

# Struggling with strategic fallouts of 2/25

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**B**DR Mutiny (or 2/25) created strategic implications of unimaginable consequences both within and without the country. Friends and enemies, far and near, are watching our actions and utterances and devising their own strategies to keep the fallout of 2/25 from reaching their own doorsteps. 2/25 has caused multidirectional alarms in regional and concerned capitals. Our government and opposition are further complicating the matter by trying to answer the unanswerable "hypothetically", thus creating insurmountable confusions, which compels all seeking answers to go astray and haywire.

Utterances of government ministers, specially the Commerce Minister, strategically put Bangladesh on the map of Nations, with the emerging problem of "jangli" or Terrorism. It is sad because it will have serious consequences for the economy of Bangladesh, especially in the overall manpower export sector and commercial exploitation of our strategic assets. According to the Foreign Minister, trial of war criminals has somehow emerged as an additional factor causing return of exported manpower, which is definitely alarming.

The opposition blamed the ministers for divulging information prematurely to influence and divert the investigation towards benefits of the party in power. People inclined towards this school of thought should have realized that divulging findings and progress of the investigation should have been done more candidly so as to avoid negative debate and propaganda. The established culture of our political leaders in the practice of democracy is to follow the principle of bashing and counter-bashing wherever and whenever they get an opportunity. Unity of purpose is the need of the hour between government and the opposition in the parliament on the issues of national interest and national security, because the nation is in no mood to give a second chance to the politicians in the matters of people's security and national cohesion.

In democratic practice, if we cannot put our trust and reliance in an elected government, that too when the government is enjoying a vast majority of seats (as is the case now), then we need the angels to tell us whom to rely on. Role and functioning of the government is unquestionably important for the nation to prosper and an elected government is the best and only desired option. We must enjoy the freedom to differ with the government about its means and ways, but we must agree on the end state, i.e. to preserve and protect our national interest and national security. The courses of action to solve a particular problem may be different, but choosing the best course is the ultimate responsibility of the government. Thus, consequences and failings of the adopted course always rest with the government,

which makes the ruling party's task extremely difficult and challenging. No matter what, all must have the patience to see the outcome of the government's decisions to enjoy a vibrant democracy.

Every decision, course, and action has both positive and negative impact and one must make cost and benefit analysis and allow sufficient tolerance to cope with unexpected failure also. The government must display credible and skillful capacity of governing the country, with its chosen team, in a complex and compound environment of the corridors of power. The party in power should also display their keenness about reading the pulse of the people and maintaining sufficient resilience and flexibility to accommodate ideas and thoughts.

Ministers categorically relating terrorism with the vitals of our economy (especially manpower export) might be reason enough for foreign employers of our manpower to seriously ponder getting rid of their Bangladeshi workers, and also take effective measures to stop further hiring from Bangladesh. We strongly feel that it is neither right nor strategic to give birth to hypothetical and imaginary threats without solid evidence, because it will have far-reaching consequences for our country, the government and the economy, both in short and long term.

It is expected of the Foreign Minister to keep her concerns to her ministry, especially when it relates to the question of employed Bangladeshi in countries like Malaysia; motivated utterance of enemies within the system (as reportedly happened in Malaysia) should have been handled with low key and silent manoeuvres. Making noise helps, but not when we hurt ourselves doing it.

The magnitude and prevalence of terrorist threat worldwide and the propensity of Bangladeshis towards terrorism cannot be equated. The government must take initiatives to ensure employment of Bangladeshi manpower, that the extent of terrorist threat can be brought down to internationally acceptable criterion in a short time with full and credible display of democratic practices. Bangladesh is definitely not a nursing ground for international terrorism. Our diplomatic torchbearers should take on the battle without wasting time to turn the sentiment, before it tilts beyond recovery.

Changing government versions on 2/25 will create incalculable concerns with different stakeholders. Internationally it puts Bangladesh in a challenging position to prove that terrorism is under control to allow economic growth to take place and aids to flow in. Development partners of Bangladesh have always taken our people as development hungry and not as suicide bombers. Besides, up to now, it is somewhat established that import and export of terrorism is not a commodity that can be easily traded here. Therefore, the government and opposition must not play partisans by giving



birth to issues, which serve their political interests but hurts the country.

War crimes and its trial is another issue, which is haunting the country since 1971. Trial of war crimes is a historical necessity and it must be done in such a way that it should heal old wounds and not open new ones. Besides, it should in no way hurt our strategic and economic interest, both within and without the country. Experience of other countries, especially South Africa and the Balkan countries, should be sought in conducting an internationally acceptable war crime trial, without any political motive and victimization. It is high time that the opponents of war crime trial saw the benefits of going through it. Opposing it, just for the sake of opposition, will bring no benefit, rather we all should see that justice is done in the trials. Anger and sentiments visibly expressed by the organized segments of the society should be handled with democratic openness and tolerance. These types of circulatory sentiment and anger normally follow bloodbaths (like that of 2/25) and don't deserve any branding. The government must act with strategic and political sagacity and prudently differentiate between sentimental threats and indoctrinated threats within the organized society and handle those accordingly.

One thing is certain, the newly elected government was not ready to handle the

BDR mutiny and therefore benefit of doubt should be given to the response of the government and its political foot soldiers to the crisis of 2/25. If any mishandling happened, conscientious efforts should be made to find out if those were innocent or deliberate. All must be aware that the new government hardly emerged from the silhouette of 1/11 when the mutiny somehow initially created the illusionary threat of another 1/11, compelling the decision makers, and as we understand, the Chiefs of the Armed Forces, to go for a negotiated settlement. We cannot but praise the extreme tolerance shown by the Armed Forces of the country after the gruesome murder of their brethren.

2/25 in no way should drive the newly elected government towards entrenched mentality. It should govern with incorruptible democratic authority without letting the fear of another 1/11 hanging over its head. The government should devise a comprehensive strategy to fight terrorism with the participation of the broader section of the society. Fighting terrorism should not turn out to be the art of mere statement-making by different ministers at different times, which actually amplifies the threat of terrorism.

The government must not go astray addressing the current fallout of 2/25 as it has the difficult and arduous task of ensuring that

in the long term the country is successfully steered towards terrorism-free vibrancy and prosperity uniting its supporting and opposing forces and weaving them together into a powerful armada where steering ahead in unison will be the only mode of survival.

The fallout of the BDR mutiny has already taken different shape and is impacting vigorously on our socio-economic cohesion and geopolitical security including the security of the leadership of the ruling party. Politico-military tactics of the militants are changing at digital speed and direction; nature and dimension of the threats has become difficult for the law enforcing agencies to identify and pin down under existing laws. Whether the questions those are being raised by the opposition or the government find answers or not, all must first recognize and agree to the perceived threats and its dangerous consequence on national security without any prejudice. It is not the time to argue on the rightness of actions, but to develop national cohesion to allow people to reject the terrorists and its propagated philosophy to root out the threats. The government and the governance should be made transparent and accountable to the people; government and the opposition are both equally liable to make it work.

Rumours and propaganda have sprayed with innocent and ulterior motive, and

stories have been floated in the air through all technological means. Some of them are so concocted that its objectives raised questions in the mind of the people, causing division and creating a window of opportunity for the militants to either operate or to transfer blame to others.

We must stand together and remember that it is our nation, an independent and sovereign country, which was achieved through sacrifice of the hundreds and thousands of our beloved people. It is ruled by people of our choice and we, the people, retain power to change our choice by whom to be ruled. Political, cultural, economic or military subjugation of our country must be made not only difficult but unthinkable. It is the efficacy of our statesmen, whom the people assigned the responsibility with trust. However, the consequences of faltering, unfortunately, are always borne by the nation and not its leaders. The government must do all it can to create a freer and kinder society where political opposition will become a tool towards creating national unity.

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## Bangladesh, conspiracy theories and unraveling truth

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**T**HE BDR carnage has left a scar on the face of the nation that will take a long time to fade off. At the same time, the country's image has taken a battering that will further debilitate its efforts to expand her interests in the international environment that is crucial to her existence and her future. The carnage has been covered by the international media in the context of the abhorrent nature of the atrocities committed. It has also reflected upon our inability in dealing with it in a manner that would help the nation recover from the shame the carnage has given us.

A recent New York Times report, while writing on the BDR carnage, has said that "conspiracy theories are a national sport" in Bangladesh. It was by no means a compliment to us as a nation because this tag has been given for our failure to deal with past political assassinations and acts of terror. In the context of the BDR carnage, the Minister of Commerce who has come before the media on the government's behalf as one responsible to deal with post-carnage responsibilities was quick to suspect a conspiracy and the hands of militants behind the BDR killings only to retract his suspicion days later. Most recently, the Prime Minister has informed the nation that the BDR carnage was a conspiracy by the evil forces who "wanted to foil the December 29th elections and push the country towards civil war by creating anarchy."

There are three investigations underway. One has been set by the Ministry of Home Affairs and headed by a former bureaucrat Mr. Anisuzzaman. There is another investigation being conducted by the CID. A third is being conducted by the armed forces. Their reports are still awaited. International agencies like the FBI and Scotland Yard are assisting national efforts to unravel the heinous crime. The US Ambassador has said recently that it will take some time for FBI to make its report known. The investigation committee headed by ex-bureaucrat has just been given a month's extension; it was asked initially to submit its report in a week and afterwards given two further extensions, which suggests that this is not going to be an easy investigation. It is therefore surprising that the Prime Minister has gone public in speaking of the February 25th carnage as a conspiracy by the forces that lost the 29th December elections to push the country towards civil war.

The Prime Minister's conspiracy the-

ory has been picked up by her ministers who are using the media to tell the nation that the February 25th carnage has been committed to destabilize the country by the forces who lost the last elections. While the Prime Minister as head of the government may know by the means available to her about the investigations underway (although not the right to reveal it till investigations are complete), the ministers orchestrating the Prime Minister's conspiracy theory have no means or reason of knowing about the investigations. Nevertheless, they are publicly talking about such a conspiracy theory with confidence. The BNP and the Jamat have also come up with their own conspiracy theories conflicting with that of the ruling party. It is just not the political parties that are suggesting conspiracies; the people are also participating in this "national sport". It would therefore be interesting to quote here relevant part of the NYT story on the conspiracy theories afloat related to the BDR carnage: "Some point to terrorist groups and anti-Indian insurgents. Others say that it was fuelled by intelligence agencies in either India or Pakistan both countries have been alternately friend and foe to Bangladesh. There are those who suggest that it could involve politicians who lost the last election, while others blame people within Mrs. Hasina's party whose goal is to keep the army in check."

In the midst of these conspiracy theories what is being overlooked is that there has been a massive failure in intelligence. To date, no one responsible has been asked by the government to stand down to facilitate the investigations. The BDR carnage, in the manner it has been carried out by its perpetrators and handled by the government, makes it imperative for the investigations to unravel the chain of events transparently. The perpetrators must be identified, including the masterminds behind it, and punished so that any theory of conspiracy, if there is any, is rested and the families of the victims satisfied that justice has been done. We must not forget that the carnage and its handling has affected civil-military relations adversely like never before in our history. A resolution of this issue will depend squarely upon transparent investigation and punishment of the perpetrators if a conspiracy involving forces external to BDR and/or the country is found in the investigation reports.

There is an event underway to brand Bangladesh: a nation that has stood with its head high before the rest of the world

when its people fought and won freedom against the worst forces of oppression; a nation that has sacrificed blood for her mother tongue; a nation that has as rich a historical and civilization roots as the best on earth. It should be an easy nation to brand. Bangladesh has made itself difficult to brand because her politics has stood in the way. Politics dominated by some degree of conflicts, acts of terrorism and killings, disagreeable as these may be, is not unique to Bangladesh. Nations that suffer these unfortunate incidents come together to deal with it like India came together following the Mumbai terrorist attacks last November. What is unique in the case of Bangladesh is that when such killings and conflicts or acts of terror occur in our politics, there is little attempt to unravel the causes to bring the perpetrators to justice. Instead, we divide our nation by accusations and counter accusations by our political parties and our conspiracies almost always succeeds in helping the perpetrators get the benefit. Even the people get caught in this frenzy of conspiracy theories that hinders in dealing with such tragedies. Bangladesh's history is replete with such examples.

February 25th has hit the national psyche at the core as it was hit on March 25th, 1971. The nation needs to get together now as it did then if it wants to heal the scars that the February 25th carnage has left. All quarters should have patience to let the investigating agencies complete their work and then the Government should come forward to take action that should be firm, transparent and should rest all conspiracy theories to rest. Failure to deal with the February 25th carnage could have far-reaching consequences that could be disastrous for the nation. It is time for the Prime Minister to lead the nation just as her father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had done in the dark moments of our history: in the days preceding the beginning of the genocide by uniting the nation, not dividing it. It is time for us to give up our "national sport" with conspiracy theories for such indulgence only dilutes the investigations and help the perpetrators. Let the Prime Minister show the way; let her tell us about any conspiracy that there may have been behind the February 25th carnage but only after this has been established as a fact. That can only be established after the investigations are complete.

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## Obama's 3 1/2 wars

MUMTAZ IQBAL

**O**BAMA is the first African-American US President and also the first to inherit 3 1/2 wars none volcanic (economy), two hot (Iraq and Afghanistan) and 1/2 simmering (Mexico).

### Economic War

US financial sector's collapse last September helped Obama win the presidency. His priority is reviving the economy through reforms on jobs, housing and credit flows.

Saving and/or creating jobs, of which 3.6 million were lost since December 2007, is the aim of the massive \$787 billion package Obama approved on 17 February that "will invest in... energy, education, health care, and a new infrastructure... to keep us strong and competitive in the 21st century." Most prominent US economists support this stimulus.

Obama unveiled a \$275-billion program on 19 February to help nine million homeowners facing foreclosure and increase availability of mortgages, since the housing mess was "...unraveling the middle class and the American Dream itself."

The biggest problem is getting the banks to lend which means persuading them to sell their bad assets at an acceptable discount to the original value, thus minimizing their equity erosion and the need to raise new capital. To sweeten the deal and unfreeze credit, Treasury Secretary Geithner announced a public-private plan on 23 March to buy up to \$2 trillion of bad loans and mortgage-related assets by offering investors up to 93% of the purchase price at cheap rates and little risk. Nobody knows if these programs will succeed. But if throwing money at a problem solves it, these measures should help. Otherwise, the world recession will worsen.

### Iraq War

Winding down an unpopular war helps Obama. He was president or lucky not to support the war and benefits from Bush's "surge" that has made withdrawal practicable by August 2010. So a war fought on false pretences humbling the younger Bush and scarring US reputation worldwide will, unlike Vietnam, be brought to an honourable end.

### Afghanistan War

During his campaign, Obama criticized Bush's Afghan policy as "unfocused" (bringing democracy) and allocating insufficient resources (men and money). On 26 March, Obama announced his Afghan policy whose aim is "to disrupt, dismantle and eventually destroy al-Qaeda in Pakistan" and allocated more money and men to achieve it.

This aim is both interesting and odd. Interesting, because it is an undeclared war against the Pakistani state and the US, for the first time, is targeting a non-government viscerally anti-American organization with a bizarre ideology for military destruction.

Odd, because senior CIA officials claimed on 2 February '09 that drones have "decimated" al-Qaida's leadership in Pakistan (Tom Gjelten, intelligence and

national security correspondent, National Public Radio). Does the aim then make sense? After all, a terrorist attack doesn't have to be executed by al-Qaeda personnel in Pakistan; 9/11 wasn't.

Obama conflating Afghanistan with terrorism should resonate well with Americans since al-Qaeda is seared in the US psyche as the devil incarnate. But tacitly invoking the 9/11 syndrome is suspiciously close to what Bush did.

Al-Qaeda's destruction may not end the Afghan insurgency. Taliban's resurgence arguably is based on Pakhtun nationalism on both sides of the Durand Line, fuelled by deprivation from power in Kabul that Pakhtuns consider their birthright.

Pakhtuns regard NATO as an occupation force whose over-reliance on air bombings cause civilian casualties and alienate the population. Resisting them is a nationalist duty leavened by cultural values and a medieval obscurantism that sanctifies ousting the infidels. Pakhtuns' FAIA sanctuary and assistance from their ethnic coreligionists makes uprooting the Taliban infrastructure difficult.

Obama acknowledges that "the problem of Afghanistan, the Taliban, the spread of extremism in that region" can not be solved "solely through military means," but will require "diplomacy... and development." Obama is using the traditional carrot and stick strategy.

The stick is deploying 21,000 extra GIs to Afghanistan including 4,000 from the elite 82nd Airborne to train the Afghan Army to take over security gradually beginning 2011. These troops will boost US strength to nearly 70,000. Other NATO members are providing 32,000 soldiers.

"Afghanisation" is estimated to cost "up to" \$20 billion over the next several years; by contrast, Afghanistan's budget is \$1.1 billion. The exit strategy of "Afghanisation" resembles "Vietnamisation."

The carrot involves sending aid workers to Afghanistan, pump \$7.5 billion into Pakistan, increase diplomatic efforts including supporting a UN conference in Afghanistan on 31 March at The Hague (Iran will attend), and persuade Moscow, Beijing, and US allies especially NATO to do more.

Obama's special envoy Richard Holbrooke's focus is to ensure Afghanistan doesn't become a terrorist safe haven rather than a democracy. He will try to wean away the "non-ideologically aligned" Taliban by dividing and conquering. Holbrooke plans a follow-up visit to Pakistan after The Hague conference where his "most important" task will be to investigate the ISI's "very disturbing" alleged links to the Taliban.

Some ISI reshuffling is likely, but any replacement within the ISI may cause the Pakhtuns to reduce intelligence inflow about the Taliban.

Incidentally, 2009 is DGF (BDR), ISI (Taliban) and RAW (Mumbai) bashing season!

Pakistan Army may not move big time against the Taliban with Indo-Pak relations being edgy, however it may renew operations in FATA under US pressure. The Army suffered in Waziristan, Bajaur and Swat, with soldiers grumbling about Muslims

fighting Muslims for US interests. Holbrooke's brief embraces the Taliban requires Delhi's involvement, given Islamabad's aspiration for "strategic depth" and quibbles about Indian machinations in Afghanistan. This would mean reopening Kashmir.

Obama now owns the Afghan war and he may fare better than his predecessors. Unlike the Vietnamese, Pakhtuns lack international patrons because of their odious ideology and pincer movements from both sides of FATA may impact their operational freedom.

The Taliban and their Pakistani counterparts retaliate by fomenting violence inside Pakistan. The 27 March Peshawar mosque bombing and 30 March attack on the Lahore police academy are ominous.

Americans face a long hard slog. Body bags will be a key determinant of the US commitment's intensity and durability. Too many dead GIs may sour the US public. It would be tragic if Afghanistan became a quagmire like Vietnam.

### Mexico's drug war

This two-year war between Mexico's government forces including 40,000 soldiers and rival drug cartels has seen 7,200 Mexicans killed since 2008. Border towns like Ciudad Juarez (opposite El Paso) and Monterrey (opposite San Diego) are under virtual martial law.

The conflict originates from US consumers' insatiable \$65 billion annual demand for illegal cocaine, heroin and marijuana. About 90% of the drugs pass through Mexico, with Mexican cartels in 230 US cities being the "biggest organized crime threat in US" (Justice Department report December 2008).

The flip side is that 90% of the weapons seized are smuggled from the 6,600 licensed gun dealers in the American south. US constitutional right to bear arms fuels a vicious internal war in Mexico that has spilled into US.

Bush and Obama have taken this drug war seriously. Bush passed the Merida Initiative, a \$900 million package of training, military hardware, scanning technology and security database improvements.

On 24 March, Obama said the Mexican drug cartels were "completely out of hand," praised Mexican President Calderón's courage "in taking (them) on," emphasised the war is a "shared responsibility" and the US has "to get its own house in order."

Earlier that day, Homeland Secretary Janet Napolitano confirmed that 460 agents, more canine teams, X-ray equipment et al were sent to the border to interdict financial and weapons flow as the "first wave of things that will be happening."

Washington's mounting concern is evident from Secretary Clinton's visit to Mexico on 26 March. Napolitano and Obama will follow in April.

Iraq is cooling down. The economy, Afghanistan and Mexico is heating up. These protracted 2 1/2 wars is more likely to worsen before improving.

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