**Dangerous next 45 days**

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The interim time between the US Presidential elections on Nov. 3 rd and the inauguration of the new US President on Jan 20, 2021 is a period of uncertainty even during normal times. His lawsuits being thrown out even by judges he has appointed, the number of States that Trump thinks he lost because of fraud has shrunk dramatically. He still insists that he is the actual winner of the election, this despite a die-hard supporter like Attorney General William Barr publicly repudiating his boss saying that there was no evidence of widespread fraud. No wonder among the cabal he has accused of orchestrating his defeat, he has now included the FBI, the Department of Justice, Homeland Security, etc. Whatever it is, while Biden is getting ready to take over power for the time being, he is powerless. Everyone paid out by govt funds, including the military, will obey President Trump’s orders without question till midday Jan 20.

Very reluctantly Trump has given the green light for the transition process nearly 3 weeks after Nov 3. Trump’s threats to derail the election results or somehow stop the transition should not be taken lightly. Moreover, one has to face the fact that in contrast to Biden winning nearly 80 million votes, he got 73 million and whatever Barr and saner elements in the Republican Party may say, 70% of whom i.e. about 50 million Americans believe that he has been cheated out of victory. To the world it may seem to be erratic behaviour, however this is quite in keeping with how he has been behaving over the years. With his last days as the Supreme Commander of all US forces coming to a close, this present situation is volatile. It bears the danger of last-minute actions and strikes.

What makes the situation so dangerous globally is Trump’s animosity for Iran. While until now he has postponed an attack on our neighbour– probably because he thought he had still enough time for it – what is going on in Iran is a clear indication that Israel is trying to use this last opportunity while Trump is still in the White House to target Iran’s nuclear sites. UAE has territorial disputes with Iran and has been encouraging the US to take action against Iran&#39;s military powers and increasing nuclear potential. Trump has already threatened to hit Iran but was probably dissuaded, a trial balloon floated by Trump did not find favour one believes by sane elements in the US military hierarchy. There is more to US Defence Secretary Esper&#39;s abrupt dismissal immediately after the US Elections than his stated reluctance to commit US troops for domestic purposes when protests were ranging through the US last summer. One thinks that Esper balked at the possible Iran adventure.
However, if Israel does attack Iran the US will be drawn into in the fray because Iran is sure to attack US targets. Fuelled by son-in-law Jared Krusher’s close relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE, all of whom hate Iran, albeit for different reasons.

On 3 Jan 2020, a United States drone strike near Baghdad International Airport targeted and killed Iranian Maj Gen Qasem Soleimani while he was on his way to meet Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi in Baghdad. Commander of the Quds Force, one of five branches of Iran&#39;s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Soleimani was considered the second most powerful person of Iran, subordinate to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Four Iranian and five Iraqi nationals were killed along Soleimani, including the Deputy Chairman of Iraq&#39;s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and commander of the Iran-backed Kata&#39;ib Hezbollah Militia, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis – a person designated as terrorist by both the U.S. and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Last Friday the Iranian nuclear scientist and Deputy Defence Minister Dr. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was killed remotely when travelling in a car outside Tehran by “electronic devices” produced in Israel. Though declining to comment on the attack Israel has been known for killing Iranian nuclear scientists over the last decade. A nuclear state itself and never under critique for it or under the control of the nuclear watchdog IAEA Israel made sure that Iran was closely watched by the inspectors of IAEA. And not only that. In a very nuanced statement, Iranian president Rouhani commented that revenge is best served cold — in this case, maybe after January 20 when Israel’s mentors and accomplices in the Beltway will retire. Rouhani would have made such explosive remarks only with credible intelligence inputs. Tehran simultaneously leaked the information that Mossad, Israel’s spy agency, had gained access to Fakhrizadeh’s name via an IAEA list which referred to him as a senior scientist of Iran’s Defence Ministry’s Physics Research Center.

The latest provocation is the assassination of Muslim Shahdan, a senior Commander of Iran&#39;s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), who was killed Monday in an airstrike by &quot;unknown&quot; aircraft along the Syrian-Iraqi border. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the strike, in which unidentified warplanes targeted the Commander and his three bodyguards near a village in Syria’s eastern Deir ez-Zor province. While the question also arises, what was he doing there except be involved in militancy it has riled the Iranians.

Continued provocation does not bode well for the interim period until the 20 th of January. While Iran President Ruhollah Khomeini has laid the blame squarely on Israel, of which there probably is no doubt, he has also threatened retaliation. Within Iran the hardliners want to retaliate immediately, Rouhani has indicated it will be in a measured way in Iran’s choice of time. Saner elements in the Iranian hierarchy are keeping their revenge in check because they understand that is exactly what Israel wants. The most important question is how long will Iran’s patience last if there are more provocations?

With Biden announcing publicly that he will re-negotiate the Iranian nuclear accord that Trump abandoned, Israel is desperate to do something before Jan 20, one can expect more provocations. Given these developments is quite mystifying as to why the UAE has stopped issuing new visas to Pakistanis as well as some other Muslim countries ‘for security reasons’. One also notes the growing relationship between UAE and India has military connotations. Initially this was thought to be because of the pandemic but with India&#39;s name out of the list that reason failed to gel. What security reasons could that be? The only
scenario that comes to mind is a situation Israel is attacking targets in Iran in a more wholesome way than until now, UAE could possibly provide the air space or give refuelling facilities Launchpad for such an attack. The UAE has some genuine grievances against Iran and has been urging the US to take action against that country. While one does not see sane elements in the US planning or even contemplating such a move it could be drawn into the fight to protect its own interests if the Iranians do get provoked and retaliate, this is quite possible. However more than anything the UAE and other Gulf States have prospered because of peace prevailing in the region. On the other hand, India will take the opportunity to attack Pakistan to try to make up for the February disgrace they suffered at the hands of Pakistan Air Force. Their military establishment has been threatening this for some time. More importantly so has their ruling political elite led by Modi. Given India’s economic and covid-related problems Modi is under severe pressure, the latest from his farmers’ constituency. India has been chafing at the bit to use its newly inducted &quot;Rafale&quot; aircraft. Indian TV anchors day in and night out exhort the Modi govt to use the weapon supplied against Pakistan. The continuing humiliation of Indian forces at the hands of the Chinese in Ladakh
has been aggravated by warmongers in India demanding action. This would be a nice distraction from Modi’s real problems.

Virtually “Deputy President” during Trump’s term of office, son-in-law Jared Kushner is quite aware that this is payback time, that he and other Trump close relatives have a vested interest in creating chaos. There are strong rumours suggesting that Trump will not only pardon the members of his family but in fact even pardon himself. This may help them escape Federal offences but what about the State laws, particularly in the State of New York, where this pardon does not hold?

The coming 45 days are thus of grave importance for Pakistan and the region. It is true that any attack on Pakistan would be retaliated with full force, the Pakistan Army and Air Force have proven they are no pushovers; but this could escalate into all-out war. China is not expected to stand by, not only because of the long standing friendship and our long standing strategy
defence cooperation but because OPEC is vital to Chinese strategy in the region. One will expect China to make some moves at both ends of the Himalayas.

Given his temperament Trump may want to sustain his tough guy image in which many of his die-hard revel in. The rest of us would prefer to get out of the current pandemic and rebuild our economy in peace. One hopes that there are enough sane people around that can prevent a global disaster. The world and the alliances within it have changed geo-politically, the pandemic has changed it economically. Provided the dangerous next 45 days pass without violence in the region, the pandemic has already brought changes that are going to stay (the writer is a defence and security analyst).