

## Long way from closing in on terror

By Bunn Nagara



*Geared for action: Duterte and Trump would be ready to dump protocol and get their hands on the root of the terrorist problem to remove it for good. AP*

AFTER more than 100 days of the Trump presidency, mainstream media in the West are only just beginning to report on the issues that matter rather than their pet peeves about Trump.

Understandably, it can be hard to let go of the fact that their preferred candidate Hillary Clinton lost. It was difficult for Hillary herself, as her interview by CNN's Christiane Amanpour on May 2 in New York showed, and for Clinton cheerleader Amanpour as well.

Yet for Trump and the voting public serious about better governance, the issues are the heart of the matter: from reducing taxes to rebooting healthcare to rebuilding infrastructure to fighting terrorism.

Candidate Trump had become known to all as one who talked tough and had no time for frothy political correctness or the civil rights of terrorist suspects. So how would he deal with global terrorism?

Pitting a tough-sounding presidential candidate against a tough international problem should have been top priority for the US news media to cover. But they were too busy with his personal indiscretions, whether real, exaggerated, imagined or fabricated, to bother with issues affecting people's lives.

At least since last September, Trump had been insisting on rolling back the tide of international terrorism. Yet, whenever he mentioned working more closely on it with another tough leader, President Vladimir Putin of Russia, he was chastised rather than encouraged.

The only ones to gain from his critics' perverse diversionary tactics are al-Qaeda, IS, al-Nusra Front and countless other terrorist groups.

Yet the public everywhere want and need to know how a superpower like the US, now "under new management," would handle a major international scourge like global terrorism. After all, terrorism had grown under the watch of Trump's immediate predecessors George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Days after his Jan 20 inauguration, Trump ordered his national security team to produce a plan for defeating IS in 30 days. After al-Qaeda, IS has become the world's most bloodthirsty terrorist group, with roots in Iraq, Syria and Libya while promoting terrorism worldwide.

Throughout his campaign and in the opening months of his presidency, Trump said all the right things to show determination in rooting out terrorist groups, particularly IS. But what does it look like in reality, such as in budget priorities?

Whatever commitment Trump had or may have had in fighting terrorism seemed to have evaporated by the time of his budget proposal in March. Key government agencies in the fight against terrorism such as the Department of Homeland Security and the New York Police Department (NYPD) would suffer drastic budgetary cuts.

New York is the financial nerve centre of the US and the city that bore the brunt of the Sept 11 terror attacks. It is still the most likely city target of terror attacks, with 21 more plots uncovered since 2001.

Ironically, it is also Trump's home city. New Yorkers complain the city has to spend more to secure Trump Tower now that the occupant is the President – one who has given the NYPD fewer resources to work with.

On most days, security measures for Trump Tower cost US\$100,000 (RM434,000) a day, but the bill is triple that when the owner is in.

The NYPD's counter-terrorism budget for last year was some US\$237mil (RM1bil). Trump's budget proposal would almost halve that allocation.

Meanwhile, the President would give the regular armed forces bigger budgets for foreign battles, a situation he criticised during his campaign.

The US Marine Corps would grow 50% in battalion strength, the US Navy would have 25% more surface vessels and submarines, US Army troops would increase almost 14% and the USAF would have a further 8% in warplanes. Missiles would be upgraded as well.

So much for all the tough talk in the White House about fighting terrorists and avoiding foreign wars.

How is another tough-sounding leader on the other side of the world, President Rodolfo Duterte of the Philippines, doing in fighting the tough problem of terrorism?

Duterte, "Asia's Donald Trump," had also vowed to come down hard on terrorists. At least he would against those who did not happen to be his friends.

In August last year, he warned Filipino terrorists trying to identify with IS that he could be "10 times more brutal" than they were. Last month, he said he could be "50 times more brutal."

For good measure, he added that if a captured terrorist suspect upset him, he would "eat his liver" with salt and vinegar.

Duterte has already been blamed for encouraging the deaths of thousands of drug suspects by unidentified killers. Lately, his original focus on fighting the drug trade shifted somewhat to terrorism.

In the first half of this year, Philippine military operations against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) intensified. Although neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia support this crackdown, their security forces have largely limited their actions to netting any ASG fighters fleeing in their direction.

In March, Duterte received visiting Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop on his home ground of Davao City. He expressed hopes for closer cooperation between the Philippines and Australia against terrorism, among other areas, at a meeting described as "warm and cordial."

The following month, Duterte in a speech called for closer cooperation with the US against terrorism. A US diplomat in Manila reportedly reciprocated.

For years, Duterte had criticised the US for lecturing and micromanaging affairs in countries like the Philippines. His experience of US excesses as Mayor of Davao City sealed it.

After Barack Obama as President commented on Duterte's war on drugs in ways that were unwelcome, he cursed Obama and spurned Washington. In sharing certain characteristics with Trump, Duterte's Philippines may yet be heading for a reset in relations with the US.

In a recent phone call with Duterte, Trump spontaneously invited him to visit Washington. US officials immediately panicked as this contravened protocol, by doing without prior discussion with the State Department.

But neither Duterte nor Trump would be enamoured of such procedures. They would rather roll up their sleeves to get their hands on the root of the terrorist problem to remove it for good.

To Trump's invitation, Duterte responded by saying he may be too busy to accept it as he is scheduled to visit Russia first. So he may open discussions on the anti-terror fight with Putin, another leading member of the tough guy club.

On May 2, Trump and Putin spoke by phone and discussed various issues, from cooperation against terrorism to their first meeting in the coming G20 summit in Hamburg in early July.

Three days later, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov vowed to eliminate IS. But since 2014, a US-led coalition of 68 countries have been striking IS hideouts in Iraq and Syria with bombers and fighter aircraft without outright success.

For four active years, IS has grown and spread, recruiting terrorists and sympathisers worldwide and inspiring terrorist actions internationally. Yet no government has been able to eliminate them.

Tough leaders have been talking about doing that, sometimes even talking to each other about it. But their actions are what count.

One question the world is asking remains: if tough leaders cannot act tough and effectively, what can they do?

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