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EXPERT TAKE **IRAN**

Coalitions of the Willing and the Strait of Hormuz

CFR President Michael Froman analyzes the United States' efforts to unblock a key chokepoint for the world's energy supply.



Context United States is finding it difficult to build an effective coalition to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, even though many countries depend on that route for energy and trade.

Facts

In the 1991 Gulf War, over 30 countries contributed 160,000 troops, 500+ combat aircraft & 60+ naval vessels.

Europe has about 150 mine-sweepers & minchunters, giving it useful capability for Hormuz security operations.

More than 50 countries met in Washington earlier this year under the FORGE initiative on critical minerals.

Analytical Crux

It is only about the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, but the weakening of U.S. coalition-making power. Even countries that need the strait reopened are hesitant to join a U.S.-led military effort because they were not properly consulted and do not see the war as their own.

In world politics, states support coalitions not out of loyalty alone, but on the basis of national interest, trust and domestic political calculation. Its larger lesson is that military strength by itself is not enough; legitimacy, consultation and diplomatic goodwill are equally important for building effective coalitions.

America's biggest problem is not lack of power, but lack of willing partners.

Theoretical lens + Verbatim Quotes

"The Strait of Hormuz case might be an indication that the goodwill and political capital necessary to respond positively to a U.S. request is now limited."

— Michael Froman

Article - 2 : 'Double engine' - serious federal question

'Double engine' — cute slogan, a serious federal question

Every election season produces memorable slogans. Most fade once the votes are counted, but some linger and begin to shape how citizens think about governance itself. One such phrase is the "double-engine sarkar". At first hearing, it sounds harmless, even cute: two governments working in tandem to accelerate development. Yet, behind the metaphor lies a serious constitutional question about India's federal compact.

The idea is simple: if the same party governs both the Union and the State, development will move faster because the two governments will work in harmony. Taken at face value, this is unexceptionable. Of course governments at different levels should coordinate. That is indeed cooperative federalism. The real question is what happens when they do not share the same political ideology. But the "double-engine" slogan carries a deeper implication. It suggests that development flows preferentially to States governed by the same party as the Union government.

'Aligned States' benefit
During election campaigns the message is often made quite explicit: elect the party ruling at the Centre so that your State can benefit from faster development. If you do not, you will be starved of funds. This is where the constitutional difficulty begins.

India's Constitution does not envisage a system where State governments depend on the goodwill, or charity, of the ruling party at the Centre. It creates a federal structure in which the Union and the States are partners within their respective spheres. The Union government represents the Republic as a whole, not merely those States governed by the party in power in New Delhi.

Public money collected through national taxation belongs to the Union of India, not to the ruling party. Taxes are collected in the name of the Republic, from citizens of every State regardless of how they vote. The distribution of these resources cannot depend on which party governs a State. A citizen in Kerala or Tamil Nadu pays the same taxes as a citizen in Uttar Pradesh or Madhya Pradesh. The constitutional promise is that both will receive their fair share in return.

India's constitutional framers understood this danger. That is why they built institutional safeguards into the system. The most important is the Finance Commission. Under Article 280, the Finance Commission is appointed every five years to recommend how Union revenues should be shared with the States. Its purpose is vital: fiscal transfers must be rule-based, not politically negotiated. The Commission evaluates States on objective criteria — how far their incomes lag



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behind the national average, their population, geographic size, and fiscal capacity — so that politics cannot determine who gets what.

Issues raised by States, federal friction
Recent debates around fiscal federalism show how sensitive this issue remains. Southern States have expressed concern that the use of more recent population data in allocation formulas may penalise them for having successfully controlled population growth. Another issue is the increasing resort of the Union government to cesses and surcharges, which fall outside the divisible pool and are not shared with States. This effectively reduces the quantum of resources available for constitutionally mandated sharing, concentrating more fiscal power in Union hands and weakening the financial autonomy of States. The Sixteenth Finance Commission, which is currently deliberating, will have to grapple seriously with these concerns if it is to restore confidence in the fairness of the fiscal federal arrangement.

Governments in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have argued that States which acted early to stabilise population should not be penalised in the distribution of national resources. Senior Ministers from these States have at times remarked, in visible frustration, that they feel reduced to "beggars", pleading for funds that constitutionally belong to them. This is not the language of political theatre. It reflects a genuine structural grievance about the terms on which States participate in the Indian Union.

Federal friction is visible not only in financial matters but also in the legislative process. In recent years, Governors in some States have sat for long periods over Bills passed by elected legislatures, effectively using the constitutional office as an instrument of political sabotage. Tamil Nadu and Kerala have witnessed particularly prolonged delays. The pattern is difficult to ignore: the delays have been in States that are governed by parties opposed to the ruling dispensation at the Centre. A Governor who withholds assent to legislation passed by an elected Assembly is, in effect, a second engine running in reverse.

Such delays have drawn judicial attention. In *State of Punjab vs Principal Secretary to the Governor of Punjab (2023)*, the Supreme Court of India made it clear that a Governor cannot use inaction to stall the legislative process. The Court emphasised that the Governor's office is not meant to function as a parallel political authority over an elected legislature.

More recently, in *State of Tamil Nadu vs Governor of Tamil Nadu (2025)*, the Court observed that prolonged inaction by a Governor

in assenting to Bills is constitutionally impermissible. These rulings together signal a firm judicial commitment to protecting the legislative sovereignty of elected State assemblies.

The experience of Delhi over the past decade provides a further illustration. Many initiatives of the elected government became entangled in disputes with the Lieutenant-Governor and the Union government. Courts eventually had to intervene. The lesson is not merely about one city; it is about what happens when the machinery of federal governance is used to punish a political opponent rather than serve the public.

Seen together — fiscal transfers, gubernatorial delays, and the Delhi impasse — these developments form a coherent pattern. The "double-engine" slogan is not merely a campaign metaphor. It is a description of how governance actually functions when political alignment is absent. And that is precisely the constitutional problem. The form of federalism survives; its spirit is quietly hollowed out.

India's federal system has faced similar tensions before. In earlier decades, Article 356 was frequently misused to dismiss elected State governments. The Court's landmark judgment in *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* placed important limits on that practice. The challenge today is subtler: governments may remain in office, yet, governance itself may become hostage to political alignment.

Structural reform needed

What is needed is not merely judicial intervention, but structural reform. The Finance Commission's recommendations could be made more binding. A fixed statutory timeline, say, three months, could be prescribed for Governors to act on Bills, failing which assent would be deemed granted. Inter-State/governmental councils, already provided for under Article 263, could be revitalised as genuine forums for cooperative federalism rather than ceremonial gatherings. These are not radical proposals; they are logical completions of the constitutional architecture that the framers intended.

Political slogans will continue to animate election campaigns. But a slogan that implicitly threatens citizens with slower development if they choose the "wrong" party at the State level does not merely distort electoral choice; it corrodes the constitutional promise of equal citizenship. Development cannot depend on political alignment. It must rest on rules and institutions that treat every State, and every citizen, with equal fairness. That constitutional balance, not the number of engines pulling the same train, is the only engine India's federal democracy truly needs.

Context The slogan "double-engine sarkar" is not just an election phrase, but raises a serious constitutional issue because it suggests that States may get development & funds only when they are politically aligned with the Union government.

Facts

- Cesses & Surcharges are outside the divisible pool, so they are not shared with states.
- In *State of Punjab vs. Principal Secretary to the Governor of Punjab (2023)*, the SC said a Governor cannot use inaction to stall the legislative process.
- In *State of Tamil Nadu vs. Governor (2025)*, the SC said prolonged inaction on Bills is constitutionally impermissible.

Analytical Crux

The real issue is not Centre-State coordination, but the idea that a State must elect the ruling party at the Centre to get fair development. This goes against the spirit of Indian federalism because the Constitution treats the Union and the States as partners, not dependents. This problem appears in three areas: fund sharing, Governor's delay over bills and Centre-state institutional conflict. The judiciary has tried to check this tendency, but courts alone are not enough; stronger institutions and rule-based federal practice are needed. In simple words, India needs rule-based federalism, not favour-based federalism.

Theoretical lens + Verbatim Quotes

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"That constitutional balance, not the number of engines pulling the same train, is the only engine India's federal democracy truly needs." — S.Y. Quraishi

Article - 3 : In West Asia, an unknown endgame

In West Asia, an unknown endgame, a distant peace, and missing statesmen

WARS ALWAYS follow a single fundamental rule. You know where to start, but you never control how they end.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East is just another. All three key protagonists — Iran, Israel, and the US — are signalling that they are “winning”. In what is supposed to be his first Nowruz — the pre-Islamic Persian New Year — message, the new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, claimed that Iran has dealt a “dizzying blow” to its enemies and that “the enemy has been defeated”. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that after 20 days of operations, “Iran today has no ability to enrich uranium and no ability to produce ballistic missiles”. US President Donald Trump, who has been claiming that the war was progressing faster than planned, signalled that the conflict is “winding down”. The Middle East, a land of prophets and prophecies, has a unique trait: Nothing happens until it really happens.

Three weeks since the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, where do we stand today? At least 14 countries are directly involved in the conflict, causing significant global repercussions. The war has already shattered several taboos and unthinkables. The killings of the Supreme Leader, security chief Ali Larijani, and several other key Iranian military figures have been devastating for the regime. This has resulted in two conflicting outcomes. One, the long-anticipated collapse of the regime has not occurred, at least not yet. And two, the conflict has weakened central authority and

loosened decision-making, giving more power to local authorities — those who control resources decide the targets for attack.

The long-feared closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the strategically crucial choke-point, has occurred. It was accompanied by Iranian energy infrastructure being targeted by the US and Israel, followed by Iranian retaliations against Arab energy assets. Both actions caused a significant supply disruption, resulting in a sharp increase in oil prices, which many expect will soon hit \$200 per barrel.

Although bunkers provide safety, the daily lives of ordinary Israelis have also been severely disrupted by a volley of attacks. Israel has yet to achieve, and is unlikely to develop, a foolproof firewall system against incoming Iranian projectiles.

Once the dust settles, what are the likely outcomes? One, the Gulf Arab countries neighbouring Iran will need to reassess their policies and strategies, especially considering their failure to safeguard the security of their citizens and large expatriate populations. They will be forced to rethink their social contract. As shown by the Arab Spring protests, monarchies tend to be more responsive and accommodating to popular moods than republican regimes. But this time, the challenge is herculean.

The GCC countries, including former allies like Oman and Qatar, will need to reevaluate their relationships with Tehran. If the US couldn’t serve as the dependable security provider the Gulf monarchies had expected, their strategy of ap-



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peasement towards Iran has also failed completely. They will have to go back to the drawing board and start over.

An unfortunate and unintended outcome will be the fate of Shia minorities in Gulf Arab countries. After being marginalised for a long time, especially following the Islamic Revolution, their situation had begun to improve slightly in recent years. The recent discovery of Iranian sympathisers and sleeper cells indicates that Gulf Arab countries, particularly Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, will view their Shia populations with increased suspicion and mistrust. The Arab Shias will be compelled to demonstrate their unwavering loyalty to their rulers and the state.

Two, the US and Israel will have to reevaluate their decapitation strategy aimed at triggering regime change in Iran. They will have to review the effectiveness and efficiency of their weapon systems. Although some regional countries benefit from Iran’s diminished military power, few have openly supported, let alone participated in, Operation Epic Fury. Even nations whose energy supply depends on the Strait of Hormuz are hesitant to join the US in keeping the strait open. Therefore, the US and Israel will need to reassess their regional strategy.

Three, the million-dollar question revolves around Iran. While the regime has shown its survival instincts and resilience in facing and responding to aggression, its future is more uncertain now than it was a few weeks ago. The regime’s “survival” comes at a significant

cost, not only militarily but also socially.

Iranian proxies are weaker than ever before. Hamas is more eager to work towards rebuilding Palestinian territories, and anger against Hezbollah has unified the Lebanese government and people towards a potential reconciliation with Israel. The weakening of domestic military capabilities has also reduced the clergy’s ability to impose its authority. The office of Velayat-e Faqih is crucial to the regime’s survival in Iran. However, dynastic succession and the appointment of someone with limited and unproven juridical expertise have greatly weakened the authority of the Supreme Leader.

Four, since the current conflict began with the US-Israel killing of Khamenei, it is natural and unavoidable that Arab anger towards them will emerge, and there may even be pressure to reconsider the Abraham Accords. At the same time, Israel alone will not shoulder all the blame. The Arab states and the Arab street are equally angry and upset with the Islamic Republic. This will create a challenge for Iran. Although its arsenal might give it military dominance, reckless attacks on Arab infrastructure will be politically costly for Iran in the long run.

While everyone, including the main leaders, wants an early resolution to the growing conflict, no country or group can get the parties to the negotiation table. Noises are often inversely related to influence, and there are fewer statesmen to help us progress. Therefore, there is no early end in sight to the ongoing Iran conflict.

The writer teaches contemporary Middle East at Jawaharlal Nehru University

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Facts

At least 14 countries are directly involved in the conflict.

Oil prices may soon reach \$200 per barrel.

The office of Velayat-e Faqih is crucial to the regime’s survival in Iran.

Context The ongoing Iran-Israel-US conflict in West Asia has no clear endgame, is changing region’s security, politics & is making peace look distant.

Verbatim Quotes

By P.R. Kumaraswamy

“Wars always follow a single fundamental rule. You know where to start, but you never control how they end.”

“The Middle East, a land of prophets & prophecies, has a unique trait: Nothing happens until it really happens.”

Analytical Crux

Wars may begin with clear goals, but they often move towards uncertain and uncontrollable endings. Iran may have survived the immediate shock, but its internal authority, proxy network and leadership legitimacy have weakened. The Gulf states have learnt that neither dependence on the US nor adjustment with Iran has given them real security. Israel and the US may gain military advantage, but they still do not have a clear political endgame. The deepest crisis, therefore, is not only of war but of diplomacy, because there are too few credible statesmen left to push the region towards peace.

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