

New Wine in Old Bottles

By Dr. John Bruni

In retrospect of the ‘Arab Spring’, most commentators believe that this is something that has happened – a past event which left in its wake just chaos – a sort of Middle East ‘default setting’. But the truth is that the uprisings that swept across a number of Middle East countries, ‘kicked-off’ by the suicide of 26 year old Mohamed Bouazizi, is far from over. Yes, dictators have fallen. Tunisian president Ben Ali is gone; Hosni Mubarak is no longer the president of Egypt; Moummar Gaddafi was ousted in the bloody, chaotic Libyan civil war (enabled by the intervention – overt and covert – of NATO forces). In Syria, the Al-Assad regime is fighting a rear-guard action against anti-government forces, and if media reports are to be believed, the harder the crackdown, the more anti-government protesters are flocking to the cause of Bashar Al-Assad’s ouster. In Yemen, while Saleh is no longer president, (having handed power to his deputy on February 27th 2012), the future of that poor, arid, chronically divided and Khat-riddled country is far from certain. Importantly, the many structural inequities and injustices that caused the martyrdom of Bouazizi are still rife thought the Middle East and will, in time, demand real and substantive political and social change.



In all of the abovementioned countries there is an awareness that most of the changes that took place, might not have occurred without the secret and not-so-secret involvement of foreign agents, diplomats, Special Forces, as well as manned and unmanned aerial vehicles. It lays bare the fact that the driving force is a new Western strategic policy, one that is still being orchestrated by the number one global power in the world – the United States. Here it needs to be acknowledged that under President Barak Obama, the application of American power has gone from the ‘sledgehammer’ approach under former president George W. Bush, to ‘stealth’.

Today’s America applies military force in a very judicious and deliberate manner. Gone are the massive displays of force we saw in Afghanistan (post-2002) and Iraq. When force is needed to undermine the grip of a tyrant today, America attempts to selectively use elite military contingents (to impose command, control and discipline), sympathetic local commanders and units (for legitimate boots on the ground) and airpower to oversee and protect those serving its interests. True, such a strategy does not require large numbers of foreign military personnel to expose themselves to a hostile ‘occupied’ population. True, offending tyrants can be brought down by their own people when supported by a light, subtle foreign security presence. But there is a problem with this new style of foreign/strategic policy. It emboldens long oppressed political opposition in any number

of different countries to expect that this light, subtle application of foreign military power can be brought to bear against long-standing enemies simply by engaging the Western media. A story of an atrocity by government forces might be all that is necessary for Western polities to press their governments' arsenals into action. Kony 2012 goes one step further. There, social media like Twitter and Facebook, with savvy activists at the helm, orchestrated a campaign to find Ugandan fugitive Joseph Kony, leader of

the Lord's Resistance

Army in order to bring him 'to justice'. That most of those involved in the

support of this high-profile international social media campaign barely know or understand anything about Kony, the history of the Lord's Resistance Army or even where Uganda is on the map, is apparently irrelevant. The message of the spin-doctors seems enough to stir up public sentiment for action. That such 'action' will have to include a military dimension was made clear by the Kony 2012 campaigners whose very emotive verbalisation delivered the message that local Ugandan forces are incapable of tracking down Kony on their own.

Yes, we live in interesting times. As the world continues to fragment into new selfish and self-absorbed entities, each seeking to better its international standing over real or perceived rivals, and as the connective tissue



of the Internet continues to give the impression of unity of human aspirations – be they social, political or economic – things are likely to deteriorate.

Take for instance the fact that the Russian Federation, Brazil, Germany, India and the People's Republic of China, each in their own way, equivocated on the use of force to topple Libyan leader Moummar Gaddafi in 2011 in the United Nation's Security Council. These countries collectively have enough presence on the international stage to thwart American or general Western ambitions. Indeed, two of them, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China have the capacity to directly confront, challenge and undermine American and Western aspirations wherever they are directed.

The Chinese capital of Beijing has spent an inordinate amount of time and money on buying influence in Africa – creating an African dependence on Chinese goodwill.



The Russian capital of Moscow has done the same in Central Asia. The economic heart of the European Union, Berlin, on the other hand, has used the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and subsequent Greek Financial Crisis of 2011 to force a largely petulant, resentful

and reluctant European Continent into the arms of the established Franco-German duumvirate. The proudly stubborn British capital of London is fighting to create a strategic space for itself between the United States and the European Union – something akin to its former 19th Century policy of ‘Splendid Isolation’.

As time forges ahead, so too will the natural competitive instinct of these emerging political blocs.

While it is hard to believe that we will ever again revisit the horror that led to the two world wars of the Twentieth Century and the high anxiety of the Cold War, we can quite easily imagine a world tearing itself apart in a series of small-scale, but profound proxy skirmishes, where great power interests will find inventive ways of challenging and undermining countries of geopolitical and strategic value.

Wars might well be reminiscent of the 17th Century – with small professional armies clashing against non-state militias and terrorist groups (or from time to time even each other), but with 21st Century weapons. The soldiery of the West will be fused more and more into the Special Forces arm. Socially, this will effectively see the re-vamping of the military into a praetorian class whose role will be as much to defend the state’s authority (whether democratic, plutocratic or autocratic in nature) from internal challengers, as defending the state against external rivals.

Such potential development should give pause for thought to those activists, ‘hacktivists’ and other political idealists who believe that the contemporary technological revolution in communication and information will usher in an age of secular, rational humanism and globalised commerce; a time when the political interests of the main powers will coalesce into one global framework – whether through the United Nations or a new as yet to be determined global political arrangement where the military power of individual states will be combined and commanded under the banner of one flag for one indivisible aim. This is unlikely. That there will be highly diverse political, cultural, social and economic entities, both at a state and non-state level, collaborating with and/or combating each other for dominance is the political ‘state of nature’. That in the 21st Century such collaboration and/or combat will be spurred on in the ethereal environment of the Internet is part of our technological evolution. But in the end, the long promised coming together of humanity through wisdom and rationality is still way off.

Take the international community’s dilemma over what to do with Syria.

Russia and China will not want their ongoing economic interests threatened by an Al-Assad ouster. Israel would be suspicious of what may lie in store for it were a non-secular, Wahhabist-orientated Damascus to succeed the current secular Ba’athists. The ruling Alawites, as well as the secular

minorities in Syria who prospered under Alawite tutelage, would fear for their future and their security were the majority Sunnis to take control. The Iranians would fear the loss of their only overt strategic ally. Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip would be minus a critical line of supply back to Iran. Turkey would fear the influx of fleeing Syrian minorities. The Saudis would suspect that Syrian sympathisers used their support only for the toppling of Assad, thereby damaging the prospect of a long-term strategic alliance between Riyadh and a Sunni Syria that the Saudis helped bring about. The Americans might welcome the end of Bashar Al-Assad, but they would need to leave the regime in place in order not to replicate the disaster the Bush administration delivered to Iraq by dissolving the Iraqi Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi Army in 2003. The Germans would be wary of supporting anything that would commit them to use military force, including humanitarian intervention. So, apart from the hue and cry of the international community over the Syrian Army's brutal crackdown on Syrian political protesters, this hue and cry is the only real point of unity among the main players of the international community. Having obviously studied the Western military interventions of the past, the Syrian military has chosen not to employ airpower (other than some helicopters), so as to keep this valuable asset from being targeted by an internationally sanctioned 'no-fly zone'. By keeping its powder dry, Syria, a relatively isolated and poor country has, by its actions, confounded the international community by leaving few

options open, except for the employment of large numbers of troops – something politically unpalatable for most, a dangerously polarising prospect for many and certainly unaffordable in the current economic climate.

In the end, given the current state of disunity over Syria and the fact that the Syrian Army fight-back is gaining momentum, the idea of doing nothing is gaining traction.



Doing nothing might alienate the idealists who want an end to war and suffering and who can vent their spleen on the Internet and on social media. But we need to remember that the idealists do not speak with one voice; that they themselves are divided between those who drift toward pragmatism and fundamentalism and any one solution to the Syrian crisis might be howled down by more radical types. The democracy of the 'information superhighway' is the public distraction that governments require for them to do what they feel is necessary to preserve the integrity of national and regional interests. Calls for Kony 2012, Assad 2012 or Mugabe 2012 are therefore likely to be equally impotent in mobilising government support for military action – such actions being reserved for critical

national interests now, as they have been in the past.

Following Images Accessed 21/03/2012

Arab Spring poster:

<http://www.redletterchristians.org/wp-content/uploads/Arab-Spring-Revolution.png>

Kony 2012 campaign poster:

<http://vibewire.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/kony2012.jpg>

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi toasting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on the completion of the new \$US200 million AU complex in Addis Ababa:

<http://abbaymedia.com/wp-content/themes/blognews/timthumb.php?src=http%3A%2F%2Fabbaymedia.com%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2012%2F02%2Fmeles-zenawi-with-chinese-prime-minister-ethiopia-and-china.jpg&q=90&w=460&h=260&zc=1>

Syrian tanks fighting opposition groups for control of the city of Homs:

http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-SZh3qIxoN_g/TzgJbvug3-I/AAAAAAAAA50/EfrV-xnBw80/s1600/120211023313-syria-tanks-story-top.jpg