

Trump has raised strategic incoherence to new levels with Soleimani's killing

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By Jennifer Rubin Opinion writer

The Post reports: "Iran on Friday vowed 'severe revenge' in response to a U.S. airstrike that killed Tehran's most powerful military commander, Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, and dramatically sharpened tensions across the Middle East." The Trump administration announced that the move was a defensive action responding to militia attacks on our Baghdad embassy, but then promptly announced all Americans should leave Iraq. Are we putting Americans at greater risk or protecting them? That is one of dozens of questions that Congress, allies, pundits and ordinary Americans are asking.

Less than seven months ago, Trump pulled back a strike force poised to respond to Iran's shoot-down of an American drone. Less than three months ago Trump abandoned the Kurds and announced a retreat from Syria to end "forever wars." Troops did not come home as Trump promised, and indeed, did not all leave Syria, yet another reversal.

With the assassination of Soleimani, who has orchestrated killings of hundreds of American forces and extended Iranian influence throughout the region, the administration raised the prospects for military conflict in the region while subsequently claiming to be de-escalating the chances of war. "U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that he discussed the operation afterwards with British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and Chinese Politburo Member Yang Jiechi, telling them that 'the U.S. remains committed to de-escalation,'" The Post reports.

All of these conversations apparently took place before Congress had been briefed, drawing a strong rebuke from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.). "Tonight's airstrike risks provoking further dangerous escalation of violence. America — and the world — cannot afford to have tensions escalate to the point of no return," she said in a written statement Thursday night. She emphasized that the killing was undertaken "without the consultation of the Congress." She demanded, "The full Congress must be immediately briefed on this serious situation and on the next steps under consideration by the Administration, including the significant escalation of the deployment of additional troops to the region."

Meanwhile, if there is an overall strategy here, it is hidden under a pile of contradictory impulses. Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper claimed that we acted to deter further attacks on Americans. Nevertheless, it is widely anticipated that Iran will make good on its threat to avenge Soleimani's death. One immediate consequence: Instead of mass protests against the regime, thousands of Iranians took to the streets to denounce the United States.

In other words, Trump has raised strategic incoherence to new levels. Acting without so much as briefing Congress and despite his own party's qualms about a new war in the Middle East, Trump risks not only war but also political blowback should Iran retaliate. Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) tweeted the question on most lawmakers' minds: "Soleimani was an enemy of the United States. That's not a question. The question is this — as reports suggest, did America just assassinate, without any congressional authorization, the second most powerful person in Iran, knowingly setting off a potential massive regional war?"

There is plenty of reason for anxiety. We stand on the precipice of an international conflagration, with a president whose word cannot be trusted and whose impulsivity and ignorance are unmatched by any modern U.S. president. He is surrounded by yes men who command little if any respect outside the Trump cult.

In response to Trump's action, former vice president Joe Biden issued a statement reminding us of what a sober, experienced commander in chief might sound like. "No American will mourn Qassem Soleimani's passing. He deserved to be brought to justice for his crimes against American troops and thousands of innocents throughout the region," Biden began. He then proceeded to warn that "this is a hugely escalatory move in an already dangerous region." He continued:

The Administration's statement says that its goal is to deter future attacks by Iran, but this action almost certainly will have the opposite effect. President Trump just tossed a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox, and he owes the American people an explanation of the strategy and plan to keep safe our troops and embassy personnel, our people and our interests, both here at home and abroad, and our partners throughout the region and beyond. I'm not privy to the intelligence and much remains unknown, but Iran will surely respond. We could be on the brink of a major conflict across the Middle East.

Biden said he hoped Trump had thought about "second- and third-order consequences," but rightly pointed that that "this Administration has not demonstrated at any turn the discipline or long-term vision necessary — and the stakes could not be higher." Indeed, the stakes could not be higher for Biden and his rivals for the Democratic presidential nomination, who, a month before the Iowa caucuses, now will face renewed scrutiny of their national security views and capabilities. We are reminded that the next president will face the extraordinary task of repairing damage to the United States' international credibility and resolving the conflicts that Trump has widened.

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