

Yet another acid test for the nation

The success of our democratic transition largely depends on free and fair elections. Our political system has so far failed to ensure that. And this failure, in a larger sense, belongs to us all. We all have the responsibility to come forward to redress the situation.

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

By-elections of the seven vacant parliamentary seats are scheduled for April 2. It is very important that these elections are free, fair, and peaceful. In fact, we feel that these elections are yet another acid test for the nation...

It is generally believed that our elected governments are incapable of holding free and fair elections. In fact, the system of caretaker government was created to redress this situation, though in reality it swept under the rug the misconduct on the political parties, which was really the problem.

More seriously, we have once again recently demonstrated that our political culture does not allow fair elections to be held under an elected government. According to all domestic and foreign observers, the interim government headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed was able to give the nation a free, fair and peaceful national election on December 29, 2008. But, unfortunately, serious accusations of hooliganism and undue influences were raised about the upazila elections held under the elected government.

Complaints have been made against some government functionaries of partisan behaviour and against some MPs and ministers of exerting undue influence. As a result, the elections of six upazilas were postponed by the EC on the election-day, and later the election results of another 16 upazilas were either fully or partially postponed and judicial enquiry initiated.

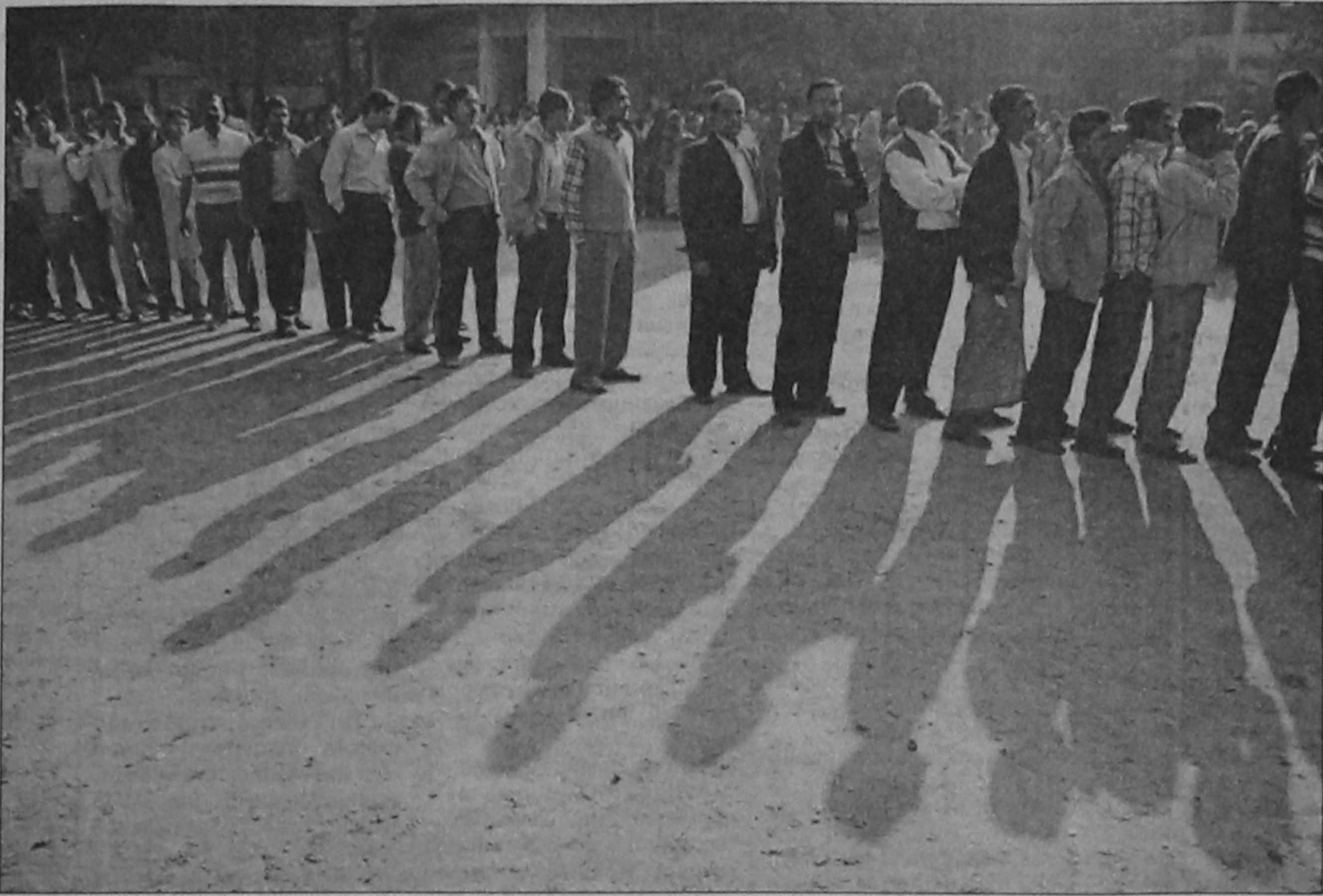
In addition, administrative enquiry was launched in several other upazilas. By contrast, no election results were suspended or elections postponed in any constituency during the parliament elections.

Elections are pre-requisites for a democratic system. However, elections, as stated in our constitution, must be "peaceful, fair and neutral." Thus if the elected governments continue to fail to hold fair elections in the future, our democratic system will be at risk again. Like nature, where species must regenerate themselves to survive, political systems must also revitalise themselves to sustain. Thus, in the interests of sustaining and institutionalising our democratic system, it must be demonstrated beyond doubt, through the coming by-elections, that free and neutral elections are possible under an elected government.

Unfortunately, we have been hearing from some of the constituencies that already the hooligans have begun to flex their muscles -- they have been harassing some voters, especially the minorities. Moneyed men have also started spreading their wealth. These illegal activities will intensify as the elections come nearer. Thus the government must begin to take stern actions immediately.

Coming by-elections are also an acid test for the EC. The commissioners themselves expressed unhappiness about the upazila elections. Now using the experiences of these two elections and also the previous local elections, the commission must take appropriate actions to make the by-elections free and fair.

It must ensure that candidates disclose information fully, debar the candidates



Lining up in hope for true democracy.

for providing wrong and misleading information, and take severe punitive actions against those who violate the law and the code of conduct. It must also ensure that ineligible candidates cannot become elected using the legal loopholes and legal manipulations. It must not hesitate, if necessary, to debar candidates and cancel elections.

Influence of money is one of the biggest hindrances to fair elections, and thus to our democratic system itself. The commission must pay special attention to ensure that money does not unduly influence the by-elections. We believe that our EC should appoint monitors to scrutinise on a daily basis the election expenses of the candidates in the seven

by-elections. In addition, the commission may arrange projection meetings in each constituency. Shujan has vast experiences in these activities and we can help the commission.

Despite all our efforts by the commission, fair elections are not possible unless the political parties behave. If the political parties and their candidates are committed to win elections at any cost, then the EC, despite its utmost sincerity, will not be able to deliver fair elections.

Political parties should have nominated candidates who are honest, competent and committed to people's welfare rather than controversial candidates. However, one cannot help but be disappointed by the nominations of the two

major parties. More importantly, none of the political parties followed the law, which required them to nominate candidates based on the recommendations of their local committees. This is a violation of the law, which is clearly inconsistent with rule of law. Compliance with only selective laws and ignoring others got our democratic system into trouble in the past, and the same consequence will follow with similar behaviour. Thus the EC and the relevant parliamentary committee must urgently look into the matter.

Responsible behaviour of the candidates and the parties must also be ensured for the sake of fair elections. Considering the seriousness of the matter, we hope the political parties will take

urgent steps to clean up their act. At the same time EC will also ensure full compliance with the law, rules, and the code of conduct.

The coming by-elections are also important acid test for the media and the citizen groups. Media's responsibility is to create voter awareness. If they disseminate information disclosed by candidates and do further investigative reporting then the voters will have a chance to be informed. At the same time they must report the violation of the laws and the code of conduct.

Citizen groups also have very important roles in creating voter awareness. They can highlight the salient issues, analyse the information disclosed by the candidates for use by the media and thereby help voters make informed choice. At the same time, they can mobilize and generate voter activism and arrange candidate-voter face-to-face meetings. Shujan did similar things during the national elections.

Winners and losers in elections will ultimately be determined by the voters. Thus the voters will have to decide what kind of representatives they want to elect. If they are influenced by money or threats, the consequence is likely to be disastrous. If the tainted candidates get elected, they will feel validated and will feel encouraged to continue their misdeeds. Thus, the EC, media and the citizen group must be vigilant so that such a scenario does not unfold.

To conclude, the success of our democratic transition largely depends on free and fair elections. However, our political system has so far failed to ensure that. And this failure, in a larger sense, belongs to us all. Thus, we all have the responsibility to come forward to redress the situation. The government, EC, media and the citizen groups will have to work together -- then only can we expect to turn the failures of the past into successes of the future.

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China expanding its horizons

It's natural for China to flex its growing muscles and vigorously pursue its national interests, and the international system should accommodate these developments. But the questions are -- how and to what ends?

GLENN D. TIFFERT

The US-China relation is frequently described as promoting China's emergence as a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. Often unexamined in this dignified formulation is that China may decide that the fundamental changes to the international system might suit it better. Therefore, China's spirited intercept of the surveillance ship USNS Impeccable near Hainan Island on March 8, 2009, acquires deeper significance.

The Impeccable incident fits into a pattern of increasingly assertive attempts by China to leverage its growing resources and capabilities to shift the regional and global balance of power in its favour.

China has framed these attempts in the rhetoric of international law and anti-hegemonism with ramifications not just for US but for others farther afield too.

The Impeccable was intercepted approximately 75 miles south of China's most modern submarine base. This base services a growing fleet of stealthy attack and nuclear ballistic missile subs aimed at projecting Chinese power, countering US naval dominance of the Western Pacific

and clouding US security guarantees for Taiwan.

As the most advanced submarine detection platform in the US Navy, the presence of the Impeccable in the area no doubt irritated China.

China insists that international law bars virtually all foreign military activities within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), an ocean that extends 200 nautical miles from its coast. Territorial waters extend out to 12 nautical miles from the coast. Underlying this opinion is a hermetic conception of sovereignty that rejects outside efforts to penetrate national boundaries on humanitarian intervention.

However, the preponderance of opinion soundly rejects China's position; the mainstream view by far is that the Impeccable operated legally in China's EEZ.

The flaws in China's legal brief are much less interesting than the implications of its argument: 36% of the world's oceans and the airspace above them would be off-limits to most foreign military activities. With due respect, this would attenuate the technological advantages of the US, Russian, Taiwanese and Japanese militaries by limiting their opportunities to intercept com-

munications.

Currently, US conducts several hundred reconnaissance missions each year along China's coast to support its interests and defence commitments to partners such as Taiwan, Japan and Korea, some of which operate around these waters themselves. Prohibiting these activities would clearly advantage China's emerging position as the dominant regional power.

This is especially true because other nations depend on American power to check China's ambitions and preserve the status quo in the area.

Chinese maps depict nearly 80% of the South China Sea as lying within China's maritime boundaries. China's views on whether its territorial waters extend to these disputed islands and whether the islands themselves generate additional EEZs remain ambiguous.

But evidence indicates that it understands these claims expansively, which would convert up to 3 million square kilometres of ocean into a virtual Chinese lake and push foreign military activities farther out into the open ocean.

To be clear, China reserves the right to operate freely in these disputed waters because technically it regards them as its own. Accordingly, it has conducted military exercises in the EEZ claimed by Vietnam and sent submarines, research vessels and trawlers outfitted for espionage into the EEZ and even territorial waters claimed by Japan.

Guan Jianqiang notes that China has recorded more than 200 instances of US naval vessels collecting intelligence in its

EEZ where it has mounted many more challenges to them than the comparatively small number of publicised cases would suggest.

US can be expected to continue its policy of defying such challenges and maintaining a high level of activity in and above these waters, effectively daring China to stop it.

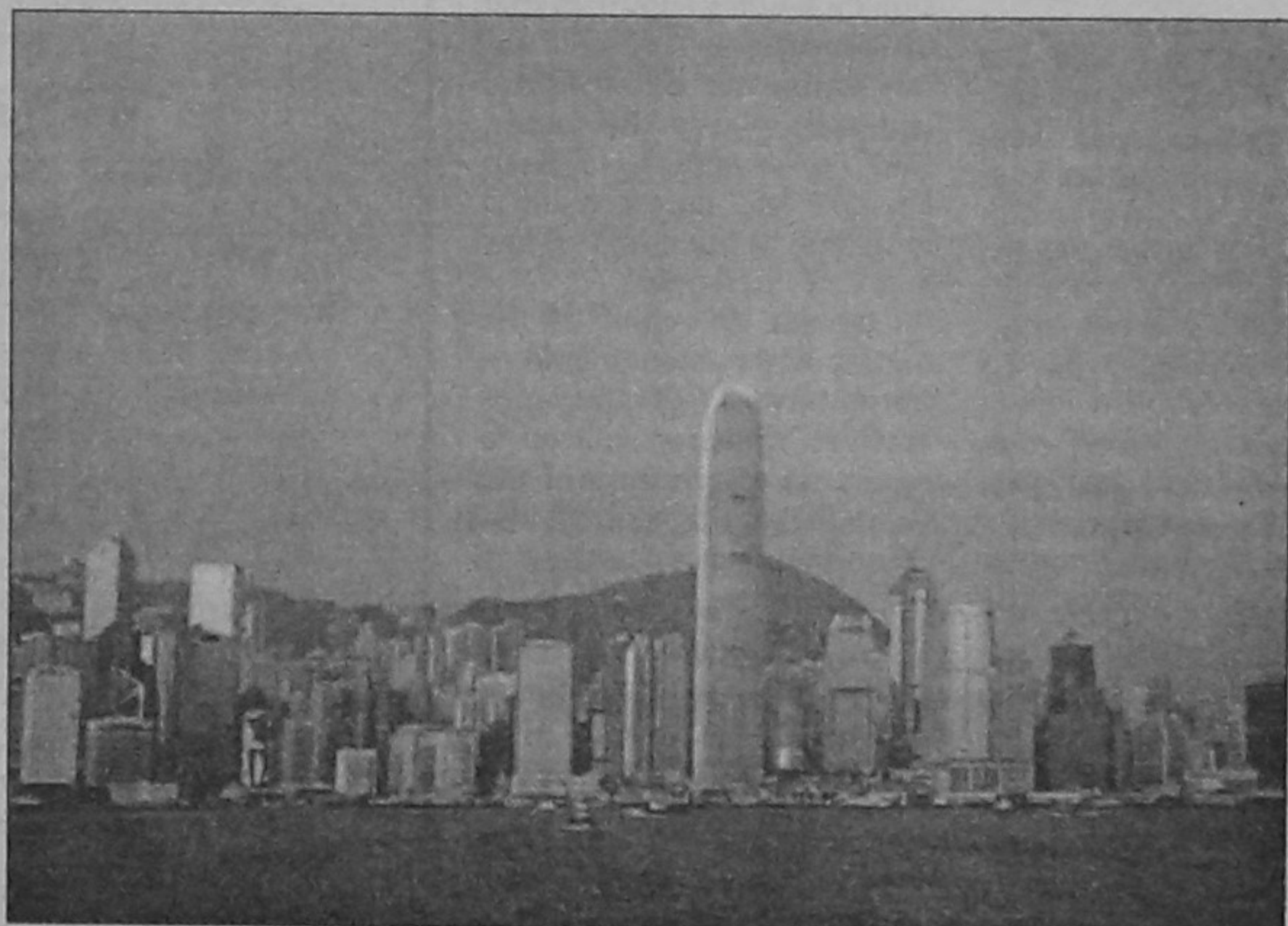
Indeed US, under its Freedom of Navigation program, dispatched military vessels to China and 25 other countries with the express purpose of heading off creeping restrictions on the Law of the Sea.

Not surprisingly, these operational assertions are often received as acts of gunboat diplomacy and in some cases led to bloodshed.

During the Cold War, US and the Soviet Union concluded bilateral protocols to prevent accidents and clashes as they robustly tested each other around the world. Despite trying, US and China have failed to reach similar accords.

The current battle of wills invites miscalculation, confrontation and casualties on both sides.

By regularly using civilian proxies in



On the banks of power.

these encounters, China courts tragedy. Only one of the five Chinese vessels sent to intercept the Impeccable was military. Chinese trawlers approached within 25 feet of the Impeccable and risked collision by stopping abruptly in its path.

They provocatively attempted to snag and recover its state-of-the-art sonar array, while the sole Chinese naval vessel on the scene observed at a safe distance. The theatrics of flag-waving trawlers and the distasteful possibilities of Chinese civilian casualties at the hands of the US military raise uncomfortable questions about China's methods and motives.

It's natural for China to flex its growing muscles and vigorously pursue its national interests, and the international system should accommodate these developments. But the questions are -- how and to what ends? China claims its rise is a peaceful one while the US calls upon China to become a "responsible stakeholder." The Impeccable incident highlights the gaps between their positions.

Under the cover of tendentious, even plainly wrong, readings of international law, China is signaling across a range of issues, at times truculently, an intention to press its new power to reshape the international system. Rising China wants to change the rules of the game.

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Iran on the table

With the global economy in a recession, the country's oil revenues have taken a toll and its oil and gas installations are aging. If the sanctions do materialise, the Iranian leaders will have to think about "unclenching their fist," in Obama's language.

MUNYEMA HASAN

The world likes mavericks and Iran seems to be enjoying the limelight. Obama's message to the Iranian people in Now Ruz (Iranian New Year) did little to appease the Iranian leaders. They continue being hostile, if not reactionary. How long can this anti-US rhetoric be maintained? Long enough, the evidence suggests but there are unforeseen elements that may make it counter-productive.

US and subsequent Security Council resolutions demanding Iran to stop its uranium enrichment are baseless. Iran has every right, under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to do so to use as fuel for civil nuclear power. Its activities are

under strict inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency, which claimed to have found no evidence that Iran has diverted material for weapons purposes.

The US National Intelligence Estimate has also admitted that Iran appears "less determined" to develop nuclear weapons than they had previously thought. Moreover, that US spends more on arms than the rest of the world combined, that it turns a blind eye to Israel's nuclear arsenal or that it along with other major powers continue to possess nuclear warheads, unleashes a whole debate on double standards altogether.

In a region where pan-Arabism is a joke, Iran and Syria stand as the only countries which address asymmetric

power relations. Surrounded by nuclear-armed Israel and Pakistan and by US invasions in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran's muscle-flexing is unsurprising.

US also needs to acknowledge that the root of the grievance lies with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Its demand for Iran to stop threatening Israel and funding Hamas and Hezbollah will fall on deaf ears unless it equally demands Israel to end the occupation and return to its 1967 borders. Hamas and Hezbollah are now seen as legitimate resistance movements and their political involvement is crucial for securing regional peace.

Obama's symbolic and conciliatory message was seemingly a 180 degree turn from his predecessor's outright demonisation of Iran. But scratch the surface a bit and there will be alarming events that deem this act as simply a cosmetic change in his Middle East policy.

The right-leaning Dennis Ross has recently been appointed as Hillary Clinton's special advisor for Iran. He has a

track record of pushing a carrots-and-sticks approach with Iran, and advocated a renewal of sanctions against the nation. He is publicly on the record for labelling Iran an "extraordinary threat" to US and Israel's security interests.

Consider another man, Charles Freeman, who was asked to head the National Intelligence Council. He withdrew after he was heavily attacked by supporters of Israel and hard-line politicians from both sides of the spectrum for describing Israeli violence against Palestinians as a key barrier to Middle East peace. The Obama administration was silent on the defence of this highly respected diplomat.

Change is what Obama had envisioned but his reluctance to challenge the bipartisan policy of unwavering support for Israel will do nothing in reigning for the Iranians. There is every indication that US foreign policy on the Middle East has become institutionalised, supported by a few neo-conservative ideologues.

These developments signal that Iran has good reasons to continue being a

nonconformist for a while. But it would be a mistake to discount the powerful domestic political forces in the US and in Israel that are zealously working to change the status quo.

The sanctions imposed on Iran so far have not choked the country economically. But the US administration is working hard to convince the Europeans and the Russians to cut off their economic lifeline to Iran. Israel is also pressuring the Obama administration to consider tougher sanctions, such as a cutoff of refined gasoline to Iran, and a full inspection of all ships leaving Iran to ensure that they are not carrying weapons.

With the global economy in a recession, the country's oil revenues have taken a toll and its oil and gas installations are aging. If the sanctions do materialise, the Iranian leaders will have to think about "unclenching their fist," in Obama's language. Obama's extended hand of diplomacy can be construed as less a sign of rapprochement and more a lack of the military alternative on the table. With the finances stretched on Iraq

and Afghanistan, another pre-emptive war of aggression seems unlikely in the short run.

A threat of war is emanating not out of the US but from Israel. Israeli officials think that possibly by the end of the year, Iran will acquire everything to enable it to develop a nuclear weapon. They have hinted that unilateral action will be taken against Iran if Obama's diplomacy fails to produce results. Israel has a history of blatant disregard for Security Council resolutions and world opinion. Iran should take heed.

If Iran does succumb to these threats to protect national interest, its more global demand for an end to America's "colonialist attitudes" and dogged support for Israel would have been lost; a demand rendered legitimate by many. Distressingly, that would breed more disillusionment and anger at US, ultimately doing little to mend relations with those it wants to engage with.

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