

# The case against war on Iran

U.S. military action could trigger multiple conflicts in the Gulf



STANLY JOHNY

U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly spoken out against America's costly wars. Last year, for instance, he called the 2003 Iraq war "the single worst decision ever made". During the presidential campaign, he had promised to bring U.S. troops home. But two and a half years into his own presidency, the U.S. is on the brink of another major war in West Asia, this time with Iran.

Claiming to have intelligence that Iran could target its interests or the interests of its allies in the region, the U.S. has already sent an aircraft carrier group and a bomber squadron to the Gulf, which U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton called "a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime". When asked if the U.S. is going to war with Iran, Mr. Trump replied, "I hope not." But the growing clamour for war both in Washington and in West Asia is hard to miss. Mr. Bolton, who is currently driving the Iran policy, is a well-known Iran hawk and has repeatedly called for regime change in Tehran.

It is Israel that provided the intelligence inputs that set off the latest flare-up. A Saudi newspaper owned by Turki bin Salman, brother of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, carried an editorial last week calling for "surgical strikes" on Iran. A mysterious attack on four oil tankers off the UAE coast, and a drone attack on a Saudi pipeline that was claimed by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels of Yemen, worsened the crisis. The situation in the Gulf is so dangerous now that a mere spark could trigger a full-blown conflict.

### Morally wrong

If the U.S. goes to another war in a region still struggling to recover from its past interventions, it will be morally calamitous and strategically ludicrous. First, Iran does not deserve this treatment. The country signed an international agreement in 2015 to limit its nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief. It fully complied with the deal until Tehran



"If U.S. President Donald Trump truly wants to change the course, he should start with de-escalation." People protest in Tehran after Mr. Trump threatened to destroy Iran if it attacked American interests. ■ AP

announced this month that it would suspend some commitments made under the deal in protest against U.S. sanctions. It was Mr. Trump who violated the deal first by pulling the U.S. out of it last year and reimposing sanctions on Iran. In a better world, Iran's adherence to the agreement would have been appreciated and the country allowed to reap the promised benefits of the deal. Instead, the Trump administration punished it.

Second, if the U.S. goes to war, it will be a unilateral military action. It won't get the approval of the United Nations Security Council as Russia and China remain steadfastly opposed to military action. Even the U.S.'s European allies, including the U.K. which supported the Iraq war, remain committed to the nuclear deal. The U.S. might get the support of Saudi Arabia and Israel, but it is not certain whether even these countries would like to get dragged into a full-blown war. A unilateral military action would further weaken international institutions and create more fissures in the Atlantic alliance.

### Iran is not Iraq

Third, Iran is not Iraq. Nor is it Libya. The U.S. went to Iraq after a decade of crippling sanctions that it imposed battered the country's economy and

military. Iraq was totally isolated. Arab countries had turned against Baghdad after the first Gulf war, Iran was its enemy, and Russia was still in retreat mode. The U.S., the U.K. and their allies marched to Iraq and toppled the Saddam Hussein regime in just a few weeks.

Iran, on the other hand, is a country that lives in a state of permanent insecurity. It has always been battle-ready. While Iran is not a strong conventional military force and is crippled by sanctions as well, Iranian policymakers were aware of these challenges. That is why they adopted a 'forward defence' doctrine of expanding Iranian influence across West Asia through non-state militia groups. Iran has Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza. In the event of a war, Iran could activate these groups, triggering multiple conflicts, drawing in several other countries. This possibility makes even "a limited strike" on Iran dangerous. Besides, Iran could block the Strait of Hormuz, which lies between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, through which one-third of the world's LNG and 20% of total oil production flows. That would be a drastic measure that could trigger a massive response from the U.S. But war itself is a dras-

tic measure and could cause extreme retaliatory action.

Fourth, the U.S.'s war record is not as great as is often presented to be. It is the world's pre-eminent military power not because of the results of the wars it has fought but because of its military might. It is ironic that the U.S. is escalating tensions in the Gulf at a time when it is negotiating with the Taliban to find a face-saving exit from Afghanistan.

When the War on Terror began, the U.S. promised to go after every terrorist in the world. Seventeen years later, al-Qaeda is still alive, the Islamic State and other terror organisations are operating across the world, and the Taliban controls almost half the territory in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the U.S. could easily topple the Saddam regime, but it failed to quell the post-Saddam unrest. The country slipped into a sectarian civil war. It was from the mayhem in Iraq that the Islamic State rose. In Libya, the promise was liberation from Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (i.e., the U.S., France and the U.K.) intervened in 2011. Gaddafi was killed, but the country sank into chaos and is still to recover from it. In Syria, the U.S. made an indirect intervention and demanded President Bashar al-Assad's ouster until it was outwitted by the Russians. It failed to get the desired outcome in all these countries. How will Iran be any different?

### Using diplomacy

As U.S. President, Barack Obama seemed to have realised the challenges in Iran. That is why he attempted to curtail Iran's nuclear programme through diplomatic means. And he succeeded, until Mr. Trump came along and sabotaged it. President Trump says he wants talks with the Iranians, but he doesn't have a realistic programme for the same. If talks were his primary objective, the U.S. should not have withdrawn from the nuclear deal. Mr. Trump should have used the bonhomie created by the deal to expand ties and address concerns such as Iran's regional activism. If he truly wants to change the course, he should start with de-escalation and rein in his bellicose advisers.

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# A jibe that marked a new low in electoral politics

Public discourse has reached its nadir, and the Prime Minister symbolises it



KAPIL SIBAL

Even as we eagerly await the verdict of the people on May 23, it is time to reflect on the nature of the political discourse this election season. We witnessed a new low in the campaign: the Prime Minister's desperate fulminations against not just his political opponents, but also the late Rajiv Gandhi, who left us in tragic circumstances.

On May 21, 1991, tragedy struck the nation when former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was campaigning in Sriperumbudur on the outskirts of Chennai, trying to turn around the political fortunes of the Congress party. He was brutally assassinated by militants of the LTTE in a suicide bomb attack. In the course of his campaign trail, he had dreamt of a new India driven by technology.

The nation mourned the death of a leader whose patriotic fervour could never have been questioned. Rajiv Gandhi was critical of the bureaucracy for having failed to deliver services to the last man in the queue. He carried the hopes of young India on his shoulders. We lost him in the midst of our nation's journey, but he left behind his vision, which brought about a revolution of ideas, laying the foundation of a modern, effervescent India.

### Stooping low

Twenty-eight years later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while speaking at a rally in Uttar Pradesh's Pratapgarh constituency, addressed Congress president Rahul Gandhi and said, "Your father was termed 'Mr. Clean' by his courtiers, but his life ended as 'Bhrashtachari No. 1 (Corrupt No.1)'" His statement surprised millions of sane voices. Very few expected him to stoop so low.

The Bofors issue is dead. The alleged charge against Rajiv Gandhi was given a quietus by a judgment of the Delhi High Court, against which the then National Democratic Alliance government chose not to appeal. The court did not find an iota of evidence to support the alleged charge. I happened to have argued the case. Yet, the Prime Minister raked up the issue and taunted Rajiv Gandhi's son, alleging that his father ended his life as "Bhrashtachari No. 1". That may be so in the jaundiced eyes of the Prime Minister, but

not in the eyes of the law. Such a statement is antithetical to the cultural ethos of India. Mr. Modi should have at least respected the sentiments of Sonia Gandhi, who dealt with this personal tragedy with stoic dignity.

Rajiv Gandhi was Mr. Clean. The Prime Minister is aware of the tainted people surrounding him, including those who consider Nathuram Godse a 'deshbhakt' (patriot). Hinduism has always espoused the path of truth, which is perhaps inconsistent with Hindutva, of which the Prime Minister considers himself to be an icon. Not the courtiers, but the nation recognised Rajiv Gandhi as Mr. Clean. All attempts to sully his name failed despite a premier investigating agency's herculean efforts to do so at the instance of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Surprisingly, in Uttar Pradesh in 1989, Bofors did not even figure in the campaign in Amethi, from where Rajiv Gandhi contested. But this time, Mr. Modi tried to make it an issue.

### A reluctant politician

Rajiv Gandhi was destiny's child. It was Sanjay Gandhi who claimed to be the natural heir to former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, but his tragic death in an accident pushed Rajiv Gandhi to the centre stage. He was a passionate pilot and a reluctant politician. Rajiv Gandhi took up the mantle to lead the country after he lost his mother to tragic circumstances. No sensitive, thoughtful, cultured human being, certainly not one who holds the office of the Prime Minister, should have made such a statement.

Responding to Mr. Modi's remarks in the course of an interaction during the Uttar Pradesh campaign trail, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said, "The Prime Minister, who is seeking votes in the name of martyrs, yesterday disrespected the martyrdom of a noble man. People in Amethi will give a befitting reply." Rahul Gandhi turned philosophical when dealing with Mr. Modi's taunt. He tweeted, "Modi Ji, the battle is over. Your Karma awaits you. Projecting your inner beliefs about yourself onto my father won't protect you. All my love and a huge hug. Rahul." This was a dignified response, the response of a true gentleman.

Irrespective of who wins in 2019, Mr. Modi's jibe will be remembered as a new low, not just in electoral politics but in public life. The example set by Mr. Modi shows that public discourse has reached its nadir, and Mr. Modi symbolises it.

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## SINGLE FILE

# The purpose of art

If art does not facilitate new thoughts and be a constant reminder of historical time, it isn't art at all

KUNAL RAY



Can art be devoid of social consciousness? Often, social consciousness defines the very credo of an artist's practice because artists don't exist in a socio-political vacuum. Their work and aesthetics are shaped by the times they live in and the reality that surrounds them. Therefore, they find a multitude of ways of engaging with socio-political or cultural factors – repeatedly, and across generations and genres.

An artist who does so also risks labels such as 'activist artist'. But this is a facile way of thinking and branding art and artists. Artists are not propagandists, but their art is a constant reminder of historical time. I often argue that history is perhaps best recorded in fiction; the greater truths are to be found in works of art resisting linear readings and interpretations of history.

The social concerns of artists could differ, as they always have, but an ivory tower artist is a menacing creature. Art ought to see and show people not as objects of anthropological inquiry, but repositories of a moment in history, living archives even.

I was assailed by a plethora of such thoughts on a recent visit to the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai, where I encountered the works of a renowned painter at a special exhibition dedicated to showcasing his works. His work was influenced by the Kerala mural tradition. Natural motifs such as flowers, birds, flora and fauna predominantly featured in his paintings. In the gallery, I wondered whether a reflection on contemporary time was missing in his work.

Women from the Bhil tribe in Rajasthan were sometimes the objects of his paintings, and he referred to them as a 'medium'. Should the artist have attempted to see them as something beyond beautiful and brooding village women? The artist was devoted to capturing and recreating a notion of the beautiful in an idyllic setting. Yet, while the purpose of a painting can be to capture and reproduce, shouldn't it also comment?

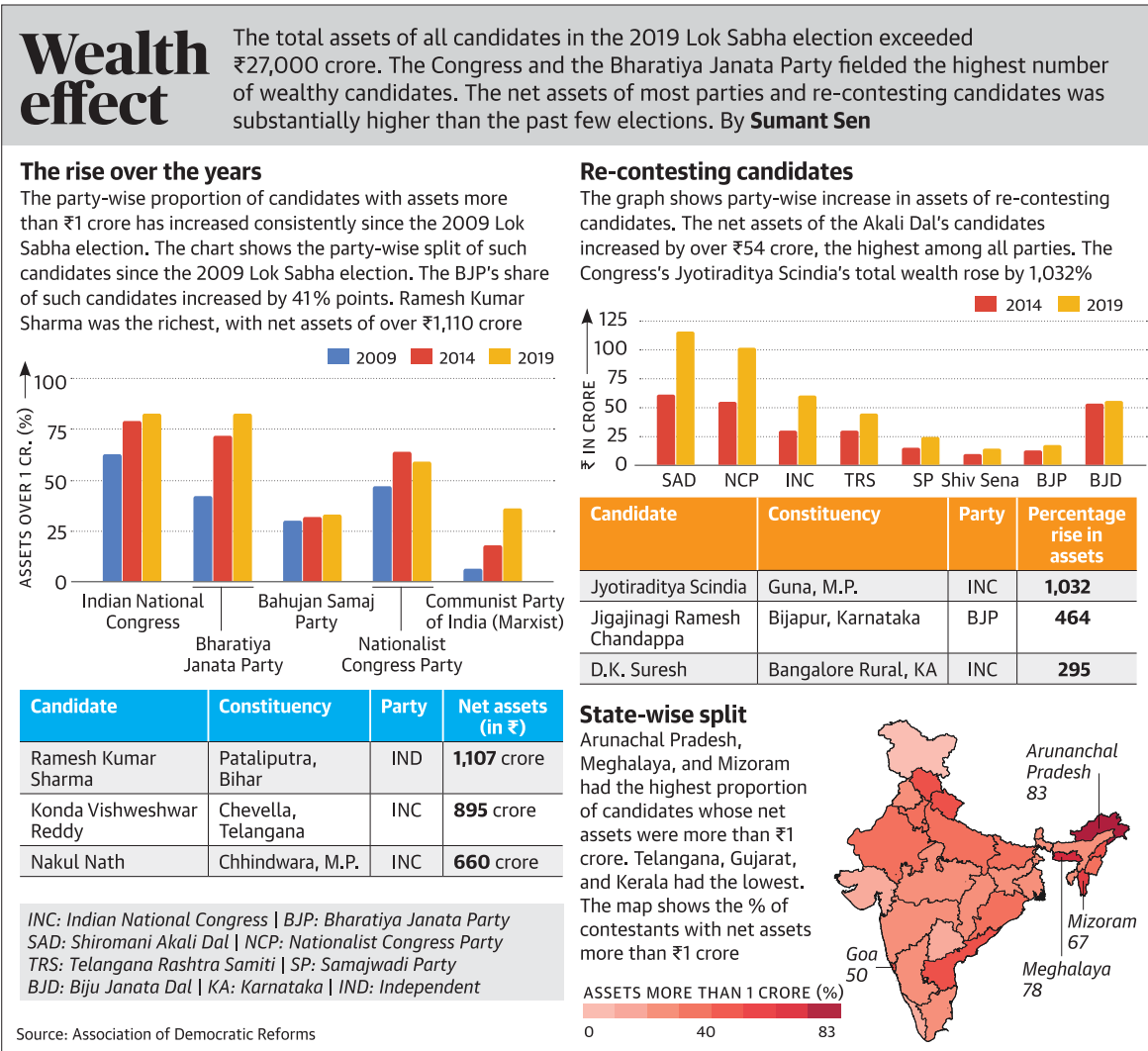
It appeared to me that the women in the paintings had no identity other than being part of a community. I wondered what the painter's humanist concerns were. I reflected that perhaps he was interested in capturing a certain aspect of his subjects and remained immune to the rest, maybe because it didn't resonate with his artistic agenda.

Stepping back from this example, what is the relevance of art in 2019 when the world is being ravaged by the clash of identities? Can there be any idea of artistic beauty that remains untouched by these forces? If art becomes all about creating escapist paradigms, we must then ask who that serves. Unless art facilitates new thoughts – and that can often come from holding up a mirror to broader society – it isn't art at all.

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## DATA POINT



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 21, 1969

### U.K.'s vital role in European Union

To a British Government worried by too many domestic troubles, the West German Finance Minister, Herr Franz-Josef Strauss, brought words of cheer yesterday [May 19, London]. He said that a united Europe was inconceivable without Britain and that the admission of Britain to the Common Market was a matter of procedure only and not of opinion. He assured that the Bundesbank would be willing to consider favourably a line of credit to the Bank of England if the latter asked for it. He underlined that Britain's partnership with France in nuclear arms was essential for an effective defence of Europe. Herr Strauss was on a visit to Britain primarily to address the European Atlantic Group. He took the occasion to reiterate, perhaps more forcefully than hitherto, his views on Britain's position in Europe and these attracted attention not only because they were expressed on British soil but because Herr Strauss is regarded as a possible successor to Dr. Keisinger as Chancellor.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 21, 1919.

### Tampering with the Evidence.

Their lordships Mr. Justice Walsh and Mr. Justice Stuart disposed of the appeal of Asghar against the sentence of death passed on him by the Sessions Judge of Budaun on a charge of having murdered an old man named Chiddo. It was alleged that the accused decoyed the deceased into the house of Amirulla under the pretext of getting him a goat for sale, and throttled him to death. Amirulla was alleged to have abetted the crime by holding the deceased's legs. The motive of the murder was suggested to have been the greed of taking possession of Rs. 75 which the deceased had with him on selling his house. Their Lordships said it was quite clear that the evidence of the daughter of Amirulla, as the Sessions Judge had found, was tampered with by the Sub-Inspector himself or through his instrumentality apparently with the insidious and thoroughly unjust motive of persuading her to give the best evidence against Asghar and to say as little as she could against her father who was tried with him.

## POLL CALL

### Voter apathy

Voter apathy is perceived apathy among those eligible to vote in an election. This can happen when voters are disillusioned with the electoral process, political parties and candidates, or when they don't think their vote will count, or when they don't care much for the issues around them. In India, voter turnouts have been going up in the past decade largely due to the Election Commission's efforts to enhance voter participation in the country, the media's efforts to raise public interest in elections, and an increase in the number of women coming out to vote.

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