

The USA Well Past its Unipolar Moment

She American public clearly sees no need to expend efforts and resources to achieve American hegemony. In one 1997 poll, only 13 per cent said that they preferred a preeminent role for the United States in world affairs while 74 per cent said that they wanted the United States to share power with other countries. Several other polls produced similar results. In the US, the disinterest in international affairs is pervasive, abetted by the drastically shrinking media coverage of foreign events.

multipolar system" before it would enter into a truly multipolar 21st century. The United States, as Zbigniew Brezinski has said, would be the first, last and only global superpower. The world now rushing towards multipolarity will hardly witness another unipolar moment.

Yet, in acting as if there were a unipolar world the American officials boast of American power and virtue hailing the US as a benevolent hegemony. They impress upon other countries on the universal validity of American principles, practices and institution. At the 1997 G-7 Summit at Denver President Clinton boasted about the success of American economy as model for others. The Secretary of States Ms Madeline Albright called the United States, "the indispensable nation" as if others are dispensable. The American leaders constantly claim to be speaking on behalf of "international community" without however specifying which nation/nations they speak for and whether any nation really sees them as its spokesmen. So indisputable is indeed the "leader of the free world".

The United States, the world's sole superpower is, of course, the only state with pre-eminence

in every component of power economic, military, diplomatic, ideological, technological and cultural with a truly global reach. It has the capability to promote its interest in virtually every part of the world. Ironically still, the world does not run the way it desires. The enormous

with all her powers? Economic sanction? Military intervention? Just how circumscribed can these instruments of coercion be is evident from the limitation she suffers from in applying them. Sanctions work only when other countries also support them, and that is decreasingly the

at home and abroad.

A nation at the apex creates more enemies than friends. The circle of governments who see their interests coinciding with American interests is in fact shrinking. This is manifest, among other ways, in the central line-up among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. During the first decade of cold war it was 4:1 the US, the UK, France and China against the Soviet Union. After the mainland communist government took China's seat, the line-up became 3:1:1 with China in a shifting middle place. Now it is 2:1:2, with the United States and the United Kingdom opposing China and Russia, and France in the middle position.

Also on various international issues the United States finds itself increasingly isolated with one or a few partners, opposing most of the rest of the world's population and countries. On the issues like the UN dues; sanctions against Cuba, Iran, Iraq and Libya; the land mines treaty; global warming; an international war crimes tribunal; the Middle East, the use of force against Iraq; and the targeting of 35 countries with new economic sanction between 1993 and 1996 much of the international

community is on one side and the United States is on the other. It is, however, another thing that the US might have been able to mobilise support on some of these issues with her overwhelming influence on the world community. In a bipolar world, many countries welcomed the United States as their protector against other superpower. But in a uni-multipolar world, in contrast, the world's only superpower is automatically a threat atleast to other major powers.

Apart from these image problems neither the US administration nor Congress nor the public is willing to pay the costs and accept the risks of unilateral global leadership. She American public clearly sees no need to expend efforts and resources to achieve American hegemony. In one 1997 poll, only 13 per cent said that they preferred a preeminent role for the United States in world affairs while 74 per cent said that they wanted the United States to share power with other countries. Several other polls produced similar results. In the US, the disinterest in international affairs is pervasive, abetted by the drastically shrinking media coverage of foreign events. So much so that 55 to 66 per cent of the public say that what happens in Western Europe, Asia, Mexico and Canada has little or no impact on their lives. However much the foreign policy elites may ignore it, the United States has no domestic political base to create a unipolar world, neither are the historical forces in its favour

Growing Links with Neighbours may Help Settle Problems within South Asia

Hopefully, silver lining will emerge in the otherwise dark cloud in the SAARC horizon in not too distant a future. Leaders of neighbouring regions visiting this region or those from here going on tour of nearby regions are expected to discuss at highest level the political milieu of South Asia.

dently, these countries appear eager to improve the state of bilateral ties and in the process are willing to play a role conforming with their concerns and anxieties for a better political climate in the region or transcending barriers to other nearby regions.

Sino-Indian ties turned sour after the 1962 border clash from a 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai' phase to hostilities. The process of normalisation keeping the main bone of contention the border dispute in the backburner made progress but suffered certain setbacks in recent times due to India's detonation of the nuclear bombs in the first half of 1998 as Beijing looked askance at New Delhi's ambitious nuclear programme. China belongs to the elite group of "Five-Member" atomic club that also includes US, Russia, Britain and France. India and Pakistan are the unofficial nuclear powers by dint of their explosions in 1998 while New Delhi first experimented the explosion way back in 1974. Sino-Indian ties also suffered setback due to certain remarks by Indian defence minister George Fernandes about two years ago when he categorised China as "number one" enemy of India citing some defence strategy of China. However, this was obviated after Beijing took exceptions to the remarks and opposition parties in India had called for restraining the defence minister known for his anti-China stance. Li Peng, the former prime minister, is now the chairman of Chinese

National People's Congress and his discussions with the Indian leaders will cover such issues like irritants in the bilateral ties and their likely settlements and, of course, the regional situation in South Asia. Beijing, a close friend of India's arch rival Pakistan, is urging both New Delhi and Islamabad to resolve their problems through discussions. It is possible that the need for introducing elements of seriousness towards resolution of the Indo-Pak problems through discussions will once again be highlighted by the Chinese



leader during his talks with the Indian leaders. Needless to say, China can play some role in encouraging both the countries to show positive attitude in improving the current sorry state of bilateral relations while there is no denying that New Delhi-Islamabad disputes are too intractable for easy solutions. Prime minister Vajpayee's talks in Jakarta also presumably included the South Asian scene in the broader context of Asian political environment.

The thaw witnessed in recent months in the Korean peninsula in the form of lessening of the five-decade long hostilities

between the two rival Koreas may have a sobering effect in the South Asian scenario since the present approach in the peninsula unmistakably shows that no problems are beyond resolution however deep they are as the process of rapprochement by the South and the North Koreas is producing tangible results despite being slow which once again is only expected given the complexities of the problems. Some countries of the South-east Asia are facing some internal political instability like the spectre of uneasiness haunting

Indonesia over the durability of the present government which took over through a largely democratic process replacing a phase dominated by Gen. Suharto and then an interim period by his men. The country is also experiencing separatist unrest in some areas. Fortunately, president Abdul Rahman Wahid and vice-president Meghwati are firm in the saddle. Another regional nation Thailand has just come a cross the fears of instability as a newly formed party won the elections and is set to form a new stable government. The ASEAN forum comprising the South-east Asian nations have proved beneficial whereas the SAARC

made up by the seven countries of populous South Asian area has not demonstrated such efficacy although people of the region pin great hopes on the economic forum. Given the political divide and resource constraints this region is also not much expected to fare remarkably in such a forum. This handicap notwithstanding, the SAARC has made considerable gains when viewed from the inherent political and economic problems that it has to face. With a permanent secretariat in Nepal and extension of integrated programme of action in several mutually cooperative economic, social, cultural and other fields, the forum in its 15 years of existence has at least not proved irrelevant even though the progress may not be satisfactory. Unfortunately, the forum is currently mired in a kind of stand-off over the holding of next summit of its leaders which is sending wrong signals for further flourishing of the organisation.

Of late, there are signs that the stalemate may break but none really knows how soon and in what form. Once the leaders particularly two hostile neighbours India and Pakistan make progress in their bilateral ties, decks may be cleared for staging the summit. Hopefully, silver lining will emerge in the otherwise dark cloud in the SAARC horizon in not too distant a future. Leaders of neighbouring regions visiting this region or those from here going on tour of

THAILAND seemed set to start the new year in a political vacuum. Despite a constitution designed to promote clean politics and greater political, election season in the past was a dangerous, dark time in Thailand. Electoral power in Thailand has long emanated from the barrels of guns and the wallets of well-healed businessmen, rather than from genuine debate over issues and the national interest. Provincial businessmen and godfathers tended to buy their way into parliament where they would recoup their investments

through graft. While the politicians used to loot government programmes and private banks, the gulf between the rich and the poor became the widest in Asia.

Many Thais hoped that this year's parliamentary elections, held on January 6, could be different, thanks in part to the candidacy of Thaksin Shinawatra, the billionaire telecom tycoon who proclaimed himself the prophet of clean politics. Thaksin is labelled by the local media as Thailand's richest man. On December 26 last year, the National Counter-Corruption Commission, or

NCCC, voted 8-1 to indict Thaksin, leader of the Rak Thai Party, on charges that he concealed shares worth 4.5 billion baht (\$104) in 17 of his 67 companies. The decision raised political temperatures and turned the election into a test of stability, raising old fears of military intervention. At issue was Thaksin's alleged failure to give a full accounting of assets when he was deputy prime minister in late 1997. Thaksin said he would wait for the Constitutional Court like the NCCC,

an independent body set up under the 1997 constitution to decide on his case. The court of 15 judges automatically reviews NCCC decision, and if it upholds the one against Thaksin he will be barred from politics for five years. A senior court official said the case is expected to last three to four months.

The commission was also investigating several minister in Chuan's government. Even the Prime Minister was probed for possibly concealing parts of his stock portfolios.

Thaksin said he could slice through the morass of corruption and had pledged, if elected, to bring honesty and transparency to the government. In a nation wounded economically, he had also vowed to use his business savvy to restore property. Voters had liked the message. And polls indicated that Thaksin and his party were racing towards a landslide win in the upcoming elections that would deal a crushing defeat for Prime Minister Chuan and his Democrat-led government. Although Chuan and company have lifted Thailand from the low point of its economic crisis, many Thais still face tough times and regarded the Democrats as arrogant and insensitive to the poor. Chuan also lost support for failing to punish members of his own government.

Early hopes that tougher election laws would curb traditional vote-buying, especially in rural areas, had led to some optimism that a cleaner election would empower a new generation of professional, result-oriented politicians. But all indications since pointed even more to illegal hand-outs to voters, as candidates were now having to use subtler means.

One Election commission's

provincial commissioner said, "People have knowledge about the new election system. Now we have to change their attitude."

Despite efforts to clean up the system, the election was plagued with the sort of bullets and baht political that have long been synonymous with Thai elections. Last year, 43 politicians, canvassers and bureaucrats were shot dead nationwide.

In some areas, to be sure, reform was making a difference. In a border area, border police acting on a tip-off last month pulled over a campaign convoy belonging to former Prime Minister Chavalit's New Aspiration Party. In the glove compartment of a pick-up truck they found 100,000 baht (about \$2,300) stuffed inside envelopes on each of which was written the name of a local candidate. Such scandals had not hit more than just old guard parties like Chavalit's. A Democrat had been red-carded, while an Australian Broadcasting TV crew caught Thaksin's party handing out cash. "You can change the laws but changing the political culture will take a lot longer," Said former Prime Minister Anand.

Still there was some hope that Thailand was becoming more and more of a legitimate parliamentary democracy. Politicians who used to buy elections and abuse power to plunder the nation now faced a harsh legal reckoning. "When it comes to corruption there is finally real hope," said a noted Thai economist, "the battle has been joined." It was a battle that was far from over, but the reformers were shaking things up.

Against the above-noted background, Thaksin's Rak Thai party scored a convincing win against the ruling Democrats in Thailand's national elections, according to exit polls released late last week. A combined poll

taken by the *Nation* newspaper and the TV network showed Rak Thai party had won 230 seats up for grabs while the Democrats managed just 107.

Thaksin welcomed the polls and said he was confident of building a close-knit coalition that would command 320 seats in the 500-seat house of Representatives.

His stunning victory came despite graft allegations that dogged his election campaign and which could see him kicked out of office within months if the allegations were proved.

The spectre of corruption had hung heavily over the Thai national elections campaign, the first to be held under Thailand's reformist 1997 constitution which aimed at cleaning up the political scene.

But there is still fear that should Constitution Court's ruling go against Thaksin, would he accept it, particularly when he is prime minister and points to his acceptance by a majority of Thais? Soon the normal courts might challenge the power of independent bodies set up under the constitution. This raises the prospect of Thaksin questioning the scrutinizing powers created under the constitution, potentially triggering a larger crisis.

Some political analysts are concerned that given Thaksin's antagonism towards the Constitutional Court, he might move to amend the constitution to curb or even eliminate such body once he takes power.

With political stalemate and Irgal confusion looming particularly as a result of Thaksin's defiance, a growing number of political observers tend to worry there may eventually be military coup.

To the Editor ...

The Meghna tragedy

Sir, We the citizens of the country are deeply shocked at the tragic loss of life on the *ML Rajhonsi* which sank in the river Meghna after colliding with another launch. There have been a series of major mishaps in recent times, claiming hundreds of lives, due to faulty vessels or unqualified personnel at the helm. After each accident the authorities set up different kinds of probe committees investigate the matter, but they have hardly ever taken stern action against the offenders. The result is that the offenders remain outside the grip of the law. My question to the concerned authorities now is to ask them how long we must wait before they do something concrete.

Eahtashamul Karim Anu
M.C. College, Sylhet

Disturbance at ZIA

Sir, The news item (*The Daily Star*, 25 December, 2000) under the above headline is most disturbing. As an octogenarian I have witnessed the worst days of the British rule; later, of Pakistani rule and, still later, of our own rule.

If the news item is correct, I must say that this must be the worst of all misrules I have witnessed. It is beyond the worst imagination of an ordinary citizen like me to learn how a Minister could have publicly indulged in such a blatant misuse of power.

I sincerely hope that the report is not entirely correct, for it is quite probable that the unfortunate incident could well have been caused by some overzealous DB men who, in order to please the Minister, went far beyond the law and the Minister himself had no part in the incident.

Be that as it may, the Home Minister owes an explanation to the nation to clarify his position, disowning the action of his said relative and also that of his DB men. A failure to do so could well be misunderstood by his countrymen. This would tarnish not only his own name, but also the image of the country as a whole since the incident was witnessed by many foreigners who were then at ZIA.

May I suggest that *The Daily Star* should have devoted a much more prominent space in your paper than you have done for an incident of such

national importance.
An Octogenarian Citizen,
Dhaka

Bias towards Israel

Sir, Nobody knows how and when the oppression and suppression of the Palestinian Arabs by the Israelis will come to an end and peace will be established in the Middle East. The superpower USA and the three big powers Russia, UK and France abstained from a draft resolution which would have implemented a key Palestinian demand for the posting of UN observers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Bangladesh, along with China, Malaysia, Ukraine, Mali and Tunisia, courageously and independently voted in favour of the resolution.

We are shocked at the pro-Israeli policy of the USA, Russia, UK and France. We wonder why these countries do not initiate imposition of UN sanctions on Israel for its aggression on Palestine as they did in the case of Iraq for its invasion of Kuwait.

O. H. Kabir
Wari, Dhaka-1203