

Soleimani Fallout Continues to Produce Diplomatic Dividends for Russia

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By [Padraig McGrath](#)

Global Research, January 16, 2020

Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),

[Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

Ahead of this year's Munich Security Conference, due to begin on February 14th, its chairman Wolfgang Ischinger praised what he called President Putin's "method" concerning security-issues in the Middle East. Talking to the ZDF television channel on January 13th, Ischinger said that managing ME-security required "political power of persuasion, clever diplomacy and military support if necessary....This is the method that Putin is using to ensure his influence in Syria, Libya and certainly in the situation around Iran."

Such remarks feature a highly practiced, polished level of banality. They are quite intentionally devoid of detail. In that regard, of course, they are not supposed to be read as analytical remarks, but as diplomatic signals.

Primarily, the most loud and clear signal contained above is a dig at President Trump.

This quickly follows Angela Merkel's highly fruitful meeting with President Putin on January 11th, after which both leaders confirmed that the Nord Stream 2 project would press ahead in spite of US sanctions. Chancellor Merkel also said that she hoped Russian-Turkish attempts to broker peace-talks would be successful, and announced that Libyan ceasefire talks would soon take place in Berlin. She also said that it was an "important step" that the Iranian government had admitted that the January 8th crash of Ukrainian Airlines Flight 752 had been the result of an "unintentional human error" on the part of Iranian military personnel.

2 more clear signals, delivered like knives to Dim Donnie's heart.

With the fallout from the Soleimani-assassination not yet settled, the temptation for European political and diplomatic figures to signal disdain for Trump by love-bombing Putin seems irresistible at the moment. It's like watching a few 16 year-old kids setting jealousy-traps for each other in your garden-variety teenage love-triangle. It's quite amusing.

"I think that Brandon's new smartphone is cooler than Jimmy's," says Ashley....

Of course, we know it'll all be different next week, but middle-aged dads still find the silliness of it all comedic.

It is almost impossible to overstate the seriousness of Trump's miscalculation concerning

the Soleimani assassination, and the manner that his stance toward Iran has unfolded since then. Even Benjamin Netanyahu took pains to publicly distance himself from that decision, stating that Israeli politicians should stay out of the discussion. Given that the United Kingdom is the United States' most uncritically subservient ally, Boris Johnson's public criticism of Trump's threat to bomb Iranian historical and cultural sites was also noteworthy.

Was this another signal?

Not exclusively. While Johnson would not be in the least bit concerned about the prospect of a military skirmish around Hormuz resulting in fatalities, apart from its economic consequences, he is still proud of being a trained classicist – the prospect of bombing an ancient archaeological site probably offends his basic sense of human decency even more than the prospect of war itself.

Nonetheless, everyone is perfectly well aware that war with Iran could very well trigger a global economic depression, and that is the factor which principally determines the reactions of US-allies' to Trump's hair-brained belligerence toward Iran.

And, regardless of the highly publicized personal antagonisms which have characterized Merkel's relationships with Putin in the past, Nord Stream 2 is still a no-brainer, with or without US sanctions. Liquefied natural gas exported from the US to the EU is 30% more expensive than Russian gas. It's just not competitive. It's that simple. The fact that the German government has decided to abandon nuclear energy, which currently accounts for 34% of German domestic electricity-production, makes this point even more crucial. In the long term, personal antagonisms are trivial – the bottom line will ultimately determine long-term policy.

In my younger days, I used to play chess in tournaments. Most ordinary, club-level, tournament chess-players will insist on the wisdom of the maxim that you should play the board, not the opponent. It doesn't matter who your opponent is, or what kind of personality they have. Chess is mathematics, not psychology. Play the board-position on its strategic merits, and forget about absolutely everything else. Play the board!

The Ukrainian crisis was deliberately engineered, among very many other factors, in order to disrupt gas-transit through Ukraine. Nord Stream 2 circumvents that point of rupture, so the US tries to shut it down with sanctions. That doesn't work either. The 30% price-differential is simply too wide for sanctions to disincentivize it.

Under the Obama administration, the US effectively lost geo-strategic control over Turkey and the Philippines. Those losses of territory were made possible only by massive blunders. Under the Trump administration, the US is in the process of gradually losing geo-strategic control over Germany, having already decisively alienated France, which will make it increasingly difficult to maintain any meaningful geo-strategic foothold in western Eurasia.

Who's left? Poland? Banderastan?

But then again, until 2016, liberal universalism was the ideological glue which held the western alliance together. Trump's election meant that it was always on borrowed time.

With these factors considered, we might ask how much difference the assassination of General Soleimani really made to US-EU relations. Yes, it was jaw-droppingly reckless and

strategically pointless. Yes, it severely alienated many US-allies. However, from the perspective of the United States' continental European allies, we have to ask, was it merely an incidental moment of realization? We have to expect that the macro-economic fundamentals would have forced an epiphany sooner or later. The Soleimani assassination, as fundamentally reckless as it was, essentially did nothing to change the positions of any on the pieces on the geo-strategic chessboard. It merely acted as an incidental cognitive trigger, whereupon some of the players woke up to the board-position a little sooner.

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This article was originally published on [InfoBrics](#).

Padraig McGrath is a political analyst.

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