

US envoy's tea party

Raises questions of diplomatic propriety

US Ambassador James Moriarty held a tete-a-tete with a select group of political leaders from AL, BNP, Jamaat and JP and some lawyers on Tuesday. Dignitaries of foreign countries may have views that they can express to politicians on one-to-one basis, to government leaders and to the media whenever they deem fit. But to have closed-door meetings with politicians is stretching the matter too far. Given the nature of issues discussed -- prevailing political situation in the country, dialogue between the government and political parties, emergency, national and upazila elections -- interspersed as the discussions were with comments by the US envoy, we wonder whether standards of diplomatic norm and decorum were not transgressed.

We have a culture of openness in which the diplomats can move freely and communicate with all strata of people. They get invited to our homes as honoured guests and appreciate our hospitality. They are highly regarded and respected in our society and their words evoke instant attention. But organising a political get-together of sorts couldn't but raise a question in the public mind about an attempt to influence politics in the country.

But the blame rests with our politicians in no small measure. Whenever there is a national issue, our politicians on both sides of the divide, fall for courting advice, even intercession of foreign governments and dignitaries. The syndrome became acute during the regime of elected governments. When the AL were in the opposition it spared no effort to take issues of domestic political concern to the outside world or foreign dignitaries and vice versa.

Basically our governments have lent their ears to words of foreign countries while perhaps the same advice had been put forward by local intelligentsia and media with little avail.

What cannot be lost on any observer is the increasing diplomatic trend in Bangladesh among ambassadors and foreign dignitaries of certain countries to publicly proffer advice on issues that strictly qualify to be called internal affairs of the country. Save a few countries, such acts of indiscretion are not committed by the majority of the diplomatic community, we are happy to note that.

What are our own political problems must be solved by us through our own collective intelligence and sagacity of which historically we have had no dearth. It is the mutual intolerance of each other feeding on confrontational politics over the years that has subsumed our indigenous capacity to solve our own problems. But this must change. We may be a small country but that doesn't mean we need compromise our dignity.

Candidate-voter interface

A good beginning made at Sylhet

THE dialogue between the mayoral candidates of Sylhet City Corporation and around 200 local people is the first of its kind, that brought the voters and the candidates face-to-face before an election and the latter had to answer some queries on important civic issues. We believe this is a good beginning -- the election seekers coming under public scrutiny from day one. A process has been initiated to bring the candidates to full public glare -- an essentially wholesome exercise. The Election Commission taking initiative, BBC Bangla Service organised the dialogue. They have done a commendable job.

The candidates said in an emphatic manner that they would work for making the city administration corruption-free. While it was only natural for them to take such a stand, it is highly desirable that people seeking election commit themselves to taking a very clear position against all corrupt practices. The candidates' past records also came up for discussion and the local people asked them how they planned to solve the problems of the city. Helping the voters to make informed choices has been an important agenda with civil society groups working for fair and meaningful elections.

Such dialogues always place due emphasis on the role of voters beyond merely casting vote, in any election -- something that received little attention in the past. The candidates have to realise that it is their moral responsibility to go by the commitments they make to the electorate. They should learn from such close interaction with voters and work out where things went wrong in the past. Obviously, the very fact that Sylhet city is beset with a number of problems is an indication of the city administrations doing little for its over all improvement.

The candidates must not treat the voters, as most of them did in the past, as having nothing to do, once the election is over. One noticeable and welcome development, which the candidates can ill afford to ignore, is that people in general are showing an increasingly greater degree of sensitivity to issues pertaining to governance. At the Sylhet dialogue, professionals from different fields and students participated and shed light on different pertinent matters. Their spontaneous participation does show that they want a truly competent and honest candidate to be elected as mayor.

If the recent developments in the political arena are anything to go by, it is neither desirable nor easy to sustain a corrupt system. So, we expect the candidates to work, once one of them is elected, in the greater interest of the residents of Sylhet city, banishing corruption once and for all from the city administration.

Legacy I: Iraq

If the United States remains for a sustained period in Iraq that nation will experience a rebirth of economy, culture, and science. If the United States withdraws rapidly it will trigger a gradual increase in violence leading to civil war until a new military dictator takes over, and the poor Iraqi people descend into poverty and deprivation.

FORREST COOKSON

As every government prepares to leave office, we ask what has been accomplished and what has failed. This is the first then of a series of articles on the legacy left by George W. Bush. Although he has a few months of his term remaining the main actions are complete. The first covers the most notorious action undertaken by President Bush, the attack on Iraq. The legacy question should focus on the end position not the beginning.

One has to face the facts -- George W. Bush has won the war in Iraq! This statement may startle many readers who have not been following events, but it seems to me accurate given what

has happened in the last few months. Civil peace is emerging and the violent enemies of the Iraqi state are losing their effectiveness. Civil society is turning against them and supporting the military forces of the United States and the Iraq government, particularly those of the United States.

The Iraqi government is becoming more forthright and determined to go forward with its agenda of governing and development. The economic situation is improving. The delivery of electricity and water is improving. Iraqis who left the country are beginning to return. There is no doubt that there has been a dramatic turn around. Most commentators doubt that sustainable change has taken place, but this

reflects their bias and unwillingness to admit they were wrong. Most indicators now point towards success of the United States. Pessimists now focus on the situation after the United States leaves. Much of the coverage of Iraq in the United States press seems determined to ignore reality. But the United States is not going to leave anytime soon. Success is the only justification if one is the aggressor.

I put aside a number of important questions that everyone likes to shout about. Was the war justified? (Certainly not.) Were too many people killed to justify the outcome even if successful? (Yes.) Was the United States military too violent, using excessive power? (Yes.) Was the cost of the war so high as to have a serious

impact on the American economy? (Yes.) Did the Bush administration really believe in Weapons of Mass Destruction argument for war or was this just cover for another motive? (They believed it.) All of these questions are different from the question: "Has the war been won by Mr. Bush?" I make the claim that Mr. Bush, with his determined leadership of the United States and the Iraq government, has won! I failed to understand how strong-willed Bush would prove to be.

How can I possibly claim this? Let us look at the three main groups in Iraq: The Kurds are happily building their own society; so long as there is reasonable acceptance of their autonomy and an acceptable resolution of the distribution of the oil profits there is no reason to expect any trouble from this group. But the Kurds see the Americans as their protectors and want the American military around. Next, the Sunni, who led the

insurgency against the Iraqi government and the United States, have largely switched sides with the emergence of the Sunni Awakening. This is partly due to the willingness of the United States military to support them, but largely, I believe, as Saudi Arabia called for the shift in allegiance, provided financial incentives and promised to protect them in the future. I guess the Sunni also decided that they were not going to succeed in their effort to drive the Americans out so it was better to come to terms and join them. The Shiite view is clear enough; so long as the Americans are around we are content that the Shiites will not overwhelm us.

Finally, the largest group, the Shiites: the Iraqi government is essentially controlled by the Shiites and the PM Maliki is certainly determined to protect Shiite interests as well as to further his own political base. The PM is moving successfully against Shiite militia who oppose

him and is making clear that he rules the country. His confidence is rising with the growing competence of the Iraqi army, improved tactics of Americans and the tremendous improvements in tactical intelligence; he is taking control with a firmer hand. The PM has a close, if quiet, relationship with the Americans.

In fact none of the three groups wants the Americans to leave. Each fears the consequences. Each has found a way to get ahead so long as the Americans are present to maintain reasonable peace and security. The terrorist groups and some of the Shiite militia are increasingly isolated. The great fear of any insurgent group is that the people will turn against them; the insurgents' ability to make threats or claim to be fighting against oppression results in people unwilling to help the government to identify and track down members of the insurgency.

But once the general population comes to believe that there is

going to be effective protection for them, they will begin to inform on the insurgents and in no time the leaders and other cadres will be caught. That is the change now taking place in Iraq. I do not mean to suggest that there will not be continuing violence and trouble in Iraq. But there is a great difference from one year ago and an even greater difference from three years ago.

Slowly the Iraq economy is coming to life as the electricity and water supplies work better and peace makes economic activity possible. The volume of oil produced is rising. The government of Iraq is now moving towards rehabilitation of its oil fields and will soon be starting on exploration and development of potential large fields. This work has been delayed for years by the battle between the insurgents and the Iraqi and United States government. Within the improved security framework work can now go forward rapidly. Of course, US companies are

going to benefit. But not at the expense of the Iraq -- rather at the expense of other oil companies.

A long term treaty between Iraq and the United States is being negotiated and while there will be a lot of arguments before its conclusion, almost certainly an agreement will be reached. This will enable the United States to station military forces in Iraq, to intervene to help the Iraqi government on request, and set up some system for dealing with crimes committed by American soldiers. Whatever the words, the reality will be continued, quiet presence of the US military.

If the United States remains for a sustained period in Iraq that nation will experience a rebirth of economy, culture, and science. If the United States withdraws rapidly it will trigger a gradual increase in violence leading to civil war until a new military dictator takes over, and the poor Iraqi people descend into poverty and deprivation.

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The economics and politics of transit

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Transit has never been a forgotten issue, at least not for India. But I guess it has become a rather embarrassing matter for Bangladesh -- not knowing perhaps how to convey to India that there are other compelling factors that influence policies. It is futile to compare a similar situation obtaining in other parts of the world with this. It is would be erroneous to see such issues in merely economic terms -- in any case economics do not drive politics in South Asia, in fact the reverse is true.



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THE issue of transit to India has dropped up again, this time with a renewed and very firm demand from India for allowing Indian goods and passenger transport ingress into, and egress out of Bangladesh, from and into Indian territory. The request has been lying with the Bangladesh government since mid-2007.

In this context, one ought to go back a bit into history to put the matter in perspective -- to address the issue more objectively, driven by the head rather than the heart -- and see if we can put it into purely economic terms.

The fact that both the countries were connected by road and rail link up to 1965 is well known. Rail links existed between the two countries prior to September 6, 1965, and were discontinued after the outbreak of the war between India and Pakistan. Three trains ran between the two countries, carrying goods and passengers -- East Bengal Express between Sealdah and Goalandua Ghat via Gede; East Bengal Mail

between Sealdah and Partbatipur via Gede; and Barisal Express between Sealdah and Khulna via Petrapole.

There were three road links connecting India with Bangladesh. National Highway No. 35 connected Calcutta to Barisal and Bongaon to Dhaka. National Highway No. 35 connected Petrapole to Barisal, and National Highway No. 40 connected Siliguri and Guwahati to Chittagong and Dhaka via Comilla.

After 1971, both the countries had expressed political will to utilise the economic complementarities for mutual benefits. And in the spirit of mutual cooperation, Bangladesh had, in fact, agreed to accord "transit" facility through the signing of the Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement on March 28, 1972, and Bangladesh could, by the same token, use the facility for its own benefit.

Article V of the Agreement provided for "mutually beneficial arrangements for the use of their waterways, railways and road-

ways for commerce between the two countries and for passage of goods between two places in one country through the territory of the other." What is of significance is the Indian foreign trade minister's comment at the signing ceremony that Bangladesh's "railways and its roads can once again be used by India for the benefit of the Indian people on either side of Bangladesh. We, on our part, Excellency, would be only too happy to provide the necessary transit facilities to Nepal and our friends in Bangladesh."

Many in India perceived Bangladesh as an "economic bridge" between India's north-eastern states and the rest of the country. For India, it makes extremely good economic sense to be able to use a corridor to its northeastern states. It would spare them constructing a long and tortuous road through hostile territory, infested with insurgents of many hues. It had been estimated -- in the '90s -- that construction of new tracks would cost Rs. 2 crore per kilometre. It

would cost many times more that amount now.

The 1972 agreement was for one year. A new trade agreement signed on October 4, 1980 had similar proviso for surface connectivity, but that the surface links, except by river routes, did not come about has to do with everything other than economics.

Why did the successive Bangladesh governments not provide the facility agreed upon? Even the Awami League government, which had in principal approved the proposal (June 1998) for the passage of goods between places in India via Bangladesh -- "provided they are conveyed by Bangladeshi carriers," had not provided this facility during its tenure. In fact, a committee headed by the then commerce minister Tofael Ahmed, to study all aspects of the proposal, had managed only to agree to further study the economic and strategic implications of allowing a corridor to India.

My impression was that it was merely to hedge the issue -- being aware of the very sensitive nature

of the matter, the government was wary of taking a decision on an issue that might have been seen at home as providing special dispensation to India, when India did not deliver on some of its commitments.

Insofar as the economic return is concerned it, too, was an undetermined element in the transit discourse. There was no gainsaying what would be the economic benefits for Bangladesh, and what opportunity costs that we might have to count by allowing India the transit facility. One is not certain whether the government or any non-government think-tank has as yet indulged in a serious cost-benefit analysis of the proposal and get a clear approximation of our gains from it.

While it is not for this government to take a policy decision on the transit issue -- and it has made the position clear -- it must be treated more dispassionately. For us, geography is not a curse but a boon. It has lent us strategic significance regionally, the significance of which cannot be lost on our policy planners. We must bring this advantage to work for gaining strategic dividends. It must also be kept in mind that multi-modal connections have a great advantage for the South Asian countries, which we cannot afford to overlook.

While it is immoral to deal with issues on a quid pro quo manner -- when it relates to one's national interest all other considerations come second -- one's neighbours would go by the same motivation.

Also, there are serious security issues that are associated with the matter that must be brought into consideration in any future negotiation, and if there are economic dividends that we can derive that are positively proportional to the investment, so much the better. This must be made amply clear to India.

Transit has never been a forgotten issue, at least not for India. But I guess it has become a rather embarrassing matter for Bangladesh -- not knowing perhaps how to convey to India that there are other compelling factors that influence policies. It is futile to compare a similar situation obtaining in other parts of the world with this. It is would be erroneous to see such issues in merely economic terms -- in any case economics do not drive politics in South Asia, in fact the reverse is true.

Had that not been so, Bangladesh would have had the benefit of access through a piece of Indian territory the size of a football field into its enclaves of Dahagram and Angorpota on a permanent basis -- the issue of sharing Ganges water would have been earnestly addressed long before 1996, and the much publicised promised sale of half a million tons of rice to Bangladesh following "Sidr" would have been fulfilled without Bangladesh having to suffer the shenanigans of some of the Indian rice traders.

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The Iranian missile tests

NO NONSENSE

Iran must restrain all insinuations. It mustn't have any miasma of doubt that its missiles won't deter Israel or the US from dropping bombs and destroying much of its nuclear and industrial complexes. However, the ailing US dollar and economy, the threat of closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the specter of skyrocketing oil prices, and the potential meltdown of the global economy are the real deterrents.



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

100 fighter jets, widely viewed as a drill for a possible "sterile" or "surgical" air strike to wipe out Iran's nuclear installations.

Washington swiftly condemned the Iranian tests while supporting the Israeli exercises privately. State Department official William Burns called Iran "as serious a problem as any we face today."

"Honestly, does anyone really believe that Iran's missiles aren't already a threat?" asked The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) in an editorial. One wonders where the WSJ gets its information to suggest that "Iran may already have the capability to target the US with a short-range missile by launching it from a freighter off the East Coast?" What a crass and puerile editorial claim from a world-class newspaper?

Last year's US National Intelligence Estimate concluded that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003. It said: "Tehran's decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic and military costs."

In a May 22 piece in the Chicago Tribune, Steve Chapman wrote: "Even if Iran were to acquire atomic bombs, there is

no reason to think it would use them or turn them over to terrorists. Even if the Iranians would like to destroy Israel, they face a powerful disincentive: the prospect of radioactive incineration. Nor would Iran be so irrational as to give nukes to a terrorist group. That would be the worst of both worlds -- giving up control of those weapons, while inviting annihilation the moment they are put to use."

Chapman added: "Iran is a very modest adversary. It has no nuclear weapons. It has a pitiful air force. Its navy is really just a coast guard. It spends less on defence than Singapore or Sweden. Our military budget is 145 times bigger than Iran's."

Amid all the bellicose exchanges and the consternation, there appeared some cautious and muted optimism for a negotiated resolution of the sticky uranium enrichment program. Iran's top nuclear negotiator will meet with the EU's foreign policy chief in Geneva on July 19 and 20 for talks on freezing enrichment.

This latest proposal of the five United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members and Germany is somewhat sweetened, if you will. The concession package

requires Tehran to stop further addition of centrifuges to the 300 already installed, in return for a pledge by the UNSC to freeze further sanctions.

The sweetening part, according to the July 13 Washington Post editorial, allows Tehran to continue enriching uranium during negotiations -- a reversal from the past -- without facing further sanctions -- a "freeze" for "freeze" reciprocity -- merely for agreeing to participate in preliminary talks.

Let us sketch a realistic picture of Iran. It is surrounded by US forces on the east and the west, and Israel is preparing for a pre-emptive attack. Why wouldn't a sovereign nation show that it will fight back if it is attacked by its enemies?

Is Iran a belligerent nation? Did Iran attack any country in the last 60 years? Do they really have a military budget that rivals the US or even Israel?

Here, the US has a president who once said that Iran was part of an "axis of evil" and routinely threatens Iran, and now a presidential candidate (John McCain) has "adopted a Beach Boys tune to let Iran know he is also spoiling for a chance to BOMB, BOMB, and BOMB Iran."

The US spends 145 times as much on the ability to threaten and obliterate the rest of the planet as Iran. So, why is Iran "as serious a problem as any we face today" -- but not Russia and China, which are sitting on stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear?

The answers are obvious:

- Iran shows disobedience and disrespect to the US;
- Iran has the third largest proven oil reserves (132.5 billion barrels, 2006) and can manipulate oil supply and prices, which can hurt our driving SUVs and hence lifestyles;
- Most of all, Iran threatens Israel;
- China and Russia are too big to be confronted, so they're tamed by getting "most favoured nation treatment" deal.

With regard to Iran's threat to Israel, University of Michigan Middle East scholar Juan Cole claims that the oft-quoted words "wipe Israel off the map" were not the words used by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. They're a mis-translation of the milder words he used. In fact, Professor Cole says: "Ahmadinejad has never threatened Israel with physical aggression," however much he would welcome its collapse.

So, what is this casus belli about?

It's all about oil and controlling oil supplies. Through the narrow waterway of the Strait of Hormuz -- only 34 km wide -- pass ships carrying oil from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and

Bahrain. The US and the EU cannot risk undemocratic Iranians mullahs controlling such an important waterway.

However, the inevitable and instantaneous reaction to the bombing of Iran will be the blocking of this waterway, sealing it hermetically with missiles and artillery -- both land and naval based. Oil prices will skyrocket far beyond \$200 per barrel. That will trigger a chain reaction -- a worldwide economic crisis leading to a catastrophic rise in unemployment in America, Europe, Japan, and an economic meltdown everywhere else.

Attacking Iran and averting the global economic fallout would require that US conquer parts of Iran -- an infeasible scenario given that much of the US land forces are tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan.

An attack by Israel is also highly unlikely since Iran will consider it as an attack by the US. The most feasible option then is to impose more stringent economic sanctions and wait. Iran must restrain all insinuations. It mustn't have any miasma of doubt that its missiles won't deter Israel or the US from dropping bombs and destroying much of its nuclear and industrial complexes.

However, the ailing US dollar and economy, the threat of closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the specter of skyrocketing oil prices, and the potential meltdown of the global economy are the real deterrents.

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