

Never say die



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MUMTAZ IQBAL

SOME issues, like old soldiers, never die, but also never quite fade away. One such issue is the National Security Council (NSC).

The idea was first floated in 1979 by then Major (later Brig. Gen. retd.) Sakhawat Hossain -- now an EC member -- in a paper at the Mirpur Staff College. Ershad picked up the idea, and apparently set up an NSC in 1985, but this remained moribund, even under the three subsequent civilian governments since 1991.

Since the emergency, talk of an NSC has blown hot and cold. In early March, media reports mentioned that the interim government was serious about setting up one, but never got round to doing it. The

Communications Adviser, Maj. Gen (retd) MA Matin, confirmed on July 11 that the proposal was in cold storage (Daily Star, July 12).

Lo and behold, a day later the idea was resurrected, from an unexpected quarter. On July 12, BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuiyan issued a 13-point reform program that included, among others, establishing of an NSC, citing various reasons.

They are analysed below (see Daily Star July 13). Interestingly, some AL reformers have also espoused the idea of an NSC. Coincidence? Or do endangered species think alike?

Analysis of Bhuiyan's proposal

Bhuiyan justifies his proposal by asserting that "NSC is playing an important role in different countries by helping in ensuring

security and facing crises." NSCs are "operating effectively in countries like US, UK, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Pakistan, India, Indonesia and Malaysia," and play "... a fruitful role in ensuring balance of power in the governance system."

Hence, an NSC in Bangladesh would yield the following benefits: "help protect the country's independence and sovereignty and ensure security," and "contribute to ensuring law and order, curbing terrorism and militancy, and protecting energy, food and water resources."

A number of countries have set up NSCs. But Bhuiyan did not elaborate on their rationale, working, or effectiveness. So it is impossible to judge what Bhuiyan really thinks of the viability of the NSC's.

Rationale for NSCs

Basically, there are two reasons why countries establish NSCs. First, to provide a forum at the highest level for discussing foreign policy issues with wide security implications. Two types of NSCs fall under this category.

In the first are those of the big countries like the US (National Security Council); Russian Federation (Security Council); and PR of China (Central Military Commission). India's NSC established, by the BJP in 1998, might be included because Delhi has the bomb, substantial territory, and is an emerging economic power-house. All these countries have legitimate global and/or regional interests.

In the second category are smaller countries with acute, localized, security concerns. One is Iran. Its Supreme NSC, founded in 1998, deals with its nuclear program. This is a major bone of contention between Tehran and Washington that could spark a conflict.

Another is Israel, whose NSC was established in 1999 by arch-hawk Benjamin Netanyahu

to coordinate security issues, despite the fact that Israel has not fought any big war since 1979.

An NSC in Sri Lanka is understandable because the country has an ongoing civil war. But it appears to deal only with issues arising from this conflict. Not much is known about Malaysia's NSC. Since Malaysia is politically stable and at peace with its neighbours, the rationale for an NSC appears weak.

The second category of NSC institutionalizes the military's role in politics. Two Muslim countries exemplify this.

The first is Turkey. It set up an NSC in 1961, following the 1960 coup, to integrate the military's participation in national affairs. While the services' role has declined over time, Turkish generals still have clout. Witness their statements on Turkey's secularism last April, when Abdullah Gul was nominated for president.

The other is Pakistan, which set up an NSC in 2004. This is a redundant body, since the army runs the country, has done so in the past, and is likely to do so

under some guise or the other for some time in the future.

Relevance for Bangladesh

Considerations of global interests don't really apply to Bangladesh, a two-product economy (garments and remittances) that is hostage to overseas forces outside its control.

The ostensible rationale, then, for our NSC is to institutionalize the military's overarching behind-the-scenes role in national life since the emergency.

Without going into the constitutional or legal aspects of setting up an NSC, it's fair to state that its establishment will formalize the government's existing decision-making mechanism, in which the services apparently have the final word on core issues.

This arrangement is likely to be case even after the NSC's establishment, even though the chairman and the majority of members may be civilians. But the voices of the three service chiefs will carry weight out of all proportion to their number.

Public perception will also be influenced by the distribution of NSC staff between mufti and khaki, and location (inside or outside the cantonment).

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The interim government will be judged on performance, not by the organizational elegance of its supreme organs. The cat has to catch mice -- its colour doesn't matter.

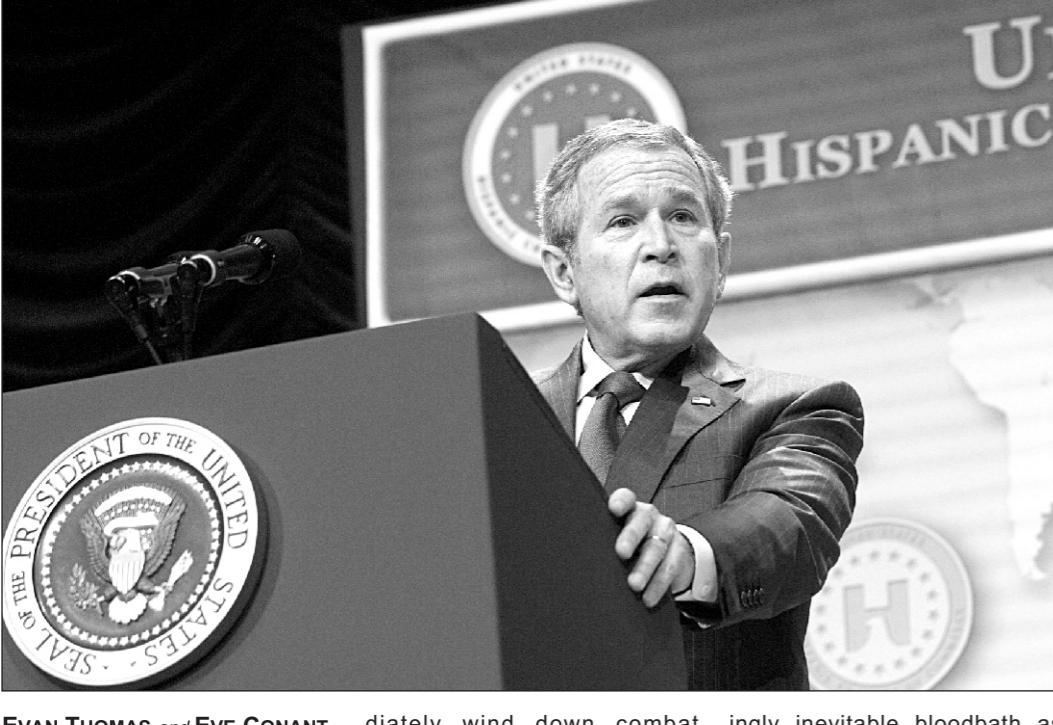
Forming the NSC will likely exacerbate public misgivings -- considerably agitated since Hasina's arrest -- about the real and ultimate intentions, not only of the brass but also of the kite-flying role of Bhuiyan and his counterpart dissidents in the Awami League.

These concerns are likely to increase since there is no indication about the NSC's duration of existence, whether this is to be a temporary expedient or a permanent feature of our structure of governance.

Given all these uncertainties and, at best, a nebulous cost-benefit ratio, one wonders whether it is worth setting up the NSC? It's probably far better to use the existing machinery to do what needs to be done to get the country moving again.

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Refusing to lose



EVAN THOMAS and EVE CONANT

THE secretary of State was cordial, but forceful and insistent. Wait until September, Condoleezza Rice told Sen. Susan Collins of Maine over the phone last week. Wait until the commanders on the ground can report their progress. "It was a strong plea for me not to join in any calls for a change of mission in Iraq," Collins recalled to Newsweek. But Collins, a Republican, was thinking of her recent trip to Iraq, where she claims that both Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and American commanders told her that a surge in troops in the end would not be the answer.

On a more visceral level, she recalled visiting a Maine soldier recuperating at Walter Reed. The soldier was trying to decide whether to have his foot amputated. "There's a 5 percent chance his foot might be saved if he waits, but he could also lose his entire leg if he doesn't amputate now," said Collins. "I thought, 'Here is this 19-year-old with this crushing decision to make.' And I have a crushing decision to make, too."

Collins seemed fed up. She says she told Rice "that the fact that Iraqi politicians still appear to be going on vacation in August, while our men and women are out there dying, doesn't make me think we're going to see any more progress by September," when Gen. David Petraeus delivers his report on the war. Collins sighed. "It's just that my patience with the administration's strategy is exhausted."

The senator introduced a bipartisan amendment to imme-

diately wind down combat operations and instead have troops focus on counterterrorism, border security and training Iraqi troops.

Collins believes her plan -- broadly similar to others floating around Congress -- will result in a "significant drawdown of our troops." Maybe. But military experts whom Newsweek interviewed (among them senior officers serving in Iraq) suggest that for such a combination of missions to be done effectively, there would be little allowance for any reduction in troops. Given political realities, of course, adding troops is a nonstarter.

How do you manage the process of losing a war? Americans don't like the word "defeat;" certainly, President George W. Bush won't be caught using it. He continues to talk of victory in Iraq, to insist that anything less is unacceptable. But his circle of true believers seems to be getting even smaller.

It may be limited to Vice President Dick Cheney, maybe a military commander or two and a few diehard senators. For everyone else in a position of authority over the war effort, there seems to be a grim recognition that Iraq is a lost cause, or very nearly so. The real question is not whether the US Army is on the verge of breaking under the strain of a war that has lasted longer than World War II.

Politicians talk; votes are cast; Washington fiddles while Iraq slowly burns. Nothing definitive is likely to happen any time soon. But the pressure will grow on the White House to face political reality: that the

inevitable bloodbath as Iraq collapses into full-scale civil war.

And what, exactly, would withdrawal look like? Americans still remember the desperate images of the fall of Saigon -- the iconic helicopter on the roof. Would Iraqis who cast their lot with the American "liberators" be seen clinging to tanks as they pull out of Baghdad?

This no-win reality is behind the current round of posturing on Capitol Hill. Some Democrats offer resolutions calling for the withdrawal of U.S. troops within a few months -- knowing that there's no real chance of the measure's passing and the president's accepting it. Some Republicans argue strongly to stay the course, while others (especially the ones up for re-election) look for a middle ground -- a gradual drawdown of troops by March.

There's no strong evidence that a partial withdrawal would be an effective endgame, but the president probably has, at the outside, until next spring to show that his surge plan can provide the security for Iraq's fractious politicians to mend their differences. By that time, President Bush may have no choice but to cut his troop force in Iraq for the simple reason that the US Army is on the verge of breaking under the strain of a war that has lasted longer than World War II.

Smith says he told the president that his opposition to the war was based in part on "knowing what it's like as a parent to bury a child." Smith pointedly added: "And we're doing a lot of that in this country now." Bush responded, "I

Cutting the number of troops or changing their mission, as Senator Collins and other lawmakers suggest, may not be so straightforward. A senior officer with a command role in Iraq operations, who requested anonymity to maintain his relationship with Congress, scoffed at the assumptions held by lawmakers who want to draw down forces.

Concentrating on counterterrorism, stopping terrorists or munitions from coming over the border and training and equipping Iraqis are missions that in total could require more, not fewer, troops.

The much-vaunted surge of 30,000 troops that began back in January did not actually crest until June. Only in the past month has the operational chief in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, been able to throw a pair of armed rings around Baghdad to cut off the movement of insurgents and munitions from the countryside.

American forces often, it seems, play whack-a-mole -- they can pacify an area, but as soon as they leave, the insurgents come back. At the same time, however, American forces are making some progress. A plan to surround and cut off Baqubah, an Al Qaeda in Iraq stronghold, seemed to fizzle in June when the insurgents fled before the troops arrived.

But last week American forces got a tip from a local resident that insurgents from the group were hiding in the small town of Sherween. This time, using American planes to bomb bridges and deploying Iraqi soldiers (aided by US Special Forces) on the ground, the Americans were able to cut off escape and kill or capture about 40 insurgents.

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"This isn't Harry Potter," says the official. "You can't just wave a wand." Many lawmakers want to implement the suggestions of the Iraq Study Group from last December. The Baker-Hamilton report suggested embedding US troops with Iraqi units. "That's a prescription for getting American soldiers killed," says retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey.

If American soldiers start dying in ever-larger numbers, political pressure will grow to pull out of Iraq altogether. Pentagon officials wary of seeming to undercut the president decline to discuss it on the record; but Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, has ordered up "staff estimates" -- rough cuts -- of what several contingencies might entail. One sobering conclusion: withdrawal would take at least nine months and possibly as long as two years. The nine-month scenario would be "if we were told to leave quickly," and would be "under combat conditions," says a military official who also didn't want to undercut the president on the record. Translation: the US military would have to fight its way out. General McCaffrey predicts a "nightmare" of ambushed convoys and a tidal wave of desperate refugees.

Getting out of Iraq, it seems, would be just as horrendous as staying in.

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