

06/12/2002

Australia may lose out in war against terror

Hardev Kaur

THE European and American (including Australian) approach to dealing with terrorists and terrorism differs. The Europeans, like Malaysia and other Asian countries, call for dealing with the root causes of terrorism. The Americans and the Australians want to go for pre-emptive strikes and seek a military solution.

The difference, according to Jamie Shae, Nato's director of Press and Information, stems from the fact that they have different experiences with terrorists.

The Europeans have been "living with terrorism for a long time" and this includes the Basque separatist group, ETA, in Northern Spain and the IRA in Ireland. They have come to realise that military action alone is not enough in dealing with terrorists, nor does it address the root causes of the problem.

The Americans, on the other hand, believe that as the world's most powerful nation, the sole superpower and the world's largest economy, it will be able to deal with the issue. Shae added the Bush Administration, which is fairly new, feels that it can "deal with it, destroy it and eradicate it (terrorism)". The US approach is military action, which Australia supports.

But military action "requires a clear target" and this is not possible with terrorists and terrorism. This was clearly evident in the Vietnam war where even the superior American military might could not win them the guerilla war against the communist terrorists. But the lessons of Vietnam seem to have been forgotten.

In Europe, on the other hand, Germany's Ambassador to Nato in Brussels, Gebhardt Von Moltke, stressed that "military action is only part of the overall strategy of the Germans in dealing with terrorists and terrorism. Military action is not the answer as terrorists require a different strategy and approach".

Malaysia has repeatedly called for the need to identify the root causes and to deal with them. The solution takes time, a very long time perhaps, even years as happened with the communist insurgency in Malaya. But Kuala Lumpur dealt with it and is the only country in the world to have defeated communist terrorists.

The "softer" approach and a more lasting solution are needed and must be sought. International rules of sovereignty and independence must be respected or else the world will plunge into lawlessness, world order threatened and rules destroyed and the law of the jungle will prevail.

A civilised world would revert to uncivilised and barbaric ways of the past.

Military action may result in the terrorist groups breaking up into more cells spreading their terror over a wider area, thus making it even more difficult to deal with. The focus must be terrorists and terrorism and because of the nature of their operations it calls for co-operation among nations not antagonism, unity not divisions. There certainly is no room for additional hostility and tension among nations in the region.

But this is exactly what Australian Prime Minister John Howard's talk of pre-emptive attacks has done. It has angered its Asian neighbours and escalated tension in the region. Yet Howard does not believe that "our relations have been damaged by those statements at all". He is

unapologetic adding that "I don't resile from them in any way" and that "They don't mean any bellicosity towards our friends".

His Foreign Minister nevertheless is seeking "damage control" and met ambassadors from Southeast Asian nations on Wednesday.

Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines have been outraged by the remarks, saying that pre-emptive action would amount to an act of war. The Philippines described the statement as "arrogant", "bizarre" and "violative" of its sovereignty.

But Singapore, which has just signed a bilateral trade agreement with Australia, has said nothing which prompted Cepheus Yap Henwei in Melbourne to ask "isn't it time Singapore did too".

Canberra has received support from Washington which has made it very clear that pre-emptive action was now part of the US doctrine because of the different nature of terrorism.

Australia has been insensitive to Asian views, and its high-handed crackdown in which police and intelligence agents raided homes of Muslims in Australia also fuelled Asian sentiments.

Australia is often accused of putting relations with the US and Britain above those of Asia and has even earned itself the title of "deputy sheriff" of the US. Howard's comments only serve to reinforce that impression.

This, at a time when Australia should actually be looking to rebuilding and strengthening its relations with its neighbours and seeking co-operation to deal with the terrorists.

After all, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which is believed to be responsible for the Bali bombings, reportedly has training camps in Australia.

Going by Howard's advocacy, can other countries then send troops into Australia for pre-emptive action to stop terrorist attacks being launched into their territories? The answer from any civilised nation and individual is "no". The parties should work together to deal with the problem and not create mistrust, more tension and antagonism.

But in this case, the arrogance, antagonism and harsh words come from a country where the leadership wants an Asean plus Summit as well as to sit on the same table with Asean members during the Asia Europe Summit (Asem) meetings.

Its Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, had said that Australia has the credentials to make a substantial contribution to the Asem process on the Asian side. How can it have the "credentials" and make "substantial contributions" when it continues to antagonise and behave as "a white colonial power with a white Australian policy".

And as Elaine Thompson, professor of politics and international relations at the University of New South Wales, points out: "Howard's outrageous statement is just going to reinforce the view of us as an alien."

Hostility towards its neighbours will not help deal with the terrorists. It will only give rise to more problems and complications. It is essential that efforts are focused on the issue at hand and as our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stressed, the attitude of the Australian Government in dealing with this might cause it to lose out in the war against terror.

* hardev@alumni.KSG.harvard.edu

(END)