

No rest for global cop

Behind the headlines Bunn Nagara



When the work culture' is to get involved in everybody else's business around the world, whether or not anything is resolved, the challenges can be overwhelming

IT is a busy time for a superpower, especially when so many everywhere refuse to oblige, conform or comply.

For Secretary of State John Kerry, it has been particularly hectic. His job is not helped by carping and sniping from back-seat driver Hillary Clinton, his immediate predecessor and a presumptive 2016 presidential aspirant.

It is not that President Obama has been dovish, from Afghanistan to Libya. But hawkish Hillary is keen to prove her battle-ready credentials even before the mid-term elections begin.

Perhaps picking up some nods from the Republican fan base as well wouldn't hurt. In the process, she is raising bipartisan stakes in gung-ho militarist interventionism.

Part of this narrative sees Obama's measured responses in Syria as hopelessly inadequate. If only the United States had armed and supplied the "moderate" rebel groups earlier, so it goes, they would have beaten Assad and the militant Islamist State (IS) by now.

But realities on the ground refuse to be so simple. For a start, it is often difficult to distinguish between Syria's supposedly good, democratic reformist rebels and its allegedly bad, mad militant rebels.

According to a report by the US-based Human Rights Watch in June, even the Western-backed Free Syrian Army committed a war crime by using child soldiers. Kurdish groups even trained young girls to be part of the fight.

The proliferation of anti-Assad rebels had always been a problem waiting to be acknowledged as such. From the beginning they were hopelessly divided, fighting one another over weapons supplies, resources, commanding authority, competing egos, tactics and objectives.

The IS' more recent cannibalisation of other groups is simply a continuation of this "civil war within a civil war" and taken further. But even so, things could still get worse.

Obama has not been doing nothing either. Unknown to Hillary perhaps, the CIA has for years been secretly involved in directing shipments of arms from Balkan surplus stocks to the rebels.

The internal debate within the administration has not been about whether to supply weapons. Rather, it had been about whether to supply "lethal" heavy artillery in addition to the "lighter" weapons, with all these terms being relative.

Despite the covert nature of the arms supply operation, the official line was that the weapons were only for the "moderate" groups. But since it was the law of the jungle that ruled, the more militant

groups ended up with a bigger share of the weapons.

That soon meant that the militant forces would eat more into the moderate forces like a cancer. With the relatively moderate groups remaining divided and many of its leaders killed off, the IS grows from strength to strength.

If the US had supplied more weapons to the rebel community, the militants would have gained even more disproportionately. Then the IS would be even stronger and deadlier today.

Even now, its gains in Syria and northern Iraq are already impressive and alarming enough. Its methods have also been so brutal and bloody as to have al-Qaeda dissociate itself from it in February.

Early this month the IS defeated Kurdish forces in battle, seized another oilfield, Iraq's biggest dam and three towns in a single day. Control over Mosul Dam gives the IS control over water and power supplies.

The IS also has significant control over five of Iraq's most productive agricultural provinces, giving it control over wheat supply. Not only does this feed its fighters and can potentially starve the enemy, the IS has the cheek to sell the wheat to the government for funds to fight the government.

The IS now controls some 70 oil wells in Iraq and Syria that finance its spiralling violence. When opposing rebel, Kurdish, Syrian, Lebanese or Iraqi forces flee, they leave territory and weapons supplies behind to the IS.

Where the IS can choose the battlefield, it prefers areas with profitable oilfields or in border regions to facilitate movement of its fighters between countries. It is now preparing a putsch in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region near Baghdad, since the capital as a logistical hub and morale booster is a long-sought prize.

When President Assad said anti-government rebels included militants linked to al-Qaeda, the US did not want to believe it since that clashed with its instinctive support for the rebels. While it was true then it has become less true now, ironically at a cost to the West.

The IS that has come to displace al-Qaeda and the less militant groups are unlike anything before in being much worse. It is known for persecuting ethnic and religious minorities and for violent punishments, imposing Islamic law on non-Muslims, stoning women, beheadings, crucifixions and burying women and children alive.

Although classified as a terrorist group, the IS differs from others in going beyond random attacks to systematic field campaigns to capture and retain territory. It also has ongoing recruitment drives and a methodical programme of indoctrinating children.

It ultimately seeks to establish a caliphate that includes the territories of several Arab countries.

It also wants to bring the rest of the Islamic world under its wing.

Neither Hillary Clinton nor Obama-Kerry has a clue how to deal with it. Scripted and routine US bombing campaigns, purportedly to save besieged minority communities in ethnic enclaves, are but ineffectual pin-pricks on the rocky landscape.

The US military is still the world's most formidable standing force in the history of the planet. However,

it has been configured to fight conventional wars between states.

When terrorist groups emerged, different tactics were thrown at the US state in the challenge to maintain security. Hardly had the US reformatted its resources - from special forces to high technology - to face this challenge when the IS appeared with a new challenge.

A decade after Obama's opposition to Bush's invasion of Iraq, the question of putting "ground troops" there returns.

It is no consolation that US ally Saudi Arabia remains complacent over its capacity to handle the likes of the IS. Saudi authorities are still under the illusion that their military forces are more than capable of dealing with the problem.

However, the larger problem is of governments and their conventional forces failing to understand that the nature of the challenge is different this time.

It is not only soldier-versus-soldier on the battlefield anymore, but also fuelling resentment among the population to wage unconventional warfare of every type from within and without.

In such a situation, Hillary would have the US pour more deadly weapons into a region with shifting allegiances and shifty agendas. In Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, the West had collectively fed monsters that eventually turned on them or their allies.

Everyone haplessly caught in between has had to bear the brunt of vital lessons that were left unlearned by others. And there is still no sign that the lessons bought at such a great price will begin to be learned.

As actor and martial artist Steven Seagal observed, those criticising Obama for not doing even more to encourage war must be crazy. Diplomatic efforts are not the only things that are deficient.

On Thursday, Kerry's official Air Force Boeing 757 broke down because of an electrical fault. By then, it was not only his mode of transport that had stalled.

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