

Old habits die hard

BY BUNN NAGARA 

Even in fighting a universal war against terrorism, major powers can still find occasion to compete at great cost to those caught between them.

IF ever a complex situation is set to get more complicated, it is the terrorist and anti-terrorist actions on the Iraq-Syria axis.

The mess is centred on the Da'ish (Islamic State) terrorist group and the countries queueing to obliterate it, even as it continues to make advances in Iraq and Syria.

The United States has pummelled Da'ish training camps with air strikes. So have Nato, Turkish, Russian and French forces.

And so have Iraqi and Syrian forces in their respective territories. In Syria, some half-dozen government affiliated armies and militias have been fighting Da'ish, with support from another half dozen Syiah militias.

Yet Da'ish fighters still claw their way forward, from conquering vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria towards taking key cities and national capitals.

By Friday, Da'ish had overrun villages on the edge of Aleppo, the largest city and among the richest in Syria. Poised within a few minutes' drive from the city in western Syria, Da'ish was ready to pounce.

The stakes have seldom been so high: Aleppo's fall would almost be as bad as Damascus' itself.

Syria's western flank is President Bashar al-Assad's vital side, its coastal access a strategic asset.

In just a few years, Da'ish has won allegiance from 13 other militant groups and recruited fighters from 72 countries. And as its successes grow, so does its mystique.

Its military triumphs have put all other militant groups fighting the Iraqi and Syrian governments in the shade, even when the latter had been established earlier.

Also eclipsed are those governments themselves and the Western forces aligned against Da'ish.

Everyone set against Da'ish, which is everyone in those countries except Da'ish, cannot afford to lose the war against it. Every setback is a victory for Da'ish, a morale booster adding to its psychological edge as a supposedly divinely ordained force.

However, Western governments' military support for Iraq and "moderate" militant anti-government groups in Syria has been limited and inconsistent. It seemed unlikely to roll back the Da'ish tide.

Enter Russian aircraft, bombarding rebel positions in Syria. Western reports, however, cite Moscow's primary purpose of attacking non-Da'ish militants fighting the government and supported by the West.

Turkey, a foe of both Da'ish and Bashar, has condemned Russia's action for making the fight against Da'ish more difficult. Da'ish had been fighting the other groups besides the Syrian government.

But freeing Syrian forces from having to deal with the other militant groups could also enable them to concentrate on fighting Da'ish. The configuration of forces allows for multiple interpretations.

Evidently, Russian forces have been working with the Syrian military in fighting rebel groups in ways likely to prolong Bashar's presidency. Not only is Syria an ally of Russia, Bashar as president of a sovereign Syria still enjoys support from a majority of Syrians.

The pattern of battle has been aerial bombardment of rebel camps by Russian aircraft, followed by mopping-up operations by Syrian infantry.

The joint offensive on Ghaib Plain in western Syria three days ago was one such example.

Despite Western criticism, Syrian locals welcome the Russian airstrikes. Among them is Aleppo's Catholic Archbishop, who said they help protect the Christian community from militant extremists.

However, Russia knows that even with (overstretched) Syrian ground support, bombing raids will not suffice to defeat Da'ish. One week ago the Kremlin began to mull over the prospect of introducing Russian ground troops.

This would raise direct Russian military involvement by another notch. Already unsettled by Russia's aerial engagement, Western powers will be more troubled if and when Russia's army moves in.

Already, some critics are blaming President Obama for letting Russia literally steal a march on him.

US reluctance to heighten its involvement and its objection to assigning ground troops has seen Russia doing both.

Russia's regional fortunes even seem to be on the upswing: Iraq could be requesting Russian airstrikes on Da'ish elements in the country.

The head of Iraq's Parliamentary Defence and Security Committee, Hakim al-Zamili, said Iraq may need to request Russian military assistance to take the lead from the US in fighting Da'ish.

Iraq-US ties worsened after US Defence Secretary Ash Carter accused Iraqi troops of lacking the will to fight Da'ish. Iraqi officials then blamed the US for providing inadequate training, equipment and air support which they now wish to get from Russia.

Some former Iraqi officials also hope to align the country with Russia rather than the US.

Former National Security Adviser Muafak Ruba'i has blamed the US for mishandling the fight against Da'ish and now looks to Russian assistance.

The dire situation in Iraq is evident. Whether Iraq proceeds to invite the Russian military in would depend on its performance in Syria.

While Western powers including Turkey wish to target militants like Da'ish, Russia prefers to strike at militants fighting the Syrian government. Besides its alliance with Damascus, Russia has a naval facility in Tartus on the west coast adjoining the Mediterranean Sea.

However, some analysts see Russia's increasing involvement in Syria as a serious mistake. Despite its formidable military prowess, Russia may not be able to sustain a heightened military presence with the constant and extended supply lines that will be needed.

If a second front opens for Russian troops or armaments in Iraq, that would add to Moscow's obligations and a further drain on resources. As in all such situations, getting in is easier than getting out.

Already, 41 Syrian militant groups angered by Russian bombardment have threatened to target Russian troops once they set foot in Syria.

With a weakened economy, Russia may find in Syria its "second Afghanistan".

Even as it is, Russian Cruise missile bombardment of Syrian rebel positions from the Caspian Sea is taking a risky route of some 1,500km over Iraqi and Iranian territory. Pentagon officials claim that four such missiles had lately landed in Iran instead.

Russia denies the allegation and Iran itself has made no comment. Even if true these mishaps would be accidental with few or no unintended victims, contrasting with the recent deliberate and deadly US bombing of a charity hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan.

Talks between US and Russian officials continue on "deconfliction" (avoiding each other's military hardware in the air), still with no standard operating procedures established.

In messy and violent failed states of the Third World, temptation that turns into opportunity requiring commitment often becomes entrapment. The price is a long, costly and unpopular war of attrition with no end or advantage in sight.

On the surface, however, President Putin appears to be basking in Russia's bold forward posture. But the limelight comes with a costly price tag.

Obama so far does not appear to be tempted to compete with Putin. Neither is Britain, which is offering no more than a token force for Nato in the Baltic states and Poland to deter any Russian ambitions.

What began as a regional battle against Da'ish may evolve into a contest for regional favours between Russia and the US. From the available evidence since mid-year, that process has begun.

Russia may feel fully justified in its interventions because the Syrian and possibly the Iraqi governments had invited it to do so. But so had another country before: Afghanistan.

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