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## **IMPACT OF ELIMINATION OF GENERAL SOLEIMANI**

**BY**

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In a drone strike last Friday, the US eliminated General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's elite Quds force, at Baghdad airport, just as he was deplaning. General Soleimani was the second most powerful figure in Iran, after Ayatollah Khamenei. He was the architect of Iran's policy in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Unofficially, he was considered as the vice president of Iran. The drone strike sent shockwaves across the globe.

Within US security circles, he was an even more important target than Osama Bin Laden. There had been multiple attempts on his life earlier. The US justified his elimination by stating, 'General Soleimani and his Quds force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more.' While Osama had no national backing, Soleimani was Iranian and had the nation's backing.

Soleimani's elimination in Iraq implied that the US violated Iraqi airspace without their explicit permission, thus breaking international law. Hence, apart from the Iranians, Iraq was also angered at the US action and are demanding withdrawal of US forces from the country. This would benefit Iran as it had for considerable time been seeking US pull out from Iran.

The US on the other hand is unwilling to leave Iraq with Trump claiming that the expenditure incurred on airfields in the country would need to be repaid first. In addition, he has threatened Baghdad with sanctions, in case it insists on US withdrawal. Thus, the US would be an unwelcome force in Iraq and open to being targeted. It is already seeking withdrawal from Afghanistan. Thus, once it leaves, it enables Iran to expand its influence.

Moscow and Beijing conveyed their concerns as the US action displayed its arrogance to international norms. They are supporting Iran while seeking both sides display restraint.

Members of the US Congress had mixed opinions. Many supported the elimination. Those who opposed it believed that Iran would react to the killing as it has promised to do, leading to escalation of violence in the region and drawing the US into another unwinnable war. They claimed that Trump seeks to divert his impeachment proceedings by opting for a conflict.

To counter any military action by Iran, the US has moved additional troops into the Gulf region. Trump even threatened Iran by stating that in case of a retaliation, he would target 52 Iranian sites, a symbolic gesture to the 52 hostages from the US embassy held by Iran in 1979. Iran retaliated by stating that 35 US targets were within their range.

The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, spoke to global leaders on the killing, explaining the US viewpoint. The reactions were not as forthcoming as expected. He stated, 'Frankly, the Europeans have not been as helpful as I wish they could be. The Brits, French and the Germans all need to understand that what we did saved lives in Europe as well.' Clearly, the Europeans did not desire any escalation in region. The EU has asked the Iranian foreign minister to come forward for talks. Some even requested Iran to continue adhering to the Nuclear Arms Deal. Thus, the US is almost alone in case of any escalation.

In Pakistan, Pompeo spoke not to his counterpart SM Qureshi, but to their army chief, displaying to the global community as to who calls the shots in Pakistan. Bajwa called for de-escalation and reduction of tensions, tacitly supporting US actions. In return, Trump recommenced military to military cooperation with Pakistan. Soleimani was expected to be behind attacks on the Pak army by the Baluch freedom fighters and hence Pak was happy to see him go. Trump stated that Soleimani also had a hand in terror strikes as far as Delhi, possibly hinting at the blast which injured the wife of the Israeli Military attaché in Feb 2012.

India called for reduction in tensions. The Indian foreign ministry spokesman Raveesh Kumar advocated restraint and underlined the need for 'peace, stability, and security in this region.' India is walking a tightrope. While it is developing Chabahar as a link to Central Asia, it has reduced oil imports from Iran and is closely allied with the US. Simultaneously, it seeks to maintain ties with Iran. Hence, it avoided taking sides. Presently there is unlikely to be any impact on Indian development of the Chabahar port, unless there is further escalation and the US targets Iran directly.

Global impact of the strike has already been felt. Oil prices are on the rise impacting economy of developing nations, including India. This would benefit the US as demands for its oil would increase. The 14 Sep drone strike on Saudi oil facilities by the Houthi rebels increased international concern and demands for US oil. Another devastating strike could impact global economy and lead to the US being blamed for global economic instability.

A major fallout of the strike would be an increased determination within Iran to develop nuclear weapons as a counter to US pre-emptive actions. They would, despite international pressure, rapidly seek to develop nuclear weapons. To this end they have already walked out of the nuclear deal signed in 2015, which Trump withdrew from and imposed sanctions.

The world is aware that the US, despite far greater losses in Afghanistan has not targeted Pak military or ISI heads, as it possesses nuclear weapons. The targeting of Soleimani is because Iran remains a non-nuclear state. Historically the US has only engaged non-nuclear countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Iran. North Korea despite being a major threat has never been hit because of possessing nuclear weapons.

Another fallout has been that the US is almost alone. None of its allies have backed its actions. This implies that global trust on the US is receding because of its unilateral actions.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, sworn enemies of Iran, have not commented on the strike, though would be relieved with the elimination of Soleimani. Their only statement mentions that they were not consulted prior to the strike. They would be expecting some retaliation even on their soil, due to their proximity with the US. It is only Israel which has backed the US.

The question on everyone's mind is how Iran would react to the strike. Iran would keep in mind that the international support which it presently possesses must not be lost. Hence, targeting major oil installations of Saudi Arabia and UAE would be initially avoided as it could impact global economy and be detrimental to Iraqi support. Secondly, it would prefer escalation being

resorted to by the US, rather than them. Thus, it may not directly employ its own military but use its proxies to target US facilities and troops. US retaliation on Iranian soil could justify any further escalation and lower US standing. It is aware that the US would avoid a ground offensive.

Earlier, it was the US which was silent despite attacks on ships in the Gulf, downing of its drone by Iran and the strike on Saudi oil facilities. Now it is the turn of Iran. Within Iran, the death of Soleimani has united the country as never before. The public appears to have forgotten its economic woes and begun demanding revenge. There is no doubt that Iran would react, if not for anything else, but to satisfy its domestic audience.

Iran has multiple options. It could strike shipping in the Strait of Hormuz or use its proxies to target Israel, Saudi and UAE oil facilities, or even US military establishments in the region. Even if US military establishments are not targeted initially, counter strikes by the US on Iranian soil could lead to them being targeted by Iranian missiles. Iran has small missile boats, which could devastate shipping in the region. Thus, future escalation, if resorted to, could end up as non-contact warfare with facilities on both sides being hit by airpower or missiles.

Iran can employ this opportunity to force nations to bypass US sanctions and procure its oil, further hurting US's global power, as a means of not retaliating against non-US targets, thus not impacting global economy. This would come up in discussions between the EU and the Iranian foreign minister.

Finally, it could act as a spoilsport in Afghan peace talks, an action it had already commenced. It has begun insisting on Kabul led talks, not US led and begun influencing the Taliban to demand withdrawal of US troops before any discussion. The Taliban leadership from Qatar was in Tehran recently post which Iran announced this change in policy. Taliban attacks on US personnel are likely to increase in the days ahead and talks for US withdrawal would move further slowly.

Cyber-attacks are the cheapest form of retaliation and have already commenced. They would increase in intensity in the coming days intending to target major US services. Retaliation against them cannot be militarily.

Iran is aware that the US has not received support from its European allies on the strike and any action which the US would take would have to be on its own or in conjunction with Israel. Israel has already placed its forces on high alert expecting a strike from Iran's proxies in Lebanon and Gaza.

Iran also knows that Trump is in his election year and a major escalation which could lead to US losses would damage his credibility. On the contrary a swift military victory over Iran would boost Trump's rating, which is unlikely as the US would never engage in a ground war. The US security forces would probably be expecting Iran's proxies to strike, enabling them to respond. A day after eliminating Soleimani, the US also targeted a convoy of an Iraqi paramilitary group with links to Iran.

In near future there would be attacks on US facilities and those of its allies by Iranian backed terrorist groups. If these attacks are not launched from Iranian soil, US counter strikes on Iran directly, would impact US standing and lead to global condemnation. A single strike on oil facilities could enhance tensions in the Gulf impacting global economy. It is the US which now needs to be watchful, rather than Iran.

Iran presently holds the cards and hence all major powers are in direct contact with it.

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