

# 'Confusion about NSC' - A rejoinder

MUMTAZ IQBAL

CONSIDERING the vacillation since last May whether a National Security Council (NSC) was to be or not to be, one expected Brig. Gen. Shafaat Ahmed's (ret.) article "Confusion about National Security Council" to elucidate the compulsions for setting up a NSC (DS Strategic Issues, Saturday 11 August).

Regrettably, not only doesn't it do so but it also adds to the "confusion", for two reasons.

The first is that the article is full of generalizations and platitudes, especially from paragraphs 3 to 6. Thus paragraph 4 refers to "...incidences in the past where our governments have not been able to react properly or reacted too late...because there is no [coordinating] body in the government [to]... provides accumulated information or intelligence."

Superficially, this seems a valid point. But without concrete examples of such incidences, its merit can't be assessed.

Similar is the author's conclusion (paragraph 8, lines 1 and 2), "the requirement of National Security Council is legitimate and justified and the Government should immediately move to set it up." The wish is the father of the thought here. If wishes were horses, wouldn't beggars ride?

The second reason is the floating of the vague and ambiguous idea that there is a "lack of strategic culture in our policy making" (para.7, line 1) as the rationale for the NSC. This is a red herring if ever there was one and will be analysed in what follows.

**What is "strategic culture"?**

Nowhere in the article does the author define "strategic culture." (By inference, is there something called "tactical culture?"). In fact, he springs this concept upon us as a surprise quite late in the essay, in paragraph 7. The earlier six paragraphs do not contain any indication that would lead the reader to expect any reference to the "lack of strategic culture" as a critically missing ingredient in our governance.

In paragraph 7, Brig. Ahmed states emphatically that "both...our politicians and bureaucrats" lack this "culture." He may be right, but only if we know what yardstick he's using.

But it does not follow from this absence that "strategic culture" is present amongst the members of the armed services, which is what the Brigadier is implying. If that's his intention, then he should make this point explicit with supporting examples and give his reasons without beating about the bush.

Merely to assert or infer is neither sufficient nor persuasive. What's needed is hard empirical evidence.

In the absence of such evidence, it's permissible then to speculate as to what may or may not constitute "strategic culture". It surely does not refer to spit and polish, shiny brass buttons, smart turnout et al. These characteristics have their place in a professional army.

But the final word on the irrelevance of these characteristics in decision making is the WWI put-down of Field Marshal Douglas Haig by Brit PM David Lloyd-George when he chided that the military "...must not make the mistake of thinking that the seat of intelligence is in the chin!"

Considering the vacillation since last May whether a National Security Council (NSC) was to be or not to be, one expected Brig. Gen. Shafaat Ahmed's (ret.) article "Confusion about National Security Council" to elucidate the compulsions for setting up a NSC (DS Strategic Issues, Saturday 11 August). Regrettably, not only doesn't it do so but it also adds to the "confusion", for two reasons. The first is that the article is full of generalizations and platitudes, especially from paragraphs 3 to 6.

From this, we can conclude that "strategic culture" refers to something cerebral not muscular, of the mind and related to the quality of thought processes, an appreciation and understanding of the big or large policy issues or considerations that national policy makers have to evaluate while researching or taking core decisions.

For example, we can buy arms from PRC but entering into a formal military alliance would be injudicious. Landlocked Nepal can't even buy arms from Beijing without attracting Indian sanctions. Colombo has got arms and training from Islamabad despite Delhi's ire.

But by definition, the training and education of contemporary service officers don't make them privy to "strategic culture." Their training is how to fight conflicts and wars of all kinds that are evolving and changing (e.g. conventional warfare, Korea, Vietnam and Iraq are examples). Their higher military education at the staff and defense colleges is geared to this

narrow but important goal, not statecraft.

It is only when these officers reach high command at the field or HQ level that the more senior ones amongst them are exposed to the complex, complementary and interlocking interaction of the material forces of domestic politics, external diplomacy and economic resources that impinge upon military capability including planning and conducting operations.

There is every reason to believe that all worthy armed services are guided by these eternally pragmatic considerations that Thucydides elaborated in his timeless masterpiece The Peloponnesian War, especially his brutally frank Melian dialogue (The strong take what they can. The weak suffer what they must). There is no reason to expect that the Bangladesh defense forces are exempt from their application.

It would have helped had the writer given examples of countries possessing "strategic culture." Within living memory and

amongst our neighbours, we see the marked divergence in performance of the Indian and Pakistani armies dominated by the Punjabi "martial race" and presumably possessing "strategic culture."

Delhi has kept its brass subordinate to the civilians, so that the three services can concentrate on strengthening their professionalism. GHQ Rawalpindi decided soon after 1947 that running Pakistan was its rightful role.

The result: Pakistan army scored goalless draws in 1948 and 1965; lost in 1971 and got nowhere with unconventional raids (Kargil). These are poor returns on vast investment but worse followed.

The Pakistani generals have run the country into a quagmire while creating ABRI under Suharto, a vast unaccountable economic empire (see Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy Ayesha Siddiqi). Theirs is an example to avoid, not emulate.

Societies that may have had a high level of "strategic culture"

have not necessarily performed well. Militarized Sparta crumbled while pesky Athens survived to bequeath the world the notion of governance by democracy. The Mongols forged an unbeatable war machine but left little durable.

In more recent times, Prussia is the example par excellence of an army with a state. But the Hohenzollerns greatest achievements were by civilian Iron Chancellor Bismarck. He crafted sensible not vengeful peace treaties that endured following Moltke's victories of Sadowa (1865) and Sedan (1870), vividly illustrating Clausewitz's dictum that war is the continuation of politics/diplomacy by other means.

Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm overreached himself in 1914 and saw his dynasty disappear. But the German General Staff survived Versailles and willingly served Hitler, only to see itself and Germany destroyed in 1945.

Perhaps the article's most contentious assertion is in para-

graph 8, which states: "In a country which lacks strategic culture, the Armed Forces have a vital role to play."

It depends upon what is meant by "vital." Defending the country from external attack, tackling major internal security threats e.g. CHT insurgency and/or aiding civil power to deal with disturbances are legitimate roles.

But if by "vital" is meant the armed forces running the country directly (e.g. Pakistan), covertly (our CTG) or statutorily through an NSC (e.g. Turkey), then this is to invite trouble voluntarily, like picking up a stone to drop at one's feet. There is a red line not to be crossed. And if crossed, it's prudent to withdraw sooner rather than later.

The two military governments we had from 1975 to 1991 left the body politic scarred. Neither Zia nor Ershad set up an NSC they didn't have to, having all the power they wanted or needed despite the CHT insurgency though Ershad briefly toyed with the idea.

Unlike arch-schemer Ershad, Kurmitola stumbled on to the Emergency more by accident than design, an outgrowth mainly attributable to prolonged misrule by vainglorious and recklessly corrupt political leaders and associates who should have known and done better.

Despite enjoying a fair measure of public support, the brass hats have discovered unsurprisingly that to run and/or reform a ship of state, especially one as fractiously corrupt as ours, isn't easy. But having stepped into the breach with a reformist agenda and zeal that enjoy reasonable public backing, they also

can't just walk away.

Unanticipated challenges like inflation, nature and protracted difficulty in sidelining the two "netris", despite their perceived and actual culpability (for example, Khaleda's tax dodging that distributing saris in Sirajganj won't expiate), suggest that good intentions in statecraft are not enough. What matters is performance.

Judged by this yardstick, there is scope to improve the structure, texture and execution of CTG's governance, especially in tackling the unavoidably necessary but thorny question of political reforms. The CTG is in the unenviable position of riding a tiger and dismounting safely. It needs all the help it can get, for the blowback from a blotched intervention could be unacceptably high for a fragile society and state.

Having said this, it's doubtful if setting up an NSC would be a panacea or enable the above problems to be dealt with either greater efficacy or efficiency. Certainly inflation respects neither mufti nor khaki. It affects all unequivocally though not equally.

It would be a pity if Kurmitola were to overlook the debilitating outcomes of past and contemporary domestic and external examples of military governance, and undertook the palpably profitless exercise of flirting with the idea of, or actually setting up, an NSC.

Shouldn't biting not once but twice over 1975-1991 be enough to make one shy?

If we have any "culture" that's "strategic", it's agriculture, the backbone of our economy.

The author is a free lancer.

## Transit rights in South Asia: Why no headway?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

INDIA'S minister in charge of trade Joyram Ramesh, while visiting Bangladesh in July, appeared to be as exuberant and vigorous as one ever could be in boosting bilateral relations with Bangladesh. In some quarters, some of his statements became controversial.

For a moment we can set aside the manifestation of exuberance of his youthful personality and pick up his serious statements regarding Indo-Bangladesh relations.

He raised certain important issues that go to the heart of improving Indo-Bangladesh cooperative relations.

Both countries are hugging neighbours and furthermore, Bangladesh is "India-locked" except in the southeast. Given the geopolitics of the region, it is imperative that the pace of Indo-Bangladesh relation should be put into a high gear.

Many political observers suggest that Indo-Bangladesh relations suffer largely from myopic vision or warped view of "national interests". National interest is a generic term and varies from time to time.

What was considered national interests in the 70s may not be treated as national interests now? The world has moved on and globalization has influenced the content of international, regional and bilateral relations among nations.

Almost all economists in the research field of both countries suggest economic integration of northeast India, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. The effect will be that investors have more opportunities to diversify their holdings; businesses have more markets to serve, and more locations for production. The idea was once mooted through the concept of the "Quadrangle" but it never took off.

Joyram Ramesh, among other things, raised important issues namely: (a) transit, (b) use of Chittagong port, (c) joint venture and (d) opening tariff post between Mizoram and Bangladesh.

Let us briefly deal with questions. In Europe, transit right is no big deal. It is granted without fuss. Even during the Cold War, the Soviet Union was accorded transit rights in the Western Europe. Everyday transports are going through Switzerland to southern Europe from northern Europe. Austria is a country that provides transit routes to many countries.

The question of trans-shipment or transit in South Asia is not as easily dealt with. It becomes sensitive and political, to the extent as if sovereignty of a country is bartered away. For example, any concession given by India or Bangladesh toward each other is seen as "sell-out" by some people within the country and the political opposition.

Nothing good can be achieved for people in believing in negative thinking. In life as well as in state-to-state relations, dynamism together with pragmatic flexibility is the key element of moving forward, keeping pace with the time and change.

India shares borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal and none of these countries do share border with each other. Accordingly, India is placed in an advantageous position to take initiative in the matter.

If India gives transit rights to Nepal and Bhutan through Bangladesh and transit rights to Bangladesh through Nepal and Bhutan, then the people in Bangladesh will tend to support

Bangladesh's giving India transit rights.

There must be perception among people in the country that there is some onward movement in granting transit rights to all countries in the eastern part of South Asia for the benefit of the people. One positive action leads to another.

There must be a beginning somewhere and India is in a position to do that. I wish the visiting India's enthusiastic State Minister had declared a date for convening a meeting among the four countries to establish a legal arrangement for transit rights. This would have been a concrete step.

Once Nepal and Bhutan are entitled to use Bangladesh ports (now they use only Kolkata port), there would be a favourable momentum in Bangladesh for access to Chittagong port by northeastern states of India from Agartala. Conducive environment must be created first prior to such transit rights being provided.

With regard to joint venture, either at the level of public or private sector, there has to be a perception that both parties get benefits. The benefits are to be tangible. Furthermore tariff, para-tariff and non-tariff barriers between the two countries must be dismantled for easy movement of goods for consumers.

In Bangladesh there are certain people who do not view any concession to be given first to India without resolving pending important issues between Bangladesh and India. They could be right in thinking in that way. However, there is the other view that let one issue be sorted out at a time. If transit facility to India is beneficial for Bangladesh, there should not be any hesitation.

Bangladesh has developed a good reputation for its goods in the markets of India's northeastern states. However, tariff and non-barriers have put a stop to further developing that trade. Moreover, India has not given attention to opening more border tariff posts in the areas bordering Bangladesh.

If Pakistan allows Iranian oil pipeline to pass through its territory to India, and if Japan's trade with China excluding Hong Kong surged 11.5% per cent in 2006 to \$211 billion making mainland China Japan's top trading partner, why is it that Bangladesh and India can't sort out the transit right among themselves? Transport interconnectivity is imperative for foreign investment and trade.

Two questions need to be asked, (a) is bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India adapted to an economic world that has been transformed in the last 30 years by growth and globalization? (b) What steps can be expected from leaders of the two countries to engage in an intense discussion to resolve the lack of transport connectivity?

Reciprocal transit right was asserted by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh at the Dhaka SAARC Summit. People in both countries do not want pledges to descend into just aspirations and then wishful thinking. The challenge seems to be the lack of India's political will in addressing this issue.

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## The legacy of politics

BRIG GEN (RETD) JAHANGIR KABIR, NDC, PSC

WE have tried just about every form of government in last thirty-six years; if the fundamentals of statecraft are not yet resolved, there is need to look deeper to identify and remove the snags. If we do not read history, efforts to build a future may tumble down again and again on weak foundations. Emotional misjudgements on complex political issues have been the core of endless miseries. It was Dhaka that gave birth to the Muslim League in 1906; A.K Fazlul Huq moved the Pakistan resolution in 1940. Swayed by the slogan of 'Larke Lenga Pakistan' the safeguards essential within physically truncated and culturally diverse Pakistan for the empowerment of the majority Bengalis had not been sought. That I suppose was the beginning of the series of blunders for which people had to pay in blood and sweat for quarter of a century of Pakistan.

The rudest shock came when Mr. Jinnah himself, right in Dhaka in 1948, declared that Urdu would be the only national language. The leaders of East Pakistan were either in deafening applause or in callous silence on the declaration of their Quid-e-Azam (supreme leader). Politicians of consequence nowhere to be seen, the students, defying authority, went on the streets spearheading the language movement that sowed the seeds of Bangladesh. Due to faulty and failed leadership the students never really came back from the streets.

By any logic, Dhaka, the city of the majority, should have been the capital of Pakistan but it went to Karachi, the hometown of Mr. Jinnah, subsequently another 1000 miles of land journey, to Islamabad, the hometown of the Pakistan Army. Khawaja Nazimuddin, Hussein Shaheed Shuhrardary and Mohammed Ali of Bogra were prime ministers of Pakistan. One of the leaders representing this wing, conceding parity formula between the wings that denied the majority rights of Bengalis, threatened to pass the 1956 Constitution by ordinance if not accepted. Betrayal was homegrown and still continues in the vitiated political culture. Punjabis, Pathans, Sindhis, Baluchis, even assorted migrants from India never gave up their ethnic identities; unfortunately, many leaders of the then East Pakistan were shy of calling themselves Bangali. Bengali language and culture was low caste identity for them. Struggle for Bangladesh was more of a cultural revolution for identity.

Divisions had been left intact to the bureaucrats to rule over the natives. As a result, the people continued to be subjects of the bureaucrats; citizens only once in five years during the façade of election to legitimise the political masters.

A farmer, cowboy, or rural living is the cultural pride of western democracies. Where is democracy when 70% people still live in the villages; but 'gramma'/'gaaiyan' (rural resident) is an abuse among elite culture. The politicians, bureaucrats, intellectuals, everybody loves Bangladesh but paradoxically not the people who are poor and uncultured for the 'brahmins'. Post liberation constitution



mean power and power means Dhaka.

The colonial rulers were bold to say the natives were unfit to rule themselves; the 1973 Constitution championed the people but deprived the political rights by built-in deception. The wide gap between the rulers and the ruled never really shrunk in spite of the independence and elections.

It is absurd that the improvement of a village road needs sanctioning of the authority in the capital, as no other authority exists in Bangladesh. Absolute political power has also sucked in all business and financial powers in Dhaka. Even the colonial masters never had so much concen-

had the greatest opportunity to institutionalise the central, provincial and local governments to contain elitism and empower people. People could chose and participate in their local government for immediate needs: law and order, education, commerce, industry at regional level, and of course the central government for national and international affairs. Election was made increasingly expensive and volatile, affordable only by the rich and powerful. Concentration of power in Dhaka had robbed the people their earnestly needed local and middle governments for their needs. Four layers of colonial administration in Thana (PS) Sub-division, District and

tration of power in one centre. The accountability was the first casualty of the absolute power. No wonder Bangladesh had become the most corrupt country in the world.

When we walk into a government office for some service or try to keep the telephones talking, the only logic that matters is money to evade harassment. The bureaucracy that continues to be the tool of repression is the persistent failure of the leadership. The 'Yes Minister' rightly depicted, bureaucracy, no matter how brilliant, has no colour nor has self-generating capacity. Political guidance and supervision is their lighthouse. How long people will beg to bureaucracy

plete and the people travelled a light-year backward. The government lost much of its face due to misrule and corruption, but the towering personality of Bangabandhu still could have led the people democratically towards the reforms.

One who struggled all his life for democracy and the 'Rights of the People', it is difficult to conceive, he was a dictator at heart; must have been cajoled into BAKSAL by the sycophants and corrupts around him. More than three decades have passed since Bangabandhu made the first move of decentralization which he could not complete. Meanwhile the population has more than doubled to 145 million

and bribe them for their needs?

The corrupt politicians apprehending anger of the deprived people, in collusion with romantic socialists, flattered Bangabandhu with slogans like 'Aak neta aak desh Bangabandhu Bangladesh'. Under flattery and extreme sycophancy, Bangabandhu proved to be a human. A quick fix solution of district governors was imposed on the people along with an effort to seal their mouth - the one party BAKSAL. Freedom and democracy shut out in barely 7 minutes - the fastest recorded coup against the people by their representatives in parliamentary history. The undoing of the spirit of the liberation and democracy was com-

now and still increasing at an alarming rate. The administrative divisions have more people to attend to today than the province of East Bengal. The best homage we can pay to Bangabandhu is through decentralization of political power into three layers of local, regional and central governments that will bring essential services near home and democracy to the people. This, I suppose, is the only way to cultivate accountability in democracy and pay homage to the liberators of Bangladesh.

The author is a freelancer.