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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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BusinessLine



1. US-Iran Conflict: Qassem Soleimani Killing

Why in News?

Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani was recently killed by a U.S. airstrike near Baghdad's airport in Iraq.

- Soleimani was in charge of the **Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)**, which the US designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation in April 2019.
- The Quds Force undertakes Iranian missions in other countries, including covert ones.
- The strike was apparently in retaliation for the storming of the American Embassy in Baghdad by protesters earlier this week.

About Soleimani

- Mr. Soleimani was the main architect of Iran's recent foreign operations, mainly in Syria and Iraq, which were crucial in saving the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and defeating the Islamic State (IS) in both countries.
- It was under his leadership that Iran founded and trained Shia militias and dispatched them to the battlefields of both Syria and Iraq.
- The militias fought alongside Kurdish paramilitaries and the Iraqi Army, with air support from the U.S. Air Force, against the IS in northern Iraq.

Impact of Assassination

- The strike could destabilise Middle East further, causing heavy casualties and helping the jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and the IS to regroup and re-emerge.
- It may draw severe retaliation from Iran and the forces it backs in the region against Israel and US interests.
- The attack has already killed off even the possibility of renegotiating the nuclear deal.
- A full-scale war with Iran would be totally different from the wars the U.S. has fought in West Asia in recent years as it could trigger multiple attacks across the region.
- Following the killing of the Iranian commander, oil prices surged, showing concerns that escalating Middle East tensions may disrupt oil supplies.
 - About 30% of the whole world's oil transported by sea goes past Iran's south coast and any problems there could lead to oil becoming more expensive.
 - However, the real concern is the passage of ships through the Strait

of Hormuz that lay between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman and is strategic since it provides the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean.

- Iraq's parliament voted on to ask for the removal of U.S. troops on Iraqi soil. The resolution was nonbinding and did not immediately imperil the U.S. presence in Iraq.
- Iran made an announcement about winding down its obligations to the 2015 nuclear deal and no longer abiding by restrictions on uranium enrichment.

Concerns for India

- While India needs to be on the right side of the U.S., its ties with Iran, apart from being 'civilisational', have their own geostrategic logic.
- Any threat of conflict or destabilisation in the region also brings back the spectre of thousands of stranded **Indian expatriates**.
 - In every such crisis- the first Gulf War, the 2003 Iraq war, the Arab spring in Egypt, the 2014 Islamic State takeover of Iraq, the conflict in Yemen- India has had to mount a huge rescue effort.
- Even without an evacuation, any potential risk situation makes the Indian diaspora in West Asia vulnerable to **disruptions in jobs and salaries**.
 - **Remittances back to India**, which form a substantial chunk of foreign exchange reserves, may be affected.
- India sees the region as part of its extended neighbourhood which is also a **major source of energy** for import-dependent India.
 - Though India does not import oil from Iran due to a new set of sanctions that came into effect in May, 2019, any unrest in the volatile region could impact imports from countries like Saudi Arabia, given that most of the exports take place through the Straits of Hormuz.
 - India which imports nearly 90% of its oil is also slated to see its import bill ballooning putting pressure on current account deficit and in turn putting pressure on the rupee also.
- The strike is expected to slow down India's plans to develop the Chabahar port.
- 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.

Reason for US-Iran Conflict

- U.S. -Iran relations have been mostly adversarial since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.
 - This was because of the sacking of the US-backed Shah of Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini.

- U.S. officials and official reports consistently identify Iran's support for militant armed factions in the Middle East region a significant threat to U.S. interests and allies.
- **Iran Nuclear Deal:**
 - Iran agreed to rein in its nuclear programme in a 2015 deal struck with P5+ 1 group (US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany).
 - Under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran agreed to significantly cut its stores of centrifuges, enriched uranium and heavy-water, all key components for nuclear weapons.
 - However, in May 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew the United States from the 2015 nuclear agreement JCPOA and **reimposed harsh sanctions on the country.**
- Last year, the U.S. designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (ISGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO).
 - ISGC, commonly known as Revolutionary Guards, is Iran's elite military force.
- Later, U.S. announced that it would stop extending sanctions waiver to nations importing Iranian oil- a move that had direct impact on India.
- Iran had hit back by signalling that it might start part of its nuclear programme, as also stating that it will close the vital Strait of Hormuz for commercial shipping purposes.
- The escalation started when sabotage on oil tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, and a drone attack on Saudi pipeline were blamed on Iran and its proxies by American officials.

Protecting Powers in U.S. - Iran Diplomatic Relations:

- A protecting power is a country that represents another sovereign state in a country where it lacks its own diplomatic representation.
- The instrument of Protecting Powers is provided for under the **1961 and 1963 Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Relations.**
- Iran and the United States have had **no formal diplomatic relations** since 1980.
- **Pakistan** serves as Iran's protecting power in the United States, while **Switzerland** serves as the United States' protecting power in Iran.



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