

02/11/1999

Prelude to a disaster?

IN AN address on the future of Asia which he delivered at a conference in Tokyo, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad presented three probable scenarios, one of which is an Asia that plunges itself into chaos as countries battle one another. If such a scenario were to dawn on the continent, Dr Mahathir predicted that Spratlys would be the cause. The scenario reflected his concern, as well as that of governments in the region, over the military build-up in this resource-rich patch of the South China Sea in recent years, as countries with overlapping claims display their respective resolve. The "stand-off" last Sunday between Malaysian and Philippine aircraft while flying over the area was due to this build-up. It could have led to serious consequences.

The parties involved have attempted to downplay the incident, saying that there was no challenge, that neither side acted hostile during the stand-off, and that there was no instance that a danger existed. The Defence Secretary of the Philippines, Mr Orlando Mercado, made it sound like the pilots of the aircraft had encountered one another while on their way to buy groceries. The place is getting crowded, so invariably you bump into each other, he said. Malaysian Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha told reporters in Kuala Lumpur not to make a mountain out of a mole hill, saying it was a long-distance sighting made by the two Malaysian Hawk fighters of the Philippine planes. And the Hawks were unarmed at that time, he said.

While the diplomatic responses have gone some way to diffuse tensions, there is an urgent need to get to the bottom of the basic issue on Spratlys. Just last week Manila filed a protest against Vietnam after the latter's troops allegedly shot at a Philippine air force plane flying over a Vietnamese-controlled reef. The Philippine plane might have been unarmed like the Hawks. Vietnam, on the other hand, has accused the Philippines of seriously violating its sovereignty and reiterated its claim to sovereignty over all of the Spratly islands. Things could easily get out of hand. The military build-up in the area is creating suspicion among governments of otherwise friendly countries and making investors nervous. Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, China and Taiwan have troops in the area, leaving Brunei to be the only claimant without military presence. The possibility of another incident like last Sunday's is real. What happens if it leads to an accident? And what kind of reaction would there be from the US if it involves China's planes or troops?

Mercado has called on all the claimants to clarify the "terms of engagement" of their forces in the Spratlys, when they meet at next month's informal summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean). Manila also hopes to that a proposed code of conduct aimed at avoiding conflicts among claimants would be adopted at the summit, which will be attended by leaders of China, Japan and South Korea. But terms of engagement are not terms of endearment and the code of conduct will not solve the problem of military conduct in the area. Spratlys will remain a powder keg of Asia, which is the kind of labelling that is not helping the region, still struggling to recover from the 1997 economic crisis, to bolster foreign investors' confidence. What all the claimants should agree to do is pull out all military presence from the Spratlys. They have spoken about it before but it is time to act on the proposed joint development of the islands.

The informal summit in Manila this week should get down to work immediately to find a more lasting solution. The stakes can be very high, especially since the economies in the region, in their efforts towards recovery, cannot afford to do anything that would jeopardise confidence in the region. More importantly, the future of Asean and its aspiration to remain a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality hinge on the ability of the member countries and their partners which have interest in the Spratlys to reach some form of compromise.

(END)