

Putin Can Cautiously Enjoy the Iran Drama From the Audience

From Moscow's point of view there must be a quiet sense of relief that this time it is in the audience, not center stage.

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The U.S. drone strike at Baghdad's international airport that killed Major General Qassem Suleimani, head of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), has opened a new and potentially bloody act in the ongoing Middle Eastern drama.

Suleimani had been as persistent a thorn in the side of the Americans as he had been an icon for the Iranian regime. The Quds Force bridged intelligence gathering, covert operations and overt military capabilities to make it the premier instrument for Tehran's asymmetric campaigns against Washington and its efforts to carve out its own sphere of influence in the Middle East.

This is a direct challenge to the Iranian regime — assassinating a serving senior officer on a third party's soil — and indeed to Iraq's sovereignty, especially as Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was also killed in the attack. The Iraqi parliament voted to demand the expulsion of US forces from its soil (a long-held Iranian ambition).

Of course, Donald Trump, facing first impeachment and then re-election, will likely not mind this, as it will allow him to make good on one of his campaign promises. This strike does not look like part of a Middle East strategy so much as an admission of its absence, a quick fix of fire and fury and Fox-friendly optics. (It didn't take long for people to note the parallel with Bill Clinton launching airstrikes on Iraq in December 1998, in the midst of his own impeachment scandal.)

There will no doubt be some form of Iranian retaliation, but so long as the conflict does not escalate out of control, while it is hard to know for sure whether Tehran or Washington will ultimately gain the most, Moscow may be quietly satisfied.

While he may or may not be personally angry about the death — although we have no reason to believe there was any personal bond there, even though they met in 2015 — he must be satisfied that this plays to his narrative, that America is essentially an arrogant, imperial power.

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Back in 2007, in his (in)famous speech to the Munich Security Conference, he had warned of the dangers of a “unipolar” — in other words, U.S.-dominated — world, in which there was nothing to stop “an almost uncontrollable use of force — military force — in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.”

Once again, he can point to US actions as seeming to justify Russia’s current campaign to push back against the world order it represents, and also to explain and excuse away Moscow’s own ventures into the bloody realm of “targeted killings.”

It also allows him to play the sober statesman. Russian news hyped that he and France’s President Macron had spoken and expressed their common concerns, while Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova highlighted the lack of any international mandate for the attack and archly noted that “American politicians have their own interests, given that this is the pre-election year.”

Likewise, although the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal was on life-support after the unilateral withdrawal of the United States in 2018 and the re-imposition of sanctions, Russia can safely present itself as on the side of the angels, as Suleimani’s death pushes Iran further towards renuclearization. JCPOA may be all but dead — but being in the JCPOA process is another opportunity for Moscow to assert its global standing.

There is also a direct benefit from seeing Iran directly challenged. Tehran and Moscow have certain interests in common, especially in minimizing U.S. influence in the Middle East, but they are at best frenemies. Tehran and Moscow may both be supporting Damascus, for

example, but they have different agendas, and part of Russia's reasons for intervening in 2015 had been precisely to prevent Syria from becoming an Iranian vassal.

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Indeed, last year saw clashes between militia's supported by Quds Force and those affiliated with Moscow in Aleppo when Russian military police tried to take control of al-Nayrab airport, which had become one of the IRGC's most important bases in the region. When, in October, the IRGC arrested Russian journalist Yulia Yuzik, claiming she was an Israeli spy, it was the Iranian Foreign Ministry who arranged her release, after heavy pressure from Moscow.

There is also a more direct financial gain. Oil prices jumped more than \$2 to over \$69 a barrel after Suleimani's death, out of fears of escalation in the region. At a time when Russia was contemplating that it might fall as low as \$25 per barrel, even as a short-term boost, this is welcome.

Of course, it is always tempting to produce the "Putin wins" hot-take whenever anything happens that potentially puts America in a poor light. In this case, it depends very much on the crisis continuing to bubble merrily without boiling over into open conflict.

The geopolitics of the Middle East are characteristically complex, unpredictable and hard to manage. From Moscow's point of view, as it watches Iran distracted, the U.S. torn between following up on its macho gesture and the imperative to disengage, and Iraq increasingly resentful at its lot, there must if nothing else be a quiet sense of relief that this time it is in the audience, not center stage.

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