

Trump's Iran 'Punching Bag': US Provocations to Continue. Baiting Iran to Escalate?

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Trump's assassination of Iran's general and senior diplomat, Soleimani, was a clear provocation by the US, designed to produce a further escalated military response by Iran. That did not happen. Iran did not take the bait. It responded minimally and appears to have done so in a way to avoid US deaths or even major US asset destruction.

If Iran had escalated militarily, which it was capable of doing, it would have fallen into Trump's trap. Trump was prepared to unleash a greater military response on Iran. He would have had his 'war', i.e. his great distraction from his pending impeachment trial, as well as a major boost to his political base in the current election year.

Trump's Baiting Iran To Escalate

Had Iran taken the bait, Trump would also have been able to bypass the War Powers Act before militarily escalating. The Act allows an unlimited and immediate US attack on an adversary that has attacked US forces. Up to now, Trump has had to explain to Congress, especially the US House of Representatives, why he had assassinated Soleimani in the first place. That was clearly an 'act or war' according to international law. And Trump had bypassed Congress before doing so, which the Act and prior precedents have required. A major Iran counterattack on the US would have put the issue of Trump's bypassing the Act by assassinating Soleimani without discussing with Congress to bed. The new escalation and conflict would have become the center of debate in the US—not the assassination and how Congress was bypassed and ignored.

Iran's missile launch yesterday against two Iraqi bases, one of which reportedly had no US forces, was clearly a measured and minimal response. It appears the missile launch may have been purposely designed to do minimal damage even to US military assets. That no photos of any damage have been released by the US suggests there wasn't much. And no US forces were killed. Either Iran's missiles and targeting are worthless; or Iran purposely intended minimal, or even no, effective damage.

Without physical evidence of extensive damage, and no American deaths from the missiles, it was, and remains, difficult for Trump to escalate military action further thereafter. Moreover, Iran's statement after the launch that it had "concluded" its response made it further difficult for Trump to escalate a US military response after the launch.

Trump therefore trotted out before the cameras and declared a 'victory' in the exchange: a successful assassination in exchange for a dozen missiles that largely missed their targets and did no damage. In other words, Iran had done little in response to the US assassinating

it leading general. Trump got to look tough to his political base at home after engaging in a foreign policy adventure, as the 2020 election takes off.

But the Trump/US/Neoncon assault on Iran is not over. As neoncon John Bolton has recently tweeted, the US was planning to assassinate Soleimani for some months now and had its plan ready to go. It just now pulled the trigger. Trump and the US were escalating the conflict steadily throughout December, as the US launched attacks on Iranian militia bases in Iraq, provoking the desired response of the militias assault on the US embassy in Baghdad. Trump in turn escalated the confrontation by assassinating Soleimani. Time will reveal what happened between the period of the US successful provocation of the militias and the subsequent assassination.

As the 2020 election year in the US continues, Trump will almost certainly replay this Iran provocation card again. It's proved successful thus far. Iran is in a box: if it responds minimally, Trump declares a short term victory and looks good to his base in the election year; if it responds in kind militarily, Trump gets an even bigger distraction—both from the impeachment and all the growing concerns about his personal instability coming to the fore in the election season. A major war with Iran will rally support by the American people and push all other issues and Trump policy failures to the background. Trump will therefore undoubtedly resort once more to a major provocation, or even several, before the election.

Iran knows it is Trump's foreign policy punching bag. It has been since Trump came to office. More blows against Iran are yet to come in this election year.

Iran's Response: Past and Future

Iran has responded minimally to date. No doubt it will publicize and declare domestically that its missiles did great damage and more is to come to drive the US out of the middle east. But that's for domestic consumption. Iran's strategy is to wait out the Trump presidency. And to continue to use its refusal to escalate as evidence to the Europeans that it is the sane party in the US-Iran confrontation. Why? Iran wants Europe to continue to trade with it, to buy its oil. More importantly, it wants Europe to implement what it had suggested with regard to establishing a more independent international payments system.

The current system is called SWIFT, and is controlled by the US and US banks. With SWIFT the US can see who is complying with its sanctions on Iran (or sanctions on any other country). SWIFT is a key institution for US imperialism globally—along with the dollar, the global trading currency, US control of the IMF, dominance of the US central bank, the Federal Reserve, influencing global money flows and interest rates, and so on. Europe and Iran had been discussing setting up an independent international payments system, called INSTEX. The Europeans have been balking, however. Trump has been threatening them with sanctions should they do so. (Or should they install 5G wireless systems by China's Huawei company. Or should they go forward with new Russian gas pipelines in the Baltic sea. And so on.)

In the 21st century, especially since 2008-09, the USA has been acting increasingly aggressive against allies and adversaries alike as US global economic hegemony begins to weaken. Thus we see tariffs as a more frequent foreign policy tool, economic sanctions imposed by the US increasingly the rule, US actions to destroy adversary economies' currencies (e.g. Venezuela) as central to US goals of regime change, US direct assistance to

indigenous capitalists to overturn democratic governments (Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia), and use of the SWIFT as a means to enforce sanctions and deny dollar access to targeted adversaries.

Should Europe and Iran establish an alternate INSTEX payment system it would mark a major blow to the US global economic empire and hegemony. Such an alternative payments system would likely be joined quickly by Russia, China, and others.

Iran therefore is keeping an eye on a possible agreement with Europe on such an alternative payment system that would enable it to avoid US sanctions. The US would then have no alternative but to blockade Iranian shipments physically. And that would be another act of war by Trump per international law.

Iran had much to lose, in other words, by escalating the conflict militarily with the US. And it didn't fall for the Trump-Neocon provocation. Not yet. Its minimal response in recent days has made it impossible for Trump to escalate further, in turn, and unleash a greater US military conflict with Iran. Trump may have gained a propaganda victory in the election year with his base, but Trump's inability to escalate still further means he won't get his big distraction from his upcoming impeachment trial. Nor will he be able now to bypass the War Powers Act or smother the charge he has already ignored the Act's limits by unilaterally assassinating a foreign government representative without consulting Congress first.

Iran will continue to avoid an all out war with the US, which Trump's neocon advisers would prefer to see before the US November 2020 election. Iran leaves the door open to the Europeans. That door would have closed had it, Iran, escalated the conflict.

Trump and the neocons running US foreign policy had to acknowledge today the limits on any further US escalation, given Iran's minimal response. Had the Trump decided to ratchet up the conflict militarily in reply to Iran's minimal response, he would have reaffirmed himself to the world as the aggressor. Political concern about Trump bypassing the War Powers Act would have increased. He would have appeared even more 'out of control' to US allies and US voters. Trump has therefore declared a 'victory' by assassinating Soleimani and getting away with it. And since it 'worked', Trump will no doubt attempt it all again.

If Trump really wanted to renegotiate a new deal with Iran, this would have been an opportunity. He could have declared he was removing some sanctions as a offer to start negotiations. Instead, he 'doubled down', as he said, imposing new sanctions on Iran. Trump does not want a new deal with Iran. He never did. Trump has always planned to use Iran and a possible attack on it as his foreign policy punching bag for re-election. So he will keep on 'punching' as the 2020 election year progresses.

Every time Iran does not escalate, Trump can declare a partial victory and look tough on foreign policy to his base. And should Iran finally escalate in turn, then Trump has his excuse to intensify his military response.

Trump and his advisers see escalating the confrontation with Iran as a win-win situation. That's why the provocations will continue. US provocations of Iran will not stop with the Soleimani assassination. They have only just begun.

The year ahead will tell whether Iran has the will to successfully wait out Trump until the US election, or whether US further provocations will result in Iran's eventually responding more

aggressively in kind in turn-i.e. whether Iran takes Trump's bait and falls into the trap the US has set. This writer's guess is they will find a way to wait him out, regardless of US efforts to continue to escalate the confrontation.

Provoking Iran is all about the US 2020 election. Trump is in the tradition of a long line of US Presidents (or would be-presidents), facing election or domestic troubles, who choose their own careers over War and the death of others: from Lyndon Johnson (Vietnam), to George H.W. Bush (Panama, 1st Gulf War), Bill Clinton (Bosnia), George W. Bush (Iraq war), and Hillary Clinton (Libya). None of these countries constituted a strategic threat to the USA. But all of them a convenient target to help them advance their political careers.

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