

Significance of Ashoura

SYED ASHRAF ALI

THE tenth of Muharram, occupies a unique and significant place in the annals of history. On this auspicious day 1364 lunar years ago (1345 sola years according to the Gregorian calendar) that Hazrat Imam Hussain (RA), the illustrious grandson of the holy Prophet (pbuh), shuffled off the mortal coil and reached the shore from which no traveller returns. But Ashoura on the tenth day of the first month in the Islamic calendar occupies an important place in history not only because the grandson of the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) embraced martyrdom on the plains of Karbala but also because many other glorious incidents took place on this auspicious day.

It is claimed that it was on an Ashoura that the Prophet Noah (peace be upon him) and his companions alighted from the Ark after the Great Deluge. It was also on this sacred day that the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and his followers crossed the Nile on foot whereas the Pharaoh and his army all perished under the raging waves of the same. Some also claim that out of a total number of one lakh and twenty-four thousand Prophets at least two thousand were born on this red letter day.

The success of Hazrat Musa (peace be upon him) against the tyranny and evil designs of Pharaoh was indeed a glorious example of the ultimate triumph of truth over falsehood. Hadith testifies eloquently to the fact that the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who had every respect and confidence in all the prophets who were sent before him, himself considered Ashoura to be an auspicious day of divine excellence.

Fasting on Ashoura is indeed beneficial for the mankind. According to the Mishkat, the fasting in the month of Muharram comes next only to the Sawm in the month of Ramadhan in order of beneficence. Ibn Abbas (RA) reported that the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) himself ordained: "You should

fast on the 9th and 10th day of Muharram to differentiate between the practice of the Muslims and that of the Jews.

It was on this auspicious day in the year 679 AD (61 AH) that Hazrat Imam Hussain (RA) embraced Shahadat on the battle-field of Karbala and with him perished all the male members of his family, old and young -- with the solitary exception of a sickly child, whom Imam Hussain's sister, Zainab (RA), saved from the inhuman and cruel massacre. In the words of Allama Iqbal: "Although all deaths are sweet for the Momen, the death of Ali's son is unique, indeed, for it passed

breadth of the Islamic world. He reigns supreme in the hearts of thousands and millions of persons, both Muslims and non-Muslims. He has indeed passed into history, he has become a name!

Imam Hussain was truly the salt of the earth. He had inherited the chivalric nature and all the virtues of his great and illustrious father. He united in his person the right of descent from the Sher-e-Khuda Ali (RA) with the holy character of the grandson of the last and the greatest Prophet. Great as a devout Muslim, great as an idealist, great as a patriot, great as a valiant warrior, great as

recognise. Naturally, therefore, he fought to the last and smilingly embraced the eternal sleep through the fragrance of Shahadat, knowing it fully well that the flower that withers through martyrdom has the sweetest smell in the eyes of Islam.

The unsurpassable and inimitable martyrdom at Karbala has indeed a deep significance in the annals of civilisation. It convinces the non-believers all over the world of the sincerity and resolution of the devout Muslims and proves their readiness to undergo any loss and any hardship rather than abjure the Faith of Muhammad, the Most Perfect Deen of Allah. A bright and glorious example of supreme sacrifice is exhibited to the believers all around who are led to regard peril and exile and martyrdom in the cause of Allah as a privilege and distinction. The Great Shahadat at Karbala indeed teaches us not to love life over much, seeing that we must one day part with it. It teaches us to face death with resignation.

Ashoura is back once again. To many of us the painful memory of the great but tragic martyrdom at Karbala overshadows the triumph of Moses and Noah (peace be upon them). And we very well appreciate the frenzy of sorrow and indignation to which the Muslims give vent on the recurrence of the anniversary of Imam Hussain's unparalleled martyrdom. But must we not forget the essence of this glorious day. Let al of us celebrate this auspicious occasion in a befitting manner, not merely through Taziyas and Dulduls, not merely through Marthias and Musadduses, not through mere lamentations and Zanjira Matams, but through fasting and sacrifice, prayers and penance, charity and benevolence. In the memorable words of Nazrul:

"Phirey Elo Aaj Shei Muharram Mahina,

Tyag Chai, Marthia Krandon Chahina."

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The Great Martyrdom at Karbala in Hegira 61 inspired by the highest love -- love for Allah -- indeed showed superhuman courage and endurance, enabling Hussain (RA) to overcome so easily the well-nigh insuperable forces of contemporary evil and untruth. It is this dying nobly in the cause of truth and justice that confers immortality on man, the immortality which the great son of Hazrat Ali (RA) won on the banks of the Euphrates.

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The heroic episode of Imam Hussain, the apple of the holy Prophet's eye and the pride of his heart, has passed into a legend. The deeds of this "Prince of Martyrs" are sung by minstrels throughout the length and

a man of action, a dreamer of dreams, he was a man daring and adventurous, reckless of consequences and yet intensely practical, one who embodied the highest qualities that giants among men might desire.

When the stories of the great battle on the banks of the Furat reached his country, people realised how great were his human qualities, how deeply he loved his comrades, how passionately he loved truth and justice, how ready he was to sacrifice everything in the cause of Islam.

The fall of the great Hussain at Karbala was no defeat; it was on the other hand an extraordinary and epoch-making success of truth and justice and righteousness. Many a less tenaciously sincere man, many a real hero would have shrunk from an ordeal so terrific, a contest so supremely titanic, but Hussain (RA) was made of sterner stuff. Failure was a word that he did not

Humayun Azad: Time to rein in ...

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

HUMAYUN Azad lies in a coma at CMH. Rumours fly about his situation. Dhaka University has exploded with rage, and the rest of the city looks ready to boilover. The Home Minister has even said: "We are engaging all-out efforts to find out whether he was attacked for personal enmity or there were other schemes."

One can assume who is ultimately responsible for this grisly incident. Azad's assassins were actively or passively created by the virulent hatred being promoted by Jamaat, Islami Oikkyo Jote and other Islamist parties. On December 12, members of Khatme Nabuwvot addressed a gigantic demonstration of anti-Ahmadiyya fundamentalists at Baitul Mukarram Mosque. At that gathering, fiery speakers demanded the arrest and trial of Professor Azad for his novel "Pak Sar Zamin Sad Bad". A month later, on January 25, Jamaat MP Delwar Hossain Sayeedi demanded introduction of a Blasphemy Act in parliament to block the publication of such books.

A glance at Humayun Azad's recent book "Amra Ki Ey Bangladesh Cheyechilam? (Is This The Bangladesh We Wanted?)" reveals clear clues about the author's enemies.

Discussing the insertion of Islam as State Religion into our constitution, Azad wrote:

"[Constitution says] 'Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all state actions.' This is a clever trick to deceive the common, God-fearing man. In this country, Muslims have always followed their faith, and always will-- no one is stopping them. But using religion as a tool is trickery, a ploy to give the people nothing. They will promise the people heaven, but will not give them economic self-sufficiency ... all our government functions have become competitions of religious sermons. If using religion [in government] was useful, Bangladesh should have become the world's most holy and developed nation. Instead, it has become the world's most corrupt nation. The corruption of reli-

gious politicians has destroyed the country."

Turning his attention to the Jamaat and its allies, Humayun blasted those who opposed Bangladesh's liberation and feel nostalgia for "united Pakistan":

"Our fathers committed a deadly mistake, a crime-- they made Bengal Pakistan. We did not want to stay sons of slaves, so we created Bangladesh. Now, let us imagine Bangladesh never became independent, we were still East Pakistan. What would we see around us? We would see the flag with moon and stars, we would hear 'Pak Sar Zamin Sad Bad', the Ministers would all be Punjabis, the army would be filled

Mahfouz had been a target of the religious fanatics since the 1959 publication of his novel 'Awlad haratina (Children of Gebelawi)', in which key characters were modeled after historical religious figures. The attacker confessed before he was hanged that he had never read the book, but had been inspired by a sheikh's fatwa.

Similar to today's Bangladesh, Egypt saw a rapid growth of religious parties, and an associated growth in violence in the 1990s. In 1992, the Gama'a al-Islamiyya launched violent attacks on the minority Coptic Christians. These attacks were linked with a campaign for Islamic rule in Egypt, resulting in pitched street battles

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The attack on Azad represents a continuum of a growing menace that has expressed itself through attacks on Shamsur Rahman, Udichi, Ramna Botomool, Ahmadiyyas, Hindus and now the push for a Blasphemy Law. Where will it strike next?...It is time to rein in those who play politics in the name of religion.

with Pathan and Punjabi Generals. Those who roar around in Pajeros today -- would be standing on the roadside shaking in front of those same jeeps. The Adamjis, Dauds, Bawanis, and Kabuliwalas would run this country..."

From the late 1970s, the BNP has actively rehabilitated the Jamaat and other Islamic parties. The attack on Azad represents a continuum of a growing menace that has expressed itself through attacks on Shamsur Rahman, Udichi, Ramna Botomool, Ahmadiyyas, Hindus and now the push for a Blasphemy Law. Where will it strike next?

Azad is not the first author to fall foul of religious extremists. In 1994, in a startlingly similar attack, a man plunged a knife into the neck of Egyptian Nobel winner Naguib Mahfouz. The assailant was quickly identified as a sympathizer of the militant Islamic group al-Gama'a al-Islam.

with the police. Al-Gama'a soon upped the ante, assassinating secular intellectual Farag Foda and taking over the working class neighbourhood of Imbaba and declaring it an "Islamic Republic." In December 1992, 14,000 Egyptian troops stormed and occupied Imbaba, putting an end to the "Republic." Driven underground, Al-Gama'a redirected its attention towards high-profile terrorist attacks, massacring hundreds of foreign and local tourists between 1993 and 1997.

The attack on Naguib Mahfouz was a watershed, turning the majority of public opinion against the extremists of al-Gama'a and Islamic Brotherhood. When the Interior Minister was assigned the task of rooting out Muslim militants, Mahfouz told him from his hospital bed, "You are leading a battle in defence of true Islam. This incident is an opportunity to ask God to make the police defeat terrorists and to plead for the country to be purified of this evil

in defence of people, liberty and Islam."

Gamal Ghitani, editor of Akhbar al-Adab, wrote, "This attack defames Islam and Arabs in a way that the worst of our enemies have not been able to inflict upon us." An Egyptian literary critic added, "When the assailant stuck the knife in the neck of our Nobel Laureate, Naguib Mahfouz, it wasn't just an attack on our country's most prominent literary personage, but an assault on Egypt itself."

Most significantly, even religious leaders joined the outcry, with Grand Mufti Sheikh Said Tantawi pronouncing, "The sharia forbids a Muslim from pointing a weapon at his fellow Muslim, not to mention using this weapon in killing."

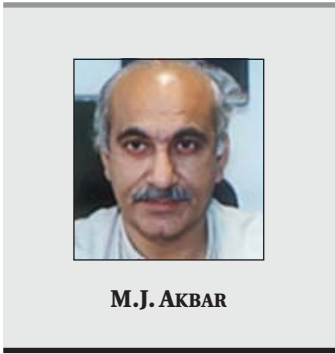
Faced with a decisive government crackdown, the militant groups slowly disintegrated. Today, an uneasy stability prevails in Egypt, but militant Islamic groups are no longer tolerated or supported by the government. Rather than silencing Naguib Mahfouz, the 1994 attack made him more determined. Suffering from nerve damage as a result of the attack, Mahfouz can no longer write. But each week he dictates his column to his friend Mohamed Salmawy. Since the incident, the government has also relaxed its unofficial ban on "Awlad haratina." The book has now been serialised in newspapers, broadcast on radio and published in its entirety. Even the authorities at al-Azhar mosque-university recommended its publication so that it could be read and debated by people.

Can we hope for a similar positive result from this tragic incident? Will the Bangladeshi people finally rise up in outrage and demand accountability from both the BNP and the AI? It is time to rein in those who play politics in the name of religion. Time to remove the ban on Ahmadiyya books, and strike down the proposed Blasphemy Act.

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Share the burden



M.J. AKBAR

WHAT is the first thing that you do at an international conference of Islamic scholars? Count the beards, of course. The ratio was fifty-fifty at Djakarta, where we had gathered at the invitation of the Nahdlatul Ulama to discourse on Islam as Rahmatan lil Alamin--or, roughly translated, as a message of peace for the world.

But the beards made one point more forcefully than the clean-shins: that Islam was spread across dozens of civilisations, colours and tongues. The most splendidly-groomed instances of hirsute fashion belonged to a pair of strikingly handsome clerics from the Balkans, their high, round, white turbans touched off by green redolence of the glories of the Ottoman Empire. The most learned I encountered was a brooding Imam from Kenya, who explained the creative way in which Jihad was being used to fight AIDS in his country. The array of faces and cultures made an obvious nonsense of the 'clash of civilisations' thesis. Islam is a single faith spread that draws upon a multiple range of civilisations, just as Christianity has a breadth that extends across the globe. Muslims live in dozens of nations with separate histories, motivations and ambitions. They are a single brotherhood when they bow towards the Kaaba, but they become different at the doors of the mosque in Mecca--just as Catholics become seamless in the Vatican and national in Rome. It is absurd to treat Muslims as some kind of single international horde thirsting for a western enemy.

So why was this thesis put about, and why does it get the respectability that an American secretary of state can provide by using the analogy in a major speech, as Colin Powell did recently?

If only ignorance were the answer. Ignorance is understandable, if not always defensible. But there is more going on.

The most interesting aspect of this theory is when it was floated. It might seem as if it was a reaction to 9/11; in fact it was a consequence of two American military victories in quick succession. The first was

the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the collapse of the Soviet empire. The second was the war in which Kuwait was freed from Saddam Hussein's occupation, in 1991. The phrase emerged in its present manifestation in an essay by Samuel Huntington in the Spring 1993 issue of the respected American magazine Foreign Affairs.

In Afghanistan America had financed and armed a Jihad by disparate armies to defeat the Soviets. Some of these armies consisted of radicalised Muslims; and one of them was led by Osama bin Laden. Against Iraq, America

people with oil. And where he did not give Muslims oil, he gave them a Hindu majority. I added that this was not necessarily a bad bargain. For while Arab Muslims might now have a bank account, Indian Muslims had an economy.)

The critical golden centre of this subterranean wealth is Arabia, Iraq, Iran and Central Asia. Access to Central Asia was exploited within months of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and easily available through the colourful dictators of the region, who knew a thing or two about discretion before the mighty, Saudi friends ran Arabia. Iran and Iraq were headaches.

BYLINE

There is uncertainty and apprehension across the Muslim nations: uncertainty about where they stand, and apprehension about both American power and the repugnant use of terrorism that in turn invites the exercise of American power. There is also anger that a legitimate cause like that of Palestine can get buried in the debris of confusion. Muslims do not see Palestinians as terrorists. They have a different take: you cannot drive a people to desperation and then accuse them of being desperate.

mobilised the international establishment. In both cases America had a strong formal case: Moscow and Baghdad had violated the independence of recognised nation-states. But in neither case could victory be taken for granted. The Soviet Union was still a fearsome power when it invaded Afghanistan in 1979; and Saddam's feet were thought to consist of steel rather than clay. Is it a coincidence that American troops are back in Afghanistan and Iraq within a decade of their first overwhelming victories? No.

The Americans declared victory but forgot to define it. Euphoria encouraged vague feelings of invincibility; and a group of extreme ideologues, known now as neo-cons, began to set the agenda of triumphalism. The 21st was declared the American century. It was the mood of a conqueror in search of an enemy.

No one conquers a poor nation--or at least no one sensible does, which is why even the Russians are bewildered at their occupation of Afghanistan. The returns are not worth the investment. Who wanted to conquer sand, until they discovered that it was floating on oil? It is obvious enough that by a strange coincidence some the world's biggest reserves of oil and gas lie in Muslim nations, whether in the Arab world, Iran, Central Asia or indeed Bangladesh and Indonesia. (I joked at the Djakarta conference, or perhaps it was only half a joke, that Allah had blessed His chosen

Direct colonialism has become unfashionable after two world wars fought for the control of the world, but neo-colonialism is a familiar sight, even when it uses pseudonyms like Halliburton. But one tactic remains in use from the more honest days of colonialism: give a dog a bad name if you want to hang him. The British only but conquered in the cause of civilisation and progress. They became limp bearing the brown man's burden. The dialectic that was once used to justify the conquest of "brown" and "yellow" peoples has been transferred to patronise, undermine and squeeze selected Muslim nations.

And so Muslims were re-cast as "anti-modern" if not positively backward. The demonology is long, and often pernicious, and there is not enough space to examine them all. One uses 'pernicious' because surface arguments to justify a case seem eminently persuasive. Let us examine a central canard, that Islam and democracy are incompatible. This is an absurdity. There is nothing Islamic or unIslamic about democracy. Democracy is the outcome of a political process, not a religious process. It is glibly suggested that "every" Muslim country is a dictatorship, conveniently forgetting that the four of the largest Muslim populations of the world, in Indonesia, India, Bangladesh and Turkey, vote to change governments. Pakistan could easily have been on this list.

Voting does not make these Muslims either less or more religious. There are dictators among Muslims just as there are dictators among Christians, Buddhists and Hindus (check out Nepal). Robert Mugabe is not a Muslim, but no one suggests that Christianity is not compatible with democracy. Christian Latin America has seen ugly forms of dictatorship as has Christian Africa. Is Christianity to be blamed because the Nazis were Christians? That would be preposterous. There are more than one billion people who have never enjoyed the slightest whiff of democracy since Adam, the Chinese, but no one organises semi-

nothing Islamic about it. Seokarno might have been as nominal a Muslim as Julius Nyerere was a nominal Christian.

Muslim countries will become democracies too, because it is the finest form of modern governance. But it will be a process interrupted by bloody experience as the street wrenches power from usurpers. Democracy has happened in Bangladesh. It is happening in Indonesia. It almost happened in Pakistan, and the opportunity will return. Democracy takes time in the most encouraging environments. The democratic spirit prevailed across France during its revolution in 1789, but it took more than a century for that spirit to become flesh. Democracy came to America in 1776 but it was not an even reality: democracy did not mean the same thing to Dwight Eisenhower and Rosa Parks, John Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

Democracy has become the latest rationale for the occupation of Iraq, after the Weapons of Mass Destruction were found only in the imagination of the neo-cons and their preferred leader, President George Bush. Granted, democracy is always preferable to tyranny no matter how it comes. But Iraqis are not dupes. They will take democracy and place it at the service of nationalism. A decade ago, victorious America was careless about the definition of victory. Today it is careless about the definition of democracy.

There is uncertainty and apprehension across the Muslim nations: uncertainty about where they stand, and apprehension about both American power and the repugnant use of terrorism that in turn invites the exercise of American power. There is also anger that a legitimate cause like that of Palestine can get buried in the debris of confusion. Muslims do not see Palestinians as terrorists. They have a different take: you cannot drive a people to desperation and then accuse them of being desperate. But the real tragedy of that region of course is that both Palestinians and Israelis are becoming desperate.

There is only one message for whoever lives in the White House. An alternative voice is not a hostile voice. If there is a burden anywhere, brown or black, share it. Peace is the objective of every religion. (Prosperity might be irreligious.) The answer to complex and complicated problems is understanding. That is possible through a dialogue. But a dialogue is possible only between equals.

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Second Beijing Talks over North Korea fizzles: What next?

A.H. JAFFOR ULLAH

writes from New Orleans

It won't be so easy for North Korea to shed its image as one of the rogue nations in today's world. The second Beijing Talks concerning what to do with North Korea vis-à-vis its nuclear weapons programme started on February 25, 2004. Two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia, and USA are attending the six nations' meeting. The not-so-easy meeting of six nations to discuss the dispute over North Korea's nuclear programme fizzled to an end on February 28, 2004 with no apparent breakthroughs announced but with an agreement to try again and create working groups to help solve the problem.

Speculation was rife for the last few years that North Korea was actively building nuclear weapons. This has become a thorny issue amongst Pyongyang's neighbouring countries, notably South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia. In the aftermath of 9-11 terrorist attacks in America, President Bush in his State of the Union Address had mentioned North Korea by name as being one of the rogue nations in our present-day world. In late August 2003, Beijing was the venue for the first ever summit on North Korea's nuclear weapons programmes. In that meeting, no resolution was passed. Nonetheless, all parties agreed to attend a second round of meeting to discuss the issue in Beijing. Nearly six months later, the same six nations have met in Beijing to deal with the nagging issue -- how to persuade North Korea to give up its desire to make nuclear bombs. It seems as if it is no easy task. North Korea refuses to shed its image as the bullyboy of the Far East as it accused the U.S. on second day of the summit of pressing "stale" demands in arms talks but said it was willing to halt nuclear weapons programme provided the West and its neighbour come up with energy aid in exchange.

In the second Beijing Talks, a debate was engendered centering the "energy aid" package as demanded by North Korea. According to Russian representative attending the talk, the U.S. and Japan were not ready to join the compensation plan. Japan does not have any diplomatic ties with her neighbouring rogue nation. Therefore, according to Japan, the establishment of a diplomatic tie is an important prerequisite to any aid to North Korea. All six parties attending the summit were close to agreeing on to discuss the "energy-for-freeze" proposal. It seems as if

there will be a third summit to iron out the differences of opinion amongst the participants. The idea is to thwart North Korea to build any nuclear arsenal at all cost. If some aid package to North Korea will do the job, the participants think it is a small price to pay. And they are ready to pay for it.

North Korea is now willing to stop making nuclear arsenals for a price but it wants to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. The U.S. however claims that North Korea may already have developed a few nuclear bombs; therefore,

America had labeled North Korea as a rogue nation, which had received nuclear technology from Pakistan, which in turn had received nuclear bomb making blueprint and material assistance from China. It seems as if China has an infant terrible by its side; undoubtedly, therefore, North Korea is now China's headache.

the U.S. is insisting that Pyongyang dismantle not only the plutonium development but also the suspected uranium enrichment programme. It should be pointed out here that both the processes are required for successful nuke making. The debate about dismantling North Korea's nuclear programme was put into fore in October 2002 when U.S. officials said North Korea had admitted to a covert programme to enrich uranium for bomb making. However, Pyongyang kept on denying this allegation.

The participants to Beijing Talks are not unified in their approach to "bribe" North Korea to dissuade the rogue nation from making nuclear bombs. However, both the host nation of China and the U.S. are offering a positive spin on Beijing Talks. Russia's delegation head, deputy foreign minister, Alexander Losyukov, on the other hand characterised the outcome of the summit being "lack of clarity" on how Pyongyang should halt its nuclear programmes -- either by outright elimination, removal or reduction.

It should be pointed out here that North Korea is an energy deficient nation, which has no fully

operational nuclear power plants. However, a five-megawatt reactor at the Yongbyon complex that experts believe had produced weapons-grade plutonium and which is not connected to any electrical power grid system in North Korea. Besides this one, two other larger nuclear reactors, a 50-megawatt at Yongbyon and a 200-megawatt at nearby Taechon were suspended at early stages of construction in 1994 because the West made much fuss about potential misuse by Pyongyang regime.

The talk on North Korea's weapon development programme and how to end this had ended on scheduled time. A joint communiqué would be released soon. After four grueling days of Beijing Talks that led to conflicting developments, China's Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said "various serious differences" remain before the standoff can be resolved but he called for patience. The minister also said, "We must use a constructive attitude to narrow differences and expand common ground through dialogue, to resolve the issue, although differences are on the road ahead." The Japanese news agency Kyodo reported that North Korea had urged a "last-minute revision" to a joint statement by all six countries working to resolve the dispute over its nuclear programme. However, the host nation of China was working to "persuade North Korea" to accept the statement.

North Korea is no ordinary nation. Its authoritative regime is very brutal, to say the least, who seldom looks into the welfare of its citizens. A massive food shortage is known to exist in this nation for the past few years. On top of it, the regime is allegedly trying to blackmail the international community using its on-going nuclear weapon development plan. The Pyongyang administration believes that by projecting a bullyboy image to its neighbours it can receive all kinds of concession. America had labeled North Korea as a rogue nation, which had received nuclear technology from Pakistan, which in turn had received nuclear bomb making blueprint and material assistance from China. It seems as if China has an infant terrible by its side; undoubtedly, therefore, North Korea is now China's headache. Until the third summit of six nations reconvenes in Beijing, stay tuned for North Korea's endless rants.

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