

Opinion

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PETER APPS

IF IRAN'S GOVERNMENT was truly behind last weekend's cruise missile and drone attack on Saudi Arabia's energy infrastructure, it has put its potential foes across the Middle East in an awkward, uncomfortable position.

Like suspected mine attacks on tanker shipping in the Gulf earlier in the year, the strike—which initially sent energy prices spiking—showed just how little those who ordered it care for the norms of international engagement, even by the standards of the restive Middle East. That's not a surprise: both Iran and its enemies, particularly Israel and increasingly Saudi Arabia, have been fighting a shadow war on and off for years. This attack, however, marked a serious escalation—particularly if US officials are correct when they say the missiles were launched from inside Iranian territory.

Perhaps predictably, President Donald Trump's response was bellicose in flavour, warning the United States was "locked and loaded" but putting the decision on whether or not it should strike firmly in Saudi Arabia's court. So far, Riyadh has shown little enthusiasm for that—it appears increasingly bogged down in a controversial, messy war in Yemen, and neither it nor Washington wants shooting in the Gulf. Amongst those in power in Tehran, the calculations appear more mixed. Outside experts increasingly suspect hardliners believe that since Trump tore up the Iran nuclear deal, they have less to lose. Even if the United States were to launch military action, it would almost certainly only be limited. Trump has made clear his opposition to major Mideast wars, and the departure of National Security Adviser John Bolton removes the only senior U.S. figure who backed them.

Interventions

With China rising and Russia reasserting itself, the United States is now much less Mideast-focused—and also less dependent on its oil. The end of the era of Iraq-style interventions is broadly positive—not least because it had fuelled Tehran's appetite for a nuclear programme. That had itself proved destabilising, including increasing the risk of Israeli military action, and prompted the Obama administration's focus on a nuclear deal to stop it.

That approach was dramatically ditched by Trump, who tore up the Iran deal with no apparent concept of what to replace it with. Powerful forces in Tehran were already pursuing an agenda of destabilising the region with covert action. The new US approach handed them a chance for ascendancy in Iran's unending internal battle for domestic power, and removed what constraints they had once felt. Particularly over the last decade, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps—and particularly its foreign-facing Quds Force under Major General Qassem Soleimani—has revelled in deniable actions across the Middle East and beyond.

Those actions included supporting insurgents attacking US and British forces in Iraq, Houthi rebels in Yemen and backing Bashar al-Assad's government as it battle for control of Syria. That had fuelled some calls in Washington for the IRGC to be listed as a banned terror

Iran's new Mideast game

Saudi oil attack shows how Iran and its enemies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, have been fighting a shadow war on and off for years



A damaged pipeline seen at Saudi Aramco oil facility in Khurais, Saudi Arabia

REUTERS

group—but doing so, as the Trump administration did earlier this year, seems just to have increased its appetite for action.

Iran has long had a sophisticated missile programme, and has been testing drones and supplying them to regional allies such as Hezbollah for years. This attack, however, showed significant recent progress. That the missiles were reportedly able to evade Saudi air defences by flying behind them demonstrates striking sophistication.

Houthis

Yemen's Houthis dispute US claims the missiles and drones came from within Iranian territory, saying they were launched from within Yemen itself. Whatever the truth, the attack clearly represents a leap forward in both technology and the appetite to use it.

So far, damage to facilities belonging to Saudi oil firm Aramco appears limited—Saudi authorities say full produc-

tion will shortly be resumed. That's unlikely to bother anyone in Tehran significantly. They may well not have been looking for a knockout blow, but have demonstrated their ability to strike the most sensitive facilities in Saudi Arabia without warning. Other potential foes, including United Arab Emirates and Israel, will have noted that with some alarm.

Such behaviour, the United States and its allies clearly believe, must not be without consequences—and Tehran should be braced for another round of sanctions. Much of the challenge here, however, is keeping the hope of diplomacy alive, giving Iran incentives to moderate its behaviour and regain admittance to the wider international community. That was the strategy favoured by the Obama administration—and then ripped up by Trump without any discernible alternative. In a particularly counterproductive step, the United States then moved this year to sanction even relatively moderate

members of the government in Tehran, including foreign minister Mohammed Javad Zarif, its chief negotiator for the nuclear deal.

Without appetite for military action, boosting diplomatic efforts may be the only option—and European states in particular have been desperate to keep such options open. That included President Emmanuel Macron inviting foreign minister Zarif to the G7 summit this summer, much to the irritation of Trump and the US delegation. Nevertheless, US appetite for a new deal may quietly be increasing. Trump's new pick for National Security Advisor, former US chief hostage negotiator Robert O'Brien, has a very different background from the mercurial Bolton. The next US presidential election is barely a year away, and the current incumbent of the White House would rather have a reputation than for stopping wars than starting them.

—REUTERS



OUT OF MY MIND

MEGHNAD DESAI

No winners in the NRC exercise

BE CAREFUL what you wish for. When you get it, you may not like it.

This seems to be the situation with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for the BJP in Assam. The headlines are about the 19 lakh left out. People from outside Assam, home and abroad, say that 19 lakh is too large a number. The BJP has been saying for three decades that the infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims since 1971 has been massive. It was expecting four or five times the excluded numbers. Alas, once you start counting, guesswork stops.

Let us look at the numbers at stake. In any such statistical exercise, it is routine to say plus, minus 5%. The number excluded is 5% of the total. Statisticians would dismiss these numbers as random measurement errors. The easy (and statistically sound) way would be to say no one will be excluded whatever their papers. The reason for saying this is not political but simple understanding of the difficulty of measuring a large population accurately. Remember the debate about unemployment rates. In the NRC there are special reasons for expecting large errors. The Indian government, since the British colonial times, has always begun with distrust of the population it governs. Independence changed the colour of the Ruler, not the attitude of those in charge towards their subjects (they get treated as citizens only on polling days). One requirement of the NRC is that you produce written evidence of your residency in Assam. These papers have to predate 1971. Forty-eight-year-old pieces of (government-quality, inferior) paper would be in tatters even if you had preserved them.

Whichever way the game ends,

there are no winners. Those who want no exclusion would be unhappy and internationally India's reputation will suffer as an inhumane polity. The Assamese who began this agitation way back in the Rajiv Gandhi days will also never believe the numbers unless they discover that these are huge. For them only 'born and bred' in Assam will qualify, but if I am from a tribe living in Assam but not Assamese speaker, do I have to produce paper evidence? Why did Rajiv Gandhi sign the pact (Assam Accord) in the first place?

The BJP would also like a crore or more 'infiltrators'. But in their search for Bangladeshi Muslims, they should be careful whether their dream of One Nation is not under threat.

What about people from other parts of India who have moved to Assam and have no papers before 1971 proving Assamese residence? Especially if they are Indian Muslims. Are they infiltrators? If the NRC is repeated in each state, are out of state persons infiltrators? There were agitations against South Indians in Mumbai by the Shiv Sena in the 1960s. If the NRC is done in Maharashtra, will only those born and bred in Maharashtra or only Marathi-speaking people count as genuine? For 70 years, Indian economy has never grown fast enough to create sufficient jobs. So there are demands for local jobs for local people, defined as local-language speakers. The NRC will give support to such demands. We will have 29 citizenships for 29 states (Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh will become Union Territories on October 31) with 'outsiders' being hounded. Do we want to break up India in search for Bangladeshi Muslims who may have arrived 48 years ago?



Indian Youth Congress workers stage a protest against the alleged unemployment and economic slowdown in Delhi

PTI

Golf for television

The 'Skins' game, with its winner-takes-all format is back. And it's tailor-made for viewers

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah



THE 'SKINS' ARE back. And no one's surprised that Tiger Woods will be part of the winner-takes-all format. So will Rory McIlroy. Throw in Jason Day for good measure, and while you're at it, get the local favourite—Hideki Matsuyama—too. That mix works: especially since you're doing this in Japan—golf crazy Japan; lots-of-money-to-spend-on-golf Japan. The PGA Tour has seen the future brothers. It's in Asia.

For those who may not know, the 'Skins' format is basically the pros doing what we rank amateurs do every weekend; a standard Nassau which involves a specific amount of money up for grabs on every hole: if the hole is tied, then the prize money snowballs to the next hole, and so forth, until someone wins a hole. It's a gripping format, both for players, and in this case, those watching. If there ever was a format made for television, then this is it. This event, coming at the end of the regular season on the PGA Tour, has been billed as

'The Challenge,' right along the lines of 'The Match,'—a similar one-on-one event between Woods and arch-rival Phil Mickelson that took place a few months back. That pay-per-view event was stitched together by GolfTV—Discovery Inc's OTT channel and app—that's positioned as a one-stop platform for golf programming from around the world. 'The Challenge,' which will be played on October 21, is the channel's latest salvo to push its offerings and drive viewership.

According to a report in Associated Press, 'The Challenge,' will have a total purse of \$350,000; most holes will be worth \$10,000 or \$20,000 while the 18th hole will be worth \$100,000. Now, by no means is that a lot of money for the dramatis personae on this stage: Woods, McIlroy, Maruyama, and Day play for way more than that, week-in and -out on the PGA Tour. For Woods though, the participation is likely part of the 12-year, \$2 billion deal that he inked with GolfTV last year that involves the golfer contributing exclusive content to the channel that's broadcast to over 220 countries around the world. The icing on the cake, for the PGA Tour at least, is that all four golfers will headline the Tour's first event in Japan—the ZOZO Championship—that will be held at the same venue as 'The Challenge'—the Accordia



Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy will be joined by Hideki Matsuyama and Jason Day for an old-fashioned 'Skins' event in Japan

Golf Narashino Country Club in Chiba, Japan, the following week.

Woods hasn't teed it up since the BMW Championship last month, and not played in Japan since 2006. "I haven't played a skins format in quite some time, so it will be fun to try something a little different and add a few strategic elements as we compete," Woods quoted in a press release. "There has always been some friendly banter between us, and that will continue until we get to the first tee." McIlroy, the reigning FedEx Champion, who edged out Brooks Koepka last week to win the PGA Tour Player of the Year, will be making his debut in a televised exhibition match. "There are so many fun elements to the challenge that will have me wanting to take home that title—playing with Hideki on his home turf, Tiger coming back to Japan with a green jacket," said the Ulsterman. "The motivation is certainly there for me, and I'm a huge fan of the skins format. I love the way it rewards attacking play and think it suits my game quite well."

In addition to the Skins, the 18-hole event—that is expected to finish under floodlights—will also feature 'special in-match challenges.' "This is our opportunity to think outside the box," said Alex Kaplan, president and general manager of Discovery Golf. "We'll put guys in different situations, and it will be a surprise to them what they are. There's going to be some fun tweaks these guys aren't used to." McIlroy, for one, is relishing the challenge. "There are so many fun elements to 'The Chal-

lenge' that will have me wanting to take home that title—playing with Hideki on his home turf, Tiger coming back to Japan with a green jacket—the motivation is certainly there for me," said the four-time major winner McIlroy.

There's no doubt that the format suits McIlroy's aggressive go-for-broke style of play. "I'm a huge fan of the skins format. I love the way it rewards attacking play and think it suits my game quite well. Anytime I can go directly at pins to try and make birdies and eagles, I think it puts me at an advantage. The other fun thing about skins is how you find yourself rooting for the other guys if you're not in a position to win the hole. You're hoping they can tie with someone else so you can play for that skin on the next hole. With the skins format, you're always in it until the end." But the real edge, or pressure, depending on how he responds to the challenge, will be on Matsuyama. The prospect of a Japanese winner, besting three of the best players on the planet, on home ground, is likely to draw huge galleries for the exhibition match. "I'll be grateful for all the support from the fans in Japan, but with the popularity of Tiger, Rory and Jason, I know they'll also be strongly supported wherever they play. It's amazing to have these great champions playing in Japan," Matsuyama said with typical grace—a cardinal rule of social etiquette in Japan. It'll be great to watch them too.

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game