

# Can Trump 'roll back the Persians'?

It's highly unlikely that Iran will give up its forward defence doctrine in the wake of U.S. sanctions



STANLY JOHNY

On November 5, nearly six months after the U.S. pulled out of the multi-lateral Iran nuclear deal, all the American sanctions that had been in place before the 2015 agreement were reimposed on the Islamic Republic. When President Donald Trump announced that the U.S. was withdrawing from the accord, despite international certification that Iran was fully complying with the terms of the agreement, he had said that the other signatories of the accord as well as Iran's trading partners would be given upto 180 days to wind down their businesses in Iran before severing trade ties with the country. The new sanctions will target almost all of Iran's vital business sectors: energy, shipbuilding, shipping and banking. Within two years of his presidency, Mr. Trump has effectively taken the U.S.-Iran relations to the pre-Obama era of hostility by reversing a signature diplomatic achievement of the former President.

This is not surprising given that Mr. Trump had attacked the Iran deal throughout his presidential campaign. In the words of Steve Bannon, his former adviser, one of the objectives of the administration's "Middle East initiative" is "to roll back the Persians". Mr. Trump is trying to do this by squeezing Iran's economy and mounting pressure on its rulers.

**Not a very popular deal**  
The Iran nuclear deal has never been popular among the conservative sections of the Washington establishment. Nor has it been with the U.S.'s key allies in West Asia – Israel and Saudi Arabia – who believe that the nuclear deal has done nothing to curtail Iran's regional interventions. They worry that the deal, which limits Iran's nuclear programme in return for the lifting of international sanctions, will make Iran economically more powerful, putting it in a better position to continue its "subversive tactics" in the region. They also say that the 30% rise in Iran's defence spend in 2016, immediately after the deal, is an indicator of its aggressive behaviour.



"Iran can either walk into the U.S.'s trap or continue to stick to the deal and pursue its regional agenda based on the 'forward defence' doctrine." Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei delivers a speech during a meeting with Iranian students in Tehran. ■ AFP

gressive behaviour.

Interestingly, this time the U.S. is not talking about regime change, but "behaviour change" of the regime instead. To be sure, there's a tactical calculus in Mr. Trump's move. By pulling the U.S. out of the deal, his administration has put Iran in a catch-22 situation. For now, Iran and the other signatories of the deal (the U.K., Germany, France, Russia, China and the EU) have stated that they will continue with the agreement. But despite these promises, it won't be easy for these countries to trade with Iran bypassing U.S. sanctions. European companies such as France's Total, Italy's ENI and Germany's Daimler have already announced plans to pull back from projects in Iran. The dilemma that Iran faces is this: it will suffer economically even if European governments stick to the agreement, but if it withdraws from the deal in protest and resumes its nuclear programme, that would only prove the Americans right and unite the West against Tehran.

**The forward defence doctrine**  
Iran can either walk into the U.S.'s trap or continue to stick to the deal and pursue its regional agenda based on the 'forward defence' doctrine – use regional allies and proxies for influence in West Asia. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has gone through several economic and military challenges, which have done little to

change its strategic pursuit. A year after the revolution, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, backed by Gulf monarchies and the West, attacked Iran. They expected the war to overthrow the revolutionary regime; instead, it helped the Ayatollahs consolidate their position within the country. It was during the war that Iran helped establish Hezbollah in Lebanon in the early 1980s and lay the foundation for its forward defence. The George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations both imposed sanctions on Iran – yet Iran managed to expand its influence in post-Saddam Iraq and even got involved in Syria, its only national ally in West Asia, to save the regime of Bashar al-Assad. As the International Crisis Group recently noted in a report: "The trajectory of Iranian foreign policy was essentially impervious to the fluctuations in its economic wellbeing."

**Asymmetric power**  
Iran knows that it's not a major conventional military power. Saudi Arabia, its main regional rival, spends almost five times more on its military than Iran's defence budget. Israel, another rival, is a de facto nuclear power and the mightiest military force in West Asia. As Iran cannot beat its opponents in a conventional power projection, it has turned to the doctrine of forward defence. Today's Iran is a conventional power

with an asymmetric military doctrine, which has served the country well over the past 40 years. Now Iran has Hezbollah in Lebanon, a regime in Syria that's completely dependent on it for survival, and influential political allies in Iraq. It also reportedly supports the Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen who control parts of the country, including the capital Sana'a. So, in the event of a direct military confrontation between the U.S. or its allies and Iran, Tehran can instigate multiple crises across the region. The forward defence is Iran's core strategic principle, launched to overcome its conventional power deficit. This is the most significant takeaway from Iran's foreign policy. And it's naïve to believe that Tehran would give this up in the wake of the U.S. sanctions. Rather, domestically, the U.S.'s rhetoric and sanctions could undermine the legitimacy of Iran's moderates and reformists who lead the current administration and strengthen the hands of the hard-liners.

Another factor that is in Iran's favour is the lack of unity in its rival camp. The Saudi blockade on Qatar has already divided the Gulf countries. Turkey, an American ally and a member of the NATO, has gradually moved closer to Iran and Russia in recent years and the three countries are now cooperating in stabilising Syria. More important, the murder of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Kingdom's consulate in Istanbul has weakened Riyadh diplomatically and thrown a spanner into Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's plan (with American backing) to create an "Arab NATO" to counter Iranian influence. Iran would likely exploit these crises within its rival camp by strengthening its own regional activism, particularly at a time when the U.S. is turning hostile.

If Mr. Trump wants peace in the region, he should have used the channels opened by the nuclear deal and taken steps to address Iran's security concerns in return for limiting its regional activities. But like most of his predecessors, he wants to "roll back the Persians". His predecessors lost the game. It is to be seen whether Mr. Trump will succeed or follow suit.

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## FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

# The RE is an inversion of the Rashomon effect

Data on the various themes dealt with in this column



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

Since the release of Akira Kurosawa's iconic film, *Rashomon*, in 1950, the term Rashomon effect has come to denote a range of ideas in politics, economics, psychology and the arts. The broad consensus about the meaning of this term is that it is possible for different people to describe an event in different ways without any one of them consciously lying. Is there a term to suggest that different people can arrive at the same inference, but for different reasons? Drawing from my six years of experience, I am increasingly convinced that the Readers' Editor (RE) may be an inversion of the Rashomon effect.

### An independent office

The RE's office is independent; it is beyond the control of the Editor. It has a dedicated space for a weekly column and the weekday Corrections and Clarifications box, which cannot be vetoed or altered. The visible mending process is a sign of accountability and transparency. When this office was created 12 years ago, it was widely seen within the profession as an enviable job. I was starry-eyed when I was asked to become the third RE of this legacy institution. But soon I realised the downside of being the person who addresses complaints, effects redress and ensures adherence to the newspaper's core values. Ian Mayes, the first RE of *The Guardian*, once said: "Being visible and accessible means you are a sitting duck." It took time to understand the real import of that statement. Everyone involved in journalism appreciates a mechanism for course correction. But when the mistake is laid at someone's door, the person feels hurt. While most people point out other people's mistakes and openly seek an apology for them, they see public acknowledgement of their own mistakes as a weakness.

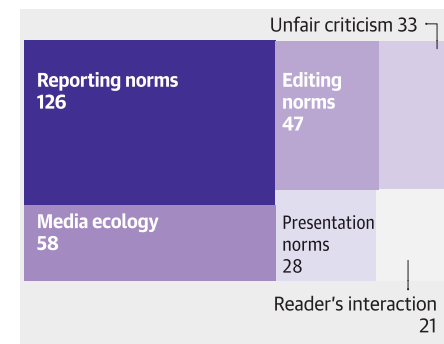
Reporters, subeditors, designers, data journalists and readers share this perception. Some readers always ask whether the RE is with those readers who oppose the editorial or with the editors who authored it. When I find some of the readers' objections to be unfair, they feel that I am justifying the

newspaper. One of the pithiest comments I have received read: "You are employed by the newspaper and it is quite natural not to bite the hand that feeds one."

I knew that this job would never fetch admirers. But what I did not bargain for was victimhood. I use the vantage point of being outside the editorial process to discuss a range of issues governing the functioning of the media in general and this newspaper in particular. Being a custodian of readers' interests does not mean, by any stretch of imagination, endorsing only one view and rejecting others.

### Breaking down the numbers

For the sake of transparency, I decided to run a fine toothcomb over my 313 columns since September 2012. I broadly divided the columns into six categories. I decided to rely on data journalism because it challenges rhetoric with hard empirical evidence. I have consciously left out the data relating to the Corrections and Clarifications space, which had about 3,780 entries during my tenure



alone. Some have accused me of only addressing issues relating to media regulation and larger media ecology issues. In reality, only 58 columns dealt with the media ecology. Some friends on the desk, after I wrote a sharp column on headlines, felt that I prefer reporters to the desk. While 47 of my columns dealt with editing norms, the reporting team has been pulled up in 126 columns. Some readers think that I have become an "Editors' Editor", but only 33 columns have pointed out unfair criticisms levelled against the newspaper. Twenty-one columns can be classified as 'interaction with readers'. The numbers suggest that the inverse of the Rashomon effect is a newspaper ombudsman.

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## SINGLE FILE

# Protect the little helpers

Hundreds of species of pollinators may be in dangerous decline

MOHIT M. RAO



Across India's agrarian plains, plantations and orchards, millions of birds, bats and insects toil to pollinate crops. However, many of these thousands of species may be in dangerous decline.

In 2015, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) found that pollinators lead to huge agricultural economic gains. The report estimated pollinator contribution in India to be \$0.831-1.5 billion annually for just six vegetable crops. This is an underestimation considering that nearly 70% of tropical crop species are dependent on pollinators for optimal yields.

The decline of moths, bees, butterflies, hoverflies and other pollinators is undeniably linked to human activity: large tracts of natural habitats have been cleared for monoculture cultivation, while the use of pesticides and fertilisers is pushing out nature's little helpers. In a series of studies at the University of Calcutta, researchers have showed that native Indian bees, when exposed to multiple pesticides, suffer from memory and olfactory impairment, lower response rates, and oxidative stress which damages cells. Parthiba Basu and his team estimated that between 1964 and 2008, there was a 40-60% growth in relative yields of pollinator-dependent crops, while pollinator-independent crops such as cereals and potatoes saw a corresponding 140% rise in yields. In Kashmir, researchers have pinned lowering yields of apple trees on the declining frequency of bee visits. In north India, lowering yields of mustard cultivation may be caused by disappearing pollinators.

At the turn of the millennium, many countries, particularly the U.S., observed with some anxiety the phenomenon of bees deserting their hives. In 2014-15, the U.S. had established a Pollinator Health Task Force and a national strategy that focussed on increasing the monarch butterfly population and planting native species and flowers in more than 28,000 sq km to attract pollinators. Around the same time, the U.K. developed 23 key policy actions under its National Pollinator Strategy. Meanwhile, after the IPBES report, almost 20 countries have joined the Coalition of the Willing and Pollinators.

Apart from promoting organic farming and lowering pesticide usage, landscape management is key. The EU Pollinators' Initiative adopted in June can provide pointers to India, particularly a policy of direct payment support to farmers to provide buffer strips for pollinators for nectar- and pollen-rich plants. India has millions of hectares of reserve forests, some of which have been converted to pulpwood plantations. Much of this can be restored to become thriving homes for pollinators. The same can be done in gram panchayat levels. Fallow areas and government land can be used to plant flowering species for pollinators.

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## DATA POINT

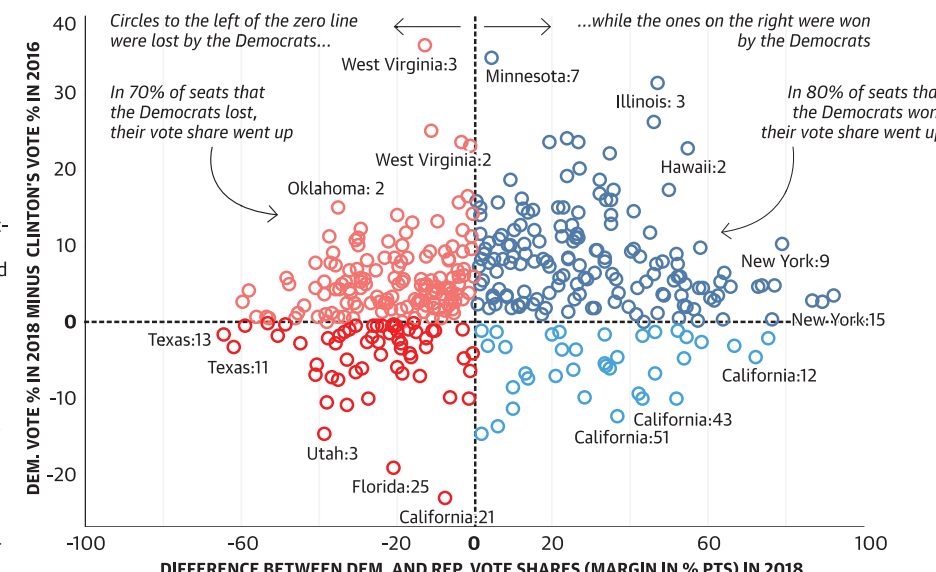
### The Blue wave

In the midterm elections to the U.S. House of Representatives, the Democrats secured a majority by defeating the Republicans with a 6.5% point margin and achieved a 4.4% point swing from the 2016 presidential poll. They gained substantially in the key swing States and made a dent in Republican strongholds. **Vignesh Radhakrishnan & Srinivasan Ramani** analyse the data

#### Rise of the Democrats

The graph plots the margin of win/loss in 2018 for the Democrats against change in vote % since 2016 in 387 Congressional districts\* (represented by circles). The Democrats increased their vote share in 75% of those districts compared to 2016.

\*Only districts in which candidates from both the parties were fielded were considered. Seven seats, where the winner has not been announced, are omitted from the analysis



**In swing States** | Of the 109 districts in the nine swing States, the Democrats lost 64 and won 45. But only in 18 districts did their vote share drop as compared to the 2016 presidential elections. A look at these districts

|                               | Florida | Iowa | Michigan | Minnesota | N. Carolina | Ohio | Pennsylvania | Virginia | Wisconsin |
|-------------------------------|---------|------|----------|-----------|-------------|------|--------------|----------|-----------|
| Dem. loss; increase in vote % | 10      | 1    | 5        | 3         | 9           | 8    | 8            | 4        | 1         |
| Dem. loss; decrease in vote % | 4       | -    | 2        | -         | -           | 4    | 1            | -        | 4         |
| Dem. win; increase in vote %  | 5       | 3    | 6        | 5         | 3           | 4    | 8            | 6        | 2         |
| Dem. win; decrease in vote %  | 3       | -    | -        | -         | -           | -    | -            | -        | -         |

SOURCE: DAVID WASSERMAN & ALLY FLINN, COOK POLITICAL REPORT

## FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 12, 1968

### 'Reckless overprinting' of govt. publications

The Public Accounts Committee of the Lok Sabha has recommended greater recourse to private printers as one of the measures to reduce wasteful expenditure on Government publications. In its report laid on the table of the House to-day [November 11, New Delhi], the committee has also urged that the expenditure on publications should be included in the budgets of the individual Ministries and departments instead of the publication branch of the Ministry of Works, Housing and Supply.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 12, 1918

## GERMANY SURRENDERS. THE KAISER'S ABDICATION.

(BRUNNEN'S AGENCY)  
London, November 11.—The Press Bureau states:—The Prime Minister announces the Armistice was signed at 5 a.m. Hostilities ceased on all fronts at 11 o'clock this morning. (November 11th).  
AMSTERDAM, NOVEMBER 11.—It is officially explained that the German courier was detained by the explosion of an ammunition dump which he mistook for machinegun fire.  
LONDON, NOVEMBER 11.—10.40 P.M. Reuter is informed that the German plenipotentiary with the terms of Armistice finally crossed the German zone by aeroplane.  
LONDON, NOVEMBER 11.—4.50 P.M. The Premier in an interview with a newspaper, announces that the German courier arrived at the Spa at 10.15 this morning. The Premier added:—"All gone well. It will not be long now."  
LONDON, NOVEMBER 11.—6.10 P.M. A wireless telegram official Communication says:—Prince Max the Imperial Chancellor, has issued the following decree:—"The Kaiser and King have decided to renounce the Throne. The Imperial Chancellor will remain in office until the questions connected with the abdication of the Kaiser, renouncing by the Crown Prince of the Throne of the German Empire and of Prussia and the setting up of a Regency have been settled. For the Regency he intends to appoint Deputy Ebert as Imperial Chancellor, and he has proposed that a Bill shall be brought in force for the establishment of a law providing for the immediate promulgation of general suffrage and for a constitutional German National Assembly which will settle finally the future form of Government of the German nation and of those people desirous of coming within the Empire."  
LONDON, NOVEMBER 11.—6.15 P.M. The Kaiser's abdication strengthens the belief that the German Government will accept the Armistice terms.

On November 12, 1918, *The Hindu* ran this announcement: "Our office will be closed to-morrow on account of the celebrations in connection with the surrender of Germany, and consequently there will be no issue of *The Hindu* on that day." The issue also carried an editorial headlined "The Dawn of Peace."

## CONCEPTUAL Degree creep

EDUCATION

This refers to the increase in the number of degrees required to land a job over time. Jobs that required candidates to hold a Bachelor's degree some years ago, for instance, might now require a Master's degree. It is believed that degree creep is the result of an increase in the number of candidates competing for a limited number of jobs. The reduction in the cost of education due to an increase in subsidies offered by governments is also seen as a reason to get more educated.

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