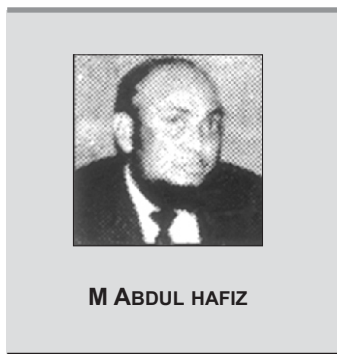


Asia's changing strategic landscape



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE change is to be viewed in terms of the perception that the centre of gravity of the world politics is shifting from the Atlantic where it was lodged for past three centuries to the Pacific now. While the Europeans already had their best days – even the Americans are convinced that it is inevitably going to be an 'Asian Century' in the vast swath of territories between Morocco and Indonesia with the agenda beyond merely an inconsequential war on terror -- the neo-conservative cabal of Bush Administration seems to have decided to move aggressively on fulfilling its long held desire of taking control of this geo-strategic space. But how?

Gone are the days of lone ranger approach. Even in a world dominated by a single power after the collapse of Soviet Union which virtually demolished the historic basis of inter-state relations as provided for in the treaty of Westphalia on the principle of balance of power the US cannot go it alone. An unwieldy coalition of the 'willing' in US' Iraq war is a pointer. The most reprehensible event of 9/11 broke the myth of American invincibility and exposed fragility of the psyche of the world's most powerful nation by driving it into a paroxysm of paranoia. While tracking down and destroying all those it suspects of harbouring anti-US sentiments it also found the necessity of strengthening politico-strategic ties with important states so that its existing power potential can be supplemented. This partly explains the US' rush to set up bases in far off places apparently to plug in her weak links. A desperate courting of India fits in this strategy of the US.

Then, India is not just another country. It's an emerging power on the world stage with its size, population, defence forces and economic growth. Being the world's largest democracy its liberal secular policy makes it the darling of the west. The neo conservative ideological gurus have long touted the advantage of establishing close ties with India located in a geopolitical area where they can see only Israel and India as "natural allies". As a result both the US and India are courting each other and it is not surprising that a

PERSPECTIVES

Asia, it looks, is entering a fresh phase of turmoil and the region will be in a flux in days ahead. What shape of things will finally emerge from the looming hostilities is difficult to predict. The Indo-US strategic partnership and Pakistan's status as a non-Nato ally of the US will however be major factors in this fascinating power game in Asia.

"New Framework for US-India Defence Relationship" has come into being. It is the instrument that the Americans would like to use to fulfil their desire to occupy the centre-stage of world politics which is going to be shifted to the Pacific, an emerging growth area as predicted by Henry Kissinger.

It is not for nothing that Ms Condoleezza Rice during her visit to Delhi, wanted to make India a major power in 21st century. Rice told her associates in Washington that 'sky is limit' as far as Indians are concerned and nothing must impede the growth of ties with Delhi what has, after all, led Ms Rice and others to befriend India so desperately. It cannot be without substantive reason. In pursuit of its aggressive preemptive policy the US has already invaded Iraq, blackmailed the PLO leadership into acquiescing a 'Bantustan' option, kept the Syrians and Iranians under intense pressure and established military bases all over central Asia. She has also ensured that there is no voice of dissent anywhere under its sway or influence.

The 10 years agreement signed during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's US visit envisages expanding two-way defence trade, increasing opportunity for transfer of defence related technology, co-producing and developing new armament and expanding collaboration in missile defence. On efforts to contain proliferation the Indians have been offered membership of the exclusive club known as the proliferation security initiative. The offer of the co-production of the F-16 and F-18 and the supply of BMD system as well as the likelihood of the transfer of "dual use" technologies are indeed tempting carrots. However, from the Indian point of view the possibility of American assistance in the nuclear field may be the most attractive offer, given India's acute energy needs.

While a friendly obliging India is floating in the vision of the Americans the influential figures in Bush Administration see China as a strategic rival. They have already determined that China is major longterm threat to the US and inimical to the latter's interest in

Asia and Pacific. Although after 9/11 episode China behaved in a responsible way, supported the US war on terror and uttered no word against US neo imperialistic drive, the US policy with regard to China is already fraught with ambiguity. While their bilateral relations have suddenly gone frosty the warmth the US-China ties generated during the earlier US presidencies has substantially faded. China is rather circumspect in not provoking the US at this crucial stage but the latter would discover some faultline to take on China. In preparation, the US has in the meantime decided on a containment policy for China. India is ideally positioned to play that role.

But China, a nation for 8000 years couldn't be fooled. She already mended her fence with India with equally attractive package during Chinese Prime Minister's high profile visit to Delhi. Moreover why should India oblige the US in containing China? While China is least likely to give US a chance with any irrational behaviour to be hostile to her, India immersed in Nehruvian philosophy Wouldn't like a subservient role to play a second fiddle to anyone. India is too big, too proud to do that. Of course, the Americans do have other options. They have their close allies in the area i.e. Japan and Australia and South Korea. They are already encouraging the Japanese to abandon many of the self-imposed limitation on the pursuit of a militaristic agenda. Washington is also pushing Australia to get more aggressively involved in Asian affairs while reinforcing its linkages and commitment to South Korea and Taiwan.

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Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

The endearing America

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

H EATED discussions and controversies have invariably characterised the debate over American image, particularly since the conclusion of the Second World War. The unsettling experiences of the 1950s in the wake of all-pervasive "McCarthyism" that saw large scale witch-hunting in several segments of the American society are still cited as great aberrations and contradictions of a democracy that cares for freedom beyond its shores. The American experience of the 1960s and early 70s, specially in south east Asia and Far East, particularly in Vietnam, was extremely painful and country's image was at its lowest ebb. Nearly 56,000 American servicemen sacrificed their lives but at the end, the great democracy was not the victor and the American society had to absorb many psycho-social shocks caused by deaths, decapitating injury and the demoralisation of many less-than-stable returning soldiers.

In recent times, America's involvement in Somalia, apparently for restoring normalcy in a manifestly failed state was tragic and fruitless, to say the least. One may also recall the death of 261 marines in Beirut during the incumbency of President Ronald Regan. Against this backdrop, the American image, however, earned international praise and recognition when the superpower of the unipolar world succeeded in halting, though belatedly, the ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia and Kosovo by activating the NATO and the Europe allies. This welcome sight was substantially marred by America's international policy and postures since 9/11. No less disconcerting are the draconian laws enacted in America itself that seriously impinge upon civil liberties of a great democracy.

On the issue of adverse image while speaking in a briefing session in the not-too-distant past the American Secretary of Defence remarked that the long lines of visa-seekers at the American consulates or embassies around the world are not supportive of the alleged negative impression. Mr Donald Rumsfeld by implication was justifying the correctness of the establishment's action in Iraq and Afghanistan in so far as it relates to regime change and the so-called democratisation ventures. In other words, the increasing number of immigration aspirants for America are convincing proof of the propriety of American action overseas. Closer at home, while giving his reaction on the subject of image the immediate past American ambassador Mr Harry K Thomas sarcastically pointed to the "Yankee go home but take me with you" syndrome.

One may or may not agree with the analysis cited above. However, the matter that may engage the attention of discerning observers is whether the principal motivation of the prospective immigrants to America is only to get rich quick. In the late sixties, one used to hear of the tentacles of the so-called military-industrial complex and its all-consuming profiteering instincts in America and the rest of the world. The same accusations are made against the present-day multinationals. One has to remember the violent protest in Seattle in the not-too-distant past.

Complaints and choice

The Litany of complaints against America could possibly be stretched further but that is not very relevant in this write-up. What instead we may venture to find out as to why millions of people still choose to emigrate to America despite the alleged haughtiness, arrogance and overbearing action

America is an open society and the average American is very frank in giving his reactions on any subject ranging from morality to marital infidelity. Many people in the so-called Bible or Corn belt are as simple as our village folks. America's actions in foreign lands are influenced by supposedly vested interest groups against which there is international protest and indignation in America itself and Europe.

of the American establishment in many countries of the world? There is no doubt that America is a land of immigrants where the overwhelming majority of the present-day population are of European descent and broadly belonging to the Christian denomination.

Why then there is no hesitation on the part of large number of supposedly conservative Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists of Asia and Africa amongst other continents, to settle once for all in a different environment in America? Why there is a deep sigh for the distant shores of America, the land of Jefferson and Lincoln? I am sure the reasons are known to the informed readers but perhaps need reiteration only to know the inner strengths of the American society in order to draw our lessons. The following are my impressions based on a few days' stay in America and some discussions with friends and relatives staying there.

Freedom and education

The immigrant's single-most preeminent motivating factor for

the north and north-east who have bequeathed their entire property and lifelong savings to the cause of education. These are indeed very inspirational sight for true Muslims who are aware of the paramount importance attached to education in the teachings and saying of the holy prophet.

In Bangladesh, there are families and house who have the means to support education in a meaningful way as the Americans do but the response is still not encouraging. Some of our private universities have admirable financial support for the meritorious but the benefits need to be broad-based. I will not discuss about the public universities because the concept of higher education and its rationale and entitlement are vastly different, comparatively speaking. The point to remember is the emphasis on substantial non-governmental contribution towards education with concomitant state support that has characterised the American system of education.

While the key appointments of administration are the political preferences of an incumbent President, there is a permanent bureaucracy whose professionalism is not tainted by political allegiance.

Civil and criminal liability

In America crime rate is one of the highest but that has not meant the erosion of the authority of enforcement or adjudication. Persons at the wrong side of the law are fully liable for both civil and criminal transgressions. Readers may recollect the sensational OJ Simson case where the accused was exonerated from the criminal charges but the civil liabilities caused staggering loss to Mr OJ Simson. As against this, in our system while the corrupt public servant or businessman may receive a jail sentence in the criminal proceedings on account of illegal acquisition of wealth he will hardly ever lose even a fraction of his ill-gotten riches. At worst, he suffers an imprisonment for some

there is no let-up in the vigilance against the lapses. Judicial supremacy is the hallmark of the American system where executive excesses are always sobered and softened by judicial prudence and circumspection. We have a lot to learn.

Candour and pragmatism

'America is not like the movies' and 'America is not a land of milk and honey' -- these used to be the warning to the potential immigrants amongst others long time back. My understanding is that the same still hold good. Most Americans are curious, candid with a disarming sincerity and are very proud of what they are doing, no matter whichever station one is at. Once an understanding is reached the usual remark is "You got a deal." Most people try to keep their part of the deal. Omission to pay the tax is treated as a substantial offence and the IRS is a tough taskmaster. Hard work and payment of taxes and other dues to the state by the citizens are considered primary American virtues. Such virtues no doubt strengthen the foundation of the great democratic polity.

The above postulations by no means seek to give an impression that the American society has everything in order and there is nothing to worry. In fact, there are serious drug problems, violent offences against person and property, latent and manifest racial hatred, mind-boggling crimes by the young, indiscriminate use of fire arms by groups, alcoholism, corporate scam and many others. However, the redeeming feature of the striking scenario is that there is no pervasive fatalism, inaction or a resigning attitude on the part of the victims or the concerned authority. There are deliberate efforts to correct the malfunctioning and nothing is allowed to go unquestioned.

The Americans stand accused of garrulity. So are we. But the distinguishing part is that on any venture while they mean business to the end, we on our part start with lot of fanfare and gusto but get lost somewhere half-way or even earlier. The corporate scandals of the recent past have shown that the very wealthy and influential who have acted in a culpable manner have received treatment due a ordinary criminal and have not received any favour from the enforcement outfit. This is visible application of the rule of law and one has to behold only and not listen to the platitudes of the pundits on the virtues of legality and even behaviour.

America is an open society and the average American is very frank in giving his reactions on any subject ranging from morality to marital infidelity. Many people in the so-called Bible or Corn belt are as simple as our village folks. America's actions in foreign lands are influenced by supposedly vested interest groups against which there is international protest and indignation in America itself and Europe.

Events of 1971 pertaining to Bangladesh are illustrative of the defiant and independent American public opinion as distinct from the establishment. America is not the so-called neo-cons only, as depicted in 'Fahrenheit 11'. Mainstream America consists of freedom-loving, fund-seeking and well-meaning individuals. No wonder the line of visa-seekers is getting longer.

Muhammed Nurul Huda is former Inspector General of Police and Secretary to the government.

The children of the 80s and 90s speak on Bangabandhu

WE passed a sheet of paper around to our Rising Stars contributors in the hope of gleaning what a cross-section of the younger population think about Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. We found their responses to be honest (some even preferred to make their comments anonymously so that they could speak their mind), refreshing, and eye-opening. Here is what they had to say:

"Hasina would know better. Well, if he had lived longer, maybe I'd have more to say about him. But, too bad for our country. He would've been so frustrated to see our country now." - Anonymous
"Bangladesh achieved independence because of Bangabandhu and we got aid of the Indian army because of him. We are grateful to him for these two major turning points." - Durdana (Age 24)

"Bangabandhu is the father of this nation and that speaks for itself." - Fahmina (Age 19)
"Bangabandhu was the man who drove the Bengali people to take up weapons into their untrained hands and fight towards freedom." - Aniqia Moinuddin (Age 16)

"Bangabandhu was really a great man. But I think AL have over-publicised him and have made him into a cliché." Zeeshan (Age 18)

"Bangabandhu is supposed to be the father of our nation. Rumour has it that the BNP might suggest a different father pretty soon." Tawsif (Age 20)

"Everyone knows him as the Father of the Nation. People say that he's the one and only saviour who pulled us through the Liberation War. But I think there are thousands of others who never got their due recognition." Nafis (Age 17)

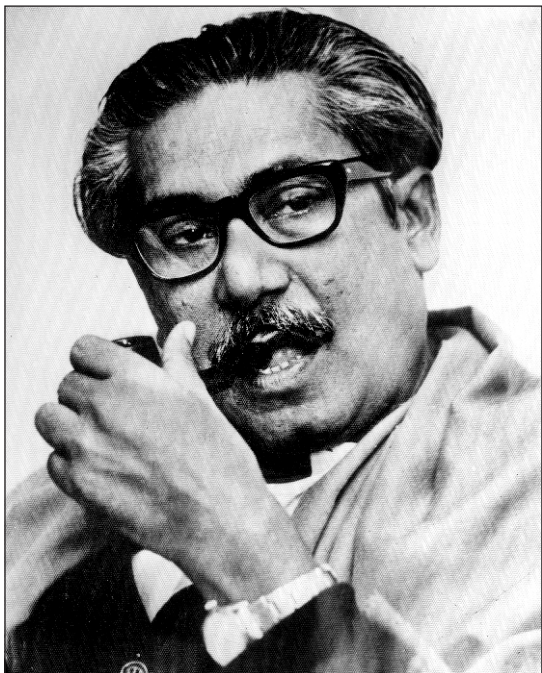
"He was a man of spirit. When he was alive, he led our nation, and even after his death, his spirit inspires us to love and cherish our country." - Ferzeen (Age 18)

"Things might have been better if he was around today." - Preeti (Age 16)

"Leaders are not created -- they are born. Bangabandhu was one of them!" - Shamma M Raghib (Age 18)

"One of the few true leaders born in this country." - Tausif Salim (Age 17)

"He gets publicised a lot every time Sheikh Hasina wins the election." - Raya (Age 15)



"He led us to our independence, no one can say enough to express his significance in the history of our independence. He is considered one of the most celebrated Bengalis, but in modern times is also a person highly criticised." - Bushra (Age 17)

"He is a very talked about figure in our political arena and yet I'm sure all are still confused about the part he played in our pre- and post-independence era." - Tanveer (Age 20)

"We were all born long after Bangabandhu's time, so much of what we know about him is from second-hand sources, and especially what we learn about him in school changes every time a new party comes to power. So most of us are pretty confused about his exact role in the events of 1971. Anyone who's heard any of his speeches will have to agree that he was a very charismatic leader, probably one of the few true leaders we had. I feel that we should look forward and move ahead instead of constantly looking over our shoulders." - Sabrina (Age 22)

Among the scholars: An update

NIAZ ASADULLAH writes from Oxford

I am writing in response to the article entitled 'Among the scholars' by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed that appeared in your daily on August 7th. The author wrote on the Rhodes, arguably the most extravagant and international of all the scholarships that a graduate student can aspire for. Each year, about 70 young men and women of exceptional academic and extra-curricular backgrounds are chosen from around the world to come to Oxford for education and join this elite group of scholars. Countries such as USA, Canada, Australia, India enjoy a greater share in the number of scholarships awarded, partly for demographic reasons. Most of the other countries, such as Bangladesh, are represented in the Rhodes only on a 'one scholar per year' basis. It makes Rhodes the most exclusive of all the mainstream scholarship programmes (such as the Commonwealth, British Chevening, Full Bright) that Bangladeshi students can consider.

Bangladesh's history of Rhodes Scholarship is not long. The first scholar was elected in the year 1998 and since then, five others have joined the rank. In contrast to the US, the Bangladeshi scholars are too young to make their mark at the national/international level. Their absence in the mainstream has, in turn, created an image problem Bangladeshi students often lack an understanding of the worth of the Rhodes. Dr. Ahmed, himself a Rhodes scholar, has contributed significantly in this respect through his occasional write ups. His latest piece highlighting the profile of various American Rhodes Scholars is an informative one for current students. Nonetheless, Dr. Ahmed ends with a heart-breaking news this time: Bangladesh is no more on the Rhodes list. This is indeed very disappointing.

Since the scholarship was first introduced for Bangladesh

only in 1998, its suspension comes as a further shock. Dr. Ahmed has attributed this unpleasant development to the local selection committee and the scholars elected so far. He conjectures: 'Apparently Bangladeshi scholars have not been performing well at Oxford. Surely, there are exceptionally talented students in Bangladesh worthy of the Rhodes. Clearly they are not being selected. Something must be done to correct it.' The author indeed has reasons to feel disturbed by the current development and hence this rather uncharacteristic note from his end. That said, such unsolicited opinion may do no good to the Bangladeshi Rhodes community which is still at its infancy. The purpose of this note is to provide an objective account of the present stalemate and discuss some related issues. While I cannot claim that past and current Bangladeshi scholars at Oxford will mature into the Clintons, the situation is surely not so grave as to merit a suspension. Of the six students who went to Oxford since 1998, three successfully completed their terms and obtained post-graduate/doctoral degrees. The remaining students are still pursuing their doctoral studies. It's therefore somewhat imprudent to hold the incumbent scholars solely responsible for the recent development.

Let us consider some facts. Bangladesh is not the only country to have lost its berth: another eight countries have been affected leading to a total of 11 suspensions. These are-Australia (2), Commonwealth Caribbean (1), Germany (2), India (1), Malaysia (1), Pakistan (1), Singapore (1) and Uganda (1). In addition, there is a case of abolition i.e. Hong Kong. Surely, performance of the scholars was not the sole yardstick that guided the decision to suspend scholarship here. Second, the suspension is temporary, not a one-off ban. The fact is, the Trust had to cut down the number of scholarships primarily due to a financial distress.

It is not my intention here to argue that Bangladesh has a

completely clean slate. In some years, somewhat brighter candidates might have been chosen and the choice of scholars might have indirectly influenced the choice of countries that slipped into the suspension list. Selecting a Rhodes scholar in Bangladesh is a difficult task particularly when (a) there is just one scholar to be elected unanimously by a committee of 12, (b) students of all disciplines are eligible for an award and (c) the candidate must not be older than 24 years at the time of the application. In my opinion, the Rhodes selection committee in Bangladesh has done a commendable job amidst a culture of nepotism and mindless political interference.

But, like any other selection committee, they have been constrained by the problem of a 'thin pool' from which a selection can be made. Whilst it is undeniable that the potential pool of scholars is large in Bangladesh, partly for a lack of awareness and partly for a structural barrier, it has been difficult to enlarge the initial pool so far. The age limit is the primary structural constraint here. Thanks to the ever-lasting campus violence and lingering session jams, some outstanding Bangladeshi graduates from premier institutes such as Dhaka University, BUET and various medical colleges never make it to the initial pool! Yet, this has not stopped selection of some of the finest young men and women from Bangladesh who have shone during their time at Oxford. When the scholarship is reinstated for Bangladesh in five years time, I am confident that the local committee will continue to elect equally bright Bangladeshi students to pursue higher education at Oxford.

Niaz Asadullah is a former Rhodes Scholar.