

Do the military have better maps?

When the civil society "leaders" were clocking up hundreds of hours in seminars and "round-tables," what were they talking about for the past few years? Did they really believe the double act of two Queens was going to carry on ad infinitum, without interruption?

FARID BAKHT

WHEN Christopher Columbus sailed off on a mission to find a short cut to India, he was sailing into "uncharted waters." He failed to reach the Moghul Empire. America stood in his way.

Much of Bengali civil society is scratching its head, trying to figure out what is going on. The in phrase is: We are in uncharted waters.

Are we really lost in uncharted waters or is it we do not want to face reality?

Why don't we look at this situation through military eyes?

Let me give you an anecdote.

Twelve months ago, I was having an adda (that favourite Bengali pastime of chatting) with an army major. He had just returned from a tour of UN duty in Africa. He was not a happy young man. During his UN

mission, he had been in regular face to face contact with the country's leader. His force of Bangladeshi soldiers effectively ran a state within a state. The citizens of that region looked to their "peacekeepers" for their livelihood. The major was preoccupied with economics, food production, markets and the dispensation of justice. The rifles were rarely utilised.

He was more a governor, than a soldier.

The country's leader rewarded him with honour and a public display of gratitude. The troops felt like heroes.

So why was not the officer pleased in our adda, over tea and mishti?

I can encapsulate the mood in one sentence, paraphrasing: "If we can run things over there, why can't we do it here ... These corrupt

politicians are ruining our country ... How long can we stand by and watch this ..."

His mood was a mixture of helplessness, frustration, disgust, despair and anger. His (and I got the impression it was the same for his colleagues) worldview could be summarised as:

"Corrupt politicians are running the place like the mafia. Gunmen are protected by ministers. Looting is the norm. The institutions of the army and civil service are in danger of losing cohesion as ministers interfere in postings. The economy is being held back by these incompetents ... surely we could do better ..."

This has been a long time brewing.

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past few years? Did they really believe the double act of two Queens was going to carry on ad infinitum, without interruption?

Civil society leaders (and their political cousins) thought the army was pre-occupied in the world of UN missions: "They love the dollars/fridges/DVDs and good life ... they are too busy to bother with nasty Dhaka politics ..."

That view may explain part of the psychology but seems to have lost out to the countervailing feeling of being devalued, not respected and even ignored.

If 40,000 soldiers have served abroad, that's 40,000 foreign experiences that do not gel well with dysfunctional Bangladeshi politics.

This slow motion coup cannot be run by remote control by some Western embassies in the diplomatic enclave of Baridhara. The general staff cannot simply order majors, colonels and lieutenants to depose democratically elected politicians without seeking their support.

If the majors oppose any political involvement, the major generals would listen and hesitate. If the military high command does stick

around in politics for the next five years, it will have a lot to do with the UN Africa veterans, who think they can do a better job than robber-baron politicians.

The military do not usually start an operation without some preliminary planning.

Operation "Clean Politics" (actually, Operation Grasshopper, as it is known in official circles) is following a plan, though no doubt some eager beavers in Baridhara are offering "technical assistance." To the "interim administration."

Which means that perhaps they are not in uncharted waters? Or they think they are not.

If they were, they would come up against the unforeseen.

The risks to this adventure are: The people become disenfranchised with the failure to reduce prices of essentials and blame the current leaders.

The centre overreaches and offers state assets on a plate to foreign companies (think gas, coal, banks, ports, and other infrastructure).

Radical forces cause mayhem and make the authorities look impotent.



A "guided" people power force succeeds in capturing the media spotlight but fails to capture sufficient votes.

The "wrong" politicians therefore make a comeback via a botched

election.

After discovering America, Columbus became a hero, and very very rich. His ending was a lot less glorious. He lost his great prize and ended up behind bars.

Those maps had better be good then.

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Bomb counts



ROD NORDLAND

BAGHDAD. Wednesday, February 28. By noon today we'd been body-searched nine times, and car-searched twice, spent a cumulative total of 1½ hours in checkpoint queues or waiting to be searched, and another half hour trying to find escorts who would take us through checkpoints. We managed in the process to be late for every appointment, progressively later as the morning rolled on, but no one much minded since as Baghdad days go, this was pretty normal. And they were all late too, since even quite high-ranking officials have to go through much the same security checks -- or if they don't, their staffs do. The precautions are not unreasonable, given the circumstances, but they do take a little getting used to; short tempers should be left at the border. Obey instructions from the guards, reads one checkpoint sign. DEADLY force authorized. Increasingly, those verbal instructions are in Spanish, in the case of our Peruvian Coalition partners, or in Russian, in the case of our Republic of Georgia contingent. Soldiers from the smaller contributors to the Coalition, ie, nearly all of them other than the Brits, are mostly used these days for checkpoint and other routine tasks, to free up American soldiers for more difficult and dangerous duty. It's one way of stretching them a little less thinly. But one of the problems with sign language is that it's notoriously vague, no doubt the reason that evolution came up with words.

And anytime you're annoyed by these realities of Iraqi life, it won't be long before something blows up to justify it -- usually the same day. Today it was an apparent suicide car bomb near a vegetable market in a southern Baghdad neighborhood, Bayaa, which killed 10 people, and another car bombing at a Baghdad police station, killing two officers. And north of the city, in Muqdadiya, two brothers of Saleem al-Jubouri, spokesman for the Iraqi National Accord Front, a coalition of moderate Sunni groups, were assassinated. There are so many such attacks it's hard even for the authorities to keep track of them sometimes. Yesterday came the news that Iraqi police officials were reporting that 18 kids had been killed by a suicide car bomber at a soccer field in a park in the middle of Ramadi. That was followed by a statement from the US military that actually the Americans found a bomb on Tuesday near a soccer field and had conducted a controlled detonation, which got out of control and blasted apart a nearby neighborhood, wounding 30 people, three of whom were children. At first, US spokesmen thought the two incidents had been confused. Turns out, however, that Iraqi officials had confused the Tuesday controlled bombing with a Monday suicide car bombing, which did kill 18 kids, by Iraqi police count. US officials had already reported the Monday incident, but put the death toll at 15, so Iraqi officials thought there were two separate incidents. Death tolls from car bombings are notoriously difficult to ascer-

tain, particularly right away; there are so many body parts, some victims get counted twice or more; while others are so thoroughly pulverized they don't get counted at all. At the end of the day, a large number of kids age 10 to 15 were killed by terrorists looking, as ever, for soft targets -- and coming after a succession of attacks on schools, a college, places of worship, it doesn't even astonish enough for everyone to get the facts straight.

So you can hardly blame the determined and intrusive effort to make places safe, with what best can be described as defense in depth, a series of concentric rings of security, with perimeters within perimeters, right down to the last office before the man you want to see; and the more people who want to see him, the more who want to kill him. Twice suicide bombers have penetrated the Green Zone, once wearing vests and killing diplomats at a café, and just last November with a car bomb that nearly killed the moderate Sunni speaker of Parliament. Another Sunni high on Al Qaeda's hit list is Tareq al-Hashemi, the Sunni vice president of Iraq, whose Iraqi Islamic Party is also part of the Iraqi National Accord. He knows about losing family; so far terrorists or militia death squads have assassinated his sister and two of his brothers. "The Sunnis have paid a high cost for participating in democratic government," he said, standing near a portrait of his most recent brother to be killed, Amer al-Hashemi, an employee in the presidency who was taken from his home by men dressed as police and

assassinated late last year -- the hallmark of Shia death squads associated with militias like Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. "It's time we consider militias as terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, only more dangerous than Al Qaeda; it's time the Americans made a decision to treat the militias as a terrorist threat," Hashemi said.

Like most Iraqi Sunnis, Hashemi and his Islamic Party have been critical of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq and have long called for a timetable for withdrawal of foreign troops. With the rise of the death squads, that position has softened, and Hashemi now believes that such a timetable should be a conditional one, and American troops should "remain on the ground until no security vacuum is left behind." And he worries that political pressure in Britain and the United States will stampede an early departure. "There's a risk in taking a decision without consideration of the consequences, a security vacuum could mean disaster." A bloodbath? "Definitely." Clearly, Sunni leaders are deeply worried about what will happen if the Americans leave their fate in the hands of Shia-dominated police and military.

More checkpoints, more security checks, more frazzled guards and exasperated people. Back at the NEWSWEEK offices, one of the translators had left an assignment undone. Around here, it's always a mistake to get angry. There was soon an e-mail from him explaining that an IED had just blown up in front of his house. "Thanks God there were no casualties or wounds among my family despite that the explosion of the IED was very strong that two steel doors in my house were destroyed, in addition to the glass of three windows. Tomorrow, I will not be able to help you, I need to repair these things, at least the doors. God protect you all."

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Pakistan: The eye of a coming storm?

Musharraf's detour on the road to democracy, with support from allegedly pro-democracy Washington, has compromised Pakistan's capacity to govern itself well and securely. Unbothered by the soft bigotry of low expectations, Washington went to war in 2001 with the ally it could cajole and buy, not the one it might ideally want.

PAULA R NEWBERG

FOR the first time since the Americans turned their gaze away from Afghanistan toward Iraq, leaving Al Qaeda to lick its wounds and regroup, Pakistan's mountainous tribal territories have returned to center stage in the global fight against terrorism. This new focus on the Pukhtun borderlands highlights the difficult political terrain on which Pakistan's contentious foreign policy is built -- and the dangerous ground on which its hopes for recovering democracy may rise or fall.

To the dismay of its friends and glee of its militant foes, the country that the US calls "our partner in the war on terror" is having a tough year. As Pakistan suffers through suicide bombings and sectarian discord, remaining on high terror alert, its ambitions remain surprisingly unclear. Pakistan's difficulties in reconciling the demands of its anti-terror allies with those of its own citizens raise critical questions about the viability of its regional ambitions and the durability of its ham-handed political system.

This is a familiar predicament for Pakistan, which has spent 60 years of independence trying to sort out how to live safely, peaceably and prosperously in a region where, paradoxically, its role seems to vacillate between victim and interloper. Convinced that its neighbors mean harm -- sometimes correctly, sometimes not -- Pakistan's politicians and army officers conspired decades ago to establish a national-security state that has only deepened the country's fissiparous tendencies and political fragmentation. The country's diverse communities struggle mightily against one another as often as they challenge the government to secure their rights. With sectarians and tribal leaders battling politicians and soldiers on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, the stakes this year continue to rise.

Policy and patronage have always dashed in Pakistan's unruly politics. But as the military has become more powerful and corrupt, its obdurate and self-interested ambitions have, in a perplexing and self-defeating way, limited its

strategic ambitions. The military has secured its political dominance, for example, by supporting an entrenched militant insurgency in Kashmir that it finds hard to give up, and has cemented its role in civil society as an enormous -- and inevitably, conservative -- commercial force. Aiming for security, Pakistan has consistently opted for a more limited stability that cannot possibly keep it safe. Its incremental failures have not only confused the conflicted, lightly governed border territory it shares with Afghanistan, but also turned the entire country into a target for domestic and global terror.

General Pervez Musharraf -- keen to keep the power he appropriated seven years ago -- has recognized some of the perils of this approach, particularly as it affects Pakistan's relationship to India. After a long dry spell, the two countries have resumed bilateral talks on a range of critical issues, including nuclear proliferation and control, intelligence sharing and the status of Kashmir.

This should be encouraging news. But as it has been for too many decades, Pakistan's foreign policy remains double-sided and double-minded. With India as the focus for long-term strategy and a consequent desire to dominate Afghanistan in a counterbalancing policy called strategic depth, all the problems that Afghanistan represents for Pakistan lead to short-term, reactive confusion for its powerful soldiers, weak politicians and foreign allies alike.

No place is more complicated and awkward than the western border, the place where Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammed Omar are still rumored to hide and where the chasms between government power and local autonomy are revealed daily. Islamabad's grudging efforts to plug the holes in the border last year in Waziristan -- where the army arrived in full battle rattle to fight a 19th century war against an insurgency of indeterminate means -- failed so dreadfully as to suggest that it was simultaneously undercutting its local alliances and risking its own security. Pakistan's subsequent decision to turn over border control to local tribes who were then

meant to thwart Taliban fighters hasn't worked, either.

Attentive to the demands of the US if not the norms of the international community, Pakistan has proposed small, ineffective initiatives in the past year, threatening in quick succession to fence and mine the border, then hastily retracting the latter notion, and return refugees to chaotic Afghanistan. This muddle is a far cry from the intrusive, but clearer, policy of strategic depth that earlier impelled Pakistan's generals. In truth, Islamabad seems not to know whether it wants its border to be a buffer against instability, a holding pen for bellicose tribes or a staging ground for further interference in Afghanistan. Little wonder that it appears one day to support negotiations with the Taliban, another to dismiss the movement's potency, a third to encourage cross-border tribal consultations and, on most days, to define its relationship with its own frontier tribes and parties by bribery, punishment and rancor.

These inimitable border conflicts reveal the searing hole at the heart of Pakistan's politics. While the world's eyes focus on the faltering enterprises of state building and security in Afghanistan, the same critical processes remain unfinished in Pakistan, where decades of nimble state patronage have turned politics into artful but dangerous and continuing manipulations. The military sets up Islamists to challenge secularists and tribal leaders and so divide tribes from themselves; the state patronizes militants; and political parties -- the haven for resolving disputes in robust democracies -- wither on the sidelines.

The greatest threat to the state remains, ironically, the management of the state itself, and its weaknesses highlight Pakistan's perpetual disputes between militarism and participatory democracy. When challenged about tactics and strategy, Musharraf reverts to a soldier's accounting of war: assassination attempts, soldiers lost to battle and the frustrations of volatile tribal politics. He rarely tallies the number of renditions undertaken at the behest of the Bush administration, the hundreds of disappearances detailed by the

Pakistan Human Rights Commissions or the acute crisis these practices inflict on an already compromised judicial system.

Musharraf's detour on the road to democracy, with support from allegedly pro-democracy Washington, has compromised Pakistan's capacity to govern itself well and securely. Unbothered by the soft bigotry of low expectations, Washington went to war in 2001 with the ally it could cajole and buy, not the one it might ideally want. Despite recent criticism from the US and persistent critiques at home, Musharraf knows that the current US anti-terror campaign relies on the same border -- the place President Bush cavalierly calls "wilder than the Wild West" -- whose porosity the US now conveniently decries. The president-general also anticipates that while opinion is shifting during Washington's budget-and-blaming season, the Bush administration is unlikely to do anything that might compromise the fragile US-Pakistan alliance that keeps him in office.

Let's hope he's wrong. Pakistan's familiar political disarray and bickering politicians will continue to tax the patience of Pakistan's and America's generals. No doubt Musharraf will bank on the popular fear of extremism to tide him over in an election year in which he should not even be a candidate. But if Pakistan is to repair its torn political fabric and fix its tattered border, the army's hold over domestic politics and foreign policy -- the calculus nurtured for decades -- needs to be broken. Support for even a small peace with India may help Musharraf lead the way: to declare victory, and, finally, turn over Pakistan's future to its voters.

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Conspiracy theories and foreign diplomats

The foreign diplomats should note that what they were doing in the run-up to the present CG take over (January 12) was, basically, poking their noses in the internal affairs of a sovereign country. Would they subscribe to this kind of behaviour had this been the other way round? It is incredible and utterly disgraceful that these ambassadors from US, UK, EC, India, Canada, Australia and other countries had a field day poking around, meeting the various political party leaders for all to see on television. On top of that, during this entire period, our foreign ministry kept a low profile and conveniently turned a blind eye.

S I ZAMAN

A recent phenomenon, which has become almost ubiquitous, compels me to write this piece. Ever since those planes crashed into WTC on 9/11, there has been a tremendous proliferation of hundreds of internet blogs and sites appearing like mushrooms on the net, promoting conspiracy theories of all sorts of political mayhem around the world. The non-resident or, indeed, resident

Bangladeshis are no different.

The aftermath of the present care-taker government (CG) take-over has seen appearance of all sorts of internet blogs or sites proclaiming yet some more conspiracy theories. Like some oracle from antiquity, most of these blogs contend that the present CG is "unconstitutional," and has been engineered by US/EC policy in order to get their "kinda guy," i.e. a puppet, in Bangladesh, as a sort of further push in their "War on terror."

Obviously, none of these theories have any plausible foundation. Indeed, constructive and positive criticism is a pre-condition for healthy discourse -- equally, a constructive and meaningful opposition is a pre-condition for a democracy to run its course.

Anything legitimate which bolsters a greater good for a nation is good enough. The question is not whether this CG is constitutional, but rather whether this CG is good for the nation. And the latter is

overwhelmingly self-evident.

Certainly, this CG should stay in power for a considerable period of time to forge a national unity government, and to create a political atmosphere where democratic systems will thrive.

If this CG is indeed unconstitutional, then what about the previous one? Very much constitutional? Perhaps! But in reality, it was a surrogate of the erstwhile BNP regime -- was that "constitutional?" Rigging elections with impunity, creating an opaque administration, installing party-leaning bureaucrats and shoving out the non-partisans like some weeds, and then installing a puppet CG government -- are these acts constitutional?

As for the contention that this CG is a consequence of a US backed policy, for one thing, it is high time that conspiracy theorists shunned any tendency towards a comparative political analysis.

Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq are all unique cases. But they have one

thing in common. The only reason Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq have been meddled with by the US is because the US has long-term strategic and economic designs (energy) on these regions.

Promoting democracy and cleaning up Al-Qaeda (AQ) operatives are the least of their concerns. As for Bangladesh, I hardly think that the US has any long-term political or economic design on Bangladesh or, indeed, cleaning up AQ operatives here.

Now, to think that the US or UK/EC would go so far as to whisper, or indeed, suggest their position to the AL, BNP, LDP, and their coalition partners, in order to manipulate the political scenario so as to benefit their design is utterly nonsensical and self-congratulatory!

The foreign diplomats should note that what they were doing in the run-up to the present CG take over (January 12) was, basically, poking their noses in the internal affairs of a sovereign country. Would they

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It is incredible and utterly disgraceful that these ambassadors from US, UK, EC, India, Canada, Australia and other countries had a field day poking around, meeting the various political party leaders for all to see on television. On top of that, during this entire period, our foreign ministry kept a low profile and conveniently turned a blind eye.

As a minimum protocol, the least our foreign minister could have done was to summon these ambassadors in order to at least get them to account for their un-diplomatic stance. The nation certainly has a right to know, was the previous administration in the "payroll" of these foreign countries to keep their mouths shut? Could we imagine this kind of behavior from our ambassadors abroad? Moreover, it is a disgrace that no outrage was voiced in our tabloids while all this was going on.

For the CG, the task that lies

ahead is a formidable one. If we fail now, then Bangladesh would inevitably be drawn into the league of "Banana republics," a la Latin America. Are we a nation run by feeble-minded, corrupt and docile politicians who let themselves become easy prey and easy game for foreigners to play with, a nation to be defiled by foreigners with utter

disregard, and without the remotest possibility of any punitive measure against them? Is this what independence was all about? The question hinges on the very psyche of this nation of 140 million or so.

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