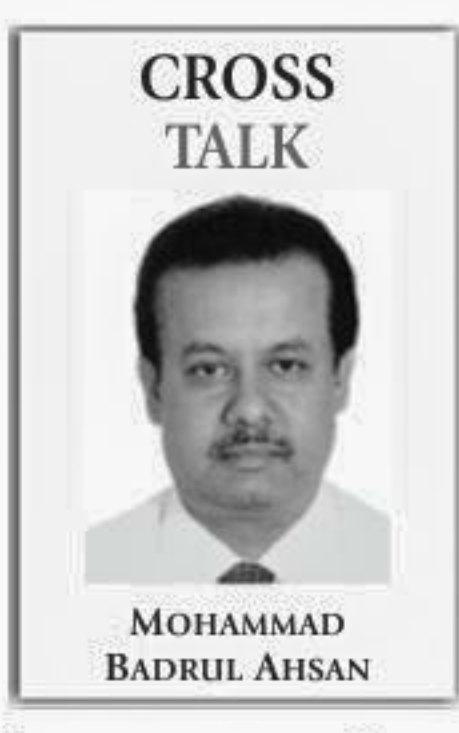


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LATE S. M. ALI

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It takes one idea to change the world



CROSS TALK

IF there's a loving woman behind every successful man, there is a moving idea behind every fruitful action. Victor Hugo said that no army can withstand the strength of an idea whose time

has come. Does that tell us why people are ready to die for an idea? Countless people in history have faced the choice between betraying their philosophy to stay alive and dying to stay faithful to their philosophy. And countless of them have chosen the latter. People may not be able to kill ideas, but ideas kill people.

American writer Earl Nightingale arrived at the conclusion that everything begins with an idea. It's the idea of automation that popularised technology. It's the idea of new manufacturing processes that started the Industrial Revolution. It's also the idea of self-sufficiency in food that ushered in agriculture. The ideas of many other things have brought about many other things.

Karl Marx explained this phenomenon in his theory of dialectic materialism. He argued that political and historical events result from the conflict of social forces

and are interpretable as a series of contradictions and their solutions. The conflict, which is believed to be rooted in material need, is routed through intellectual pursuit. A clash of opposing ideals, ideologies, or concepts evolves through the rigours of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In reality, it's nothing but an incessant cycle of old ideas clashing with the needs of time and resulting in new ideas.

Ideas originate inside human brains where experiences, observations and visions sublimate notions like cream is whipped from milk. Critical and creative thinking generates ideas, but many ideas are born on the spur of the moment. Greek scholar Archimedes is famously known for proclaiming "Eureka" when he stepped into a bath and noticed that the water level rose. It was then that he had realised how the volume of water displaced must be equal to the volume of the part of his body he had submerged. Dr. Alexander Fleming invented Penicillin after he returned from a summer vacation in Scotland to find that a mould had contaminated his Petri dishes.

Throughout history, mankind had its Eureka or Penicillin moments, which are still the driving force of its existence. Scientists believe that the Neanderthals perished because although their brains were as big as those of modern men, they had bigger bodies. Thus, they needed more of their brain cells to control these

larger bodies and didn't have the bits of cortex needed for enhanced vision. This species of ancient humans eventually ran out of their survival skills, leading to extinction.

Steven Weber and Bruce W. Jentleson claim in their book *The End of Arrogance: America in the Global Competition of Ideas* that the era of U.S. ideological dominance is over. The world no longer gravitates to American-style ideas about the virtues of free markets, democracy, and hegemony. Power is diffusing not just to other states but to young people and social groups increasingly connected within an electronic global village. In this new setting, Weber and Jentleson argue, the "competition for ideas" is rapidly growing. To exercise leadership, the United States will need to fashion more appealing ideas about order and justice.

That has been true for everybody in every setting. Idea has been power and everything else has been nothing but the manifestation of that power. The American Civil War started over the emancipation of slaves. The Cold War was the outcome of Stalin's fixation that Communist Poland, friendly to and dominated by the Soviet Union, could serve as a buffer against future aggression from the West. The Second World War was seeded in Germany's determination to retaliate for its humiliation over the Treaty of Versailles.

One can always debate whether ideas shape the world or the world shapes ideas. It's perhaps both. The French Revolution was the precursor to the American Revolution. Again, exploitation of the peasants was so harsh in Russia that historians often wonder why a revolution had come to France when Russia was a more fertile ground for it.

But these are proofs of how ideas catch up on each other. Religion is its earliest evidence, communism and capitalism being more contemporary markers. Civilisations have risen and fallen as barbarians destroyed stagnant and decadent ones to build dynamic and vibrant ones.

If an idea doesn't come before its time, it also doesn't go before its time. Slavery persisted worldwide for many centuries. Widow burning continued for almost ten centuries until Queen Victoria issued a general ban in 1861. Racial segregation in the USA lasted until late 1960s.

It's a bad idea to suppress an idea, which is why prosperous societies encourage birth of ideas through freedom of speech and expression. One in 250 million sperms fertilises the egg. Likewise, it only takes one idea to change the world.

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Rising tension in the education sector

Government must address protesters' concerns

BOTH private and public universities in the country seem to be in a state of flux, with dissatisfied students and teachers waging separate movements to realise their demands. The government ought to address the concerns of the affected groups before the situation escalates.

The students of private universities across the country have been protesting the imposition of VAT on their tuition fees, arguing that education is not a commodity that only the rich can afford, since the budget was announced in June. After four months of continuous protests, rather than withdraw VAT, the Finance Minister declared yesterday that the burden of the VAT should be borne by the university authorities, not the students. That is well and good, but how is the Finance Minister going to ensure that the burden of the VAT is not passed on eventually to the students through enhanced fees? It seems to us that the government has stalled the issue rather than really solve the matter. If this directive is to work, the government must engage the university authorities and ensure that they pay their dues to the government from their coffers without unduly affecting the students.

Meanwhile, teachers in public educational institutions have intensified their protests regarding their pay scale following the approval of the new pay structure on Monday. We believe that the teachers have some legitimate concerns. Rather than brush off their demands the government should live up to its commitment to set up a separate pay commission for them. At the same time, we request the teachers not to call for programmes that hamper the educational activities, for the ultimate loser would be the students.

Public transport fare hiked

How justified is it?

THE anticipated rise in bus and auto fare has come. The new fares for buses will come into effect from October 1 and for CNG-run auto-rickshaws from November 1. While we commend the BRTA for not giving in to the transport owners' demand of an exorbitant rise in bus fare, we are surprised that some transport operators had already implemented a fare hike on their own, on the pretext of increased CNG prices, even before the government had announced a revision of fares.

Fare hike for buses, mini-buses plying Dhaka and Chittagong cities is 6.25 percent, with minimum bus fare remaining unchanged at Tk 7. However, the hike in fare for CNG-auto rickshaws -- for the first 2 km Tk 40, an increase of 60 percent, and Tk 12 for each additional km travelled -- is exorbitant and unjustified, and the rationale is incomprehensible. This will severely cut into the purse of the middle income groups and should be reconsidered.

Our experience shows that in spite of fare rates fixed by the government, very few transport operators, particularly CNG-run auto rickshaws, bother to comply. And the auto-rickshaw meter has become a fairytale. The bigger question is this: precisely what steps do authorities intend to take against these errant transport owners who choose to fleece commuters at will? We expect relevant agencies to show zero tolerance against owners of buses and three-wheelers who have regularly held residents of this city hostage to their whims.

ASM ALI ASHRAF

AS the United States observes the fourteenth anniversary of 9/11 terrorist attacks, it is important to have a fresh look at U.S. counterterrorism strategy in South Asia. Such discussions should focus on U.S. threat perception and the evolving responses to deal with the threat.

Until the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as a self-sustaining force in 2014, al Qaeda's core and affiliates have long constituted the principal threats to the U.S. and its interests. There are sharp differences between the core and the affiliates. While al Qaeda core is located in Pakistan, the affiliates are nothing but a wide variety of groups, cells, and individuals either directly or loosely connected to the core. Al Qaeda core is defined by the organisation's senior leadership, including Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, who have long stayed in Pakistan and maintained a strong relationship with the Afghan-focused Taliban insurgent groups.

Between 2001 and 2007, al Qaeda was initially on the run but later began to regroup and re-organise -- thanks to the distraction and negligence caused by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. During this period, al Qaeda changed its attack styles from the use of expeditionary strikes, such as the 1998 US embassy bombings in East Africa and the 9/11 attacks in New York, to the guerilla style strikes in Madrid (2004) and London (2005). While expeditionary terrorist strikes required the deployment of trained recruits to overseas target countries, the guerilla strike strategy has involved radicalised immigrant communities and local recruits. Since 2007, al Qaeda core has continued to lose its strength in Pakistan with a corresponding increase in the strength and activities of its affiliates in the Middle East and North Africa. It is in this context, the Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al Shabaab in Somalia, and Al Nusra Front in Syria have come into more prominence in recent years. The latter group has eventually morphed into a more sinister threat of ISIL which now draws a huge pool of young recruits not only from the impoverished regions of Africa and Asia but also from the wealthy countries of Europe and North America.

After al Qaeda, two versions of Taliban have continued to pose serious threats to U.S. and its allies. The first represents three major Afghan Taliban groups including Mollah Omar's Quetta Shura Taliban, the Haqqani Network of Sirajuddin Haqqani, and Gulbuddin

Hekmatiyar's Hezbe Islami. It is now abundantly clear, these Taliban militias have wanted the expulsion of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan, and power sharing in Afghanistan's domestic politics. They are believed to have a sanctuary in Pakistan's frontier areas in FATA and Balochistan Province, and a support structure inside Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus. Pakistan's support for these Afghan groups is premised on the ground that it would provide a strategic depth in the event of a nuclear standoff with India.

The second Taliban version, also known as 'Pakistani Taliban,' is a loose network of violent extremist groups, who are opposed to Pakistan's support for the US led war on terrorism, and Islamabad's

priority in the national security strategies of Bush Jr. and Barack Obama administrations.

The use of military force came in several forms. In Afghanistan, the United States initially wanted to avoid the 'Soviet mistake' by maintaining a light footprint. The goal of the Afghanistan War at this period, from 2002 to 2005, was fighting terrorism. As the war goals were expanded to include the ambitious tasks of nation-building, between 2006 and 2010, the U.S. force deployment in Afghanistan peaked to 90,000 troops in 2010. This U.S. troops surge was matched by the gradual deployment of another 40,000 troops from European and NATO allies, many of whom were unwilling to do more

burden-sharing. A reluctant Pakistan was dragged into these war efforts. Despite such military contributions, Pakistan's flirting with Islamist militants has created a trust deficit in Islamabad-Washington relations. It is in this context, on May 1, 2011, the U.S. Navy Seal conducted a commando operation which killed Osama bin Laden. The murder of Laden in a covert U.S. operation not only exposed the trust deficits between Islamabad and Washington, but also raised questions about the complicity of Pakistan's state apparatus or any rogue elements in it in providing a support structure for al Qaeda.

The Laden killing mission, planned by the Central Intelligence Agency and executed by Navy Seal, also reveals the growing role of intelligence and special operations in the global war on terrorism. Between 2001 and 2014, numerous cross-border covert operations in Pakistan were carried out by the U.S. and NATO forces. These strikes are targeted to extremely hostile and inaccessible areas of FATA, which are used by al Qaeda and Taliban militias as a staging ground for launching attacks on U.S. and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan. The use of pilotless drones also reduces the probability of harming U.S. soldiers, who would otherwise be engaged in armed hostilities in Pakistan and thus risking their lives.

The U.S. led coalition military strategy in Afghanistan and the adjacent border areas of Pakistan has drawn huge criticisms for its over-reliance on the use of coercive force and utter negligence of peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction efforts. The coalition strategy has also been criticised for creating an inefficient Afghan security force, which lacks sufficient training and morale to withstand Taliban insurgents, and shoulder the responsibility for securing Afghanistan after the U.S. and NATO forces' withdrawal in 2014. These generic problems in the Afghan National Army were exposed in August 2014 when U.S. Major General Harold Greene, the deputy commander of the Combined Security Transition Command, was killed by an Afghan soldier at a training facility in Kabul. The murder of Greene and other high profile terrorist attacks in 2014 have emboldened the U.S. position that a small contingent of U.S. and NATO troops would stay in Afghanistan at least for a decade.

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LUCAS JACKSON/REUTERS

The U.S.-led coalition military strategy in Afghanistan and the adjacent border areas of Pakistan has drawn huge criticisms for its over-reliance on the use of coercive force and utter negligence of peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction efforts.

COMMENTS

"What can our mayors do?"
(September 8, 2015)

Ezaz Chowdhury

We need a countrywide master plan and form PPP to fund and implement that plan.

Khandaker Shamsul Huda

From the present perspective, a mayor has little to do as he has no control over many organisations like Wasa, Rajuk, etc.

Syed Najmul Hussain

These age-old accumulated chronic problems of this bustling metropolis can never be completely resolved but surely can be minimised to a great extent, if a long-term pragmatic and comprehensive action plan is taken judiciously and the authorities responsible are eager to make nimble efforts to execute these programmes accordingly.

Arifin Anik

They can at least take some steps.

Shemul Pradan

It's not a simple task. Long-term plans are needed.

"SUHRAWARDY: THE PIONEER OF DEMOCRACY"

(September 8, 2015)

Sadman Bin Ornob

Very few politicians in Bangladesh are as knowledgeable as him.

Razia Begum

Politicians of Bangladesh should learn from him.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Are we really living with half-truths?

This is regarding the article "Living with half-truths" published in this daily on September 9. Although the author has rightly pointed out that the mayors are unable to deliver on many things because of systemic problems and their limited jurisdiction, I am not sure what the mayors are doing where they do have jurisdiction. We need to stop talking about what they can't do and hold them accountable to tasks they should have delivered on by now. We are honestly sick and tired of justification of inaction and we want things to get done! Furthermore, the author takes

issue with the media continuously bringing up Rana Plaza which, according to her, takes away from the "moral fabric" of the industry. I'm sure the writer is aware that the international media too provides the example of Rana Plaza again and again when discussing industrial accidents, of which Rana Plaza is probably the worst in human history. And those affected by it are still suffering to this day. So please spare us your "concerns" about the media bringing up Rana Plaza, as if that's somehow worse than the life-long suffering inflicted on the families of the deceased and injured workers.

Rehana Ahmed
On e-mail

Worsening flood situation

The country's flood situation is getting worse every day especially in the southern parts. The government is not giving due attention to this issue and to the flood victims. It is urgent for the concerned ministry to extend necessary help and assistance to the flood affected people and undertake massive rehabilitation programmes for them.

Anami
Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR