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US Assassination of Gen Soleimani & Its Aftermath

The Middle East Effect: How US' China Policy Will be Influenced

By Zi Yang

SYNOPSIS

As the threat of war looms following the assassination of Iran's General Qassem Soleimani by US drones on President Trump's orders, many parties stand to lose, yet China may gain. What are the implications for the US' China policy?

COMMENTARY

On 4 JANUARY 2020, a red Shia religious banner was unfurled above the important Jamkaran Mosque in Qom, the spiritual capital of Iran, for the first time in its history. Symbolising a desire for revenge, the raising of the red banner reads "Those who want to avenge the blood of Hussein," and was for none other than General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Quds Force. He was assassinated -- martyred as Iran sees it -- in a US air strike a day earlier.

Soleimani's death is a gut-punch to Iran. Besides a loyalist to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Soleimani is also the architect of Iran's proxy wars who constructed a network of Shia paramilitary forces throughout the Middle East. Touted as a national hero, [Soleimani enjoyed widespread popular support in Iran](#).

The sudden loss of Soleimani, therefore, is not only an emotional moment for the whole of Iran, but also a development that may have crippled Iran's foreign military operations.

China's Gain

Although Iran has vowed revenge for Soleimani, it is unlikely to initiate an all-out war where the US has overwhelming advantage. The response to Soleimani's death will likely be calculated. So far, Iran has withdrawn from the 2015 nuclear deal.

Likewise, an escalation of Iran-directed proxy wars against the US and its regional allies will likely move ahead. Either way, 2020 is off to a bad start for the Middle East and instability is poised to multiply as the year goes on.

In a previous article I indicated China will not sacrifice its overall interest for Iran come a time of troubles. Indeed, although fresh from a joint naval exercise with Iran, China's response to brewing conflict between Iran and the US has been measured.

After receiving a briefing of the situation by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, China's senior diplomat and State Councilor Yang Jiechi told his US counterpart that China always support resolving differences through dialogue and called on Washington to restrain its use of force and choose diplomacy, a fairly typical statement coming out of China.

While China tries to distance itself from the escalating tensions in the Middle East, it is necessary to point out that Beijing has much to gain from the situation. Conflicts in the Middle East post-Cold War have mostly benefited China in drawing away US commitment to Asia that would mean greater competition with China.

The more severe the conflict, the longer the US is drawn away, thus creating a wider window of opportunity for China to advance its own agenda. The "Middle East Effect" seems to be picking-up steam once again.

The Middle East Effect

The enormous influence Middle Eastern conflicts have on the US' China policy is evident. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has maintained a strong interest in building ties with Asian states, a region of steady economic growth. Given its importance, China feature prominently in all US policies regarding the region.

While China hawks tried to use policy platforms to contain Beijing's expanding dominance in Asia, doves sought to shape Chinese behaviour by bringing China into global institutions.

In its early years, the Bill Clinton administration harshly criticised China's human right abuses and tried to tie the issue to China's World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession. However, the administration switched strategy a few years later, believing greater integration of China into international organisations such as the WTO would bring economic and political liberalisation in China.

However, despite having overall stable relations, US-China ties became increasingly bumpy, especially in the security realm. The issue of Taiwan continued to overshadow bilateral relations, and the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995 – 1996 heightened tensions between China and the US.

Three years later, the US bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade ignited waves of nationalist protests in China and generated further animosity between the two states.

Shifts in US' China Policy

Such ill will was still present when George W. Bush became president in 2001. At the outset, Bush adopted a friendly position towards Taiwan and approved a major arms deal that included submarines, anti-submarine warfare aircraft, cruise missiles, and destroyers. In April 2001, the EP3 Incident saw the loss of one Chinese fighter pilot when intercepting a US signals intelligence aircraft north of the Paracel Islands.

Yet September 11 and subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq upended Washington's calculus regarding China. Bush no longer saw China as a competitor but a potential partner in the Global War on Terror. Engagement with Beijing increased while that with Taipei declined.

In addition, the Bush administration made clear its opposition to any Taiwan independence attempt that could upset the cross-straits status quo. Middle Eastern conflicts had a healing effect on US-China relations and Bush's China policy remained stable for the rest of his time in office.

The Obama years saw US withdrawal from Iraq and a general attempt to disengage from the conflict-prone Middle East. In 2011, then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton announced the "Pivot to Asia" strategy, designed to shift US focus away from the Middle East to the other side of Asia where stability and economic growth were the norm. Yet the new policy angered many in Beijing who saw it as a stratagem to contain China's rise.

Within a few years however, the US had to shift its attention back to the Middle East as the Syrian Civil War descended deeper into the abyss that gave rise to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This event forced Washington to revert its attention to a region it had tried to extract itself from.

Ticking Time Bomb & China's Benefit

Donald Trump came to power promising to get US out of Middle East wars. Indeed, Trump focused on China for most of his first term in office, taking Beijing to war in the trade realm. Simultaneously, Washington announced its desire to maintain a "free and open" Indo-Pacific free from Chinese dominance.

However, US commitment to Asian partners in the Trump era has been tenuous at best, and the president's protectionist, anti-free trade, and anti-global institutions stance has not been helpful towards realising US goals in the region.

Although the Trump administration has been gradually disengaging from the Middle East for the past years, it is at risk of being pulled back into the region once again due to recent events. The killing of Soleimani is a dangerous escalation that could further weaken the US' Asia policy, making China the ultimate winner.

As Trump goes full steam ahead with the maximum pressure campaign against Iran, it is now unlikely Tehran will come to the negotiating table to resolve differences with Washington. Time is ticking and more conflict in the Middle East seem inevitable.

While Middle Eastern countries stuck between the US and Iran have much to lose, states outside the region that are currently taking pressure from the Trump administration have much to gain. This is especially true for China that bore the brunt of hawkish US policies.

The Middle East Effect, which has diverted US attention and resources in the past, could soon present itself once again.

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