

# Where will it end?

The Americans, the Europeans and the Arabs must all hold their nerve



THE spectacle of American, British and French missiles pulverising an Arab and Muslim country at the dead of night arouses a sense of foreboding. Such ventures have too often begun with good intentions and naive overconfidence, as oil-rich despots see their armour crumple and burn beneath superior Western technology. Within weeks, though, vainglory turns into a costly and bloody quagmire.

Yet nobody could accuse Barack Obama and his allies, chiefly Britain's David Cameron and France's Nicolas Sarkozy, of overconfidence in attacking Libya on March 19th. It is hard to think of a military enterprise that has been conceived in so much doubt and anxiety. What if Muammar Qaddafi sits out the raids in his bunker? What if Libya is partitioned? What if, chastened by news footage of dead women and children in a Tripoli market, the coalition starts to fall apart? What if many of the eastern Libyans whom the outside world is protecting turn out to sympathise with al-Qaeda? What if they go on to behave as murderously as the colonel and his paid killers?

The answers to those questions start with the case for intervening in Libya. Western sceptics complain that they have "no dog in this fight". Libyans, they say, should be left to submit to the colonel or kill him off, as best they can.

That view is too parochial. Colonel Qaddafi is the Arab world's most violent despot. In one day in 1996 his men killed 1,270 prisoners in a Tripoli jail. He has backed terrorism and assassinated dissidents. Western leaders were right to have given him a chance to turn a new leaf after 2003, when he renounced his nuclear programme. But when peaceful protesters marched for change a few weeks ago he shot them—seemingly with relish. Whatever the course of the coming weeks and months, do not forget that the colonel and his sons had vowed to slaughter the people of Tobruk and Benghazi, house by house. In the narrowest of senses, a mission that many said was pointless and too late has already chalked up one success.

Moreover, what happens in Libya, for good or ill, will affect its more hopeful neighbours, Egypt and Tunisia. Farther afield, even Syria is beginning to stir and its government may be tempted to be as ruthless as Libya's (see page 53). If violence prevails in Libya, the momentum for peaceful change across the Middle East may drain away, as both autocrats and protesters elsewhere in the Arab world conclude that violence is after all an essential tool for getting their way.

## Be practical, as well as principled

The sceptics' second retort is that the West is guilty of hypocrisy. As it inveighs against Colonel Qaddafi, its Saudi allies have helped snuff out the flame of democracy in the Gulf state of Bahrain. And surely the West should stop propping up the Yemeni dictator, Ali Abdullah Saleh, whose forces have just shot dead dozens of protesters?

Here practicality—some would say *realpolitik*—comes into play, sometimes frustratingly. The violence in Bahrain is on a

vastly smaller scale than that in Libya; and the West is locked into a military alliance with both Bahrain—home to America's Fifth Fleet—and its royal family's protector, Saudi Arabia. To take on Bahrain's rulers would be to endanger that alliance—and they have run a more open society than Libya anyway. As for Yemen, it is an ungovernable snakepit, home to rival tribes, secessionists and a local branch of al-Qaeda. Nobody in his right mind would intervene there. Neither Bahrain or Yemen is susceptible to an air campaign as Libya is, with its long stretches of desert that expose Colonel Qaddafi's advancing tanks. You intervene when you can, not to be consistent.

The sceptics' third complaint is that the West has entered this campaign without defining the mission. That is both unfair and true. It is unfair because dictators do not work to a diplomatic timetable. Colonel Qaddafi's rapid advance to Benghazi meant that the outside world had to intervene within days or not at all. But it is true that there has been some indecisiveness—principally from Mr Obama. That helped forge a broader coalition, but the West now has its work cut out. It must urgently decide who is in charge, clarify the powers granted by the Security Council resolution enabling Libya's civilians to be protected by "all necessary means" and, most important of all, determine what the campaign's aims should be.

## A fight that needs a general

America wants to cede overall control as soon as it has carried out the bulk of the initial bombing. Although to some extent Mr Obama is again shrinking from leadership, it probably makes sense. The mission will look less American: it will force the Europeans to be responsible for a cause they championed; and in NATO there is a body that can take operational control.

The difficult decision is whether Colonel Qaddafi's removal, dead or alive, should be an explicit aim of the enforcers. The UN resolution makes no mention of such a thing, though many Western and Arab leaders have said they want the colonel to go. As commander-in-chief of security forces that have already killed hundreds of civilians since peaceful protests started a month ago, he is arguably a legitimate target. But it would be far better if his own people dealt with him, handed him over to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, or chased him into exile, rather than let him be singled out by his Western enemies for elimination.

Leaving the Libyans to do that unaided is admittedly a risk, but the odds are on the rebels' side. Once Colonel Qaddafi cannot pound cities such as Benghazi with impunity, opposition across the country will grow again. Isolated and economically strangled, the colonel and his regime would be lucky to survive indefinitely. Even if Libya were temporarily partitioned, the West could keep up the no-fly zone with minimal effort. Gradually, the noose would tighten around the colonel, especially as the anti-Qaddafi east holds most of Libya's oil.

Libya is not Iraq. The West has learned through bitter experience to avoid the grievous mistakes it made from the outset of that venture. For one thing, the current mission is indisputably legal. For another, it has, at least for now, the backing of Libya's own people and—even allowing for some wobbles ••

- from Turkey and the Arab League-of most Arab and Muslim countries. Libya's population is a quarter the size of Iraq's, and the country should be easier to control: almost all its people, a more homogeneous lot albeit with sharp tribal loyalties, live along the Mediterranean coastal strip. If Colonel Qaddafi's state crumbles, the West should not seek to disband his army or the upper echelons of his administration, as it foolishly did in Iraq. The opposition's interim national council contains secular liberals, Islamists, Muslim Brothers, tribal figures and recent defectors from the camp of Colonel Qaddafi. The West

## Japan's disaster

# A crisis of leadership, too

## The many-headed catastrophe points to deeper-seated problems in governing Japan



**S**INCE the lives of hundreds of thousands of ordinary Japanese were turned upside down by earthquake, tsunami, fire and looming nuclear threat, people around the globe have watched, amazed, at the survivors' composure—"stoicism" is the word

they most often reach for. There have been few complaints, just civic-minded initiative. All along the coast, the urgent talk is not just about survival in the face of shortages of food, water and fuel. Stricken communities are desperate to start rebuilding their towns (see page 47).

Stoicism is an admirable response to what fate deals you. It also serves as a coping mechanism in the face of incomprehension. And the Japanese no longer just find it hard to understand how nature could deal such a blow; increasingly, they want to know why the government of a rich and orderly land should be taking so long to tame an overheating nuclear plant and get help to communities ravaged by the tsunami. A lack of water, food and warmth are a fresh and acute source of suffering. Despite the scale of the humanitarian disaster, some of the suffering is avoidable. The system is letting citizens down.

This criticism may seem harsh. For a start, Naoto Kan, the prime minister, has maintained relative calm despite the menacing situation at Fukushima Dai-ichi, the crippled nuclear plant. His government has also been far more transparent than its predecessors. The Bank of Japan acted promptly, providing liquidity to prevent a natural disaster from becoming a financial one.

Favourable comparisons have rightly been made with the bumbling response by an earlier government to the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, which killed 6,400. Then, Japan's government was slower than South Korea's to set up an emergency relief operation. *Yakuza*, the Japanese mafia, were the first to set up soup kitchens for the victims.

But that is setting the bar very low indeed. After all, the Kobe fiasco hastened the end of the Liberal Democratic Party's post-war supremacy and the rise of Mr Kan's Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Kobe showed that the country was run by incompetents. The shock led to soul-searching by a once-confident Japan which, with its economy broken, seemed adrift. Yet all was not lost in the "lost decade". Out of Kobe grew new civic-minded energies. Mr Kan himself has a background in civic

should recognise the council as a transitional government, provided that it promises to hold multiparty elections. Above all, there must be no military occupation by outsiders. It is tempting to put time-limits on such a venture, but that would be futile.

Success in Libya is not guaranteed-how could it be? It is a violent country that may well succumb to more violence, and will not become a democracy any time soon. But its people deserve to be spared the dictator's gun and be given a chance of a better future.

activism. In 2009 the DPJ promised a new, more accountable kind of politics. A less deferential electorate approved.

Yet, this month's disasters underscore how much more the system still needs to change—along with the politicians guiding it. For one, the fiasco at Fukushima Dai-ichi has revealed, again, the cosy ties between the nuclear industry and government. Together, they have stifled debate, covered up bungles and made assumptions about risks that were too optimistic. The crisis management at TEPCO, the plant's owner, has laid bare an astounding lack of leadership. "What the hell's going on?" Mr Kan demanded at one point.

The same might be asked of the operation to get help to the tsunami victims. For all that Mr Kan has attempted to be seen at the front, in Tokyo the sense of a looming humanitarian crisis in the north has been slow to sink in. That is partly because nuclear worries have absorbed much of the government's attention. Few politicians in a centralised system have bothered to travel north themselves. The media, taking their cue from the Tokyo establishment, have not thought properly to report the unfolding struggle for food and fuel.

Yet businessmen and victims say supplies are being held up as bureaucracies fall back on tired old rules and straitjacket procedures. Lorries full of supplies have been unable to get petrol on the empty expressway north, reserved for "emergency" vehicles. While this severe shortage of fuel spread through northern Japan, oil companies were sitting on huge supplies which by law they had to keep in reserve. If ever an occasion for their use was justified, it was this catastrophe. Yet the government took ten days to beg for (not order) their release. From the start, Mr Kan should have declared a state of emergency. Even now, clear lines of authority for handling the many-headed crisis have not been properly established.

### Who the hell's in charge?

Japan has gone without effective leadership for so long, with an endless procession of faceless prime ministers and their cabinets, that it has made political dysfunction look almost like well-practised art. But this crisis has shone a pitiless light on that failure. Mr Kan, who has promised political change, now needs to bring it about. Japan's people can help, adopting a different attitude to their government. Stoicism—however good for coping with adversity—is bad for bringing on change. Time for the Japanese to unleash some righteous anger on a system that has let them down.

# Not so fast, Ma Bell

AT&T's takeover of T-Mobile USA would damage mobile-phone choice. It should be stopped



**B**EWARE of habitual monopolists bearing gifts—especially if they operate in shamefully uncompetitive markets, AT&T's proposed \$39 billion takeover of T-Mobile USA would create a dominant mobile-phone operator, with a 39% market share in

America, and a near-duopoly with Verizon, the current market leader: together their combined share would be 70%. It is a mark of the mess that the United States has made of telecoms not just that such a deal is being considered, but also that a duopoly might actually bring genuine short-term benefits. All the same, it would be far better if the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Department of Justice blocked the T-Mobile merger—and tried to reform the market instead.

The bait for Barack Obama is that the deal could speed up his commitment to make broadband available to more Americans, AT&T says the acquisition will let it expand its fourth-generation (4G) technology—which will provide faster data connections on mobile devices—to a further 46.5m Americans, including many in rural areas who cannot get fixed-line broadband. This is much the same argument that AT&T's grandmother, Ma Bell, made a century ago when it lobbied successfully to be allowed to swallow up lots of other telephone operators and become a monopoly, on the ground that this was the best way to ensure decent coverage, especially in a huge country with a thinly spread population. In the 1970s the government decided that technological gains had undermined such "natural monopoly" arguments: AT&T's local phone services were subsequently hived off, and it was forced to accept competition for long-distance services.

Why reverse history? AT&T argues that by making better use of the two firms' combined infrastructure it could improve

the quality of connections. It says the merger, by making it a stronger rival to Verizon, would improve the industry's competitiveness. Consumers everywhere would have a choice between two strong national companies.

This new-found zeal for serving consumers needs to be taken with a pinch of salt: AT&T now gets the worst customer-satisfaction ratings among the main mobile operators. The deeper question is whether two is enough, especially in a business that is evolving as fast, and becoming as important to people's lives, as mobile communications. Canada—also vast and sparsely populated—concluded that lack of competition had contributed to its having some of the rich world's most expensive call rates, and has been trying for three years to promote new entrants. The FCC's British counterpart wants to manage its 4G auction to guarantee consumers have at least four operators with nationwide coverage.

AT&T points out that consumers in many American metropolises already have a choice of five or more operators; and it is prepared to give up market share in some localities where the merger would make it dominant (see page 71). But many consumers want a mobile operator with good national coverage. That is why AT&T and Verizon each spend so heavily on advertisements claiming they are the best for this.

## The president's call

The suspicion is that Mr Obama, desperate both to build some broken fences with big business and to make progress on connecting every American home to the internet, will give in. In fact he should push the FCC to promote more competition—by, for instance, allowing other firms to buy bulk wireless capacity from AT&T and resell it, by freeing up underused spectrum and by making local phone and cable firms share their wires. A duopoly would in the end reduce choice for American consumers, and be hard to reverse. Best to block it.