

US ENGAGEMENT WITH MYANMAR

Implications for Bangladesh

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

A few events have put Myanmar on international focus in recent days. Myanmar's Prime Minister General Thein Sein was in New York and addressed the UN General Assembly, the highest ranking General of Myanmar to address the world body since 1995. In New York, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near East met the Myanmar Ambassador at the UN and a Minister of Myanmar on the sidelines of the UN general assembly. This was the highest level direct talks between US and Myanmar in a long time and was undertaken at the initiative of President Obama. Under President Bush and President Clinton, the US policy was to punish Myanmar with sanctions to force the release of the Noble Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi with 2,000 other political prisoners and to soften the military regime there that has been in power since 1962, with the present military junta in office since 1988.

The Myanmar military leader also met Senator Jim Webb who is Chairman of the Senate Sub-Committee for Near Asia and Pacific. The senator had earlier visited Myanmar in August to seek the release of the US tourist whose dramatic swim to meet Aung had earned the Nobel Laureate an extension to her house arrest sentence. The senator told journalists that his meeting with the General in New York was to follow up on his discussions with him during his visit to Myanmar. Although the US has made a major shift in policy towards Myanmar, General Thein Sein said in his UN speech that his country would follow its own course towards democracy and would not give in to outside pressure. He also said there was no question of releasing Aung.

Thus, without any major concession, why has the US shifted towards engagement? The reasons are quite a few. First, the Obama administration has concluded that the sanctions have not worked to force the regime to change because US has been alone in trying to

isolate Myanmar. Second, commitment of countries crucial to isolate Myanmar has never been forthcoming. China has its own strategic reasons vis-à-vis India to look the other way towards the ruthlessness of the Myanmar regime and to engage with it deeply. India, leaving aside its democratic credentials, has been drawn to Myanmar to balance the Chinese influence as well as to access Myanmar's gas for its energy starved northeast provinces. Thailand has used Myanmar's gas and Singapore does business with it, acting as Myanmar's major trading link and a safe haven for its generals' wealth. Japan and South Korean companies benefit from doing business there and the European Union have invested heavily in Myanmar's gas industry, their support for sanctions notwithstanding. Third, the suspected nuclear collaboration between Myanmar and North Korea that has recently come to focus has also encouraged USA to seek engagement. Finally, the illegal drug trade has also motivated the change in US policy.

The US Government has, nevertheless, stated clearly that one-way engagement has failed. It has opted for engagement without lifting the tough economic sanctions. The US policy of engagement has also been influenced by a few faint hopes in the horizon of Myanmar's politics. The military junta has announced multi-party elections in 2010 to legitimize its power having achieved national integration by successfully dealing with the Karen insurgency in June this year. Although the junta gave Aung a shortened sentence in her house arrest following the case against her for the meeting with the US tourist, they have nevertheless made sure that her sentence extended beyond the date of the elections. Nevertheless, the US is hopeful that through engagement, the US may be able to push for Aung's participation. The Obama administration has considered the aging process of the leaders of the junta that took power in 1988. Senior General Than Shwe is 76 and reportedly not in good

health and his Deputy General Maung Aye is 71. Engagement would allow the US to reach the younger elements of the junta who could be more susceptible to change as they have a better view of the world than the elders in the leadership role. The Noble Laureate has given her go ahead to Obama's initiative of engagement but has also asked the US to talk with the leaders of her National League for Democracy.

In a surprise but parallel development, Aung was escorted on October 3rd from her residence, where she has been in house arrest for 14 of the last 20 years, for a meeting with Relations Minister. It resulted from a letter she wrote to the junta chief Than Shwe a week prior to the date on which she said she would help lift international sanctions. In the letter that was a gesture of cooperation towards the junta, Aung also proposed to hold talks with western diplomats. Although details of the talks have not been revealed, the meeting has given cause for optimism.

There was a time not very long ago when Myanmar was almost totally isolated from the rest of the international community as much as by way of sanctions against it as by its own volition. At that time, Bangladesh was one of the very few countries with which Myanmar had direct diplomatic and economic contacts. Although for a while, Bangladesh-Myanmar relations were restrained with the influx of Rohingya refugees in the late 1970s, the two countries maintained close and friendly relations both under military and democratic governments in the successive decades. Unfortunately, in recent times, Bangladesh-Myanmar relations have faltered on the issue of demarcating the maritime boundary. There is also tension in the border where both countries have moved troops. Myanmar is being wooed by both China and India for their respective reasons. China's major interest in Myanmar is strategic. It wants an access to the Bay of Bengal to keep a watch on the naval presence of the US and India



in the Indian Ocean, an access that Bangladesh also could provide. However, for that access, China has tilted towards Myanmar because Bangladesh has not been so forthcoming. The factor of geography and internal politics has also worked to bring China and Myanmar closer in strategic

partnership.

In such a scenario, the initiative of President Obama to engage with Myanmar would put Bangladesh at a disadvantage. Its problems with Myanmar relating to the vital issue of demarcation of the maritime boundary would not fall on receptive ears if it tried

as it may have to at some stage to seek assistance of the United States and other powers that are now drawn towards Myanmar for its rich energy and other resources. Simply put, Myanmar has a lot more to offer to these powers than Bangladesh and the latest developments concerning Myanmar would only make Myanmar more important. Although there is no reason to conclude that this would automatically weaken Bangladesh's position, nevertheless there is the possibility that its concerns vis-à-vis Myanmar would not find takers.

Thus, if the current initiative taken by President Obama succeeds in softening Myanmar towards democracy which is still very unlikely, it would only bring it closer to the US and the others that are in engagement with it. That in turn would strengthen Myanmar's international position which it could use against Bangladesh in the context of its bilateral problems. There is of course the nightmarish possibility of Myanmar becoming nuclear and in that context Bangladesh's position would be worse, in fact precarious.

The recent developments related to Myanmar are very important for Bangladesh. It must activate its foreign policy on a number of fronts. It must talk with the United States without losing time to convey its concerns about Myanmar that should be many so that these are brought into the equation when the US talks with Myanmar in greater depth in the weeks and months ahead. Bangladesh foreign policy makers must also hold in depth talks with China and India, two countries that could be crucial in the way they motivate Myanmar because they are already in direct contact with the military junta there. Bangladesh must find a way to convey to the military junta that it has friends to expect a fair deal on bilateral problems.

The writer is former Ambassador to Japan and Egypt.

Afghanistan War: Can the US win?

BILLY I AHMED

THE war in Afghanistan launched on October 7, 2001, dubbed "Operation Enduring Freedom," were to locate, capture or kill Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the members of his leadership cadre and end the Taliban regime's stronghold in the region, striking a decisive blow in the Bush administration's infamous global "War on Terror."

While many members of Al-Qaeda's command staff captured or killed, and many Taliban members neutralized, Osama bin Laden remains hiding, suspected of being somewhere in a mountainous remote Pakistani region. Al Qaeda has evolved, spreading to several areas across the globe. The Taliban appears able to strike U.S. military forces at will, and public support for the war is rapidly falling.

A CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll released September 1 found that 57 per cent of the American people are opposed to the war, up 11 points since April.

Last month was the deadliest for U.S. military personnel since the war began eight years ago and pressure is rising on Pres. Barack Obama and top

troops in Afghanistan," she added.

Ms. Moen's group, an 84-year-old nonviolent antiwar organization, plans major anti-war action in cities across the U.S. on October 5 to protest the War in Afghanistan and demand an immediate withdrawal of troops.

Responding via e-mail from France to questions presented by The Final Call, author, political commentator and co-founder of the on-line news magazine Electronic Intifada Ali Abunimah wrote, "During the campaign, Obama promised to intensify the war in Afghanistan and spread it to Pakistan."

By all accounts he is keeping that promise. More bombs, more violence, more displaced people will not produce the conditions for peace. Rather, it will expand the circle of suffering and those willing to take up arms in defence of what they experience as a foreign invasion. So sadly I do see the worst yet to come."

President Obama, immediately on taking office, said Afghanistan was a "necessary war" and while he has ordered an increase in troop levels and has taken on to work with cooperative allies within Afghanistan and Pakistan to succeed, conflict rages. The results from the recently held Afghan presi-

"The bottom is starting to fall out of the Afghan opium market. For the second year in a row, cultivation, production, workforce, prices, revenues, exports and its GDP share are all down, while the number of poppy-free provinces and drug seizures continue to rise. Yet, Afghan drugs still have disastrous outcomes. They fund criminals, insurgents, and terrorists in Afghanistan and abroad. Collusion with corrupt government officials keeps undermining public trust, security, and the law," said Mr. Costa.

Robert T. Starks, political science professor at North-eastern Illinois University described Afghanistan as "almost ungovernable" and pointed out that if President Obama continues to ramp up troop levels in an effort to stay in the course, he runs the risk of a prolonged conflict without end. As the American bodies continue to pile up, public support will continue to decline. However, the major issue, according to Prof. Starks, is the financial drain the war is having on a faltering American economy.

"Economically, this country cannot afford to continue that war," said Prof. Starks. "The last thing he wants to do is to have a repeat of what went on in Vietnam, that type of long range fight going on in Afghanistan," said Prof. Starks.

For President Obama and the multinational forces in the region, the bad news keeps on coming.

According to media reports, a NATO air strike in Afghanistan on Sept. 4 caused at least 90 civilian casualties. Constant drone attacks with Hellfire missiles have taken the lives of hundreds of non-combatants in the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which has not helped matters with locals whom the multinational forces are ostensibly seeking to enlist for support.

A top defence aide to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown resigned on Sept. 3 over disagreements on the government's Afghanistan policy and involvement. According to a recent poll in London's Daily Telegraph 66 per cent of Brits are against the war.

Fifty-two British soldiers have been killed in the conflict within the last two months. With four months left, 2009 has already been the deadliest year for troops in Afghanistan. There are about 68,000 American troops engaged in combat operations.

Despite those realities on the ground, Defence Secretary Robert Gates at a Sept. 3 press briefing alongside Adm. Mullen at the Pentagon, reiterated his support for President Obama's strategy while acknowledging faltering support.

Prof. Starks said despite what the generals are saying, the reality is that President Obama is going to be forced to consider a withdrawal "sooner rather than later."

Leading Islamic scholar Imam Zaid Shakir of the Zaytuna Institute, a non-profit, educational religious institute and school based in Berkeley, California agreed. His advice to President Obama would be "blame it on Bush and get out."

"It's an unwinnable war, it has nothing to do with stopping terrorists, in fact, if anything, it is going to create more animosity towards this country and it is going to create more people who have reasons to seek revenge against this country," said Imam Shakir. President Obama should not be deterred by the possibility of being called weak by the right-wing, he added.

"It takes more strength to do the right thing. Sometimes it takes more strength to walk away from a fight you shouldn't be involved in than to display a false sense of macho and a false sense of courage by engaging in that fight. It takes more courage to defy the warmongers, it takes more courage to defy the militarists, it takes more courage to stand up to admit that you made a mistake," said Imam Shakir.

The author is a columnist and researcher

Time for the government to act

BRIG GEN (RETD) JAHANGIR KABIR, ndc, psc

ABDUL Jalil, the erstwhile General Secretary of Awami League, has flare for sensational politics; he is also capable of telling the truth, occasionally. Why else should he challenge the last election that his party won? Even without salvos from the loose cannon, the shock of the journey back to democracy came from the election itself. The general speculation was that the BNP alliance would lose, broadly for three reasons - people generally do not vote for the incumbent party, rise of terrorism alarmed the west and the caretakers could not afford to see the BNP back to power.

After the legal battles against the Zia family and the leaders, a demoralized BNP had little time to energize for the election. The party was sharply divided between pro and anti election camps. Only point that finally convinced Begum Zia to go for election was the long shot strategy to jettison nonpolitical elements from the political arena to revive the derailed democracy. Opting for the rebirth of democracy in spite of deep personal pain and disadvantages of the party in the election is a commendable judgment by Begum Zia.

The ballot boxes and election activities were apparently transparent but all kinds of stories were fed from the state machinery to influence voters' mind. Rural Bangladesh is still in the grip of the Radio and BTv where voters carefully listen to make up their mind. Koko was not a candidate. If anything, it was a court case. What was the intention to tell the people with lot of fanfare four days before the election that Koko had stashed money in a bank in Singapore? The news played a decisive role on the large swing vote.

Ten months on, the honeymoon for the government is over. It is now time to pay attention to the jobs at hand. The Four-party Alliance gave legitimacy to the government by participating in the election; it is now the responsibility of the government to restore the invincibility of the constitution.

The load the caretaker government put on the shoulders of the army is still weighing heavy. The fatigue of the army officers was visible when the PM came to Dhaka cantonment to address them after the Peelkhana tragedy. If caretaker regime had not ridden on the back of the army and other paramilitary forces to prolong its life, the Peelkhana tragedy could probably have been avoidable. The danger of frequently misusing the army is its intrinsic capacity to endanger democracy. The gambling must cease for the growth of democracy and professionalism in the army. Nobody should escape the responsibility of illegally grabbing power and derailing democracy.

My worries are not for what has happened during the caretaker regime, but the future of democracy that will remain vulnerable until the honourable court pronounces judgment on the violation of the constitution. The first responsibility of the rulers is to secure constitution and democracy for the people and their own future. I quote here the recent direction given by the supreme court of Pakistan - "General Parvez Musharraf is as much a usurper as general Aga Mohammed Yahya Khan after the imposition of Martial Law in 1969. Therefore, his actions should be nullified, and he would be liable to be tried for high treason and punishment". If that is what the highly militarised Pakistan is saying against usurpers, how the government charters an escape route for the illegal actions following 1/11?

The reason why democracy is still struggling is due to the flippant attitude taken by the political elements towards constitutional obligations. I am a fan of Dr. Fakhruddin in many areas of his accomplishment, but sorry; the constitution is against him. The essence of democracy is in the culture of constitutionality and rule of law. The Awami leaguers had bitter experiences; they must not derail from the highway of law and constitution. The commitment of the government is in trying those who violated the constitution. A presidential pardon can take care later, if they deserve mercy. Nevertheless, the illicit door must close forever for the uninterrupted growth of democracy. The advantages are temporary, powers are short lived; but the violation of constitution and rule of law if ignored, a usurper may emerge anytime.

Many Muslim Leaguers mistook Pakistan as the war booty of a successful political maneuver. Their jest for plundering made Bangladesh possible in quarter of a century. Nobody should claim monopoly political right on Bangladesh. Even some ruling party leaders are voicing concern about the extortion and tender manipulation by Juba and Chatra league leaders. Not to be outdone, Mohila League has recently grabbed 12.5 acres land in Chittagong. Extortion, murder and rape cases are alarmingly rising. Honest intention is not enough; the government is suffering from hesitation and indecision.

After so many years, blaming the 4-Party alliance government for everything wrong has few takers now. Electricity is not the moonlight that can appear and disappear at will. People need food and shelter, health and hygiene, education and job. The representatives of the people may be kind enough to devote their time on these in an environment of constitutionality and the rule of law.

The author is a retired military officer



JOHN MOOREGITY

U.S. military officials to find a quick solution to the complex problem. Some critics on the left and the right are calling on him to withdraw from Afghanistan, while others, including military officials, are suggesting recalibration of troop levels and force deployment.

Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff recently described the situation as "serious and deteriorating." U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Commander of the U.S. Forces in Afghanistan said the situation in Afghanistan needs a "revised implementation strategy." Even conservative commentator George Will in an opinion appearing in the Sept. 1 Washington Post suggested "rapidly reversing the trajectory of America's involvement in Afghanistan."

"What the last eight years have shown us is that what we need is not a new military strategy, but a new strategy altogether," said Clare Moen of the War Resisters League and editor-in-chief of their official publication, WIN magazine. "Sending in more troops has not been working. We just finished the deadliest month in the deadliest year for U.S.

dential election are still in dispute, with the announcement delayed because of allegations of voter fraud. Even after the results are announced, analysts say the Afghan government is weak and the drug trade threatens what little stability there is.

Though there is a government in Kabul, the capital city, but real control over what happened on the ground rested in tribal leaders and warlords. That is layered on sharp ethnic differences in different parts of the country.

In fact, it is misleading to think of Afghanistan as a country or a nation. It is a territory containing several nations and falling woefully short of having the coherence we normally associate with the word 'country.'

Though poppy cultivation and opium production has gone down, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009," its executive director, Antonio Maria Costa still sees narcotics trafficking as a major problem in the region.

According to the report, poppy cultivation dropped 22 per cent and opium production by 10 per cent and there has been a 33 per cent drop of land devoted to poppy cultivation, the report said.