**The Military Conflict in the Middle East And Pakistan**

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The rogue state of Israel, after unprecedented devastation in Gaza, seems determined to expand the military conflict in the Middle East by dragging Iran into it. Iran, though known for its strategic patience and restraint, had to respond to the Israeli attack on its diplomatic facility in Syria which killed seven people including one senior commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. This jolted the allies of Israel including the US-led Western bloc, and major capitals around the world exasperating their concerns about the conflict spiraling out of hand.

Israel has been targeting Iranian facilities and proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq in connivance with the US for the past many years. Since these attacks had not become public, Iran exercised restraint and never directly responded to Israeli misadventures. The latest attack on the Iranian facility was carried out in the full glare of the international media causing a wave of anxiety all over the world. Iran had to respond for several reasons sending a strategic message to the aggressor that: i) it was not invincible; ii) Iran is capable of tit for tat; iii) it lies within the range of its ballistic missiles and iv) Iran would not be a piece of cake. There was also mounting domestic pressure on the leadership to respond to the unprovoked aggression by the Jewish State.

Some analysts criticize Iran for this halfhearted attack on Israel. They forget that the objective of Iran was not to inflict a heavy loss of life and property on Israel but to transform the ongoing conflict into an Israel-Iran war to distract the attention of the International Community from the atrocities of Israel in Gaza, being the main objective of the rogue Prime Minister Netanyahu. Iran has been under economic sanctions for years together. The expansion of war would have harmed Iran’s national interests without even serving any Muslim country’s strategic interests. Hence, Iran decided to measure and restrained strategic response taking some countries into confidence.

Rather, the Iranian leadership deserves applause for their courage to respond to the Israeli aggression. Other Muslim countries remained content with molly-mouthed condemnations of Israel’s atrocities on the innocent Gaza population killing thousands of men, women and children and starving the displaced population of 1.8 million.

After the attacks, the Iranian leadership declared the spat ‘concluded’. This was a loud message to the international community that Iran didn’t want to get involved in the expansion of the ongoing conflict. That is why there was pressure on the Israel from UN, the USA and Western allies to not attack Iran again. All major capitals from Washington to Moscow and Beijing and major Middle Eastern countries showed their concern over this new dimension of the Gaza conflict. But when has Israel listened to the warnings of the international community? It has, since its inception, arrogantly defied the US, the UN and the international community.

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Israel finally responded to Tehran by drone attacks on Isfahan airport. Iran has rejected Israeli claims for any loss of life and facilities. However, the full details of the latest Israel attack would unfold within the coming days. The latest attack by Israel also seems to be measured and restrained, and more in response to the missile attacks by Hezbollah on an Israeli strategic position within its territory a few days ago causing some casualties. Prime Minister Netanyahu, to some extent, has diverted the focus of the world capitals to gain time to realize his nefarious designs of appropriating the Palestinian land sans the Palestinian population and wriggling out of the loss of credibility within his country.

The Gaza conflict has laid bare the failure of the current international order based on morality, to restrain wars and military conflicts. The UNSC, throughout the conflict, was helpless to stop the wanton slaughtering of the Palestinian people and arrange a ceasefire because of the repeated exercise of veto by the USA to scuttle any resolution calling for a ceasefire. The international order has almost collapsed. This order needs to be reformed without further loss of time to save the world from the Third World War. The UNSC has to be expanded horizontally and the veto power of five states dispensed with to make the UN more representative and effective for conflict management and resolution of festering issues.

Pakistan could not play any worthwhile role in the ongoing conflict. The unending economic crisis and unabated political polarisation have rendered Pakistan beholden to the world financial institutions and some rich Gulf States restraining its position to take a bold stance befitting its size, traditional influence in the world capitals, and military strength, though it has condemned the Israeli aggression and inhuman atrocities perpetrated on the Palestinians, in the UN, and refused to condemn the Iranian response to the Israeli attack. Though the recent visit of a Saudi delegation to Pakistan which conspicuously included the Saudi Defence Minister is viewed from the prism of Saudi assistance in easing our economic crisis, it seems to have a security dimension too.

The presence of the Saudi Defence Minister in the delegation signifies a budding security arrangement between the two countries particularly in the context of the unpredictably flux situation in the Middle Eastern region. In such situations in the past, Pakistan has always played a modest role in the security of the kingdom. This security arrangement if any would be a purely bilateral arrangement. In conflicts between Muslim countries, Pakistan has followed a traditional policy of neutrality. How the Iranian leadership would view the Saudi delegation’s trip to Pakistan ahead of President Ibrahim Raisi’s state visit remains to be seen.

Pakistan and Iran have multiple bilateral issues to resolve which include border security, the presence of militants on both sides, border trade, Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline etc. However, it is strongly assumed the Saudi-Iran relationship, though calm but fraught with a lurking distrust beneath the surface, would certainly figure in the high-level discussions. Pakistan has a delicate position to balance its relationships with these two important Muslim countries.

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