

## COMMENT &amp; LETTERS



Iranian demonstrators hold placards bearing the images of slain military commander Qasem Soleimani and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in front of the British embassy in the capital Tehran. PHOTO: ATTA KENARE/AFP

# The US and Iran. What just happened?

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The world has spent the past week trying to make sense of the US attack in Iraq that resulted in the killing – some would say assassination – of Iranian military commander Qasim Suleimani. The attack resulted in retaliation on the part of Iran, as well as concerns over an escalation of tensions between the adversaries.

That Donald Trump is an unconventional president is not breaking news. Depending on which side of the political fence you sit, his style seems erratic or troublesome at best, while to others he is refreshing.

Both Trump's domestic audience and the international community were increasingly concerned by the motivations as well as the possible repercussions that this attack may have had. Was it a matter of impulse or a guided and precise decision based on the expertise of officials and functioning institutions? Or was it a political calculation by a president and Administration facing an impeachment trial?

Immediate as well as broader, long-term questions are raised by these events. What were the motivations of the attack and how do they fit into the broader longer-term goals, vision and strategy of the Administration and indeed the United States within the Middle East?

Trump has presented a world view that prescribes to US withdrawal from the region and projects an America whose greatness is rooted in its retreat from frustrating international engagements and overstretch, yet paradoxically also projecting a bold United States that would retaliate and take decisive action when necessary.

This strike also bears the hallmark of others within the Administration.

In a 2018 Foreign Affairs article, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo outlined what is effectively the Administration's Iran policy, and explained the events that have materialised recently. He highlighted Iran, together with North Korea, as a key threat to the "security of America's people, US allies and partners" due to their nature as outlaw regimes that defy international norms and peace. He was critical of the Obama administration's "lead from behind" approach, which, he argues allowed for Iran's malign influence to grow and failed to keep in check its nuclear ambitions. He highlighted the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign to disrupt Iranian funding and support of violence throughout the Middle East.

Yet, he notes "President Trump does not want another long-term US military engagement in the Middle East – or in any region, for that matter."

At the same time, he touts the President's willingness to talk to and engage with the United States' adversaries, yet underscores the fact that he would not shy away from walking away from negotiations in the face of a bad deal.

And that bad deal was seen to be the Iran nuclear deal, or the JCPOA, as it is known,

because it was seen to be ineffective in protecting the US and its allies from the proxy attacks that Iran was supporting.

In its wake, the administration has pursued a multifaceted approach composed of economic sanctions that are intended to suffocate the regime and expose its brutalities, and also draw out the hypocrisies of an elite that enjoy wealth and luxury goods within a struggling society.

Pompeo stated – "Iran's leaders – especially those at the top of the IRGC, such as Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force – must be made to feel the painful consequences of their violence and corruption".

He argued that sanctions were complemented by deterrent efforts and the clarity that the US would hold the Iranian regime responsible for attacks on US facilities and personnel, and that it would "respond swiftly and decisively in defence

of American lives." In words that have been very much echoed in the wake of the January 3 attack, Pompeo warned: "We do not seek war. But we must make painfully clear that escalation is a losing proposition for Iran; the Islamic Republic cannot match the United States' military prowess, and we are not afraid to let Iran's leaders know it."

Thus, the roots and rationale of the attack are clear and largely consistent with US policy. Whether the outcome will be consistent pressure on Iran that would bring about the longer term goal in US policy – regime change – or bring Iran to the negotiating table once again is uncertain, and the Trump Administration appears to be open to any prospect.

What remains uncertain is the timing of the attack, and as many Democrats have questioned, "why now?". Undoubtedly, the current crisis serves as a distraction from President Trump's domestic political pressures, and will also serve him well in his bid for re-election next November.

The events also send a wider message on the global stage. The complete withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East is unlikely. Yet over the years and across administrations, the appetite for long-drawn-out conflicts is reducing. In the meantime, the likes of China and Russia are increasingly seeking to expand their reach and influence – across the globe but particularly within the Middle East. This crisis undoubtedly serves as a reminder that the United States should not be discounted as yet.

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