

Dr. ElBaradei and Egypt's Presidency

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EGYPT, a country unaccustomed to tolerating political opposition, could be getting ready for a change finally. Nobel Laureate and former Chief of the IAEA, Dr. Mohammed ElBaradei, who is the most well known Egyptian internationally in contemporary times, was given a rousing welcome when he arrived in Cairo recently; a reception that was motivated by politics as many Egyptians are beginning to see him as their man of destiny. He is viewed as one who could transform Egypt into a working democracy based on doubt upon his fame for winning the Nobel Peace Prize and handling the crisis in Iraq over presence of WMD as Chief of IAEA and his impeccable record on corruption, a rare commodity in the politics of Egypt.

Egypt saw the downfall of monarchy when King Farouk was quietly sent on exile by a group of army officers led by Lieutenant General Mohammed Najeeb in 1952. However, the real power behind the move by the disaffected army officers called the "free officers" was Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser who set aside General Najeeb and assumed power. Initially Egyptians were unsure about him but his stars rose dramatically when he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. It helped him ride the wave of popularity not just in Egypt but also in the Arab world for placating pan-Arabism and Arab socialism. Nasser ruled as arbitrarily as all Egyptian rulers in history but he had Vice Presidents while he governed with Anwar Sadat, the last of his many Vice Presidents. As President, Anwar Sadat took General Hosne Mubarak as Vice President who became President when he was assassinated in 1981.

Nasser's sudden death and Sadat's sudden assassination did not create any problem in succession as a Vice president was already in place who was in due

course elected President through Egypt's system of referendum. Already 81, in failing health and the next presidential election due next year, the issue of transition from Mubarak has emerged as a major political issue in Egypt's politics because Mubarak has ruthlessly subordinated the opposition and did not take a Vice President. He has not overtly groomed any successor but gave enough power and influence to the younger of his two sons Gamal Mubarak not to leave much doubt in the public mind that he wanted him to "inherit" the Presidency. In fact, the father has more than ensured the son the Presidency because of his absolute control over the military and the intelligence that virtually control and rule Arab world's most populous nation. Perhaps with this succession by "inheritance" in mind, President Mubarak never took a Vice-President. However, where all the past Presidents, including Mubarak, have been from the military, Gamal Mubarak is a civilian. With President Mubarak still in firm control, there seems to be no one else in the wings to contest Gamal's claim but that situation could change dramatically if anything happens to the President between now and the election.

Egypt is the hub of politics in the Middle East. Its history and geopolitical location gives it a place of pre-eminence not just in regional affairs but also in international politics. In a region that is a hotbed of crisis of all sorts, the United States and its allies have always sought Egypt's assistance to seek their resolution. The United States provides Egypt with the largest quantum of assistance that totalled US\$ 28 billion between 1975 and 2005. Unfortunately, while the United States has gone to Iraq and other places of the world to bring about democracy, in Egypt it has backed Hosne Mubarak to the tilt although his rule has been anything but democratic. Mubarak was re-elected



in 1987, 1993 and 1999 through referendum. In 2005, after a change in the constitution that allowed parties to directly contest an incumbent President, Mubarak was again re-elected by a massive majority but the result has been contested both at home and abroad on issue of fairness. Mubarak has thus ruled by force of military and intelligence backed power rather than with the people behind him. He also lacked the charisma of his predecessors, particularly Nasser, and did not enjoy the popularity to sup-

port his long hold on power. He has thus not been able to play a role in international politics as effectively as a popularly backed Egyptian leader could have.

Dr. ElBaradei has thus landed in Cairo in the backdrop of an interesting and exciting political scenario. Dr. ElBaradei who retired from his IAEA position after 12 years in November last year remained abroad from where he gave interviews to the media indicating his intention to contest the next Presidential election but subject to a few conditions. The wide

range of people who greeted Dr. ElBaradei at Cairo airport is revealing. It did not just include people with known opposition links; there were people from all regions and walks of life, many with no political links, who came to show their support for someone they thought had the potentials to change Egypt's political system known to be inefficient and corrupt. An independent group called "ElBaradei for Presidency" that has 65,000 members on Facebook has already started campaigning actively and they claim representation

in all the cities across Egypt.

Some people are also wary whether a former diplomat who has lived most of his life abroad and out of touch with Egypt's politics would be able to lead Egypt if he wins the presidency. However, more serious issues must first be resolved before going to that stage. For one, whether Dr. ElBaradei would be allowed by an authoritarian regime determined in favour of the incumbent President's son to contest the election is yet to be settled because he does not fulfil the requirement of heading a political party for at least a year to become a candidate. Then there is the military and intelligence who would like their candidate to win and win handsomely and they have many a trick up their sleeves. Dr. ElBaradei has also set conditions like assurance of a free and fair election, independent judicial review, international oversight, and equal opportunity for media coverage. These are big issues and President Mubarak could agree to meet these conditions only by putting his son's succession in jeopardy. In his negotiations with Iran as IAEA Chief, the US thought he was soft on Iran and that could become an issue against him as Egyptians are not known to be pro-Iran.

However, all the above factors notwithstanding, Egyptians are agog with the prospect of a change from the absolute rule that Dr. ElBaradei's candidature has caused across a wide spectrum of religious, regional and other issues that divide Egyptians. President Mubarak will not find it easy to hand over power to his son; that in itself is a victory for democracy. In Egypt's stereo-typed politics Dr. ElBaradei's entry, even if it is not successful, has injected a breath of fresh air and an element of hope for change.

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Obama plans dramatic reductions in US nuclear weapons

PRESIDENT Obama plans "dramatic reductions" in the country's nuclear arsenal, a senior U.S. official said Monday, but it remains unclear if he will opt for a radical break from past policy.

A review of nuclear policy, due to be completed this month, "will point to dramatic reductions in the stockpile, while maintaining a strong and reliable deterrent through the investments that have been made in the budget," a senior administration official told AFP.

It will also "point to a greater role for conventional weapons in deterrence" and rule out the need to develop low-yield "bunker-buster" nuclear weapons for penetrating underground targets, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates was due to meet Obama on Monday and was expected to present final options on the "Nuclear Posture Review," which was initially supposed to be released in December.

Gates, an influential figure in Obama's cabinet and former CIA director, has been portrayed by arms control advocates as reluctant to back major changes in nuclear arms policy. It remains unclear how Obama will decide the crucial question of whether the United States should openly declare the conditions for the possible use of nuclear weapons, or retain ambiguous language.

Some of Obama's allies in Congress are pushing to change standing U.S. policy that permits using nuclear weapons in response to a biological or chemical attack, even against a country without an atomic bomb.

The lawmakers want Obama to declare that the exclusive purpose of the arsenal is to deter nuclear attack, which would allow for more drastic cuts in the atomic arsenal.

Amid an intense debate among Obama's advisers, arms control experts and media reports say such a shift appears unlikely.

He has called for nuclear powers to make major cuts in stockpiles in return for

stepped up global efforts to counter the spread of atomic weapons.

The policy review "will be an important step forward in pursuing the goal of reversing the spread of nuclear weapons and seeking a world without them," the administration official said.

Amid growing concern over Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs, the Obama administration is pushing to bolster the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which comes up for review this year.

Officials said the U.S. policy review will call for funds for maintaining the current nuclear arsenal, which the administration believes will pave the way for reducing the country's overall stockpile.

Washington's policy review comes as the United States and Russia appear close to a new deal to slash their nuclear arsenals, despite Moscow's concerns about Washington's latest missile defence plans.

The broad outlines of a new treaty on nuclear weapons have been clear since a

summit in July, when Obama and his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev agreed to slash the number of warheads on either side to between 1,500 and 1,675.

The presidents also agreed that the number of carriers capable of delivering the warheads should be limited to between 500 and 1,100.

The United States has said it currently has some 2,200 "operational" nuclear warheads, while Russia is believed to have about 3,000.

In addition, the U.S. stockpile includes 2,500 additional warheads "in reserve," which can be activated if necessary, according to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists.

The administration is also pushing the Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would ban all nuclear tests, whether military or civilian in nature.

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US hopes NATO's proposed reforms would be ready this year

US officials hope a series of reforms envisioned for the 28-country NATO alliance will be available for review by member nations when they convene later this year, a senior defence official said February 26.

Those reforms, spelled out broadly by Defence Secretary Robert M. Gates, include sweeping changes to a 61-year-old institution suffering from deep problems in how it perceives and responds to threats in an era when its scope has widened beyond traditional Cold War boundaries.

Providing further clarity on the timeline of those expectations, Alexander Vershbow, assistant secretary of defence for international strategic affairs, said he hopes proposed NATO changes would be ready ahead of a NATO meeting in Lisbon, Portugal, slated for November.

"We are hoping that allies will have the chance to approve a package of reforms that will help us meet the vision and the ambitions set out in the Strategic Concept," Vershbow told reporters at the Foreign Press Center here.

The remarks this week came as the alliance undergoes a self-assessment that will culminate in the Strategic Concept, a once-per-decade process of redefining and articulating the alliance's purpose and capabilities in light of the often mercurial security envi-

ronment that frames the organization.

While Gates said the new concept would not attempt to "reinvent the wheel," he acknowledged dramatic changes in the security landscape since similar self-analyses in decades past. Threats such as trans-national terrorism emanating from failed states, for instance, were mostly theoretical concerns when the collective security group outlined it in the 1999 concept paper.

In light of the altered security climate, senior defence officials have put under the microscope what has been characterized as shortfalls in NATO's level of commitment to its mission in Afghanistan and responsible budgeting.

Speaking to NATO representatives at the National Defence University here about the culture of pacifism that emerged in Europe following World War II, Gates said "the continent has gone too far in the other direction."

"The demilitarization of Europe where large swaths of the general public and political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it has gone from a blessing in the 20th century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21st," he said.

Expressing similar concerns, Vershbow said he hopes NATO members use the

forthcoming meeting in Lisbon to recalibrate the alliance's solidarity.

"We hope it will be an opportunity to commit to one another's defence, to better understand the variety of new challenges the alliance is facing, and to prepare ourselves to face these challenges that lie ahead," he said. "We want this to be a vehicle to help our publics, our parliaments, especially the rising new generations, to better understand what NATO means, what it's for, [and] what it can do in the 21st century."

In his remarks this week, Gates praised the beefed-up troop commitment that member nations have pledged in Afghanistan, where non-US troops will increase from roughly 30,000 last summer to 50,000. He urged NATO to muster the same commitment and willingness in its approach to a much-needed overhaul of its current institutional practices.

"All of this should be a wake-up call that NATO needs serious, far-reaching, and immediate reforms to address a crisis that has been years in the making," he said. "And unless the Strategic Concept spurs operational and institutional changes like those I just mentioned, it will not be worth the paper it is printed on."

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NATIONAL SECURITY

Bangladesh perspective

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BANGLADESH, lying between the Himalayas in the north and the Bay of Bengal in the south, offers the only land route connecting South and Southeast Asia. Any invasion into South Asia from the East must pass through Bangladesh; the Japanese tried to do just that in the World War II. The British colonization of India also started from Bengal when the Bay of Bengal became the point of ingress. Bangladesh's close proximity to both India and China, two rising powers in the 21st century, adds to its geographic importance.

India shares more than 3000 km of border with Bangladesh. The border is well demarcated except few stretches totalling about 9 km that remains unresolved due mainly to lack of political will. India envelops Bangladesh on three sides; similarly, Bangladesh almost dissects the north-eastern India from the heartland. Lying only 30 miles north of Bangladesh is the strategically important Nathu La pass that connects India with China through Tibet. Despite rapprochement with India, the Chinese have not recognized the so-called "McMahon Line" or renounced claim on the Indian state of Arunachal. Thus, in the unlikely event of an India-China conflict, the access to or denial of the use of Bangladesh territory to the belligerent forces will be of utmost strategic importance. As India becomes an economic powerhouse its need for shorter, faster, and more diverse means of communication between the northeast and the rest of India becomes more urgent and therefore, the need to transit across Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh-Myanmar land border is demarcated, inflow of minority Arakanese refugees has been a source of tension for many years. The Bay of Bengal spans the vital maritime route between SE Asia and ME. Bangladesh has vital interest in the Bay, but its neighbours - India and Myanmar - dispute its maritime boundary claim. Unless resolved amicably, the maritime boundary issue could be a serious irritant in inter-state relations.

Water and Energy: Bangladesh's primary strategic concerns

While the demand for fresh water continues to rise in Bangladesh, as elsewhere in the world, its supply dwindles. Some of the major rivers are being diverted upstream in India. The Ganges or Tista, once mighty rivers, have reduced to trickles. Lack of information from India regarding proposed Tipaimukh dam over the Barak has been a concern for Bangladesh. The Chinese government's plan to divert the Brahmaputra could be a major issue affecting millions in India and Bangladesh. Unless the riparian countries join together to ensure optimum use of water, there is the likelihood of conflict and tension in the region in future. Our industrial growth continues to suffer due to shortage of electricity. Meanwhile, a regional power grid could

be established to import power from countries such as India, Nepal and Bhutan, which have great potential for hydroelectricity. Water and energy could be the two most important areas of regional cooperation or confrontation.

Bangladesh's national security priorities

Based on the discussion so far, it can be concluded that the danger of Bangladesh getting involved in an armed conflict with either India or Myanmar or with a country beyond the border is remote. Bangladesh's grievances with India could be addressed if the Mujib-India Pact of 1973 is implemented. Although the Maritime boundary has not yet been demarcated, the negotiation is already on with Myanmar and India, the prognosis so far is that a negotiated settlement will be arrived at with the spirit of compromise and cooperation. It is important for us to remember that rivers are the common heritage of mankind and an equitable share of the resources would benefit us all.

On the non-traditional front, however, there are quite a few challenges. The first is the threat of terrorist activities inside the country and across the border. All the SAARC countries have recognized this and they have signed a number of protocols to that effect. In the past, the Indians alleged that separatists from NE states used Bangladesh territory as sanctuary and even used our territory to smuggle in arms and ammunition. Bangladesh continued to deny their presence here. It is now alleged that some top-ranking security officials of Bangladesh were involved in the process. That is indeed deplorable, if true. These are the issues that we need to take care of for the future. In this respect the suggestion put forward by our PM to create a Counter Terrorism Task Force manned by security personnel from all South Asian countries will be a step in the right direction.

The neighbours have viewed Bangladesh's population as a possible security concern. But the good news here is that as the economy prospered and education spread, the population growth reduced. Since 1971, the population has doubled but per capita income has gone up nearly seven times. Instead of being afraid of hungry mass migrating across the border, our neighbours, India and Myanmar should invest here and enter into greater economic activities to the mutual benefit of all so that the people have no incentive to leave. One of our biggest security insurance would be to turn Bangladesh into a regional hub of transportation, transshipment, and transit that would attract investment and boost national economy. A powerful economy means a robust national security.

Bangladesh military and national security

Bangladesh armed forces are to provide a robust response to traditional security threats whenever and from whatever sources those appear. Building up an army, air or naval force is a long drawn out affair. Just because we do not have a threat in sight does not mean we have no need of

an armed force. The purpose of the military is to ensure that the threat is not allowed to develop and nipped in the bud. A standing military provides quick response to crush the threat before it gains an upper hand. Our armed forces must be able to inflict sufficient damage to an aggressor to deter him from launching an attack in the first place, what is called deterrence capability. Given the financial resources that are made available now for the military, we would be able to further develop our forces to meet the challenges that might appear.

In the non-traditional sphere, we already have the threat of religious extremists who want to establish an Islamic state by violent means. We also have the extreme leftists who in the name of establishing a classless society are in fact, looting the countryside. Coupled with these are the separatist elements from across the border trying to use Bangladesh as sanctuary; arms and drug smugglers use Bangladesh as a conduit. The armed forces would be called upon to help the law enforcing agencies whenever required. Military's training and operational doctrine, force structuring and equipment procurement should reflect these urgent security imperatives.

Bangladesh armed forces had done a great job in peacekeeping missions worldwide. Although these do not contribute directly to national security, the goodwill that they earn in the international arena helps us boost our national image. Moreover, exposure to international arena, dangers and hazards of operations under different climatic, cultural and operational conditions enhances military professionalism, thus helping national security posture. Employment of armed forces in nation building works such as construction projects, disaster management, medical emergencies not only enhance the forces' professional capability but also contributes directly towards mitigating civil-military relations.

Conclusion

National security is a vital issue for the nation, yet it is not often discussed in public. It is considered to be a classified matter best left to the military; ordinary citizen would not be privy to it. In the developed world research, debates and discussions are carried out in the universities and national security issues are in the open for all to participate. Thanks to organization such as Dhaka University, BISS, BEI etc., we now have a pool of experts who could make important contribution in the security debate. While the issues are debated in civil society, media and on the floor of the parliament, the military and other security agencies would provide vital inputs so that a correct judgment could be arrived at. As the theoretical structure of the national security undergoes revision, we need to focus on the security challenges of Bangladesh, now and in the future, and prepare ourselves to face those challenges.

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