

Iran plays chess, the US plays backgammon



JAMES M DORSEY

IRANIANS play chess and Americans play backgammon when it comes to warfare, military strategy and conflict management.

That is becoming increasingly obvious in the US-Iranian tit-for-tat on an Iraqi gameboard.

Hobbled by harsh US economic sanctions and a weak military hand, Iran has perfected the art of asymmetric warfare and carefully calibrated operations as well as acts of political violence—an approach that the United States, 40 years after the 1979 Iranian revolution, has yet to come to grips with.

Iran's firing of missiles at two US bases in Iraq in its initial military response to the killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani deftly served multiple purposes while leaving the door open to de-escalation.

The Iranian missiles targeting the bases, part of what Iran dubbed Operation Harsh Revenge, were launched as millions crowded the streets of the city of Kerman for the funeral of Mr Soleimani, the third day of a mass outpouring of mourning, public anger and calls for revenge. Using guided precision missiles, Iran was careful to demonstrate its capability while not causing further US and/or Iraqi casualties that almost certainly would have provoked a harsh US response.

Driving the point home, Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei described the missile attacks as a "slap in the face" of the United States. Mr Khamenei went on to say that Iran's real revenge would be the expulsion of US forces from the Middle East. "Military actions in this form are not sufficient for that issue. What is important is

that America's corrupt presence must come to an end in this region," he said.

In a televised address, Mr Trump, flanked by Secretary of Defence Mark Esper, Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and several members of the military top brass, appeared to respond positively to the Iranian overture, cloaking it as Iran "standing down."

Amid the bluster justifying the killing of Mr Soleimani, promises to impose additional sanctions against Iran, vows that Iran would not be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon, and extolling American military and economic might, Mr Trump insisted that "the United States is ready to embrace peace with all who seek it." He noted that the US and Iran had a common interest in fighting the Islamic State, one reason why Mr Soleimani was a popular figure in Iran, and went on to say that "we should work together on this and other shared priorities."

Determined not to get embroiled in another Middle East war, Mr Trump's acknowledgement of the Iranian gesture hardly comes as a surprise.

Mr Trump has in the past nine months exercised in military terms the kind of strategic patience that Iran adopted in the first 18 months after the United States withdrew in 2018 from the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear programme and imposed its economic sanctions. Iran in May/June of last year switched its posture to one of calibrated escalation after Europe, Russia and China proved unwilling and/or incapable of salvaging the nuclear accord in a way that Iran would be at least partially compensated for the severe impact of the sanctions.

Mr Trump refrained from responding militarily to numerous attacks, including last year's Iranian downing of a US drone, attacks



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PHOTO: REUTERS/MURTAJA LATEEF

on tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, and two key Saudi oil facilities. Those attacks were the ones that caught the most international attention, but were, according to US officials, only the tip of the iceberg.

The officials said there had been some 90 attacks on US targets in Iraq since May 2019 carried out by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, including Kataeb Hezbollah, whose leader, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was killed alongside Mr Soleimani. The attacks were intended not only to force the US to escalate tensions by provoking a military response in the hope that it would lead to a return to the negotiating table but also an environment conducive to a withdrawal of US forces from

Iraq at the behest of the Iraqi government and/or public pressure.

"The nearly eight months in which the United States did not respond forcefully to a series of military provocations and attacks almost certainly contributed to the increasingly assertive and audacious actions by Iran and its proxies," said Michael Eisenstadt, an expert on the military and strategy at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP).

Mr Trump's apparent, so far disproven, belief that bluster and intimidation will force his adversaries coupled with television images of the besieged US embassy in Baghdad is likely what persuaded him to respond disproportionately to the killing

of a US contractor by assassinating Mr Soleimani.

Iran hopes that the scare of an escalating tit-for-tat that gets out of control will energise efforts to bring the United States and the Islamic republic back to the negotiating table. To do so, a third party with leverage on both sides of the divide like Oman would have to bridge a gap on the terms of reviving negotiations aimed at reinstating the nuclear accord that has been widened by Mr Soleimani's killing. Revival of the agreement would have to involve revised terms that include Iran's controversial ballistic missiles programme and support for proxies across the Middle East, the core of its defence strategy.

Timing is of the essence. Dialling down tension at best buys the United States and Iran time. It does not solve anything. Mr Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, insisted this week that the Trump administration's goal was to "contain and confront" Iran.

Iran retains a vested interest in strategic escalation. It may hope that the current crisis is the monkey wrench that breaks the logjam but will seek to again push things to the brink if it is disappointed.

Said The Washington Post in an editorial prior to Mr Trump's latest remarks: "The way to avoid these outcomes is to work with allies and other intermediaries to offer Iran a diplomatic solution, before the slide toward war becomes irreversible. In short, what's needed is Mr Pompeo's 'de-escalation,' not Mr Trump's reckless threats."

Mr Trump, however, has proven that he can go either way.

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NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Is it a new concept for Bangladesh?

HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

BANGLADESH'S forests tell us many stories. Let me share three of them. The first story is about how, over the years, concepts of forest management have been created and recreated. Let's take, as an example, people's participation in forest management and improvement. In the 1980s, an approach called "social forestry" was introduced where local people were engaged in plantation and afforestation programmes initiated by the Forest Department. This system has a benefit-sharing mechanism involving the local people as project beneficiaries, the Forest Department, landowners, the Tree Farming Fund, and respective local governments.

In 2004, the "Nishorgo Support Project" promoted another concept called "co-management" in the protected forests of Bangladesh. Here, forest-dependent people got involved in the conservation and protection efforts. Through a couple of follow-up projects—namely "Integrated Protected Area Conservation" (IPAC, 2009-2012) and "Climate Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods" (CREL, 2013-2018), all funded by the USAID—the co-management concept was further strengthened on the ground. The Protected Area Management Rules, 2017 has been a milestone in this 14-year-long co-management journey, which is expected to mainstream co-management mechanism beyond donor-funded projects.

The final example of participatory forest management comes from the "Sustainable Forests And Livelihoods" (SUFAL, 2018-2023), a USD 175 million World Bank-funded programme of the Forest Department. This initiative has introduced another new concept called "collaborative forest management" and is going beyond protected areas to engage people in forest and non-forest area management.



PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh has time and again shown the effectiveness of people's involvement in ecosystem-based actions—from the coast to the hills, from the mangroves to the haors.

The second story tells us how we have redefined our natural resource management approaches in response to changing situations. Since 1960s, the Forest Department has been undertaking coastal plantation programmes to stabilise Bangladesh's coastline. In this era of changing climate, coastal afforestation has become an essential climate action to protect our coast and the people. Initiatives like "Community Based Adaptation to Climate Change through Coastal Afforestation Project" (2008-2016) of the UNDP, supported by the LDC Fund, and "Climate Resilient Participatory Afforestation and Reforestation Project" (2013-2016) of the Forest Department, funded by Bangladesh Climate Change Resilience Fund (BCCRF), have redefined coastal afforestation as a

climate change adaptation measure. This approach was followed by CREL and is expected to be further promoted by SUFAL.

The ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis is also writing a new story on our forests. The world's largest refugee camp is now occupying more than 2,500 hectares of forest land of the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf peninsula—an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA). In 2018, the UNHCR and its partners planted tree saplings in 40 hectares of camp area. In June 2019, the UN agencies and their partners initiated reforestation in more than 200 hectares of land inside the refugee camps involving the refugees and the host community. This land technically still belongs to the Forest Department. But the department is playing an advisory role, instead of getting directly

involved in the reforestation, due to the current arrangement of camp management.

All these stories share some common features. We do realise that we have been changing our ecosystems drastically. We, therefore, have long been trying to protect our existing forests through protected area management, by restoring the degraded forest areas, and by expanding the forests/vegetation in new areas—sometimes involving people in all cases. These actions can be classified as "Nature-based Solutions" (NbS), a relatively new but much-talked-about concept in the global arena.

Nature-based solutions are "actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits." The NbS is an umbrella concept that covers a wide range of ecosystem-related approaches. All these actions and approaches address the challenges our society is now facing, like food and water insecurity, unsustainable resource management, unplanned economic and infrastructural development, environmental pollution, vulnerability to disasters, and long-term impacts of climate change.

A recent report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Oxford University has noted that NbS can play a crucial role in tackling the causes and consequences of climate change. Research shows that NbS could offer cost-effective mitigation measures to keep the global temperature below 2°C. Research also suggests that NbS can protect vulnerable communities from the climate change impacts as well as provide a range of other benefits to the society.

As the stories of Bangladesh's forests show, we have long been practicing nature-based solutions to conserve and manage our forests, although we have not branded

it as NbS. Despite spending modest funding for conservation and completing some successful projects, our on-going development activities often undermine our environmental sustainability. We still have a huge gap between the demand and supply of conservation funding. Overdependency on donor-funded projects and ensuring sustainability of project achievements beyond the project tenure remain major challenges. The current limitations and challenges around forest conservation in Bangladesh, therefore, indicate a long journey ahead of us.

To make Bangladesh's NbS approaches more effective, we need to consider the historical aspects and challenges of our ecosystem degradation, restoration and conservation and the lessons that we have learnt from the past. We need to understand the current and future challenges that await Bangladesh as the country aims at joining the lower-middle-income country club in 2024. Based on these, we must further explore the opportunities of NbS in the ongoing and future sustainable forest or ecosystem management projects (e.g. USAID's Protibesh). Before scaling up new NbS initiatives, we need to pilot and test their effectiveness, through appropriate research and evidence generation.

As we go forward with NbS, it is crucial to remember that our NbS ventures should always involve the local people whose lives, livelihoods, and well-being directly depend upon the nature. Bangladesh has time and again shown the effectiveness of people's involvement in ecosystem-based actions—from the coast to the hills, from the mangroves to the haors. Participatory nature-based solutions can continue to benefit Bangladesh in its journey towards a resilient future.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

COMMON SENSE; INHABITANTS OF AMERICA,

JANUARY 10, 1776
'Common Sense' published

On this day in 1776, Thomas Paine published 'Common Sense', a 50-page pamphlet that sold more than 500,000 copies within a few months and called for a war of independence that would become the American Revolution.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Didn't budge
7 Atomizer's output
11 Sword-making city
12 Formerly
13 Out of bed
14 Valhalla VIP
15 Betray
16 Cuff site
17 Hammer wielder
18 Axle gunk
19 Infamous emperor
21 Silent approval
22 Ajax's fight
25 "Norma—"
26 Keenness

27 Counsel
29 Like the desert
33 Used up
34 Jiffy
35 Saddle part
36 Canadian coin
37 Different
38 Ticked
39 Crystal gazer
40 Gauges

DOWN

1 Kick off
2 Temple text
3 O'Connor's successor
4 Answer choice
5 Perfect place
6 Ho of Hawaii

7 Sculptor Henry
8 Gary's home
9 Cut
10 Like some wedding reception
16 Injustice
18 A+, e.g.
20 VCR button
22 Future frog
23 Shifting choice
24 Exhaust
25 Skin woes
28 Central
30 Washer cycle
31 Less friendly
32 Actions
34 Big book
36 Woolen cap

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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L A M E R T A M E R
S L E E T E M E R Y

BETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

TAKE THIS TO THE MAILBOX. YES, SIR. HEY!

STOP DOING YOUR GENERAL HALFTACK IMPRESSION!

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

DAD! OUR SCHOOL IS SELLING MAGAZINE SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR OUR FUNDRAISER. WILL YOU HELP?

IN OTHER WORDS, HOW MANY SUBSCRIPTIONS CAN I BUY?

NO, HOW MANY CAN YOU SELL?

YEAH, WE DON'T HAVE A LOT OF FREE TIME.