

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# What's new in US' strategic shift?



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's visit to Dhaka unveils tomorrow. Her sojourn in Dhaka comes on the heels of her Beijing trip along with US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner. They talked trade with Chinese premier Hu

Jintao and other top functionaries in Beijing, a pressing bilateral issue that. This went undeterred in the shadows of Communist Party's discredited top brass Bo Xin Lai's exit and the embarrassment of the Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng's leaving the US embassy following a reported deal with Beijing on his safety.

As Beijing continued with its objection to US meddling in China's "internal affairs," the primacy of economic interests got the better of political leveraging. On balance, it is a clear vindication of live-and-let-live policy, in spite of geo-political and strategic rivalries focused on threats of Chinese encirclement in the South China Sea, Asia-Pacific region including Southeast and South Asia. The US is China's principal contender along with India there.

Note, however, that Hillary's visit is set in the backdrop of a flurry of trips to Dhaka by US dignitaries: US Assistant Secretary of State Robert O Blake (February 15); Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy R. Sherman (April 5); and Assistant Secretary of Political-Military Affairs Andrew J Shapiro (April 19).

Soft diplomacy blended with a brass tacks approach set the scene for a Bangladesh-US partner-

ship dialogue framework, according to preliminary information. Assistant Secretary of Political-Military Affairs Andrew J Shapiro said on April 24 in Washington after his Dhaka trip: "Bangladesh is working through a military modernisation plan including looking to partner for affordable defense system, especially to supply its special operation forces and disaster relief equipment."

Hillary Clinton's trip to Bangladesh needs to be placed in a broader international perspective to gauge its true significance. There are three dimensions to it: First, the US' pivoting to Asia; second, this is an election year in USA; and third, US establishment with its Zionist inclination takes Muslim-

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majority countries seriously. Especially, countries with moderation, given to liberal, secular, democratic values attract its attention. More so when this is becoming a rarity even in the post-Arab Spring political landscape where Islamists fill in the void. Bangladesh's 160 million populace is overwhelmingly Muslim, religious but wedded to keeping political Islam at bay.

America's strategic pivot towards Asia which President Obama touts as America being back, the question is did it actually ever leave? To quote from United States Pacific Command Facts (USPACOM): "The United States Pacific Command, which operates throughout the Asia-Pacific, is made up of about

325,000 military and civilian personnel. Six aircraft carrier strike groups are based permanently in the Asia-Pacific region. The US Navy makes about 700 port visits each year, and carries out a number of bilateral and multilateral military training exercises."

America maintains formal military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines and Australia, and has a significant presence in Singapore (gleaned from an article in Foreign Policy Analysis titled Southeast Asia's American Embrace by Jessica Brown; CIP, Australia).

One more excerpt from the Jessica Brown article: All Southeast Asian states want to take advantage of the benefits of a rising China, yet none wants it to be

in a position to dominate the region strategically. All welcome America's strategic 'pivot' towards Asia because they hope it will provide a counterbalance to China's growing weight.

Turning to South Asia, America is goaded by experts to develop closer ties with smaller countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Nepal. Three of these are maritime states, "Given the importance of securing Indian Ocean sea lanes, through which 50 percent of the world's container traffic and 70 percent of the world's crude and oil products transit, it is in US interests to promote maritime security cooperation among South Asian countries and deepen defense ties with these navies

as a from of burden-sharing in the Indian Ocean," (Nilanthi Samaranyake, Strategic Studies Analyst at CNA in Asia Pacific Bulletin, September 22, 2011 issue; East-West Center).

China for her part seeks to build "string of pearls" in the area including Myanmar. But the West is with drawing its sanctions on Yangon following its embrace of reforms.

Bangladesh's geo-political importance having been enhanced by the settlement of maritime disputes with Myanmar under international arbitration accepted by both sides, its ranking as an investment destination is placed on an upward curve.

So much for the South-Asian scenario, in an election year, Hillary Clinton's diplomacy is geared towards playing the foreign policy card which is Obama administration's strong point against Republican presidential probable Mitt Romney.

For the last 60-70 years, the USA despite policing the world and committing invasions and interventions has provided a climate in which the emerging economies (Brics) as well as Hong Kong, Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia could come to their present state of development.

A new balance of power can work to the advantage of the world, so the spheres of influence of US, China and India are not necessarily an evil; it may be a value addition to world order.

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## Firewalls and firepower?

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

At a press conference during the recent IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings, the managing director of IMF was heard using two words that are often not heard in economics classrooms or seen in textbooks, firewalls and firepower. I am sure most of her audience and the rest of the world were very impressed by her forceful advocacy of action and her urgent appeal for funds to combat the looming global economic crisis.

These are extraordinary times and if the head of the IMF, who is at the frontline in dousing fires that have been raging since 2008, and particularly the out-of-control Greek melodrama, uses metaphors and colourful language to convey the serious nature of the situation, it is just in keeping with the emerging new vocabulary of the season. However, many around the globe, including some of my readers, were left wondering about the context of Christine Lagarde's rhetorical salvos.

Firewalls became a popular concept a few years ago when computer systems came under attack from viruses and hackers, and various types of protective armour, or firewall, were being put in place to counter these invasions. Firewalls prevent intruders from gaining access to a network or data and using it for their own gain. Firepower on the other hand is an old term used to convey the strength of an army to defend its interest or to overwhelm the opposing forces. Firepower might also have a benign, less threatening use, to provide protection against forces of destruction and to offer resistance.

So what was Ms. Lagarde alluding to in her speech, and how much of it was hyperbole? And most importantly, were these appropriate usages of these terms where in their respective disciplines, firewalls and firepower have well-defined and measurable impacts?

It is probably not such a mystery to many of the readers that in recent years, the world economy, and particularly European countries, has been

struggling in the face of rising debt burdens, instability in Greece, Spain, and Ireland, and slow economic growth in many G20 countries, barring Russia and China. The Greek debt crisis has had a major impact on the international financial market and even after all these months of crisis management, it is still not clear that the Greeks are out of the woods. There is still a fear that the Greek bailout would amount to nothing, and they will either declare bankruptcy and/or leave the Euro Zone to be followed by another round of serious economic fallout.

Two issues that have emerged from the year-long crisis is the need to strengthen the institutions and instruments to fight similar crises or even a Greek default, and the need to protect other European countries from the possible ramifications of a Greek or other financial failures. It is

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often mentioned that the international community needs to avoid another Lehmann-like effect, referring to the catastrophic nature of the after-shock following the demise of Lehman Brothers in 2008.

Now the question is, what have we learned from the financial crisis and what are the tools available to meet any future threats? I will first list the policy instruments (or the "firepower" in the language of Christine Lagarde). Some of them have been in the headlines in the last year and a half. Debt reduction, "controlled default," concerted international action, domestic policy initiatives, budgetary measures, etc. As we have seen in the case of Greece, all these are at best half-measures even when used in tandem.

Therefore, her emphasis on money, as can only be expected from the head of the IMF, is completely out of

sync with the real situation, and the causes that have brought the European countries to this predicament. All these tools are only as good as the commitment and will power of the national politicians, which may be termed as the "software." I hardly need to point out that it is the "software" that makes the "hardware" work!

Even before the Spring Meetings were over, scepticism and other emerging issues have cast a shadow of doubt on the efficacy of the proposed measures. The countries labeled as PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain) have found the cost of borrowing go up, and further belt tightening and lay-offs, even in the private sector, may not be too far away.

IMF has appealed to member countries to offer generously to its proposed trillion-dollar fund. However, the largest stakeholder of the IMF, USA, has decided to ignore Ms. Lagarde's call -- so has Canada, and these countries want the Europeans to do more. There is also gross dissatisfaction among Russia, China, India and Brazil, who want more say in the IMF's policy-making protocol.

Another criticism came from Pascal Remy, director general of WTO. According to him participants appeared to be more concerned with "political considerations than with international cooperation." He adds: "What's missing is a common road map ... they're all focused on the short term."

Finally, one would like to add that the international agencies seem to suffer from lack of humility. The talk of "firepower and firewalls" only heightens the feeling that the IMF/WB clique believe that in this complex world order, these agencies have what it takes to deal with all economic and development issues, whatever its shape and form. However, we hardly need to look very far to see that reality and theory sometimes do not match. As Lord Acton said: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," and I would like to humbly add "absolute power breeds hubris."

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## Protecting freedom of expression online

JEREMY BROWNE

MEDIA freedom has the power to transform societies and to change the course of history. Over the past year, across the Middle East and North Africa, ordinary citizens found their voices using social media and blogs. But freedom of expression continues to be repressed in many countries and some have seen a significant decline in media freedoms. Around the world, journalists, bloggers and others have been obstructed from doing their work by being harassed, monitored, detained, or subjected to violence.

On World Press Freedom Day, on May 3, we recognise the role the internet continues to play in strengthening freedom of speech across the globe. More importantly, as a pioneer of digital media and a supporter of freedom of speech, we pledge to defend this progress. This clear commitment features prominently in the Foreign Office 2011 Human Rights and Democracy Report, which is published this week.

Britain stands for universal human rights, the rule of law, democracy and freedom of expression. We fight for these values wherever they are under threat and, as demonstrated in our Human Rights Report, name those countries where the worst abuses take place. Britain is committed to being a strong global voice against restrictions of freedom of expression on the internet.

Digital and social media have changed the world, but that process of change presents new challenges. The existing framework of international human rights law -- including the right to freedom of expression -- is equally applicable online as it is offline. But the daily technological battle, as governments find new ways to block legitimate criticism, and protesters find new ways to escape their control, means the rules are constantly changing.

The overriding challenge is that 95% of the internet is owned by private companies, so to guarantee an open and innovative internet,

governments must work with business, as well as with civil society, on how to safeguard and enhance online freedoms. This is why we took the decision to include internet-related companies at the London Conference on Cyberspace in November last year -- which, in international diplomatic terms, was ground-breaking. A limited forum where foreign minister talked to foreign minister would not have worked -- which is why we invited the practitioners at the front of the digital revolution.

So Britain is committed to helping governments, business and individuals to overcome threats to internet freedom. We are supporting businesses to enhance internet freedom through responsible commercial practice. Human rights could, for example, form part of a company's risk analysis prior to investing in a country.

We also know business is taking the lead itself. In the ICT sector, one tool available for companies to protect themselves is the Global Network Initiative (GNI). This is an effort by Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, human rights organisations, academics, and investors to ensure companies protect freedom of expression and privacy online through a set of voluntary principles.

In the great ideological battles of the last century, there was a debate about the nature, extent and value of freedom. The supremacy of the liberated individual triumphed over the ambitions of the authoritarian state. Internet freedom exists and is unstoppable -- attempts to block sites and to stifle free debate will prove to be futile. The question for governments around the world is not how to repress free speech -- online or offline -- but rather how to engage and interact with their population. That is the internet of the future, and a central principle of Britain's ambition for individual freedom for all people.

The Foreign Office 2011 Human Rights and Democracy Report was published this week at www.fco.gov.uk/hrdreport.

The writer is British Foreign Office Minister. (This article is exclusive to The Daily Star).