**[Escalation below firebreak point](https://nation.com.pk/11-Jan-2020/escalation-below-firebreak-point%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

Samson Simon Sharaf January 11, 2020

It seems that the spat between USA and Iran has taken a sharp turn towards negotiations and peace, a position inherited by President Trump from the previous administration and later discarded with jingoism. If President Trump had to take this U turn, what was the logic behind sustained hostilities in Middle East resulting in loss of lives, millions of injuries and with endless displacements and human misery? There are serious questions about who handles the Middle East Policy in Washington and why it was permitted to run berserk in the past few years. Not that Obama Policy was any better, but for want of a better term, what President Trump executed was a Strategic Farce.

For someone keeping a close eye on the region, it was always a low intensity conflict never meant to escalate into a conventional war. Readers may muse why I used word ‘spat’ rather than ‘conflict or war’. It is there to observe and comment. My argument is, that from the prolonged Iraq Conflict (2003) to the Syrian Civil War, I have witnessed alternating layers of relationships, conflict and cooperation between USA and Iran. USA did not move to defeat Saddam Hussain with Iranian cooperation only to find a pro Iran dispensation in Iraq. This is indicated by US studies and war games from 2000 onwards. The element is clearly visible in the very controlled spat from assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani to surgical strikes by Iran. The highs and lows are visible in the burial of undoubtedly the most celebrated military general of the Islamic World post Khalid Bin Waleed and Musa Bin Nusayr, retaliatory strikes by Iran and USA holding out an olive branch.

Aforesaid in view, there are many technical, strategic and tactical parallels in this acrimony that shall be the subject of this article.

Apparently, the Iranian retaliation was well timed, precise from the selection of targets, credible in intent and technology. It was supplemented by early warning to Iraq (means USA) and a tweet by the Iranian Foreign Minister who called it ‘conclusive’. Therefore, the response was un-punishing on the escalation ladder. Fire Break Point was excluded. Does it goes to infer that the Iranian military mind is fertile in evolving strategies, something its armed forces have learned through US and Israeli training in the Shah’s time underlined by a common strategic parlance or it is Strategic Management?

Minutes into the missile launch and crash of the Ukrainian Boing 737, I tweeted in response to Iran Foreign Minister Javad Zarif’s tweet: -

“Let’s wait and see how the US air defence and interception worked. ‘Concluding the escalation’ means a message for de-escalation. Having written extensively on “escalation ladder & fire break points” my conservative estimate is that this is most likely a cooling down stratagem. In strategy, this is called face-saving. Iran must have learnt lessons from Pakistan after Post Balakot Strikes. Cautious restraint plus warning.”

But there was a difference.

Pakistan’s reaction on the Escalation Ladder was against a real vibrant enemy backed by USA, Israel, France and perhaps UK. Pakistan’s aircrafts entered airspace dominated by India and its undeclared allies to a sufficient standoff point to launch missiles that were terminally guided to reach offset targets. Surprisingly the strikes were led by aging Mirage fighter bombers and Pakistan’s indigenous JF-Thunder cover.

The intention, capability, credibility and policy of offset targeting were enunciated in real time by DG ISPR backed by a very statesmanlike statement by the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Had Pakistan wanted, it could have killed the Indian Military Chief but as part of ‘peace policy’ spared him. Indian air defences reacted and IAF scrambled to lose two aircrafts at the hands of PAF and a helicopter by its own fire. The very controlled escalation below a ‘Fire Break Point’ averted further adventures from India. The ‘Inertia of Standoff’ was re-established.

These warning shots by Pakistan wrote a new chapter on the Theory of Escalation and Fire Break Point between two nuclear armed rivals. It is a case study in the Management and Employment of Nuclear Command and Control Systems. Amidst the strong public reactions after the assassination, Iran also employed the same theory with a difference.

There is no technical information available on the systems employed by Iran in strikes on US targets. As a student of Nuclear and Military Strategy, I can only infer in backdrop of professional knowledge and chatter.

Iran claimed launching 10 Fateh-110 short-range ballistic missiles but the range of Ain-al-Asad is beyond them. USA reported more than a dozen launches on the two locations and some sources claim more than two dozen. There are reports of rocket attacks from Iraq by Iranian proxies, particularly the barrage that hit Ain-Al Assad. It is possible that Iranian forces that hit Saudi Arabia in September 2019 with drone missiles were also employed? There are reports that US air defences were alert and in at least one case the computerised Centurion Gatling Cannons intercepted many rockets and low flying missiles. Inferences though not conclusive can be drawn.

Iran most likely used a wide array of launch systems from inside Iran and Iraq. The attack was multidimensional and multi directional. These included terrain hugging cruise missile with inbuilt navigation and terminal guidance systems, a possible reason why American surveillance systems could not detect, track and destroy them at a standoff. These strikes were augmented with short range drones, cruise missiles and free flight rockets from inside Iraq. It also seems that either Iran used the long range liquid fuelled Qiam Missiles or overcame range difficulty towards Ain-al-Asad from Iraq. Logically, the choice of wide array of systems in the same Beaten Zone was sufficient to leak through air defences.

It is also likely that Iran did not arm its missiles with heavy warheads. In order to show the ‘intent of conclusivity’ as mentioned by Javad Zarif, these missiles were loaded with small explosives or crackers.

On the efficacy of American air defences. The early warning by Iran facilitated evasive actions by USA. Hence there were no casualties and damage. Footage if real show pot holes. It is most likely that USA managed to intercept most of these systems but certainly some leaked through. The multi directional strike gave Iran an element of surprise. Given the characteristics of Iranian arsenals, it happened once but too difficult to repeat.

Iran’s reaction was not punitive. At most it was a statement of intent whose credibility leaves many doubts. The most piercing question is about ‘Mutual Escalation Management’. It is nigh possible that this was mutual. Backstage channels and intermediaries were active.

So what has USA achieved? Ultimate result is that President Trump is now talking peace and showing willingness to a negotiated settlement a la 2015 agreement and even beyond. He is talking the humanitarian language of mutual national reconstruction and development.

What has Iran achieved after the elimination of the most feared and contentious general? Perhaps now it has a better working relationship with USA, Saudi Arabia and UAE. It stands to benefit in Syria and Iraq. Both countries can now put up a unified front against remnants of ISIS. It is too early to evaluate Israel’s gains in this conflict.

What effects does this have on the American Great game of the Greater Middle East? Does it mean that the threat to Iran has been eliminated, or that Iran will be co-opted into an economic cooperation that harnesses Russian and Chinese influence in the region to a limit?

Aforesaid, centrality of Pakistan to this conflict was amply demonstrated. American officials maintained contact with Pakistan’s COAS and also named Pakistan’s Prime Minister as the most effective player in peace making. As much as this was part of Panic Control Measures, it indicated that USA was conceding a much greater role to Pakistan in Middle East. Most likely a new phase of carrot and stick could commence. It depends on what USA wants and what Pakistan concedes.

Last but not least, if we concede that US-Iran escalation was real and not Escalation Management, then the biggest lesson is that conventional war between two asymmetrical belligerents is no more possible. The conflict will therefore likely to intensify on the peripheries. In the same vein it is suicidal if India opens a conventional limited conflict in a region where belligerents are nuclear armed and share a common border and line of escalation.

Happy Thinking!

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