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US-IRAN CONFLICT: Impact on Indian Economy and Defence Budget



S S Deswal, IPS
DG ITBP



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TEHRAN-WASHINGTON : NEW AXIS

As for direct US-Iranian communication, the options available to the Iranian regime are very limited. With the financial crisis that is exacerbated every day and the Soleimani assassination, the downing of the Ukrainian plane has led to a further escalation of Iran's financial plight, as compensation for up to \$5 billion may be raised.

The “Axis of Evil”. This is how Washington describes the Iranian regime expressing the extent of hostility between the two countries. Tehran, on the other hand, describes Washington as the “Great Satan”, with the most frequent slogan within the circle of supporters of this system being “death to America” and “death to Israel”. This rhetoric, which suggests that there is no link between the two eternal enemies except to the language of war and blood, is not in fact an accurate depiction of US-Iranian relations after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but only a small part of the scene in general.

Tehran-Washington Cooperation And Beyond

Relations between the two countries have had ups and downs, between co-operation and hostility. Indeed, we can say that over the last 40 years except in the past year, there has been more cooperation

between Tehran and Washington in many files and fields than hostility. Here we must emphasise the basic rule of politics that says there is no permanent enemy or permanent friend, but there is only the language of interests that determines the enemy or the friend. Under this rule, no political analyst or observer of military movements can accurately predict the future of relations between any two countries. It is not possible to say that the war will break out or that the doors of negotiations will open.

However, in today's file of Tehran-Washington relations, the most weighty and valuable suggestion to describe the future scene is what US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper said just hours before US aircraft moved from the base of Ain al-Asad

base in western Iraq to Baghdad International Airport and the killing of Maj Gen Qasem Soleimani: “The game has changed”.

To fully understand the current and upcoming scene in US-Iranian relations, a precise outline of these relations before the assassination of Maj Gen Qasem Soleimani must be drawn.

The Afghan File

Following the events of 11 September 2001, the US government, led by George W. Bush, began planning an invasion to Afghanistan. Prior to that, Tehran had secretly dispatched a group of its diplomatic and military representatives to Washington despite the fact that their diplomatic relations had been severed. At this

Tehran had **secretly dispatched** a group of its **diplomatic and military** representatives to **Washington**

meeting, Iranian representatives offered full cooperation to the Americans in any military operation against the Taliban. Indeed, this happened on the field. The information provided by the Iranian regime was the main reason for Washington's acquisition of 95 per cent of Afghanistan's control in 2002 and one of the most important services Tehran provided to Washington far from the media and the spotlight. This service has given Iran the freedom to move to Afghanistan and reshape its lobby in the country, the Fatemiyoun militia.

The Iraqi File

As is well known, former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had very bad relations with the Iranian regime and fought with it in a war that lasted eight years, during which hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Iranians died. This tension and hostility continued after the first Gulf War. As the US prepared for the Iraq War on the pretext of weapons of mass destruction and the spread of democracy, the Iranian regime

once again opened its doors to Washington, declaring its readiness to cooperate in overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Indeed, Iran and the Iraqi-led Al-Dawa Party, created by Tehran's Shiites in Iraq, played a very important role in the rapid collapse of the Iraqi army and in the downturn of post-war Iraqi resistance. As a sign of gratitude for the role Iran has played, Washington has offered Baghdad in a golden plate. Thus, the Al-Dawa Iraqi Party created and ideologically driven by Tehran, de facto led the country under new names such as "Rule of Law Coalition", "Alliance of Wisdom" and "Alliance of Conquest" or militarily under the title "Popular mobilisation forces".

In Syria, US' green light has allowed the influx of thousands of Iran-backed militants from Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon to support the survival of the Assad regime. In Lebanon, the Hezbollah militia is the one that sets out the governments, and that is under Washington's eyes. In the south, the Houthi militia in Yemen backed by Tehran has managed to control half of the country, including



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the capital, Sana'a, while the eyes of successive US' governments are watching with no discomfort.

Trump's Governance

With Donald Trump assuming the White House leadership, many observers who have heard his statements on Iran and the nuclear deal between Tehran and the five major countries expected that Trump was preparing for a new stage in Washington's relations with Tehran, where the apparent would match with what's happening under the table. Trump has stressed that he will terminate the nuclear deal and reinforce economic sanctions, which happened in May 2018 and additional oil sanctions in May 2019. These have been regarded by many as a turnaround in US-Iranian relations and that the two countries are led to war anytime. But again, the reality was different from what we see in newspapers and on television screens. The last seven months have been the best period for Iran in which it has felt comfortable and strengthened more than ever in the last 40 years.

It should also be emphasised that Trump, since his first day at the White House, has affirmed



US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper speak during a news conference at the Pentagon in Washington.

that he is not a man of war. He systematically reiterated that he would work to end a series of crises in an economic and diplomatic manner and return thousands of US' troops to their homes, something that happened when he quickly and irresponsibly decided to withdraw most of the US' forces in Syria. Also, ongoing diplomatic talks between Washington and the Taliban over the past year are a prelude to the gradual withdrawal that is likely to begin in the spring of next year. The traits and personality displayed by Trump, as well as his decisions about passivity towards militarisation or military action, were used to the maximum by Iran.

Tehran-Gulf Agony

On the pretext of responding to US' sanctions, Tehran has carried out several attacks in the Gulf, ranging from shelling ships in the UAE's Fujairah Port, reaching attacks at

Aramco's facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia. Through these attacks, Iran has sought to present itself as an international power that must be taken into account and a regional power that cannot be ignored. The Iranian regime has presented itself to its people that the plan to deploy militias in the region has begun to reap results.

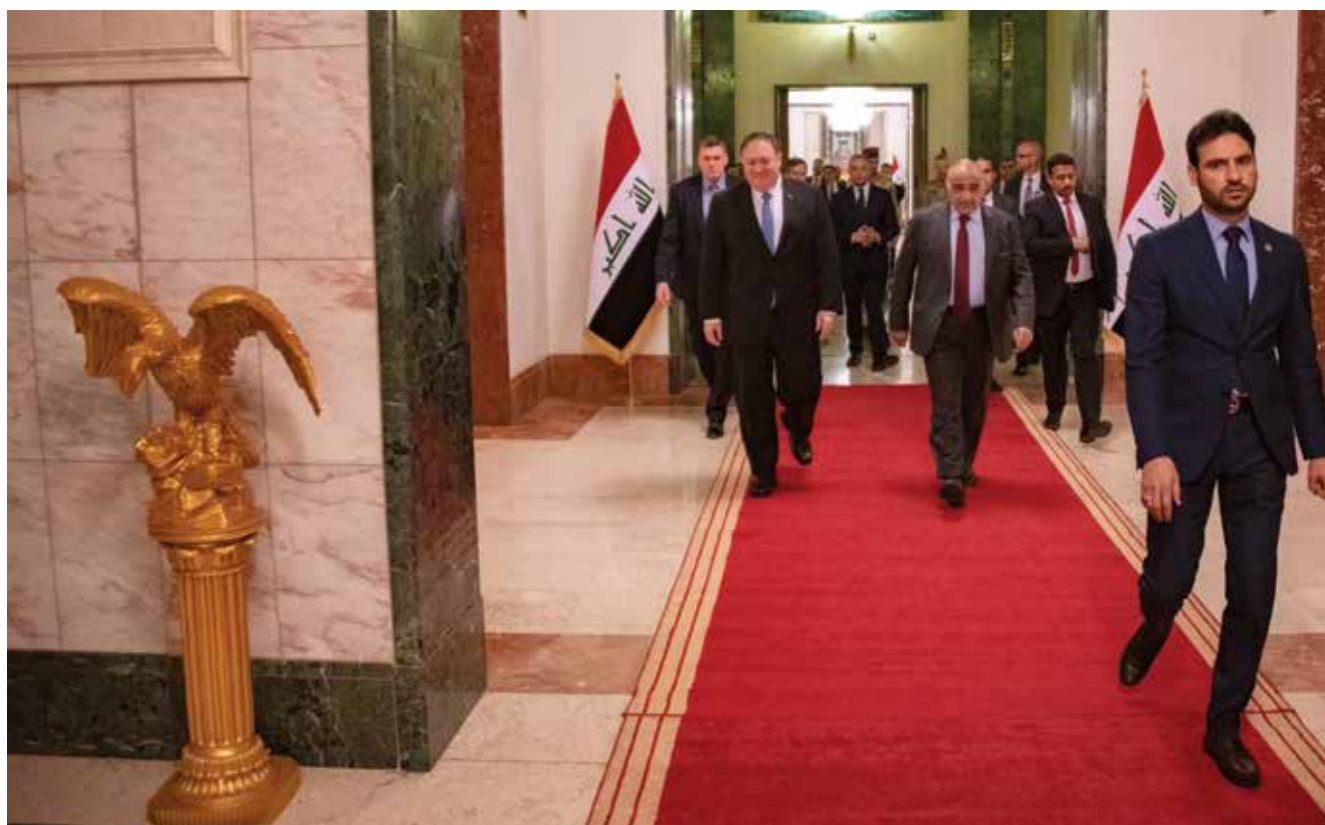
The UAE, which rely on tourism and investment, were forced to open their doors in Tehran and make significant concessions to the Yemeni file. Similarly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also experienced the same pain and was forced to take steps to approximate Iran to the war in Yemen.

The Iranian attacks would not have taken place without US' economic sanctions, which were the perfect cover for Tehran to show its military might. The attack on Aramco demonstrated the progress

of the Iranian defence industry. The rockets that crossed thousands of kilometers, accompanied by Iranian-made drones, in the presence of the American Patriot systems, managed to hit their targets with striking precision. While this was happening, General Soleimani was secretly preparing for his next strike in Iraq by organising missile attacks by small Iraqi militias trained for this purpose by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. But Trump had a different opinion. On the night of January 03, an American drone struck General Soleimani's convoy shortly after his arrival in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. Thus, began a new phase for the Middle East in general.

After Soleimani

Undoubtedly, the assassination of the most weighty man for Iranian offshore movements, who had enormous charisma and great support inside Iran, would bring



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi in Baghdad.

about major changes in the Iranian scene, inside and outside. The battle of whispering in the ear of Khamenei between the diplomatic wing under Zarif and the military wing under Soleimani finally ended with the decisive victory of the first. Based on this reality, everything that happens hereafter will be built on a mixture of sadness and emotional anger for the great loss with a purely diplomatic touch. We can safely say that Zarifi will be the leader of the Iranian scene internationally.

Outside the Iranian border, a significant portion of Tehran's weight will be less cohesive than with Soleimani. In Lebanon, in light of the ongoing state of government vacuum and popular anti-corruption demonstrations, Hezbollah militia will try to reduce its military presence in the next phase so as not to give Israel any opportunity to take advantage of the vacuum left by Soleimani and hit its missile programme. It is also possible that, with the less radical wing in Tehran prevailing, financial support to the militia will be reduced.

In Syria - here we must dwell on Israeli leaks - the Israeli government and intelligence believe that, in the absence of Soleimani, Tehran's hand in Syria has become much weaker and that Iran's chance of accepting withdrawal from Syrian territories is possible if the Israeli Ministry of Defence moves strongly against the Iranian presence. Given this, we are likely to see an increase in the frequency of Israeli strikes against Iranian facilities and warehouses in Syria.

In Iraq, the scenery is more complicated, intensifying day by day. The protests that have been going on since last October against the Iranian-backed Iraqi government and in the light of close

The **Iraqi-led Al-Dawa Party**, created by Tehran's **Shiites in Iraq**, played a very important role in the **rapid collapse of the Iraqi army**

US watch, Iran will try not to slip into a conflict with Washington, directly or through Iraqi militias that are part of the Popular Mobilisation Forces. Most likely, the only move in Iraq will focus on the parliamentary call for the withdrawal of US' troops from the country.

Possibilities For Iran

As for direct US-Iranian communication, the options available to the Iranian regime are very limited. With the financial crisis that is exacerbated every day and the Soleimani assassination, the downing of the Ukrainian plane has led to a further escalation of Iran's financial plight, as compensation for up to \$5 billion may be raised. On the other hand, Trump set a new red line in a tweet noting that Washington would hit 52 Iranian targets if any US soldier, citizen or diplomat was harmed by Iran or its militias. Therefore, the slightest mistake will cause a tough American slap that will destroy everything that Tehran has built in the last 40 years, and especially the last seven months, to show that it is a strong country. Tehran is currently at a critical juncture between the views of Iranian regime extremists and diplomats. We can distinguish two scenarios:

The extreme rhetoric

The response to Soleimani's assassination is not just a blow to an enemy, but rather a message received by both the allies and the enemies, indicating Tehran's weakness and being a paper monster. On this basis, a strong Iranian response must be carried out with a missile attack by

aircrafts such as the one carried out at Al-Baqiq facility in eastern Saudi Arabia and the target again be one of the most sensitive sites in the region.

The diplomatic language

The response to the assassination of Soleimani is an attempt to stifle Trump's impetus in the upcoming presidential election through two fronts. One is to support the re-emergence of ISIS to overthrow Trump's most important international achievements, and the second is to create a channel of communication and support with the Taliban in Afghanistan to drain Trump and US' forces there.

In a way, all the scenarios at the table of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei have some effect, which prompts Washington to accept a concession and the first step for the two sides to sit on the negotiating table. Neither side wants the war. What Tehran wants is to have the upper hand and Washington to give up two important files: the Iranian ballistic program and the Iranian influence in the Middle East.

In my previous article in DSA's September issue under the title "War is not an Option", I close by describing the US-Iranian conflict as a "battle of biting fingers". Whoever hurts first, he will back down. I can now assure you that this battle is over with an American slap in the face of the Iranians waking them up from the dream that they can stand upright to Washington and for the region to be closer to negotiation or a new storm. 