

What if there is global power vacuum?

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

PROFESSOR Niall Ferguson (of New York University) paints a terrifying picture of a new Dark Age, far more dangerous than the one of the ninth century, should the US retreat from its hegemonic role. The alternative to a single super power unipolarity, he argues, would not be Europe, nor China, nor the Muslim world, and certainly not the United Nations, but "apolarity" meaning power vacuum filled with "anarchic new Dark Age, an era of waning empire, and religious fanaticism, of endemic plunder and pillage in the world's forgotten areas, of economic stagnation and civilization's retreat in to a few fortified enclaves."

Power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Throughout the history of mankind, periods of apolarity have been short lived. Greek civilisation was succeeded by Roman civilisation that shaped the subsequent world history for the next two thousand years. The British ruled the waves and the sun never set in the British Empire for centuries. Concurrently with the British rule, albeit in smaller degree, there was French, Spanish, and Dutch colonisation. However in the enumeration of the history of civilisations, generalisation of the term "civilisation" has been contested. German philosopher Oswald Spengler described civilisations as living organisms, each of which passes through identical stages at fixed periods. Arnold Toyenbee also described a uniform pattern in the history of civilisations whose life can be extended by successfully responding to internal and external challenges that constantly confront it. Toyenbee, writes Samuel Huntington, identified twenty-five major civilisations out of which six exist in the contemporary world. Huntington defines civilisation as a cultural entity that finds commonality in language, history, religion, custom, and in the subjective self-identification of people. By his measure existing civilisations consist of Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and African civilisations. The present discourse is not so much on cultural identification of civilisations as it is on the possible shape the past and present global power structure can take.

From George Marshall to John Foster Dulles to Henry Kissinger to

Madeline Albright, every one in varying degrees was convinced that the existential American power had ensured global security, notwithstanding aberrant proxy wars and sometimes direct intrusion by the super powers, for more than fifty years of the Cold War period. Yet till the emergence of President Bush and his doctrine of preemption, the free world was happy with American leadership, the values of freedom and democracy, its propagation of pluralism, and its abhorrence of totalitarianism. These values, described by Joseph Nye (of Harvard University) as "soft power," enticed, enthused, and attracted both

friend and foe alike, because they were convinced that even the harshest criticism would not find any concrete shape of opposition. Perhaps this structural change effected by Bush administration can explain why sadism at Abu Ghraib prison has fallen on the shoulder of junior reservists only and the flouting of the Geneva Conventions in Guantanamo Bay is so inconsequential to some American political leaders. The recent public statement of a Danish colonel who used to command a Danish military unit under overall British command, that the British troops in Iraq are systematically violating Geneva Convention in their

to finance excessive private and public consumption, the US as a net importer of people and troops deployment suffering from "imperial overstretch," and most critically its republican institutions and political traditions making it difficult to achieve collective focus on long term nation building. So if the US were to withdraw itself into a cocoon of self-isolation (an unlikely scenario) would Europe which is literally growing older be able to occupy the vacant place? The consensus opinion is no.

Besides, in the face of revanche de Dieu (revival of God) the transatlantic alliance, despite bruised ego and

fiscal, and regulatory institutions. Chinese economy faces serious obstacles of transition from inefficient state enterprises, a shaky financial system and inadequate infrastructure. Besides, writes Joseph Nye, growing inequality, massive internal migration, corruption and inadequate institutions may foster political instability. Despite Robert Kagan's belief that China aims in the near term to replace the US as dominant power in East Asia and in the long term to challenge America's global preeminence, political analysts do not believe that China would be able to achieve "peer competitive status" vis-à-vis the United States in the twenty first century. What is feared on the other hand is the possibility of an economic meltdown in China plunging the communist system into crisis unleashing centrifugal forces.

One therefore, comes to the inevitable conclusion that American withdrawal from global leadership despite current dislike of the display of American muscularity is more likely to plunge the fragile international order (after the Iraq war) into a vortex of instability and chaos which may see economic stagnation and even depression in the Third World, limited nuclear war in the Korean peninsula and South Asia, and increased incidence of terrorism caused by the states' loss of monopoly over agents of violence and the possibility of their transfer to non-state actors. Such terrorist activities are more likely to take place in developing countries that are likely to remain soft targets as developed economies will have shrouded themselves with impenetrable armour of security and thereby insulating themselves from the dreaded Orient.

A meridian line needs to be drawn between the two extremes of isolated prosperity and chaotic poverty. What needs to done is to reduce western panic to a logical level by unhesitatingly joining hands with a multipolar West consisting of the US and Europe and the developing countries that are no less threatened by terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Vigilance has to be constant so that the contagion of terror cannot incubate. As Bassam Tibi (of Gottingen University) observes, a critique of western hegemony need not amount to a wholesale rejection of the West and its values. In this endeavour of a change of course Bangladesh like some other Muslim countries could enhance its socio-economic security by denying quarter to any form of Al-Qaedaist religious extremism. In adopting such a policy we are more likely to succeed than many other Muslim countries because our societal values and traditions are comparatively more secular and less dogmatic unless forces of intolerance are unleashed either by design or by default.

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Let history resolve an unnecessary debate

a formula can be worked out which looks at our saga of liberation holistically and apportions due credit to our contributing leaders. The draft formula (not the final one) may be worked out in the following way: Brain: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; Soul: Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq and Moulana Bhashani; Organiser: Tajuddin Ahmed; Sword: Shaheed Ziaur Rahman and Gen. M.A.G. Osmani.

DR. SYED ANWAR HUSAIN

IN the post-1975 period, this nation of ours has been caught up in the vortex of the debate on the declaration of independence. The debate has been going on unabated, occasionally infused with high political tension. The recently marketed edition of *Swadhinata Juddher Dalilpatra* has witnessed another outburst of emotion across the political spectrum represented by the two major political parties of the country. Unfortunately, this debate is on prioritising the role of two significant players in our national history in the declaration of independence. More unfortunate is the fact that this kind of debate was never heard of during the lifetime of these personalities.

If history, with its prescribed role as the teller of "naked truth" (Leopold Von Ranke), can be any judge, it would appear that both Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman had their distinct contributions to our Liberation War, differing, however, in content, extent, and circumstances. This is plain as well as historical truth, and as such, both should be accorded their due recognition.

The only pragmatic way to accept and recognise this historical truth is to leave history to do its job without any political interference. Indeed, history and politics are two different domains that do not have anything in common. History has its right to concern itself with politics and political happenings to record the march of time, keeping, however, strictly to the limitations of historical exercises. But, politics being an altogether different kind of exercise, does not have any reason to impose itself on the domain of historical exercises. In the case of such an imposition, both history and politics get distorted; a phenomenon that produces unwelcome consequences for a nation. Bangladesh is perhaps the worst example of this.

Without denigrating the role of these two historic personalities, and, taking a broad brush sweep across history, it can be suggested that at a time when the people of Bangladesh took up arms to resist the Pakistani crackdown in the small hours of March 26, 1971, they did not wait for

any declaration to do so; it was their spontaneous resistance, although ill-equipped, disorganised, and scattered.

In the background of such a spontaneous resistance, there had been a long preparation of the popular psyche, in which personalities like, Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Moulana Bhashani, and, in the final stage, Bangabandhu played a role unsurpassed by his peers. Shaheed Ziaur Rahman's role at a critical moment in the beginning of the resistance is also a fact of history, the significance of which cannot and should not be undermined. While Bangabandhu, preceded by his peers, had the comprehensive contribution in preparing this nation in stages through twists and turns in political evolution for the final moment of reckoning, Shaheed Zia's role at a critical moment did act as a catalyst for those who took up arms throughout the country for resisting the Pakistani occupation forces.

It would be illogical to change this simple order in the initial phase of our Liberation War history with a politicised orientation. Even the oft-attempted ranking of all these national personalities is uncalled for. We should not lose sight of the fact that the common people are the best judges of the role and performance of their leaders. They hold in high esteem both Bangabandhu and Shaheed Zia, and some enlightened ones do recall leaders like Sher-e-Bangla, Suharawardy, and Moulana Bhashani. I assert this on the basis of many an encounter I have had with common people on this issue over the years throughout the length and breadth of the country. It is, however true that an altogether different and certainly divisive opinion would emerge if we talk to persons or people with narrow political orientation.

In a humble but certainly desperate bid to put this raging and counterproductive controversy to rest, a formula is suggested by drawing an analogy with the history of independence and unification of Italy between 1859 and 1870. Italy had two problems: geographic division of the land into many city-states; and all these were under Austrian domination. So, they had the twin goals of

achieving both -- independence from Austrian domination and unification as a viable state. By 1870 both of these goals were achieved. This twin-success was rendered possible by the cumulative contributions of three leaders: Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi, who played their roles at three different stages between 1859 and 1870, and made their distinct contributions. Mazzini was a dreamer of independence, who exhorted his people intellectually to throw off Austrian domination. Cavour was a diplomat. He tried diplomatically to weaken and isolate Austria-Hungary in the comity of European nations. Finally, it was Garibaldi the general who gave the lead in the fight to drive out the foreign forces from Italy in 1870; and thus Italy became independent and united.

Italians do not do any ranking of these three leaders of their independence; they have their own way of recognising their contributions. They regard Mazzini, Cavour, and Garibaldi as the brain, soul, and sword of independence, respectively. This is a recognition, which gives everyone his due; none is overestimated or underestimated.

Following this worthy example, a formula can be worked out which looks at our saga of liberation holistically and apportions due credit to our contributing leaders. The draft formula (not the final one) may be worked out in the following way:

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This is an entirely tentative formula, it can be further worked on provided there is a consensus to let history be the final arbiter in this unnecessary and unending political controversy. Moreover, after all these thirty-three years of independence, it is time we as a nation demonstrated some degree of maturity by reaching a consensus to make a list of some national personalities, who should be kept above any political controversy and beyond any political wrangling.

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