**Implications of Soleimani’s killing**

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The assassination of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Crops (IRGC) chief General Qassem Soleimani by the US in Baghdad is the most seismic event of the last decade in the Middle East.

This will take the simmering tensions between Iran and the US to a boiling point and implications of this development will be felt across the Middle East. Soleimani’s elimination is more consequential than the killings of Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

Soleimani’s killing came after months of tensions between Iran and the US. In April 2019, the US designated IRGC as a terrorist organisation. Since then, the Saudi oil facility, Aramco, was targeted with drones by Yemini Houthi rebels (said to be supported by Iran), oil tankers in Gulf waters were attacked, a US drone was downed and a US installation in Iraq was hit, killing a civilian contractor.

The US responded by bombing a camp of Iran-backed militia Kata’ib Hezbollah, killing 25 fighters. In retaliation, Kata’ib Hezbollah stormed the US embassy in Baghdad’s Green Zone. Consequently, the US took out Soleimani and the deputy head of Kata’ib Hezbollah Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Soleimani was a revered figure and a war hero in Iran; he had defeated the Islamic State militant group. He was very close to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and a symbol of Iranian resistance and civilisational pride in the Middle East. He formed, trained and funded a network of militias and proxies to maintain and spread Iranian interests in the region. Khamenei’s participation in the Supreme National Security Council meeting for the first time underscores the gravity of Soleimani’s killing.

From targeting Iranian interests and installations to targeting a top-ranking security official, the US has redefined the redlines with Iran. In doing so, the US is reassuring its allies in the Middle East of its continued security umbrella as well as resurrecting the deterrence by increasing the cost of future Iranian misadventures. In a statement after Soleimani’s killing, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo maintained that the US does not want escalation or war with Iran but warned of striking back with greater force if US interests or installations were attacked.

If history is any guide, President Trump has demonstrated that his response to provocation has been harsher: killing 25 militia personnel in revenge for one contractor and eliminating Soleimani in retaliation to an embassy attack.

Soleimani’s killing has put Iran in a dilemma. Iran is acutely aware of its power asymmetry and weak military muscle. Tehran cannot afford a full-scale war with Washington; it will avoid a direct confrontation.

At the political level, Iran will try to push the US military out of Iraq and Afghanistan or increase the financial and human cost of continued military presence in these countries. Iraq’s Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi has termed the US strike against Soleimani a flagrant violation of agreement which was restricted to fighting IS and training the Iraqi security forces.

On January 5, Iraqi parliament voted to expel US troops from the country — though this decision is non-binding and would require a new legislation to cancel the agreement. The fact that Baghdadi has been killed and the IS has lost territorial holdings in Iraq, Baghdad could scrap the deal. The US-led anti-IS coalition has suspended operations against the militant groups to focus on protecting military bases and personnel in Iraq.

In Afghanistan, Iran can join political forces with Pakistan, China and Russia along with intensifying cooperation with the Taliban to hurt American interests. For instance, Tehran could provide the Taliban with anti-aircraft missiles, something the militant group has demanded since forging close links with Iran. Like the US provided shoulder-fired stinger missiles to the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet Russia in the 1980s, the anti-aircraft missiles might prove to be a game-changer in Afghanistan.

In the Middle East, Iran can continue to target US military bases across the region, and naval ships in the Gulf Waters. At present, the US has 5,000 troops stationed in Iraq and 50,000 across the region. Tehran could single out oil tankers and commercial shipping vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz. Following Soleimani’s killing, the US has directed its nationals in Iraq to leave the country immediately.

The recent hostilities have diminished any chances of reviving the US-Iran negotiations on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Short of scrapping the deal, Iran has rolled back its commitment removing all limits of uranium enrichment, stockpiling and Research and Development. Iran has indicated that these steps could be reversed if the US lifts the sanctions. Since Washington’s withdrawal from the JCPOA, Tehran has stockpiled more uranium than allowed under the deal, reducing its breakout time to seven months to develop a bomb.

Notwithstanding the power asymmetry, a full-scale US-Iran war would be different from Afghan or Iraq wars, and its reverberations will be felt across Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world with sizable Muslim populations. Unlike other Middle Eastern countries whose borders were drawn by colonial powers, Iran is a deeply ideological and civilisational state. Moreover, Iran is the center of Shia Islam and Shias across the world look up to Iran’s clergy leadership for spiritual and political guidance.

A US-Iran confrontation in the Middle East will put Pakistan in a difficult situation. Pakistan will have to pay a cost for neutrality and an even bigger price if it takes sides. In case of a war, the US could ask for bases and permission to use the airspace to attack Iran. The US might postpone its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the expected deal with the Taliban.

Also, the soaring crude oil prices (already up by four percent) will negatively affect current account deficit and inflationary outlook. Continued Taliban attacks on American troops in Afghanistan might also create difficulties for Pakistan.

This is why in a rapidly changing regional environment, a US-Taliban deal becomes more important than ever.

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