

## Trump stokes endless war: His attack on an Iranian military leader will come back to haunt him and us

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In his last State of the Union address, President Trump boldly stated that “great nations do not fight endless wars.” It was a statement in keeping with at least some of the rhetoric from the 2016 campaign. Taking aim at both Democratic and Republican administrations, he complained about Americans expending precious blood and treasure in Middle East conflicts, to the detriment of both U.S. interests and regional stability.

Trump’s decision to order the assassination of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassim Soleimani near the Baghdad Airport on Thursday, however, is likely to further draw the United States into the Middle Eastern morass. Tensions between the United States and Iran have now risen to new heights and the world is bracing for a violent Iranian response that could put U.S. forces in the region, and the many civilians likely to be caught in the cross-fire, in grave danger.

How did we get here? It all started with Trump’s reckless decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. That agreement (officially the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) obligated Iran to give up 98% of its stockpile of enriched uranium, two-thirds of its operating centrifuges, and to open itself up to the most intrusive UN inspections regime in the world, according to the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Trump, however, always *hated* the JCPOA — even though it was never clear that he understood what it actually did. Following months of secret meetings and negotiations, Secretary of State John Kerry presented the framework agreement on the evening of April 2, 2015, with the understanding that additional details would be worked out in the ensuing months.

But by the following day, on April 3, 2015, Trump had concluded that the deal was “terrible...for the United States and the world” and that it did “nothing but make Iran rich.” He predicted via Twitter that it would “lead to catastrophe.”

It was unsurprising, therefore, when he withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018. He did so despite assessments from the IAEA, the U.S. military and intelligence community, and allies and partners around the world, that Iran was fully complying with its stringent terms. The president then re-imposed crippling economic sanctions on the country as punishment for their compliance, thus denying Iran its side of the bargain. The Trump administration, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the lead, called it “maximum pressure.”

All the while, Trump and his allies insisted that pulling out of the deal would absolutely not put us on the path to war. That, they said, was ridiculous left-wing fearmongering.

For a full year following this, Iran continued to comply with the nuclear deal. Starting in fall of 2019, Iran began to make calculated violations in an attempt to pressure Europe, Russia, and China to revive the faltering accord, to no avail. Through it all, the Trump administration never gave Iran a viable diplomatic off-ramp — a set of compromises that would persuade Washington to lift sanctions and refrain from threatening military action.

Desperate under the weight of America's economic warfare, Iran then ratcheted up its provocations in the region, attacking oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, bombing a Saudi oil field, and even shooting down an unmanned U.S. drone flying within (or at least near) Iranian airspace.

In recent weeks, following a number of tit-for-tat bombings and the storming of the American Embassy in Baghdad, Iranian-backed Shia groups in Iraq began protesting the ongoing U.S. military presence in the country. Now, with the killing of Soleimani, we have a dramatic escalation and, possibly, an act of war.

In other words, Trump's "maximum pressure" strategy produced the exact opposite set of results than the administration's stated intentions. It has been an undeniable policy failure. Presuming, that is, that the ostensible object was to obtain a better nuclear deal with Iran. An alternative goal may be the collapse of the Iranian regime, a fantasy that Iran hawks have been entertaining ever since a popular revolution overthrew the U.S.-backed Shah in 1979.

Now the Trump administration appears to be tangled up in its own complex web of contradictory rhetoric, disparate and often reactive military operations, and grossly exaggerated perceptions of the Iranian threat. Lacking a clear path forward, or a coherent strategy, in which some combination of pressure and concessions convinces both sides to back away from the brink, Trump and his team seem trapped in a dangerous escalatory cycle, with no end in sight.

In other words, an endless war.

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