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Assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani

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Recently, the top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani (the commander of the Al-Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC) was assassinated by the US during his visit to Iraq.

The assassination of Qassem Soleimani may spark a full-blown war between the US and Iran as self-preservation or protecting the lives of the top leaders is the primary objective of any regime. The spiralling of the US-Iran tensions also puts India in a difficult spot.

Chronology of US-Iran relations

1953: Overthrow of Mossadeq

- The US and British intelligence agencies planned a coup to oust Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadeq.
- Mohammad Mossadeq sought to nationalise Iran's oil industry, which was against the USA's capitalist interests.

1979: Iranian Revolution

- **The US-backed Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, is forced to leave the country** in 1979, following months of demonstrations and strikes against his rule by secular and religious opponents.
- This led to the return of Islamic religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini from exile and following a referendum, the Islamic Republic of Iran is proclaimed on 1 April 1979.

1979-81: US Embassy Hostage Crisis

- The US embassy in Tehran is seized by protesters in November 1979 and American hostages are held inside for 444 days.
- **The final 52 hostages were freed in January 1981**, the day of US President Ronald Reagan's inauguration.

2002-13: Nuclear Fears and Sanctions

- In 2002 an Iranian opposition group reveals that Iran is developing nuclear facilities including a uranium enrichment plant.
- In pursuance of this, several sanctions are imposed by the UN, the US and the EU against Iran.
 - US President George Bush denounces Iran as part of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and North Korea.
- This causes Iran's currency to lose two-thirds of its value in two years.

2013-2016: Closer ties, and a nuclear deal

- In September 2013, Iran's new moderate President Hassan Rouhani takes office.
- In 2015, after a flurry of diplomatic activity, **Iran agrees on a long-term deal on its nuclear programme- Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** with a group of world powers known as the P5+1 - the US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany.
- Under the accord, Iran agrees to limit its sensitive nuclear activities and allow in international inspectors in return for the lifting of crippling economic sanctions.

US-Iran Tensions in current times

- **The policy of maximum pressure:** In May 2018, US President Donald Trump **abandons the nuclear deal** and reinstated economic sanctions against Iran and threatening to do the same to countries and firms that continue buying its oil.
- **The policy of strategic patience:** Iran acted with restraint, with thinking that abiding by the nuclear deal it could get economic favour from EU. However, this policy failed to work for Iran and thereby it began a counter-pressure campaign.
- In June 2019, **Iranian forces shoot down a US military drone over the Strait of Hormuz** and then began the cycle of response and escalation between the two countries.

Possible Impact of US-Iran Conflict

- **Destabilisation of West Asia:**
 - West Asia has already been ravaged by past conflicts like the Syrian civil war, War against ISIS.
 - Possibility of war between the US and Iran can further lead the region into destabilisation.
 - Further, this may enhance the sectarian divide in the region like in Iraq.

- **Shock in Oil Supplies**
 - Instability in the region can impact global oil supplies which in turn can affect the global production and trade.
 - Global oil prices have already seen a 4% rise within hours of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani.
- **Disruption in Afghan Peace Process**
 - Afghan Peace Process is already in jeopardy due to hasty American withdrawal from Afghanistan.
 - US-Iran conflict can also hamper connectivity to Afghanistan (via Iran).
- **Intensification of Regional Rivalries**
 - Saudi Arabia and Israel are strategic allies of the US, the rising tension between the US and Iran will mean other regional players will also be involved.
 - As these countries are engaged in competition for influence, a war between these two nations can spread to a larger region.

Impact on India

- **Oil Supply:** The conflict can affect oil supplies in the country.
 - **India imports 84% of the oil** it needs. Thus, a spike in the price of oil makes a big difference not just to domestic cost conditions but also to the **balance of payments**.
 - **India's foreign exchange reserves** are relatively comfortable, at over \$450 billion, and can easily cover 9-10 months' imports at current prices. An increase in the price of oil would have to be both sharp and sustained in order to erode this buffer
- **Diaspora: Large Indian diaspora** in West Asia, and particularly the Persian Gulf might be affected due to the tension in the region.
 - Their safety will have to be a priority. India has in the past organised big evacuations — famously from Kuwait at the time of the first Gulf War, and more recently from Libya.
 - However, the scale of any evacuation from the Gulf would on this occasion be even larger even if it remains relatively unlikely.
 - A downturn caused by tensions might cause a large number of guest workers to return to India — and to stop remitting money.
- **Connectivity: Strategic connectivity interests** of India might be affected. This includes the port of Chabahar in Iran, linking India to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The project which received a rare exemption from US sanctions, but in the event of an escalation of tensions the viability of other connectivity projects will also get compromised.
- Last but not 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.

Conclusion

Lord Krishna in Bhagwat Gita held that **War shall be the last option**, therefore, both the US and Iran must act with **strategic restraint** as any crisis in West Asia will not only affect the region as a whole but will have a detrimental impact on global affairs as well.

Drishti Mains Question

Discuss the impact of rising US-Iran conflict on India and its international relations.