

U.S.- Iran Crisis: RSTV – The Big Picture

Anchor - Frank Rausan Pereira

Guests - Meera Shankar, Former Ambassador,

Prof. Swaran Singh, School of International Studies, JNU,

Wael Awwad, West Asia Expert.

Larger Background:

- The United States was all set to carry out military strikes against Iran recently.
- American President Donald Trump himself tweeted to say that his military was “cocked & loaded”, prepared to hit three sites in the Islamic Republic, a move that would have potentially killed 150 people.
- Just 10 minutes before the strike was supposed to happen, Trump said, he decided to call off the operation.
- With tensions between the US and Iran running so high, many are wondering whether the US is going to repeat a tragic historical mistake a decade and a half after it bombed its way into a disastrous war against Iraq.
- It’s impossible to say for certain if there is going to be a war, but the events of the past few days have certainly increased the chances of some sort of conflict.
- This edition of The Big Picture will take a closer look at the crisis in West Asia.

What’s currently happening between the U.S. and Iran and what is at stake?

- Tensions between the U.S. and Iran have rocketed and they are on the threshold of what could prove to be an escalation in hostilities. It started with the withdrawal of the U.S. from the nuclear deal, as President Trump had promised, and the re-imposition of sanctions against Iran.
- Iran has of course said that while it had earlier continued to abide by the deal, it has now said that unless the Europeans step up to ease the sanctions, which have been put into effect by the U.S., Iran will not adhere to certain elements of the nuclear deal, including the limits for the stockpile of low-enriched Uranium and that later on, it might start enriching Uranium below the low-enriched threshold.
- So, Iran is also gradually stepping up the pressure on U.S. allies to either adhere to the waiver of sanctions which was implicit in the deal, or face the possibility that Iran could gradually renege from the agreement. There have been incidents in the Gulf against oil tankers. The U.S. says that it was Iran that was involved, while Iran refutes this. There is no clear evidence towards any particular party to whom the blame can be directed.
- Most recently, one witnessed the shooting down of the unmanned drone by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The Iranians point out that it was in defence, and that an intrusion was made over their airspace. However, the U.S. says that it was over international waters. In response to this, the U.S. prepared contingency plans for military strikes against three targets in Iran. The U.S. had also escalated their military deployments in the Gulf. One witnessed the deployment of around 1500 troops, an aircraft carrier, and surveillance aircraft and so on.
- President Trump called it off because he said that it would not be proportionate, since it would lead to the death of around 150 people. This itself underlines that the President himself has doubts about the possibility of an escalation that could then lead to a longer term military entanglement in Iran, which is something that he has always criticized and said that it is a waste of American treasure and American lives, and that the U.S. needs to get out of this and focus on building its economy instead.
- Clearly, Donald Trump’s aids were pushing for retaliation. General Joseph Dunford is supposed to

have expressed some caution about the possible repercussions of a military strike. However, according to news reports, it is also Fox News anchor, Tucker Carlson who is believed to have echoed or reinforced perhaps the doubts that the President himself may have had about getting into a spiral of escalation without intending to do so.

- For the moment at least, things have not come to a head, but the risks remain high.

Who wanted the war?

- There are many war hawks in the White House who wanted war. They include John Bolton

(National Security Advisor of the United States) and Mike Pompeo (United States Secretary of State). As a matter of fact, they are the main cause of trouble in the region as well. Even the Arab nations, such as Saudi Arabia, U.A.E, and the Israeli's were pushing Trump into a misadventure in Iran.

- Although a sense of wisdom prevailed, but the Pentagon was right in calling off the attacks. If war did break out, then all the American bases which are in the target range of Iranian gunships would have been in flames.
- One should also look at Donald Trump's way of conducting diplomacy over the last 2+ years. His tweets and words are often very aggressive. However, on the ground, when we look at the examples of Iran, Venezuela, China, etc., Trump's approach is far more cautious. Even with Iran, Trump's words are more cautious now. As a matter of fact, when the drone was shot down, Trump called the incident a big mistake, and he even went to the extent of saying that it was perhaps not intended. Thus, it is the distinction between words and deeds that one has to take care of.
- Secondly, the kind of triggers which we have seen in the past, for example, the Iraqi attack on Kuwait in the 1990's, or in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, were not present this time around. Thus, there wasn't a trigger where the mandate could be given to Donald Trump to start another war in the middle east.
- Also, the democrats are very skeptical. They have cautioned Trump on the likelihood of slipping into a dangerous war. Even some in the Republican camp are asking for caution. Thus, one doesn't imagine that Doanld Trump has a mandate to conduct military strikes in Iran.
- Next, it is important to understand that Iran is a very different ball game when compared to Afghanistan for instance. Crucially, when we look at it, the United States has already alienated many of its European allies. So, an operation like **Operation Desert Storm**, doesn't seem possible this time. The only allies that the U.S. has worth mentioning in this misadventure would be Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E. However, one remains skeptical as to whether or not they might want to involve themselves in a war.
- Iran on the other hand, has proxies in the region. They include the Houthi's in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and even some militias in Iraq. Even Syria can harm U.S. interests and personnel across the region.
- One must also factor into account that President Donald Trump would need to gear up for the Presidential elections as well.

What would a war achieve in West Asia?

- A war would not be an easy exercise. It would be a prolonged process. One is not sure as to what the consequences might be if the U.S. is looking at a regime change in Iran. This is because, even in Iraq, one has witnessed the rise of ISIS, which posed a very serious threat to the United States. Eventually, the U.S. had to take on ISIS itself within the region.
- In Iran, there is no guarantee as to what the outcome is going to be, except for the fact that the U.S. could really get trapped into a very prolonged war of attrition. One doesn't imagine that there would be many voices really looking seriously at an all-out war. The idea of limited military strikes is what perhaps was on the table. But there is no guarantee that limited military strikes won't spiral.
- Thus, one imagines that the U.S. would continue to work on the idea of sanctions. The U.S. has said

that it would re-impose sanctions (which was suspended), on the account of lack of Iranian action with regards to money laundering and terrorist financing.

- The U.S. is going to use the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), to put Iran on notice on these counts, and reimpose the sanctions which were suspended by the FATF. So, the U.S. would rely for the moment on economic pressure and ratcheting up the military rhetoric, but perhaps will not use it.

Who is to blame for the present situation?

- We need to look at the situation not in isolation. As a matter of fact, we need to see the whole chronology of the problem in West Asia. The regime change policy which the United States started in different parts of the Arab world needs to be looked into. We have also seen the Arab spring followed by the Saudi led coalition war on Yemen where the Americans and Europeans are backing Saudi Arabia. The Bab-el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz, are important theatres of action that assume importance during this period. The U.S. imagines itself as the custodian of the Gulf region. It looks upon itself as the custodian of West Asia and the custodian of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries.
- To create wars in the region does not solve the problem of West Asia.
- A misstep on the part of the U.S. would mean that the entire architecture of peace and security in the region would get disturbed.
- When we look at the chronology of American interventionism in the region, we also find the big mess that they have created, whether it is in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, etc. So how long can the world suffer because of a war monger like the U.S.?
- The countries who would suffer include, India, China, Japan, South Korea etc. Essentially all the eastern nations which are coming up in the “Asian Century”, would be the countries that would suffer the most.
- Having said this, declaring sanctions is a type of economic terrorism.

Implications for the World:

- It clearly shows that the military-industrial complexes play an enormous influence on how politics is organized among states. If there is to be any stakeholder who is wanting to have wars, it would be the military-industrial complexes who would want wars.
- Operation Desert Storm was often described as a museum of American technology.
- This led to the creation of several world orders that emerged post Operation Desert Storm.
- We also often witness Mike Pompeo and John Bolton making extremely harsh comments on Iran.
- These are important individuals and they represent certain constituencies, and interests. However, the immediate implications of the ratcheting up of tensions would be felt on the Straits of Hormuz, which can be clearly blocked by Iran.
- This means that the economies of the Gulf countries, who are the main suppliers of oil, and the economies in the East, which are rapidly growing economies, would be the ones who would suffer. This would cause not just a regional chaos but a much larger, global chaos. As a consequence, one can witness downtrends in global growth rates; downtrends in the global economy, etc. The IMF has already pointed out that the U.S.- China trade war has already shrunk the global economy this year by 0.5%.
- The tensions in West Asia would add on to this percentage of slowdown. Thus, the economic impact of the tensions in West Asia are very high. However, having said this, it is highly unlikely that the U.S. would undertake the misadventure of attacking Iran.

Implications for India:

- India is heavily dependent on energy imports from the region, including from Iran. Some of India's major refineries are geared to Iranian oil. Thus, there are costs which India would need to incur as she scales down the import of oil from Iran.

- At the same time, India has longer term strategic interests in Iran, including the port of Chabahar. However, India would need to weigh against this the strategic relationship she has with the United States of America. India would need to balance here interests very carefully, i.e. with Iran and with the United States.
- There is an energy cost that India pays each time her energy supplies are impacted. For example, India was receiving oil from Venezuela, however this has been impacted with the U.S. pressure towards stopping oil imports from Venezuela.
- For a period, India was importing oil from Iran against payment of rupees. Thus this saved India precious foreign exchange and helped India's Balance of Payments.
- India would hope that at the end of the day, diplomacy should be given a chance.
- Also, United Airlines have suspended its flights from the United States to India. This is because, these flights fly over Iranian airspace. There are several other airlines as well, who have decided not to fly over Iranian airspace. The airline industry all across the world are already suffering.
- America needs to understand the culture of the region, and the culture of Iran. They should have a sustained dialogue process with Iran.