege of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979. Trump was emphatic about not countenancing Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons capability. The first words he uttered before even greeting the gathering at the White House were that "as long as I am President of the United States, Iran will never be allowed to have a nuclear weapon". That is a clear enough red line, which Iran would have noted.

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Notably, even when Iran publicly declared its intention to walk away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in the aftermath of Soleimani's killing, it was careful to reassure the international community of its continued commitment to the NPT and IAEA inspections.

If Iran has regional proxies, the US has a strong ally in Israel in addition to its many bases and carrier forces in the region. Given Iran's implacable hostility towards Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu had unequivocally lauded Trump's action after Soleimani's killing. After Iran's retaliation, he had said Israel had both the will and the capacity to inflict a "crushing blow" on Iran if attacked. Any armed conflagration between Iran and the US would only deepen the faultlines between the Shias, Sunnis and Kurds, worsening the fragility in Iraq.

The Iraqi parliament's non-binding resolution to end the presence of all foreign troops on Iraqi soil is unlikely to make any difference. On the face of it, one can infer that it is not only aimed at the US and its allies, but also at Iran.

The receding war clouds may not be enough to calm the nervous energy market, where a spike of one dollar per barrel can result in a magnified surge in India's import bill by about \$1.6 billion, according to CARE Ratings.

In his parliament speech, Iraqi PM Adil Abdul-Mahdi had stated that Soleimani was in Baghdad to meet him to discuss reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This may seem premature given the historical rivalry between the two countries for leadership in the Islamic world. At the same time, the reality is that Saudi Arabia is chasing the mirage of a military victory in Yemen. In the aftermath of "black swan" events such as the drone attacks on two Aramco oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in September, and the unexpected killing of Soleimani, Saudi Arabia may be willing to explore a back channel deal with Iran that permits a face-saving retreat from the quagmire in Yemen.

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Russia has been supportive of Iran's policies in Syria. It condemned the US attack on Soleimani as a violation of international norms, though China was by far the more vocal of the two, calling it dangerous military adventurism. China remains Iran's biggest oil market, an arms supplier and a top trade partner. Iran was reassured of China's support for safeguarding the JCPOA. Oddly, amidst the rising regional tensions on December 27, Russia, China and Iran came together for a four-day trilateral naval exercise, the first of its kind, in the Gulf of Oman. It was intended to send a strong message to the US that Iran was not isolated.

Each time there is a regional crisis, whether the tide of communism in the 1950s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, or more recently, the global war on terror after 9/11, Pakistan has returned to the game with newer chips. However, the US should not take Pakistan for granted. It is driven by its own compulsions and has a history of perfidy. If the Saudis could not get Pakistan to rally around it in Yemen, it is doubtful if the US will be able to secure Pakistan's support against Iran. Pakistan would more likely gravitate towards any emerging tandem between Russia, China and Iran.

India cannot afford to take sides. Energy supplies and the safety and security of its vast diaspora in the Gulf are of utmost importance. India has a substantial Shia population too, with sympathy

for Iran.

Proposals for regional security abound — from Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) to the US's International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). Russia too has a proposal for collective security in the Persian Gulf. As a large and influential country with goodwill and abiding stakes in the extended neighbourhood, it is in India's interest to activate its regional diplomacy in order to shape outcomes.

***This article first appeared in the print edition on January 14, 2020 under the title 'Reshaping the Gulf'. The author, a former ambassador, is currently director general of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses. Views are personal.***

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