

Avoid any further escalation at all costs!

Both sides should exercise utmost caution

THE killing of top Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani by a US drone strike, followed by another strike on a convoy in Iraq, have pushed the world to the brink of a major disaster. Tension between the two countries, which was already high, has risen further in recent weeks. The recent US drone attack just added to that tension and increased chances of another war breaking out in the region—which could potentially morph into a World War.

The Iranian leadership has already promised to retaliate. The US is all set to send up to 3,500 more troops to the Middle East. And the war of words between the leaderships of the two countries continues to intensify. While it is possible on the one hand that a large part of what is being said is posturing by top officials and military leaders of the two countries, when countries continually threaten each other, things often escalate faster and in a way few initially expect.

Iran has seen itself being portrayed as a great villain by the US and its allies for decades now. And the Trump administration has ratcheted up all sorts of pressure on Iran since 2016—cancelling the Iran nuclear deal, slapping fresh sanctions on Iran, etc. Therefore, it is only natural for the Iranian leadership to feel nervous seeing the world's only superpower—with a record of disastrous interventions in the Middle East—breathing this heavily down its neck. Not only does this fail to tone down tension, but it also makes it more likely for both sides to mistakenly walk into a disastrous conflict.

After the killing of Soleimani, president Trump said that the US is not looking to start a war, nor does it seek a regime change in Iran. However, given that the US has failed to keep its previous promises to Iran, such reassurances may not be enough to walk back on the volatile situation the two countries are now tangled in.

This is where the international community and the UN Security Council must urgently step in before things deteriorate any further. Any conflict between the US and Iran will not only be devastating for their respective people and the Middle East in general, but also for the rest of the world. Thus, it is crucial that both sides exercise restraint and engage each other in dialogue to find an end to this dangerous standoff.

Gear up efforts to eradicate drug abuse

Why are drugs so easily available?

IT is alarming that the number of drug addicts is on the rise in the country. According to the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC), an average of 114 patients took treatment every day at public and private rehabilitation centres last year while the number was 104 in 2018, and 69 in 2017. Also, the number of female addicts who took treatment at government rehabilitation centres in 2019 was four times higher than the previous year. Unfortunately, this is the case despite the fact that the government has declared a war against drug abuse and the law enforcement agencies have been carrying out drives to stop the menace. Over the last few years, many drives had been conducted by the Rab and other law enforcers to arrest drug dealers and traffickers, and, admittedly, the drives saw some success. Even so, drug addiction among young population has reached an alarming proportion with most drug abusers being in the age group 18-35.

While it is absolutely necessary to find out why our young generation is increasingly being vulnerable to drug abuse and raise awareness among them about the disastrous impacts of drug addiction on their lives as well as the society at large, it is equally important to find out the reasons why drugs are so easily available to the youth. Reportedly, at present anyone can buy drugs from home by simply placing an order over phone or online. Although the police say that narcotics are now less available than before, the reports by the DNC say otherwise.

Under the circumstances, systematic efforts are needed to fight this social menace. The measures that should be taken include taking action against the drug dealers and traffickers; raising awareness among people—parents, children, teachers and students; setting up rehabilitation centres in each district to make treatment available to those in need; introducing student counselling centres in all educational institutions, etc. Only our combined efforts can rid society of the curse of drug abuse.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Price hike of essentials unjust

Consumers across the nation are bearing the brunt of high prices of essential food items, and there is no solid reason for the price rise. For the last couple of months, the onion crisis has created much unrest and now, add to that the recent issue with vegetables and spices.

All my life, I've seen that during winter months, most of the vegetables tend to be priced fairly as there is an abundance. However, compared to last year, 2020 poses a threatening start for consumers. In comparison to last year, this year the prices of ginger, garlic, lentils, sugar, tomato, bitter gourd, beans, cinnamon and fish among many other daily cooking essentials have seen hike in prices.

Such an increase is absurd. It clearly reveals that the market is being manipulated by cronies for their own benefit. Strict supervision is of utmost necessity. The government must intervene to regulate the matter immediately.

Nafees Ahmed Noor, by email

EDITORIAL

Qassem Soleimani's Assassination

An irresponsible move that could push the region down a precarious path



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

Force, by the United States near Baghdad's international airport.

While Qassem Soleimani's assassination comes as no surprise—especially two days after the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) attacked the US embassy in Iraq—that was startling was the surprise of the US congressional committee, as the air strike was carried out without their knowledge.

In a statement, House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Eliot Engel said that the strike to assassinate Soleimani “went forward with no notification or consultation with Congress.” Engel added, “To push ahead with an action of this gravity without involving Congress raises serious legal problems and is an affront to Congress's powers as a coequal branch of government”.

Tensions between Iran and the Trump administration have been on the rise for the last couple of years. In May 2018, despite objections from various quarters, Trump unilaterally pulled the US out of a multilateral nuclear deal with Iran, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed between Iran and the P5+1 countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China. And this despite Iran fully complying with the ground-breaking nuclear deal that was signed in 2015. Why? Because Donald Trump felt that he could strike a better deal with Iran that would not only cover Iran's nuclear activities, but also its missile weapons and its role in the region. Unfortunately, years after withdrawing from the JCPOA, the US has not been able to get Iran to join in any kind of bilateral negotiation.

Since the withdrawal from the JCPOA, the US has imposed multiple crippling sanctions on Iran to force its hands into coming to the negotiation table. But how can the US expect Iran to take part in any bilateral negotiation after imposing sanctions on its foreign spokesperson—Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif?

When Gibraltar decided to allow Iranian oil tanker Grace 1 to set sail after detaining it for months for allegedly trying to sell oil to Syria in violation of EU sanctions, the US tried its best to thwart it—in a last- ditch attempt, the US sought legal assistance to stop the tanker from being released.

And in the face of all these events Iran has been cautious. After the US' withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran had repeatedly requested the other signatories of the deal for their support, especially in the context of the harsh and inhumane economic sanctions slapped by the US.

Only after multiple failed attempts to salvage the nuclear deal did Iran gradually increase its nuclear activities.

However, there have been times when Iran lashed out: it was linked with the attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz in 2019, and the drone attacks on Saudi Aramco refineries, which were claimed by Yemen's Houthi rebels, among others. In June last year, Iran's IRGC shot down a United States surveillance drone over the Strait of Hormuz, which it claimed had entered into its territory. And in retaliation of the detention of Grace 1 by British Royal Marines off the shore of Gibraltar, Iran seized British-flagged oil tanker Stena Impero in the Strait of Hormuz. These events further escalated tensions between the US and Iran.

While Soleimani was no doubt a controversial figure, his assassination was an irresponsible and unnecessary move

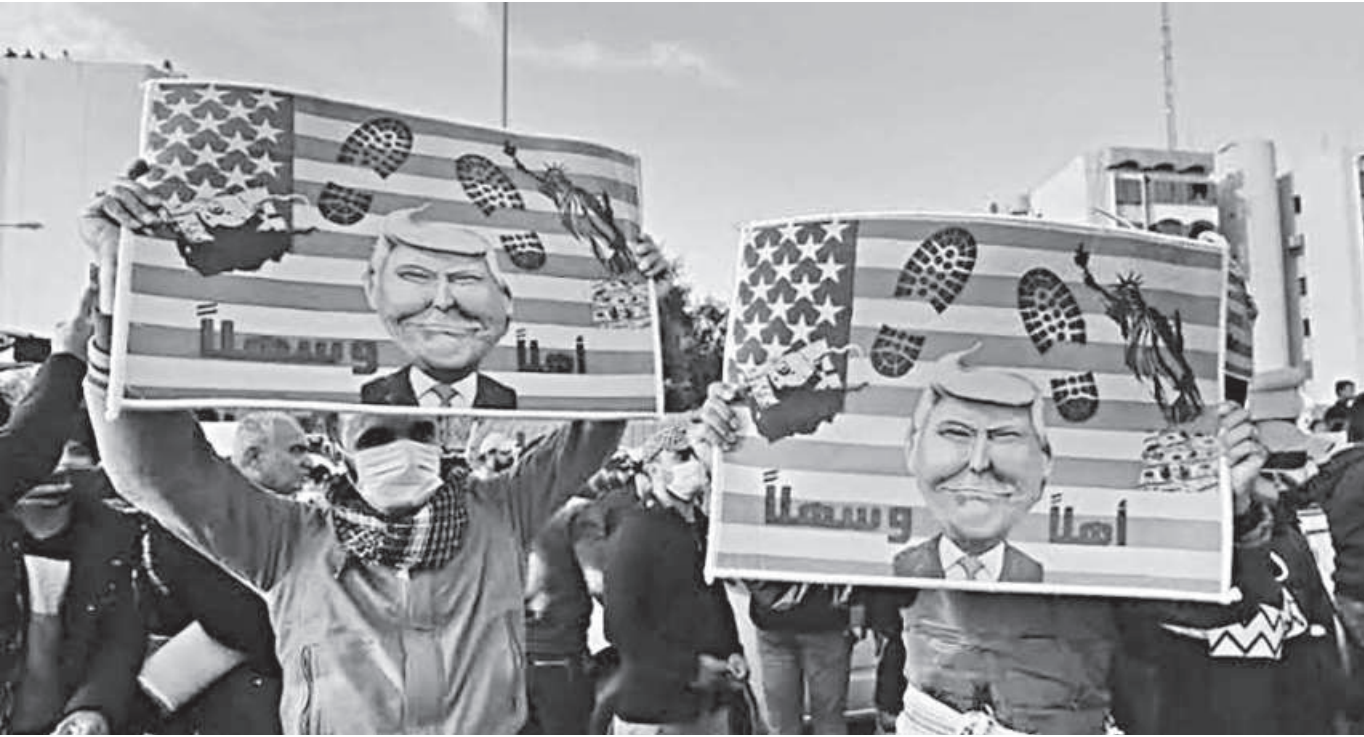


PHOTO: AFP

by the US. Saying that the US' move will expose it to multidimensional challenges is an understatement.

For one, even though a statement from the Pentagon said that Soleimani had been “developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region” and that “this strike was aimed at deterring future Iranian attack plans” by assassinating Soleimani, the US has jeopardised the safety of hundreds and thousands of its soldiers, diplomats and citizens in the region. And although the US, in the aftermath of Soleimani's assassination, has advised its citizens to immediately leave Iraq, how it plans to protect its military personnel in the region, should Iran choose to retaliate, remains to be seen. The US is admittedly set to deploy additional troops in the region, but is it enough?

Secondly, Soleimani had played a

key role in eliminating the ISIS from the region and the PMF had been crucial in fighting off the ISIS, Al Qaeda and other such elements in the region. Terrorist outfits might decide to take advantage of the assassination of Soleimani along with that of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second in command of the PMF. This will pose further challenges for the US.

Third, Soleimani was a highly respected figure in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and his assassination has increased the hostility of Iran's many allies in MENA towards America. While talking to reporters, Trump said that Soleimani had been assassinated “to stop a war, not to start one”. However, many analysts, including Iranian analyst Mohammad Marandi, say that the move by the US is nothing short of an “act of war”. Iraq's prime minister has warned that the assassination can “light the fuse” of war. Pro-Hezbollah

Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar* published the headline: “The martyrdom of Soleimani: It is war”. And Iran's National Security Council spokesman Keyvan Khosravi has warned that “the legal, political, security, and military consequences of this crime is on the US government”.

Israel putting its military on heightened alert amidst fears of retaliation by Iran is a barometer reading of the intense tension that is brewing in the region. According to a CNN report, in the wake of Soleimani's assassination, oil prices have also jumped by four percent.

Fourth, the assassination of Soleimani will potentially act as a major factor in unifying the various anti-US militia factions in the region against their common enemy—the US. Prominent Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr has already called on the Mahdi army and other armed groups to be prepared to

protect Iraq. And Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq armed faction, has said that “all fighters should be on high alert for upcoming battle and great victory.”

If these don't bode ominous for MENA's regional stability, one wonders what would.

Finally, by killing Soleimani on Iraqi soil, the US has sent a very negative message to Iraq and the region—that it does not respect the sovereignty of Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi in a written statement said that the airstrike is a “breach of Iraq's sovereignty.”

And after this, any peaceful, bilateral dialogue between the US and Iran seems like a distant—if not impossible—possibility. Soleimani was considered the second most powerful man in Iran and was very close to Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, who has vowed revenge in a Twitter post on Friday: “a #SevereRevenge

awaits the criminals who have stained their hands with his & the other martyrs' blood last night.”

In a region already teetering on edge, this latest US action is another spanner-in-the-works of any possible talk of de-escalation, let alone peace. Even for the current US administration, which despite its boots-off-the-ground rhetoric is having to deploy an additional 750 soldiers in the region in the wake of the recent attack on the US embassy in Iraq and thousands of troops after the assassination of Soleimani, this action will be an expensive gambit.

So where does this latest action fit within the grand masterplan of the leader of the free world? That remains to be seen—along with whether there is a plan, master or otherwise, at all.

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Why infrastructure is vital for the SDGs

ZUBAYER HOSSEN and NADEERA SULTANA

IN coming years, balanced social, economic and environmental development will be critical for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Improved infrastructure is going to be a major prerequisite for this project, since infrastructure acts as a wheel in an economy, especially at its development stage. The SDGs comprehend the importance of better infrastructure for inclusive development and thus emphasise investing in infrastructural development. Specifically, SDG 9—which focuses on industry, innovation and infrastructure—recognises investment in infrastructure as one of the crucial drivers of economic development.

The interconnection among different areas through infrastructural development facilitates trade and socio-economic development and is likely to alleviate poverty through improving the quality of life for the poor. In Bangladesh, with persistent economic growth over the past two decades, infrastructural facilities have seen expansion. A number of mega projects are being implemented with the view to achieve faster economic development. Despite these initiatives, however, Bangladesh suffers from poor infrastructural capacity which may thwart progress. This raises questions about the efficiency of recent investments in mega infrastructural projects and thus reiterates the need for “efficient investment” in infrastructure in order to achieve the SDGs in Bangladesh.

An efficient supply of infrastructure is argued to be conducive to inclusive growth. ‘Infrastructure’ as a term is an all-encompassing concept that provides sector-wide and country-wide benefits and thus, has an impact on the economic, social, environmental and institutional dimensions of sustainable development. Some direct effects are more easily visible—new job opportunities, transaction and communication facilities, construction projects creating the demand for more goods and services, and so on. Less evident benefits take fruit over the long run, both at the regional level and global level. Infrastructure

across all sectors delivers services to people; it connects and empowers them. In doing so it helps an economy achieve anticipated economic growth, improve business competitiveness, lower inequality, reduce poverty, and pursue the SDGs and other internationally agreed development goals effectively.

The financing of infrastructure has been a critical element of most economic development plans, i.e. poverty reduction strategies in developing countries since the start of this millennium (Cockburn et al., 2013). Bangladesh, as a developing

aggregate demand is likely to escalate through increased construction activity and the creation of new employment opportunities. In the long term, the supply capacity of the economy is likely to expand due to accelerated economic growth.

Bangladesh has identified access to infrastructure services as a major driver for accelerating growth and empowering citizens in its national development strategies such as the Five Year Plan (FYP), Perspective Plan, and SDGs Financing Strategy. The seventh FYP



PHOTO: STAR

nation, is no exception. Improving access to infrastructure services will boost our economic activities and produce spill-over effects in its various productive sectors. The potential economic impact can be as high as USD 35.5 billion for Bangladesh by 2030 (UNESCAP, 2017). It will help raise public revenue that can be reinvested into enhancing inclusive growth and achieving sustainable development. Productivity is also likely to improve under various transmission mechanisms. In the short term,

has classified infrastructure investment as a priority and emphasised on the categorisation of the infrastructure projects, allocation of resources, and timely completion of transformational infrastructure investment. According to the seventh FYP, Bangladesh will need more than five percent of GDP as additional investment in major infrastructure projects per year to sustain growth at a higher level. However, to attain the infrastructure related SDG targets, the additional cost

for infrastructural development has been estimated to be 5.67 percent for fiscal year 2030 (GED, 2017). Currently, investment in eight mega infrastructure projects—the Rampal power plant, the metro rail, Padma bridge and rail link, Chattogram-Cox's Bazar Railway, Matarbari coal power plant, the power grid network, and expansion of the power system network—is a reflection of long run national development strategies. A total of BDT 392.33 billion was allocated for the aforementioned mega projects in fiscal year 2019-20. The total estimated cost for these projects is BDT 2,736.26 billion. By May 2019, 25.61 percent of this estimated cost had been spent (Planning Commission, 2019).

Though Bangladesh is investing in big physical infrastructures, there is a concern about the quality and effectiveness of the investment. Absence of strong implementation, monitoring, and evaluation institutions is enabling corruption. It is creating massive inefficiencies and blocking the full benefits of the investment from taking effect. Besides, Bangladesh has improved transport and water and sanitation, but progress in energy and ICT infrastructures still remains unsatisfactory. In 2015, Bangladesh scored 0.277 and ranked 28 in the Access to Physical Infrastructure Index (APII) among 41 Asia and the Pacific countries (UNESCAP, 2017). One of the key reasons for this poor score is stunted progress in energy and ICT infrastructures.

To reach the sustainable development agenda by 2030, it is high time that Bangladesh realise the importance of efficient investment in infrastructure development. Right priorities need to be set and areas of investment identified. In the future, considering the inclusiveness of development, Bangladesh will require sufficient planned investment in energy and ICT sectors. Most importantly, it will have to ensure transparency and accountability within and across the relevant economic and political institutions.

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