

FOREIGN POLICY AND SELECTIVE ASSASSINATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE BIN LADEN AND SOLEIMANI CASES

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Introduction

After 9/11, the United States began to prioritize a foreign policy aimed at eliminating terrorist groups. The protection of national borders and international security drove the military actions carried out from that moment on. However, the difficulty in identifying a diffuse non-state threat and its implications made the ongoing military actions extend over the years. With support from more than half of the American population (Schaeffer 2022), they began in 2001 and officially ended only in 2021. As in previous wars, the spoils of the war on terror affected the presidents' popularity. The extent and use of considerable numbers of military personnel in the conflicts resulted in the wearing down of public opinion, with frequent casualties of American soldiers. However, recent technological advances have enabled the USA to rely on a key asset: drone strikes in the fight against terrorism. The level of precision of this device favors a decrease in casualties and a reduction in the material costs of armed interventions, making it seem possible to put an end to military actions that are so costly in human lives and material losses to incumbent governments.

The selective assassination of a particular enemy in an orderly fashion has become a foreign policy strategy considered by U.S. presidents, having occurred with Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, a similar method for eliminating distinguished political leaders,

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a non-state actor and a statesman, respectively. Taking into consideration the motivations, repercussions, and consequences of using this strategy, what impacts did the decision-making generate for the governments of Barack Obama and Donald Trump?

Selective assassination as a foreign policy strategy of a State is still an under-explored topic in Political Science. The secretive nature of this type of operation limits its studies. Moreover, the use of drone strikes is a controversial topic. On one hand the expectation that targeted assassinations assist in defeating insurgencies in a given country and consequently reduce tensions in peacebuilding activities, on the other hand, field research points to negative outcomes of the use of drones. The reason for this conclusion would be that targeted killings using drones would affect the sense of fear in the population, as well as the existing social and economic disturbances in the local community, in addition to affecting institutions of governance (Page and Williams 2022).

However, when compared to traditional air power, remotely controlled drones offer strategic advantages in military operations in terms of persistence, lethality, and relative risk (Grieco and Hutto 2021). U.S. presidents have used this alternative primarily to eliminate terrorist groups. Since 2001, when the first drone attack was carried out in Afghanistan, presidents have authorized 414 attacks in Pakistan, 374 mixed operations in Yemen, and 253 in Somalia that involve this type of technology with air strikes or special troops (Bergen et al. 2021). However, despite these characteristics, Grieco and Hutto (2021) argue that the coercive effects that drones have are limited. Drones would be less effective in terms of clear communication, credibility, and assurance, making a successful act of coercion more difficult. Because of the mixed conclusions found in the literature, the debate on the importance of this strategy in counterterrorism remains.

Existing empirical evidence points to a relationship between drone use and the popularity of the president-in-office (Bodderly and Klein 2021). The terrorist threat arouses a sense of anger in individuals (Fisk et al. 2018), and is related to people's support for harsher counterterrorist tactics, regardless of their perception of the motivations of terrorist groups (Canetti et al. 2021). Support for armed drone use varies according to individual values, i.e., values more associated with tradition, security, and conformity are positively associated with support for armed drone use, while values closer to benevolence and universalism are negatively associated (O'Dwyer and Coymak 2020). Thus, if values that are more closely related to conservation (i.e., security, conformity, and tradition) predominate in the post-9/11 American population, we can expect greater support for the U.S. government's policy of

selective assassination in the fight against terrorism.

In this regard, what were the motivations, repercussions, and consequences of the use of selective assassination as a foreign policy strategy in the War on Terror? The purpose of this article is to evaluate the similarities and differences of the decision-making process of Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump in the selective assassinations of Al Qaeda terrorist leader Osama bin Laden and Iranian General Qassem Soleimani. The descriptive research design proposes a comparative analysis from official documents and speeches, among other primary and secondary sources. The research findings point to different decision-making styles of presidents and indicate how the impact of selective assassinations on foreign policy increases political and electoral gains in the short and medium terms, regardless of the president's party or political ideology in office.

The analysis is conducted in five parts. In the first part, we have gathered empirical evidence that points to the strategic use of targeted killings for electoral gains. In the second part, we discuss the theoretical concepts present in the motivations of governments after Schilling and Schilling (2016) and present the analyzed cases. In the third part, we analyze the decision-making process during the Obama government, specifically for the killing of bin Laden. In the fourth part, we conduct the same analysis of the decision-making process of the Soleimani assassination during the Trump government. Finally, in the final considerations, we discuss the main findings of the research and the contributions to the still-emerging literature on the topic.

Public opinion and the support for counterterrorist actions

Empirical evidence suggests that a successful drone strike against a terrorist target significantly increases the president's approval, even if the country's scenario is economically unfavorable, such as a weak economy and high unemployment. Therefore, the effect of the military use of drones on the president's approval is greater than when compared to the use of troops of soldiers to help fight terrorism, for example. Thus, a drone strike produces more positive electoral effects than a traditional diversionary force (Boddery and Klein 2021).

When people feel threatened by terrorism, they have higher levels of anger. Contrary to expectations, the feeling of fear is more related to economic-type threats. When comparing three countries - the United States, France, and Turkey - researchers find that the threat of terrorism is more likely to trigger

anger in individuals, while the economic threat is more likely to generate fear. In the USA, individuals exposed to a terrorist threat are more supportive of drone strikes when compared to individuals not exposed to the same threat. Thus, feelings of anger are related to a significant increase in support for drone use (Fisk et al. 2018).

Threat perception is correlated to the individuals' support for violent and restrictive counterterrorism measures (Ceccoli 2021). People support harsher counterterrorism tactics when they hold the perception that terrorists are motivated by hatred (compared to motivation by lack of opportunity). These perceptions can be changed when experts expose the real motives of the terrorist group, but this does not seem to affect the change in preference for a tougher counterterrorism policy (Canetti et al. 2021). This finding helps us better understand the public's support for the selective assassination actions ordered by U.S. presidents.

Looking deeper into public opinion, the researchers found significant differences. There is variation among individuals' values regarding foreign policy preferences, i.e., while values more associated with tradition, security, and conformity are positively associated with support for armed drone use, values closer to benevolence and universalism are negatively associated. Furthermore, women, compared to men, are less likely to support the strategy (O'Dwyer and Çoymak 2020). These results may indicate that in a scenario where there is a predominance of more conservation-related values in the post-9/11 American population, we are likely to observe greater support for the policy of selective assassination in the fight against terrorism.

In this part we discuss the most recent findings in the literature on the impact of the military use of drones in counterterrorism on U.S. public opinion; in other words, what lies behind public support for this foreign policy strategy. Next, we will look at the motivations that governments have for taking the actions in question.

The motivations of selective assassinations as foreign policy tools

Why do U.S. governments use selective assassination as a foreign policy strategy? What do they expect to gain from the executions? The inaugural paper by Schilling and Schilling (2016) points to three possible motivations: 1) gains associated with the policies of the successor, i.e., by interfering in the correlation of forces, the expectation is that the successor of the assassinated leader will adopt policies that are less hostile to foreign interests; 2) gains

based on the successor's capabilities, i.e., the intent is to eliminate important military leaders and prevent the enhancement of rivals' war capabilities; 3) gains unrelated to the successor, when the intent is to generate effects on a third State, to satisfy domestic emotional demands, or to demonstrate power and affect the morale of the opponents.

The case of the arrest and death of Osama bin Laden is a recent example of political assassination (Schilling and Schilling 2016). Although the officially stated purpose was the arrest of the terrorist leader, his assassination in 2011 provided gains to President Obama. The use of drones to execute political and military leaders who are hostile to U.S. interests in the international system has been increasingly used by presidents as a strategy. The main justification is to avoid U.S. soldier casualties and to lower costs when compared to traditional military operations. According to a Pew Research Center poll published in 2015, 58% of Americans approved of the lethal use of drones in attacks abroad.

Like the bin Laden case, this article also analyzes the targeted assassination of General Qasem Soleimani. In both analyzed cases, we seek to explore possible motivations related to domestic politics. The vast majority of political assassinations occur in State secrecy; however, polling data shows that Presidents Obama and Trump carried out extensive press and social media publicity of the assassinations of bin Laden and Soleimani, respectively. The central argument of this article is that among the motivations there are electoral interests and political use of the assassinations by U.S. presidents.

Barack Obama's Motivations in the Assassination of Osama bin Laden

As soon as he took office as President of the United States in 2009, Democrat Barack Obama made it clear to the National Security and Defense Agencies subordinate to the White House that the priority in fighting terrorism would be the capture of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (Bowden 2012). In August 2010, American intelligence discovered that bin Laden might be hiding out in a compound in Abbottabad in Pakistan (The New York Times 2011). About eight months later, in April 2011, President Obama authorized the operation (known as Neptune Spear) to capture the Saudi terrorist (The New York Times 2011).

What motivated the operation? We can identify four possible motivations for carrying out the operation: a) to satisfy the feeling of revanchism present in the American population since 9/11; b) to carry out

counterterrorism; c) to protect the national territory of the USA; and d) to increase the President's electoral popularity. Each motivation is discussed in more detail below.

The first motivation is the declared desire of Americans for revenge for the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers ten years before, at the command of the leader of Al Qaeda. We believe that this motivation is one of the main explanatory factors for the targeted assassination of bin Laden in 2011. After the leader's death was announced, Americans felt relief, happiness and pride, attributing the success of the operation to the work of the military and the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) (Pew Research Center 2011). Interestingly, this datum shows us that the credit for the achievement did not lie with the president, but with the agencies linked to the government. However, this feeling, present in public opinion, was also expressed in the President's rhetoric. In his speech announcing the success of the operation, President Obama recalled the 9/11 attack in a sentimental way, pointing out that three thousand Americans had lost their lives on that tragic day in U.S. history, illustrated in the excerpt below:

It was nearly 10 years ago that a bright September day was darkened by the worst attack on the American people in our history. The images of 9/11 are seared into our national memory – hijacked planes cutting through a cloudless September sky; the Twin Towers collapsing to the ground; black smoke billowing up from the Pentagon; the wreckage of Flight 93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where the actions of heroic citizens saved even more heartbreak and destruction (Phillips 2011).

The 2001 al Qaeda attacks planned by bin Laden were the first major direct attacks on the U.S. territory since the Japanese raid on the U.S. base at Pearl Harbor during World War II. In effect, there was a breakdown in the confidence and general sense of security of the American population in living within their own country. This feeling of insecurity and fear spread throughout society as a whole, raising doubts about the ability of the USA to maintain the inviolability status of their territory in the international system.

The confirmation that Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden was the intellectual mastermind of the attacks began a ten-year international hunt. In a speech, President Obama reinforces the need for a strong American response against a terrorist organization that had declared war on the United States, acting to destroy American citizens:

We were also united in our resolve to protect our nation and to bring

those who committed this vicious attack to justice. We quickly learned that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by al Qaeda – an organization headed by Osama bin Laden, which had openly declared war on the United States and was committed to killing innocents in our country and around the globe. And so, we went to war against al Qaeda to protect our citizens, our friends, and our allies (Phillips 2011).

The second motivation is directly associated with the first. The terrorist attacks on American territory produced a debate for the creation of a new paradigm in foreign policy.

Combating terrorism became the main focus of republican President George W. Bush's presidential agenda. The U.S. strategy focused on prevention by pursuing terrorist groups abroad before they could successfully direct operations against the homeland (Ganor 2014). President Obama endorsed this perception in his speech announcing bin Laden's death: "Over the last 10 years, thanks to the tireless and heroic work of our military and our counterterrorism professionals, we've made great strides in that effort. We've disrupted terrorist attacks and strengthened our homeland defense" (Phillips 2011).

Bush had been elected on a platform of social public policies and soft power in foreign policy. Among other proposals was the legalization of illegal immigrants and the expansion of soft and hard power in Europe and Asia. In that first moment, the fight against international terrorism played a secondary role in Bush's foreign policy strategy (Leffler 2011). After the terrorist attacks, the president began a profound reform of the institutional and bureaucratic structures of the government. The first step was the creation of the Patriot Act in 2001, followed by the reform of the specialized intelligence agencies under the White House with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (Waxman 2009).

The third motivation, national protection, was also a determining factor in President Obama's decision in favor of the operation, since bin Laden was considered a central threat to national security. However, that was not the first time that bin Laden had threatened the national security of the USA. The Al Qaeda leader was responsible for ordering several attacks that resulted in the deaths of U.S. servicemen in Somalia and Saudi Arabia; he also masterminded the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, when about 1,000 people were injured; he also ordered the attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996; and he was unsuccessful in a failed plot to target a plane at the CIA headquarters and assassinate President Bill Clinton in 1993. Therefore, in the 1990s, bin Laden became one of the most wanted

names by the U.S. government (International Committee of the Red Cross 2022).

The focus on capturing bin Laden proved to be justifiable. During Operation Neptune Spear, numerous documents, computers and flash drives that revealed his direct participation in organizing terrorist attacks were found, even though he had been in hiding for a decade (The New York Times 2011). In other words, bin Laden was indeed one of the main threats to U.S. national security.

Finally, electoral ambition was a relevant motivational factor in authorizing the execution of Osama bin Laden. President Obama was looking for ways to increase his approval rating as a national leader and facilitate his re-election the following year. The U.S. history shows that positive results in the military or in foreign policy produce positive results in the popularity of presidents. President Bush, for instance, after the success of Operation Red Dawn, in which the hideout and capture of the former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was discovered in 2003, achieved a 7% increase in popularity (Pew Research Center 2011). President Obama's approval rating prior to Operation Neptune Spear remained at about 40%. However, during this period, there were huge concerns among Americans about the Obama government's economic management, marked by rising gas prices, unemployment rates, and foreign debt (Dao and Sussman 2011).

Mark Bowden, in his book published in 2012, reported in detail on the meetings to prepare the operation that would invade the Abbottabad compound. According to the author, election concerns were a major factor in the decision-making process, as they involved important names from the military, from foreign policy and from the intelligence sector, as well as President Obama and members of his office. According to reports, then Vice-President Joe Biden believed that a failure in the operation could cost Barack Obama's re-election in 2012.

Another source that reinforces the argument of electoral ambition is the documentary "President in Waiting," produced by the CNN news channel chronicling the vice-presidents' performances over the years. In the documentary, Biden reports that he urged caution from President Obama regarding Operation Neptune Spear. There was an atmosphere of alarm over the Democrat President's re-election, stressing the importance of capturing bin Laden to secure the president's electoral ambitions. At the same time, any negative outcome of the operation could cause irreversible electoral damage, according to Vice-President Biden (CNN FILMS 2020).

Repercussion of the successful operation Neptune Spear

The successful U.S. military operation Neptune Spear marked a major victory in the fight against terrorism, resonating nationally and internationally. Success in the execution of military operations, or in foreign policy, has resulted in the growth in popularity of the ruler (Lian and Oneal 1993). According to the poll conducted by the partnership between The New York Times and CBS TV after President Obama's speech announcing the success of Operation Neptune Spear, his popularity rating increased significantly (Dao and Sussman 2011). In this sense, polls show an increase in the Obama administration's approval of the fight against terrorism and of his foreign policy management (Dao and Sussman 2011). The population's fear of a terrorist threat still prevailed.

The poll showed an 11% increase in the President's approval rating compared to previous polls, from 46% to 57%. Another important fact: a little more than half of the population came to approve of his management of foreign policy, compared to 39% in the previous poll. It was also possible to see that seven out of ten people approved of the fight against terrorism under the Obama government - a significant increase, since in the previous survey the figure was below 50%. Finally, about 90% of the American population believed that the assassination of Osama bin Laden represented a victory in the fight against terrorism (Dao and Sussman, 2011).

However, the survey also brings up data about the fear of the American population regarding possible reprisals for the killing of bin Laden. The results present alarming data: a) 60% of Americans believed in an increased terrorist threat to the USA; b) 70% saw a terrorist attack on U.S. soil in the following months as very likely; and c) only 16% felt safer with the death of bin Laden (Dao and Sussman 2011).

In the international arena, the reaction was positive after the announcement of the successful military operation Neptune Spear. The celebrations were comparatively smaller than those at home. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reacted positively to the success of the operation. In an official statement, then Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made it clear that the killing of bin Laden was a victory for the West: "a significant success for the security of NATO allies and all nations that have joined us in our efforts to combat the global scourge of terrorism" (NPR 2011).

In Europe, the response was also largely favorable, with congratulatory speeches coming from then President of the European Union Parliament

Jerzy Buzek, from former British Prime Minister David Cameron, and from former German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The European leaders' speeches were marked by positive messages; however, they also had a cautious message and stressed that the fight against terrorism was not over (NPR 2011).

In some Middle-Eastern countries, reactions were moderate. In Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden's homeland, the government issued a simple note in favor of fighting terrorism. In Afghanistan, reactions were mixed, as part of the local population feared the withdrawal of American troops from the region before it was stabilized. However, this fear did not materialize and the USA did not withdraw their troops from Afghanistan under the Biden Administration until 2021 (Schaeffer 2022). The Afghan leader at the time, Harmid Karzai, celebrated the killing of the Saudi terrorist. Finally, in Pakistan, where the operation took place, there was a sense of accomplishment on the part of the local government, and the Pakistani people wanted the USA to withdraw immediately (NPR 2011).

The consequences of the death of bin Laden

The death of bin Laden was a historic milestone in the fight against terrorism. Al Qaeda suffered irreversible damage, fragmenting and dispersing their members. The group was taken over by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Unlike bin Laden, the new leader was not a prominent charismatic figure and his speeches did not have the same motivational and mobilizing effects on the members. Although not extinguished, Al Qaeda's capacity and power were reduced after the selective assassination of their historic leader (Jenkins 2016).

Although bin Laden's assassination was fundamental as a symbol of counterterrorism, it failed to actually destroy international terrorism. The space left by the terrorist organization was occupied by the Islamic State (ISIS), a group that also pursues jihadist goals (Annamalai 2011). After 2011, ISIS has become the main terrorist threat in the international system. The group uses suicide operations and mass killings. What differentiates ISIS, from an ideological point of view, is the goal of immediately establishing a caliphate in which religious radicalism is treated as a mobilizing factor for recruiting young people, unlike Al Qaeda, which conceived this idea as a long-term strategy (Haykel 2016).

The central argument of this article is that among the main

motivations there are electoral interests in the political use of political assassinations by U.S. Presidents. The use of this foreign policy tool boosts the popularity of presidents, as was seen in the Obama government, in which the assassination of Osama bin Laden may have been a determining factor for his reelection, considering that other foreign policy proposals that were campaign promises, such as closing the Guantanamo Bay Prison, were not carried out. The correlation between political assassination and an increase in popularity becomes a central element of the cost-benefit analysis of this type of strategy in the fight against international terrorism, since it brings political benefits in the international system and in domestic politics.

President Trump's Decision-Making Process in the Selective Assassination of Qassem Soleimani

The military operation that assassinated Iranian General Qassem Soleimani was carried out on January 3, 2020, during the rule of Republican President Donald Trump. Unlike the hunt for Osama bin Laden, due to the fact that General Soleimani was a major military political actor and was not in hiding, the American intelligence services had no difficulty in locating him. Relying on Israeli intelligence assistance, the USA was able to plot their target's route of movement. Soleimani took off for Baghdad, Iraq's capital, to meet with the deputy head of the anti-American stance Iraqi militia Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. According to press reports, the intelligence service was already at the airport to confirm the general's location (Doucet, 2020).

The operation was carried out by three MQ-9 Reaper model drones, which were positioned in the skies above the airport. Each drone carried four Hellfire missiles. The images transmitted by the drones showed two elderly people, Al-Muhandis and Soleimani, getting into a sedan car, leaving the premises, and being followed by the rest of the retinue in a minivan. The drones began tracking the two vehicles leaving the airport, and once the identities of the targets inside the vehicles were confirmed, the raid was authorized. Altogether, four missiles were fired, blowing up the car and the minivan, killing all the people in them (Doucet 2020)

According to Ryan, et al.(2020), President Trump's decision to authorize the operation that assassinated General Soleimani was perceived as unexpected, surprising even many high-ranking U.S. government officials. However, in the months leading up to the execution, an escalation of tensions

between the USA and Iran occurred. We can then cite two main motivations that influenced President Trump's decision to authorize the assassination of General Soleimani: national protection and electoral ambitions.

Considering that nationalist discourse was part of Trump's politics, national protection is understood to have been a key factor in authorizing the execution of the military operation. As Trump states at the UN General Assembly in 2019: "Wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their own country first. The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots." (Edelman 2019). That was then the first motivation. Soleimani was the second most powerful person in Iran, being the leader of the Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force, an elite Iranian unit that carried out covert military operations abroad. The importance of the Iranian leader can be observed in the speech of President Trump, who made the following statement to the American population after the operation: "Soleimani was plotting imminent and sinister attacks on American diplomats and military personnel, but we caught him in the act and terminated him." (U.S. Embassy in Georgia 2020). Other U.S. political and military actors followed Trump's statement. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said the operation was necessary to prevent 'imminent attacks' that would lead to the deaths of countless Americans (Forgey, Oprysko and Orr 2020).

As a second motivation, we identify President Trump's electoral ambition. To increase his popularity, it was important to present a victory in the military field, as successful military operations have produced this effect throughout American history. The selective assassination of General Soleimani occurred in the year that Trump was going to run for his re-election. Prior to the execution, the Republican President maintained an approval rating by around 40% (Kahn 2020). Combined with the strong approval around his economic management, it was likely that the President had the perception that the military operation would be an important element in securing his election.

Taking into consideration the possible electoral impact in terms of popularity, similar to the killing of bin Laden ordered by former President Barack Obama, President Trump decided to go ahead with the operation. If during his term Trump advocated the withdrawal of the American military presence abroad and had a large number of soft power initiatives, the action for the assassination of General Soleimani also showed that he would be capable of the use of extreme military actions if necessary.

Repercussions of the selective assassination of Qassem Soleimani

After the confirmation of Qassem Soleimani's death, resulting from the successful American military operation in Iraq, there were mixed reactions both nationally and internationally, sharing a common fear of Iranian reprisals and a possible war conflict, essentially motivated by Iranian threats of retaliation after the American action. Crises in foreign policy traditionally lead to an increase in the ruler's popularity, such a phenomenon being known as "rallying around the flag". Since the publication by John Mueller (1973), it has been well established that dramatic events that propel a country onto the international stage create a temporary effect that rallies the country's population around its government leader.

Despite expectations of repeating the positive electoral effect that Obama achieved with the killing of bin Laden, the execution of Soleimani caused an opposite effect for the Trump government. As can be seen from the data of a poll conducted days after the operation, public opinion expressed negative reactions. The results showed a strong disapproval of the Americans regarding the management of the Republican President in relation to Iran and the expectation of a possible war in the short term (Kahn 2020).

Unlike Obama, Trump's approval rating remained stable. Only 41% of Americans approved of his rule as President. According to the poll, more than 53% of Americans disapproved (39% strongly disapproved) of President Trump's handling of Iran, an increase by 9 percentage points over the poll conducted the month before the operation. Moreover, some 71% of Americans believed that the USA would soon start a war against Iran, 20 points more than in a poll that was conducted in May the year before the operation. Days after Soleimani's death was confirmed, 41% of Americans saw Iran as an imminent threat to the United States. This is 17% higher than in a similar opinion poll carried out at the end of the previous year (Kahn 2020).

At the international level, the repercussions following the news of Soleimani's targeted assassination were varied. The Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) António Guterres demonstrated, through a spokesperson, concern over the American decision. The statement said that "The world cannot afford another war in the Gulf" (Dwyer 2020). At the same time, fearing rapid Iranian retaliation, countries in Europe such as the Netherlands and France issued warnings to their citizens, asking them to avoid crowds on the days following the U.S. operation (BBC News 2020). Russia, which has a history of collaborating with Iran in fighting ISIS,

criticized the operation through a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, saying that the United States wanted to change the balance of power in the region. The Iranian nation reacted to the death of their top general through its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and their President Hassan Rouhani, promising “severe retaliation”. In Iraq, the nation where the operation took place and birthplace of anti-American Iraqi Shiite militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, one of the victims of the air operation, Iraqi militias also promised revenge on the USA (Dwyer 2020).

Not all reactions urged caution, the operation having been praised by some international leaders. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, a cooperating nation, praised the operation, emphasizing America’s right to self-defense, and Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, offered support for the American raid, saying it was the result of Iranian military provocations, but stressed the need to reduce tensions (BBC News 2020).

Consequences of the selective assassination of General Soleimani

The selective assassination of General Soleimani, contrary to initial expectations and fears, did not result in an armed conflict between the United States and Iran, despite the Iranian leadership’s promise of reprisals. However, Iran, in its regional surroundings, chose two American bases located in Iraq as targets for attacks. Most of the missiles missed their targets, with no deaths, only material damage. The failure made Iran’s military fragility evident. A few days after the American military operation, the Iranian Revolutionary Force took the blame for accidentally hitting a passenger plane, being another embarrassing act. The initial tension gradually subsided and the global community relaxed their alert regarding an attack by Iran (Chulov 2020). With the election of the current Democrat American President Biden, the negotiation of a nuclear agreement with Iran was once again considered, broadening the perspective of a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

Final Considerations

From the theoretical reflection on drone use, foreign policy, and public opinion, we can present two key contributions of the article. Firstly, the use of drones to carry out political assassinations, in these two cases, apparently did not indicate strategic gains for the USA. However, this foreign policy

strategy did impact the Presidents' domestic popularity, bringing political and electoral gains to the White House. The killing of bin Laden boosted Obama's popularity and facilitated his re-election, as the polling data point out.

The success of the Democrat President encouraged Trump to repeat the strategy, but with a fundamental difference: the Republican's target was a State actor. The repercussions in the international community were not positive and Trump was unable to capitalize politically as Obama had managed to. In summary, the use of drones in foreign policy is a potential alternative to leverage presidential popularity within the USA, but the type of target - State or non-State - seems to have an intervening effect on the final political outcomes.

Finally, the second contribution of this article discusses how the use of technology in military missions produces a reduction in its cost as a foreign policy activity, as well as a decisive reduction in the number of casualties, a factor that directly impacts public opinion and the popularity of Presidents. This set of positive factors allows military operations such as political assassinations, which were previously carried out in a secretive way, to be incorporated into the electoral political process of supporting the President in the re-election period. According to the cases analyzed here, the electoral results were positive for Obama, but negative for Trump.

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ABSTRACT

What were the motivations, repercussions, and consequences of the Presidents' use of selective assassination as a foreign policy strategy in the War on Terror? The main objective of this research is to assess the similarities and differences in the decision-making process of Presidents Obama and Trump in the selective assassinations of Osama bin Laden and Qassem Soleimani. The descriptive research design proposes a comparative analysis of official documents, speeches, and literature. The findings point out different decision-making styles of both presidents and expose how this tool enhances political and electoral gains in the short and medium terms.

KEYWORDS

Foreign Policy Analysis; Presidency; Selective Assassination; Barack Obama; Donald Trump

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