

With Soleimani's killing, US ups stakes in Middle East

By Wang Lincong

In the past few days, conflicts between the US and Iran over the killing of Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani continue to escalate rapidly and have reached the brink of full confrontation.

Currently, the biggest concern of the whole world is whether the tensions between Iran and the US will go out of control.

Some experts take the mutual retaliation as a prelude to war. Although neither Iran nor the US would like to take the initiative to start a war, the likelihood of local clashes turning into war still cannot be ruled out.

There are two reasons why US President Donald Trump took such extreme actions as assassinating an Iranian high-ranking military official.

First, the US is trying to continue suppressing Iran's influence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq. The assassination can be seen as reckoning for its previous setbacks in the region. But the US may hardly get what it wants through this kind of action.

Not only are Iran and Iraq close geographically, they are also bonded religiously and politically. About 60 to 70 percent of the population in Iraq are Shia Muslims, and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces are tightly related to Iran.

Therefore, Iran's influence on Iraq is all-round. It is basically impossible for the US to remove Iran's influence out of this region completely.

Second, Trump intended to divert domestic attention. Currently, Trump is facing impeachment as well as harsh criticisms for improper handling of the Korean and Iranian nuclear issues. By eliminating an Iranian high-profile military official, Trump can show how tough he is.

However, Trump is now facing more criticism from the US because of his impulsive decision. The assassination

of Soleimani has exposed the US to greater danger. As the US military has stepped up security of its forces in the Gulf region, particularly in Iraq, and heightened alert amid threats from Iran, the actual effect of the assassination was far from what it was intended to be.

On the surface, Trump's Middle East policy aims to strategically withdraw from the Middle East, but actually the US has gone deeper into the mire in the region. Trump did not fulfill his goal of a pullout from the Middle East, but has sent more forces there and risks being dragged into war.

Iran's revenge is expected. What the US did will have a profound impact on its relations with Iran. The deterioration of bilateral relations and the escalation of their confrontation have already become irreversible.

So far, except Israel, other Middle Eastern countries have shown a cautious attitude toward the feud between US and Iran, which indicates it is highly likely that the killing may evolve into war. The delicate balance between US maximum pressure and Iran's ultimate resistance may be broken due to the incident.

As one of the US most important allies in the Middle East, Israel sides with the US. But it also worries that it will be heavily affected if the situation gets worse, which is a reason why Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly cut his Greece visit short and returned to Israel.

In this conflict between Iran and the US, Israel probably provided assistance. However in the meantime, it should guard against potential attacks from Syria and Lebanon and not underestimate Iran's influence in the Middle East.

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Piling pressure on Iran doesn't benefit US in anyway

By Shu Meng

The targeted elimination by the US of a senior Iranian military figure has stirred a hornet's nest in the Middle East, sparking a groundswell of anti-US sentiment in the region already reeling under geopolitical tensions. Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a commander of Iraq's Shia Hashd al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Units, and two other militia leaders loyal to Tehran, were killed in an airstrike in Baghdad on January 3.

The killing of Soleimani has escalated tensions between the US and Iran. "World War III" has become a top-trending search term as the contradiction between a global superpower and a regional power intensifies.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on January 3 that Iranians' resistance "will continue with a doubled motivation." There is, of course, little chance that the assassination will directly lead to a full-scale war.

The confrontation between the US and Iran has become normal under the US policy of "maximum pressure" on Tehran since Donald Trump became US president. After withdrawing from Iran nuclear deal in 2018, Washington has stepped up sanctions against Tehran, upgrading from conventional to economic measures and including individuals and entities. The US intends to bring down the Iranian government by striking at its fiscal revenue, economy and the livelihood.

However, the sanctions did not receive expected results. Although sanctions have affected its economy, Teheran still holds a hard-line position. Pressures piled by the US have reinforced cohesion among Iranians.

US maximum pressure policy toward Iran has met considerable opposition among US allies, who want to deal with the issue under the framework of

the Iranian nuclear deal. The disadvantages of US maximum pressure policy have far outweighed the gains so far.

In addition, a large-scale war is not an optimal option for both Washington and Tehran. Waging a war is costly for the US. Iran, which holds the biggest and most advanced missile arsenal in the Middle East and the largest standing army in the region, is capable of being a great military power. Although US military clout far exceeds that of Iran, in the era of advanced military technology, the US is reluctant to launch another war.

Furthermore, US presidential election is to be held later in 2020. Trump prefers to use military measures to divert domestic political attention and buttress his political position, but he is not willing to risk US public concern on national security by waging a war against Iran.

Therefore, the US will continue to use the policy of maximum pressure, but will not easily cross the line. In addition, once a war breaks out between Washington and Tehran, oil price will rise sharply and the Federal Reserve's monetary policy will be affected. At that time, both the US and Iran will suffer.

Iran has been showing a tough attitude toward the US, threatening to revenge Soleimani's killing, but Iran's official statement has left some leeway, noting Iran has never and will never seek war, yet the US "should accept appropriate reactions to their actions."

Under US sanctions, Iran's economic development has been severely affected with increasing social instability. At this point, an all-out war with the US will only exacerbate Iran's plight.

However, it is worth noting that under maximum pressure by the US, struggling bilateral ties have reached a critical point. Iran's announcement that it will no longer observe limitations on its capacity for enrichment means the country will no longer be bound by any restrictions imposed by the 2015 nuclear deal.

The possibility of resuming negotiations between the two sides has therefore been further reduced. Security and stability in the entire Gulf region is in a precarious state.

Soleimani's death will once again drag the US and Iran into a vicious cycle of revenge. The situation in the Middle East is sensitive, fragile, complicated and constantly changing. A slight move in one part may affect the entire region. Against this backdrop, even if all parties are reluctant to start a war, tensions and turbulence in the region are at a risk of snowballing any time.

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