

Cheonan reshaping strategic relations

The sinking of Cheonan is an extremely provocative action. Nevertheless it was not unexpected. North Korea is in the habit of such provocations and the list is indeed a long one. It carries out such actions to draw attention of its neighbours and the big powers towards it. In fact, despite its lack of resources, North Korea has demanded and received world attention because of its nuclear capability and its ability to carry out threats.

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

THE situation in the Korean Peninsula is tense to use a mild word to describe a situation that an US official has called, with reference to the sinking of the South Korean ship Cheonan by an alleged North Korean torpedo that killed 46 South Korean crewmen, the gravest provocation in decades. It has also set into motion possible developments that could re-define the future of the decades old strategic relationships shaped in the region painstakingly out of realities emerging from the end of the Second World War; the Korean War; the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of China as a world power.

The most important of the strategic relationships has been the US-Japan Security Pact under which some 47,000 US troops are stationed in Japan with more than half of it in Okinawa to give it defense and nuclear protection as Japan is forbidden by its constitution from having offensive military capability. That pact has been under pressure since the Democratic Party of Japan came to power after overthrowing the LDP last year. In fact, when the schedule of the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's just concluded visit to Japan was being finalized, the hot topic was expected to be the fate of US air force base in Futenma in Okinawa that the local residents wanted to be shifted

with the DJP also supporting the local demand. Japan-US Security Pact's future was under serious pressure as Hillary Clinton prepared for her Japan visit.

An international commission inquiring into the sinking of Cheonan revealed just before Hillary Clinton arrived in Tokyo last Friday that a North Korean torpedo had sunk the ship. The revelation had an unexpected result on the talks that Hillary Clinton had in Tokyo. Instead of heated exchanges where Japan was expected to put pressure on the US, it was the Japanese who changed their views. After his meeting with the US Secretary of State, the Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada said, "in the current security environment, the presence of U.S. forces is indispensable for the security of Japan." Okada also suggested that the DJP Government would be able to reach some satisfactory understanding with the residents of Okinawa. Hillary Clinton and Okada agreed that the international community cannot allow the attack to go unanswered and must send a clear message to North Korea.

North Korea has denied any responsibility for Cheonan, insisting that the situation in the Korean Peninsula is fast moving towards war. The tough action that the United States and Japan have demanded in Tokyo will depend primarily on which way China leans. China is North Korea's principal ally and has veto power

in the UN Security Council. The early signs are not encouraging for China's support. Chinese President Hu Jintao this month welcomed the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il on his train visit to China shortly after he met the South Korean President indicating clearly his country's unwillingness to take sides on the Cheonan issue.

The Cheonan issue, sad as it has been for the South Koreans, has opened up opportunities for USA's strategic interests in the Korean Peninsula by influencing the Japanese Government to resolve the conflict over the air force base in Okinawa to be resolved in favour of the United States. The US however must get China on board to drive home fully the advantage that the Cheonan issue has provided. That was one of Hillary Clinton's primary sale items to the Chinese at the US-China Strategic and Economic Talks that was held in Beijing early this week.

In the long list of US demands on China that came up at the talks, the issue of Cheonan was discussed in a matter of fact manner despite the gravity that the US attached to it. China did not seem eager to look at the issue with the same anger and passion that was generated during the Hillary Clinton-Katsuya Okada talks in Tokyo or in Seoul where South Korea has frozen all trade ties with North Korea and has strengthened its military posture towards its neighbour. Despite proofs to the contrary, China continued to remain skeptical about North Korean involvement in the sinking of Cheonan, making it difficult to launch a UN sponsored move for sanctions against North Korea let alone harsher punitive moves demanded by South Korea and to a lesser extent by Japan and the USA. In Beijing, Hillary Clinton strongly urged China to find common cause with the USA regarding "the serious challenge provoked by the sinking of the South Korean ship". To the Secretary's forceful appeal, the Chinese called the incident "unfortunate"



and hoped that "all relevant parties will exercise constraint and remain cool headed". Although such a response by China is normal even where they may harbor a more intense reaction, in case of the Cheonan issue it does not appear that the parties seeking serious action against North Korea on the issue would get China fully on board.

The sinking of Cheonan is an extremely provocative action. Nevertheless, it was not unexpected. North Korea is in the habit of such provocations and the list is indeed a long one. It carries out such actions to draw attention of its neighbours and the big powers towards it. In fact, despite its lack of resources, North Korea has demanded

and received world attention because of its nuclear capability and its ability to carry out threats. However, from the Obama administration, it has not been getting the attention it wants which is an abandoning of the six-party talks of the Bush era for a new format and veering away from threats of tough economic sanctions. Although the Obama administration has spoken of engagement in dealing with countries his predecessor termed as "axis of evil" in reality this has not happened, not even after North Korea's nuclear test in May last year.

Nevertheless, the US has always come back eventually to talks with the North Koreans and with promising results. It was engagement in the 1990s that has

contained North Korea's nuclear arsenal to just 6 today. This time too, despite all the tough talk by the Secretary of State, the parties look likely to return to the table because without China's total support that is not forthcoming, the chances of tough economic sanctions or military action are very unlikely. In that sense, Cheonan will bring out the same result as always; listening to what the North Koreans have to say. This time however the latest provocative act of North Korea has, for the time being, strengthened US' strategic standing in the Korean Peninsula.

The author is a former Ambassador to Japan and a Director, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies.

US rejects Iran's nuclear fuel swap

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

ON 17th May Iran managed one of its "diplomatic coup" by bringing to Tehran Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Erdogan and President of Brazil, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, (both countries being the current members of the UN Security Council) who negotiated a deal with Iran of a swap of nuclear fuel with Turkey.

The deal has two elements:

- Iran to ship 1200 kilograms or 2,640 pounds of low enriched uranium to Turkey where it would be stored.
- In exchange, after one year, Iran would have the right to receive about 265 pounds of material enriched to 20% per cent from Russia and France.

Iranian officials applauded the deal as a breakthrough, with President Ahmadinejad saying at a news conference that the agreement would be "to the benefit of all nations who want to live freely and independently".

Officials said on Iranian state TV that the next step would be to agree to terms for the exchange with the Vienna Group - an informal grouping that includes Russia, the US, France and the IAEA.

The announcement of the deal appeared to aim at satisfying Western demands and came at a time when Iran faces new UN sanctions, proposed by the US and allies. The deal, according to Iranian government leaders, could well undermine the Obama administration's chances of approval for punitive sanctions against Iran.

Russia and China, which have been very reluctant to impose sanctions on a major trading partner (Iran), could end discussions about further measures.

The swap deal is similar to the one the West proposed in October that fell apart when Iran backtracked. Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani and his brother Sadeq Larijani, the head of judiciary, undermined President Ahmadinejad by

pointing out that the deal would violate Iran's inalienable right to use peaceful nuclear energy and that the West was trying to "cheat" Iran.

They were not eager to see Ahmadinejad take credit for resolving the nuclear issue and thwarting relations with the US, analysts said. It is reported that the deep division among Iranian leaders that emerged after the Presidential election had reportedly complicated, if not undermined, the ability to resolve the nuclear issue with the West.

Why the deal falls short?

Since October Iran continued its enrichment programme, adding to the stockpiles. In October 1200 kilograms that Iran was supposed to ship out of the country represented about two-thirds of its stockpile. By May this year, the 1200 kilograms account for a smaller portion of its declared stockpile.

It is reported by experts that the amount is believed to represent a little more than half its current stockpile and Iran would have sufficient enriched uranium to pursue a nuclear weapon. Given the change in scenario, the US and its allies rejected the deal.

On 18th May, the Obama administration announced that it had struck a deal with major powers, including Russia and China, to impose new sanctions, a sharp repudiation of the deal Tehran offered just one day before to ship its nuclear fuel out of the country.

Although the US Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton acknowledged the efforts of Turkey and Brazil leaders to have a deal with Iran, there were a number of unanswered questions regarding Iran's announcement.

Clinton told a Senate Committee "We plan to circulate the draft resolution to the entire Security Council." It is reported that one of the critical sections of the draft resolution contained that all nations would be authorized to search cargo ships heading into or out of Iran for suspected weapons,

nuclear technology or other cargo prohibited by previous UN resolutions. Other elements of the proposed sanctions are aimed at Iranian financial institutions including those that support the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

However, proposed sanctions relating to Iran's oil and gas industry were removed due to opposition from Russia and China, which have vast investments and interests in Iran's energy sector.

What the US and its allies want is to pressure Iran to give up its uranium enrichment programme because the know-how of enrichment can be used to make nuclear bombs. Expert say if a country enriches uranium up to 3% per cent which is suitable to generate electricity, it has done nearly three-quarters of the work needed to move along the road to 90% per cent enrichment, which is what is required to make a nuclear bomb.

Iran has consistently maintained that its nuclear development programme is intended to produce civilian energy but the US and its allies have pointed that Iran has not complied with the NPT obligations for permitting the UN watchdog IAEA unfettered inspections to all of its nuclear facilities.

Fate of New Sanctions

Although there could be general agreement on new sanctions among the permanent members of the Security Council including China and Russia, insiders say China may not agree to all the measures contained in the draft resolution since Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi has stated on May 17th (from Tunisia) that China has noted the deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil and "expresses its welcome and appreciation for the diplomatic efforts made by the parties involved to seek an appropriate solution to the Iran nuclear issue". No wonder Clinton paid a four-day visit from 21 May to China to discuss among other things the contents of the draft resolution.

Turkey is annoyed that the deal that was brokered by Turkey at the encouragement of the US has not been acceptable to the US. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu reportedly said "What they wanted us to do was give the confidence to Iran to do the swap. We have done our duty."

Turkey shares a large border with Iran and has a very important and growing energy relationship with the Islamic Republic. Turkey is concerned about Iran's nuclear program, but cannot support US or P5+1 policies that seek to isolate the regime. They believe that this is a tactical mistake and a risk Turkey cannot afford to take. The Turks believe that more diplomacy can lead to a successful outcome.

Some analysts say further sanctions will not change Iran's nuclear programme and last year President Obama at the UN called for a new era of shared responsibilities. Turkey and Brazil did that and what did they get from the US? They got snubbed.

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Awami League in power Lost priorities and opportunities

SMRUTI S. PATTANAIK

Did the two year intervention by the military that backed Fakhruddin Ahmed's caretaker government teach any political lessons to the political parties in Bangladesh? The answer is unfortunately no. The culture of confrontation and ideological contestation are very much parts of Bangladesh's political culture where the two political parties refuse to cooperate. The Awami League (AL) won a landslide victory in December 2008, which generated the hope of democratization and a change in the confrontational politics that has plagued the nation. People sincerely believed that the two years of military intervention has certainly taught the parties a lesson. Expressing such sentiment the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) General Secretary said "We should replace the existing political culture with a fair one. I won't see your face just because you hold different political ideals or there's a difference of opinion...this attitude can never be helpful for democracy."

Though Awami League assumed office on 6 January 2009, it is yet to make its presence felt and is gradually losing popular appeal. The level of its unpopularity is yet to reach a critical point where the opposition can enforce a successful hartal, but there is a general disillusionment about the lack of change. AL has been going slow on many important issues that were vital to its success in the last election. Apart from the issue of price rise and power shortage, the government faces crucial challenges on two fronts that would impinge on its performance.

First, the Party's inability to control the violence unleashed by its Student organization, the Bangladesh Chattro League (BCL), in various University campuses has been one factor that has reflected badly on the Party leadership. Violence by the student organization of the incumbent party is not a new phenomenon in campus politics. Capturing residential halls and providing political patronage to students in lieu of support is a method of recruiting cadres, exerting influence and distributing patronage. Many of the student leaders are involved in criminal activities and are patronized by law-makers for political reasons and the police have chosen to remain a mute spectator. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's repeated calls to rein in the Chattro League has fallen on deaf ears. Unruly incidents have been reported from all over the country adding to the unpopularity of the AL. At universities like Dhaka University and Jahangirnagar University, the BCL is engaged in a confrontation with the Jatiyobadi Chatra Dal (JCD). At Rajshahi University and Chittagong University the BCL has fought pitched battles against Chattro Shibir, the student organization of Jamaat Islami. At various Engineering colleges and technical organizations such violence has resulted in disruption of classes. In some cases it has resulted in the death of students as seen in Dhaka University and Rajshahi University. In the May 11 clash in the Jaganath University, choppers, machetes and axes were used between two factions of the BCL. These incidents and their frequent recurrence are reflecting poorly on the AL leadership.

Second is the issue of trial of the war criminals for their role during the liberation war. The government could have done well to avoid controversy regarding the constitution of the tribunal and appointment of Abdul Matin as Chief investigator of a seven member probing agency. Matin was alleged to have been a member of Chatra Sangha, the student body of Jamaat Islami in the pre-independence days, which is accused of collaborating with the Pakistan Army and killing freedom fighters. Though most of the political parties are supporting the government effort to establish a war crime tribunal, BNP has kept its position ambivalent. Initially, given the popular mood, BNP Secretary General Khondokar Delwar Hossain had said, "We support the demand for the trial of war criminals in principle and none should have any objection against it." However, the BNP has raised several questions about the Government's motive in constituting the tribunal. To generate a controversy and create doubts the BNP says that it doubts the transparency and fairness of the tribunal. It has accused the government of holding the trials to eliminate the political opposition. The government has formed a 3 member tribunal and 12 member panel of lawyers under the International Crimes (Tribunal) Act of 1973. Since one of the prominent BNP member S.Q Chowdhury's name figures among the list of war criminals, the BNP has demanded that the government probe and initiate actions against some of the war criminals within the AL itself. Controversy and political bickering has not helped the process of the trial. It has created unnecessary doubts regarding the independent functioning of the tribunal. It is important that the tribunal has independent members without political bias. If unnecessary doubts are created, the credibility of the tribunal will suffer and thus render the entire exercise futile.

The two political parties neither share cordial relations nor have made any attempt to develop a consensus in spite of their promises to the people soon after the election. On the 16th of January 2009 in the first Parliamentary Party meeting of the BNP, the leader proclaimed, "we want to assist the government and we want the government to create that atmosphere and maintain it." Soon after, a major problem arose out of seat sharing arrangement in the Parliament leading to the opposition boycotting the parliament a tradition that continues. The opposition returned to the Parliament on the 11 February 2010 after having boycotted the Parliament for ten months.

AL needs to work with the BNP on many of the issues that remain fundamental to the AL. It has the majority and needs to show magnanimity. Instead, the AL has kept itself involved in trivial issues like the renaming of the airport, renaming University, questioning Zia's leadership and whether Zia was buried in the Jatiyo Sangsad premise or not. What has perhaps helped the AL is BNP's poor political health. Rivalry within the party and differences between leaders has afflicted the party organization. BNP is yet to shed its image of corruption, militancy and misrule. Their poor performances in the election and its inability to come out of the election debacle and reorganize the party have resulted in the demoralization of its cadre. Even if Begum Khaleda Zia gave a call to launch a movement against 'government's misrule' the party is not in a position to demonstrate its strength. Given the state of the BNP, the AL has time to resuscitate itself, to prioritise issues and prepare itself for the next election from now. For AL time is running out and it has miles to go in translating promises into action.

The author is a Research Associate at IDSA, New Delhi.

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