

US security strategy in Asia-Pacific

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE Bush administration seems to focus again on China as its "strategic competitor", not as "strategic partner". In 2001 when President Bush came into power, China was his number one focus but after 9/11, China was lost from its strategic radar scene and both US and China maintained as far as possible a correct balance of relationship.

Now that the Bush administration seems to have lost its strategy in Iraq and on war on terror, it returned to the earlier themethat is China's power must be contained in the Asia-Pacific region.

The US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (who had a Ph-D on Russian Communism) has been engaged in visits to various countries in the region to ensure that the US focus on China is not diminished. The latest visit of the US Secretary of State to Australia and Indonesia is to be seen as a campaign to list these countries to contain China.

One of the important aspects of this strategy is the recent trilateral dialogue at the ministerial level on security between Australia, Indonesia and Japan. The talks were intended to advance regional compact on security against China's power and influence by identifying shared strategic concerns and effectively coordinating policies.

Some political observers believe that what the US is thinking is not bilateral security agreements but a multilateral security organisation in the Asia-Pacific region, similar to that of NATO in Europe.

The US has been always a player in the Asia-Pacific region since the Second World War. Japan was under occupation of the US and a Constitution was imposed upon Japan. Since then, first it had to compete with the Soviet Union and now it has to face challenge from China's power.

China will be Asia's most powerful country and the second most powerful state in the world by 2050, with an economy close in size

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tom that of the US and an expanded military (China is believed to be spending US\$90 billion on defence budget).

In the Korean peninsula, US military alliances with Japan and South Korea have failed to halt nuclear proliferation. China is a friendly neighbour of North Korea that poses a problem for the US in the region because of its nuclear weapons and missiles. China is the only power that has some influence on North Korea. In that respect, China has a key leverage with the US in relation to North Korea.

Some political observers perceive that by 2020, Islamic radicalism may develop a stronger nationalist flavour and become a substantial force in Indonesia and

the southern Philippines. Violent separatist insurgencies in Thailand and Myanmar could lead to an increase in terrorist and transnational criminal activities, threatening the security of the region's states.

Security in Papua New Guinea may deteriorate further by 2020, with a risk that the country may be a failed state and Australia, a former colonial master, may be asked to contribute to an international security force to provide stability to the nine million strong population. Fiji is politically not stable. The civil government and the military are at loggerheads and recently it has been reported that the military chief has not ruled out a coup if the civilian government does not play a stable

role in unifying the various ethnic strands in the country.

The US ally Australia is in a dilemma. Australia has a huge economic interest in China, while it keeps happy the US by sending its troops to Iraq. Against the background of US strategy to contain China, Australia is not sure to which it can go. If war breaks out between China and the US on Taiwan issue, it is not known how Australia would respond. Australia's Foreign Minister Downer once said that Australia would play a neutral role. But in fact the foreign policy is run by the powerful conservative Prime Minister John Howard and not by the Foreign Minister.

Furthermore, some defence experts believe that Australia is



unprepared to face new emerging threats in Asia Pacific region. They claim Australia's decline in military superiority in the region may not be able to operate at the optimal level. Although the Bush administration is aware of Australia's weakness and dilemma, it has been pushing a security compact with regional countries together with Australia to keep Asia Pacific region under the

influence of the US. Multilateral security organisation in the Asia Pacific may avoid increased military role of Japan because Japan's military power sets many regional nations on edge and uneasy in the light of its role during the Second World War.

There is another negative factor in the game of the US. Many regional states are the critics of President Bush and the style and policies of his administration. The editorial page editor of the International Herald Tribune, Serge Schmemmann, wrote in 2004 that summed up anti-Americanism across the world.

Schmemmann wrote: "The new American order has generated a tsunami of anti-Americanism. Though I have lived abroad for many years... I was taken aback to have my country depicted, page after page, book after book, as a dangerous empire in the last throes, as a failure of democracy, as militaristic, violent, hegemonic, evil, callous, arrogant, imperial and cruel".

Against the negative image of the US, the question is: whether regional states would form a multilateral security organisation in Asia Pacific at the bidding of the US? Many countries have maintained economic interests with China and China's diplomatic conduct with them has been cordial, peaceful and mutually supportive.

In the light of these developments, it is an interesting scenario as to how far and to what extent the US will be able to persuade regional states to form a multilateral security organisation. It seems that diplomatic war game has just begun between the US and China.

Barrister Harun Ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Siege of Jericho prison

Annexing territory and killing Palestinians?

BILLY I AHMED

IN a major escalation, the Israeli Army stormed Jericho Prison on March 14, to arrest Palestinian political leader Ahmed Saadat and fellow political prisoners. US and British monitors left the prison minutes before the siege began, suggesting their complicity in the operation. But the excuse of complicity is a violation of "Ramallah Agreement."

Ahmed Saadat, leader of the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PLFP) was accused of masterminding the murder of Rehavam Zeevi, the Israeli Tourism Minister in October 2001.

Rehavam Zeevi, was head of the Central Command in the late 1960s and early 1970s, personally developed and managed Israel's brutal regime in the newly occupied West Bank.

After retiring from the battlefield, Zeevi waged a relentless war against "the Arabs" on the political front. His Moleket party, founded in the 1980s, advocated the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Greater Israel - in other words, from Israel and the occupied territories.

Saadat was first arrested by Palestinian security forces on January 15, 2002. No charges were presented against him. A year later, the Palestinian High Court of Justice ordered his immediate release, challenging the legality of his detention.

Jericho is a small Palestinian island in a sea of Israeli occupation, with a population of 15000. Most of the Jordan Valley has been entirely controlled by Israel for decades.

According to reports in the Hebrew media, Israel is poised to announce the Valley's annexation sometime after its elections later this month. Jericho is the quietest place in the West Bank and Gaza.

Around Jericho itself the Israeli army has dug a deep ditch to prevent all unauthorised movement in and out of the city. And beyond that is the busy "settlers' highway" through the occupied Jordan Valley, linking Jerusalem with the north of Israel, officially known as Gandhi's Road - after Rehavam Zeevi. He earned the nickname "Gandhi" as a skinny youth in the army.

Four years later, on March 14, morning, Britain, backed out of the Ramallah agreement with the Palestinians and quit Jericho and Israeli amour rolled into Jericho at once to capture Saadat and a handful of other wanted men.

The raid began when Israel forced 170 prisoners out of the jail wearing only their underwear; the main targets of the raid, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine leader Ahmed Saadat and five fellow political prisoners, held out inside for 10 hours before they were taken by Israeli troops.

During the siege, injured prisoners were not evacuated; and all were suffering from the effects of the shelling, including fires and fumes. At least three Palestinians were killed, and 35 injured in the attack. Some 800

children in Jericho were confined to their school all day.

What distinguishes this episode from those that have preceded it, however, is the brazenness of US and British collaboration in what can only be described as illegal interference.

The Israeli attack was coordinated with Washington and London, which withdrew their monitors stationed at the facility only minutes before Israeli troops backed by tanks and armored bulldozers stormed into Jericho and attacked the prison, knocking down walls and ultimately demolishing the jail.

The US and British monitors were stationed at the Jericho

McClellan told the press that Washington was appealing to all sides "for calm and restraint," a phrase meant to demonize the Palestinians for out crying against the act of aggression by Israel, upon which the US urged no restraint whatsoever.

Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is pursuing this unilateralist policy, proposing to abandon some isolated Zionist settlements in the West Bank, while annexing territory without negotiations or international sanction.

As the Israeli daily Haaretz put it, the raid represented the embodiment of "a favorite expression" of former prime

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prison to oversee the Palestinian Authority's custody of the six prisoners. Their deployment was worked out as part of a US and British-brokered deal for lifting the month-long siege of Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah in 2002, under "Ramallah Agreement". Arafat refused to turn them over to Israel, fearing Saadat may be assassinated by Israel, but agreed that his administration would prosecute and jail the six.

So what was Britain's defense of its inflammatory action? According to foreign minister Jack Straw, Britain had no choice but to pull the monitors out of Jericho because of growing concerns for their safety.

The official reaction in Washington to the siege of the Jericho prison was an obscene exercise and double talk. White House spokesman Scot

minister Ariel Sharon's advisers: "To return territory and kill Arabs."

During a tour of police headquarters in Jerusalem staged for the media, Olmert declared, "We are proud that we have imposed justice on these killers." He affirmed that the Palestinians who were abducted by the Israeli military "will be indicted according to Israeli law and they will be punished as they deserve."

The fact that some of these same men have already been indicted, tried and convicted under Palestinian law for the same crime -- making a second Israeli prosecution illegal under international statutes -- is obviously of no concern to a government that considers itself immune from far more basic considerations of international law.

The Israeli regime acts with

complete impunity because of the unconditional support it receives from Washington. Olmert himself made this clear, rejoicing that the assault on Jericho enjoyed backing from both the US and Britain. "I refer you to the statement made by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and the State Department that all responsibility for the decision made by the US and the British governments to pull the inspectors from the jail, and thus to make the Israeli operation inevitable, lies on the shoulders of the Palestinian Authority," he told the Israeli press.

Meanwhile, sources at the United Nations indicated that a resolution put forward by Qatar, the sole Arab state sitting on the United Nations Security Council, condemning the raid and demanding that the prisoners be returned to the Palestinian Authority would be either buried by the Council or vetoed by Washington.

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Billy I Ahmed is a researcher.

Save Mongla Port

COMMODORE MK ALAM

ANY port is known by its volume of cargo generated through exports and imports of the country. The Mongla Port Authority (MPA) was no where near Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) and handled maximum 15 percent of total cargo of the country (33 lakhs tons and 25,000 containers) during its heydays. It was not a jetty port like CPA but an anchorage port requiring additional facilities and manpower for handling of cargo.

With the partition of the sub-continent in the year 1947, Chittagong being the only port with limited facilities and inadequately equipped for handling large number of ships, faced a sudden on-rush of imports and exports of all types of commodities required for East Pakistan. Moreover because of its location at the south eastern part of the country, the import and exports from the rest of the area had to be transported through different tedious, expensive and time consuming modes of transport causing excessive delay and rising transportation cost.

The Korean war caused unprecedented rise in the export demand for jute and jute goods and the increased volume had put enormous strain causing congestion at Chittagong.

Admiral R.W. Jefford, the first C-in-C of the Pakistan Navy, realising the importance of a second port surveyed the approaches to the Pussur River and found a site suitable and the port of Chalna started functioning with a British merchant ship "City of Lyons" first entering the port and anchoring at Joymonirgol on 11 Dec 1950. In 1951, the anchorage was shifted near Chalna Bazar, 22 km upstream. Further investigations of the Pussur-Sibsra river system were undertaken by Sir Claude Englis and in 1954, the anchorage site was shifted to Mongla, about 16 km downstream from Chalna Bazar. Thereafter a series of studies were undertaken and the present site was selected for constructing permanent port facilities and finally five jetties were constructed with necessary back up facilities including handling of containers in 1978. Finally the port found its present name MPA on 8 March 1987.

Mongla Port is situated at a distance of 65 nm from the Fairway Buoy in the Bay of Bengal. The banks of the river are stable and have continuous belt of Sunderban forest with small creeks. Maximum permissible draught of vessels is 8.5m and maximum length of vessel allowed is 225m since 2003 (previously it was 186m). The port is well connected with the hinterland by road and river. There are 5 jetties and 21 moorings and it never experienced what is called congestion. Pussur River maintained adequate navigability till commissioning of Farnakka barrage by India. Since then there was rapid siltation in the Pussur Channel, in front of jetties and anchorage area. The reduction of upstream flow resulted in a decrease in river cross sectional area. The devastating flood of 1988 also added to the siltation process. MPA had to carry out dredging almost every year spending huge amount of money as it was not lucky to own a dredger like CPA to carry out planned, timely and cost effective dredging. Moreover it did not have any fresh water source and water had to be carried initially from Khulna and later on from

Failahat, about 21 km. north of Mongla.

MPA lost out to Chittagong as the whole region west of Brahmaputra/Jamuna/Padma having no new industries and old industries being closed down, could not feed the port with export and import cargo. Consequently it did not stand a chance to carry its projected share of 40 percent cargo of the country as per the study of Mott McDonald. Initially with the introduction of Dock Labour Management Board, the 29 labour unions became very aggressive in calling frequent hartals and forcing the authorities to give in to their illegal demands. There were hardly any ships, which could unload its cargo and sail in time without disturbance from the unions/importers/some stevedores in some pretext or the other and without meeting their undue demands.

The MPA itself faced lot of corruption cases giving free hand to the port users, one or two odd pilots and union leaders to dictate terms. It could not introduce the Merchant Labour System till 2004 as existed in CPA to handle the cargo like packages/boxes/cars/refrigerators/TVs etc at a cheaper rate instead even for unloading one TV or Refrigerator, importers had to employ one full gang of labour costing Tk. 3500-4500 which

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obviously scared away the importers. Then the govt built two bridges at Meghna and Daudkandi, reducing Dhaka-Chittagong distance to about 4 and 1/2 hours leaving the Dhaka Mongla distance to 6-7 hours and thus discouraging Dhaka (this area actually produces more than 50% cargo for CPA) exporters to use MPA.

Politicians of that area failed to appreciate the impact of these two bridges and could not convince the govt to build bridges at Paksey and Rupsha at the same time and as result, cargo of North Bengal region also found its way to CPA. The strong strike culture in the region and activities of the Sharbahara literally drove away all the industrial entrepreneurs and hardly any new industries were set up in the whole region west of Brahmaputra/Jamuna/Padma. Jute export also started decreasing as most of the industries in Khulna which were the prime supplier of cargo to the port also closed down. From every food grain ship whether imported by the govt or donated by the donors, hundreds of tons went missing because of unholy nexus among the barge owners/operators, food officials and the labourers. The World Food Programme blacklisted MPA and stopped sending foodgrain ships there and by then the govt also reduced importing of food grain from abroad.

The Mongla Custom House remained in Khulna causing unnecessary delay to the unloading of cargo and importers felt harassed. Unlike Chittagong,

Mongla was in a Upazila Headquarters and did not get the support of the civil administration when needed. The so called piracy took a dangerous turn in the absence of Port Police Station with senior officer like that at CPA. To add salt to the injury, unscrupulous importers got arrested over 90 ships mostly on flimsy ground and illegally compelled ship owners to pay crores of taka for release from such arrest. Not only that ships were also used as godowns for six months to a year causing worldwide alarm. A good number of shipping agents/stevedores got their cargo unloaded without paying labour charges amounting to about Tk.8 crores. Containerization did not increase because of no export cargo during return journey.

The port needed about 1500 labours and it ended up with 5000 labours causing both working and social problems. Mongla probably is the only port where no facility for supplying duty free oil to the incoming vessels was developed. No river training scheme like Chittagong port was taken inspite of the strong recommendations by so many experts and studies.

Mongla lost another earning source after investing crores of taka, when the govt separated Benapole land port by creating a

the customs, port and other agencies, thus reduce illegal arms smuggling and increase govt's/port's revenue earning or they can go to Mongla for unloading. Secondly the outer bar of Mongla port (about 5-6 km) must be dredged so that the 9+m draft ships like those in case of CPA could come to the port. Thirdly the present road link between Mongla-Mawa should be extended by another 19km to Nouduba on the western side of the Padma which will reduce the ferry timing to half an hour only from the present 1and 1/2 hours and given dedicated RO RO ferry while reduction of duty for garments will allow exporters of Dhaka area to channel some of their export through MPA.

Fourthly allottees of MPA industrial plots must set up industries and plots of those found noncompliant, should be cancelled and Mongla EPZ should be given more than double incentive as there is no gas and fresh water like Dhaka, Comilla and Chittagong EPZ. Fifthly, the port management must create salubrious atmosphere by reducing corruption, labour categories from 13 to three, restart 8-hour shift instead of 12-hour and full scale operation of merchant labour system. In the medium term, Asian Energy Corporation must be allowed to proceed with their planned export of coal through MPA by dredging the channel to about 11 m. If the govt wants to increase economic activity in those areas and bring down Sharbahara activities then this deal will be the first step towards creating business friendly infrastructure in that part of Bangladesh.

In the long term govt should develop train link upto Mongla through the proposed Padma Bridge as this will allow our business community to use Mongla port as the distance from Dhaka will only be 165km. Without developing road and railway infrastructure between Dhaka and Chittagong, no money should be spent for proposed deep sea port (deep sea port requires at least 15-20 m water which our eastern coast does not have naturally) as this will be counterproductive, rather this money may be spent to improve the existing facilities of MPA. Govt should also consider special tax holiday packages for setting up new industries in the western part of Bangladesh so that the region also become economically self reliant, sectorally developed, do not feel neglected and can generate import and export cargo.

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