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Stupid Old Men

by GWYNNE DYER

Leading an entire country for a few years is a steep learning curve, but it's useful experience. Being in power for a dozen years makes most leaders arrogant and careless, but some remain more or less functional. Being in power for more than thirty years just makes you stupid. Consider Cambodia's Hun Sen and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Hun Sen began as a Khmer Rouge commander and went on to rule Cambodia effectively as an absolute dictator for 36 years. (He is by far the country's richest man and his personal guard rivals the national army in size.) He passed the prime ministership on to his son Hun Manet two years ago, but he really still rules.

There is an old history of military confrontations between Thailand and Cambodia, but relations have been stable since Hun Sen came to power. In fact, there were close links between him and the Shinawatra family that has dominated democratic politics in Thailand for half of this century.

So when there was a shoot-out on the Cambodian-Thai border a couple of weeks ago the Thai prime minister, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, got on the phone to calm things down with Hun Sen. (She called him ?uncle' because her father and the Cambodian leader had been so close.)

Only one Cambodian soldier was killed in the incident, but who wants a war? She criticized the Thai regional commander, who she said ?just wanted to look tough,? and added that if Hun Sen wanted anything she would ?take care of it.?

This is how grown-ups in power manage random incidents that can cause serious trouble: apologize (whether your side was in the wrong or not), lay on the flattery, give everybody an off-ramp. And keep it as private as possible.

Instead, Hun Sen put the entire 17-minute conversation on his website. Its effect, and most likely his purpose, was to humiliate Prime Minister Shinawatra and stir up outrage among Thai ultra-nationalists. We can probably therefore assume that he was acting in league with aforesaid ultra-nationalists, but he's crazy to believe that they are reliable allies.

Hun Sen may be calculating that a small military confrontation with Thailand will help his son to consolidate his hold on power. However, it's just as likely that the Thai hard-liners would exploit a brief victorious war (Thais outnumber Cambodians four-to-one) to legitimize their intended coup.

Hun Sen used to be ruthless but clever; now he's just stupid. He's taking an unnecessary risk for a doubtful outcome. But the uncomfortable truth is that at least half the wars on this planet start for reasons no more profound than this. Which brings us to the truly counterproductive behaviour of Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Like Hun Sen, Iran's Supreme Leader has been in power for 36 years. At least half the Iranian population would be glad to see him gone, but during his early years he was an effective ruler. Now he is an isolated old man of 86 who simply does not grasp the plight of his nation.

Donald Trump gave Iran's leaders an unintended opening with his over-the-top boasting about the damage that one day of US air strikes did to the country. The American and world media were already questioning his claims that the three nuclear enrichment sites at Fordo, Natanz and Esfahan were ?totally obliterated?, and Trump had doubled down on them.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who knows his way around the diplomatic world, humbly admitted the American strikes had done ?excessive and serious damage.? The country is virtually defenceless against American and Israeli airstrikes: why would Iran give them any reason to believe that they had to go back and finish the job?

But Ayatollah Ali Khamanei was living in Cloud Cuckoo Land. In a video statement on 26 June, he insisted that the American air strikes ?did not achieve anything? and further threatened to give the United States ?another slap? (referring to the Iranian missile attack on an American base in Qatar in retaliation for the US air strikes).

Khamenei seemed unaware that no damage had been done to American lives or military assets. He didn't even seem to know that Iran's surviving military leaders, hoping to avoid a game of tit-tor-tat in which they would be utterly outmatched, had informed US authorities in advance of when the missiles would be launched and on what trajectories.

Trump went berserk at Khamenei's speech. ?You got beat to hell,? he raged, and declared that he had been about to end sanctions against Iran but the Ayatollah's speech changed his mind. That's probably untrue, but Khamenei is too old to be left in office. As Trump himself will probably be before his presidential term is finished.