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Trump may seem crazy, but he is not (always) mad



To many, President Trump seems to be a king of chaos – even more so following the US assassination of Iran’s General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad at the beginning of the year. [Inderjeet Parmar](#) writes that despite this view, there is frequently more to the Trump administration’s actions than normally meets the eye. Chaos and madness even if only projected have their uses, he writes, but also can have real world consequences.

The swirl of controversy surrounding the [Donald Trump-ordered assassination](#) of Iran’s General Qassem Soleimani based on an unspecified “imminent” threat to US assets, citizens, or forces, and the various convoluted, ambiguous and contradictory statements from the Pentagon, state department and White House, and rather smug questioning by prominent reporters of what the administration defines as “imminent”, clouds significant fundamentals when it comes to understanding the Trump ‘administration’.

Kings of chaos Trump-ists may be, but there is frequently more to this than normally meets the eye. Chaos and madness, projected or real, has many uses. As Niccolo Machiavelli [argued](#) centuries ago, it may be wise, from time to time, to “simulate madness”. President Dwight Eisenhower practised it to force an armistice in the Korean War. President Richard Nixon, who served two terms as Eisenhower’s vice president, used ‘[madman](#)’ theory as a rational weapon to project irrationality when dealing with his foes in the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

Madness does not have to be real to become real in its consequences, to have real world effects.

But an aura of permanent madness can also be misinterpreted as genuine madness or ‘adventurism’, as the Iranian administration claims (in part) led to the downing of the Ukrainian airliner in Tehran. Of such miscalculations are tragedies made, including major wars especially in a region beset from one end to the other with manoeuvring armies, navies, air forces, militias, paramilitaries, terror groups, guerrilla units, private military contractors, and lone actors such conditions nourish.

An aura of madness, eccentricity, arbitrariness, reversals of previously stated positions and statements, and even more chaos – real and falsely projected – is a hallmark of the Trump administration. It has become almost its standard operating procedure with every other state, friend or foe.

But it is not all that it seems: it is too easy to throw our hands in the air and cry “crazy” and explore just how crazy things have become.

The imminence of threats

The “imminence” of Iranian threats is a case in point. In pursuing the administration on this question, it has hardly been noted that “imminent threat” is being claimed by the administration because it’s the minimum self-defence requirement for a military attack by one state on another under international law. The historic legal authority regarding imminent threat in international law was established by the [Caroline case](#) (1837-38) that there must exist “*a necessity of self-defence, instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment of deliberation,*” and furthermore that any action taken must be proportional, “since the act justified by the necessity of self-defence, must be *limited by that necessity, and kept clearly within it.*”

It is the absence of any concrete proof of imminent threat from Iran towards US assets, persons or territory that makes America’s attack on the sovereign territory of Iraq illegal, and justifies Iraq’s [complaint](#) to the UN Security Council and secretary-general Antonio Guterres.

No proof of imminent threat has been provided thus far; just statements that contradict one another which have been skilfully picked apart. CNN’s White House correspondent Jim Acosta summed up the situation succinctly via a tweet.

Admin inconsistent on Iran over last 24 hrs. Trump said: “they were looking to blow up our embassy.”
Then admin said Trump talking about storming of embassy. Then DOD said there was embassy plot.
Then Pompeo on Fox: “We don’t know precisely when and we don’t know precisely where”

— Jim Acosta (@Acosta) [January 10, 2020](#)

Such reporting is absolutely necessary and informative – but the near-universal focus on basic levels of Trump’s ‘incompetence’, ‘lack of planning’, undefined strategy, end goal of ‘maximum pressure’, and a rational means-end analysis and action, is too narrow a lens; it obscures a broader analysis, constricts the frame to the usual Trump-induced chaos narrative.

This is part of a political strategy championed by the mainstream of the Democratic party that argues, in effect, that since Trump is the problem his removal will restore ‘normalcy’. Things were fine till he messed them up.

What of General Soleimani’s assassination? In law and convention, including during inter-state warfare, it is explicitly illegal under the 1907 Hague Convention and the 1998 Rome Statute. During peacetime, the assassination or extrajudicial execution of political opponents is illegal, a violation of the human right to life as enshrined in Article 6 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).



“President Trump Delivers Remarks” by [The White House](#) is [Public Domain](#).

The interesting thing is the use since the Bush-Obama eras of the term, “targeted killing” – acts for which Israel was condemned by the US in the 1980s and 1990s but which have become conventionally accepted and practised by US presidents.

A [New York Times report](#) on January 11 said that planning Soleimani’s assassination began several months ago after broad agreement within the administration, including the CIA, secretary of state Mike Pompeo and John Bolton as the-then national security advisor. This is illegal. Assassination violates the US Constitution and US law, as well as international law. According to the Bill of Rights, “No person shall ... be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.”

The 1975 US Senate Committee chaired by Frank Church exposed CIA assassination plots against a number of foreign leaders, forcing President Gerald Ford to sign [Executive Order 11905](#): “No employee of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination.”

But with President Trump, the narrowest political calculation is never far from mind: the [New York Times notes](#) that, “He [Trump] told some associates that he wanted to preserve the support of Republican hawks in the Senate in the coming impeachment trial.” If true, not only did domestic political calculations play a significant role in this crime, it shows that Trump is capable of marrying the criminal plans of the broader national security establishment – those he derides as the ‘deep state’ – with his own narrower personal-political interests.

Lawlessness in the interests of power in the self-declared, and receding, rules-based order.

The world awaits to see if this matter is investigated by the House of Representatives and further ventilated in the upcoming impeachment trial of President Trump in the Senate.

A wider angle framing

What might a wider angle or framing reveal? Quite a lot. One step removed from the exclusive attention to Soleimani's assassination, we should recall the simultaneous killing of the deputy head of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). In addition, as revealed by the [Washington Post](#), US forces tried (unsuccessfully) to assassinate another senior Iran's Quds Force official in the Yemen at the same as the strike on Soleimani.

We also missed Israel's attacks on the [Popular Mobilization Forces](#) – Shiite forces that are officially part of the Iraqi National Army, normally described as Iran-backed – on the Iraq-Syria border. US forces also [struck Taliban forces](#) near the Iran border with Afghanistan earlier this week. Oh, and [Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Erdogan inaugurated](#) the Turkstream pipelines that will supply Russian gas directly to Turkey and other European countries, bypassing Ukraine, just as the Nordstrom pipeline does between Russia and Germany, much to the US's chagrin. The Trump administration and Congress (both chambers) via the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA 2020) are applying sanctions on Turkey for the pipeline and Erdogan's purchase of Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft missile system.

Turkey, a member of NATO, is moving too close to Russia for America's liking. Tellingly, Erdogan moved towards buying Russia's missile system only after the attempted coup against him in 2016, under the Obama dispensation.

In December 2019, several Islamic states – including Iran, Turkey, Qatar (Pakistan and Indonesia withdrew following Saudi pressure) – met in Malaysia to create a new formation to contest the domination of the Islamic world by Saudi Arabia via the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

With a still wider angle, Indian [political analyst Dr Atul Bhardwaj argues](#) that American and Israeli attacks on Iran and its allies are targeted on preventing Iranian plans to build through Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese ports a land-bridge to the Mediterranean.

Why does that matter? Because it [strengthens an official enemy state](#), and it may threaten America's closest ally, Israel. In addition, it renders obsolete, or at least less effective, American naval supremacy in the Gulf and elsewhere.

Naval powers don't like rivals building land-bridges: as Bhardwaj argues, just bear in mind British opposition to the German plans for the Berlin-Baghdad railway in the run up to, if not a key cause of, the First World War.

The madneses – real or affected – of the Trump administration require careful attention and contextualisation in real time breadth and historical depth. Because hidden therein lies the more interesting finding that Trump, while certainly unique of style and desire for personalist-authoritarian government, at a particularly volatile time in world and domestic politics, bears greater resemblance to his predecessors than his mainstream detractors care to admit.

- A version of this article first appeared at [The Wire](#).

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