

The beginning of the end in Syria

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THE situation in Syria seems to be rapidly spiralling out of control. Recent developments point to a sharp escalation in the crisis, even as prospects of a grim and drawn-out civil war appear imminent. Ferocious street battles are being waged in Aleppo by soldiers in armoured vehicles and tanks, supported by artillery and air fire, as President Assad's forces seek to drastically expand the sphere of conflict and strike a decisive blow against the opposition. Proponents of peace have all but given up on achieving any diplomatic headway, and Kofi Annan, whose peace plan was the centre-piece of all diplomatic efforts in Syria, has expressed a desire to opt out of the peace process.

Kofi Annan's scepticism is not misplaced. As the violence escalates, prospects of a truce between the military and rebel forces in Aleppo and Damascus appear bleak. The focus of the military's efforts is to take back from the rebels the occupied southwestern part of Aleppo, Syria's commercial capital. The rebel forces have held-up admirably so far but, in the absence of external military support, are coming under increasing pressure from the security forces. What is more, there is now a serious threat of a looming human catastrophe. Reportedly, over 200,000 people have fled Aleppo, creating a potential refugee crisis. Turkey is reported to have beefed up its military presence on its border with Syria, and is providing the Syrian rebels all material and moral support, upping the ante in Ankara's own stand-off with Damascus.

The End Game

However one looks at it, the situation is increasingly looking like the end game for the Assad regime. The protests in rebel strongholds had been simmering for some time, but it all seems to have come to a head a fortnight ago when a powerful bomb ripped through the National Security Headquarters in Damascus killing three top-ranking ministers of the regime. So shaken was President Assad after the attack that his government issued a warning that it would consider using its stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons to suppress the rebellion, if there was strong reason to suspect the involvement of an "external hand" in engineering the attacks by rebel forces. In response, the United Nations Security Council cautioned Assad against taking such a drastic measure and ordered him to secure his stockpile of Weapons of mass Destruction (WMD). Meanwhile, the Syrian National Council and its Western and Middle Eastern allies issued calls for external intervention that would bypass the UN Security Council altogether in bringing about a regime change in Damascus. For President Assad, the shock of losing his top aides to a bomb blast in the heart of the most secure zone in the national capital has brought home, perhaps for the first time, the magnitude of the crisis he faces. Only a few weeks ago, he seemed well in control of the situation, but now finds himself reduced to a spectator in a rapidly moving game where the opposition clearly has the upper hand. The regime's stronghold of Aleppo is floundering, with the army struggling to wrest control from the rebels, and the enemy is at the gates of Damascus.

The Threat of WMD

Assad knows that, from a tactical perspective, he must now appear strong. Now is the time to

expose his trump cards, if he has to retain any chances of staying in power. The threat of WMD is one such 'ace' that considerably boosts his leverage. In late-June, when Syria shot down a Turkish reconnaissance aircraft, Damascus had sought to send a clear message to the West that a Libya-style air campaign was not going to work in Syria, as the country's air defences were too strong for any misadventure to achieve even a minimal degree of success. The WMD threat is again meant to signal that Syria will be a harder nut to crack than Libya. And while in the days that have followed, Syrian officials have tried to retract the comments made about using such weapons, the issue is now out in the open.

There may be reason to suspect that the issue of Syria's WMD programme is being exaggerated. But if the Syrian regime does, indeed, have the capacity to produce and deliver chemical and biological weapons, then it has severe implications not only for Syria, but the larger West Asian region and including for Israel and Turkey.

'Red-herring' or not, the WMD issue could be a potential 'game-changer', although its effectiveness would depend on the sort of response it



evokes from the international community. Conceivably, there will be some who will choose to get more closely involved in the crisis. For states like Israel, the imperative of pre-emptive strikes on Syria will override all other considerations. But others like Turkey will be more circumspect. Given their physical proximity to Syria and the threat of an all out war following a muscular intervention, there will be a certain reluctance to the use of force. There is a third category of players that will draw the opposite conclusion out of Syria's stated intention of putting chemical weapons to use. For them, intervening in Syria will imply becoming a legitimate target of the regime and bring about assured retaliation. This would, in a sense, vindicate the stand taken by regimes such as those in North Korea, who have for long argued that WMD do act as an effective constraint on the willingness of states to exercise power.

The Real Deal

There are three fundamental questions that need to be answered if one is to get to the bottom of the murky developments in Syria: a) What led to the escalation of violence in Syria? b) Who constructs the narratives of conflict in the war zone? And, c) Who benefits from the violence? In the wake of a recent expose in The Guardian (Charlie Skelton, The Syrian Opposition: Who's doing the talking), it is now quite clear that events in Syria are not as indigenous as made out by the mainstream

Western media. The rebel movement is a phenomenon that was nurtured and provided momentum by organized external forces, including many Western governments that, for many years, led a focused campaign to topple the Syrian regime. And this is, apparently, all being done to undermine Iran, Syria's steadfast regional ally and an avowed adversary of the West. The conflict under-way is not, quite, for the benefit of the people of Syria, even though it is all meant to seem that way.

In stark contrast to the narrative being propagated by the Western media, there has been some willingness on the part of the regime to settle for a peaceful solution. But a non-violent resolution based on consensus, and one which does not result in Assad's departure, is not the result that the West is seeking. To achieve what's being sought, it is important to make the world believe that the regime is resorting to brutality and butchery, and that without external intervention, there would be a massacre in rebel strongholds.

The truth, of course, is that "armed groups" are as engaged in the violent killings in Syria as the ruling dispensation (as acknowledged by Kofi Annan himself). But now that the regime appears fragile, the opposition is keen to press home the advantage and go for the kill. So, regardless of the fact that the onus of 'restraint' lies with the military if only by virtue of it being the more organised force with far greater lethal weaponry the situation on the ground will not change unless the rebel forces show an equal willingness to scale back violence.

Ironically, both President Assad and the rebels acknowledge that radical Islamic elements are benefiting from the rapidly deteriorating security situation. Yet, all sides including Syria's allies Russia and China are now so heavily invested in the conflict that a 'negotiated settlement' is just not an option.

On August 4, at the United Nations General Assembly yesterday, India abstained from voting after failing to rid the original draft of an explicit reference to the July 22 League of Arab States resolution that called upon Al-Assad to step down. There has been a concerted push by the Arab League to by-pass the Security Council completely, 'grid-locked' as it is, over the fate of the incumbent regime in Syria. It is, however, becoming increasingly clear that the final moves in this vicious geopolitical battle will not be played in the UN at all. The WMD insinuation by the West, the debate over the impending genocide in Aleppo, and the swelling ranks of refugees, all point to an orchestrated shift in the narrative of the conflict that makes external intervention an 'inevitability'.

The problem is that while the opposition forces in Syria are gaining in strength, their ranks are divided among numerous groups, with no clear political leadership. Even if President Assad were to step down, the Alawite military machine and its sectarian allies would most likely fight on, holding large parts of territory, leading to a low-level, protracted civil war.

The end-game has begun, but the end is nowhere in sight.

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Whither the Asean community?

EDITORIAL DESK, THE JAKARTA POST

THE discord over how to deal with China in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea overshadows the 45th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), which falls today.

Hanging in the balance is not only whether the 10 member countries can realise their plan to turn the region into one single community in 2015, but also whether there is really a future for Asean at all.

Indonesia has done its share in trying to forge Asean unity in the wake of the failure of the foreign ministers to come to a common position on the South China Sea at their annual meeting in Phnom Penh last month.

As commendable as the efforts of Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa were in salvaging the meeting following his 36-hour whirlwind diplomacy to hammer out a joint final statement, there is no denying that Asean members are deeply divided on this issue. No sooner had the statement been issued than the Philippines and Cambodia were attacking one another once again.

Asean failed in the most serious test so far on its way to becoming a real community. Some member countries are more interested in turning to outside powers, or even in bringing in outsiders, to address the South China Sea disputes.

They obviously have little or no trust in Asean capacity or Asean ability to speak with one voice on this issue. We already had a glimpse of this mistrust among Asean members in 2011 when Thailand and Cambodia turned to outside forces to mediate their border dispute.

Asean's limitations come from its outdated modes, firstly in its decision-making process through consensus and secondly its policy of non-interference in the affairs of other members.

We have seen how the Myanmar junta slowed down the entire Asean integration process by taking a long time before allowing a modicum of freedom for its people. Asean's silence in the face of recent violent ethnic conflicts in Myanmar between the Rohingyas and Rakhines also shows the group's virtual impotence.

Unless these two obstacles are resolved, we are likely to see a dysfunctional community from its birth in 2015.

The latest discord over the South China Sea contravenes the spirit which led the 10 Asean leaders to sign the Second Asean Concord in Bali in 2003, a milestone agreement to create a single community, originally by 2020 but later moved forward to 2015.

Recent events, but particularly the division over the South China Sea issue, prove that Asean may be being over-ambitious in its community target.

The Asean community project of raising the countries and peoples in this part of the world to be on a par with the rest of the world in the competitive global environment is a worthy and noble cause.

The rapid economic rise of China and India since the 1990s has given the Asean community idea a greater sense of urgency. Southeast Asian leaders rightly decided in 2003 that the way forward for the region was to unite, to speak with one voice in regional and global affairs and to integrate and become a single community.

But is the whole really greater than the sum of its parts? Unfortunately not when Asean is as divided as it is today.

Forging unity has its price, but Indonesia should not bear most or all of the costs, certainly not when the other members are failing to contribute their fair share. Not everyone has lived up to their commitments to Asean.

Indonesia meanwhile has continued to put its faith in the group by consistently making Asean the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Being the largest member in the group carries certain responsibilities.

Indonesia, dating from the Soeharto years until now, has provided the necessary leadership as well as many of the diplomatic initiatives, not to mention resources, to turn Asean into one of the world's most successful regional organisations. But there are limits to what Indonesia can do in Asean, and the recent behaviour of some Asean countries tells us that we may be approaching that limit.

When that happens, Indonesia should rethink its foreign policy paradigm.

In marking the Asean anniversary today, we can all look back with satisfaction at how the group has served well in fostering peace and development, and with it prosperity for the peoples in the region. But looking ahead, we have to ask ourselves whether there is still any sense in forging an Asean community by 2015 if everyone now seems bent on going their separate ways.

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HARSH V. PANT

WHILE the world focuses on the rising tension between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea, Beijing and Delhi are also engaged in a quiet struggle in the contested waters. By putting up for international bidding the same oil block that India had obtained from Vietnam for exploration, China has thrown down a gauntlet. By deciding to stay put in the assigned block, India has indicated it's ready to take up the Chinese challenge. At stake is Chinese opposition to India's claim to be a regional power.

The conflict between India and China over the South China Sea has been building for more than a year. India signed an agreement with Vietnam in October 2011 to expand and promote oil exploration in South China Sea and has now reconfirmed its decision to carry on despite the Chinese challenge to the legality of Indian presence.

By accepting the Vietnamese invitation to explore oil and gas in Blocks 127 and 128, India's state-owned oil company ONGC Videsh Ltd, or OVL, not only expressed New Delhi's desire to deepen its friendship with Vietnam, but ignore China's warning to stay away. After asking countries "outside the region" to stay away from the South China Sea, China issued a demarche to India in November 2011, underlining that Beijing's permission should be sought for exploration in Blocks 127 and 128 and, without it, OVL's activities would be considered illegal. Vietnam, meanwhile had underlined the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to claim its sovereign rights over the two blocks being explored. India decided to go by the Vietnam's claims and ignore China's objections.

China has been objecting to the Indian exploration projects in the region, claiming that the territory comes under its sovereignty. Whereas India continues to maintain that its exploration projects in the region are purely

commercial, China has viewed such activities as an issue of sovereign rights.

India's moves unsettled China, which views India's growing engagement in East Asia with suspicion. India's decision to explore hydrocarbons with Vietnam followed a July 2011 incident during which an unidentified Chinese warship demanded that a INS Airavat, an amphibious assault vessel, identify itself and explain its presence in the South China Sea after leaving Vietnamese waters. Completing a scheduled port call in Vietnam, the Indian warship was in international waters.

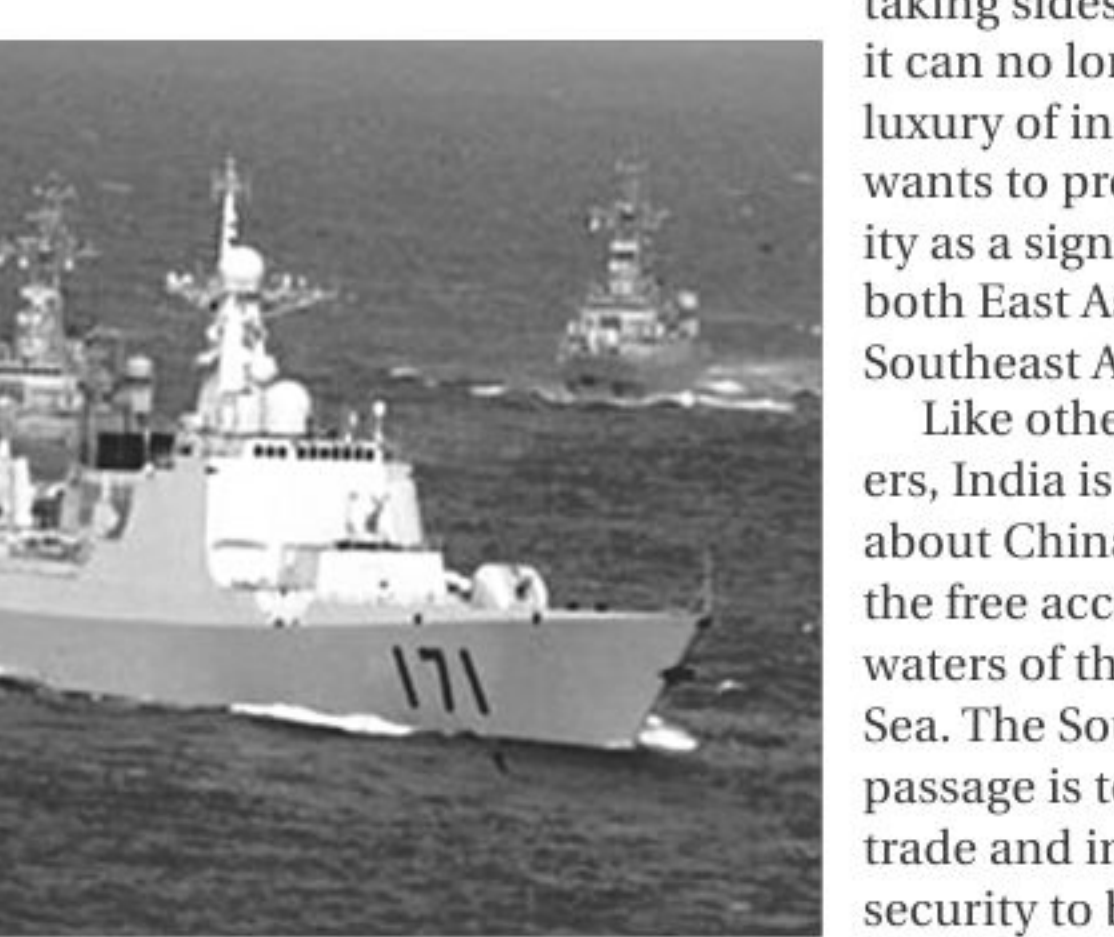
After an initial show of defiance, India showed second thoughts. In May, India's junior oil minister R.P.N. Singh told the Parliament that OVL had decided to return Block 128 to Vietnam as exploration there wasn't commercially viable. Hanoi publicly suggested that New Delhi's decision was a response to pressure from China. In July 2012, after

Vietnam gave OVL more incentives in terms of a longer period to prove commercial viability, India decided to continue the joint exploration. Vietnam decided to extend the OVL contract for hydrocarbon exploration in block 128, reiterating that it valued India's presence in the South China Sea for regional strategic balance.

In June 2012, state-owned China National Offshore Oil Company, or CNOOC, opened nine blocks for exploration in waters also claimed by Vietnam. Oil block 128, which Vietnam argues is inside its 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone granted under the UN Law of the Sea, is part of the nine blocks offered

for global bidding by CNOOC.

By putting up for global bidding a Vietnamese petroleum block under exploration by an Indian oil company, China has forced India into a corner. That India would not be cowed by Chinese maneuvers came during the July ASEAN Regional Forum in Phnom Penh. There, India made a strong case for supporting not only freedom of navigation but also access to resources in accordance with principles of international law. New Delhi, which so often likes to sit on margins and avoid



taking sides, must assume it can no longer afford the luxury of inaction if it wants to preserve credibility as a significant actor in both East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Like other major powers, India is concerned about China's challenge to the free access to the waters of the South China Sea. The South China Sea passage is too vital for trade and international security to be controlled by a single country.

Meanwhile, China has been doing its best to roil the waters in the South China Sea. Concerns have been rising about China's claim to the ownership to much of the South China Sea waters and the Chinese Navy's assertive behavior in the region. China has decided to establish a military garrison on Woody Island in the Paracels in a latest attempt to assert claims over the region. China's Defence Ministry has openly warned that "combat ready" Chinese naval and air patrols are ready to "protect our maritime rights and interests" in the South China Sea.

In a bold display of power and with the help of its

friend Cambodia, China prevented ASEAN from even issuing a joint statement for the first time in the organization's 45-year history. China succeeded in playing divide-and-rule politics, thereby ensuring that the dispute remains a bilateral matter between Beijing and individual rival claimants.

When China suggests that it would like to extend its territorial waters which usually extend 12 nautical miles from shore to include the entire exclusive economic zone, extending 200 nautical miles, it is challenging the fundamental principle of free navigation. All maritime powers, including India, have a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea. China has collided with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Philippines in recent months over issues related to the exploitation of East China Sea and South China Sea for mineral resources and oil.

India's interest in access to Vietnam's energy resources puts it in direct conflict with China's claims over the territory. In an ultimate analysis, this issue is not merely about commerce and energy. It is about strategic rivalry between two rising powers in the Asian landscape. If China can expand its presence in the Indian Ocean region, as New Delhi anticipates, India can also do the same in South China Sea waters. As China's power grows, it will test India's resolve for maintaining a substantive presence in the South China Sea.

India has so far been a passive observer amidst growing maritime tensions and territorial claims in the region. But now after expanding its footprints in the South China Sea, New Delhi must come to terms with China's regional prowess. The challenge for New Delhi is to match strategic ambition realistically with appropriate resources and capabilities.

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