

No takers for a West Asian war but war seems inevitable

by M.K. Bhadrakumar,* India



M. K. Bhadrakumar
(Photo ma)

There is no question that smart power enhances foreign policy. Since the notion of “smart power” entered international diplomacy some two decades ago, a major regional power, Iran, is applying it to an actual conflict situation.

Smart power is about the strategic use of diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building, and the projection of power and influence combined together in ways that are cost-effective and have political and social legitimacy.

Certainly, Tehran is dipping into its investments heavily in alliances, partnerships and institutions (and non-state actors) at all levels to expand its influence and capacity and establish the legitimacy of its action in the developing situation surrounding Gaza.

The remarks by Iran’s Foreign Minister *Hossein Amir-Abdollahian* during a televised interview on Monday following a regional tour that took him to Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Qatar and closed-door meetings with the leaders of the resistance groups, stand out as an audacious display of smart power aiming at nudging the ground situation towards the diplomatic track at a crucial juncture when dialogue and diplomacy are at a premium.

Iran’s top diplomat, a career diplomat by profession before entering politics from the position of deputy foreign minister, warned that the resistance leaders “will not allow the Zionist regime to do whatever in the region” and may take “pre-emptive measure in the coming hours.”

* M. K. Bhadrakumar has worked for about three decades as a career diplomat in the service of the Indian Foreign Ministry. He has served as ambassador to the former Soviet Union, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany and Turkey. His texts mainly deal with Indian foreign policy and events in the Middle East, Eurasia, Central Asia, South Asia and Pacific Asia. His blog is called “Indian Punchline”.



For the first time since Gaza crisis began, Chief of Staff of Iranian Armed Forces Gen. Mohammad Baqeri engaged with Russia’s Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu on October 19, 2023. (Photo ma)

Amir-Abdollahian said that during his meetings with leaders of the resistance front, they believed that “an opportunity should be given to political solutions” to end Israel’s brutal strikes against the fully blockaded Gaza Strip. However, all scenarios are open to the resistance groups, especially the Lebanese Hezbollah movement, and they have also made meticulous calculations.

Such dexterity to combine hard and soft power into a successful strategy is putting Iran in an influential position at a defining moment in the geopolitics of West Asia. The West’s cautious attitude toward Iran since the crisis erupted on October 7 testifies to this reality.

Right from the initial stages, top US (and Israeli) officials said that Iran was complicit in the Hamas’ October 7 attack, but their intelligence couldn’t identify a direct Iranian role. Neither the CIA nor Mossad picked up intelligence about an Iran-backed plot before the Hamas assault.

Gen. *Charles Q. Brown*, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned Iran not to get involved. “We want to send a pretty strong message. We do not want this to broaden and the idea is for Iran to get that message loud and clear,” he *told* reporters on October 10. President *Biden* reiterated that warning.

On Wednesday, Biden’s statements while visiting Israel also eschewed any rhetoric against Iran. While reiterating that Israel should act under international law and urging *Netanyahu* to exercise restraint — Biden implicitly messaged the crucial importance of avoiding a conflict with Iran.

So indeed was the case during Biden's address to the nation since returning to the White House on October 19. Through the past four decades of mutual hostility, the US and Iran have acquired mastery over an unwritten code of conduct to tread softly so that friction points did not lead to confrontation and conflict. They largely succeeded in keeping things that way. It is entirely conceivable that in the present fluid situation, Washington and Tehran communicate with each other, especially since neither wants a regional war today. (See my blog *Why Biden lied on Gaza hospital attack*.²)

This matrix needs to be understood despite the reality that there is no daylight between Tehran and Hezbollah – and Hezbollah is by far the strongest and toughest of the groups in the Iran-led 'axis of resistance' in West Asia.

Certainly, in hard power, Iran is no pushover. By coincidence, on October 18 the UN Security Council *Resolution 2231 lapsed unconditionally*,³ which lifts the restrictions on Iran from undertaking activities related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons. Iran's defence ministry since asserted in a statement that it has plans to expand the missile and weapons capabilities, take part in arms trade and "meet the needs of the country's security, and participate more actively in international affairs than in the past."

Without doubt, this will not only boost Iran's "hard power" but deepen and expand its military cooperation with Russia and China. This is hugely consequential, since Iran is the key 'influencer' today to avert a regional war. It comes as no surprise that for the first time after the Gaza crisis began, Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Gen. *Mohammad Baqeri* held a *telephone conversation*⁴ with Russian Defense Minister *Sergei Shoigu* on Thursday and urged that Israel's "savage behaviours will not be tolerated and independent governments must show a serious reaction."

Baqeri added, "The continuation of the Zionist regime's crimes and direct support and assistance provided to it by some countries have further complicated the situation and can lead to the involvement of other players."

Equally, in soft power, Tehran has successfully broken out of its regional isolation. Fundamentally, Iran-Saudi rapprochement, brokered by China, is a game changer in the geopolitics of the region and is a force multiplier for Tehran's

exercise of smart power. Last Wednesday, it was with a phone call to the Saudi Crown Prince *Mohammed bin Salman* from President *Ebrahim Raisi* that Tehran shifted gear on the diplomatic track.

That was a profound gesture on Iran's part. Abdollahian also held a meeting with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud in Jeddah yesterday on the sidelines of the OIC foreign ministers' meeting on October 19.

As the Saudi moves testify, Riyadh swiftly moved to the centre stage to engage with Beijing. (See my blog *US faces defeat in geopolitical war in Gaza*.⁵) Indeed, the Saudi stance transforms the regional mood and makes it very challenging for Washington to pursue the old strategy of 'divide-and-rule', as apparent from the *Saudi rebuff*⁶ to US Secretary of State *Antony Blinken*. *Regional states that marked their distance*⁷ from the resistance groups traditionally, have called for ceasefire and de-escalation, and refuse to condemn Hamas.

The big question, however, remains: What about the Israeli resolve to decapitate Hamas and occupy Gaza? Israel continues to stand on the brink of a *military assault in Gaza Strip*.⁸ Significantly, the Russian prognosis on this front is rather gloomy. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister *Sergei Ryabkov* said at a Kremlin meeting with Putin on Monday, that the situation "is tending to get worse. The operations undertaken by the Israeli military are indiscriminate. There remains the looming threat of a ground operation encompassing an incursion into Gaza. [...] Diplomatic efforts on various fronts are intensifying. In principle, the risk of this conflict spiralling out of control is substantial."

The paradox is, while there are no serious takers for a West Asian war, that alone may not suffice to avoid a war if the Israeli army's forthcoming assault in Gaza *falls short of its objective to destroy Hamas*⁹ and/or Netanyahu decides to widen the war for geopolitical purposes and/or to extend his floundering political career which is nearing a dead end.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/no-takers-for-a-west-asian-war-but-war-seems-inevitable/> 20 October 2023

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/do-not-get-involved-israel-crisis-top-us-general-warns-iran-2023-10-10/>

² <https://www.indianpunchline.com/why-biden-lied-on-gaza-hospital-attack/>

³ <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2023/10/20/713068/UN-Security-Council-officially-declares-end-sanctions-Iran>

⁴ <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/490313/Iran-military-chief-warns-other-actors-may-get-involved-if>

⁵ <https://www.indianpunchline.com/us-faces-defeat-in-geopolitical-war-in-gaza/>

⁶ <https://www.businessinsider.in/international/news/saudis-crown-prince-snubbed-the-us-secretary-of-state-by-making-him-wait-hours-for-a-meeting-before-postponing-it-report-says/articleshow/104475834.cms>

⁷ <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4615336-egyptian-president-jordan's-king-condemn-'collective-punishment'-against>

⁸ <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/israeli-defence-minister-tells-troops-to-prepare-for-ground-assault-in-gaza-15464208>

⁹ <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/can-hamass-qassam-brigades-stand-against-israels-ground-offensive-15417475>