

Will the Iran war go global?

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BY STEFAN WOLFF

Before the first airstrike hit Iran on last Saturday, analysts were warning that a war against Tehran would be a highly risky business. The regime has been in place for nearly 50 years, has a huge, well-trained and loyal military, proxies throughout the region and a huge stockpile of ballistic missiles and drones, plenty to wreak havoc across the region and beyond.

And so it has proved. While Israeli and American forces have been pounding targets across the country, Iran has responded by attacking Israel as well as US military targets in neighbouring Gulf States, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Attacks have also been reported from Cyprus, Iraq and Jordan. There is a fresh round of fighting in southern Lebanon after Hezbollah joined Iran in targeting Israel. Beirut is being bombarded.

The economic damage to the region

has been enormous. Oil refineries have been shut down, the vital Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of the world's oil cargo passes, is effectively closed, evacuation flights are leaving the Gulf States around the clock and people are cancelling their travel plans in droves.

And within days of the assassination of Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, in a targeted airstrike that also killed a number of his top advisers, a new leader was picked.

Khamenei has been succeeded by his son, Mojtaba, known to be cut from very much the same authoritarian clerical cloth as his father. So the notion that with Iran you kill the figurehead and the regime collapses appears to be flawed, to say the least.

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RUSSIA

The assassination hit a raw nerve in Moscow. Putin, whose fear of assassination borders on the pathological, watched the killing of a fellow autocrat with undisguised alarm.

Iran is a close ally of Russia. Tehran provided huge numbers of its Shahed drones to Putin to help him wage his illegal war in Ukraine, and Iran has also helped Moscow circumvent the west's sanctions regime.

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This would seem to hint at something that analysts have speculated about, namely that a lengthy conflict could exhaust America's stockpile of munitions. The US and its allies, including Israel and the Gulf States, are most acutely ex-

posed to this shortage of defensive interceptors. This inevitably means that Washington will have to pull munitions away from other theatres, including those earmarked for South Korea. It is also fair to say there will be fewer available for Kyiv's European allies to purchase for the defence of Ukraine, which will please Vladimir Putin.

And whether an air campaign will be enough to achieve regime change, if that is indeed the purpose of this conflict, is debatable, writes Matthew Powell, an expert in air power at the University of Portsmouth.

Air campaigns rarely work as intended, they often make matters worse, as the world saw after the Nato air campaign that led to the toppling of the country's ruler, Muammar Gaddafi. With no coherent ground strategy to follow, things fell apart rapidly, with the terrible results that are with us to this day.

The view from Moscow and Beijing

As expected, Beijing was quick to condemn the strikes. China has been heavily dependent on its imports of oil from Iran, and regime change there would threaten this and force it to look elsewhere.

China is linked to Iran in a number of ways, including, significantly, via Tehran's use of China's satellite navigation system, BeiDou, which Beijing is touting as a possible replacement for the western Global Positioning System (GPS).

China-watcher Tom Harper, of the University of East London, assesses how this conflict will affect China and concludes that while it will cause turmoil in the short-term, a protracted conflict will play to its benefit in the long term.

