Syllabus subtopic: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests, Indian diaspora.

Prelims and Mains focus: about the escalation in US-Iran tensions and its geopolitical implications

News: Five days after Major General Qassem Soleimani, the Qods Force chief, was killed in a U.S. air strike outside Baghdad airport, Iran on Wednesday launched ballistic missile attacks at American troops in two military bases in Iraq.

What did the attack achieve?

- President Donald Trump has said that there were no American casualties in the attacks on the Erbil and al-Asad bases and the damage caused was minimal. However, the strike is still a pivotal moment in the U.S.-Iran tensions as this is the first time Iran is launching a direct attack at the U.S. troops and owning it up.

- Practically, these are acts of war. First, the U.S. took out an Iranian military leader in a third country and now Iran has struck U.S. troops. Javad Zariff, the Iranian Foreign Minister, said, “Iran took and concluded proportionate measures in self defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter targeting base from which the cowardly armed attack against our citizens and senior officials were launched.” The Article allows states to take action in self defence when they are under attack. Mr. Zariff has added that Iran doesn’t seek “escalation or war, but will defend ourself against any aggression”.

Was the attack imminent?

- The Iranian response was expected. The call for revenge was reverberating throughout the funeral processions of Soleimani. A mosque in the Shia holy city of Qom in Iran had unfurled a red flag indicating that war was coming.
Kataib Hezbollah, a unit in the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), the umbrella organisation of Iraqi Shia militias that Soleimani helped build, had asked Iraqi forces to stay away from the bases that house American soldiers, indicating that U.S. troops in Iraq could be targeted.

Iran has launched a calculated, limited strike that doesn’t cause much damage to the Americans but yet makes good on its pledge for revenge. It was an escalating step, but not yet an all-out war.

By hitting the U.S. base in Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran may also be sending a message to Washington. Erbil houses not just American soldiers but also a large American consulate.

The U.S. has deep ties with the Iraqi Kurdistan and it would like to keep some U.S. troops in the autonomous region even if its forces are forced to pull back from the rest of Iraq. It’s to be noted that most Kurdish lawmakers had boycotted Sunday’s Iraqi Parliament session, in which lawmakers passed a resolution to expel American troops from the country.

For the U.S., some troops in Iraq are necessary to retain its presence in Syria. So Iran’s message could be that, 'you’re not safe in Erbil'.

So what are the possible scenarios?

President Trump has already indicated that he’s backing away from further conflicts with Iran. In a televised speech from the White House, he said Iran appears to be standing down, and urged European countries as well as Russia and China to break away from the nuclear deal and negotiate a new one. He has also threatened to slap Iran with more sanctions. But despite his message of de-escalation, the risks of further conflicts still remain.

The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has hinted that more actions will follow to force the U.S. to retreat from West Asia (read Iraq and Syria).
The Revolutionary Guard’s commander Hossein Salami threatened on Wednesday before a mourning crowd in Kerman, Solaimani’s hometown, that Iran would set ablaze “the place the U.S. loves”, in a reference to Israel.

Iran could target U.S. troops inside Iraq through its proxies such as the Badr Brigade and Kataib Hezbollah, like it did before the killing of Soleimani. That could drag the U.S. into a deeper conflict. Also, the Shia militias in the region operate with relative autonomy. Infuriated by the loss of their commander, they could act without authorisation from Tehran against U.S. troops in Iraq, which could trigger a harsher response from the U.S. against Iran, dragging both countries into war.

All these suggest that West Asia remains on the brink.