

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
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THIS piece has been motivated by the cover picture of the latest edition of *The Economist*. I am told that this is the

world's most twittered picture since it appeared on the internet, reaching nearly a million. It is a picture of the reelected President Obama hugging his wife, his face showing distinct signs of happiness and, perhaps even more, of relief.

Different people will read the picture in different ways but the poignancy of the picture is equally matched by the sublimity of the caption which reads: "Now, hug a Republican." It is difficult to miss the underlying message of the heading which urges the president to reach out to the other side. Nobody knows better than President Obama the need to involve the opposition in conducting the affairs of the state, something that he made abundantly clear in his victory speech last Wednesday. And given the character of the House and the Senate there cannot be any other way. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh reaching out to the opposition is not a part of the political culture.

And that is what made me relate so deeply and so intently with the weekly's cover. That would be so for anyone who wants to see an end to the nature of politics in Bangladesh. The caption could not be more applicable to Bangladesh politics, deeply divided as it is by hostility, confrontation and exclusiveness. The outcomes affect the people severely. What can one expect in a situation where the political opposition is considered an "enemy" not an opponent who needs to be engaged for the larger interest of the people?

SALMAN HAIDAR

NOW that the election frenzy is over and President Barack Obama has retained his hold on the White House, attention has shifted to what the result can mean for the US and its partners across the world. During the campaign, India barely made a blip: outsourcing and visas earned a passing mention but neither candidate brought the India-US relationship anywhere near the centre of his electoral concerns.

The relationship is a key one and it has come to transcend partisan considerations, so India was able to witness the electoral show without feeling tied to one candidate or the other. Even so, there was considerable satisfaction at Obama's victory. India regards him as a well-disposed leader and there has already been a substantial upgrading of relations in his first term, as seen in the plethora of inter-governmental committees and joint initiatives, which will no doubt be expanded and taken further in the coming years.

Personalities keep changing, of course, and many prominent officials, including the secretary of state herself, are to leave the scene. However, there will be enough of a carryover to sustain the easy contact that has been established between senior officials, and even though Clinton will be replaced, the president and the prime minister will remain where they are. They have done much together and have taken every opportunity to stress the importance they attach to India-US ties, and they will surely try to take the relationship further in the new phase that has just commenced.

With all the goodwill, however, it is unlikely to be simply a matter of picking up the threads and resuming normal business. The promise of change was a leitmotif of Obama's campaign, and we must expect to see fresh issues and new priorities that will affect the US' relations with the world. Nor will

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For Sheikh Hasina, understandably, the events of August 1975 pervade her mind and predominate her thoughts and actions. And it is not unnatural for that to spill over into the realm of politics. And the well-planned attack on her and her party leaders on August 24, 2004, which by all indications was designed to wipe off the AL

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leadership, has reinforced her conviction that her main opposition is out to eliminate her, in the same manner, she is convinced, the founder of the BNP was complicit in the killing of her father and members of her family. That is the psyche of the leader of the Awami League which has come to inform the collective consciousness of the senior leaders of the party too.

And this mindset is what is resented by the BNP. As for Begum Zia, she feels the accusations are wrong; on the other hand it is the AL that is out to see the end of BNP as a political party. Thus the starting point of our politics

is antagonism and mistrust.

I do not think that sinking differences is not impossible by either. And I base my comment on the past understanding and cooperation between the two parties when they came together against President Ershad in the late eighties. If Ershad was the common cause that brought them to a common ground 20 years ago than there are enough causes for them to effect a meeting of the minds.

It will be a folly on AL's part to disregard the political realities. BNP had been twice chosen to run the country, and in the two elections that it lost the



BNP managed to garner more than 30% of the votes. In discounting the BNP is the AL not in fact ignoring the more than 30% of the electorate? Can it afford to do that? And in any case a parliament without the opposition invalidates the position of the ruling party to a very large extent.

The BNP on its part can ill afford the state of continuing confrontational politics. It has chosen to boycott the parliament thereby depriving its voters of their right to be heard in the parliament. And even the BNP supporters are not convinced that the reasons for keeping

away from the parliament, which their leaders offer as reasons for doing so, has to do with politics.

I am told by wiser minds that changing such a mindset will require changing our political culture. That is a tall order since cultures cannot be changed overnight; it needs mutation of the mind to be able to change the culture of politics. Can we wait that long?

And the chance of the present crop of leadership of the two parties passing on the baton to a lot that will not be weighed down by the baggage of the past seems remote,

in which case one can only see deliverance from the present state coming in the form of third party offering the voters a free choice. On the other hand, the chance of a third party surviving its gestation period is remote, given the pathological hatred the two major parties have displayed towards the idea of an alternative political party.

We can only hope the two would think of the country and shed the past baggage.

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Police's role baffling

Threat to public order must be taken seriously

THE scale of the violence that activists of Jamaat-e-Islami and militant cadres of its student wing Shibir unleashed against the police and pedestrians on Tuesday afternoon was extremely worrying. Compared to the pitch of their destructive attacks, the police's role seemed to be rather feeble and withdrawn. In fact, the police were on the defensive and took the beating from the Jamaat-Shibir cadres who were clearly on the offensive.

In consequence, the Jamaat-Shibir men had a field day and they came down like brigands on law-enforcement personnel, unsuspecting commuters and passers-by. They brought traffic at the Farmgate-Karwan bazaar area to a screeching halt and struck terror among the public.

Over the last nine days, since they announced their agitation programme demanding the release of their leaders now facing trial at the International War Crimes Tribunal, their cadres have injured more than 200 policemen and hundreds of common people across the country.

The law-enforcers' laidback attitude has been quite disconcerting and at the same time baffling. It seemed they lacked sufficient will and preparedness to handle the situation.

If in this way police fail to face up to such kind of exigencies, what will remain of law and order and where will the members of the public go for protection?

Moreover, reckless Jamaat-Shibir behaviour may provoke counteraction from the ruling party youth and student cadres, signs of which were visible on Tuesday. This can only make things worse.

The message must be dinned in Jamaat-Shibir ears that they have a right dissent and express their grievances but not to create chaos and panic in public life.

The government, the home ministry in particular, has no reason to take this threat to law and public order lightly. They must take every necessary step to nip this menace to peace and law and order in the bud before it causes more damage.

Good news for the environment

No bar to strict regulation on ship breaking

IN an ironic twist to the saga of whether or not ships carrying toxic material would be allowed entry into the country, Bangladesh Ship Breakers Association (BSBA) has withdrawn its appeal against a High Court (HC) verdict given in 2009. This removes the last hurdle to the government's plans to formulate legislation on ship breaking.

When Bangladesh Environment Lawyers' Association (BELA) filed the writ back in 2009, it came up against stiff resistance from BSBA which effectively put on ice plans to frame rules on regulating an unregulated ship breaking industry. As there was no law in place that made it mandatory for the industry to obtain environmental clearance from the responsible department, Bangladesh had effectively become the dumping ground for some of the world's most toxic and dangerous derelict ships. Furthermore, no government regulation meant that workers' safety was also a non-issue resulting in unnecessary deaths and injuries to workers.

In light of the BELA's writ, the HC had directed the government to frame rules and regulations drawing on six international laws on the subject within three months. The formulation of Ship Breaking and Ship Recycling Rules, 2011, subsequently amended to meet HC directive in December 2012 lays the foundations for protecting workers and the environment. The new rules allows for import of ships for dismantling purposes only on the condition that they are decontaminated as per HC verdict in 2009. This is good news indeed. However, for the new law to act as deterrence in the interest of protecting the environment and workers' protection, active enforcement by the department of environment is mandatory. Without that, the new rules will be just another piece of legislation that will gather dust on the shelf while an already polluted environment continues to suffer

With Obama's victory, where does India stand?

the world grant much breathing space, for there are many pressing issues demanding immediate attention. One of the earliest is withdrawal of US and other foreign forces from Afghanistan.

It has already been made known that these troops will be effectively withdrawn by 2014, which is now close at hand, but there is still uncertainty about what withdrawal entails, how complete it will be, and whether some military presence will remain over the longer term.

These are issues that are bound to concern India deeply for it cannot escape the long-term consequences of the Afghan endgame.

Already, India is a major party in the international action plan for the rehabilitation of Afghanistan. What shape its future commitment to that effort should take needs careful dis-

US policy on Iran is significantly at odds with that of strategic partners like India that have different interests. Ambiguities about Iran's nuclear facilities have created problems not for Iran alone but also for India.

cussion and consideration, both internally and between India and its strategic partners, of which the US is the most prominent.

The "AfPak" approach that Obama adopted at the start of his presidency proved a failure, there has been a steep decline in US-Pak ties, the Afghan insurgency is as threatening as ever, and the world is still groping for answers. The Afghan war has become very unpopular in the US, so rapid reduction of US military commitment looks certain.

That could mean enhanced regional uncertainty, perhaps even revival of the disarray that made room for the Taliban two decades ago. As disorder is not to be confined and affects the entire region, there is a need for an alternative way of trying to bring about stability and render needed support to the Afghan government.

President Karzai has just been in India where he presented his country as a good prospect for foreign investment, and he looked especially to India which he said would be made very welcome when it took up projects to develop the enormous unexploited mineral resources of Afghanistan. For some time now, the theme of encouraging regional initiatives to underpin stability and progress in Afghanistan has had many adherents, especially as Western intervention is coming to an end with much less achieved than had been hoped.

Outsiders from distant parts may depart but the regional entities will stay perforce and could be critical to the international effort that will still be required after the current phase comes to an end.

Afghanistan's neighbours are divided among themselves and some

ence to the IAEA-mandated inspection regime for its nuclear facilities and the ever tighter sanctions have created problems not for Iran alone but also for its trading partners, including India. Nor can Iran's role in Afghanistan be ignored for it has much to contribute to the restoration of peace in that country, which is its close neighbour. India now needs to be more active in seeking a way out of the present dilemmas about Iran.

On global nuclear disarmament, Obama did succeed in pushing the theme forward though without decisive results. Maybe there will be a renewed drive in the second term. India has traditionally been in the forefront of the disarmament effort and will no doubt take its usual active part when the matter comes up again for international discussion, notwithstanding the fact that its greater preoccupation today is to consolidate and safeguard its deterrent capacity.

To be noted, too, is what Obama indicated in his acceptance speech about greater thrust on environmental issues. Super storm Sandy had something to do with it, showing as it did that the US was not immune from the devastating impact of climate change. Climate issues have been on the international agenda for the last forty years, but US commitment has been held back by strong domestic lobbies decrying the need for global action; that seems set to change and developing countries like India may need to rethink some of their positions on the subject.

Even a cursory look will show that in Obama's next term a number of fresh issues will have to be taken up within the ambit of the regular consultations between India and the US. The relationship between them is currently good and there are many constructive possibilities in meeting the new challenges ahead.

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Ambiguities about Iran's adher-

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 15

- 1777**
American Revolutionary War: After 16 months of debate the Continental Congress approves the Articles of Confederation. 1859 The first modern revival of the Olympic Games takes place in Athens, Greece.
- 1920**
First assembly of the League of Nations is held in Geneva.
- 1949**
Nathuram Godse and Narayan Apte are executed for assassinating Mahatma Gandhi.
- 1988**
Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: An independent State of Palestine is proclaimed by the Palestinian National Council.
- 1990**
The People's Republic of Bulgaria is disestablished and a new republican government is instituted.
- 2007**
Cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh, killing an estimated 5000 people and destroyed the world's largest mangrove forest, Sundarbans.

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