

# THE DYNAMICS OF THE US-IRAN RELATIONSHIP AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF QASSEM SULEIMANI: EXPLANATIONS AND PREDICTIONS

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## Abstract

The political dynamics of the US-Iran relationship have kept the two states always on the brink of the eruption of a major conflict. The targeted assassination of Major General Qassem Suleimani, one of the most consequential figures in Iranian military history, took the world to the brink of a global conflict on January 3, 2020. Fortunately, however, the subsequent events did not escalate to declared or undeclared war. This article provides a theoretical analysis of the conflict following the assassination of Major Suleimani to explain why and how war was avoided in this context. The analysis based on contemporary context, regional power dynamics, and relevant conditions illustrates how de-escalation of conflict was possible and argues why, in light of existing theories, there is hardly any possibility of a manifest war between the US and Iran in the near future despite prevailing in an alternate and latent form.

**Keywords:** Iran, USA, War, General Suleimani, Grey Zone Conflict

## Introduction

Historically, the relationship between Iran and the US is that of strategic engagement, periodically punctuated by political infliction, economic sanctions, military discordance and regional disruption of peace. The US has been able to exert dominance or forge alliances with several countries in the Middle East, except this one nation. Since the departure of Shah Pahlavi and the ascendance of the Islamic Revolutionary regime in 1979, the US has struggled to accommodate its interest in the Gulf. Decades of conflict came to a head when in 2020 then-US President

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Donald Trump greenlighted the targeted missile attack on Qassem Suleimani, Major General of the Iranian Army and Commander of the IRGC foreign operation wing 'Kurds Force'. The assassination enraged the whole country and retaliatory measures were expected of the government. (Khalaji, 2020). For a few days, the entire world waited to see if there might be a declaration of war from Iran or a pre-emptive attack by the USA (Grant, 2020). Fortunately, despite several threats of retaliatory measures along with a few short-range attacks, all-out war was averted. Questions remain, however, if war is ever a real possibility between these two countries, and whether they would ever settle into a stable dynamic.

With the view to evaluating the future of this conflict, this paper deduces which factors prevented the countries from going to war. It is based on the analysis of two sources of data, namely existing literature on war, deterrence, and security, and the opinion of experts collected through interviews from experts in security studies from Bangladesh and Iran, academics and scholars, and security specialists working at the think tanks of both countries. To collect insights from the US side, secondary analysis of data collected from interviews in newspapers, scholarly writings, seminars, and discussions was utilized. The primary research question that this paper aims to answer why we have not witnessed an armed conflict between Iran and the USA even after the provocation of the assassination of a top military personnel. It uses a theoretical analysis based on a realist perspective to detect following which states declare war against each other and diagnoses if those elements were present in this circumstance. The paper will also seek an answer to the question of whether we would witness a war between the two nations in the near future. Focusing on a liberalistic framework, it determines the reasons for why states hardly declare wars anymore and the angle from which these might be applicable to this situation. The article has been divided into consecutive segments overviewing the historical relationship between the US and Iran, a discussion of the theoretical ground based on which the evaluation and prediction of the relationship have been made, and an analysis of the collected primary and secondary data in the perspective of the theoretical framework. Lastly, it will offer some predictions about their prospective interactions.

### **Overviewing the threat of war in the US-Iran relationship**

Since the Islamic revolution, the US has viewed Iran as a terrorism-sponsoring state under a prudent dictatorship. As a result, the involvement of third-party stakeholders, regional and international behaviour of the US, dynamics of other conflicts in the alignment of this crisis, etc. get overlooked (Simbar, 2006). Periodic

apprehension of war intertwines the political and strategic dynamic between Iran and the US where many points of crisis are not even visible and acts of conflict are conducted under the cover of miscalculation, deterrence, regional fragmentation, military enhancement, etc. (Crist, 2013) Donette Murray stresses the urgency of developing a pragmatic framework to negotiate this bilateral security concern with pursuable goals. Neglecting opportunities to come to a discussion table, the USA's tendency to use military force that only helps to refuel anti-Americanism in the region, and avoidance diplomacy as the prime channel of negotiation has recurrently led to deadlocks with uncertainty over whether the relationship will collapse into war or not (Murray, 2009). According to Middle Eastern security expert Vali Nasr, substantial restriction on Iran is eventually aggrandizing its tendency to build up a defence mechanism against foreign aggression and is trying to create a sense of weaponized deterrence against its opponent (Wright, 2012). The intensity of the conflict might be augmented in the coming times with the changing pattern of politics, but it will neither end up in a full-ranged war nor emerge into a completely peaceful resolution (Yazdani, 2019). According to some, a stable Iran is also vital for the US for safeguarding its regional interest because the eruption of any conflict in the Gulf means a threat to Saudi and other allies, a low supply of oil, and intrusion of other regional entities (Sreedhar & Cavanagh, 2010). On one hand, the fear of armed violence between Iran and the US is not negligible for many scholars like F. Leverett and H. Mann Leverett (Leverett & Leverett, 2010). Mohammad Javad Zarif, former Permanent Representative of Iran to the UN and renowned Iranian academic emphasizes that the decreasing inclination of super and emerging power towards an exhibition of weaponry force would be giving rise to a revisionist approach, as a result of which nation-states would move forward with a balanced combination of cooperation and competition to gain their interest (Zarif, 2014). Countries are moving towards more collective approaches and the tendency for zero-sum win no longer serves any party to gain practical efficacy (Pickering, 2010). On the other hand, the US administration has been highly suspicious of Iran's regional hegemony and the possibility of nuclear weapon proliferation. President George W. Bush even addressed Iran as "the Axis of Evil", using it as a metaphor indicating that Iran does not consider the language of diplomacy (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). It is due to a lack of a sustainable diplomatic endeavour and foreign policy exercise, according to security consultant Robert J. Pranger, that both Iran and the US are often driving themselves towards the threshold of an outbreaking conflict, despite both nations having no motive of eruption (Bootwala, 2020).

Just before the assassination of Suleimani, the Iran-US relationship was going through a strained phase. Though Obama took an initiative to break the vicious cycle of threats and counter-threats by initiating negotiation over nuclear program, the Trump administration withdrew from the subsequent deal, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA, which brought Iran under certain containment measures for the enrichment of nuclear-procuring uranium (Kroenig, 2018). The following year was marked by small attacks and counterattacks as well as economic pressure. With assassinating the most important personality of Iran under the direct order of the then US president, the two countries entered into the ‘Persian Gulf Crisis’ of 2020. Three possible retaliatory reactions from Iran’s side were predicted, namely, a direct response by launching attack targeting eminent places, personnel or ground that might pose a serious threat to US’s interest; indirect response by using regional or international allies; or no response with Iranian regime using rage to strengthen the internal factors and come up with a more strategic and diplomatic force to tackle with the US (Arab Centre for Research & Policy Studies, 2020). Following this assassination, along with the imposition of “maximum pressure” after withdrawal from JCPOA, we saw formation of close ties with China and Russia, which clearly shows the outreach measures Rouhani’s government has gone through to minimize US influence in the region (Belal, 2020).

### **Theorizing the threats of war from realist and liberal perspectives**

When states decide to declare war against their adversary, it goes through a process of political decision-making where issues of military capability, economic capacity, and strategic calculation emerge into the scenario (Levy, 2011). After the assassination of General Qassem Suleimani, it appeared as though Iran and USA were on the verge of war, but fortunately decided to stand by. This section will theoretically analyse the situation. A theoretical framework based on realist theories will postulate why a war was probable after the assassination and why it did not erupt. A second framework will be devised using liberal theories to discuss the reasons Iran and the US would not declare war in the near future.

#### ***The realist perspective***

For the emergence of war, there need to be definite factors, a historical context between the states, or non-bargainable disputes or allowances that might propagate them toward war (Fearon, 1995). The causes of war can be determined based on three levels of perspectives—the individual, nation-state, and the international system (Waltz, 1965). As per the realists, anarchy, and uncertainties about the intention

of adversaries lead to spiralling insecurity, competition, and tension that forces decision-makers to concentrate on short-term security factors, thus approaching military capacity-building initiatives (Levy, 2011). Besides, uncertainty about the intention of the adversary leads a security-seeking state to go for militarization for defensive purposes. This leads to a spiralling security dilemma which becomes difficult to resist after a threshold and leads to the escalation (Jervis, 1978). Another technique for promulgating inter-state conflict is the propagation of 'preventive war' which originates from the anticipation of a negative power shift, fear of its consequences, and when there is a temptation to dominate the capacity of the adversaries using existing hostilities (Copeland, 2013). In regard to evaluating the wars in the past, Lebow has focused more on the reasons behind a nation's affiliation to go into a war than the reasons for which it fixates on immediate goals. He has shown that general wars that usually erupt regarding the involvement of great powers arise largely from miscalculated escalations. He has constructed six propositions based on his discussion about the causes of warfare and the types of states it is likely to involve (Lebow, 2010). Proposition 4 suggests that 'hegemonic wars are often the result of accidental and unintended escalation (Lebow, 2010). The escalation caused by the assassination of General Suleimani was the result of an unconsidered decision of then-President Donald Trump, mainly because he was kept under the impression that killing Suleimani would help the US regain its deterrence in the Gulf (Pamuk & Landay, 2020). Proposition 5 denotes that 'unintended escalation and miscalculation of the balance of power have deeper causes than incomplete information (Lebow, 2010). The decision taken by then-President Donald Trump was an impulsive order which had no coordination between the administration and the relevant allies. According to proposition 6, 'weak and declining powers frequently initiate wars against great powers' (Lebow, 2010). Iran falls in the declining state category<sup>1</sup> from the economic perspective of year-long sanctions, the political perspective of unwavering democracy, and the military perspective of irregular proxy wars. So, it is vigilant that Iran had every possibility of declaring war against the action conducted by the US in the surge of taking revenge, as per the proposition. The other propositions of this theory focus more on the nature of the states and their vis-à-vis tendency to rise to power through war, the ways the powers set their war strategies, and the nature of states targeted in an armed conflict. But since all these propositions focus on definite states that are either rising or declining powers and dominant powers, these have not been considered relevant in this paper as the argument is not constructed on characteristics of state power.

As a formalized version of the ‘The Bargaining Model of Wars’ prescribed by Blainey, Fearon has considered three sets of conditions that lead rational actors to end up in war; ‘private information and incentives to misrepresent that information, commitment problems, and indivisible issues’ (Fearon, 1995). Evaluating the private information, wars arise when there are disagreements about relative power and the actors are not comprehensive about the outcome of the war due to a lack of transparency of opponents’ capability (Blainey, 1975). When actors are in consensus about the outcome of the war, they are likely to avoid the circumstances and initiate negotiation. On the concept of commitment problem, it becomes difficult for actors to reach a settlement that is mutually preferred over war if the relative distribution of power between two states is in the process of shifting (Levy, 2011). Lastly, when mutually acceptable settlement requires a division of goods that is proportionate to the likely outcome of the war, the actors prefer the settlement over emerging into the war (Fearon, 1995).

### ***The Liberal Perspective***

Countries that have been engaged in wars for a long time against their adversaries are pursuing the consequences based on different causes. But in today’s world, nations hardly declare war against each other—even if they do, they keep it under the name of “terror”, “democratization”, “removal of dictators”, “establishing peace”, etc. Thus, determining any one factor behind the eruption of war is difficult and narrows down the horizon. According to liberal scholars, under certain domestic circumstances and by following organized calculative strategies, states can overcome the pressure of anarchy. For example, Kant focused on the concept of “Perpetual Peace” based on democratic institutions, free trade, economic interdependence, and international law and institutions (Kant, 2004). Theorists of democracy have emphasized that democracies are hardly involved in wars against each other (Ray, 1995). For optimists, John Mueller insisted that “war is on the decline because peoples and leaders in the developed world have increasingly found war to be disgusting, ridiculous, and unwise” (Mueller, 1989).

### ***Investigating the motives behind possible Iran-US war***

With all possibility of an armed conflict, questions come up about why the incident did not lead to a full-ranged war. The possibility of war between the US and Iran must be evaluated in the overall trend in the post-Cold War era, which is marked by a decline in the overall frequency of war; an increase in its lethality; the steady growth of anti-war sentiment (Lebow, 2010). In the 21st century, states no longer

try to invade other territories to gain hegemony. Considerations of trade and investment mean indomitable interest in cooperation and declining interest as the prime motive of war (Lebow, 2008). Not only do states have to analyse the expense of war, but they also have to account for the anti-war sentiment, the consensus of the administration of their respective governments, the affiliation of allied states, the assistance of regional enemy states in the enhancement of opponent's capability, and various non-state actors, including international organizations.

The second motive concentrates on security which is more relevant in the case of the US and Iran. The World War I, II, and the Cold War were all driven by security concern along with a mixture of other reasonings (Lebow, 2010). According to democratic theory of peace, economic interdependence plays major roles in restricting countries from entering war now. An attack against any state is no more viable due to the concept of "collective security" where other states vehemently resist the aggressor with political, economic, or military means of sanctions (Himmer, 1994). All these evaluations have made it unlikely for a state to engage in a war solely on the basis of security concerns in rivalry.

The last two motives according to Lebow are standing and revenge. The issue of standing or honour was touted when US attacked Iraq where the USA needed to display its military might and political will. States can lose honour by too much of defensive behaviour (Lebow, 2010). However, as discussed above, it is no more rational to inflict war due to the economic cost, geostrategic calculation, and most importantly, the unwillingness of governments and people to invest in a war (Lebow, 2010).

The experts interviewed for the research behind this paper presented their opinion on the matter. According to Group Captain Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan, the war did not break out because the objective was served. The US objective was to degrade and decapitate the influence of Iran in the region, and Trump did not want to escalate since the motive has been achieved (Khan, personal communication, 2021). From a strategic point of view, Iran commanded short-range retaliatory methods and not a full combat war because that decision would have backfired. On the other hand, USA, as a superpower, was interested in maintaining status quo and keeping the conflict under control. Paul Rogers has defined it as the 'attempt to keep the lid on the insecurity.'—a pervasive and accumulative strategy to refrain from addressing the core reasons for dissent (Rogers, 2021). Taking the situation to a chaotic result could have caused another disaster like Afghanistan. Noor Mohammad Sarkar analysed that Suleimani, and thus Iran was turning

into a regional power, and therefore, a regional threat to the US. For Trump's administration, the elimination of this significant personality was a solution that led to the uncoordinated order of attack. He emphasized the model of leadership that the US had had during this crisis. But after the incident, it was realized that it was a calculative risk on behalf of the administration and could not be allowed to degrade any further (Sarkar, personal communication, 2021). Alex Vatanka predicted that though Iran had vowed retaliation, it would proceed with crude calculations as it knew that declaring war against the US would not be sustainable (Vatanka, 2020). Iran is aware of its diplomatic interest and is also well informed that a sudden emotional action would deteriorate the situation for itself (Slim, 2020). Dr. Alireza Miryousefi has pinpointed the whole incident based on the 3P model—past, personality, and perception; the historical context of the Iran-US relationship, the personalities of the stakeholders, and the perception of the determining factors (Miryousefi, personal communication, 2021). A bubble was created in which killing Suleimani was determined as the keyway to regain US deterrence in the Gulf and once it was done, the US administration did not want to risk extending the impact (Slim, 2020). Professor Bahman Azad also emphasised that Iran limited itself to small retaliatory measures because it knew that a war will not be beneficial for any side (Azad, personal communication, 2021). Besides, all the US allies were highly discontented with the decision and wanted immediate refrainment from war. When the US administration realized the danger underway, they tried to contain retaliation to a minimal level using secondary sources (Baker et al., 2020).

The theoretical emphasis of the miscalculation of Trump's aspiration to uphold his honour via gaining hegemonic supremacy can be denoted when he believed that launching the attack was credible and he has removed a significant enemy from the region. There was even a miscalculation and deliverance of incomplete information regarding a probable attack that Suleimani was rumoured to launch (Baker et al., 2020). Though Trump had been emphasizing Suleimani being an "imminent" threat to the region as well as US interest and security, US Defence Secretary Mark acknowledged in an interview with CNN that there was no evidence of imminent attack even though he shared the concern with his president that there might be one (Porter, 2020). So, these statements make it clear that this attack was launched from a conspicuous sense of security threat with the hidden reason of regional balance of power, but no intention of starting a war. With the rising voice of the citizens of both states, the focus was on internal public service rather than on a military confrontation with a country in another part of the world



(Porter, 2020). Even the US Congress questioned the legality of this act by Trump and refused responsibility even if Trump did have the authority to launch an attack against a country without their approval (NPR, 2020).

### ***The US-Iran relationship: A Conflict in the Shadow***

War will not only involve these two countries but many other regional allies and enemies; some of whom might propagate a conflict, and others want resistance to war for serving their regional economic and strategic purposes. Though the Iraq-Iran war is considered “America’s first war against Iran” (Riedel, 2013) this event was more of proxy participation of the US. This war has taught the US the reasons behind another war being overly expensive, unworthy, and exceedingly difficult to end because Iran is hard to intimidate and is likely to retaliate using asymmetrical tactics. (Riedel, 2013). Iran’s technique of guerrilla warfare and its crooked method of taking revenge is well-known. Besides, Iran is known to be a significant sponsor and supporter of groups like Hezbollah and Hamas who conduct terrorist activities in Lebanon and Palestine which is already a threat to the US (Koss, 2018). Though there are allegation on IRGC of targeting oil tankers along Strait of Hormuz, none of these small-ranged attacks ever turned into a full combat conflict (United States Institute of Peace, 2022).

Another factor that keep USA and Iran from engaging in all-out war is the nuclear deterrence. As soon as USA moved away from JCPOA, Iran started increasing its uranium storage citing violation of the deal and recurrent sanctions to justify its action (Koshgarian, 2020). With the threat of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, a spiralling model of security dilemma is active in the US-Iran relationship and pushed it towards a more complicated form of mutual deterrence. Below we discuss some other factors that maintain this deterrence.

### ***The impact of economic and strategic dimensions in restraining the war***

Group Captain Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan sees the strategic viewpoint as more important than the economic standpoint of the two states. Presently, American domestic and foreign policy is guided by the nature of its leadership. With the mode of leadership during the escalation and presently changed, the vicious tendency of involving in a war for the sustenance of standing and honour would seem unlikely now. Currently, it depends on Biden how he will define the concept of ‘security’ to guide the administration and to what extent he will keep closer proximity with the allies. Going into war after the assassination or even in near future would be drastically disadvantageous for Iran if they cannot match the US on more of a

military level (Khan, personal communication, 2021). Besides, Iran is not in a situation to emerge into a war against a great power because regional influence is more significant for it than global power politics (Wilmoth, 2020). The government needs regional assistance to maintain hegemony rather than fighting a nation on passive causations of revenge. As a result, it is concentrating on its strategic intellect to establish regional influence. At the same time, since Iran has lately started to regain its economic interdependence with allies, it would not allow a war that will drastically disrupt its growth by driving away opportunities. Therefore, Iran cannot afford a war. Its strategies are limited to guerrilla techniques, holding hostage of foreign personnel, or launching missiles on US bases, but never towards full-fledged confrontation. On the other hand, the US recently withdrawn from a long 20 years of war in Afghanistan that cost \$6.4 trillion since 9/11 (Aftergood, et al., 2021). So, all these would ensure avoiding security as a motive to engage in war.

#### *The contribution of regional allies and enemies*

The US-Iran relationship has been affected largely by its allies and enemies mainly in the Middle East and Asian region. The rules of foreign policy have changed, and every player knows that war in any region will affect all other regions as well as strategic stakeholders (Watling, 2020). Discussion of Israel, China, and Russia come to the forefront while dealing with the next generation of conflict between the countries. Israel and Iran consider each other an existential threat and Iran's nuclear attempt is the prime threat to Israel. Israel has been promoting propaganda against Iran via media, news, speeches, conferences, etc. portraying it as a "military threat" and that all allies should unite and prepare for sudden aggression from Iran (Eilam, 2021). Fortunately, with the change of regime, the US has started to evaluate the suggestions given by its allies. It is transparent that, more than the US, Israel is visualizing Iran as more of a security threat thus pushing the US to engage in a confrontation making 'military security' the main issue. Under the Biden administration, it depends on the leadership dynamics of the current administration to pursue that motive.

Russia and China are considered allies of Iran because they have been against the US historically, geo-strategically, diplomatically, and global power-play-wise. The conflict between the US and Iran is a gateway for both Russia and China to remain relevant in the region. (Rhoades & Kaye, 2021). Conversely, following the Superpower Collapse<sup>2</sup> and Power Transition Theory<sup>3</sup>, with the rising threat of China as a vital competitor to the US existence as a superpower, the US itself

will not engage in a region where both China and Russia's interests are affiliated (Miryousefi, personal communication, 2021). Their main targets are economic sustenance in the region and exert an influence here to be at the discussion table (Talbot & Tennis, 2020). For executing all these projects, China needs a stable Gulf and does not want the breakout of any war. Keeping the project and continuous oil supply from Iran in consideration, China is even prepared to support a US-led military escort force for shipping in the Persian Gulf (Scimia, 2019). With the recent tension between Russia and the US regarding Ukraine issue Putin would try to keep the US under regional restrictions, but Iran would not be a direct factor of deterrence. (Rondeaux, 2020).

### *Shifting regional power concentration for the US*

The possibilities of war in the Gulf have been minimized in these recent years because the US is more concentrated in other regions than occupying the Middle East—mostly because of the rise of China in prime regions and because the US has derived everything it could avail from the Middle East (Sokolsky & Miller, 2020). Under Biden's administration, the Middle East is already at the back of the list with much more importance given to global health cooperation, combating global warming, and pushing back on China's predatory trade practices. But it will not also be lesser important, and the nuclear issue will have its precedence on the table (Maloney, 2021). With changing modes of industrial functioning, the oil demand is already on the low, and the least that is needed would be transported via the Strait of Hormuz which no one is willing to turn into a war zone. Iran might plan to close the strait as a retaliatory mechanism, but it will not sustain for long because of the lack of military and economic support on Iran's side; Iran also needs the trade ongoing to sustain itself (Haynes, 2019).

### *The Future of the US-Iran relationship*

Though the war was not declared after the assassination of Suleimani and the so far analysis of the hypotheses shows that there is no possibility that Iran and the US would fight any war in near future, the tension will not disappear. On an interview with New York Time, before taking over office, Joe Biden discussed the topic of Iran and said that he would prefer to return to the JCPOA deal if Iran exhibits its commitment to the nuclear deal with the optimism that returning to the deal might be the start of follow-on negotiations regarding Iran's production of missile materials and Iranian proxy activities in the region (Friedman, 2020). Iran's fear about re-entering the deal is that the deal was revoked when they followed it and

the situation was getting better for them. Thus they need full confirmation of compliance from all stakeholders (Azad, personal communication, 2021). Iran is doubting that if another President withdraws from the deal, Iran will again have to go through the rigorous motion of sanctions, regional imbalance, and manifested tension; which makes the deal a less lucrative opportunity for Iran (Miryousefi, personal communication, 2021). On the other hand, if there is no deal and the current tension between the two states along with their regional stakeholders sustains, there will be harsher sanctions, more political pressure, extended economic isolation, and regional apprehension on Iran (Khan, personal communication, 2021). Besides, there will be the spiralling threat of nuclear weapon procurement by Iran, an increased number of proxy wars using militia groups, and pressure from Israel and other allies. No matter what tactic any side emphasizes in case there is no negotiation, all the data suggested the conclusion of utilization of the “Gray Zone Conflict”<sup>4</sup> technique to continue between these rivals.

Anyways, the importance of the Middle East as an area of interest is decreasing for the US. But Iran would always remain a matter of concern for its governance, nuclear weapon program, and constant revolutionary tendency against US submission. It is still an important actor in the economic and geo-strategic arena in determining regional security prospects. Though President Trump during his regime has stated that, “there is always a chance of war with Iran” (Centre for Preventive Action, 2022) the possibilities are minor now. With Biden in office, trying to bring about Iran to the reinstatement of the JCPOA deal, two possible outcomes might be visible in the future; Iran and the US negotiate on the collaborative ground on basis of the JCPOA deal, and Iran and the US do not agree on any deal and conflict continues as ‘Grey Zone Warfare’. If this deal can be resumed, it is scheduled to return to the same form of Iran limiting its uranium enrichment and increasing surveillance over its nuclear program, in return the US would uplift the imposed sanctions (Masterson, 2022). On the other hand, if the deal does not work, the conflict will barely turn into a war, but never submerge—it is more likely to continue as a grey zone conflict and follow the pathway of intense deterrence. Iran would continue developing ballistic missiles and supporting the proxy groups across the region, and the US in return would impose heavier sanctions (Centre for Preventive Action, 2022). To contest Iran in this grey zone tactic, the US would also have to deal with the help of limited military actions keeping the level under the radar. As a defence, the US would use retaliatory political warfare mechanisms like information operations, cyberattacks, and non-lethal responses to deal with Iran on the same platform (Trask, Ruhe, & Cicurel, 2019). Besides, the interest of the

regional allies mainly Saudi Arab, Russia, and Israel will be a major gameplay in the situation considering the fact that these states have had key role in determining the decisions on the deal.

### **Conclusion**

The objectives of the paper were to analyse three main points and hypotheses—the reason behind the US and Iran not declaring war against each other after the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani, the probability of Iran and the US engaging in a war against each other in near future, and to determine the alternative situations of the war that might exist between the states. This paper has illustrated the gaps remaining in the existing literature on this issue. Study on the situation following the assassination of Suleimani is still scarce—its driving factors and alternative outcomes have not been discussed. Firstly, the paper discussed the realist view of the causes of inter-state war to deduce the possibility of war after the incident. Lebow's proposition of the Great Power Wars estimated that there was a possibility of a war between the states. Consecutively, Fearon's 'Bargaining Model of War' depicted the factors due to which countries go to war instead of a peaceful negotiatory settlement. The liberal theorists on the other hand generated models depicting why states no more declare war against each other. Richard Lebow's future war theory has been used in this perspective where he has determined the factors due to which countries go to war—and the subsequent diminish in the significance of those factors no more working as motives of war. Setting the US-Iran relationship in the background, it was evident that these motives of war do not serve the policies and interests of either state, so being involved in a war would be a lose-lose situation. The discussion and data analysis of the collected information, both from primary and secondary data have helped the paper to reach a conclusion. The assassination of Suleimani was more of a leadership deficit on US behalf where the President was not under the guidance of proper administrative decisions and rightful coordination with the allies regarding the action. But fortunately, the situation did not erupt into a full-ranged war. The US and Iran will not engage in a war against each other unless the contemporary variables that have kept their relationship under the threshold of war get disrupted. However, the tension of deterrence will continue between them, and unless there is a drastic change in the scenario or long-term initiatives of normalization either it will be reduced and contained within a minimum threshold. The hegemonic gameplay of great powers is always expected to be sustained, as will the security concerns of these powers with regional allies and enemies. The interest of regional allies, importance of Iran as an economic and geostrategic diffident, and the shifting concentration of the US

towards other regional engagement other than the Middle-East will continue to be relevant in this picture. But the situation is unlikely to end up in a war and more possible to continue in deterrence mode depending on the extent of cooperation or aggression the states decide to maintain. It is expected that this paper has been successful in creating a portrayal of an adequate picture showing how the relationship between the US and Iran is navigating. The relationship between these two states might not be of complete cooperation or confrontation, but the tension can be predicted to continue under the deterrent threshold of grey zone warfare.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 92.2 index points in 2010, and the latest value from 2021 is 84.5 index points.
- <sup>2</sup> Superpower collapse, replaced by an endless series of domestic struggles, scandals, celebrity, and vitriol between the various parts of the body politic. The result has been strategic isolation and domestic chaos.
- <sup>3</sup> Power transition focuses on differential growth rates and their effect on altering relative power between nations, resulting in new relationships among nations or competing groups and the formation of new political and economic entities.
- <sup>4</sup> Gray zone activities involve purposefully pursuing political objectives through carefully designed operations; moving cautiously towards goals rather than seeking decisive results quickly; acting to remain below key escalatory thresholds to avoid war; and using all instruments of national power, particularly non-military and non-kinetic tools, such as cyber warfare. It is also referred to as hybrid threats, sharp power, political warfare, malign influence, irregular warfare, and modern deterrence.

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