

JAPAN

Old wounds heal hard

M AL-AMIN

In the latest show of anger against US military presence in Japanese soil, it's the Okinawans again who rang the alarm bell and uttered the most unpleasant words setting aside the Japanese government's position on the US submarine's collision with a Japanese fishing boat that left nine people missing and presumed

dead.

A municipal assembly in Okinawa called for the withdrawal of all US marines from the islands and also the resignation of commander of the submarine which caused the accident.

On February 9 the US submarine Greenville rammed the Japanese fishing boat Ehime Maru during an emergency resurfacing drill causing it to sink within minutes off Hawaii.

The fishing boat was carrying a group of



PHOTO: AFP

Some 30 members of a civic group hold banners and a chain of handkerchiefs in front of the National Diet in Tokyo on Thursday demanding the withdrawal of US bases from Okinawa, southern Japan, and to ask US officials to salvage a Japanese fishing boat sunk after a collision with a US submarine off Hawaii. Relations between Japan and the US have been strained following a series of recent incidents in Okinawa involving US military personnel off base and the latest mishap in Hawaii has damaged further the bilateral situation.

THE KOREAS

Re-unification? When?

EKRAM KABIR

WHEN two Korean leaders met last year, emotions ran high as far as the re-unification of North and South Korea is concerned. After various events took place. Recently, military officials from North and South Korea have agreed to a code of conduct for soldiers involved in the reconstruction of a railway line across the heavily-militarised border zone. The agreement - reached after months of negotiations - is aimed at avoiding potential clashes in the zone, as work begins to reconnect a railway line linking the two Koreas. It also covers the clearance of landmines.

Officials holding separate talks on a deal to share electrical power failed to reach agreement after Pyongyang refused to allow the south to inspect its power plants. North Korea is suffering from serious energy shortages and has been demanding free electricity from the South.

The issue has derailed progress on other matters, including efforts to set up a permanent venue for holding re-unions for divided families.

Therefore the hopes for reunification the Koreans come under question given the prevailing conditions. And circumstances that can be conjectured in the future, Korea's unification seems a remote possibility.

Exactly what international conditions must be met to enable Korea's unification? Although no one can define the smallest actual requirements that must be met before the unification can be achieved, one could still discuss the larger frames under which it could be realised.

At the very top of the list, one may argue that no unification in Korea will be possible as long as China is against it and/or that there continues the fundamental discord between China and the US over the larger vista of East Asia's basic strategic conditions. So long as the two countries consider each other as the chief opponent to each other's vital interests and security, Korea will never be allowed to unify. As a smaller country entangled, against its will or interests, in the great powers' geostrategic ambitions, Korea will never have independent means to overcome or bypass their

central interests or strategic calculations. Compared to the circumstances as well as the processes of German unification, the Korean situation is too fundamentally different to be usefully compared.

The inhibiting factors that work against Korea's unification will become even more insurmountable if the Sino-American conflict becomes more complicated, especially if it is more clearly transformed into a bloc-to-bloc confrontation by adding Russia and Japan. However for now and through the foreseeable future, the following would be the minimum necessary preconditions for the successful unification of the Korean Peninsula:

The first will have to be the US decision to finally detach itself from Taiwan in genuine conformity with the spirit and letter of all the existing Sino-American agreements since the first Nixon visit to China in 1971.

Among other things, this will mean the withdrawal of all naval and air units from the Taiwan area, along with a complete stop to any military cooperation with Taiwan as well as a total stop in weapons supplies. Only then can there be genuine "give and take" dialogue between Taipei and Beijing for peaceful resolution of the unification issue. The US persistence on the present course of policy, reinforced by surreptitious backdoor military connection to Taiwan, can only be construed as the continuing American strategy to frustrate, block, and defeat China's national progress well into the future will be met with equally hostile response; and as China's power rises, the US future in Asia will be more thoroughly blocked, and will only expedite the end of American role and presence in Asia. As long as the US and China are thus divided on Taiwan and on China's future role, no satisfactory resolution will ever be possible for Korea's unification.

Only when the US is removed from the Taiwan-China equation, can there be a true beginning of mutually beneficial relations between Beijing and Washington. Without the genuine improvement of Sino-American relations based without the imbroglio of Taiwan and Japan alliance, Korea's unification will remain forever impossible.

The conflict between China/Russia vs.

Japanese high school fisheries students. Of the total 26 people were rescued by the US Coast Guard - but four students, two teachers and three crewmen are still missing and feared dead. Now their relatives are demanding that the bodies of victims be recovered and handed over to relatives for last rites.

Shizuko Kimura, sister of a missing crew member, said she will wait for even years to receive her brother's body. "I'm not asking you to bring him back alive, but please bring his body back", she was quoted to have said, "Please give my brother back for my mother who's waiting for him in Japan."

And to the grief-stricken relatives, US President George W Bush's apology to the Japanese people does not bear any standing but a symbolic sense of national ambience about the incident. But it certainly has its diplomatic weight and meaning in political terminology, which matters in bilateral ties, though it won't be able to suppress the internal feelings of the aggrieved people and their utterance.

Following the sequences of events, even the Japanese government itself is facing the music for being slow to react. People's anger rose in such an extent that the popularity of Mori government faced a slide and the gaffe-prone Prime Minister would have lost his job if a suitable successor could be found.

On the other hand, the new Bush administration was very quick in its diplomatic response seeking apology following the incident, though very slow to feed the anxious Japanese of the obvious information they sought most. And that made the Japanese government utter some unpleasant words to fend off the public pressure. And the Mori government finally managed somehow to keep its identity intact.

But the obvious question resurfaced once again: the relevance of US military presence in Japanese soil even after more than 50 years of the Second World War for which one Japanese lawmaker recently blamed the US in clear words. US military presence in Asia and more specifically in Japan is vital for American identity and

existence as a superpower in a unipolar world in which Japan is a major contender as an economic superpower. Japan, to a great extent, controls not only the US economy but also the world economy in a fiercely competitive era of globalisation.

Despite US-Japanese interdependence in world politico-economy amidst Sino-Russian axis in the region, though post-Soviet era Russia is a mere paper tiger even in its own domain. Actually Japan and US are both worried about China's role in arms proliferation and world politics. China is the most unpredictable and emerging superpower who has all the potentials to change the world's polarisation.

These factors, in Japan, may have their implications in greater national interest in the long run, but ordinary Japanese people and the relatives of the victims seemed less bothered, rather they want instant action in line with the words already on the dock. And the Chatan (a small town of about 25,000 people near the state capital of Naha) municipal assembly in Okinawa is symbolically representing the public opinion of the mass people and on Thursday it called for the withdrawal of all US Marines from the island and also the resignation of submarine's commander, Commander Scott Waddle.

Chatan was the scene of arson attacks last month that local police and people suspect were committed by a US Marine. Tempers flared last week when the US base authorities refused to hand over the Marine for arrest. The standoff has strained relations already made tense by derogatory remarks by Lt. Gen Earl Hailston, commander of US forces on Okinawa. Hailston issued apology last week for the remarks. But Chetan assembly added its voice to a chorus of communities calling on Hailston to go and demanded all Marines leave with him for good.

Okinawa is home to half of the 47,000 US troops stationed in Japan. It has been an important forward post for US in the Pacific since it is occupied at the end of World War II. US military installations including an air base occupy more than half of Chatan.

Crimes committed by US military personnel are one of the biggest headaches for Japanese people. Thousands of Okinawans marched in protest in 1995 after a 12-year-old girl was raped by US servicemen.

Okinawa state lawmakers last month passed a resolution urging a reduction in number of Marines on Okinawa but stopped short of advocating a complete pullout.

In the backdrop of this demand, the sub crash added salt to that and strained the ties further. As US Navy took four days to admit that civilian visitors were manning the two key controls of the USS Greenville during the collision and civilians role in the accident can't be ignored. An American civilian, John Hall, one of the 16 civilians on board the sub, has admitted he pulled the levers that led to the sub's ramming Japanese boat.

Hall's admission came as Japan warned of serious consequences if it was found that the civilian had contributed to the accident. Foreign Minister Yohei Kono also protested to the US Secretary of State Colin Powell over Washington's failure to inform Japan about the civilian's role.

The US Navy launched a top-level court of inquiry late Saturday - the highest of its kind into the collision. US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Thomas Fargo announced a hearing scheduled yesterday in Pearl Harbor to inquire all facets of the accident.

Fargo named Greenville commander Scott Waddle, executive officer Lt Commander Gerald K Pfeifer and deck officer Lt. Michael J Coen as party to the inquiry and removed them from their post immediately. A Navy submarine called 'Deep Drone' surveyed the ocean floor around the Ehime Maru Monday but found no remains of the nine people missing since collision. The Navy also showed the video footage of the sunken boat to families of the victims.

But Kazuo Nakata, the father of missing Jun Nakata told a television interview that it (the wreckage) looked too good. They are not showing us the damaged parts of the sunken boat. "We asked them not to control the information and

provide us with clear images of the parts we want to see - no matter how difficult and shocking it may be for us," he added.

In an editorial, The Washington Post accused the Navy of "withholding key facts because it wants to avoid full responsibility." Leonard Steinhorn, a professor of communications at American University said, "There is an irony that the Navy, which used its submarine for public relations purposes, is now stonewalling the press and undermining whatever good will it could have had by getting this story out and addressing it straightforwardly." He also said, "Unfortunately, a military that felt burned during Vietnam is very nervous about airing its dirty linen in public. That mentality is still very strong in the United States military today, to its own detriment."

Following sequence of events, BBC's Washington correspondent reported the incident is rapidly turning into a diplomatic disaster for President George W Bush as Bush had hoped to strengthen ties, already strained over incidents involving US troops in Japan's Okinawa island. And for that Bush apologised immediately after the accident and asked the Pentagon to review its policy on civilian participation.

Without making any gimmick, are these mere words and acts without trust enough to heal the wounds of the victims' families or does it really matters to the waiting relatives? Well, yes - mere words sometimes matters if words and actions follow the same tune with trust. But the handling of the human tragedy by US administration has its own characteristics that lacks trust, humane touch and hearty fellow feelings, rather it has its tricky efforts, from the very beginning, to cover up and cold shoulder the responsibility for the tragedy. Now if this sort of cover up efforts continue in the final report of inquiry then Japanese might think of going on their own alone in world politics and the whole scenario would be different.

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Picking on China

LIFE is not always full of thrills for the mushroom bureaucrats of Japan's agriculture ministry. Yet in recent weeks the atmosphere at the ministry's forest-products division has been little short of electric. A flood of cheap imports is threatening Japan's 30,000 shiitake growers. An investigation is afoot, involving colleagues from the exalted finance and trade ministries. For the first time since 1955, when Japan joined what is now the World Trade Organisation, talk has turned to invoking its "safeguards" emergency tariffs or import quotas. Officials are also considering a move against imports of a type of onion, and of the bulrushes used for weaving tatami mats. What all three cases have in common is that the targets of Japan's proposed retaliation are Chinese.

It used to be said that the relationship between Japan and China was good if their ageing leaders pronounced it so. These days, a more accurate description is that, despite official assurances, relations are bad and getting worse. For this, the Japanese blame Chinese aggressiveness, in

trade and in foreign policy. Yet a good part of the reason can be found in Japan. There, old policies of "engaging" the Middle Kingdom are under sustained attack from an assertive new generation of politicians, academics and journalists. Even foreign-ministry officials have begun to pay attention. Official China policy has suddenly begun to harden.

The China hawks have an attentive audience: as happens the world over, Japan's sick economy and persistent high unemployment are fanning the flames of chauvinism. Racial violence is still infrequent. But milder forms of prejudice are flourishing. Illegal Chinese immigrants infest the building industry, grumble the Japanese, undercutting honest native workers. Chinese crime syndicates are bringing confusion to Japan's carefully-ordered society. Chinese burglars are masterminding a surge in petty crime.

The authorities are taking things seriously. Police statistics on rising crimes by "foreigners" (ie, mainly, Chinese) are followed with keen interest. Until they were hurriedly removed

recently, posters put up by the police in Tokyo urged that, since there had been a recent spate of burglaries by "Chinese and other people", "if you notice anyone speaking Chinese, call the police."

China's leaders are not deaf to Japanese hostility. During a recent visit to Japan, for instance, Zhu Rongji, its prime minister, refrained from the usual demands for another official apology for Japan's wartime sins, although he could not resist mild needling on the subject. But neither the Chinese nor the Japanese government seems fully abreast of the forces at work in Japan. As Takeshi Sasaki of Tokyo University points out, Japan's economic crusade has largely sublimated its nationalist urges since the war. But, since the crash of the early 1990s, years of recession and financial crisis have upset that delicate accommodation. Japan is getting angrier. And it is unlikely to stop after taking out its frustration on Chinese mushrooms.

This piece was first published in The Economist of London.

AFGHANISTAN

The tragedy

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AFGHANISTAN was historically the proxy and sometimes the actual battleground of the Russian and British Empire. In order to obtain a de facto control over this buffer state, the British forward frontier policy led them inexorably to three successive Afghan wars starting from deposition of Dost Mohammad circa 1839 to the third Afghan war in 1919.

The conclusion drawn from these adventures by the British were: (a) It is impossible to instal 'your' man in Afghanistan (b) nor is it possible to annex it, with overwhelming military power for long so, it is best to treat it as a buffer state, pay a subsidy or tribute (call it what you will) to maintain your influence (d) and accept the tribal nature of the Afghan people letting them sort out their differences through Jirgas or localized conflicts.

In order to build a second defence line in the over-spill of Afghan Tribes in Balochistan & NWFP, the concept of a second buffer as Tribal areas (administered loosely by Political Agents through bribe and punishment) was considered expedient. British Indian Empire could afford to buy peace for itself because it had the necessary depth and a resource-rich hinterland. To keep Russians away, the British would rattle sabres every now and then and talk darkly of their ambitions of reaching warm waters.

The successors of British India in the North-Western Region was

Pakistan. Much before that, the Russian Empire had been converted into the Soviet Union but with same imperial ambitions. Both badly played their politico-economic relations with Afghanistan resulting finally in the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This was succeeded by the Afghan Jihad and now its aftermath has witnessed one of the most hopeless, bloody and callous wars sans end.

Let us enumerate Pakistan's mistakes first as the successor power to British India. After partition of India, the Pakistani policy makers were irked by the propaganda and small needle-pricks of Pakhtunistan cause espoused by the Afghan Government. We started tampering with the transit trade and overreacted to small mischief by some Afghan agents-provocateur.

We thus became a big bully boy ignoring the fact that we had real problems on our other frontiers. Secondly, we retained the quasi-independent status of tribal area, thus denying ourselves geographical depth. We should have befriended Afghanistan through economic integration viz trade, investment and training.

I recall that as an Assistant Collector of Customs, I once facilitated a shipment of American grain for Afghanistan - where near famine conditions were prevailing - a simple act of official duty. Next day, at a reception at the Afghan Embassy a tearful charge embraced me as his brother and wished there were more helpful Pakistani officials like me, in

which case he assured me that our mutual difference would evaporate. But we went on to stop the transit trade altogether in 1963-64, making them more and more dependent on the Soviets and the Indians.

They began by demanding a certain aggressive action on part of King Zahir Shah, who was in Moscow enroute to Kabul in 1971, when Pakistan was embroiled in its tragic war with India. On the king's refusal, his cousin Sardar Daud Khan (a sympathizer) but not a card-carrying comrade was encouraged to depose him. Finally, when the Sardar felt hemmed in by the Soviet bear's embrace and during his visit to Pakistan started talking of Allama Iqbal's vision and Saadabad Pact (an alliance of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey), he was assassinated.

Mr Nur Muhammad Taraki became the President of (the Socialist) Republic. He was killed by his rival Hafizullah Amin. The Soviets did not trust Mr Amin and finally Secretary-General Brezhnev, obdurate and senile as he was, sent Babrak Karmal on top of a Soviet Tank alongside Soviet troops to incorporate Afghanistan into the union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

History repeated itself. The fractious, intrepid and fiercely independent Afghans would never accept a ruler imposed from outside. So they rose, giving an opportunity to USA to wage a war through mercenaries (with apology to the brave Afghans and the volunteers from the Muslim world who were led

to believe that this is a Jihad by the master communicator Ronald Reagan).

Funds were no problem. Arms were plentiful. Pakistani leadership was a willing conduit because the establishment had the choice of sending these to their chosen jihadi leaders or selling them in the arms Bazaars of the world. Arms trafficking and drug trafficking was freely permissible in the name of the noble goal of driving the infidels out of Afghanistan.

Pakistan is an equal sufferer and is in equal jeopardy. We are like a house next door to a strong conflagration and the wind is blowing in our direction Refugee influx into a fragile economy, influx of weapons in abundance, ideology and practice of violence and fanaticism are our rewards for being conned into the role of a front-line state against the march of communist monolith. "A fool and his money is soon parted" says Shakespeare. I would modify it. A fool and his friends are soon parted.

Let us induce Iran to help these efforts. Maybe the fatigue of war will finally persuade the two warring factions to call it a day given some strong and sincere mediation. In the meanwhile, keep the fancied victors of Kabul and Kandhar at arms length and refrain from blaming either foreign powers or our unlucky stars. No amount of America or Russia-bashing is going to help! We must have a peaceful and united Afghanistan soon.

This piece was first published in the Dawn of Pakistan.