

Comment:

Bracing for global impact after Soleimani's assassination

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There are apprehensions that the Iranian commander's death may be avenged by a thousand cuts

Yesterday's targeted assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani, Commander of Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), bears two important differences from recent targets of similar U.S. operations. Unlike Abu Musaib al-Zarqawi (leader of the al-Qaeda in Iraq), Osama bin Laden (founder of the al-Qaeda) and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, (founder of the Islamic State, or the IS), Gen. Soleimani, 62, was a state actor. Second, unlike the previous three, he was not past his prime. Both these factors could lead to more substantive fallout.

The U.S. has sought to link the operation to a surge in attacks on its assets and personnel in Iraq. America proscribed the Qods Force and Gen. Qassem Soleimani more than 12 years ago for terrorism, but has not acted. In fact, during 2017-18, the U.S. indirectly collaborated with the Hashd Al-Shabi created by Gen. Soleimani, to defeat the IS. Gen. Soleimani was a frequent visitor to Iraq, and these visits were hardly secret. Moreover, had the U.S. wished to avoid a direct confrontation, it could have steered clear of taking public responsibility for the operation. But, presumably for domestic political reasons, it decided otherwise, thereby throwing down a risky "double-or-quit" gauntlet, at Tehran. Yet, unlike the targeted assassination of the IS chief in October, the U.S. President has, uncharacteristically avoided taking personal credit. Therefore, the handling of this operation raises more questions than it answers.

Pivotal figure

Gen. Soleimani hailed from a modest background in Kerman, far from the country's traditional power centres. He was a child of the revolution, fought with distinction as a member of the IRGC in the Iraq-Iran war and was from 1998 the founder-commander of its Qods Force, formed for extra-territorial operations. During the past decade, he managed to leverage the disarray to enhance Iranian influence in Arab countries with a significant Shia population such as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

He astutely created a network of local sympathisers and proxies and waged effective asymmetric wars. Unlike many Iranian public figures, he was untainted by corruption. His accomplishments earned him a cult-like following among most Iranians and their regional proxies. The U.S. and its Sunni allies saw his successes being at their cost. In an unguarded comment in 2017 that caused much alarm, he claimed that four Arab capitals were under Iranian sway.

Iranian authorities have reacted with predictable vehemence at Gen. Soleimani's "martyrdom" and vowed vengeance. This tit-for-tat between the U.S. and Iran could easily go out of hand and lead to a major confrontation in a pyretic and fragile region, with unpredictable consequences. Both the antagonists have their respective domestic compulsions: Mr. Trump faces a Senate impeachment and re-election and Iran has its parliamentary elections next month. These factors would, hopefully, limit their options to low-intensity skirmishes. Iran has in the past used its foreign proxies, many of which were created and fostered by Gen. Soleimani, and they may now be itching to avenge his loss. Moving concentrically, Gen. Soleimani's assassination in Baghdad is one incident most Iraqis could do without. It is likely to queer the pitch for Iraq, a hapless country with a caretaker government convulsed by nearly three months of youth protests, inter alia, against undue foreign interference by both Iran and the U.S.

The event is likely to re-polarise Iraqi society along sectarian lines and intensify the Iran-U.S. competition for influence. In a worst case scenario, Iraq could turn into the new Syria. The popular Iraqi clamour for political reforms and transparency may be eclipsed by the demand for eviction of the U.S. presence itself.

Oil sector as target

At a regional level, anxiety may rise about Gen. Soleimani's death being avenged by a thousand cuts at the interests of the U.S. and its allies. This may involve resumed attacks on oil tankers and other low hanging but high value economic targets, particularly in the oil sector. Global oil prices have already seen a 4% rise within hours of the incident due to the "fear premium"; unless de-escalated, jittery commodity speculators may spin out of control.

The urge for a riposte runs deep in the Iranian psyche. The U.S. has a global presence but that also brings in vulnerabilities. All that can be safely predicted is that the situation remains highly unpredictable.

Potential fallout, on India

India has already had considerable difficulties in meandering through the obstacle course created by the U.S.-Iran cold war. While we need to be on the right side of the U.S., our ties with Iran, apart from being "civilisational", have their own geostrategic logic. Now that the conflict has turned hot, its adverse impact on India could magnify. Apart from a rise in our oil import bill and difficulties in supplies, the safety of an estimated eight million expatriates in the Gulf may be affected. Iran has the capacity to influence the U.S.-Taliban peace process in Afghanistan, a neighbouring country. Last but not the least, after Iran, India has perhaps the largest number of the world's Shia population and the possibility of some of them being radicalised by this event cannot be ruled out.

It can be argued that had the U.S. not invaded Iraq in 2003 creating the mother of all chaos, Qassem Soleimani and his Qods Force would have largely remained a sideshow in Lebanon. So his targeted assassination yesterday completes the circle. *(919 words)*

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