Russian Reactions to the U.S. Strike on Soleimani

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Brief Analysis

State officials and media are condemning the incident, but Putin is well aware that his fragile role as regional mediator depends on treading carefully around Washington's unpredictability.

In the days since the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, officials in Moscow have lamented his loss and decried the U.S. operation as an "adventurous" move that will lead to regional destabilization. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the strike a gross violation of international norms, much like his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif. Senator Alexey Pushkov tweeted that the killing was an American attempt to maintain its grip Iraq after "losing" Syria; he also argued that the United States is closer to war with Iran than it has been in the past forty years.

President Vladimir Putin has yet to address the crisis publicly, though a Kremlin statement noted that he spoke over the phone with his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron after the strike. According to the statement, Macron initiated the call, and both leaders expressed "concern" over the killing. Putin also invited German chancellor Angela Merkel to visit Moscow for discussions on Iran. In the meantime, he made a surprise trip to Damascus today—purportedly to highlight improvements in "restoring Syrian statehood and territorial integrity," but more likely due to his concerns about fallout from the Soleimani situation.

In carrying out Russian policy in the Middle East, Putin has always leaned closer to the Iran-Syria bloc. In particular, deploying forces to protect the Assad regime has brought the Russian-Iranian partnership to unprecedented heights. Putin ordered that move in September 2015, only a few months after Soleimani visited Moscow and presumably helped shape the intervention's first steps. Fast-forward four years and Russia is still defending Iran's military presence in Syria, as seen last June when top security advisor Nikolai Patrushev reiterated that stance at a U.S.-Russia-Israel summit in Jerusalem. It comes as no surprise, then, that Russia's state-controlled press is now highlighting Soleimani's domestic Iranian reputation as a hero who fought the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

Moscow's condemnation of the American strike is equally predictable. Putin fears what he perceives as a U.S.-led campaign of regime change around the world, including within Russia itself, and that fear colors his interpretation of U.S. actions. Moreover, being able to predict the moves of rival nations is important to the Kremlin. Thus, Soleimani's unexpected killing was unnerving both as a possible harbinger of Iranian regime change and as a testament to American unpredictability.

Despite the state's far-reaching control over media coverage of the assassination, some Russian commentators have gone against the grain. Boris Vishnevsky, a deputy from the liberal opposition party Yabloko, wrote that Moscow should not accuse others of breaching international law and killing sovereign officials given its own annexation of Crimea, its assassination-by-poison plots in foreign countries, and its elimination of Chechen officials after signing peace agreements with them. Leonid Gozman, another opposition politician, wrote that America "should be thanked" for taking Soleimani out because he was guilty of killing people and threatening to destroy other states.

Journalist Arkady Dubnov offered a different take, suggesting that Moscow's official reaction hides a more complex reality. According to him, the Kremlin received news of Soleimani's killing with a mixture of "satisfaction, envy, and admiration"— satisfaction because his elimination will weaken Iran's position in the region and thus elevate Russia's; envy because the United States demonstrated it is still the leader of the global order; and admiration because the operation was "efficient, targeted, and lightning fast."

Yet the most relevant question remains unanswered: what will Moscow actually do besides warn of "grave consequences"? Some in the U.S. government and abroad believe that Russia and Iran have increasingly been competing against one another in Syria. On the military front, Syria's irregular National Defense Forces and Shia militias have become more beholden to Tehran, while the Assad regime's regular army forces are still working closely with Moscow. On the economic front, Moscow monopolized Syria's phosphate industry in June 2018 and reportedly pushed Iran out of that market.

Despite such competition, there were no indications prior to Soleimani's death that Moscow wanted to push Iranian forces out of Syria (assuming it was even capable of doing so). Whatever the complexities of their bilateral relationship, Russia and Iran's common geostrategic goal of reducing American influence has kept them together and will likely continue to do so in the future, despite their tactical differences and periodic friction.

Yet Soleimani's killing will still present challenges to Putin given his reliance on Iran's help in propping up Bashar al-Assad. If Iran is weakened, Moscow risks getting bogged down in the type of costly quagmire it has worked hard to avoid. Recent articles in state-run media indicate that this issue is on the Kremlin's mind; for instance, RIA Novosti quoted Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi's statement that Soleimani's death will not affect bilateral coordination in Syria.

Yet Putin's biggest worry right now is who the United States might come after next. Despite his unequivocal support for Assad's "legitimate" government, Putin generally presents himself as a neutral arbiter in the Middle East, and going too far in openly supporting Iran or any other side risks upsetting that balance. Thus, even amid the chorus of anger over Soleimani's killing, RIA Novosti took care to highlight that regional players Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have each called for restraint despite their "difference in positions…regarding Iran." Going forward, Putin will likely keep trying to play mediator, contrasting his efforts with the instability and conflict that the United States supposedly brings. His success may depend on how Washington manages the aftermath of its hit on Soleimani. And insofar as Moscow can burnish its powerbroker credentials without committing too many resources, Soleimani's death might also give it further leverage over Iran in Syria. All in all, however, the latest twist leaves Putin with more problems than opportunities

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