



Trump's Rubicon Moment with Iran Might Benefit European Diplomacy

By Guillaume Xavier-Bender

President Donald Trump's decision to order the killing of Iranian General Qassim Suleimani on January 3 brought the world to the brink of a war nobody really wants. Five days later, Iran retaliated by launching missiles against coalition troops stationed in Iraq – fortunately with no casualties. No proxies this time. No shadows. The United States and Iran were directly engaged in conventional warfare, targeting not drones nor ships nor networks, but soldiers. While the worst seems to have been avoided for now, the situation remains tense and highly uncertain. Restrain from both sides might have played a role in avoiding further escalation. But it is a tireless Europe that has stepped up to prevent the region from spiraling into chaos. Europe was indeed instrumental in convincing all those involved of the need to keep a space open for diplomacy. Somehow, multilateralism helped. And as tensions fade without disappearing, Europe may find itself in a position where it can capitalize on the momentum it created.

The EU should continue to call for a regional political solution in the region. The consequences of Suleimani's killing are far reaching, from the risk of further action by pro-Iran factions against U.S. and European assets, to the future of the presence of foreign troops in Iraq. This crisis has also shown that neither the United States nor Iran want a full-scale confrontation, nor do their allies in the region. Saudi Arabia's concern that it would be dragged into a crisis that would directly affect its own interests is telling—a concern that seemed to have preceded Suleimani's killing, as he was in Baghdad to try to ease tensions between Teheran and Riyadh. A European-led framework for a political solution in the region may therefore be welcome, and well timed. Such an initiative should nonetheless remain distinct from the non-proliferation agenda regarding Iran's nuclear program.

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The EU and its member states should renew their support to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The announcement by France, Germany and the United Kingdom that they are triggering the Dispute Resolution Mechanism is a clear indication of their commitment to the deal. Iran's announcement that it will no longer



respect the agreed limits on the number of centrifuges it can operate is worrying, but this should not distract from the overarching goal of preserving the deal and its multilateral approach. As much as possible, upcoming discussions among parties also need to avoid focusing on tensions between Iran and the United States. By inviting Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to come to Brussels, the European Commission reasserted its dedication in finding a diplomatic solution with Iran. The deal is not yet dead, and Teheran has been careful in quickly confirming that it will continue to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Unless the next IAEA inspector's report, due in February, shows grave violations by Iran of its commitments, the EU's support of the deal is unlikely to waver. In the meantime, it should capitalize on the recent tensions to convince Iran of the strategic value of fully complying with a multilateral agreement that not only commits the EU itself, but also Russia and China.

Finally, the EU should look into adjusting its positioning towards the United States' policy on Iran. This will be delicate, but the status quo is no longer tenable. President Trump's decision to order the strike on Suleimani without consulting allies has yet again confirmed his preference for immediate tactical wins over long-term strategic objectives. While, in a timid show of support for Washington, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom ended up condemning the negative role Iran has played in the region under Soleimani's leadership, the reality of the situation is that they were kept in the dark concerning a military operation that could have had a direct impact on European interests and lives in the region.

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TEuropean countries now find themselves in a conundrum: on the one hand, transatlantic cooperation is essential to the fight against terrorism and to contain Iran's influence in the region; on the other hand, U.S. policy on Iran is undermining EU diplomatic efforts to tackle the nuclear threat and to restore stability in the region. The transatlantic relationship is strained enough already that any attempts to oppose President Trump on this might only make things worse. Yet, European countries need to better assert the fundamental role they can play in trying to find a diplomatic resolution to issues of concern with Iran, just like President Emmanuel Macron did during the Biarritz G7 summit by taking the initiative to invite Foreign Minister Zarif for talks, regardless of a possible U.S. backlash.

Such role for the EU will be all the more essential as de-escalation is underway. Indeed, Iran's immediate retaliation reflected a calculated compromise, neither too strong as to trigger a U.S. response, nor too weak as to downplay the symbolic and operational significance of Suleimani's killing. Yet it would be naive to believe that this will be it, and that "all is well" as President Trump tweeted. Iran's response is likely to continue in the coming weeks and months through proxies, and the use of less conventional means, including cyberattacks. It will once again take all of Europe's diplomatic efforts to help contain the situation.

Julius Caesar is said to have thought thoroughly about the consequences of what he was about to do before crossing the Rubicon with his legions nearly 2070 years ago, setting in motion the end of Rome's republic and the advent of its empire. He knew that so much would be left to chance and fortune, and that there would be no turning back. It is unlikely that President Trump thought thoroughly about the consequences of what he was about to do when he ordered the killing of Qassim Suleimani. But like Julius Caesar, there would be no turning back, and he had to leave a part of it to chance. And in his case, to Europe. *Alea jacta est. The die is cast.*

Transatlantic Take

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