

JAPANESE PRIME MINISTER QUILTS

Japan-US relations poised to strengthen

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

HERE was another twist in the tail related to the sinking of Cheonan. Japan's Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama resigned, primarily over his failure to keep his election promise to the people of Okinawa to shift the US base out of the island. The sinking of Cheonan allegedly by North Korean torpedo created heightened security concerns among the majority of the people of Japan. They have seen the indispensability of strengthening the security links with USA instead of weakening it, as Hatoyama was perceived to be doing.

The sinking of Cheonan came at a wrong time for Hatoyama. Only eight months ago, he had led the Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) to a resounding victory ending the LDP's nearly 6-decade long stranglehold on power. One important factor that influenced the public to vote for the DJP was its promise to stand up firmly in dealing with the United States, particularly on the sensitive issue of the stationing of over 40,000 US troops on Japanese soil, with the air force base in Futenma in Okinawa that has the majority of US troops stationed in Japan at the centre of the controversy. Hatoyama also promised to make Japan's foreign policy more Asia centric looking more favourably towards China, which was not the case under the LDP.

Hatoyama's personal popularity started to nosedive with early allegations of corruption in the DJP traced to him and more importantly, in dealing with the United States on Futenma. The Obama administration made it very clear that it had no intention of reopening the agreement the two countries had reached in 2006 when the LDP was in power. The agreement was to move the Futenma base to a new but less crowded facility on Okinawa's northeast shore. US Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, on a visit to Japan in October last year, said that the 2006 agreement was a "done deal" opposing Hatoyama's efforts to move it out of Okinawa altogether that strained Japan-US relations from the beginning of DJP rule. Okinawa is strategically located on the Straits of Taiwan that makes US troop location there of the essence to the United States.

The US stand on keeping the air force base in Okinawa against his election pledge to move it out

put Hatoyama in a difficult situation. He could not deal with the issue with Washington in a decisive manner that affected adversely his standing with his people. His popularity rating was on a serious decline from an impressively high of 70% when he assumed office to below 20% in recent weeks because of financial scandals and his indecisiveness in dealing with Washington. Cheonan was the straw that broke the camel's back.

There are a few ironies in Hatoyama's departure. The US has always wanted a change of power in Japan, wary of the LDP's stranglehold on power, that should have worked in favour of Hatoyama. Yet it ended by pushing Hatoyama to a corner over the Futenma base, making him indecisive that created the ground for his departure. The public that supported him strongly and voted the DJP to power because of the stand to be treated as an equal by Washington eventually went against him. They felt that as Prime Minister he was trying to make Japan independent of the United States and was putting Japan's security at stake, a view that was reinforced by Cheonan.

The DJP quickly elected Naoto Kan, who was the Finance Minister in Hatoyama's cabinet, as the new Prime Minister; the sixth Prime Minister in the last four years. This incident is raising fear of a return to past political instability when Japan, apart from Yasuhiro Nakasone (1982-1987) and Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2006), had a new Prime Minister each year. Naoto Kan is in many ways a sharp contrast from Hatoyama. In background, he is also a sharp contrast from Japanese traditions of electing those with politics running in the family to head the Government. Kan is a first generation politician, coming from middle class background. As Health Minister in 1990s, he had earned a tough and clean image for dealing with Japan's powerful bureaucracy by ordering an inquiry into his own Ministry for promoting HIV tainted blood transfusions. In the last eight months of the DJP Government, he kept that clean image while Hatoyama was immersed with serious allegations of corruption. His background and image will no doubt bear him in good stead in leading Japan from the mess into which eight months of inept governance of Hatoyama had taken Japan.

The new Prime Minister's major task will be in dealing with Washington that could also determine how long he will remain in power. He would need to keep in mind that getting respect from USA would be crucial while not forgetting that there is still no scope for Japan to carve a foreign policy independent of the USA; not as long as a nuclear North Korea under an unpredictable regime is in power. The reaction from China, which did not show much enthusiasm to deal with North Korea for sinking Cheonan despite strong urging from the US, has convinced Japan about the indispensability of strengthening the Japan-US defence pact. The US that was to a great extent responsible for pushing Hatoyama to his doom, must offer to the new prime minister the opportunity to keep his standing with his people because Japan is US' most important ally in Asia with a long track record. The US now must show flexibility on Futenma and at least allow the new Prime Minister the chance to negotiate on the issue keeping in mind that in politics perception is sometimes more important than reality. After becoming Prime Minister, Naoto Kan told his party members that he would emphasize a "Japan-US relationship at its core while contributing for forward development in Asia." He also assured Okinawans that he would lessen their burden of retaining the US airbase. The US would need to allow Naoto Kan space on the issue of the base if it does not want him to meet the same fate as his predecessor. The US should also keep in mind that he did not support Hatoyama when as Prime Minister the latter had chosen to free the 2006 agreement arguing that the agreement reached by the LDP should be respected.

Naoto Kan will also have serious domestic issues to deal with such as the nagging debt, history of fiscal scandals and an economy not in good health as well as regain people's trust in DJP. The litmus test for success for him will however be foreign affairs, particularly in dealing with USA. He would be wise not to move closer to China under the pretext of an Asia-centric foreign policy and playing the USA and China against each other that Hatoyama tried and failed. In this context, the sinking of Cheonan has helped reassert the strategic relationships in the Korean Peninsula where the value of the US-Japan defence pact has reasserted itself and now seems poised to grow stronger in the time ahead. All these seem to be at the expense of



China. Naoto Kan's background, image and lessons from his predecessor's downfall could set Japan on course to political stability under a two party system that the US should also be

interested to sustain for its own sake.

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

Consequences of Israel's raid on Gaza aid ships

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

HERE is no doubt Israel grossly underestimated the worldwide condemnation to its naval operation against the flotilla of six ships trying to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Israel's raid on international waters (117 kilometres from the Israeli coast) has been a clear breach of international law and in an emergency meeting on 31st May the Security Council condemned the raid and called for an impartial inquiry into the tragic incident.

The condemnation of Israel's raid is the least Israel sought from the international community because seldom the Security Council condemns Israel's action due to difference of opinion of the veto-carrying members of the Council. All this is a PR blow to Israel.

Israel's policy of gross violation of human rights has been practised on a daily basis in the occupied Palestinian territories. Much of these activities rarely get mentioned in the world media. These violations of human rights were hardly investigated, and Israel did not pay any price for its blatant disregard of international law.

Israel behaves like a "spoilt child" of the international community and the big powers usually issue sanctimonious statements of conventional wisdom, without any sign of concrete serious action against Israel for its systematic and planned transgression toward Palestinians.

Many in Palestine and the Arab world have been calling on the world not to apply double standards when it comes to Israel. Yet many governments have found a populist spin to sell to their constituencies to justify the Israeli actions.

However, the fall-out from the raid may have multiple consequences and only two of them deserve mentioning below.

First, three of the six boats were Turkish. The only boat on which violence took place was Turkish. It may be by attacking a Turkish ship a huge strategic realignment may take place.

Turkey is the most important Muslim nation allied to the West. Turkey is a member of NATO, to anchor down the Eastern end of the NATO defense line. Its strategic significance is immense to the US and allies.

Since the mid-1990s it has had an intimate military relationship with Israel. The two nations helped each other with hi-tech military equipment and intelligence.

Turkey recalled its Ambassador to Israel and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan cut short his visit to Latin America. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan reacted angrily and reportedly said "This irresponsible, heedless, unlawful attitude that defies any human virtue should definitely but definitely be punished".

Turkey's growing diplomatic initiatives under the new foreign policy have led Turkey to offer mediation in regional disputes such as between the US and Iran, Iraq and Syria, and Israel and Syria has enhanced its international stature.

Turkey maintains a good working relationship with Iran and Syria. 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. Last month, it, together with Brazil, had a deal with Iran in which Iranian enriched uranium would be swapped with Turkey to resolve Iran's nuclear proliferation issue with the West.

The attack damaged Israel's ties with Turkey, one of its most important Muslim partners. Israel has angered Turkey by the raid.

Israel's arrogance in the region rests on its military power of sophisticated weapons supplied by the US.

Israel is an undeclared nuclear power and if Israel gets unpunished for its unlawful raid on the Turkish ship, Turkey may eventually consider its option of having nuclear weapon and if that occurs, this is a grave new development for the region.

Second, the raid has complicated President Obama's efforts to move ahead on peace negotiation between Israeli and Palestinian leaders. While the Obama administration's public response has been restrained, US officials reportedly expressed dismay in private not only over the raid but also over the timing of the crisis, which erupted just as long-delayed US-mediated proximity (indirect) talks between Israelis and Palestinians were getting under way.

At a time when the US is increasingly linking its own security in the region to the inability of Israelis and Palestinians to make peace, the raid has put that process of peace in unchartered waters. If the US wants to move ahead, the US administration needs to handle with Israel the issue of blockade of the Gaza.

Although the Obama administration officially supports the Gaza blockade some aides say that President Obama has expressed strong frustration privately with the humanitarian situation of 1.5 million people in Gaza.

While declining to condemn the raid, Obama, in an interview with the CNN host Larry King that was broadcast on 3 June, said: "What is important right now is that we break out of the current impasse, use this tragedy as an opportunity so that we figure out how we meet Israel's security concerns but at the same time start opening up opportunity for Palestinians."

Former US Ambassador to Israel, Martin S. Indyk reportedly said: "This regrettable incident underscores that the blockade of Gaza is not sustainable... Our responsibility to Israel is to help them find a way out of this situation".

Observers suggest that for Obama administration, the top priority is to talk to Israel and other players in the region including Egypt and Jordan as to how to end the blockade of the Gaza to alleviate the acute sufferings of people including women and children in the Gaza strip.

Robert Malley, programme director of the International Crisis Group for the Middle East, reportedly said "You can talk all you want about proximity talks, expend as much energy as Obama has, but if you ignore the huge thorn in Gaza, it will come back to bite you."

Following a week of unrelenting international condemnation over Israel's raid, Israel reportedly has changed its policy of blockade to Gaza and would allow goods to get through after inspection. Israeli Prime Minister has proposed to Tony Blair, the international envoy of the Quartet of Middle East peace-makers, that an international naval force may inspect goods on ships bound for the Gaza.

Palestine was never a land without a people. Israel has been persistently and grossly breaching international law and infringing fundamental human rights with impunity afforded to it through inaction of big powers.

Gunmen destroy Nato supply trucks outside Islamabad

Gunmen in Pakistan opened fire on trucks carrying supplies to NATO troops in Afghanistan, torching more than a dozen vehicles and killing seven people near Islamabad, police said Wednesday.

The attack took place overnight at Tarnol on the outskirts of the Pakistani capital on the road to the northwestern city of Peshawar and in turn towards the main NATO supply route into neighboring Afghanistan.

Although militants have carried out a series of strikes against supplies for US and NATO-led foreign forces fighting the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, Wednesday's assault was the first so close to the heavily guarded capital.

"Seven deaths have been confirmed. Four are injured. There is no information about any arrests," said police official Gustasab Khan. The casualties were the drivers of the trucks, their helpers or local people, Khan said.

"Unknown attackers opened fire on vehicles parked at Tarnol. Fire erupted in the tankers and trucks, and over a dozen were set ablaze. They were trucks carrying NATO supplies," said police official Tahir Riaz.

Local television stations reported that fire brigades had been mobilized to the scene in order to bring heavy fire under control and said there had been a series of explosions caused by the bursting of tires and fuel tankers. Kalim Iman, inspector general of Islamabad police, told reporters that the attack was carried out by 10 to 12 assailants, who stormed the terminal outside the capital. "We are working to arrest them," he said.

The bulk of supplies and equipment required by the 130,000 US-led foreign troops across the border are shipped through northwest Pakistan, which has been hard hit by shootings and bomb attacks blamed on radical Islamist militants. But the heavily protected capital has been largely shielded from attacks blamed on Al-Qaeda and Taliban-linked militant attacks, which have killed more than 3,370 people since July 2007.

The attacks began as retaliation over a government siege on a radical mosque in Islamabad and flared last year as the military fought major campaigns against Taliban in the northwest regions of Swat and South Waziristan.

Washington says Pakistan's northwest tribal belt, which lies outside direct government control, is an Al-Qaeda headquarters and a stronghold for militants plotting attacks on US-led troops fighting against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Faced with the increasingly deadly and costly conflict between Taliban insurgents and the Kabul government, the United States and NATO allies are boosting their troop numbers to a record 150,000 in Afghanistan by August.

www.defensenews.com

Israeli army forms team to learn from flotilla raid

Israel's army announced late Monday the creation of a team of high-ranking officials charged with examining and learning from the deadly May 31 operation against a Gaza-bound aid flotilla.

The team - to be headed by a general in the reserves, Giora Eiland - would "examine the unfolding of the operation and to draw lessons from it," an army statement said.

"It must submit its conclusions between now and July 4," it added.

Besides Eiland, the panel includes two other generals in the reserves, a colonel in the marine reserves and a high official in the defence ministry, it said.

Israeli special forces stormed a flotilla of six ships carrying aid for blockaded Gaza, killing nine Turks on board one of the vessels and sparking international outrage.

Israel has defended itself saying it must stop vessels from travelling to Gaza since they could be carrying weapons for Hamas, an Islamist movement committed to the destruction of Israel which controls that Palestinian territory.

It also says the aid the activists wanted to deliver is not needed.

Israel has resisted calls for an international enquiry, but the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced plans for an internal examination of the events and whether the blockade and its implementation were in keeping with international law.

Media reports said the panel could include international figures chosen by Israel.

www.defensenews.com



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