

# **US-IRAN Standoff: Implications for Regional Security and Pakistan**

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## **Abstract**

The rise of tensions in the broader Middle Eastern region between the US and Iran after President Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA is worrisome for Pakistan. Moves, such as the US deploying the aircraft carrier and bombers against Iran, alleged proxy attacks by both sides, Saudi calls for surgical strikes against Iran, and Iranian threats to resume the nuclear program, are extreme examples of brinkmanship. Amidst these tensions, Pakistan's position has become strategically sensitive as it might have to, at some point, have to tilt on one side. This paper aims to study the circumstances that have led to the current state of brinkmanship between the US and Iran and the consequences of an active conflict for the region in general and for Pakistan in particular. The paper argues that maintaining a neutral stance would be the best option for Pakistan in order to be able to engage with the US, Iran, and Saudi Arabia and play some role to lessen distrust and tensions in the region.

## **Keywords**

Iran, US, Pakistan, Middle East, Security, Conflict, Regional Security, Brinkmanship, Strategically sensitive.

## **Introduction**

Since Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, the US has consistently portrayed the country as a hostile and dangerous actor. With the withdrawal of US from JCPOA in 2018, the United States and Iran have once again, as they have many times in the past, approached the brink

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of conflict. The rise of tensions in the broader Middle Eastern region between the US and Iran are particularly worrisome for Pakistan that is already faced with a two-front situation vis a vis India and Afghanistan. Moves, such as the US deploying an aircraft carrier and bombers against Iran, alleged proxy attacks by both sides, calls by Saudi Arabia for surgical strikes against Iran, and Iranian threats to resume its nuclear program, are extreme forms of brinkmanship by all sides. Amidst these tensions, Pakistan's position has become strategically sensitive as it might have to, at some point of time, decide which side to tilt on. Pakistan has fraternal relations with Saudi Arabia, from whom the country has had financial support and supply of oil on easy terms when it needed it. With Iran, than a long and restive border which makes it imperative to ensure that this border remains peaceful. With US, Pakistan has had decades-long ties and despite the vacillating trends from distrust to a working relationship, may want to mend relations by taking advantage of the situation currently developing in the broader Middle Eastern region.

This paper aims to study the circumstances that have led to the current state of brinkmanship between the US and Iran in the Gulf region and the consequences of any active conflict for the broader Middle Eastern region in general and for Pakistan in particular.

### **Iran US tensions: An Overview**

Iran-US relations have remained tense since the Iranian revolution in 1979, that had led to the storming of the US embassy in Tehran and 400 days of siege of the premises.<sup>1</sup> Iran's nuclear program, which the US had itself encouraged the Shah of Iran to commence, the US thinks that it may now be used against it. It therefore vehemently opposes Iran's nuclear program now. The US sanctions, severance of diplomatic relations, and its efforts to isolate Iran added to Iran's determination to pursue its nuclear program without crossing the threshold of enrichment to weapons-grade.

At the same time, Iran continues to be perceived as a global and regional threat by the West, the US in particular. Its nuclear program is indeed a dominant factor in this threat perception, besides other elements such as the Iranian posture viz-a-viz Israel, the vulnerability of energy supply lanes, and the so-called Shia-crescent.<sup>2</sup> In this backdrop, about four decades-long sanctions regime has not eroded the Iranian 'resilience' despite a negative fallout on its economy. To date, Iran continues to face sanctions that are either the US imposed or US-led. Ever since the first US unilateral sanction against Iran, in November 1979, the series of efforts have never come to a stop.<sup>3</sup> Despite all the sanctions, Iran continues to seek a significant role as a regional player. Interestingly, Iran is a signatory to NPT and it has not expressed its intentions to scrap the commitment or to breach it. Nevertheless, 'nuclear enrichment' in Iran is not necessarily an index of acquiring a weapon status; it primarily speaks of the country's urge to seek recognition as one amongst major players in the arena.

President Barack Obama initiated negotiations with Iran under the P5+1 formula to cap and restrict Iran's nuclear program that resulted in an interim agreement. The interim deal between P5+1 and Iran officially called the "Joint Plan of Action" was an outcome of silent and proxy negotiations<sup>4</sup> between Iran and the US, promoted by Russia and the European Union. It finally resulted in the agreement named as, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. President Trump in his typical arbitrary manner pulled the US out of the agreement in May 2018. Many international analysts have since argued that his gamble could start off a chain of events that could potentially result in a war with Iran.<sup>5</sup> As put by Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, "driven by greater political incentives and intensified lobbying by Israel and Saudi Arabia, Trump has inflated this animus to cartoonish proportions. In doing so, he runs the risk of a serious miscalculation."<sup>6</sup>

Iran's interface with South-Asia carries the imprint of shared historical experiences and constant geographic realities, besides ethnic and sectarian overlaps. In this backdrop, Pakistan, because of

its geographical disposition, has been the main repository of the synthesis emerging from the two civilizations as well as of the advantages and disadvantages that may have been transferred from the past to the contemporary era. For Pakistan, Iran itself and being in its neighborhood is rooted in geography and history, therefore not being a matter of choice. In order for both countries to take advantage of the fast transformational changes in the region, energy, and trade corridors, a good Pakistan-Iran mutual understanding of commonality of interest are a pre-requisite. There should also be in harmony with the larger interest of the international community. It is therefore important that Pakistan and Iran energize their bilateral relationship in a manner that transcends notions of interference from abroad and ethnic and sectarian irritants from within the region.

### **Latest Developments in the Gulf Region**

In the Gulf region, particularly since March 2019, the tensions between the US and Iran have been rising and the environment remains fraught. An inescapable escalatory cycle seems afoot. In April, as an enactment of “maximum pressure”<sup>7</sup> agenda, the Trump administration designated the Iranian “Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) a terrorist group”;<sup>8</sup> terminated the waivers that permitted buying of Iranian oil despite US sanctions for a small number of countries;<sup>9</sup> imposed further sanctions on Iran designed to further cripple the country’s economy;<sup>10</sup> furthermore the US deployed an aircraft carrier (USS Abraham Lincoln) strike group and B-52 bombers in the region to send “a clear and unmistakable message”<sup>11</sup> to the Iranian leadership that it should either not challenge the United States or should remain ready to face the consequences.

Typical of its recent actions, Iran’s response was not to cave into the American demands (much less collapsing) but with its own counter pressure operation. On 22 April 2019, Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, an Iranian IRGC Navy Commander reiterated Iran’s often repeated

threat that it would block off the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, on 8 May 2019, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani proclaimed that his country would incrementally break from compliance with JCPOA starting with some of its parts and would completely withdraw from the agreement if Europeans remained unsuccessful to find a way to extradite economic benefits for Iran.<sup>13</sup> On fourth September 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced that Iran will no longer restrict its development of centrifuges for uranium enrichment unless firm commitments for the economic relief were made by other signatories of JCPOA.<sup>14</sup>

The Trump administration responded by "leaking intelligence that Iran was preparing potential missile attacks against American interests and warned Iran publicly about potential military action".<sup>15</sup> The US even went so far as to reveal that it had evacuated its embassy staff in Baghdad and presaged that America was readying exigency plans to send about 120,000 troops in the region.<sup>16</sup> Though President Trump termed the reports of US military preparations as "fake news,"<sup>17</sup> but declared that if needed, he would "deploy a hell of a lot more troops than that".<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he warned that if Iran attacked Americans, it would 'suffer greatly'.<sup>19</sup> On his part, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that "if American interests are attacked, we will most certainly respond in an appropriate fashion".<sup>20</sup> If President Trump is to be believed, the US was "cocked and loaded to retaliate" in June (2019) when Iran downed the US drone, however, ten minutes before the strike he (President Trump) called it off.<sup>21</sup> The US envoy Brian Hook announced a \$15 million reward for information to help disrupt the operations of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, as well as sanctions on an oil network linked to the Revolutionary Guards.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding all the statements about the possibility of a conflict with Iran, Trump at the same time seemed to be looking for a solution. He is reported to have said that he would "like to see [Iran's leaders] call me,"<sup>23</sup> and reportedly communicated to the Pentagon that he did not want to start a war.<sup>24</sup>

War-mongering attitude has been also witnessed in the Saudi media and hawks in the US itself. For instance, on 16 May 2019, a state-aligned newspaper in Saudi Arabia, asked for “surgical strikes”<sup>25</sup> against Iran, while a Trump supporter and occasional foreign-policy adviser, Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton, confidently predicted that the US could win a war with Iran with just two strikes: “the first strike and the last strike”.<sup>26</sup> On 19 May, President Trump tweeted a warning, “If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran”.<sup>27</sup>

Though Iran's leaders were shocked at the killing of General Qasim Suleimani in January 2020 both parties were able to de-escalate, from what could have become a hot military conflict, through back-channel diplomacy.<sup>28</sup> Thus prospects for new diplomacy cannot be dismissed entirely. At the same time, the anticipated 400 billion USD deal between Beijing and Tehran that extends into the "sectors of trade, economy, politics, culture, and security"<sup>29</sup> carries the potential to provide Iran much needed economic relief. It has been plainly evident for years now that maximum pressure has not only failed to curtail Teheran's drive for continuing its nuclear program but has made it a more desperate and provocative regime.

In the second high-profile assassination since January 2020, a prominent Iranian scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, was killed in an attack outside Tehran on 27 November. It was a well-planned operation that is being attributed to Mossad.<sup>30</sup> Although Iran has vowed ‘retaliation’, the question is whether Iran, Israel or even America are ready or can they afford a ‘war’ at this moment? Nonetheless, the assassination of Fakhrizadeh will make Biden’s ability to restart diplomacy between Washington and Tehran even more difficult. A lot would depend on how Iran reacts. Iran’s leadership has been careful not to take risks that could upend their hopes of lifting sanctions, and restoring the deal, after Mr. Trump’s term ends. If Iran holds off on significant retaliation, then the bold move to take out the chief of Iran’s nuclear program will have paid off,

even if the assassination drives the program further underground. Any retaliation by Iran will give Trump a pretext to launch a return strike before he leaves office in January. President Elect Biden will then be inheriting bigger problems. Biden, who will take office on 20 January 2021, has said he wants to return to the 2015 international accord, a move that would signal a pullback from President Donald Trump's hardline "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. It is obvious that the assassination has impacted and may change the dynamics of the US-Iran relationship. In view of Trump's partiality for Israel during his tenure, there is a fair chance that Trump wants to make things more difficult for the newly elected US President. It has also severely compromised and damaged the likelihood of Iran's willingness to engage with the new US administration without seeking preconditions and assurances from the US.

### **Regional and Global Response**

Regional or major powers have either been calling for restraint or going with the US policy. Most countries are complying with the US sanctions on Iran and have gone along with its refusal to extend waivers. Some countries, however, such as China and Russia, may try to find ways to circumvent some of the sanctions. China is one of the biggest importers of Iranian oil. Russia had assisted Iran to build the Bushehr nuclear power plant, has long and deep ties with Iran. However, since the global economy is so deeply intertwined with the US economy that any country which may want to follow a more independent stance, would not be able to withstand the cascading negative impact of US sanctions. Some feeble protests notwithstanding, the US European allies have no choice but to go along with the US whether they like it or not. Major European countries may consider the US policies against Iran as misguided, but they cannot afford to ignore them.

Russia's President Putin is watching the developments in the Gulf region with a keen eye. He has warned the US that "Russia was not a

fire brigade and could not rescue everything”.<sup>31</sup> Whereas, a British general, Maj Gen Christopher Ghika (a deputy commander of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the coalition conducting counter-terrorist operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria) observed that “there has been no increased threat from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq and Syria”.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, officials from several countries visited Iran, to counsel restraint. During Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan’s visit to Iran on October 12th, 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani welcomed the peace efforts by Pakistan while Imran Khan opined that Pakistan “would like to play the role of a facilitator and not mediator”.<sup>33</sup> Pakistan has for long tried not to become a party to a conflict between the two Muslim countries (Iran and Saudi Arabia).

The US allies in the Gulf seem to want to achieve their goals by talking quietly with the US and supporting a firm US line rather than confronting Iran on their own. Saudi Arabia is the only country that has publically called for strikes on Iran.

Concurrently, the decision of the UAE to establish diplomatic relations (The Abraham Accord) with Israel with the US backing is a major development that would have far reaching implications for the broader Middle East. The Abraham Accord also sparked a controversy of claims and counterclaims about a cascading effect on more regional countries. So far, Bahrain and Morocco among the Arab countries have announced to follow in the footsteps of UAE. The two main objectives for the US to encourage the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab countries are: to break Israel’s isolation and preserve its economic interests in the Middle East.<sup>34</sup> The deal will allow the US and Israel to drive political benefits and serve their joint effort to isolate Iran in the region.

Notwithstanding the calls for war by hawks, so far both sides have exercised restraint and except for posturing, have avoided direct military engagement. However, with the charged environment a tiny

miscalculation by either side may spark a conflict that would have far-reaching impact on global politics.

### **Implications of US-Iran Tensions for Broader Middle East**

While apparently neither Washington nor Tehran is seeking to directly engage the other militarily at this stage, the regional and global scenario remains fraught and under the shadow of an escalation. Pakistan being Iran's neighbour, an ally of the US and Saudi Arabia, having tense relations with Iran and Afghanistan on the West, and with India on the East, cannot afford another war in its neighbourhood. Moreover, with the current unstable economic situation, Pakistan has to keep its options open.

Pakistan needs to keep an eye on the developing scenario in view of the following:

- Each side will pursue incremental escalation. In Iran's case, this could take place either within the nuclear realm (minor but nonetheless real violations of the JCPOA) or in the region. Tehran's hope for economic lifelines rely in significant measure on the P4+1's continued willingness to counter US sanctions, that in turn rests upon the compliance of Iran with the deal. Thus, in short to medium term, a likely response to US pressure would be through regional activism. The US also appears to be making Iran's regional presence a target: statements by US officials to stay in Syria as long as any of Iranian-controlled force remains there, propose an emphasis on decreasing Iran's reach.
- Given the determination of each side not to yield, preventing further escalation will be difficult. Negotiations to review the Iranian nuclear deal, which Trump wants, could be one option to circumvent a conflict. However, Iran is unlikely to start talks with a US administration it distrusts, not to mention to agree to the sort of far-reaching changes Trump says would be required. Changes Trump proposes to bar all enrichment which is long-lasting, and asking for permission to even more strong inspections than the

JCPOA, which curtails Iranian ballistic missile program, and modulates Iran's regional behaviour., By threatening to incrementally do away with the nuclear deal if Iran did not receive quick economic relief, Iran seems to have closed the door on that option.

- Concurrently, one of the major impetus behind Iran's increasing inclination towards China and its signaled interest in being a part of BRI/CPEC, is to mount pressure on the US. The US already frustrated to the core over China's unhinged influence all around the world cannot lose another state to China. The strategic importance of Iran in the Middle East and particularly its influence in Iraqi politics can really turn the tide in China's favour if Iran decides to side with China. As Iraq is the only state with a substantial US military presence in the region, if it drifts away from the US influence, it will further add to difficulties for the US. However, this move of Iran is also driven by its own interests. Given the tumultuous situation of Iran's economy and ever brewing threat to its security may have prompted Iran to tilt towards China. On one hand, Iran wants some compensation, economic and military, from China against the losses it has been suffering in the face of sanctions imposed on it by the US-led western world, while on the other hand, Iran's use of China card may help it in getting some concessions from the US
- Nonetheless, an escalation in the charged environment is easily imaginable. If Iran leaves JCPOA completely or takes further actions to undermine it, extend its nuclear program even incrementally, or is suspected of having backed the direct or proxy attacks on US forces, the US administration will have only two options—an embarrassing retreat or application of military force.
- At the same time, the activities of regional actors may deliberately or inadvertently push their backers into a conflict situation. Already, the US' two main regional allies are running their own campaigns against Iran. Saudi Arabia is engaged in a costly

campaign in Yemen to oust Houthi forces with American backing. Meanwhile, Israel, worried that Iran has already made a foothold in its southwest (Gaza) and north (Lebanon), is competing against Iran's efforts in Syria. On its part, Tehran while dismissing the culpability for the Houthi missile strikes, largely abstaining from directly responding to the Israelis, have claimed to deny its adversaries the opportunity to push it into an active conflict. According to Javid Zareef, Iran's Foreign Minister, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and UAE have tried to provoke it into a war. However, he proclaimed "we are not falling into a trap."<sup>35</sup>

- The US-brokered deal between UAE, Bahrain and Israel is likely to have a cascading impact. Israel is the main beneficiary of the insecurity and instability in the Middle East. Iran is viewed as an enemy while Israel is becoming a friend of the Arab world. As a result, the broader Middle East region may experience a divide that would be hard to bridge.

The scenarios mentioned above are sobering enough. Even if the US and Iran were to settle into a standoff though an uneasy one – the US expecting for Iran's regime to yield to the pressure of economic sanctions, Tehran thinking that it can weather the storm – no matter if auxiliary regional conflicts also remain simmering. The alarming point remains that the combination of reciprocated distrust and high friction can turn a minor incident into a serious one. Iran's threat, for example, to blockade the Strait of Hormuz may be exaggerated, but it can serve as the only logical reason in US assessment to keep a watch on Iran. Any slight miscommunication may lead to a naval incident ultimately escalating into an active military confrontation.

According to US Energy Information Administration, the "Strait of Hormuz is one of the most critical chokepoints in the world. Nearly one-third of all seaborne crude oil (more than 18 million barrels a day) passes through the 21-mile-wide opening between Oman and Iran, as well as about 30% of all natural gas shipped on tankers".<sup>36</sup> The strategic significance of the Strait can be gauged from the fact that

it is even narrower than it seems, as the deep-water shipping channel used by oil tankers is only two miles wide. With military placements near the Strait on a number of islands and along the northern coastline, Iran largely dominates this critical body of water and carries the potential to choke one of the world's major economic arteries, possibly wreaking painful economic losses.<sup>37</sup> As a potential alternate, Saudi Arabia and UAE though have some overland pipelines that can transfer oil towards the Red Sea while bypassing Hormuz and thus an Iranian threat, these pipelines can transfer only a fraction of what currently is carried through ships. General Alireza Tangsiri, Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Navy, reiterated the energy security formula that Tehran has observed for the past 30 years, warning that if Iran is prevented from exporting oil, its neighbours will face similar impediments.<sup>38</sup> Tehran has a variety of instruments—from undersea mines to proxies and cyber warfare—to deliver on that threat.<sup>39</sup> This is probably the reason that nearly every time Iran feels itself under pressure, it raises the spectre of blocking the Strait.

Barring Iranian oil from coming into international market could lead to an oil crisis. Though the US has tried to allay anxieties by asking Saudi Arabia and UAE to make up for the loss of Iranian oil in the international oil market, the per barrel price has kept rising. No matter if the other oil producing countries try to fill in the Iranian gap, the oil market would be functioning at a reduced availability of oil than it would otherwise, mounting pressure on prices. Concurrently, in his exuberance to pressurize Iran, the decision of President Trump to withdraw from JCPOA and end the oil waivers has placed Washington on a collision course with EU, China, India, and Turkey—whose continuing crude imports from Iran would be subject to American sanctions. Additionally, while Saudi Arabia and Israel have been advocating military action against Iran to stop its nuclear program, but an active conflict would be counter productive and harmful even for the GCC region including Saudi Arabia. In such a

crisis, particularly the economy and security of UAE and Qatar would be most affected.

### **Implications for Pakistan**

Pakistan is in a catch 22 situation. On one side, neighbourhood with Iran is a geopolitical reality that will remain a constant, while on the other hand, it needs economic and Saudi support. Thus, Pakistan has to keep a delicate balance to pursue its national interests despite pressures all sides may bring to bear.

Pakistan has remained overly dependent on Saudi Arabia's goodwill and financial support. The country has received financial support at various times to bail Pakistan out of a difficult situation. In 2018, Riyadh agreed to give \$3 billion to Pakistan as a loan on a favorable interest rate.<sup>40</sup> Earlier, Saudi Arabia had agreed to sell oil to Pakistan on deferred payment. Pakistan receives "about 61% of its remittances from expatriates based in the Middle East, particularly from more than 1.5 million Pakistanis working in Saudi Arabia".<sup>41</sup> Saudi Arabia, therefore, enjoys a high level of leverage in the unfolding US-Iran crisis.<sup>42</sup>

Saudi Arabia would expect Pakistan's political and diplomatic support in any conflict against its rival Iran. To display their displeasure, Saudis have asked for return of loan that was given to Pakistan in 2018. , It may even begin to deport large number of Pakistani expatriate workers at the same stage. These measures could be taken one by one or simultaneously to increase pressure on Pakistan. Saudi irritation with Pakistan is manifested in the lack of empathy shown for the plight of the Kashmiri people after India's decision to revoke the special status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and apply inhumane measures to control protests by the Muslim majority people of the state.

With Iran, Pakistan has had a difficult relationship. The two countries share a long border where frequent incidents of cross border terrorist activities have created tension between the two neighbours in the last

two decades. Iran has blamed Pakistan for cross border attacks – Jundullah is a terrorist organization, that reportedly has bases in Pakistan's side of Balochistan, and operated against Iranian interests. It is also a fact that Commander Gulbushan Yadev, the Indian spy (now in Pakistan's custody), entered Balochistan from the Iranian side and is suspected to have masterminded several terrorist incidents to destabilize the situation in Pakistan's Balochistan province.

Concurrently, Pakistan faces immense energy deficiency and the Iran-Pakistan Pipeline is a natural answer to meet some of its energy requirements. However, the project has not taken off due to (a) financial constraints, (b) lack of political will, and (c) the US sanctions.

Whenever Iran feels vulnerable due to international pressures, it approaches Pakistan with offers to help to construct the Pakistan side of pipeline. On the other hand, when international pressure eases it threatens to take Pakistan to the International Court of Arbitration. In 2015, after JCPOA had been signed, "Iran threatened to invoke a clause in the Pakistan-Iran Gas Sales Purchase Agreement, under which Pakistan is bound to pay \$1.2 million per day to Iran from January 1, 2015, for failing to import gas from Iran" otherwise, Iran would take the case to International Court of Arbitration.<sup>43</sup> In February 2018, Iran once again threatened to take Pakistan to the court.<sup>44</sup>

Pakistan doesn't import substantive quantities of oil from Iran. Its bilateral trade is only 350 million dollars with Iran. Political and diplomatic relations between the two states have suffered in the past from distrust. However, Iran is an important neighbour of Pakistan. Iran's support is crucial for eradicating terrorist activities from Pakistan's Balochistan province. . This would have far reaching impact on Pakistan's internal security since Afghanistan will also take advantage to add to Pakistan's instability through cross border terrorist activities if the internal security situation in Balochistan remains unsatisfactory.

In the wake of US threats to teach a lesson to Iran and heightened tensions between these two countries, there was a flurry of diplomatic activities with Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Iran on 21-22 April 2019 and Iran's Foreign Minister's visit to Pakistan on 24-25 May 2019. Speculations about Pakistan's Prime Minister's visit to Iran just before he went to Beijing to attend the second BRI Forum notwithstanding, it was diplomatically a positive move to engage with Iran to discuss the unfolding situation in the Gulf region. Iran is obviously anxious about Pakistan's stance in the current situation. Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's visit to Pakistan in November 2020 was utilized to exchange views and to assure Iran of Pakistan's commitment to remain neutral in the prevailing situation. Pakistan also conveyed to Iran that the US pressure on Iran was unjustified and emphasized the need for resolution of the crisis through dialogue.

The US is already present in Afghanistan. Despite its claims to withdraw as early as possible, the US is likely to stay in Afghanistan for a long period of time. It has taken advantage of its own threats to Iran to move into the Gulf region. A Gulf conflict may or may not happen, but it is a given fact that the US finds excuses to resolve or to prevent perceived threats by moving into a particular region as was the case with Iraq previously. Therefore, the US presence in the Gulf may also be seen from an entirely different angle. This may actually be one of the prime moves in US strategy to delay or stop China's trajectory to world connectivity through BRI. The presence of USS Abraham Lincoln in the Gulf region will ensure a close surveillance of CPEC and particularly that of Gwadar.

At the same time, the reckless trade war and bitter exchange during the pandemic has damaged China-US relations to such a degree that now China is ready to confront US sanctions. The reported 400 billion dollars planned investment by China in Iran's infrastructure projects is likely to change the geo-political landscape of the Middle East and Saudi-Iran rivalry that can become a subsection of China-US rivalry. Nonetheless, the more China is pressed by the US through sanctions

and other institutions, the more it is getting closer to establishing the alternate international structures that are free from US influence. For Pakistan, this deal can bring positive as well as negative consequences. Pakistan believes in a positive relationship with all of its neighbors. But over time, numerous factors have contributed in deteriorating Pakistan's ties with its neighbors, particularly with Iran. It would be wise for Pakistan to find equilibrium and maintain brotherly linkages with both Iran and the Arab world, to serve its own national interest as well as for sustainable peace in the region.

It is no secret that Pakistan has become a proxy ground for testing of influence both by Saudi Arabia and Iran since the Iranian revolution. The infighting between the custodians of Shia and Sunni Shrines has fueled sectarian tensions within Pakistani society, creating fault lines that have been exploited to engender instability.

To maintain a position of neutrality in any Iran-Saudi dispute is challenging for Pakistan, to say the least. "Religious affinity, cultural ties, and geographic proximity are the key terms that join Pakistan and Iran".<sup>45</sup> Historically, "despite Arab-Persian tensions in the Gulf, Pakistan has maintained good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, because it is neither Arab nor Persian and has avoided becoming a party to their bilateral issues".<sup>46</sup> A manifestation of this neutrality was seen during the ten-year long Iran-Iraq war, and the Saudi military attacks in Yemen. However, Pakistan should be under no illusion that the proximity and influence US-Israel-UAE coalition will gain near our waters will remain only limited to Iran. Moreover, there is a new triangle: with India, Israel, and UAE emerging in Pakistan's neighborhood. What would be the future stance of Pakistan in coming years? Thus, Pakistan must survey the changing nature of emerging threats in its broader neighborhood, especially in the northern Indian Ocean and the Arab and Gulf region, and proactively map strategic implications of those threats for its' national security

interests. A key challenge for the current government in Pakistan however is to balance its relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

### **Way Forward**

The security situation in the Gulf region has become precarious and may turn catastrophic. Pakistan being in a very delicate situation where it has historically close friendly relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, would need to employ all its political and diplomatic skills to avoid a situation where it must take sides. Therefore, it is important that Pakistan may continue with its efforts to diffuse tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In its efforts to ease tensions, it would be extremely important for Pakistan to avoid any sectarian argument that may feed into the already high level of distrust between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While Pakistan can play a role to promote reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran; but, it should not have high hopes for a breakthrough in near future. The efforts of Pakistan therefore should be to positively engage and not to ignore the emerging situation. At the same time, Pakistan should draw its red lines and make its friends and neighbors respect these lines. One of the red lines can be no sectarian proxies in Pakistan. It is also imperative that Pakistan develops a national narrative to underpin its neutral stance between two almost equally important countries.

It is already being demanded by some parliamentarians, that a national debate on the current situation in the Gulf region and the US' abrasive attitude against Iran should be initiated. Such a discussion would generate a national narrative that would strengthen the government's policy of maintaining a neutral position between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its efforts to mitigate the situation.

### **Conclusion**

The relations between Iran and the US have nose-dived since 2018 and the tensions are escalating with the potential to develop into an

active military conflict. This situation is particularly worrisome for Pakistan that is already faced with two-front situations with India and Afghanistan. The regional situation remains fraught and highly charged with all sides incrementally raising the bar. The US deploying the aircraft carrier and bombers against Iran, alleged proxy attacks by both sides, Saudi Arabia's calls for surgical strikes against Iran, and Iranian threats to resume its nuclear program, are extreme forms of brinkmanship by all sides.

Amidst these tensions, Pakistan's position has become strategically sensitive as it might have to, at some point in time, decide which side to tilt on. The current economic situation in Pakistan may need some analysts and political leaders to counsel a political tilt towards Saudi Arabia. Others may advise that since Iran enjoys more potential to create trouble for Pakistan in Balochistan, it would be best not to irritate Iran. In fact, both the options are not in Pakistan's interest. Maintaining a neutral stance would be the best option for Pakistan.

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