

## **Ottawa does not need to blindly support the U.S. in its approach to Iran**

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More than 12 hours after Iranian ballistic missiles struck Iraqi bases housing American troops – a response to the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani – U.S. President Donald Trump assured Americans that “Iran appears to be standing down.” While not ruling out further action, he suggested a path forward: more economic sanctions, European withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal, and “much more” involvement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Middle East process, presumably on American terms.

As a member of NATO, Canada has an obligation to participate in the collective defense of all members. But while membership requires loyalty to allies as dictated by Article 5, it does not require blindness to rogue behaviour. Obligations notwithstanding, Canada retains decision-making autonomy as to whether, to what extent and with what means it should come to the aid of any NATO member. We should use that flexibility to think twice about endorsing any American belligerence and policy in the Middle East.

We have faced a similar choice before. In 2003, Washington and a too-deferential London pressed Canada to support the invasion of Iraq, arguably the worst foreign policy decision any U.S. administration has ever made. Canada nevertheless consulted its values, assessed the facts and refused to go to war, in an unpopular but courageous act of statesmanship by Jean Chretien’s government.

Rarely are such decisions so quickly and thoroughly vindicated. Just a year later, Washington’s justification for going to war had evaporated. There were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, no connection to al-Qaeda, no link to 9/11. It was all a fraud that culminated in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. My Egyptian counterpart had warned Colin Powell on the fateful day the then-U.S. secretary of state briefed the UN Security Council that the U.S. might prevail militarily, but it would take 60 years for stability to return to the Middle East, and 600 years for Arabs to forget what the U.S. had done.

There is plenty of blame to go around. Mr. Trump lays all of the blame for current tensions on Iran: the attacks on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, the bombing of Saudi oilfields, the shooting down of U.S. drones, the backstopping of the murderous Assad regime in Syria, the support for Houthi rebels in Yemen, the death of a U.S. contractor in Iraq, the attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and the support for militias in the region. U.S. intelligence’s new “high level of confidence” that an Iranian missile unintentionally downed a passenger plane, killing everyone on board including at least 63 Canadians, adds to the toll of blood and innocents.

But he neglects the other side of the balance sheet: the U.S. withdrawal from a nuclear disarmament agreement with Iran negotiated by Barack Obama’s administration, which Mr. Trump has been only too happy to turn into a political cudgel; the “maximum pressure”

campaign designed to crush the Iranian economy; the threats of nuclear war. Now, after assassinating a top Iranian leader, his administration has made (and then retracted) threats to destroy historic cultural sites, as if taking a page from the Taliban and Islamic State playbooks.

All of this plays out against a history of U.S. interference in Iran: the 1953 CIA-run coup against the democratically elected Mosaddegh government; political and material support for Saddam Hussein in his eight-year war on Iran that killed more than a half-million Iranians; the shooting-down of Iran Air Flight 655 by a U.S. warship in 1988, killing all 290 civilians on board. These are all things that Mr. Trump's base, like the man himself, can be counted on to know nothing about.

Even as tensions appear set to de-escalate, Mr. Trump's call for increased involvement by NATO suggests we are not out of the woods. It is worth recalling therefore the lessons Ottawa learned in 2003. First and foremost, values matter in foreign policy. Reduced to its basics, participation in the 2003 Iraq war would have meant sending young Canadians to kill, and be killed by, young Iraqis solely for the sake of maintaining cordial relations with Washington. A war with Tehran would likely be worse. Second, going along to get along has never made for good public policy, or ultimately good politics. Finally, we should not shrink from disagreeing with the Americans when we believe they are wrong any more than we should hesitate to agree with them when they are right. We should call them as we see them.

We did so on Iraq, and we were vindicated. We should do the same with Iran.