

THE CASE AGAINST WAR ON IRAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

“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 the nation if it attacked his country. AP

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.

Deal in danger: on Iran and nuclear deal

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.

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 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.

Slippery slope: on India and Iran developments

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.

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.

U.S. curbs: India to decide on Iran crude imports after polls

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 drastic 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?

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.

stanly.johny@thehindu.co.in

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