

Hong Kong 1997 and Bangladesh 2007

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PAST imperfect, present tense and future conditional was how a departing British bureaucrat described Hong Kong in October 1997 on its reversion to PRC control.

This is not a bad description of Bangladesh since 1971 and where it's now.

PAST IMPERFECT

Our past is not particularly noteworthy for positive achievements.

We experienced the euphoria of independence in 1971; the satisfaction of global recognition from 1972-74; the trauma of BAKSAL in 1975; two military dictatorships over 1975-1991; and three civilian governments from 1991-2007 under two successive women PMs, a world record.

The quality of governance over 1971-2007 was imperfect. Each administration was as bad or worse than its predecessor. It's a toss up whether the three civilian PMs were as bad or worse than the two presidential generals.

But one thing is indisputable. The two ladies outclassed Sheikh Mujib and Abdus Sattar for bizarre behaviour and facilitating their kinsmen and associates feathering their nests and, by inference and at one remove, their own.

Thus, no tears were shed for them or their henchmen when Emergency was declared. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

The question arises: is something emerging under the prevailing civil-cum-military management that, in contrast with the past, could be more positive despite our sad experience of martial laws since 1958?

PRESENT TENSE

The short answer is that the blueprint of the unfolding architecture is a work-in-progress. The resulting structure by definition cannot be brand new. Not all the political rubbish can be carted away - but more so a renovation and retrofit of an existing but creaky building. This

effort has several distinctive components.

One component is clearing away physical and overt debris (hardware). All authoritarian regimes do this initially, and do it reasonably well, because it's relatively easy.

Mussolini boasted that he made the Italian railways run on time. Similarly, the CTG swiftly cleaned up the footpaths; demolished illegal structures; evicted squatters and the like.

What this gained in improved civic appearance was lost in increased distress of the poor. No attempted good work is without its drawback. Newton's law applies to governance: every action has a reaction, not necessary equal and opposite.

Another component is the more complex but relatively straightforward job of organizational revamping (software).

The comic playhouse that was the EC and the anemic patient that was the ACC were beefed up and running more actively than before.

Because it has a straightforward mandate, the ACC is more active. Rather than diffuse its efforts, it has chosen to investigate about 200 individuals who held positions of trust and influence directly or indirectly over the past 15 years or so.

The most high profile individuals are the two 'netris'. They have been charged with corruption and arrested.

Is this political vendetta or overdue house cleaning? The safe answer is that it's both.

Anecdotal and published information suggest that much hanky-panky went on under both their administrations. Khaleda's shenanigans appear more glaring both because of their pervasive audacity and their more recent happening.

While time may have dimmed the luster of Hasina's supposed misdeeds, they are no less potent. It's worth recalling her injudicious effort through a pliant parliament to assign expensive public property for perpetual use by her and her



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family.

The years 1991 to 2007 saw abysmal governance. Surely the women supremos who ran the show bear considerable and ultimate responsibility for the fiasco.

Far from expressing remorse for presiding over this descent into chaos, both ladies repeatedly disclaimed accountability.

Khaleda flatly denied her children and/or her/his associates were corrupt, despite the perceived and actual accounts of corruption (e.g. Hawa Bhavan) that discredited her regime.

Hasina loudly trumpets the virtues of democracy, conveniently overlooking the fact that quite a lot of things she did (e.g. hartals) were self-defeating and unworthy of a democratically elected leader.

Contrast their behaviour with that of Bush and Blair. Iraq cost Blair his job and Bush his popularity. In a parliamentary system, Bush would be toast by now.

The point is actions, especially

failures, have consequences for political leaders. Hasina and Khaleda consider themselves immune to this immutable law.

In charging the 'netris', the CTG is taking a risk but one that's unavoidable if it's to carry out its self-imposed mandate of cleansing the Augean stables. If the charges don't stick, then the CTG and its backers are in trouble.

So is the country. For then the normal acceptable institutions of governance - the political parties and the services/bureaucracy combination - will have been compromised and a dangerous vacuum will have emerged.

From this perspective, the 'netris' trials are a defining moment in our political history, ensuring that their trial processes and verdicts will be keenly followed.

By contrast to ACC, the EC's job is more complex, cerebral and creative in developing software for the future that has a material impact

on how we do politics.

The EC has a tough job in terms of operations and processes.

Operationally, it has to register transparently about 90 million voters a big job at the best of times but now more so since so much is at stake.

Process-wise, the EC has to change the pattern and profile of social behaviour by establishing and ensuring observance of ground rules on how political parties run themselves and how politicians fight forthcoming elections.

These are contentious issues, not only in themselves, but also because of the lingering toxic effects of a past environment littered with unsavoury politics and grasping politicians.

EC's plan to start discussions with political parties from 12 September is a hopeful development. The relaxation on the ban on indoor politics, one assumes, will facilitate the parties, specially the two big ones, to come up with



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constructive suggestions to ensure sensible elections in 2008. However, if the legacy of the two 'netris' conduct and statements are anything to go by, there is little hope that this will happen.

Certainly, nothing prevents those AL and BNP leaders at large from putting on their thinking caps and mapping out their respective strategies of dialogue with the EC. Refusing to do so as their leaders are in jail is no excuse for not thinking. In any case, neither 'netri' is known for intellectual prowess. Thus, expecting any meaningful contribution from them is wishful thinking.

FUTURE CONDITIONAL

By its very nature, the future remains conditional. In our case, it remains more so for two reasons.

The first is the inherited burden of acute past misgovernance going back to our inception. Arguably, the failings of 1991-2007 differ in magnitude if not always in substance

from those over 1971-1990.

But size matters. A cancer detected early is more treatable before it spreads when drastic surgery is required. There's fairly general agreement that our body politic is in bad shape. And that desperate conditions call for desperate reform measures.

The second of course is the quality and skill of the reformers. By ethos and training, the services lack the wherewithal to govern. But the Emergency has placed the generals in the driving seat. They have made the right noises and shown zeal for reform, relatively easy things to do.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. In practice, the CTG's performance despite its professed good intentions leaves something to be desired in terms of formulation, coordination and execution, especially in dealing with political reforms, inflation and pace of EC's work.

The vexed but core question of political reforms has reached new heights of tension with Hasina's and Khaleda's arrest. The peak will be reached with the outcome of their trial.

Hong Kong faced great uncertainties as 1997 approached. But Beijing and London handled the handover pragmatically. Thus, Hong Kong's economy is functioning smoothly since 1997, despite intense competition from emerging powerhouse Shanghai.

Like Hong Kong in 1997, we face great uncertainty. Can and/or will the CTG and dispossessed politicians cooperate and show mutual restraint (e.g. avoiding NSC, dialoguing with EC) to handle our current tense situation pragmatically, so that the future post-Emergency environment, both structurally and institutionally, holds the promise of substantial improvement over the past?

The author is a free lancer.

Will Hillary make it to the White House?

BRIG GEN JAHANGIR KABIR *ndc, psc (Retd)*

AMERICAN Presidential race-2008 is surging ahead rather early for a variety of reasons. The Bush era is struggling with little hope of late hour turning around. VP Dick Cheney is not running, never mind the health grounds; the race is without incumbency since 1928. The dismal approval rate of President Bush has not encouraged many Republicans including Jeb Bush, the governor of Florida, to run. Mayor Rudy Giuliani is an exception, still walking above the Bush approval rating due to his brave leadership following 9/11. Dubbed as the Mayor of America, an able crisis leader of Italian origin, he was never tested outside cosmopolitan New York. Rudy walked off the senatorial race in 2000 against Hillary Clinton in the greater state of New York on health ground. In one-on-one presidential race, snap polls suggest he is convincingly behind.

The democrats appear poised to reclaim the Whitehouse after eight long years. The Whitehouse is hardly for a party, it is for the person of the president and the magic of 270 in the Electoral College is still a distant mirage. The Democrats have already ten candidates and Republicans eight in the fray but new entry up to the year end is possible. Not all of them are serious. Which party wins the presidency is directly related to who looks more presidential in the race. Senator Hillary Clinton no doubt is way ahead of other Democrat hopefuls, especially Senator Barack Obama of Illinois. Of Kenyan descent, the brilliant Obama's meteoric rise could not, however, cross the line of doubt and the distance with Hillary is widening. It reminds us of the brilliant Jessie Jackson's failed effort to be a presidential candidate. Visiting that great society for quarter of a century and looking for clues, I am not convinced that America is ready for Obama. Some still feel Al Gore may announce his candidature after Hillary and Obama get burnt out through mud slinging, for, if some other Democrat reaches the White House this time Al Gore may not get another chance in his lifetime.

Instead of sweeping conclusions about Senator Obama or Hillary on sex and colour one has to agree that vibrant America is boldly addressing the fault lines and increasingly expanding on the hitherto forbidden zones. Hillary is an elegant Lady, a brilliant lawyer and a tough fighter. A buddy in politics with Bill, especially on abortion, healthcare, education and the poor, she has been on



many occasions independent of the shadow of her husband. One can say she is a byproduct of Clinton presidency. America values inheritance, but the venture loving society is always exploring the horizon for something new and original. Can Hillary fend off a masculine prejudice and give a new direction to war torn America?

Even with high approval rating the question will hang like Damocles' sword over Hillary till last, if America is ready to vote a woman to the Whitehouse. Happily, the masculine culture is vanishing. On the heels Madeline Albright and Condoleezza Rice as powerful Secretaries of State, Nancy Pelosi is the first Speaker of the House of Representatives. Golda Mayer, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, many women leaders have proved to be tough in the world arena, and Angela Merkel of Germany is the latest sensation among the woman leaders. Her opponents would still like to express doubt on Hillary as the future commander-in-chief. With increasing women's participation in Iraq and other combat zones, risk is high in making sex an issue in the presidential race. Certainly, nobody can blame Hillary for not being man enough.

The American presidential race

is a grueling marathon contest. A slip anywhere and media can hype the damage beyond recovery. Only the very brave and able try, while most burn out, only one reach the pinnacle of power. American media is merciless towards the politicians - the holders and hopefuls of the public offices. We have seen how President Nixon was destroyed by Watergate. Due to the very brave defense by Hillary at tremendous personal agony, Clinton survived on the razor's edge. The First Lady has converted the Lewinsky affair from personal tragedy by her consummate ability to bear the pain and assume the responsibility of defending the political life of her husband under emotional stress. Any man would cherish a wife like her, but will the men, wicked that they are, compliment her decisiveness and goddess like manner while voting? A decade later, Lewinsky affair may still draw frowns from women voters to register their disapproval for her forgiveness. In any case, when President Clinton will surely be working for her with his tentacles in every state, America should know that she has a deeper sense of judgment to convert a personal pain into a historical opportunity. She did not merely save the

Clinton presidency from the Lewinsky scandal, she made one more president possible.

Hillary's autobiography- Living History - amply demonstrated she was the stronger of the Clintons and her ambition for higher office never in doubt. Later, Bill Clinton's 'My Life' facilitated her acumen in more subtle ways. She is a formidable forerunner today in the race for 2008 in her own right. Her propensity to edge ahead of others on issues and concerns is understandable but, being the forerunner, she is drawing fire from all directions - the nine other democratic hopefuls and the whole lot of Republicans. As President Clinton, the magician of politics, remains her moderator and underwriter, any undesirable slip may avoid a thud on her political self. But the great names have great many things to hide in politics and the media pathologically loves scandals. The best bet is not to conclude sixteen months ahead.

War and the sensitive Immigration Bill are going to be the cut and dry areas of next election. Healthcare for all is only a lukewarm agenda for the poor; even the pro-choice and anti-abortion issue get precedence over healthcare. Budget overrun, tax cut and supply side economics are matters for the gurus. In spite of bumps and controversies, Reaganomics adopted by President Bush fared well. With the exception of 'Clinton Bush' election, which went by the slogan 'It's the economy stupid', war and foreign policy is the fate of the American presidential race. Rich America hates poverty; the poor get the scorn, at the most lip service. One also has to agree that anybody can be rich and nobody has a right to be poor in the land of opportunity. Anti-war sentiment is taking a full circle for race-2008.

The American Muslims could not prove to be a wise vote bank. The unconditional support to Israel and recent commitment to bombard specific targets within Pakistan by major candidates is political exigency. Weighing between the overriding Jewish influence and weak Muslims, have politicians have very little choice while campaigning. It does not matter what Democrats or Republicans say while locking horns, the next president should offer a better deal to the restive Muslims. They do not hate America; but many still quiver with fear and suspicion. More than a roadmap, America needs a bridge with the billion plus Muslims of the world.

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The Sydney APEC Summit

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

A catchy slogan appeared in Sydney "Twenty-one leaders, one great city" for APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) Summit. The Summit took place on 7th and 8th September and the delegations including ministers, senior officials and top business leaders started arriving at Sydney from 3rd of September.

Australians took pride in holding the Summit at the beautiful harbour city, although about \$300 million dollars of taxpayers' money were spent. During the Summit, the central business district of Sydney became a "fortress". Friday 7th Sep, the first day of the summit, was declared a public holiday to ease the traffic of the office goers.

Currently APEC countries represent 60% of world's GDP and 40% of world's population. Five of the world's six biggest standing armies and four of the world's eight declared nuclear powers cluster around the table. Furthermore, around the APEC table are also six of the world's ten biggest carbon-emitting countries.

The leaders include one absolute monarch, Communist heads of states and other heads of states/governments including the big three-- the US, China and Russia.

Every year APEC provides an opportunity for Asian and Pacific leaders to meet with the US President, other than bilateral visits, which are strictly one-on-one affairs that do not allow regional interplay.

AUSTRALIA'S INITIATIVE

APEC Forum was an initiative of Australia's Labour Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1989 in which 12 countries participated. His successor Paul Keating elevated it to a summit level in agreement with President Clinton and the first was held in 1993. It regularly meets every year. Last year it met in Vietnam.

Apart from the Commonwealth, Australia has not been a member of any Asian Forum. It is an "odd-man out" in the area because although it is geographically located in the Asia Pacific region, its history is tied with Britain. Furthermore its "White Immigration" policy which had alienated Asian countries was only dismantled totally in 1974, although the policy was getting relaxed since 1968.

Necessity is the mother of invention and the then Australian Prime Minister followed the spirit of the adage and invented a forum in which Australia could mix with Asia-Pacific countries.

After Britain joined the European Union in the early 70s, Australia's economy had to depend on its exports to Asia and currently 80%

per cent of its exports go to Asian and Pacific countries and China has become the largest trading partner.

MEMBERS OF APEC

The eligibility of membership is that a country must be in Asia and share borders with the Pacific directly or indirectly through sea, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore via Malacca Straits and Thailand through the Gulf of Thailand.

Now it has grown to 21 countries including Russia, Chile, Peru, Mexico, Canada, the US, China, Australia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Papua New Guinea, Japan, Thailand, Hong Kong, South Korea, New Zealand, Philippines, and Brunei.

APEC is founded on economic cooperation and not on the basis of nation-state and that is why Taiwan and Hong Kong are members. There is a moratorium for new members but some countries

sidelines of the Summit meeting.

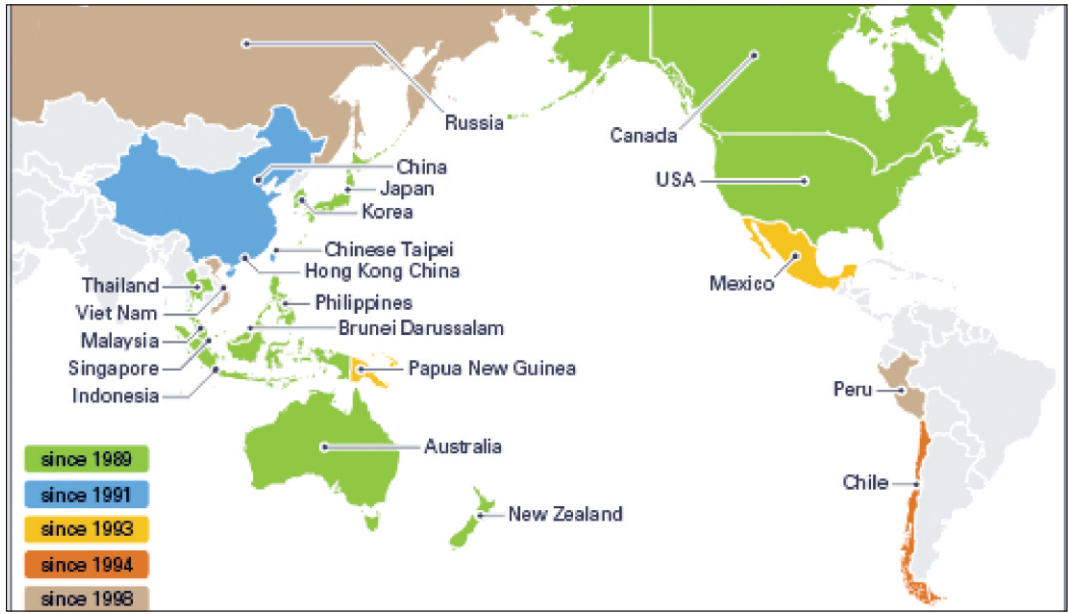
Since the US is bogged down in Iraq, at the Sydney Summit, President Bush concentrated his remarks on Iraq and national security. Among Asian issues, he only mentioned Burma's abuses of human rights.

Critics pointed out that President Bush should have realised that it was Asia Pacific forum and should have devoted to the issues affecting the Asian Pacific countries.

China's President discussed trade promotion among countries and Russian President wanted a broader agenda for APEC that might include corruption in some Asian Pacific countries that posed a threat to trade and investment promotion.

WHY IT DID NOT ACHIEVE MUCH?

Sydney APEC Summit did not achieve much because the interests of member countries are so



including Australia want to get India as a member. Some countries oppose India's entry because India cannot claim to be a Pacific country given its geography.

Its main agenda was trade and economic cooperation. Gradually the agenda has expanded into security, climate change and energy. Since 9/11, terrorism has become an important agenda item.

Business leaders of the member countries simultaneously meet and discuss major global and regional issues and recommend plans for action to the political leaders.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE IN SYDNEY?

The agenda items have been broadly discussed but concrete results are missing. What was important was that the world leaders had the opportunity to discuss sensitive and regional issues in bilateral meetings on the

varied that consensus is not easily achieved on big issues. APEC is too big and handling too many issues is difficult when it was originally set up to unlock trade and investment across member-economies.

Asia Pacific region is diverse and APEC in its present form does not address regional security. Furthermore APEC is economic, too broad and India is missing. How can one talk seriously on security issues at a forum where both China and Taiwan are present?

That is why two other forums in the region have cropped up. One is the ASEAN +3 (Japan, China and Korea) group and the other is East Asian Summit with ASEAN + 3 +Australia, New Zealand, and India. None of the forums includes the US.

TWO QUESTIONS ARE FOREMOST IN THE REGION

First, the main concern is how to handle China's rise. Currently the

US, Japan and Australia have a security alliance and they want India to join the trilateral alliance to contain the rise of China. To ease concerns of China, Australia's largest trading partner, Australia and China agreed to hold annual meeting on security matters. (During APEC meeting, Australia signed a \$45 billion gas export deal with China.)

Some commentators have indicated that the present policy of the US towards China as a "strategic competitor" is wrong and instead the US should have a regional security forum with China, Japan and Korea. The main issue is how to turn China's entry into strategic environment of Asia Pacific into a positive factor.

Second, the rise of China and India is so significant and intimidating that some stresses are inevitable in neighbouring countries. The neighbours look at the rise of the two countries with

both admiration and apprehension. Adjustments will be easier and smoother if neighbours of China and India get a voice in a forum in addressing the impact of emerging economic political and strategic landscape at the 21st century.

None of the forums indicated above could address the above two burning issues.

CONCLUSION

Some strategists say that a new forum, consisting of the US and representatives from countries of East Asia, South Asia and North Asia, is to be set up for addressing the issues concerning the countries of the region. Its sole function would be to discuss the central issues affecting regional security and prosperity.

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