

Confusion about National Security Council

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HERE was a news item in one of the vernacular daily, which said that a proposal for the formation of National Security Council (NSC) is now lying on the President's Table for his approval. The news did not stir me much as it is in the air for quite some time that the present Government may go for setting up the NSC. What perplexed me was that the Chief of the Army Staff General Moin U Ahmed would be the co-chairman of the Council along with the Chief Advisor.

There seems to be quite a confusion regarding National Security Council. There has been talk of this particular body since 1981 but no work has been done so far at the government level. The Advisors of the present Caretaker Government themselves are not in harmony in their utterances. The political parties as well as the elite group seem to be very keen to have an NSC. From the comments made by the political parties, there seem to be enough confusion about this body. The question of setting up an organization like NSC only comes up whenever there is a political crisis. This indicates that our politicians and elites perceive this as an organization above the government, which can act as an advisory body or an arbiter in case of political crisis. They possibly think that this body can mediate or settle issues between the political parties or forestall any political confrontations. It can also be discerned from the comments of the politicians and elites that they would like this body to be set up to forestall any political venture by the military also. Making the Chief of the Army Staff as co-chairman of the NSC is rather ludicrous. The armed forces are the actors, who will act according to the directives of the political government. The politicians must come up and take their responsibilities. In case of a political crisis or confrontation they have to resolve that themselves. Getting Military involved in it is calling for disaster in the future.

Most countries have an organization, which deal with matters

pertaining to national security. The name and format may vary. No one country's model can fully be implemented in another country. We have to form it to suit our requirements. We have to remember that NSC is a policy making body that formulates and advises governments on strategic issues of a country related to national security. It has to fit in our political framework also. If we look into the past the picture is not bright at all. Right from our independence we had a 'one man show'. As a result no such organization or body was developed. What is alarming now is that the present Caretaker Government seems to be too fickle. Either they should decide that they would set up the NSC or say that this should be left to the political government. In latter case the chances will be remote.

There have been incidences in the past where our governments have not been able to react properly or reacted too late. These have happened because there is no body in the government that can provide accumulated information or intelligence to the government. The head of the government or the cabinet gets report from individual organizations. There is no coordinating agency. Another lacuna we have inherited since the beginning is that the head of the government also holds the Defense portfolio; as a result he or she gets directly involved with the day-to-day matters pertaining to defense.

Bangladesh's national security decision-making process has so far been archaic. Discussions on security matters are a taboo in our country. The western democracies and even India share some common features like public debates, some prominent national values and the need for a wide consensus on matters of national security. But in Bangladesh we do not have these practices. The major political parties are poles apart on major issues. When the heads of the two major political parties are not in talking terms, not much can be expected from the others. Unless there is a tectonic shift in the mindset of our major political leaders we cannot expect any tangible result.

National security normally has

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five traditional components - diplomatic, military, internal security, economic potential and strategic intelligence. In recent times, unconventional threats to the national security such as insurgents and terrorists, trans-national criminals, narcotic smugglers, counterfeiters etc have forced countries to reevaluate their national security mechanism. Some countries have added components like disaster management within the purview of national security. These unpredictable adversaries have brought in new dimension to the security perception of countries. The old concept of threat analysis has been supplemented by risk analysis and vulnerability analysis. The speed, with which these threats emanate and are at times executed, necessitates the need of a comprehensive system of national security policy formulation, implementation and coordination. These have further underlined the importance of integrated approach to national security.

No effective and institutionalized structure or mechanism catering to our security needs was designed mainly due to political and bureaucratic neglect. The evolution of an NSC should have been a natural process as we had a low level insurgency prevalent in our country. However, it is not too late to have an apex body advising the PM on national security matters. One may argue on the necessity of having a NSC but the matter of the fact is that at present there is no coordination between ministries and departments in real sense. It is no longer possible to look at domestic security policy and foreign policy separately from each other. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Finance, the intelligence agencies and the Prime Minister's Office would all be involved in this body. What is needed is a mechanism within which those responsible for action within the government can ensure that, from the start, policy adopted in any of the areas covered by the body is coherent in the sense that it takes fully into account the likely consequences at home and abroad.

One of the most glaring shortcomings in our country is lack of strategic culture in our policymaking; it is evident both in our politicians and the bureaucrats. There is a tendency among our politicians and bureaucrats to withhold information from public, so that they do not face criticism. Similarly if any issue comes to limelight, which is incoherent or does not meet our expectation, then they try to cover up the issue.

The requirement of National Security Council is legitimate and justified and the Government should immediately move to set it up. NSC is expected to discharge two vital functions:

- NSC is a decision facilitating body to assist and advise the Prime Minister. In a country which lacks strategic culture, the Armed Forces will have a vital role to play.
- The NSC is to evaluate, coordinate and integrate strategic information, advice, expertise and suggestions from government agencies, armed forces, intelligence agencies and think tanks.

To carry out the above vital tasks, NSC has to have a very strong fully operative organization. Any half-baked effort will boomerang the entire effort. Such an organization may not be at the liking of our politicians who tend to believe in autocratic method, whereas NSC is an organization where free flow of thoughts and opinions form the lifeline.

Any confusion regarding NSC should be cleared. Whether we have an NSC or not, but it has to be a body headed by a person senior to the Chief of Army Staff. It is basically a civilian outfit where military plays a significant role. At the end it will all depend on the personality who heads the body and whom the body advises.

The author is a freelancer.

Will the US arms sale bring stability in the Middle East?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

IRAN has become the "eye of storm" for the US in the Middle East. The US does not seem to have a negotiating policy towards Iran, only confrontation. The US Secretary of State, at the beginning of her tour in the Middle East, termed Iran as "the biggest threat to Middle East". Diplomatic dialogue is ruled out with Iran, although the two sides meet only on the issue of stability of Iraq.

The Bush administration looks at most problems that have a simple solution, often a military solution. US Vice President Cheney told long time ago that he had no faith that diplomacy would work with Iran. He said that he would not be surprised if Israel decided to take out Iran's nuclear facilities. It is reported that lately Cheney has been advising the President to go for a military solution before he leaves office, if Iran does not halt its uranium enrichment nuclear programme.

On 31st July, both the Secretary of State Dr. Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates commenced their visit to Egypt and Saudi Arabia together and other Gulf countries separately.

What was the purpose of the visit?

The visit has the following aims: (a) to provide Israel new arms to have an advantage over the Arab countries, (b) to strengthen defense capabilities of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman, to contain influences from Iran, Syria and regional militant groups, (c) convening a new conference for peace between Israelis and Palestinians and (d) stabilize Iraq with the cooperation of Arab States.

The US plans to sell satellite-guided bombs, fighter aircraft upgrades and new naval vessels. Israel is concerned that the US is providing arms to Arab States and after the stalemate in war with Hezbollah last year in Lebanon, it wants a definite edge over the Arab countries in quality of weapons.

The US has agreed to it and reportedly US\$30 billion aid would be given to Israel over 10 years, representing a 25% increase from present levels. Already, Israel has replenished the weapons that were lost during the Lebanese war. Israel will always have advantage over the Arab countries, according to US policy.

The US wants to strengthen Egypt's ability to "address shared

strategic goals" by giving US\$13 billion worth of weapons as the Secretary of State reportedly stated. What is the shared goal? The goal is to contain influence of Iran and Syria in the Middle East and to lobby for Israel among Arab States to soften their attitude towards Israel.

Saudi Arabia and five other Arab countries are expected to get US\$20 billion worth of advanced weapons as a counterweight to Iran and Syria.

Will the strategy work?

The proposed new conference for peace between Israelis and Palestinians is not likely to work. There are many inter-linked issues

wealth from oil belongs to all Iraqis. Then the Iran-US confrontation looms large in restoring stability in Iraq. Unless these issues are addressed, observers do not think any headway is likely to be made to stabilize Iraq.

Human Rights Watch said the sales would undermine US goals in the Middle East. This will reduce pressure on Egypt and the Arab states to reform their political system through participation of ordinary people in governance through elected representatives.

What about the rhetoric of President Bush when he said to the people of the Middle East "as you stand for your liberty, America stands with you." Many believe that

There are complex set of relationships behind it, and while it is very desirable to have the Saudis and others recognize that Iran is an existential threat, there is also a degree of responsibility that they have to show on broader US foreign policy interests.

What he meant is that sometime ago, Saudi Arabia's King called the US military presence on Iraq an "illegitimate occupation". It is alleged that Saudi Arabia has been unable to stop suicide bombers who ended up in Iraq. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia reportedly stated that it would support and assist the Sunnis in Iraq in a conflict with Shi'as.

On 28th July, the Democrat

support of the US. According to Washington-based Pew Research Institute, 70% of people in Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait oppose US policy in the region.

Israel does not even care the Arab states and refused to sit on the table with the proposal of Saudi Arabia for recognition of Israel by Arab countries in exchange of the return of occupied lands that were captured since 1967 by Israel.

Ordinary Arabs do not want American weapons in their countries, often being used to suppress their voices. They point out that not a single country except Lebanon out of 21 Arab states has given the opportunity for people to have their say freely in governing the country.

Some suggest that the rise of militancy is due to the deprivation of people of their voice in running the country. If there had been participatory or representative democracy, there would not be resurgence of militancy in the region. It is a fight against injustice and deprivation that is the root cause of the rise of militancy.

Some suggest that why do the Arab countries not produce or manufacture the weapons themselves? They have no shortage of money. Why do they not wish to be self-sufficient in weapons? Did they try to be self-reliant?

Today, Muslims are oppressed, deprived and most are uneducated with no scientific or technological achievements to show to the world. There is a report that Greece publishes more books per year than those of the entire Arab world. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad regretted that the Muslims had become complacent, lazy and do not want to march in science and technology with the time.

There is a view that unless the Arab countries assert themselves in invention, science, technology and knowledge, they will remain backward of the West that has progressed tremendously in science and technology at the 21st century.

It is noted that during the Middle Age, when Christians in Europe were steeped in darkness, it was the Muslim philosophers, scientists and physicians that dominated the world. Who does not know the names of Al-Farabi, Al-Kindi, Ibn-Sina, Al-Gazzali or Ibn Rushd?

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along with it. First, Hamas is to be given a place in the political map of Palestinian state and second, Israel will have to withdraw from occupied territory. Third, Israel has to withdraw from Syria's Golan Heights. Finally, Iran's cooperation is imperative because it reportedly supports the policy of Hamas and Hezbollah. Hezbollah wants Israel to withdraw from Lebanon's Shebaa farm in the south.

Likewise, the war in Iraq involves a number of elements: Shi'a Sunni fight, Shi'ah-Shi'ah fight, nationalists' fight against foreign troops and Al-Qaeda fighters against US troops. Furthermore, the present Iraqi Constitution needs to be amended to satisfy the Sunnis so that national

the administration promotes democracy only if it serves US interests. It now wants to purchase stability at the expense of freedom and democracy in the Middle East.

Another Human Rights group warned the offer could backfire, allowing the Iranian President Ahmadinejad to rally greater support for his faction in the run-up to parliamentary elections next year.

Reaction from some members of the Congress

All big arms deal needs to be approved by the Congress under the Arms Export Act of 1976.

The Democrat Chairman of the House of Representatives foreign affairs committee reportedly stated that he had reservations. He said: "

congressman Anthony Weiner and Robert Wexler said that they would oppose the deal and move a resolution of disapproval to block the deals to Saudi Arabia. Mr. Weiner reportedly said: "Saudi Arabia should not get an ounce of military support from the US until they unequivocally denounce terrorism and take tangible steps to prevent it." The congressman pointed out that 15 out of 19 hijackers who carried 9/11 attacks were Saudi nationals.

Reaction from people in Arab World

Ordinary Arab people are overwhelmingly anti-American. They see injustice and oppression of Israel on Palestinians with the

India and China: Bangladesh equation

WALI-UR RAHMAN

AS Congress spokesman for Commerce, Industry and Foreign Trade, Mr. Joyram Ramesh was a familiar face on the television screens. The story goes that as Mr. Kamalnath, the commerce minister is spending time with the top notches in International Trade and Finance - today with the WTO and Brussels mandarins, and tomorrow with the Brazilian President De Silva Lora - he has left the charge of bilateral trade and commerce matters in the steady hands of Joyram Ramesh.

His two-day visit to Dhaka was significant for many reasons. He reopened certain issues, which were considered taboo in our discourse like transshipment, Chittagong New Mooring facility, tariff outpost between Mizoram-Bangladesh border and joint venture between Bangladesh and India for the 110-megawatt power plant etc. As an example he cited the cement factory in Bangladesh working with the raw materials from Meghalaya. He also requested that the most wanted Indian criminals in Bangladesh may be handed over to India and in return, India would send back all the wanted Bangladeshi fugitives in India.

The export of Garments from Bangladesh to India, as first proposed by the Indian External Affairs Minister Mr. Pranab Mukherjee and reaffirmed by the Indian Prime Minister to our Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed at the SAARC Summit in New Delhi, also came up for discussion.

Apart from his address to the Indo-Bangla joint chamber of commerce, inaugurated by the Hon'ble President of the Republic, and addressed by the Hon'ble Adviser for Finance and Commerce Mirza Azizul Islam, the Indian State Minister also paid courtesy calls on the Hon'ble President, the Finance Adviser, Foreign Adviser and DG, BDR.

In between, there was an informal luncheon at a local Hotel hosted by Indian High Commission where some select civil society leaders were invited. This informal discussion meeting held under Chatham House rules turned out to be more fruitful in import than any of the other meetings, which were only following the protocolaire diplomatique! Certain issues of the discussion cannot be written in black and white, that is the spirit of the Chatham House rule. However a few things, which are our well-known demands and have been aired publicly by both sides, can be paraphrased in diplomatic lingo. We want Indian Government to take effective measures allowing our electronic channels, including BTv, to be shown in India, as we in Bangladesh have access to over 100 Indian channels in English and all regional languages! For the first time an Indian official openly admitted that this should be rectified as soon as possible, and even gave a road map about the plan, albeit the official may be blamed for the "Stockholm syndrome" by the concerned authority! The official also suggested that there should be more civil society outfit meetings and interactions with each other in Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. At this moment it is only confined to two think tanks, one in India and one in Bangladesh. The dimension should be expanded so that new thoughts and ideas can be garnered to the benefit of both the countries.

Concern was expressed about the ineffective use of soft power by India vis-à-vis her neighbours. Whereas China was doing it more effectively both

with her neighbors and overseas countries, India appeared to be lagging behind. The question of the decline of American soft power also came up for scrutiny an American official admitted how the US is lagging behind China and India both in this regard. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore he said that 16 years ago, the USAID had over 16 thousand officers working all around the globe effectively; today it is only 3½ thousand! The USIS has been closed in most of the countries thereby leaving the field to others to fill in the vacuum. An Indian official admitted to this though he mentioned about Indian soft power use in Afghanistan, most significant of that was the building of the Parliament House in Kabul.

The much talked about MoU for export of Bangladesh garments to India was not signed though agreement in principle was reached. We were, however, surprised at what was reported to have been said by a Bangladesh official that the Indian Minister's proposals were made only informally; once formal proposals are received, the Government would consider that seriously.

It may be mentioned that if a hypothetical number of one thousand agreements, Treaties, Protocols or MoUs have been hitherto signed, their progress in making the process of moving ahead were first done informally. For example, when Bangladesh Government was desperately trying to get President Nelson Mandela to Bangladesh, one senior Cabinet Minister was sent and three senior most bureaucrats were dispatched to Pretoria; unfortunately, none of them could even meet the South African President. But it was through an informal channel that the President was met and brought to Bangladesh to attend our Silver Jubilee celebration in March 1997!

India should be more generous; it has to first translate into action the promises so far made, including the withdrawal of non-tariff barriers. In such matters India should proceed on the basis of non-reciprocity to demonstrate her goodwill to Bangladesh. India may also announce that Bangladesh's request for corridor to Bhutan and Nepal will be granted without delay.

I seriously believe that both India and Bangladesh should use the window of opportunity created through the friendly meeting between our Hon'ble chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed and the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh at the SAARC Summit in New Delhi. Diplomatic wisdom warns that an opportunity lost is an opportunity gonebut of course we must keep our national interest uppermost in our mind. Remember what Napoleon Bonaparte said about 'Czar Alexander-1, "I am no better than an idiot, but he who laughs last laughs best". Let both India and Bangladesh seize the opportunity of the favorable vibes.

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