

Inflection point

West Asia needs the intervention of major world powers for peace

Iran's October 1 ballistic missile attack on Israel marks a serious escalation in the multi-party conflict in West Asia. The attack is not surprising as Iran was under pressure, at home and in the region, from its allies, to respond to repeated Israeli provocations. It was Israel that took the war straight to Iran by attacking the Iranian embassy complex in Damascus, Syria, on April 1. Iran responded with its first direct attack on Israel 14 days later, giving Israel and its allies enough time to prepare for it. Israel's response was a symbolic, unclaimed strike at a radar system in Isfahan. In end-July, Israel again escalated the conflict by killing Ismail Haniyeh, the political chief of Hamas, in Tehran. Iran vowed retaliation but showed restraint, promising to hold back fire if there was a ceasefire in Gaza. But Israel not only continued the war on Gaza but also expanded the war in the north with Hezbollah. Late last month, Israel unleashed waves of attacks on Lebanon, killing Hezbollah's commanders and its chief, Hassan Nasrallah. Now, with Israel threatening to respond to the October 1 attack, the conflict is set to enter a more dangerous phase.

In the current conflict, no party is deterring its rivals. Israel's greater firepower did not stop Hamas from launching the October 7, 2023 attack. Israel's threats of retribution did not stop Hezbollah or the Houthis either from attacking the Jewish state. Nor did Iran's proxy network and its missile might deter Israel from expanding the war by bombing the Iranian embassy complex in Syria. And Israel's nuclear weapons did not stop Iran from launching direct attacks on the country. As deterrence collapsed, the crisis has escalated and widened. What has made the situation worse is the abdication of leadership by U.S. President Joe Biden. He has given Israel a free hand in Gaza while focusing his diplomatic resources on preventing a regional war. He has remained unmoved when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has continued to breach red line after red line. Today, the war in Gaza remains unfinished, while a regional war, which could draw in even the U.S., could break out any time. There are no clear off-ramps. A full-blown war would be catastrophic and could spiral out of control with the involvement of multiple parties. With Israel's threat of retaliation looming large, the clock is ticking. Preventing such an outcome should be the immediate priority of the major world powers, including the U.S., which has great leverage over Israel, and China, which has a deep influence in Tehran. West Asia is at an inflection point, and the region needs emphatic diplomatic intervention to break out of its conflict loop and dial down the heat.

