

Experts: Killing of Iranian Commander Sends Message to North Korea



FILE - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un guides the test-firing of a new weapon, in this undated photo released on August 11, 2019, by North Korean Central News Agency.

WASHINGTON - U.S. efforts to deal with Iran in the coming days could divert its attention from Pyongyang, meanwhile the killing of Iran's top military general by the U.S. could prompt North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to reassess how willing the U.S. is to use force, experts said.

"North Korea may get put on the back burner," said Robert Manning, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, as the Trump administration becomes occupied with possible Iranian retaliation in the Middle East.

The U.S. killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani Friday with an airstrike at the Baghdad airport. Soleimani was the commander of Iran's Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the chief strategist of Iran's military influence in the Middle East and the architect of major operations of Iranian forces over the past two decades.



Burning debris is seen on a road near the Baghdad International Airport that Iraqi paramilitary groups said was caused by three rockets hitting the airport, Jan. 3, 2020. (Iraqi Security Cell/Reuters)

President Donald Trump authorized the attack amid rising tensions between Washington and Tehran. Soleimani "killed or badly wounded thousands of Americans over an extended period of time, and was plotting to kill many more," Trump said via Twitter Friday.

The U.S. and Iran have been competing to exert influence in the Middle East and tension between the two has been growing over Iran's nuclear program and U.S. withdrawal from a landmark 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

On Friday, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called for retaliation against the United States. Soleimani's death is expected to have an effect across the region.

US attention

Iran could take the U.S.'s attention away from North Korea as Pyongyang seeks to raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula, said David Maxwell, a former U.S. Special Forces colonel who served on the Combined Forces Command of the U.S and South Korea.

"Kim is not going to be happy with all the attention focused on Iran when he was trying to execute a large-scale information and influence campaign against the U.S. and the international community to get sanctions lifted," he said.

This week, Kim vowed to "actively push forward the project for developing strategic weapons." North Korea's aim to develop weapons is believed to be for escalating threats on the Korean Peninsula to increase leverage over the U.S. to extract sanctions relief.

North Korea has been demanding that the U.S. lift sanctions since Kim met with Trump at their Hanoi Summit last February. The summit broke down when Trump rejected Kim's proposal for partial denuclearization in exchange for sanctions relief.

While the talks remained stalled, North Korea has conducted 13 missile tests since May in an effort to pressure the U.S. to lift sanctions.

Change of thinking

Experts said the U.S. killing of the Iranian general could change North Korea's thinking about the U.S. ability to use force.

"The attack tells adversaries like North Korea to reassess [its] assumptions about U.S. actions moving up the escalatory ladder," said Ken Gause, director of the adversary analytics program at CNA.

“Trump, more so than previous presidents,” he added, “is not averse to doing decapitation strikes and focused assassinations.”

U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper Thursday said the U.S. could use a military option on North Korea if necessary.

“We think the best path forward, with regard to North Korea, is a political agreement that denuclearizes the peninsula,” Esper said in an interview with Fox News. “But that said, we remain, from a military perspective, ready to fight tonight, as need be.”

The Pentagon recently released a photo of U.S. and South Korean special forces conducting drills simulating raids on North Korean facilities aimed at taking out its top officials.

“It will be interesting to speculate if [Kim] thinks something like this [the U.S. killing of the Iranian general] could happen to him or if his paranoia would lead him to think that Trump is somehow sending him a message,” Maxwell said.

“We should look for [North Korea’s] responses in the coming days,” he added.

This story was originated on VOA’s Korean Service.

Source:

<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/experts-killing-iranian-commander-sends-message-north-korea>

[Disclaimer]