

'India has no intention of diverting water'

The outgoing Indian High Commissioner, Mr. Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, was interviewed by Syed Fahim Munaim and Rezaul Karim of The Daily Star.

EXCERPTS:

Daily Star (DS): Today is your last day as the high commissioner to Bangladesh. It is almost three years that you have been here. Tell us about your feelings, and about your achievements.

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty (PRC): I am a Bengali and so is my wife, and we have spent in total six and a half years in Bangladesh. So, our interest in Bangladesh is not merely diplomatic, it is also personal. We naturally have a large circle of friends here.

I am very satisfied, and my only regret is that I am not able to stay on for the visit of your honourable prime minister to India. Now my successor who is coming here on the 26th will have the honour, and I shall surely watch with great interest from Bangkok, my next mission.

DS: How would you describe the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India? What do you think are the roadblocks on the way to better relations between the two neighbours? What are the areas that you think should be explored?

PRC: I think Indo-Bangla relations are breaking new ground thanks to the two new governments. There is a renewed commitment to try to find innovative solutions to the problems. I have tried very hard to see how we can settle some very old issues. I think that a mutually accommodating attitude and the will to solve them are present now.

For example, take the issue of land boundary and enclaves. We are working on very innovative things. What do the people in the enclaves want? For example, there are Bangladeshi farmers who live in the Bangladesh side of the border but have to go to the Indian side for cultivation. We checked this during a joint visit, and we found that the people don't want to leave the land on which they have settled, worked, and have farms. My solution has been generally accepted in the sense that it is doable, and we feel that it is a new way of doing things. We suggested a redrawing of the international border. A Bangladeshi farmer has to go across the border everyday and runs the gamut of officialdom -- BDR, BSE Of course, he has a permit to do it. Similarly for the Indian farmers who have to cross the international border into Bangladesh to cultivate land. These pieces of land are all contiguous. So, there is a possibility that we can redraw the international border and finish this problem once and for all. Of course, we will need a joint survey, which we will start doing soon after the PM's visit.

DS: Will it come up during the PM's visit?

PRC: I am sure this will be discussed. The last point about the land boundary is that 6.2 kilometers are un-demarcated. People tend to see these three little segments, and forget that there are 4096 kilometers of border, which we have demarcated. So, it is a question of how you look at the glass, as half full or half-empty. My suggestion, which seems to be generally acceptable, is to draw the line along the status quo. Though these three segments are not in a position of strategic importance, let us finish it off.

DS: Has any progress been made in this regard?

PRC: I think this issue has been discussed at the highest level. But it needs to be implemented now and will naturally need redrawing of the borders. You need constitutional amendment. You have to get people on board, and carry out a survey. Only the operational details need to be settled. By and large there is agreement in principle.

DS: This is Sheikh Hasina's first visit after coming to power. There are a lot of issues in the public domain. Many say that Hasina and Manmohan Singh will resolve and clarify them. How do you view all these things?

PRC: I am very optimistic, because I know what kind of discussions we had between the officials at the higher levels. Our prime ministers have actually met twice, once in the NAM summit and then in Trinidad and Tobago in the Commonwealth summit. So, a dialogue has started. I look at the visit as culmination of this dialogue. We hope there will be a joint declaration. All the issues of bilateral significance will be covered. Let me say that we will surprise you with what will happen.

DS: Yes, it is in the air that something dramatic will come up out of this discussion.

PRC: No, nothing dramatic. I mean there will be no earth-shaking event, but there will be solutions. We will break some new ground. For example, in the power sector, we have promised 100 MW of power. India is not a power surplus country, yet we realise that this is an important area, and that is why this offer of 100MW power. I think the grid connectivity work will start soon after the agreement.

DS: Any other areas on where you would have agreements?

PRC: I think another important area would be transit for Bangladesh to Nepal and Bhutan. We are looking at railway transit, and we have agreed to Rohanpur-Singla. We are looking at the other route, which is through Jhikabari-Jhalaihati. We hope that a motor vehicle agreement will be signed, or at least work will start, immediately after the visit so that Bangladeshi trucks can go to Bhutan and Nepal. And vice versa, Indian trucks can come up to certain points to offload goods.

The other major issue is transportation of containers overland from India and Bangladesh to each others' territories. I think the train route and waterways are viable for container movement. Once containers start coming and going, the cost of trade will go down.

DS: Can you tell us about the issue of harbouring of insurgents or wanted criminals, which has been on top of the agenda of both the countries for quite some time?

PRC: You know we have a very long border between us. Sometimes what happens is that people who are wanted in one country escape to the other and seek refuge. This issue is bigger than that because there are insurgent leaders, and there are terrorists. They do not believe in borders. So, when we have information, we pass it on. I am very happy to say that our cooperation in this field is expanding. I am very happy that the Bangladesh government is very sensitive. Every Bangladesh government had promised that your territory would not be used for any insurgency or terrorism against India. We have always accepted that assurance. I am happy to say that we are working very closely. Let me say that India is not interested in any Bangladeshi who is wanted here and we will not give refuge to anybody. We will be happy to hand them over to Bangladesh. I am confident that it is already happening. I am sure this will send a huge message to those who want to disturb the peace and destabilise the region, and that Bangladesh and India are not the places where they can get away with it. We will naturally pursue it vigorously because we think security is essential to our development, to our well-being and to our future prospects.

DS: What kind of cooperation are you getting from the government?

PRC: I think exchange of information and intelligence is now an established fact. We are exchanging information. Sometimes what happens is that I may want Mr X, but he cannot be found. It is always a possibility. But, Mr Y can be found. You know that way it can be done. So, we do exchange information for this kind of thing and we do believe that this is working in the sense that they have got the message. They are, in fact, on the run. And when they run into India, we will catch them.

DS: There has been a lot of news about Ulfat in the media. Are there any specific persons in Bangladesh who you think belong to that group and should be handed over to you?

PRC: Yes, there are some people who we know are here and we hope that some kind of arrangement can be worked out so that they can surrender to the Indian authority.

DS: You know that the trial of Bangabandhu murder has come to a close. There have been efforts by our government to bring back the convicted killers absconding abroad. Some say some of them may be in India. What is your view about it? There are some media reports that two convicted killers are in jail in India.

PRC: I think there is some confusion about it. I can confirm that the two people who are in jail in Tihar are two brothers who were involved in the August 21, 2005, grenade attack on an Awami League rally. These two gentlemen were later on caught in India in connection with terrorist attack in Varanasi and perhaps in Hyderabad. I think they are in jail facing a case. Hence they are in our jail facing a case that has been lodged against them. It was discovered only later that they were also wanted in Bangladesh. There is a judicial process that is going on in India. We will have to see how we can work this out. But, I think there will be no hesitation in the government of India if the government of Bangladesh wants them back to prosecute them for the crimes they committed, or alleged to have committed, in Bangladesh. We will certainly hand them over if necessary.

About the convicted killers of Bangabandhu, I think there is no confirmation about that. I think that is simply a speculative report. Let me say in principle, if such people are found in India we will certainly hand them over. But, I personally have doubts as to whether the convicted killers are hiding in India because I think they will not feel comfortable there. The two in jail are also very young. I think the media are confused about the two issues.

DS: There is a huge trade gap between India and Bangladesh. How can India help Bangladesh in this regard?

PRC: I don't think India is the only country that Bangladesh has adverse trade balance with. However, we do take on board Bangladesh's concern about trade imbalance. We have tried to see what kind of concessions we can give. In January 2008, the government of India provided duty-free entry of Bangladeshi products to India under Safta. Bangladesh as an LDC is already enjoying this duty-free access into the Indian market -- except for, what we call under Safta, the negative list. The negative list has also been reduced from about 700 plus to about 400. Bangladesh provided the list of 101 items which they would like India to consider for duty-free entry. I think more than 50 percent of that has been included. Where we have not been able to provide duty-free entry we have used tariff free quota system. We have provided duty-free market access to 8 million pieces readymade garments, of which I think you have not used 60 percent or so yet. Among the trade concessions, these are the two major issues.

Apart from that, people talk of barriers. Trade can be facilitated if you remove congestion and go for containerised transportation. I don't think removal of trade

imbalance will happen in the near future. You must understand that the two economies are entirely different. India being the larger economy certainly has a bigger market. And, Bangladesh has goods that it can manufacture and sell. I think that Bangladeshi exporters and producers of goods need to go to the Indian market and do a lot more advertising. If people do not know what Bangladesh is making, then there is a problem. There is a communication gap. I think this is a very important factor.

Individuals, groups or the Export Promotion Bureau can do it. A combination of all these will help Bangladeshi exports. We have also talked of opening up more border trade stations, for example in Tripura and Mizoram. Mizoram actually needs goods from Bangladesh. That is how Bangladesh's market can expand in India. There is an element of infrastructure and official support which needs to be looked at also.

DS: Regarding obtaining visas for India, there seem to be a lot of hassles. How do you think getting visas could be made easier so that people of both the countries can have more people to people contacts?

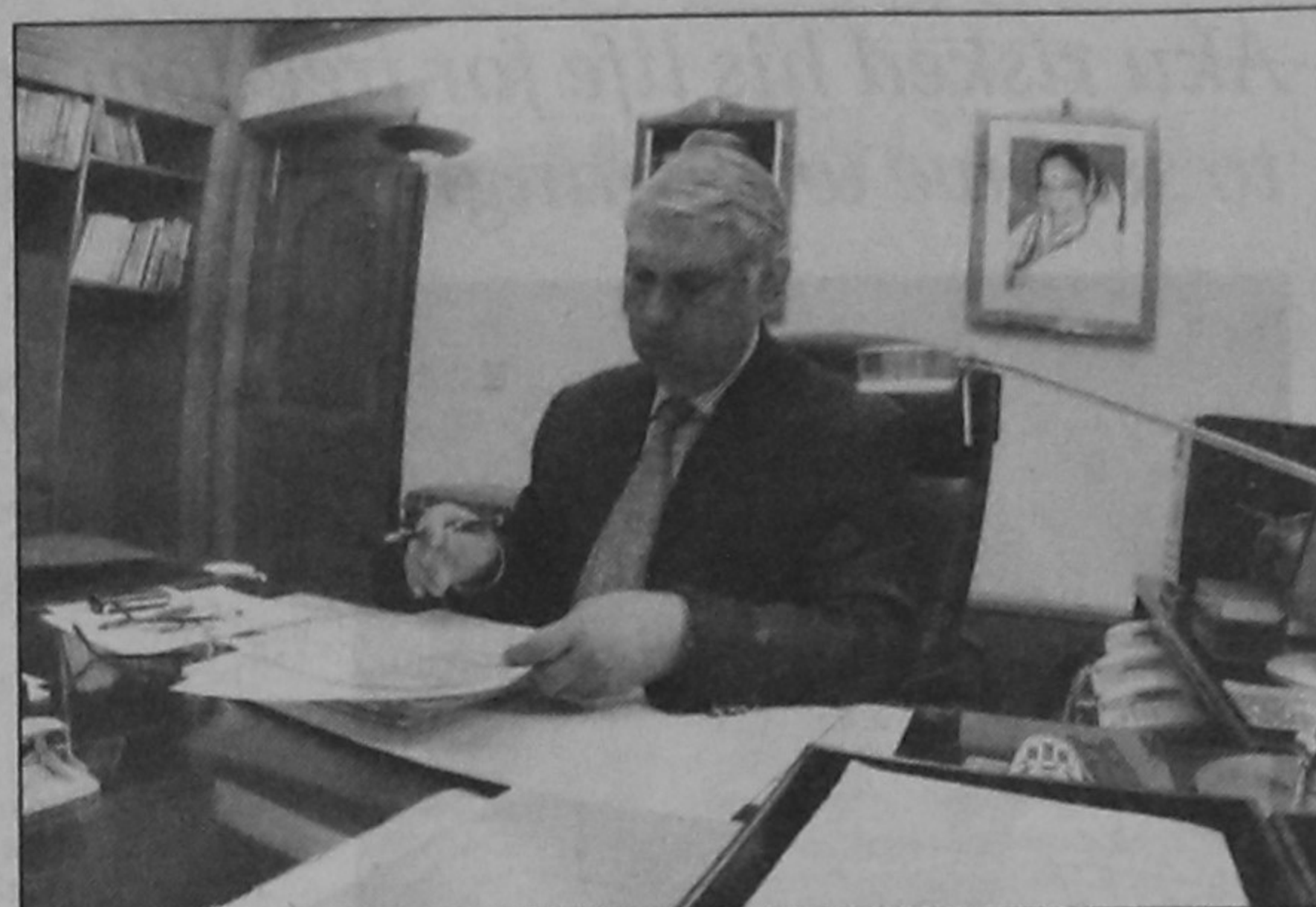
PRC: India is the only country that gives the Bangladeshis the maximum number of visas, over half a million a year. The point is that the demand is much more. Now we have gone electronic. When someone wants to go to India, he has to log on to the website and then get an e-token with date and time. But, of course, emergency cases for medical reasons are handled differently. I can assure you that if you have a genuine reason, and you have an e-token that is scheduled for 15 or 20 days later, but you need to travel in two to three days, we are here to entertain those visas.

DS: How do you want to dispel the concerns of Bangladeshis people on Tipaimukh Dam and water sharing treaty?

PRC: India has no intention of diverting water. Bangladesh will continue to get what it ought to get legitimately. We have more than 54 common rivers. The only agreement that we have is the Ganges Water Treaty, which is working well. You will be happy to know that Bangladesh got more water than its share. Whatever people might say, I am not going to listen to any argument because I have all the facts and figures, and we got them jointly. But, the other major issue is a Teesta water treaty. Technical people will have to do a hydrological study so that we can address the issue quickly. There are other issues related to water. There are some border rivers which need dredging. If you don't dredge them the banks break, so we need river-bank protection, we need drinking water and minor irrigation schemes on the border rivers. These are all held up because of lack of technical agreements. I am sure that the Teesta water treaty will come up during your prime minister's visit.

DS: Has any hydrological study started?

PRC: Well, we have started a study on Teesta. Other rivers will be taken up one by one. It depends on the two sides coming to an agreement. Now, you talk about Tipaimukh. Actually, nothing has happened yet. But there are a few issues that people should know. Number one, it is not a water diversion project. It was essentially a flood control project. Later on, we felt that we could also produce electricity. You would be surprised to know that the concept of having reservoirs in the upstream actually emanated from Bangladeshi experts in the '80s, when we were discussing flood action programmes or the Brahmaputra-Ganga link channel. Bangladesh proposed that we should actually build reservoirs in the upstream. Tipaimukh is part of that concept so that some water can be pulled back during the rainy season and released during the lean season. This is the concept which was



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pioneered by the Bangladeshi experts and it is there black and white in the in the Flood Action Programme. If you read the account of the parliamentary committee, you will find the concepts were developed during that era. I think it is regrettable that people have tried to politicise it.

Our prime minister has told your prime minister that India is not going to take any steps if there is any evidence that it will cause harm to Bangladesh.

DS: Coming to the issue of Asian Highway, there is a perception that India is reluctant about Bangladesh's proposal to have a route through Cox's Bazar connecting Myanmar. Some have the perception that India has become a barrier for Bangladesh regarding Asian Highway. How would you comment on that?

This is funny. People are using misinformation only to create confusion and fear of India. And some are planting in the minds of people that India is against this thing and India does not want Bangladesh to do this and that. This, I think, is a legacy of the past. I maintain that there is no future in anti-India and India fear politics. I look forward to the new generations, the internet generation.

Having said that I would say that Bangladesh could have joined the treaty, but it chose not. Unless you are a member you cannot decide which route you would want to take. If Bangladesh prefers a certain route, it should have joined the treaty and then could say look we want this route. But it did not. Whatever routes were discussed at that time have been approved. Bangladesh is now seeking a route to Myanmar, let there be another route to Myanmar. We have no problem. But, yes we are interested in transit. It is not a state secret. This issue has been written down in the treaty signed by Bangladesh and India in 1974, and has been renewed every time needed. It is, in fact, called the Trade and Transit Treaty, but we have not been able to implement it. I think that anybody who says transit is against Bangladesh's interests, that it will destroy Bangladesh's sovereignty and security, needs to rethink because in today's world there are transits everywhere -- transit is an economy. And, we're not going to do anything without the consent of Bangladesh, without actually agreeing to arrange for transit. Let me put it like this, if we sign a motor vehicle agreement, Bangladeshi trucks can go to Kathmandu to pick up goods. Is there anything wrong with it? But, your objection is that Indian trucks should not come. If that is to the advantage of Bangladesh, then where is the problem? If Indian trucks come to Bangladesh, not to Dhaka but to Benapole, where there is big yard to offload goods and things can be distributed from there, will it destroy Bangladesh's sovereignty?

DS: Is there anything happening on transit?

PRC: No, there is no agreement on transit. We are discussing a motor vehicle agreement, which is road transit. We

already have waterway transit, what we are now looking at is how we can expand that agreement to include, for example, Ashuganj water port where goods could be offloaded and then taken by road to Agartala. We requested transit for the turbines that will go from India to Agartala for Balakhana power project. We have invited Bangladesh to take part in the project, and we can offer some electricity. Two grids, Bheramara in your side and in Binodpur on our side, are very close, and we will connect it there. And, there will be a very high-level technical feasibility study. Once the grid is connected, the switching arrangements will be on the Bangladeshi side. There will be joint efforts to do that.

DS: You know Bangladesh does not have that much of infrastructure, especially in the railway sector. Does India have any plan to invest in this sector?

PRC: We are discussing a range of projects in the railway sector, including rehabilitation of certain old structures, lines etc., building of railway bridges, connecting certain points like Agartala and Akhaura, and reopening of certain routes we had traditionally, but have not been used. All of these are being examined. In addition to that there is a railway workshop in Parbotipur. We have offered to modernize it to build coaches, or at least assemble them. We are thinking of meeting Bangladesh's requirements of coaches and locomotives. There are some technical issues there, which are going to be resolved. For this the government of India will give lighter credit and for dredging. A lot of discussion is going on about dredging, for which India will be happy to give a lighter credit or grants for example. I think there are a lot of things that can be done.

DS: Maritime boundary has been the other issue. Bangladesh has gone for arbitration. Do you think there is a different way of handling it?

PRC: Well, there are only two ways of handling it. One is the bilateral and the other is arbitration. It is well laid out in the international agreement to which we all are party. We all have to follow the rules. Bangladesh has decided to do so.

DS: Were there any efforts at bilateral level?

There were efforts, but not very sustained. Because Bangladesh and India never talked for twenty five years on this issue. Only in the last one year that have we had two meetings. Clearly, there is difference of opinion on the claims and on offshore drilling and other issues where each country thinks along its line. So, I call it an overlapping area when we have some difference. And, I think let us go through the arbitration that has been initiated. We already have nominated arbitrators. We have to have some common arbitrators and names have been exchanged. So, the process is on.

The issue will come up during the PM's visit. We don't have any restricted agenda between India and Bangladesh. We will discuss everything that is relevant.

A matter of national sovereignty

Part of this determination mirrors the American mindset that Muslim nations would indeed be better off if they simply borrowed secular institutions of the United States. This mindset presumes that Islam is a reactionary religion that impedes material prosperity and social justice.

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ARTICLE 2(4) of the UN Charter promulgates: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

Territorial integrity and political independence are the principles of national sovereignty -- key principles of the U.N. Charter and post-colonial international law -- which empower nations to freely determine their political, social, economic, and religious institutions, without external coercion, diplomatic pressure.

war threats, and economic sanctions.

Philosophically, these principles respect human diversity and presume that no system, including liberal democracy, can be the singular model for all nations. The principles caution against any mindless importation of legal and political systems that are successful in other nations. Accordingly, the peoples of the world are free to institute political systems of their choice, including constitutional monarchies, presidential systems, secular or religious forms of government.

Contrary to the U.N. Charter, and in violation of the principles of territorial integrity, the US seems determined to shape the Muslim world in its own image. Part of this determination mirrors the

American mindset that Muslim nations would indeed be better off if they simply borrowed secular institutions of the United States. This mindset presumes that Islam is a reactionary religion that impedes material prosperity and social justice.

Part of this determination reflects the dark side of American self-pride and super-power exceptionalism, which sees most other nations as the lesser nations in need of American guidance. Undoubtedly, the U.S. foreign policy is also geared toward obtaining key natural resources (such as oil) and maintaining strategic military dominance in various Muslim regions of the world.

For most part of the twentieth century, Muslim nations, some emerging from colonial yokes, approached the US for economic assistance, development, and even protection against regional and global enemies. For example, the U.S. played a supportive role in the independence of Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation.

The fear of the Soviet Union, which had occupied Central Asian Muslim

nations and later invaded Afghanistan, drove many other Muslim nations to seek U.S. patronage. For a variety of reasons, the US succeeded in constructing strategic alliances with key Muslim nations, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran under the Shah.

The relations with the Muslim world, however, began to fracture as US foreign policy favoured Israel in the Middle East conflict. The 1979 Iranian revolution painted the U.S. as the Great Satan, and highlighted the immorality of US foreign policy that subsidises occupation of Palestine and institutes puppet governments in Muslim countries. A few years later, the Al Qaeda, an international militant organisation, launched asymmetrical warfare against US targets to draw attention to the occupation of Muslim lands. In countering terrorist attacks, the U.S. bombed Tripoli and Khartoum, ratcheting up the conflict with Muslim nations.

The 9/11 attacks and subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have further fractured relations with the Muslim world. The U.S. homeland secu-

city and the associated legal rhetoric of self-defense and the war on terror have been invoked to establish a new justificatory paradigm for violating territorial integrity of Muslim nations. The phraseology of "Islamic fascism" and "Islamic terrorism" paints Muslim militants as inherently violent individuals who kill to please God and to go to heaven. Almost every Muslim nation, foe or friend, is under US diplomatic pressure to take action against national militants.

The US logic of homeland security is weighing heavily on Afghanistan, where the war machine has killed civilians in pursuing the dubious goal of defeating the Taliban. Even Pakistan, an ally, has been subjected to drone attacks while Pakistan's democratically elected government and its armed forces seem to be helpless in protecting the nation's territorial integrity.

In addition to military attacks, the U.S. foreign policy employs dubious modus operandi. The 2006 Iran Freedom Support Act allocates millions of dollars authorising U.S. intelligence agencies to support groups opposed to the Iranian

government. This law is fashioned after the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, a law that paved the way for invasion and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The threats of attacking Iran are in the air. Meanwhile, US intelligence agencies are busy trying to destabilise the Iranian government by sowing seeds of confusion and anarchy.

Unfortunately, these massive violations of the U.N. Charter, specifically of the principles of territorial integrity and political independence, go unnoticed. US foreign policy remains the same under President Obama, who promised to mend relations with Muslim nations.

Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers continue to talk about winning hearts and minds of Muslim populations. Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Palestine, Iran, with so many Muslim countries on the US watch-list, it is unclear how a foreign policy of territorial aggression, invasion, and subversion can generate goodwill that the US seeks in the Muslim world.

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