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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Iran's decision-making hit by killing of Larijani; its options now very limited

Reuters

Dubai, March 18

THE KILLING of Iran's most influential powerbroker, Ali Larijani, has pushed the Islamic Republic into a more uncertain phase, complicating decision-making in Tehran and narrowing its options as war grinds on.

The US-Israeli war on Iran began with the killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei alongside a group of military commanders, and shows no sign of abating, with several more senior officials now targeted by air strikes.

The deeper challenge for Tehran is increasingly structural. A system built for endurance is being tested by attrition. As experienced officials are picked off in targeted killings, the pool of figures capable of managing both war and statecraft is shrinking.

Four senior Iranian officials said there were few figures in the establishment like Larijani who could translate battlefield realities into political strategy — a gap that could slow decision-making and coordination.

Iran's security chief Larijani combined rare clerical legitimacy, rooted in his prominent religious family, with the stature of a seasoned politician who had deep ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

Those credentials made him



• The Khatib Dossier

A SHIITE cleric who held various positions in the judiciary and intelligence ministry, also served in the IRGC in the Iran-Iraq war.

KHATIB WAS sanctioned by the US Treasury in 2022 over the Intelligence Ministry "engaging in cyber-enabled activities against the United States and its allies"

IN JUNE 2025, Khatib claimed Iran seized documents from Israel's nuclear program. The head of the IAEA said that the information "seemed to refer" to Israel's Soreq Nuclear Research Center.

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a trusted intermediary in a system where power centres — from clerics to the security apparatus — often compete for influence, one of the officials said.

Alex Vatanka, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington, said Larijani's death and those of many other senior figures will "obviously upset the political process in Tehran and might even jeopardise policy continuity or policy flexibility."

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MISSILES FIRED AT ISRAEL, LARIJANI FUNERAL HELD

Israel strikes Iran gas field, kills intel chief

Tehran retaliates by threatening Gulf energy sites

Parisa Hafezi, Rami Ayyub & Maya Gebeily
Dubai, Jerusalem, Beirut,
March 18

IRAN'S HUGE Pars gas field was hit Wednesday, a major escalation in the US-Israeli war, prompting Tehran to announce it would respond with attacks on oil and gas targets throughout the Gulf.

Oil prices shot up after the attack in a conflict that has already halted shipping from the world's most important energy-producing region and could now bring lasting damage to its infrastructure. Benchmark

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•Crucial natural gas deposit



‘We could see the missiles coming’: A captain’s call that ended 2 weeks of fear

Sunanda Mehta
Pune, March 18

IT WAS close to 2 am on March 14 when *MT Shivalik* sailed past the final stretch of the conflict-hit Strait of Hormuz and entered the safer waters of the Gulf of Oman. Captain Sukhmeet Singh (39) looked at the Chief

Officer and Second Officer on the navigation bridge, and said, “We are out of danger now — tell everyone and tell them to inform their families too.”

The two officers shook hands with their captain, said, “Thank you, sir,” and, overwhelmed, stepped forward to hug him.

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Israel strikes Iran gas field, kills intel minister

Brent crude prices rose around 5% to above \$108. Stock markets veered lower.

Pars is the Iranian sector of the world's largest natural gas deposit, which Iran shares with Qatar across the Gulf.

Iran's Pars news agency reported that gas tanks and parts of a refinery had been hit, workers had been evacuated to a safe location and emergency crews were trying to put out a fire. State media later said the fire was under control.

The attack was widely reported in Israeli media to have been carried out by Israel with US consent, though neither country acknowledged immediate responsibility. The Israeli military did not respond to requests for comment.

Qatar, a close US ally which hosts the largest US airbase in the region, blamed the attack on Israel without mentioning any US role. The Qatari foreign ministry spokesperson called it a “dangerous and irresponsible” escalation that put global energy security at risk. The UAE also denounced the attack.

Iran listed an array of prominent regional oil and gas targets belonging to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, which it said were now “direct and legitimate targets” and should be evacuated at once before it struck them in the coming hours.



Medical aid from India delivered to the Iranian Red Crescent Society in Tehran, Wednesday. ANI

Iran's warning was directed at Saudi Arabia's Samref Refinery and Jubail Petrochemical Complex, the UAE's Al Hosn Gas Field, and Qatar's Mesaieed Petrochemical Complex, Mesaieed Holding Company and Ras Laffan Refinery.

The Israeli military also hit central Beirut, destroying apartment buildings in some of the most intense airstrikes on the Lebanese capital for decades, on Israel's other front in the war it launched with the US against Iran.

Israel killed Iran's intelligence minister Esmail Khatib on Wednesday, a day after killing powerful security chief Ali Larjani.

“No one in Iran has immunity and everyone is in the cross-

hairs,” said Defence Minister Israel Katz. He and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had authorised the Israeli military “to target any senior Iranian official for whom an intelligence and operational opportunity arises, without the need for additional approval”, Katz said.

It appeared to be the first time Israel has publicly stated that it would let the military target enemy officials without seeking special permission from political leaders.

In Tehran, thousands of people appeared in the streets for a funeral for Larjani and other slain figures. The crowd waved Iranian flags and carried portraits of the dead as a eulogist sang: “Martyrs are leading the way, they've become

E. EXPLAINED

Key energy fields

The South Pars in Iran and the North Field in Qatar together constitute the world's largest natural gas field, critical for global energy supplies. It supplies Iran's domestic energy and ensures Qatar remains a leading LNG exporter.

more alive, burning with love.”

Iran retaliated for the killing of Larjani by firing missiles at Israel, which Israeli authorities said killed two people near Tel Aviv. Tehran said it fired overnight on Tel Aviv, Haifa and Beersheba in Israel, and at US bases in Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Mojtaba Khamenei, Iran's news supreme leader, said those responsible for Larjani's death would pay for his blood.

Several loud bangs were heard in the Saudi capital Riyadh on Wednesday and some of its residents received phone alerts for the first time warning them of a hostile aerial threat, a Reuters witness in the city said. State TV said Saudi air defences had dealt with a “ballistic threat”.

- REUTERS

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RAJAN KUMAR

WEST ASIA continues to be trapped in a deadly conflict with no end in sight. Most recently, Iran's security chief, Ali Larijani, and the paramilitary force Basij's commander, Gholamreza Soleimani, have been killed. The conflict has claimed over 1,300 lives, energy prices have hit the roof, and global security is at stake. But the global response remains tepid and perfunctory, marked by strategic ambivalence and risk aversion. The world is drifting towards disorder in the absence of collective action, owing to leadership paralysis. European leaders have abdicated their obligations, while the leaders of the Global South are reluctant to coordinate a joint response. Every state is apprehensive of disrupting its ties with Washington and souring relations with the unpredictable US President Donald Trump.

The central dilemma facing every state is: Who will bell the cat? Every state recognises the threat to global security, but each remains averse to initiating action, fearing punitive measures by Washington and uncertain outcomes. The middle powers expect the powerful countries to assume leadership, while the powerful states fear entrapment and uncertain support from the middle powers. Two sets of actors have economic and diplomatic capabilities to change the course of the war and restore the global order: The European coun-

tries and the leaders of the Global South. But unfortunately, while Europe does not want to disrupt its alliance with Washington, BRICS countries appear equally apprehensive of antagonising Trump and thus prefer strategic restraint.

The European states do not view this as a necessary war, and most of them ignored Trump's exhortation to join it. Kaja Kallas, EU foreign policy chief, stated that Europe feels slighted because it was not consulted and because the US has no clear objectives. Trump expressed his displeasure with most NATO members because they refused to deploy their militaries to ensure free navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. However, their action is unlikely to move beyond non-cooperation. No European state blamed Trump squarely for initiating a war. In contrast, European states and experts were quick to blame the Iranian regime. Compared to the European stance on Russia, its posture on Iran is revealing. It invoked international law and sovereignty in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but is restrained even in using words against the US.

More striking, however, is the absence of strong statements and condemnations from the BRICS countries. The war has entered its third week, and there is a serious risk of escalation, but BRICS has not issued a joint statement condemning the US-Israel action. For an organisation whose politics

centres around countering Western hegemony and which draws legitimacy from the Global South, its inaction is woefully inadequate. In a modest statement, it called for a ceasefire and urged dialogue and consultation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation issued a joint statement without naming or blaming anyone.

Ideally, BRICS should have taken concrete measures immediately. BRICS members — including the UAE, a US ally — have diverse interests. However, powerful actors such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil have higher stakes in global stability. BRICS states reiterate the cause of sovereignty and non-interference at every multilateral forum, but when it comes to concrete measures, their approach is lacklustre. In such a scenario, its credibility becomes suspect. It must not allow the world to hurtle towards a disorder where the powerful do what they can while the weak suffer what they must.

As the chair of BRICS, it is incumbent upon India to mobilise members. The Trump administration is not worried about the EU, given its dependence on the US. However, the combined strength of Brazil, Russia, India, and China will certainly serve as a deterrent. The question is: Will the leaders of these countries put aside their differences and coordinate action to send a powerful message? One cannot be sure.

Trump is not worried about the EU, given its dependence on the US. However, the combined strength of Brazil, Russia, India, and China will certainly serve as a deterrent

The writer is professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

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Why NATO doesn't have to answer Trump's call to join Iran war

Anagha Jayakumar
New Delhi, March 18

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump revived a familiar refrain this week, calling on NATO to join the war commenced by the US and Israel against Iran, now in its third week.

"I think NATO is making a very foolish mistake. And I've long said that I wonder whether or not NATO would ever be there for us," he told reporters on Tuesday. "So this was a great test, because we don't need them, but they should have been there."

The latest remarks on the alliance have prompted a recall of Trump's rhetoric at the start of the year, when he took to the stage at Davos to say that the US "never got anything out of NATO."

What NATO's charter says

The parameters of the current war show a rejection of NATO's rules of engagement under its charter. Under Article 1 of the Charter, members must commit to resolve any international dispute they are involved in through peaceful means, without endangering international peace, security and justice. Allies are also expected to refrain from using threats or force inconsis-

ent with the purposes of the United Nations. The present conflict presents a clear rejection of this practice, with the fallout spreading globally.

Even the use of Article 5, obligating a response by all members to an attack on one member, may be invoked strictly as a defence measure. Post 9/11, other allies were not obligated to join the US offensive in Afghanistan, but opted to join a Coalition of the Willing formed by the US.

Geography is another limiting factor. Under Article 6, the alliance's collective defence obligations apply only to specific regions — the territories of member states in Europe and North America, Turkey, and the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer, including their forces and vessels in the Mediterranean. The current conflict, playing out in and around Iran, falls squarely outside these boundaries.

Given these caveats, NATO exercises a high bar for military response. An attack on any member country's military bases or missiles, therefore, does not automatically result in the invocation of Article 5.

Allies responding individually

Thus far, the alliance has limited its role

Rules of engagement

- Article 5, obligating a response by all members to an attack on one member, may be invoked strictly as a defence measure.

- An attack on any member country's military bases or missiles does not automatically result in its invocation.

to "enabling support", such as logistics and missile defence, without invoking Article 5. Early into the war, NATO Secretary General Rutte emphasised that there are "absolutely no plans" for NATO to be involved, "other than individual allies doing what they can to enable what the Americans are doing together with Israel".

Several European countries have rejected Trump's call for naval reinforcements, while others have chosen to engage at their own discretion. The UK has allowed the US to use some of its military bases in Cyprus following suspected Iranian drone attacks. While Cyprus is not a NATO member, the UK is. Greece has sent frigates and F-16s, while France deployed the frigate *Languedoc* to Cyprus. NATO forces have also intercepted Iranian drones and missiles near Turkey's Incirlik Air Base. To date, the eastern flank of the alliance has absorbed the spillover of conflict, even as NATO itself refrains from formally entering the war.

Trump's grievances

Since his first presidential term, Donald Trump has claimed that other NATO allies haven't contributed as much to the shared alliance defence budget as the US. Since

2006, each member has been expected to contribute at least 2% of its GDP on its defence, and since 2014, endeavour to "move towards the 2% guideline within a decade".

According to NATO data, US defence spending constituted 63% of total defence spending in 2024, down from 72% in 2016, when Trump was first elected president. While both figures are substantial, the US ranks sixth in terms of the percentage of GDP spent on defence.

More importantly, Article 5 has been invoked only once, for America's aid following the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. Several NATO allies came together to stage a military intervention in Afghanistan. When the US exited it in 2021, there were about 10,000 NATO troops in the country (of which 2,500 were American), down from over 100,000 in 2011. Soldiers from Britain and other European nations died fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Denmark alone sent 18,000 troops during this period, and had one of the highest per-capita death rates, losing 43 soldiers between 2002 and 2014.

Several European leaders have seen the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a costly mistake driven by faulty intelligence.

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SPORTS

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• WORLD CUP

Iran wants its matches moved from US to Mexico but FIFA sticks to its schedule

Associated Press
Geneva, March 18

THE PUBLIC wrangling between Iran, FIFA and U.S. President Donald Trump over the narrative of playing in the World Cup shifted to Mexico where President Claudia Sheinbaum seemed open to a suggestion by Islamic Republic diplomats that Iran's games in June be moved to her country.

The Iranian ambassador and embassy in Mexico City said the country was negotiating with FIFA to move Iran's three group-stage matches from the United States to Mexico after Trump last week discouraged the team from attending the 48-nation tournament, citing safety concerns.

It was already unclear whether such talks were even happening before FIFA said such unprecedented changes in World Cup history were not planned to a match schedule

agreed three months ago.

Sheinbaum was asked about it Tuesday during her daily briefing.

"They are discussing with FIFA whether it's feasible because they were going to hold the (games) in the United States," she said.

"They are looking into whether they can hold (them) in Mexico, and we will inform you when the time comes. Mexico has relations with all countries in the world. We'll see what FIFA decides and then we'll announce it."

In a statement, FIFA said it is "in regular contact with all participating member associations, including (the Islamic Republic of) Iran, to discuss planning for the FIFA World Cup 2026. FIFA is looking forward to all participating teams competing as per the match schedule announced on Dec. 6, 2025. The Feb. 28 start of U.S. and Israeli bombing of Iran that killed the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader Ayatollah

All Khamenei and senior officials immediately cast doubt on the national soccer team going to play at least three World Cup games in the U.S., which is co-hosting the most watched global sports event with Mexico and Canada.

Iran's soccer federation has not canceled its World Cup entry with FIFA, though official comments have variously suggested the U.S. is unable or unwilling to ensure the delegation's secure arrival and accommodation.

Since last week, Trump has variously said "I don't really care" if the Iran team comes, that it was welcome and would be treated like all players as stars, and that the players' safety was at risk.

In comments posted late Monday on the embassy website, Iran's Ambassador to Mexico Abbasololou Pasaandideh urged FIFA to move the team's games to Mexico, saying the U.S. was not cooperative on visas.



FIFA chief Gianni Infantino has been closely involved with U.S. President Donald Trump in organisation of the World Cup.

"We love the Mexican people very much and for us, the best situation is for our games to be held in Mexico," he was quoted as saying by state-run news agency IRNA. An Iranian government spokesman and the team itself have said in recent days it is up to FIFA and the U.S. to keep the team safe during the World Cup. The Iran team's planned training camp is in Tucson, Arizona.

Pasaandideh's embassy in Mexico City also posted a statement attributed to national soccer federation president Mehdi Taj saying Iran wants to move its group-stage matches out of the U.S.

"When Trump has explicitly stated that he cannot ensure the security of the Iranian national team, we will certainly not travel to America," the statement said.

Iran is scheduled to play New Zealand on June 15 and Belgium on June 21 in Inglewood, California, before finishing group play in Seattle against Egypt on June 26

"We are currently negotiating with FIFA to hold Iran's matches in the World Cup in Mexico." Iran is scheduled to play New Zealand on June 15 and Belgium on June 21 in Inglewood, California, before finishing group play in Seattle against Egypt on June 26.

Moving the games would be remarkable less than three months before the World Cup and risks being judged a failure in the history of tournament hosting. It also is not envisaged by Iran's first opponent,

New Zealand soccer federation chief executive Andrew Pragnell said Monday: "I also don't foresee it as remotely feasible" to move scheduled games to another country. Tens of thousands of tickets have been sold for Iran games, including to visiting fans who have booked flights to the U.S.

"By trying to move the match schedule, you actually create more problems down the track," Pragnell told New Zealand media outlet Stuff, adding "I don't think it'll happen." The Belgian soccer federation declined to comment Tuesday.

Trump said last week that the Iran team was welcome at the World Cup despite the ongoing war in the Middle East but "I really don't believe it is appropriate that they be there, for their own life and safety."

Iran's mixed signals include Sports Minister Ahmad Donyali telling state TV last week that it was not possible to play "due to the wicked acts they

have done against Iran." But after Trump's post the national team said on Instagram that "no one can exclude" it from the tournament and a government spokesman in Tehran stressed it was the responsibility of FIFA and the U.S. as a co-host nation to keep players safe and secure.

"FIFA is the organizer of the World Cup," Iran Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei said.

"When warnings are issued at the highest level about the environment being unsafe for Iranian football players, this indicates that the host country apparently lacks the capacity and ability to provide security for such an important sporting event."

Soccer is followed passionately in Iran, a nation of more than 90 million people which has qualified for seven men's World Cups and each of the past four editions. The team is ranked No. 20 in the world by FIFA and behind only Japan from Asia.