**[Clouds of war](https://nation.com.pk/19-Jan-2020/clouds-of-war" \t "_new)**

Senator (R) Sehar Kamran January 19, 2020

Once again, Iran is in the eye of the storm. The raging clouds of war seem to have engulfed the Middle East. With every passing day, the uncertainty and confusion are gaining momentum, and the world is waiting with a bated breath to see where this tension in the US-Iran relations is heading towards. It is no secret that Iran has been under severe international pressure and sanctions, directly for the last two decades at least. Tensions in Iran-US bilateral relations have been simmering since last year, when the US unilaterally abandoned the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed between Iran and the P5+1 in 2015 following over a decade long diplomatic endeavors, and imposed strict international sanctions against Iran which has crippled its economy.

The latest US drone attack resulting in the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, of the elite Quds Force, in Baghdad recently has amplified the strain in the already tense US-Iran relations. This assassination jolted not only Iran but the region and the whole world, because it was seen by many as an act of war. In retaliation, Iran fired 22 missiles targeting two American bases in Iraq. Following these attacks, President Trump in a live televised address to the nation threatened to “target 52 Iranian sites” including cultural centers, and announced more “punishing” economic sanctions against the country. However, the US officials later back-tracked and Trump also toned down the war rhetoric by tweeting “all is well”.

When it seemed that the war cries had slowed down, a Ukrainian commercial airliner in Tehran was shot down by the Iranian military on 8th January consequently worsening the already tense situation. The passenger jet was carrying 176 persons on board who were all killed. Initially, Tehran denied the news and dubbed the allegations as a part of US’s “psychological operations” against Iran. However, on 11th January, Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani tweeted that an Iranian internal investigation had found that the missiles had been fired due to human error, and described the missile attack on the plane as an “unintentional” and an “unforgivable mistake”. Many observers viewed this statement as a step on part of Iran towards de-escalation in the tensions in the region. However, the situation continues to be tense and still remains explosive warranting serious and meaningful diplomatic efforts.

Another factor that needs to be examined in this situation is the upcoming Presidential reelections in the US. It seems that President Trump intends making anti-Iran rhetoric as part of his campaign. Echoes of starting a new war are being heard in Washington, and as a result the US Congress led by Democrats, has passed a resolution on 9th January, to curb President Donald Trump’s powers of waging war against Iran. Although it doesn’t carry the force of law, the measure calls for Trump to stop use of military force against Iran within 30 days if he does not have congressional approval. On 11th January, 13 US lawmakers including Bernie Sanders and Kamala Harris, introduced a “No War against Iran Act”, which would deny the Pentagon of any funds for unauthorized use of military force against Iran.

However, there is uncertainty that the proxy war in the Middle Eastern theatre is likely to intensify in the coming days especially in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. US’s Middle Eastern allies will be on high alert because there is a danger of Iranian backed militants’ attacks on strategic targets and US bases across the region. This will cause further chaos and instability in the region and the world, due to retaliatory attacks.

Iran is Pakistan’s Western neighbour and the two countries share a 959 km long border though Pakistan has stated that it will not “take part in anyone else’s war”, and will stay neutral. It is no secret that in case of an armed conflict between Washington and Tehran, the country will be badly impacted. Pakistan cannot take sides in the war between its strategic partners including the US as well as its Middle Eastern allies and its brotherly neighboring country, Iran.

Furthermore, Islamabad is already engaged on its Eastern border with India and has tense Western border with Afghanistan, and it cannot afford to get involved on another front. In addition, the country is already grappling with the menace of violent extremism and radicalism, another misadventure by global powers will only make matters worse, for the entire region. The region which is already in turmoil cannot afford to have another armed conflict.

In the light of these events, though Pakistan’s Foreign Minister is on a whirlwind tour of Iran, KSA, and the US where he will hold meetings in order to defuse tensions and discuss the Middle East crisis, but there is a limitation as to how much and how effective a role can Pakistan play in these crucial times.

It is high time for Pakistan to focus on domestic issues, maintain internal stability, promote political and institutional harmony, evolve national unity and elicit public trust.

Undoubtedly, the onus lies on the international community to play its role to de-escalate the situation before it gets out of control. The world needs no reminders how devastating a war can be, and how it can hamper international peace and security.

War is in nobody’s interest. The world is already burning. Humanity needs to come together and prevent another disaster in the making. The year 2020 has started on a dangerous note where Trump brought US and Iran on the brink of war. Sanity must prevail, otherwise the fate of this world will be nothing but death and destruction.

The writer is the founder and Patron in Chief of a non-partisan think tank; the Centre for Pakistan and Gulf Studies (CPGS). She is a Senator from the PPP. Twitter @SeharKamran