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The oft-quoted Chinese curse about "living in troubled times" certainly seems to be with us at present. The earthquake and tsunami in Japan, and continuing unrest in the Maghreb and the Middle East (now spreading to the Gulf): the world is jittery and that is without asking what is happening with Somali piracy, the development of nuclear weapons in Iran, or continuing tensions between North and South Korea. Meanwhile both the US and Britain are significantly committed in military terms to Afghanistan in particular, and the capacity to undertake additional tasks (such as the new No-Fly Zone over Libya) is therefore necessarily limited (albeit that that is not the same as impossible). This short piece will concentrate on events in Japan, Libya and Bahrain and ask how, together (although they are not necessarily connected), they should give cause for concern.

The short answer to the question implied in my previous paragraph is instability. When the world undergoes a period of significant change - be that man-made (such as political change) or natural (earthquake, tsunami) confidence in international organisations, norms and stability is

undermined. Given the knife-edge on which we continue to balance (the famous clock of the Bulletin of The Atomic Scientists remains set at 6 minutes to midnight - see: <http://www.thebulletin.org/> - so one group at least is far from sanguine about the prospects for world peace) such feelings of insecurity are not to be welcomed. So why might we feel particularly uncertain about security at present? I offer six areas that concern me.

First, financial instability. The Tokyo stock-exchange has, unsurprisingly, witnessed significant swings over the past few days with concomitant swings elsewhere. The effects on the Japanese (and therefore global) economy in the longer term are still to emerge fully, but it is likely that there will be a significant down-turn in (global) manufacturing and R&D capability for at least the next six months and more likely next three to five years as Japan re-builds its electricity generating capacity, national infrastructure and manufacturing base. There will, clearly, be an up-turn in some sectors such as civil engineering and construction which may have a discernible impact on some commodities. But at best I suggest that we are in for a period of uncertainty in the financial markets with the increasing danger of another global economic recession which will do little to calm tensions in North Africa and the Middle East.

Next, the role the media as an opinion-forming body with significant influence in the policy arena. The media coverage switched almost totally to the tragedy in Japan, away from North Africa and the Middle East, but one has to ask whether that is indeed the greatest threat at present to world peace? Less this sounds callous, the events in Japan are indeed tragic and almost beyond comprehension, and I add my voice to the millions around the globe offering the Japanese people my sympathies. But while the human tragedy in Japan offers good media opportunities (television pictures, stories of personal suffering and of survival against the odds)

the more crucial story, in my eyes, remains the Maghreb and the Middle East/Gulf. Meanwhile, what is happening in Egypt: a rush to democratic reform or the replacement of one regime by another that is fundamentally the same? Again, the lack of media coverage has allowed this to drift from the public consciousness, at a time when for reasons of longer-term stability it is of particular significance.

Third is the debate surrounding nuclear power for electricity generation. Yes, the handling of the impact of the earthquake and tsunami by the Japanese nuclear agency has been indifferent at best, and questions are rightly being asked about the wisdom of building nuclear plants in an earthquake-prone zone, and of the degree of back-up control and cooling systems in place. But this has triggered a wider, and frequently hasty and ill-informed, debate on the entire future of nuclear power as a source of electrical generation (see, for example some of the statements from contributors to the this debate:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/dan-plesch-harald-heubaum/nuclear-follies>).

Let us step back and establish a few facts. First, while there have been leaks of radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi plants, there has been neither (at the time of writing) a nuclear explosion nor a reactor melt-down (terms the press are too freely bandying about). Second, global electricity demand is soaring. Third, renewables are not meeting the rising demand. Fourth, China is opening, on average, the equivalent of one new, average-sized coal-fired electricity power station per week - think of the carbon footprint. It should be remembered that coal fired power stations are the greatest and constant source of man-made radiation in the air. Fifth, the waste from nuclear power plants is highly toxic and takes an incredibly long time to become safe, so nuclear power plants have severe down-sides too. I am advocating neither side of the debate, merely asking that we hold a measured and sensible debate because it might be that we really DO need nuclear as part of the energy mix. Some rationality and calm in the debate would be good: Germany closing down five of its nuclear power plants on safety concerns (with the concomitant rise in requirement for output from gas-, oil- and coal-fired plants – yet more carbon in the air) is not, I suggest, entirely rational or helpful. More of Germany later.

Next, oil. The price of oil has fluctuated dramatically over the past months, with events in the oil- and gas-producing countries stretching from Morocco to Iraq unsettling the world market; instability in Egypt making the Suez Canal seem vulnerable; Libyan oil production (admittedly not hugely significant in terms of world output) fall; and now new paradigms in oil demand as a result of countries closing down nuclear power stations and requiring alternative energy sources balanced against a short- to medium-term downturn in Japanese manufacturing and transportation requiring less oil. Yet again instability, which can lead to wider tensions.

My fifth and penultimate area of concern is the UN involvement in Libya. While I applaud the imposition of the no-fly zone and acknowledge the diplomatic prowess of France and the UK in getting the motion through without veto from China or Russia, with the necessary majority and with the (albeit late and seemingly reluctant) support of the US, this undertaking is fraught with difficulties. There are the practical difficulties – certainly the UK is not as well-placed to play its part as it might wish to be. Yes, the Air defence assets are not in huge demand in Afghanistan where there is no air threat, so Typhoons and E3D AWACS aircraft are likely to be fairly readily available. But the Air Transport to deploy their support equipment (presumably to Italy) is in

short supply (aging aircraft, shrinking fleets, high levels of existing commitment) and tanker aircraft to support them are not exactly plentiful. The French are better placed with fewer commitments, but the real power would be American carrier-based aviation one can surmise. It is hopeful that the Arab League is so fully behind this undertaking, not for practical but for political reasons: this must be seen to be a UN- or Arab-led undertaking and not mistaken for Western imperialism or driven by oil. One would also hope that the planners and the politicians have learnt their lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan and have already started serious consideration of what happens after the (presumed) overthrow of Col Gaddafi. But there are other areas of concern. Italy's position is understandable given her historic involvement within Libya and her reliance on Libyan gas, but her offer of bases is brave and to be welcomed. Germany's position while good for domestic politics does less to support international institutions, including the UN, EU and NATO. Yes, it is in Germany's democratic right to decide when to play or not to play an active role. Yes, we should respect that right. But Germany has power, and with power comes responsibilities. I doubt that Germany's position with reference to the no-fly zone will in itself weaken any of the institutions that I have just listed in the short-term, but in the longer it does bring in some degree of doubt about how united Western democratic countries are when faced with blatant aggression and disregard of civil rights – two of the cornerstones of the liberal democratic model that we in the West trumpet so loudly. But above all, with respect to Libya, is this too little, too late? And is the UNSCR too broad: is this actually the UN declaring war on the present Libyan regime, with a clear view to replace it? If so, that is a significant step for the UN to have taken. Only time will tell whether either of these are going to become significant issues.

Finally, what of the Gulf region? What is happening in Bahrain gives me cause for grave concern. Not only is Bahrain significant and long-standing ally of the West (and particularly for both the UK and the US) but had been assumed to be relatively stable. That such violent tensions can explode there is indeed cause for worry. The involvement of Saudi Arabian (and other) forces, albeit at the request of the Bahrainian rulers may be legal under International Law, but appears to be at best heavy-handed and raises some doubts as to Bahrain's true independence. Next, if the UN is happy to become involved in (potential) regime-change in Libya, why not elsewhere? Moreover, with a Shi'a majority in Bahrain, across the causeway in the oil-producing region of Saudi Arabia and across the Gulf in militant Iran, are there wider problems still to come? And finally, what of other states within the region, such as Yemen/

In sum, we are at best facing a period of instability, but potentially something far worse. At a time when the UK's forces are stretched, against a time of financial difficulties and understandable retrenchment of defence spending, with a government still finding its feet on the international stage and with America not displaying clear-cut, consistent leadership, we are indeed in interesting times.