

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Syria, a middle east war and the Caribbean

A week ago it seemed certain that the US administration intended authorising a military attack on Syria. The purpose of this uncertain adventure was, according to President Obama, to demonstrate that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable.

Although when this may now happen is less certain, as with the invasion of Iraq, any decision to attack Syria raises difficult questions for the Caribbean, but could serve to further promote synergies within the new political grouping, CELAC, the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños, which consists of all 33 nations in the Americas other than Canada, the US and the dependent territories of European nations.

The issues surrounding what happened in Syria are subject to a wide range of interpretation, but anyone who saw the horrific pictures of those dying from the effects of some sort of nerve agent, who read the comments of Médecins Sans Frontières about the large numbers of patients arriving in less than three hours with symptoms including convulsions, dilated pupils and breathing problems, or how many were successfully treated with atropine, a drug administered to those with neurotoxic symptoms, will have no doubt that some sort of chemical weapon attack took place.

Neither is it beyond doubt that Syria is one of only five nations in the world have not signed the UN Chemical Weapons Treaty – the others are Angola, Egypt, North Korea, and South Sudan – and of these, it is one that has well documented stockpiles of chemical weapons.

Although there is unlikely to be any conclusive proof as to the perpetrators as the UN weapons inspectors have no mandate to apportion blame, the higher probability is that an attack took place and that the delivery of a nerve agent, either on an authorised or unauthorised basis, was most likely undertaken by one or another militarily capable group loyal to the Syrian government.

That said, it is hard to see how the lack of certainty as to who is to blame can be used in any way to justify what is now being proposed, why once again the UN may be bypassed, or why the US and parts of Europe continue to believe that they alone are the world's policemen when they face no direct threat from this or the many other horrific events that are taking place within the context of a civil war.

Why what may now happen is particularly alarming is because the proposed demonstration of force seems to have no utility other than to punish, and is not allied to clear political objectives or a result.

Others may disagree, but to engage in yet another military conflict in a Middle East with an uncertain outcome, not just for the country concerned, but for a region that appears inexorably to be heading towards a sectarian war that may engulf other nations and involve terrorist groups, is dangerous in the extreme for us all.

Thankfully, in parts of Europe at least, politicians have begun to recognise that public opinion is not on their side and that despite the emotional pressure from the now pervasive rolling twenty four hour news channels, ordinary people's views are being heard.

For the Caribbean, this may all seem remote, but as with the decision to invade Iraq, it raises important and sometimes confusing questions as to how the region should react; whether it has a forward looking and coherent foreign policy on such issues; whether nations should respond individually or as a group; and which regional body offers the most effective vehicle through which to speak.

What is happening in the Middle East once again confirms the need for a new direction of regional political travel away from the past and bodies such as the Organisation of American States (OAS), towards the newer hemispheric political grouping, CELAC.

Established in 2010 out of the Rio Group, CELAC reflects a desire to reduce the overwhelming influence of the United States on the politics and economics of Latin America and to lessen the influence of institutions that, in their origins, were constructs of the Cold War.

The new organisation represents a broader desire to establish a political framework based on a desire to authentically represent the views of the southern part of the hemisphere to a world in the process of change.

Perhaps best known for the decision taken in 2011 by all of its members to support Argentina against the UK in relation to the Falklands/Malvinas dispute, in doing so, the body was able to demonstrate that CELAC is a potentially powerful new hemispheric political voice for the South.

CELAC's emergence coincides with nations like Cuba and the Dominican Republic seeking to find ways to enlarge the space in which they might operate with others hemispherically on the international stage.

It also comes at a time when some in CARICOM are exploring where the region should position itself in the next decade, how best to overcome fragmented nationalism and institutions unable to deliver integration and change, and the extent to which it will be possible in future to define an identifiably Caribbean response to changes in the global exercise of power.

Although it is hard to know what may happen in the coming weeks in Syria, it is clear, as the vote against intervention in the UK Parliament demonstrated, that political leaders in some western democracies are learning a long overdue lesson, that post imperial ambition arising out of the legacy of the Second World War and the Cold War has less and less support, and that new ways of relating to history and the world are now required.

From a very different starting point and perspective, the Caribbean too needs to consider what is now happening in Syria, absorb the lessons of history, and weigh the opportunity that new hemispheric bodies present to have the region's voice better heard on this and other issues.

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