Time Is Now to Scale Back the Saber-Rattling Rhetoric

By RICHARD CHERWITZ

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Iran’s Jan. 7 ballistic missile strike against bases housing U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq was carefully calibrated, clearly owned, highly symbolic, proportional, limited and with what appears thus far to be no resulting American casualties.

As a scholar of political communication for over 40 years, it is clear that from a rhetorical perspective, the verbal message issued by Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was strategically crafted, making it easier for President Donald Trump to do nothing in response.

In a tweet shortly following the missile strike, Zarif succinctly proclaimed: “Iran took & concluded proportionate measures in self-defense under Article 51 of UN Charter targeting base from which
cowardly armed attack against our citizens & senior officials were launched. We do not seek escalation or war, but will defend ourselves against any aggression.” His use of the phrase “concluded proportionate measures in self-defense” was deliberate and telling.

What is noteworthy is that President Donald Trump’s subsequent decision not to deliver a speech to the American people after consulting with Secretary of State (Mike) Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and members of the national defense team, as well as to take no additional action, was in essence a move toward de-escalation.

Trump’s optimistic, though chest-thumping, message following Zarif’s response suggests this was indeed a move to de-escalate the crisis. In a late-night tweet, Trump bragged: “All is well! Missiles launched from Iran at two military bases located in Iraq. Assessment of casualties & damages taking place now. So far, so good! We have the most powerful and well equipped military anywhere in the world, by far! I will be making a statement tomorrow morning.”

If, in fact, this was a deliberate effort by the commander-in-chief to scale back his rhetoric, we should be thankful.

Sadly, however, Iraq is the battlefield, being caught in the middle between the U.S. and Iran. They now will increasingly turn against the U.S. which, of course, is what Iran wants and will create ongoing instability.
In short, it must be admitted that Iran behaved in a more calculated and rational manner than Trump and certainly more than many would have predicted. They provided the U.S. an off ramp from a crisis Trump created and perpetuated as a result of the president’s hasty and less-than-careful decision-making, as well his constant saber rattling — a crisis that for days spiraled and of which the president had lost control.

Hopefully, Trump will not take a victory lap in the days to come.

Assuming he resists this irresistible tendency and usual habit, a cataclysmic event may temporarily have been averted.

The turmoil, however, is far from over. Proxy groups undoubtedly will respond and the region will remain unstable until Iran and the U.S. can come to the negotiating table — something that thus far has not been possible.

To accomplish this will require Trump to tone down his rhetoric and for him to repair the damaged relationship with our allies. In short, it will necessitate him behaving like a president, acting primarily on behalf of the American people rather than his own selfish interests. I wish I could be more optimistic that he will do so.

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