

COMMENT

Three takeaways from two issues

2016 OUTLOOK: Saudi-Iran row, N. Korean test offer considerations for Malaysia's foreign policy for the rest of the year

IF there were any concerns that events in Asia would be less robust in 2016, those were quickly and emphatically put to rest in the first week of the new year. A few days past the fireworks, the continent was already grappling with fissures — both figurative and literal — in its western and northeastern reaches. Saudi Arabia severed ties with Iran over the former's execution of the Shia ulama Nimr al-Nimr, and North Korea claimed to have successfully tested a hydrogen bomb.

As startling and disturbing as these developments were, they were not altogether unpredictable. Rather, they marked a continuum of long-standing issues in the region. Nimr, a Saudi citizen, had been sentenced to death in September 2014. Factor in the centuries-old bitter Sunni-Shia split, which, in modern times, has morphed into terse geo-political rivalry between the predominantly Sunni Gulf states and Shia Iran; a domestically vulnerable Saudi Arabia and an emboldened post-nuclear Iran, the fallout between both governments over the beheading of an influential ulama was not completely

beyond contemplation.

Closer to home, North Korea's nuclear test was nothing new. As commentators have pointed out, this was North Korea's fourth test since 2006, in defiance of United Nation's sanctions and world opinion. It will likely not be its last. It is also testing its other arsenal. Just three days ago, North Korea released a video of an apparently successful submarine ballistic missile test.

West Asia and the Korean peninsula may be geographically too distant for Malaysia to be imminently concerned about, much less directly involved in. But, they offer important considerations for the conduct of Malaysia's foreign and security policy for the rest of this year in at least three ways.

The first and biggest takeaway is this: that specific, single actions can have disproportionately larger and unintended consequences in the region and beyond. The Riyadh-Teheran rift reverberates in Putrajaya because Malaysia adheres to the *Sunnah*, is part of its community of followers (Ahlus Sunnah was Jammah), and does not officially recognise Shiasm. Yet, Malaysia also hosts a sizeable Iranian diaspora of some tens of thousands. Only four years ago, Iranians formed the largest group of Malaysia My Second Home expatriates. While not all Iranians are Muslim or Shia, a Malaysia

that takes side in the Saudi-Iran break will sit awkwardly within the country, particularly as Malaysia has long practised a policy of non-alignment.

The implications of the Sunni-Shia schism also go further beyond in the fight against extremism. By burnishing its Sunni credentials, Malaysia will have to be cautious in not seeing to be validating the delegitimisation of, and crimes against, other Muslims who happen to be Shias in Syria and Iraq. The sectarian rhetoric among Da'esh sympathisers and supporters in Malaysia on social media is enough cause for concern. There must not be fuel for the fire.

By extension, the second takeaway is that the slightest miscalculation could trigger or escalate a rapid unravelling of relations. This is a frequent reprise among international security thinkers but it bears underscoring, given potential flash points in this region. The Korean peninsula is certainly one but closer to home, the South China Sea, improperly managed, could force a series of actions and reactions that may aggravate tensions beyond their current state. There have already been a few despite rhetorical calls for the observance of international law and the Asean-led Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Extensive land reclamation, civilian aircraft land-

ings on artificial islands, freedom of navigation operations have all complicated an already complex multi-claimant territorial dispute. There will likely be some clarity when the Permanent Court of Arbitration delivers its judgment in the middle of this year but we would do well to expect more assertive moves by claimants and stakeholders in the run-up to that decision as well as after.

Third, context matters. While the outlook may seem gloomy if January is any measure, it is important to remember that relations among countries are multifaceted. Where there may be trouble brewing on the political or security front, the economic or investment relationship can paint a different picture. Where governments are unable or unwilling to communicate diplomatically, it is often the business community or civil society that steps up to the plate. Far from a sign of weakness, the ability to juggle these different elements at different times is a necessary skill for a small country like ours. Malaysia will need to use all these components strategically and balance its relations pragmatically as the occasion befits to suit the evolving national interest.

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