



CENJOWS

LIKELY SCENARIOS IN USA IRAN STANDOFF AND OPTIONS FOR INDIA

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BACKDROP ON WEST ASIA REGION GEOPOLITICS

West Asia, the cradle of ancient civilisations, venerated birthplace of three major religions, harbouring huge petroleum reserves, epicentre of world trade routes of importance, is now a **quagmire of fratricidal ethno-religious frontal and proxy conflicts**, actively aided and abetted by extra regional powers.

Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Israel are the major regional countries with potential to chart and influence the geopolitics in West Asia, based on their demographic mass, economic profile, maturity of governance structure, and combat potential of armed forces.

The most populous countries in the region are Turkey and Iran, each with around 79 million population, followed by Iraq and Saudi Arabia with around 33 million each, and Yemen with around 29 million.

Turkey with GDP of 800 billion US Dollars has the largest economy in the region, closely followed by Saudi Arabia 750 billion US Dollars, Iran 550 billion US Dollars, Israel 350 billion US Dollars, and Iraq 200 billion US Dollars.

Militarily Israel, an undeclared Nuclear power, has one of the most powerful military in the region, closely followed by Turkey and Iran, with Saudi Arabia and Iraq in the next league. Israel and Turkey have robust governance structures, followed by Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Saudi Arabia, by virtue of being the **custodian of the holiest shrines of Muslims** and the strength of its petroleum industry based economy, considers itself to be the leader of the Muslim World.

Turkey considers itself to be the rightful leader of the Muslim world and the **rightful owner of the legacy of the old Ottoman Empire**.

Iran looks at itself as the oldest continuous civilisation of the region and the **custodian of the Shia Muslim faith and the ummah**. The dispersed spread of the Shia Muslims in the region gives it capability to influence events beyond its borders.

Israel, the only non-Muslim country in the region, has **strong ties with USA** enabling it to develop the strongest military in the region. Having successfully fought several battles of survival with the neighbouring Muslim countries it pursues **policy of pro-active intervention to safeguard its geostrategic interests**. Its strategic reach encompasses almost the whole of West Asia.

ONGOING REGIONAL CONFLICTS AND PROXY WARS

Saudi Arabia-Iran proxy wars are underway in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

Kurds are embroiled in homeland insurgency with Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

Palestinian terror acts against Israel across borders of West Bank & Gaza Strip is continuous.

Iran and USA are engaged in mutual standoff with potential for open hostilities.

Challenge posed by Non State Entities and Jihadist groups, covertly funded by Saudi Arabia and Iran, is another threat to weak states and regional stability.

CHANGING ALIGNMENTS IN WEST ASIA REGION

The withdrawal of Egypt from the leadership space of Arab Muslim world, due to internal strife and a weakened economy, has resulted in the **Palestinian issue being relegated to the periphery of Arab geopolitical stage**. This has had three consequences.

- **Israel** has got breathing space, which it has utilised to **extend its geostrategic reach** in the region.
- **Saudi Arabia** has stepped in to assume the **mantle of leadership of Arab Muslims**.
- **Iran** has picked up the gauntlet of **challenger to Saudi Arabia**.

Turkey, by far one of the most militarily powerful nation in West Asia, has also commenced **reasserting its dominant position of old by actively intervening in Syrian conflict** as well as in Libya. To buttress its leadership claims in the region, it has also **joined hands with Iran to jointly combat Kurdistan factor and challenge Saudi Arabia leadership of Organisation of Islamic States**. The recent holding of a conference of Muslim countries in Malaysia, outside of OIC, duly backed by Turkey and Iran is the first gambit in this direction.

Installation of a Shia Government in power in **Iraq has facilitated full rapprochement with Iran**.

Iran, is now fully aligned with Shia Muslim predominant countries and regions in Arab world comprising Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Lebanon, and Kuwait.

In this emerging realignment **Russia is providing indirect military technological support and influence to this alliance**.

China is favourably inclined towards Iran led alliance but is maintaining, overall, a neutral stance.

All these factors combined together have created tangible shift in the power equations hitherto dominated by **Saudi Arabia led, Sunni Muslim predominant countries, coalition** of United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, Jordan, Egypt, and Yemen. It has also influenced Pakistan, dependant on Saudi aid, into providing freelance combat support.

USA is providing active material support to the Saudi led alliance.

Tacit support to Saudi Arabia alliance is also there from Israel.

INTERESTS OF MAJOR EXTRA REGIONAL POWERS

USA

- Maintain stability and security of petroleum operations in the region.
- Protect USA economic assets and interests in the region.
- Ensure freedom of navigation of maritime trade routes.
- Provide protection to allied countries.
- Influence regional allies to purchase USA armament industry products.
- Establish presence to influence a favourable geostrategic environment.

Russia

- Check on Muslim extremism influence from spreading in its Southern region.
- Influence cash rich West Asia arms market in favour of Russian armaments.
- Establish presence to influence a favourable geostrategic environment.

China

- Security of its energy supplies.
- Security of its maritime trade routes.
- Extend its geopolitical influence in the region.
- Security of its investments in Gwadar port of Pakistan.
- Influence impact of Muslim extremism in Uighur Muslims of its Xinjiang province.

India

- Security of its energy supplies.
- Gaining access to Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.
- Security of large Indian diaspora in the region.
- Security of its economic assets in the region.
- Regional stability essential to safeguard its engagement with mutually antagonistic major power centres in the region.
- Favourably influence Muslim opinion in international fora.
- Extend soft power exercised by Indian diaspora in the region.

LIKELY SCENARIOS

Open Conflict

Iran understands its military technological limitations of engaging in open and frontal conflict with USA and is likely to employ this as an **option of last resort**.

USA administration of President Donald Trump does not have the requisite political capital to push through legislation for an open declaration of war against Iran. **This precludes the quantum of mobilisation required for developing a land invasion of Iran.** The **sensitivities of heavy USA military casualties** in the Presidential election year will weigh heavily on any decision to be involved in an open conflict with Iran.

Considering the employment of unpredictability factor as a geopolitical tool by Donald Trump administration, **strong possibility exists of USA standoff precision strikes** employing land, air and naval resources.

The possibility of the **ongoing sequence of indirect strike and counterstrike getting out of control**, and spiralling into full blown conflict, cannot be ruled out.

Low Level Hostilities

Options available to Iran:-

- Stage managing closure of the Strait of Hormuz thereby disrupting the petroleum supply lines.
- Launch of proxy attacks on Saudi Arabia and its allied countries.
- Series of proxy attacks on USA assets in the region, inflicting minor casualties, to influence their public opinion and the will to continue hostilities.
- Major proxy attack on USA assets outside the region.

Options with USA:-

- Extend the period of standoff and simultaneously tighten the economic sanctions, thereby straining Iranian war fighting potential and its will to fight.
- Establish naval and/or air blockade outside Iran airspace and maritime boundaries.
- Inflict direct strikes on known Iranian proxies.

The initial battle lines have nevertheless already been drawn. What is of interest is how the antagonists design the form of the conflict and the options they choose.

OPTIONS FOR INDIA

India has deep strategic interests with both USA and Iran as also with all the other mutually antagonistic major regional powers of West Asia. It is **in its best interest that the hostilities between USA and Iran do not spiral out of control.**

Option 1

Actively **employ its diplomatic capital** with both countries to manage a stand down/unstated understanding to keep hostilities at a low level.

Option 2

Refuse to be drawn into open alignment with either country, **accept temporary fallout** of this decision, and take steps to mitigate the repercussions at a later date.

Option 3

In the eventuality of the hostilities escalating into an open conflict, the option of stated neutrality may not be viable for India. In such an eventuality, to minimize the geopolitical fallout, India should exercise the **option of aligning** with one of the two opposing blocs, without being involved militarily. This should be the **option of last resort.**

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