

JAPAN

The "Axis of Evil" during Bush's East Asia visit

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THIS was the first Asia visit of the US President George W. Bush after the historic September 11 events that have brought about a new global situation. The significance of the visit doesn't end only there. It was also for the first time that the US president set foot on Asian soil after waging a war against an almost unarmed and backward Asian country, and also after threatening further military action against three more Asian states that he thinks are harboring terrorism. Taking into consideration all such recent developments in international politics, the visit was supposed to be quite significant in nature.

The US president's first stopover was in Tokyo, considered to be one of the most trusted and reliable partners of Washington not only within the Asian continent, but also all over the world. But the visit came at a time when Japan's economic crisis is deepening and country's leadership is coming under increasing attack for failing to mend the economy in time. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's popularity graph marked a sharp declining trend after he sacked the former Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka over a controversy surrounding the role of the foreign office on NGO participation at the Afghan reconstruction conference held in Tokyo in late January. As a result, during the first leg of his three-nation tour, the US president seemed to have taken up the additional responsibility of expressing his whole-hearted support for the beleaguered Japanese leader who has obviously done a lot to in support of the US military campaign in Afghanistan.

President Bush not only offered endorsement to Japanese prime minister's outlook and program to get the country out of recession, but also was full of praise for a leader whose fortune within the country now might have taken a descending course. Addressing a joint session of the Japanese parliament last Tuesday, Mr. Bush portrayed Japanese prime minister as someone who "reminds me of a new American star Ichiro! The Prime Minister can hit anything you throw at him!" Bush's reference to the Seattle Mariners' Japanese baseball star Ichiro Suzuki might have brought applause from his audience at the Diet, but how much in reality this would prove helpful for Koizumi to hit back hard all criticisms that he is facing these days remains doubtful. The truth is that Koizumi is looking far weaker these days than only a month ago.

During his Japan visit President Bush toned down some of the stern



rhetoric concerning Japanese economy that US officials had earlier used. He suggested politely that the US economic revival in the 1980s might be a lesson for Japan, but didn't advocate any specific policy for country's economic revival. His idea of "axis of evil" also didn't get much priority in bilateral talks in Tokyo. This is probably because the United States might have been aware of the fact that the question of North Korean threat as a part of that axis might turn out to be something that would affect Japan directly due to country's geographic proximity. If the United States called for an armed campaign against North Korea, Japan would indeed find itself facing contingencies in its surrounding areas. At the bilateral summit in Tokyo Bush did not push Japan into a corner with any difficult demands, mainly because the United

States hoped for the stability of the Koizumi cabinet as it considers the recovery of Japanese economy also important for US security. Moreover, the wasting away of Japan's economic muscle, the very foundation of Japan's strength in international politics, would also mean an erosion in US confidence in Japan as an ally.

From Japanese position, on the other hand, there was also no such loud protest concerning the idea of "axis of evil", as it was seen later in South Korea or in China. A sense of uneasiness on part of Tokyo was obvious, as Japan is keen to resume dialogue with North Korea despite a series of provocative acts on part of Pyongyang in recent years. But this didn't spill over to take the shape of open disagreement. In short, as the state of Japanese economy was the issue that both side considered utmost important for their own future interest, bilateral discussions were predominantly centered on that particular topic, leaving other issues as matters of secondary interest.

But on the second leg of President Bush's East Asia tour his "axis of evil" remark took the center stage and surpassed most other topics, both in terms of media coverage and as well as public debate. In the summit talk between President Kim Dae-Jung and his US counterpart, both leaders agreed on strengthening the security alliance between South Korea and the United States. The two leaders also reaffirmed that they were ready to engage in unconditional talks with the communist state anywhere at any time. In addition President Bush also expressed US backing for President Kim's sunshine policy of engaging North Korea saying it was vital for establishing lasting peace and stability in that part of the world.

Later in a joint news conference Bush said that neither the US nor South Korea were going to invade the North. Commenting on his "axis of evil" remark, US president said he was only referring to the non-transparent, isolated government that allowed its country to starve. President Kim on his part reaffirmed media representatives that through his dialogue with President Bush, press reports indicating that there existed differences between the two leaders had been completely cleared up and according to his view there was no fundamental difference between the US policy and that of the South Korea.

It seems US President's South Korea trip proved to be crucial in diluting some of his earlier strong convictions concerning "axis of evil." South Korean leadership's firm commitment on its open door towards the north and mas-

sive anti-US rallies and demonstration throughout the country during the visit of the US president probably played crucial role in convincing the US side of the importance of fruitful engagement through dialogues and exchanges. Such upbeat mood of the host was also evident during the last leg of the three-nation tour of the US president.

In Bush's meeting with Chinese President Jiang Zemin in Beijing, the two leaders agreed to strengthen strategic dialogue and to work together to build up further a constructive relationship of cooperation. Bush and Jiang also confirmed that they would step up cooperation against terrorism. US president's Beijing visit was timed to mark the 30th anniversary of the President Nixon's China visit, which led to the normalization of diplomatic ties between the two countries. It was a calculated act to show the world that the bilateral relationship between the two important players in global politics is just fine. But looking at the meeting in detail some disagreements can obviously be seen.

While China approved the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan, it did not subscribe to the US view of the "axis of evil." China opposes the possibility of the expansion of US military involvement in its campaign against terrorism and cooperation on an antiterrorism campaign between the two nations would most likely crumble if Washington puts priority on unilateral action.

President Bush might not have gone to North Korea during his recent East Asia trip, but North Korea was all along present in his discussions with the leaders of all three countries he visited. And if a single country gained most out of this visit, it is most likely South Korea that can claim any such gain. Japan received praise for country's prime minister despite his inability to move ahead on way to reform, and China a commitment of more active partnership. But nothing matches South Korea's success in converting a tense situation into an atmosphere of relative tranquility where direct talks between various parties in the future could prove vital in stabilizing the situation further.

AFGHANISTAN

Old rivals, old tunes

Murders and a bit of mayhem were anticipated during the peace-building process. But nobody expected a lack of international unity to destabilize the interim government in Kabul so quickly

AHMED RASHID In Lahore

IN THE FIRST weeks of February, Abdul Rahman, 49, the jovial Afghan minister for tourism and civil aviation, had been joking with reporters about how quickly he intended to turn Kabul back into a tourist destination-just as it had been for hippies in the 1960s. Instead, on the evening of February 14 on the tarmac of Kabul airport, Rahman became the first high-level victim of Afghanistan's lethal internecine conflict since the interim government was installed in power in December.

Rahman was stabbed to death by intelligence officials of the Jamiat-e-Islami faction of the Northern Alliance-who also happened to be officials of the interim government. Rahman had been a leading member of Jamiat before 1996, when he left after differences with its former leader, Ahmad Shah Masud.

Some of the killers were camouflaged within a group of 800 Afghan pilgrims travelling to Mecca for the haj, who were castigating Rahman on the tarmac for long delays in their flights.

The interim government, headed by Hamid Karzai, was immediately plunged into crisis. Many Afghans feared the start of multiple conspiracies and assassinations, and that Rahman's murder could split the cabinet. "This is Karzai's biggest test so far," says a Western diplomat in Kabul. "It is the general climate of impunity that is fuelling this violence. People still believe they can get away with anything."

The government-a shaky coalition of rival factions just barely united by their opposition to the Taliban-was a gamble that depended on international support to take shape and now depends on that support to succeed. By failing to give adequate support, Karzai and other Afghans believe, the international community has played its part in the erosion of the government's authority.

Since December, the international community has refused to deploy more international peacekeepers and failed to provide desperately needed cash from the \$4.5 billion reconstruction fund pledged in Tokyo in January-a

bureaucratic failure in what is essentially an emergency situation.

Karzai has been campaigning for support, saying he has no means of pressure yet-be it a national army that answers to him, or the cash to get the country running-to keep rivals in line.

Rahman was an ardent supporter of former King Zahir Shah and was preparing the ground for the king's return to Kabul from exile in Rome in March. "The murder was clearly intended to warn off Zahir Shah and even other expatriate Afghans from returning home," says a senior Afghan official in Kabul. An aide to the former king, Zalmai Rassoul, has been appointed to replace Rahman.

A number of people have been arrested in Kabul but the three principal suspects, all belonging to the Jamiat faction, fled to Saudi Arabia. Karzai has demanded their extradition.

Karzai admitted to reporters on February 15 that Rahman "was killed by people who planned it and . . . some of those people were working for the Afghan security forces." He tried to downplay the murder saying it was a conspiracy carried out "for personal reasons." But the sense of fear and mistrust was palpable. In two raucous cabinet meetings, ministers loyal to Zahir Shah demanded that their Jamiat bodyguards be replaced by international peacekeepers.

The Jamiat, the most powerful faction in the interim government, controlling the ministries of defence, foreign affairs and internal security, was quick to denounce the murder and order the arrests of its own security officials. The three absconding perpetrators were all Panjshiri Tajiks, the key Tajik clan that dominates the Jamiat under the command of Panjshiri Defence Minister Gen. Mohammed Fahim.

Sources in Kabul told the REVIEW that on February 16, Fahim offered his resignation to Karzai, who refused to accept it. Karzai has appointed two cabinet ministers to investigate the murder-one of them allied with Zahir Shah-though some cabinet ministers fear that if the investigation implicates Fahim, the crisis between the

Northern Alliance ministers and others, such as Karzai and the monarchist supporters of Zahir Shah, could worsen.

Karzai's high-wire act on the international stage-where he has received accolades from everyone from United States and European leaders to American fashion designers-has faltered at home. This is not due to lack of trying, but because of a lack of international support where it is needed. In recent weeks Karzai has toured world capitals trying to galvanize support for extending the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, to Afghanistan's four other major cities: Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad. His appeals have so far fallen on deaf ears.

Afghans argue that if the ISAF were more plentiful and assertive, the assassins may not have been emboldened enough to kill Rahman. The British-led ISAF, which has now deployed some 3,200 troops from 15 different countries in Kabul, has stabilized the capital, allowing embassies and aid agencies to open. But outside Kabul warlordism and banditry is widespread and aid agencies are unable to deliver relief to wide swathes of the country. In northern Afghanistan, over the weekend following Rahman's murder, factional fighting between followers of Deputy Defence Minister Gen. Rashid Dostum and a faction loyal to Defence Minister Fahim and the Jamiat-e-Islami left five people dead.

Karzai's argument is that a troop presence in other cities would allow for the distribution of aid, allow people to begin growing crops again, and allow for the same mixture of incentives and pressure to disarm that moved most Northern Alliance soldiers out of Kabul and stabilized the capital in January. While it would increase the spoils for warlords, it would also raise public pressure for them to get in line.

"The alternative," says an Afghan aide to Karzai, "is the unravelling of the interim government in Kabul." The current goal is to make sure members of the interim government are committed

to beginning the process of reconstruction and holding the country together at least until June, when the current government's mandate ends and a loya jirga, or supreme council, meets to assemble a new transitional government.

Nobody ever doubted that bringing peace to Afghanistan would be a long shot, or that murders and a bit of mayhem would continue to be part of the peace-

building process. The Bonn agreement that established the interim government in December was clearly only going to succeed if there was an effective partnership between the international community and the government. "We cannot clap with one hand," says a senior aide to Karzai.

The real fear in the region is that the Americans have already begun to drift away from Afghanistan. If

that drift becomes a stampede the Afghans will once again be left alone to deal with putting their country back together again-something that they cannot achieve alone.

This piece first appeared in last week's Far Eastern Economic Review.