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Escalation, Deterrence, And Regional Order: An International Relations Analysis of The U.S.–Israel–Iran Conflict

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Abstract
This paper looks at the strategic crises between the United States, Israel and Iran using the concept of international relations within the context of international relations theory, the dynamics of escalation, deflection and transformation of regional order in the Middle East. It holds that the U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict is a triangular security dilemma whereby security seeking by each of the involved actors increases the instability in the region as it goes about strengthening deterrence based restraint. Underlying the work are realism, offensive realism and the deterrence theory, which illustrate that instability has become embedded in strategic mistrust, politics of alliance and military posturing and has failed to lead to full scale interstate war. The paper also analyzes the security architecture implication of this conflict to Middle Eastern architecture and evaluates the policy implication of this conflict on Pakistan. It arrives at the conclusion that the regional order is still threatened of being shaken by strategic rivalry unless institutionalized crisis management and rejuvenated diplomatic involvement is enforced.

1. Introduction

The modern Middle East has continued to be one of the most geopolitically disputed in the global politics and the three-way competition between the United States, Israel, and Iran has proved to be one of the most fateful faults. This is more than conventional interstate confrontation and includes military deterrence, ideological confrontation, proxy war, economic sanctions, cyber action and brinkmanship with nuclear weaponry. These actors have greatly influenced the regional alignments, security doctrine, and the wider geopolitical dynamics through the tactical interaction of these actors. To international relations scholars, the U.S. -Israel-Iran conflict is an imperative case study of how realism, deterrence theory, politics of alliances, and transforming regional order may have worked in a continuously tension-ridden environment.

The question that this paper puts forth is the following: what are the dynamics of escalation and deterrence mechanisms that influence the development of the U.S. -Israel-Iran conflict, and how do the larger implications of the Middle East region as a whole? It stake asserts that the U.S.-Israel -Iran security dilemma is a triangular issue of strategic insecurity where a practitioners functionalization of strategic security creates strategic insecurity on their opponents so as to

create a continuous process of escalation and also in contraposition strategic constraint of deterrence. The paper also argues that the conflict is altering Middle Eastern regional order by changing it into a more fragmented and multi-polar strategic environment, though it is no longer U.S.-centric security architecture. Lastly, it evaluates how this transformation impacts Pakistan, which is exposed to instability in its region, economic vulnerabilities, and strategic diplomatic balancing needs that can make it very sensitive to any change. The paper goes ahead to describe the applicable theoretical frameworks and the historical development of the rivalry, the dynamics of escalation and deterrence, the transformation of regional order, and policy implications to Pakistan.

2. Theoretical Framework

Despite the fact that other theories like constructivism and liberal institutionalism would provide some helpful information in the formation of ideological identity and institutional restraints, this paper will use realism and deterring signaling as its key approaches to the vivid U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict as they are the most applicable in explaining the strategic behavior, military balancing and coercive signaling of U.S. foreign policy.

The realist and deterrence paradigms are often used to explain through the scholarly literature on Middle Eastern strategic competition the U.S.-Israel-Iran rivalry. Kenneth Waltz suggests that structural anarchy forces states to focus on survival and relative power, which can be relevant in the strategy of regional actors in the Middle East to a great extent. John Mearsheimer has also proposed an offensive realism, which further postulates that states will desire regional hegemony where feasible, which would aid in explaining why Israel pursues military thought and Iran attains strategic depth. The reasons of deterring used by Thomas Schelling is further elucidators because his framework of deterrence reveals the concentration on coercive negotiating, conveying, and the manipulation of the risk in the antagonistic associations.

The theoretical perspective that the U.S.-Israel-Iran rivalry can be explained through realism gives us the foundations of its understanding. Kenneth Waltz was of the opinion that all states want to survive and enhance their security at all costs since the international system is anarchic. States in such an environment are in a process of trying to maximize relative power and minimize vulnerability. This paradigm is very applicable to the Middle East where there is no viable regional security structure and deep-rooted distrust between participants that exacerbates competition. This point of view is further driven into a harder stand by offensive realism which insinuates that as long as there is an opportunity states are interested not only in security but also in dominance over the region. The Israeli conception of qualitative military superiority, the attempts of Iran to develop strategic depths by using regional proxies, and the U.S. military dominance in the Persian Gulf are all indicative of offensive realism calculations that serve to maximize strategic advantages.

The deterrence theory is a complement to realism in that it describes how states use the threat of retaliation credibly to deter aggressive acts by their adversaries. The Israeli preemption policy, U.S. long-term deterrence promises, as well as Iranian asymmetric retaliatory efficacies exemplifies deterrence dynamics. The article on coercive diplomacy by Thomas Schelling is of special interest as it can be applied in developing an explanation of strategic signaling, brinkmanship and escalation management among the parties.

The security dilemma also sheds more light on how considerations to protect oneself are perceived to be offensive to others. The deployment of the Israeli missile defense systems, Iranian missile systems development, and American force deployment all create a response balancing behavior, thus perpetuating escalation cycles.

3. Historical Background of U.S.–Israel–Iran Rivalry

The strategic causes of the rivalry have been widely reported in the body of research of post-revolution Middle Eastern politics. According to scholars, 1979 Iranian Revolution was a revolution that overturned the foreign policy identity of Tehran based on its opposition to the influence of the West and opposition to Israel. This ideological change reformed regional alliances and brought in a revolutionary challenge to the existing U.S. regionalism.

Before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was interested in having close strategic ties with the United States and Israel. Iran served as an element of U.S. containment policy in the Persian Gulf and was a participant in the cooperation with Israel as the latter used its own approach of alliances with non-Arab countries, the so-called periphery doctrine.

Iranian Revolution has fundamentally changed the geopolitics of the region. The formation of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini brought a revolutionary ideological regime that was strongly opposed to the United States as well as Israel. Anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism took the center stage as major aspects in Iran foreign policy identity.

Decades later saw even more enmity. The U.S. sanctioned, labeled Iran as a terrorist state sponsor, and sought strategies to contain. Israel grew to consider the nuclear program and proxy network of Iran as existential threats. Iran in the meantime fostered local allies like the Hezbollah, Hamas and the Shiite militias to exert control and intimidate the opponents indirectly. The Iraq War in 2003 further reshaped the balance of power since it dethroned Saddam Hussein, thus increasing the dominance of the Iranian forces in Iraq and increasing the perception of threats by Israel and America. The Syrian Civil War, the rise of ISIS and the entrenchment of Iran in Syria created a new level into the strategic rivalry.

4. Escalation Dynamics and Security Dilemma

Security dilemma theory offers a highly interesting explanation behind the never-ending increase in conflict. According to Robert Jervis, the actions taken to provide defense in an anarchical state are seen to possess offensive threats thus creating spirals of insecurity of each other. This phenomenon is observed in the U.S., Israel, and Iran in terms of mutual modernization of the military, deployment of forces, and proxy mobilization.

The U.S.-Israel-Iran war has been escalating greatly at the low end of conventional war. The ability to rely on the proxy warfare strategy allows Iran to exert influence, whereas having restricted attribution and retaliation opportunities. Hezbollah in Lebanon, militias of Iraq, Syrian paramilitary groups, Hamas, and the Houthis are part of the main tools of Iranian power projection.

The Israeli has responded with its own strategy of camping between wars wherein they involved regular airstrikes of Iranian assets in Syria, covert sabotage activities and targeted killings of Iranian military staff and military scientists. The United States has used economic sanctions, military activity, and selective strikes towards Iranian-associated resources.

Such actions create a typical security dilemma. The development of Iranian missiles is presented by Tehran as the defense deterrence, but perceived by Israel and the U.S. as deterrence increase. On the other hand, Israeli preemptive attacks are on the basis of self-defense yet understood by the Iranians as aggression which should be responded by counterattack.

Failure of strategic signaling also adds to the risks of escalation. The undefined red line, decentralized agents of the proxy, and home country political forces are features that make the inadvertent escalation of conflicts more likely. The crises instability is escalated through the packed decision-making timelines in the missile and drone wars. The recent cycles of escalation in 20252026 such as direct missile and drone attacks between Iranian and Israeli sides and

increased deployments by U.S. forces in the Gulf have contributed to the increased vulnerability of deterrence balance and the diminishing buffer zone in times of crisis management.

5. Deterrence Theory Application

The central theme of strategic interaction between the three actors is deterrence. The strategy of deterrence adopted by the country of Israel is based on the overpowering conventional strength, a supposed nuclear capability, intelligence hegemony, and the readiness to work with preventive military actions.

The US offers deterrence to Israel in terms of diplomatic support, military supplies and intelligence exchange and projecting force in the region. It is also an extension of the deterrence system whereby the aggression of the Iranian regime is discouraged, and allies are reassured of the commitment of the U.S. to them.

Asymmetric deterrence is used by Iran. Devoid of a more traditional balance, Tehran banks on ballistic missiles, drones, maritime disruption capabilities, cyber warfare, and proxy retaliation. This policy will increase the price of direct attack against Iran.

Nevertheless, it turns out that deterrence is not perfect. Gray zones in proxy conflicts have varying attribution contested and ambiguous retaliatory thresholds. The threat resides not in an intentional decision to go to war but the miscommunication or overreaction to the situation, or inability to deter, under emergency settings.

6. Regional Order and Alliance Transformation

U.S Islam-Israel war has also re-balanced the organization of alliances in the Middle East. In the past, Arab-Israel hostility dominated the politics of the region. The possible expansion of Iran in the region has, however, changed the perception of the threat among monarchies in the Gulf.

The Abraham Accords are a signal of a significant strategic change where Israel and a number of Arab states normalize their relations. That is indicative of overlapping strategic preoccupation with Iran as well as decreasing salience of the Palestinian question in the elite threat structures. Future regional diplomatic efforts and security talks in 20252026 indicate that anti-Iran balancing remains or will serve to drive emerging Middle East alliances amid periodic instances of tension over Gaza and regional humanitarian disasters.

Saudi Arabia and UAE adopt strategic hedging, which oscillates security co-operation with U.S. against reach to Iran and building relationships with China and Russia. This indicates indecision when it comes to commitment in the U.S. regionally over time.

Thus, the conflict has hastened the move towards a more multipolar regional order typified by flexible alliances, issue-oriented alliances, and less U.S. exclusivity.

7. Implications for Middle Eastern Security Architecture

The regional order reorganization has far reaching consequences on the organization of security in the Middle East. The new regional order based on the leadership of the U.S. after the Cold War is progressively disintegrating as local policies seek individual strategies of balancing.

There is building up of an arms race in the region. Iran: Iran has failed to halt its missile and drone development efforts, Gulf states have increased their defense purchases, Israel has improved its missile defense capabilities and long-range strike. This is a threat of nuclear proliferation should Iran make a move towards becoming nuclear weaponized.

Collective security on an institutional basis is weak. There are no strong multilateral security organizations that can handle a crisis as it is the case in Europe or East Asia in the Middle East. As such deterrence is extremely personalized, militarized and volatile.

8. Future Scenarios / Policy Implications for Pakistan

The changing U.S.–Israel conflict with Iran has critical strategic consequences on Pakistan. Firstly, the threat of long-term escalation poses a threat to the energy security of Pakistan because the

interference in the oil markets in the Gulf would have dire consequences on the economy of the country that relies on imports.

Second, Iran may become unstable creating a threat to border security in Balochistan, further sectarian tension, and internal security management. Third, Pakistan needs to balance diplomacies with Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, and the United States.

Controlled deterrence stability, regional war at a limited scale, or more widespread systemic war with outside powers are all possibilities in the future. The increased pace of regional crises in 20252026 implies that less lethal conflict situations are now becoming more attainable, especially where proxy conflict intersects with face-to-face state retaliation.

Strategic neutrality coupled with proactive diplomacy is probably the best approach that Pakistan can employ. Through the support provided by Islamabad to de-escalation efforts, the state can utilize the ties with various actors without necessarily taking sides.

Pakistan needs to diversify its energy sources, upgrade its border security and increase its diplomatic hope towards the Gulf and Iranian stakeholders. Regarding short term, Islamabad ought to put contingency plans in place to address oil shortage or destabilization of borders. Pakistan could undermine diplomatic vulnerability by enhancing strategic dialogue with states of the Gulf Cooperation Council in the medium term and also Iran. Over the long term, Pakistan ought to consider wider energy diversification and regional connectivity policies, to lessen the reliance on unstable supply chains in the Middle East. Having plans of strategic foresight is necessary in light of the fact that the region may deteriorate fast.

9. Conclusion

The U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict serves as evidence to the timeless explanatory nature of realism, deterrence theory and the security dilemma when examining the role of these theories in contemporary international relations. Competition is also marked with continuous build up and alliances, tactical suspicion and oblique fighting but deterrence has so far averted an out-right inter state war. But deterrence is not a sure way to bring lasting stability in the region. Rather, the crisis is transforming the alliance practices, enhancing the pace at which the Middle East is militarizing, and disaggregating the security order in the Middle East.

The implications are significant to Pakistan and other stakeholders in the region. As the Middle East transitions to a more uncertain multipolar setting, the need of strategic adaptation, diplomatic balancing, and contingency planning will become quite pertinent.

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