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*The US Assassination of Gen Soleimani & Its Aftermath*

## **Russia as Mediator in US-Iran Crisis?**

*By Chris Cheang*

### **Synopsis:**

*The killing of Iranian military commander, Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike on Iraqi soil last week presents Russia with a godsend: it will not only increase its prestige and influence in the Middle East but more importantly, further weaken Western attempts to isolate it.*

### **Commentary**

IN THE immediate and short-term aftermath, the killing of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani in Iraq by the United States clearly stands to benefit Russia.

Economically, the immediate oil price rise as a consequence of the conflict adds to Russia's state coffers. Iran's retaliatory missile attacks from Iranian territory on at least two Iraqi military bases hosting US-led coalition personnel have worsened the tensions and raised the oil price.

### **Diverted Attention Benefits Putin**

Geopolitically, if US attention is diverted to Iran, that might ease the focus on the Ukraine, in the Baltics and Eastern and Central Europe and over other hitherto well-known differences between the two powers. Russia could, as a result, breathe more easily.

Moreover, if the crisis deteriorates into open hostilities, Russia is in the best position to play the role of mediator. US and EU economic and political pressure on Russia would certainly have to be either reduced or gradually removed.

The fact that German Chancellor Angela Merkel will reportedly travel to Russia on the 11 January 2020 for talks with President Vladimir Putin – at his invitation – on the US-Iran crisis, reflects this very possibility.

Politically, President Putin's prestige and influence in the Middle East can only increase even if Russia does not play a mediator role. It is the only global power which enjoys good relations with Iran and other countries in the region. While its relations with the US and the EU have not been as close as they could be, they are not hostile either.

The West would need Russia to de-escalate tensions with Iran, even in a non-mediator role. The price for the West would be a gradual decrease and finally removal of economic and political sanctions on Russia.

### **Russia as Mediator?**

Russia is best placed to play a mediator role, or at least exercise a moderating influence on Iran.

First, no Western country enjoys good relations with Iran like Russia does. Both countries have been working together in Syria to support President Bashar Assad's government in its efforts to expel or crush ISIS and other anti-government forces.

Second, Iran was a beneficiary of Russian arms sales; in late 2016, Russia completed delivery of the S-300 air defence missile system to Iran, concluding an US\$800 million deal signed between the two states in 2007. Russia had suspended the agreement in September 2010, to comply with a stricter UN arms embargo passed in June that year.

After the six-country group known as the P5+1 agreed on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to constrain and roll back Iran's nuclear programme in July 2015, President Putin lifted the ban on weapons sales to Iran and signed a new agreement with Tehran, sending the first shipment of parts in April.

### **Putin's Restraint on Iran**

However, President Putin reportedly turned down a request by Iran to purchase the advanced S-400 missile defence system, in May 2019, according to media reports.

Apparently, President Putin rejected the request given the worries about rising tensions in the Persian Gulf region where several Arab leaders are concerned about Iran's military capabilities. Moreover, Russia itself is not keen on arming Iran to the hilt.

Nevertheless, the December 2019 Russian-Iranian-Chinese naval exercises, the first, in the Gulf of Oman and northern Indian Ocean, reflected growing cooperation with Iran. Tehran itself is aware it cannot afford to alienate either Russia or China if it is to deal with US sanctions and other pressure.

With current tensions with the US, Tehran needs the support of these two world powers to restrain any further US military action.

Third, since its successful military intervention in Syria, Russia's prestige and influence in the Middle East have become stronger. Its good links with Iran have not prevented the strengthening of links with Israel as well as Saudi Arabia, both of which are suspicious of Iran but need Russia to ensure a moderating and constraining influence on Tehran.

### **Russia Loses in the Long-Term?**

While Russia might benefit in the short-term from the US-Iran conflict, it is not keen on any wars or an escalation in military action so close to its borders.

First, it does not serve Russia's long-term security interest if Iran and the US were to go to war. Its porous southern borders where most of its Muslim citizens live, are likely to become unstable should Shia Iran call upon the entire Sunni Muslim world in the Middle East and elsewhere, to rise against the US.

That cannot be totally discounted since anti-US sentiments in the Middle East still linger. It has been more than a decade since Russia's southern Muslim regions were finally stabilised after a long and bloody conflict. It cannot afford another destabilising development in those regions.

Second, should oil prices rise too fast and too high as a consequence of open hostilities, that might lead to more economic difficulties in the EU or even China, Japan and other powers with which Russia enjoys strong economic links. A weak EU or China would perform be more likely to reduce their economic ties with Russia.

### **Impact on Domestic Politics**

Finally, President Putin's focus is on 2024 when his current term of office ends. He is keenly aware that he must stimulate economic growth beyond the current 1% to meet and satisfy his people's needs and hence secure their support beyond 2024.

A war or escalating tensions in the Middle East between the US and Iran would only distract his attention and focus on domestic issues and not help him seal his political future beyond 2024.

In the final analysis, prolonged conflict between the US and Iran provides Russia with the opportunity to improve its relations with the West and ultimately lead to a normalisation with the West as a whole. This has been President Putin's goal since 2014. He appears to be a step closer to achieving it.

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