

Evolution of international strategic configuration and Asia-Pacific security – a view from Pakistan *

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I would, to begin with, like to compliment the organisers of the present Third Xiangshan Forum for their so succinctly encapsulating the inescapable geostrategic challenges as also the opportunities offered by these very obstacles on the global scene in general and with specific reference to the Asia-Pacific region in the theme of these deliberations.

Two aspects of the framing of the issue are at once striking here.

One, the prefix of ‘new’ that defines the terms of reference for each of the three panel groups. That has already set the stage for sharing one’s views with this most distinguished gathering without having to bring home the pivotal point that our world today is indeed at the dawn of a new era whether it be in terms of the evolution of the international strategic configuration, the challenges to Asia-Pacific security and stability, or the construction of Asia-Pacific security mechanisms.

One would, personally, go even further to suggest that the world today is at a defining moment in history. What makes the present discussions and the given venue for them all the more pertinent, however, is that we are gathered here in the capital of the Peoples Republic of China at the epicentre of the tectonic shift in contemporary global affairs.

The second aspect of the theme worthy of note is its emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. For, it is within this zone of earth that the protagonists of the transition on the world stage are located. It does not take much to recognise the two principal global actors here: the United States to the West and China to the East.

Before zooming out to the larger regional dynamics informing the given change, it would be only in order for this participant to present a brief overview of the scenario that presents itself to any keen observer in Islamabad.

To begin with, even as these lines are being penned down in early October 2010, the stresses and strains of Pakistan’s strategic marriage of inconvenience with the United States, if not outright coercion on the part of our supposed partner, enforced on Islamabad with reference to the war in Afghanistan, have

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reached a height unprecedented since the start of the Western occupation of our immediate neighbour to the northwest nine long years ago.

It would not be out of place to recall that when, in the aftermath of 9/11, while America's dictum for the rest of the international community was that of being with it or against it in the ensuing global war, the stark choice for Pakistan was to either join up or be prepared to be bombed back to the stone age. Nevertheless, Islamabad was still able to get a few red lines accepted by Washington beyond which the alliance in the making for the launch of; what many viewed as highly questionable, premature and even perhaps predetermined; offensive in Afghanistan would not go.

The most relevant of these conditions today is the denial of the right to hot pursuit into Pakistan to those conducting the warfare beyond its north-western frontier. Beset with the very real prospect of losing its majority in the House of Representatives in next month's mid-term elections, the ruling Democratic Party of President Obama started searching desperately for some sort of victory abroad. The choice fell on Pakistan as the scapegoat to explain away the looming defeat in Afghanistan.

Amid an intensified phase of Drone attacks inside Pakistan's bordering Tribal Areas that would invariably result in the loss of more innocent lives than the intended militants, and have been the cause of deep and widespread resentment in the country,¹ NATO gunship helicopters committed a most flagrant violation of the mutually agreed terms of engagement on September 27 by intruding well inside Pakistan territory and reportedly killing over fifty civilians in two strikes.² Pakistan lodged a protest "at the highest military level".³ NATO regretted the incident.

Nevertheless, NATO helicopters struck again on September 30 in what was yet another serious provocation: three of Pakistan's security personnel were killed and three others injured at a paramilitary security post. The nation, its elected representatives and the independent media were understandably enraged. The question was natural to arise and be debated: Were we together as allies in this war or at war with each other? Pakistan's interior minister voiced the same national sentiment. "We will have to see whether we are allies or enemies," he was reported to have said.⁴

Pakistan was left with no choice but to shut down the major NATO and ISAF supply route (Torkhum) across its territory to Afghanistan; the vital lifeline to the allied occupation troops accounting for some eighty per cent⁵ of their entire non-lethal supplies.⁶ Late the same night, armed men torched more than two dozen trucks and tankers carrying supplies for the NATO forces in Afghanistan at a fuel station in Shikarpur.⁷

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Although such convoys had even earlier been set aflame by militants, those incidents had mostly occurred in or around the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan close to the Afghan border and hence would be attributed to those fighting the foreign occupation of Afghanistan. This particular incident, on the other hand, had happened at a populated area deep inside Pakistan's southern-most province of Sindh where there has been no trace ever found of the existence of Afghan militants.

Quite clearly, then, it was a manifestation of the boiling over of the deep and heightening antagonism for the United States among the people of Pakistan at large. The supposed alliance had come to be tested as never before. An early reopening of the supply route did not now appear likely.⁸ Pakistan foreign office spokesperson told *Reuters* on October 3 that the Shikarpur incident represented "public anger" over NATO incursions, and "unless the reaction cools down and we make sure that the supply line is secured, we cannot reopen it."⁹

Some in the West wonder as to why Pakistan reacted in the manner it did when NATO had on occasion in the past as well intruded into the country's air and ground space and inflicted even larger number of casualties to security personnel.¹⁰ The answer is not far to seek. Unlike the earlier instances, Pakistan today has a democratic dispensation that is obliged not to ignore public sentiment on such a sensitive issue.

This new dimension of the Afghan conflict has of necessity to be factored into the overall conduct of the nine-year-long war which the occupation forces are anything but winning. The question of a graceful exit for the United States so earnestly desired by Washington, again, is open to question, as also is the post-war security construct for Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, what is clear beyond doubt is that for any such arrangement to work toward restoring durable and sustainable stability not just to the war-ravaged country but also the region around it, it must address the valid concerns and interests of all six of Afghanistan's immediate neighbouring States, particularly Pakistan, China and Iran. The need for closer cooperation and coordination between Islamabad, Beijing and Tehran for the purpose at this juncture cannot be overemphasised.

As for the traditional flashpoint of Kashmir, Pakistan and India have, subsequent to the prolonged disruption of dialogue as a result of the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008, restarted the process of diplomatic engagement without making much headway so far. At the same time, the eruption of a new phase of youth uprising in the part of the territory under Indian control in June this year; that has been accepted as essentially indigenous by a large number of independent observers even within that country; has added urgency to the long-standing need for finding a peaceful, negotiated and durable

solution acceptable to all three stakeholders: Pakistan, India and the people of the former State of Jammu and Kashmir.

The silver lining on the cloud, however, is that both New Delhi and Islamabad have at long last come to the sober realisation that there can be no military solution to the dispute between the two nuclear powers in South Asia.

Another factor impacting on the regional security environment is the uneasy standoff between Iran and the United States stemming from, but not exclusive to, the former's peaceful nuclear programme. The positive sign in this regard are the indications of some diplomatic contacts between the two sides having already been initiated with the focus on the evolving Afghanistan situation.

One's personal reading of the overall situation from America's perspective is that this given stage has been reached by it after a full realisation of both the strategic counter-productivity and Washington's sheer financial inability to launch a military adventure against Iran either on its own or under the sham cover of the Israel proxy.

Whereas the economic health of the United States as compared to that of some other major global actors – principally, China – at this point is rife with far-reaching consequences for the basic theme of this discussion and would therefore have to be reverted to, it may be noted in the present context that, to all intents and purposes, the choice of Pakistan as the fall guy for America's Afghanistan fiasco appears to have been made only after the disastrous potential of an Iran adventure had dawned on the USA.

No account of the West Asian security scenario would be quite complete, however, without underlining the relevance of the Palestine question to the prospects of peace, security and stability in a regional framework much more extensive than the Middle East. The international community must make every effort to ensure the emergence of a viable Palestinian State at the earliest if this tinderbox is not to be allowed to explode with consequences much too severe for the entire world to contemplate.

As for the prospect of an Iran-America rapprochement, it would be well worth bearing in mind that such an eventuality is unlikely to be met without accommodation for Tehran's inalienable right to pursue its indigenous nuclear programme for peaceful purposes. At any rate, Iran has already gone a long way in unravelling the post-war global nuclear order and thereby introduced the very real possibility of any number of countries in its own region as also in other parts of the world taking the same path to the development of their respective indigenous fuel cycles beyond which the decision to go for the weapon remains only political.¹¹

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What makes the Iranian case unique is that, while being signatory to the NPT and open to inspections of its sites by the IAEA, it has all through the past three post-Revolution decades braved ceaseless Western propaganda, pressure, intimidation, sanctions, psy-warfare and covert operations to continuously advance its peaceful nuclear programme and claims to have indigenously mastered the fuel cycle.

In other words, we are on the threshold of certain fundamental changes in the international order the contours of which are still far from certain. What is abundantly manifest, however, is the unsustainable prolongation of the unipolar world which to many was from the very start a state unnatural to all socio-political affairs. At the same time, the multipolarity now taking shape in more multifarious and geographical diverse than was earlier projected to include, apart from the existing P5, such developed economies as the EU, Germany and Japan.

The noted political-economist and currently professor of international relations at Keele University, Bulent Gokay, has in a well-documented study published in May 2010 first taken note of a November 2008 report of the U.S. National Intelligence Council that had predicted that America's global superiority would gradually disappear over the next 15 years. Highlighting the fact that the said report was written before the global financial crisis had reached its full extent, he has concluded that

The financial crisis and global economic downturn, however, have radically altered that timetable. As a result of the enormous economic losses suffered by the United States and other Western economies and Japan over the past 20 months, and China's remarkably swift recovery, the global power shift the report predicted has gathered speed. For all practical purposes, 2025 is already here.¹²

He has then proceeded to take note of how the emerging economies, in what was once called the "Third World", represent a new configuration of economic and political order.

Emerging economies, or 'anchor countries', are the largest economies in their respective developing world region, like China being the dominant economy of East Asia, India in South Asia, Brazil in Latin America, Mexico in Central America, South Africa in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Turkey in the Middle East and the Balkans. All current indications point out that the anchor countries challenge the existing world economic and political order.¹³

Finally, going back to the underlying dynamics of the global shift referred to in the opening part of this presentation, it is axiomatic that leadership in worldly matters – be it the question of war or of peace – is a derivative of resources, both human and material. It is only in recent times, however, that the pivotal nature of

geoeconomics as a well-defined concept has found its due place in the discourse of political science and in the conduct of international affairs.

At the same time, it would be pointless to inform the well informed group here about China's success story in the economic realm. After all, it was only recently that the world woke up to the reality of this country's having overtaken Japan to emerge as the second largest global economy after the United States, and we are also aware of how it is projected to reach the top position before long. Nevertheless, the more fundamental of indices, in view of this participant, tend often to be obscured by the glitter of trillions of dollars China has accumulated in foreign exchange reserves or invested in overseas bonds.

The determinants of any great power's rise and fall lie instead in the strength or weakness of its foundations in human security. It is the contrast between the health of China and the United States on this score which is most glaring. When the glad tidings came from the summit of world leaders at the U.N. on the occasion of the midterm review of Millennium Development Goals last month that the world was well on track to halve the percentage of people below the poverty line, the major chunk of the credit for the achievement went to China. The following are some extracts from a *Washington Post* report carried in this regard:

Many note that the decline in poverty is due in large part to changes in a few big countries - in particular, China ... How have so many people managed to get out of poverty? China, with 1.3 billion people, has had the biggest impact. About 60 per cent of its massive population lived in extreme poverty in 1990 ... that figure had plummeted to 16 per cent by 2005, according to U.N. figures.

'There are a lot of very large countries in terms of population that have had dramatic reductions in poverty,' said Benjamin Leo, a researcher at the Center for Global Development. He cited Brazil, Pakistan, Vietnam and Bangladesh as examples.¹⁴

Only four days ahead of the publication of the *Washington Post* report cited above, the same newspaper had dropped the bombshell on the alarming state of American economy in the same area of human development. According to the figures released by the Census Bureau, the proportion of those living below the poverty line, as worked out on the official criteria, in the United States now stood at the record high of 14.2 per cent of the population.¹⁵

However, this figure is subject to two qualifications. In the first place, while the U.N. determines the poverty line at U.S. \$ 1.25 per day for each person, America measures the same on the basis of U.S. \$ 22,000 a year for a family of four. Calculated for an individual in daily terms, the American poverty line comes to U.S. \$ 15 – twelve times as high as the U.N. yardstick. Nevertheless,

the difference in standard does not in any way mitigate the severity of the poverty crisis in America which by all accounts is projected to increase in the days ahead.

The second of the provisos, on the other hand, brings out a figure of poverty in the U.S. much higher than that officially stated. A large number of American analysts has disputed the government's criteria for working out the relevant number. Independent investigative reporter David DeGraw, for instance, has challenged the statistics, pointing out a number of flaws like the costs of living metrics being outdated (having been worked out 55 years ago) and the non-inclusion of some 50 million more people subsiding on unemployment benefits. Taking into account these factors, he has come up with the figure of 60 million Americans now living in poverty – 19.3 per cent of the population.¹⁶

Before proceeding with the effect of the publication of data on increasing poverty on the American polity, it would be proper to introduce another indicator of the declining state of the country's economy which had come to light at the end of July 2010. According to the figures released by the Congressional Budget Office, the federal debt held by the public had mushroomed from 36 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) at the end of the 2007 fiscal year to a projected 62 per cent of GDP at the end of fiscal 2010.

Taking note that the federal debt held by "the public" here increasingly meant "foreign governments and investor" – but still skirting the aspect as to how much of this was due to China alone – *Washington Post* projected that, "according to the more realistic scenario", by 2010, "debt would be close to 90 per cent of GDP, reaching 180 per cent of GDP by 2035."¹⁷ Contrary to what was suggested by the very title of this editorial – "CBO's deficit forecast shows need for early action" – the clear wakeup call went practically unnoticed in Washington; and for reasons best explained by the recent publication, *Washington Rules*, by Andrew Bacevich, which we shall cite below.

It was, instead, the disclosure of the increasing rate of poverty and the ongoing debate on it within the United States which has sent America in a tizzy on what to do about it. And, not surprisingly, it is the usual suspect, China. It was all the doing of Beijing's "currency manipulation"; they started shouting from the rooftop. Although saner voices are still out there advising caution, their protestations would be drowned in the cacophony raised by the champions of what Anatole Kaletsky has called "market fundamentalists".

Commenting in *The New York Times* on the action taken by Japan in the middle of last month to manage its wayward economy, he has concluded that there is a growing belief among Asian leaders that the era of United States' hegemony will soon be over, and that the "polarisation of its politics" symbolises "America's inability to adapt to the changing nature of global capitalism after the financial crisis."

He views the Chinese economic policy now serving as “the model” for other Asian countries, and points out that Japan had chosen “to follow China at the cost of irritating America.” He has cautioned that if the United States continued to blame China instead of coming to terms with the new Asian realities, “the new model of capitalism will probably be made in China, like so much else in the world these days.”¹⁸

To conclude, we take recourse in trying to better understand the path ahead the United States is likely to take, to the author of a recent publication – *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* – Andrew Bacevich. In a press interview last month, he has both in a nutshell put forward the major thesis of the book and left not much hope of U.S. policymakers’ deviating from what he sees has served as a “quasi-religion” for them since the end of the Second World War.

It is for the same reason that he has employed terms of Christian belief system like “the credo” and “the sacred trinity” to explain the precepts of U.S. policy toward the rest of the world. In his words,

The credo asserts a claim, and out of that claim comes a demand that the United States be able to exercise certain prerogatives. The second piece of the Washington Rules I label the sacred trinity, core principles that define the way we conceive of and use our military power. The elements of the sacred trinity are the following:

First of all, a demand that the United States exclusively maintain a global military presence; second, the practice of configuring U.S. forces not to defend the country, but so that they can serve as instruments of power projection; and then, finally, to combine that global presence with those global power projection capabilities to support a policy of global interventionism.¹⁹

He does not leave much scope for a rethinking of this approach by the United States by asserting that “Washington subscribes to these principles as a matter of faith,” and that “people in Washington tend to act as if the world has not changed at all” since the end of the 1940s – something of a 70-year time warp if you like.

Finally, a short piece of detached – but friendly – advice from Islamabad on the issues of the South China Sea: the more troubled its waters are, the bigger the catch for those long habitual to fishing in locales far off from their shores.

Notes and references

¹ The Drone attacks by CIA inside Pakistan territory have in any case shown an upward trend since their start in 2005. In the first year, there was only one such strike causing one death. The next strike came in 2007 resulting in the death of 20 persons, mostly non-combatant civilians. The practice has seen a sharp increase starting 2008 when 19 Drone strikes took 156 deaths and injuries to another 17 persons. The figure

of such attacks jumped to 46 in 2009, accounting for 536 deaths and causing injuries to an additional 75. This year, according to the latest available tally till September 19, the U.S. has conducted as many as 53 Drone strikes killing 473 and injuring over 52. As many as 21 attacks were made last month alone: Haji Mujtaba, “U.S. drone strikes kill 18 militants in Pakistan”, *Reuters*, October 2, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6910M020101002> The cumulative total thus far comes to 123 strikes, 1,194 deaths and injuries to at least an additional 174. Only a very small proportion of these casualties are claimed to have been of militants. However, even these initial pronouncements are often proved wrong when the supposedly killed militants would turn out to be alive.

² “‘Self-defense’: NATO choppers strike Pakistan”, *mnsbc*, September 27, 2010, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/39376671/ns/world_news-south_and_central_asia/

³ Hussain Afzal and Iftikhar A. Khan, “3 personnel killed in Kurran Agency: Nato supply line blocked after attack on post”, *Dawn*, October 1, 2010, <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/front-page/3-personnel-killed-in-kurram-agency-nato-supply-line-blocked-after-attack-on-post-100>

⁴ Jane Perlez and Helene Cooper, “Signaling tensions, Pakistan shuts NATO route”, *The New York Times*, October 1, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/01/world/asia/01peshawar.html?th&emc=th> In fact, the newspaper considered this statement important enough to use it in its daily feature “Quote of the day”.

⁵ *The New York Times* report cited above quotes Teresita C. Schaffer, director of the South Asia programme at the Center for Strategic and international Studies in Washington in this regard: “We have been trying for a couple of years to decrease our logistical dependence on Pakistan, and have only managed to get it to 80 per cent from 90 per cent. So, no, we clearly don’t have anyplace to go.”

⁶ Hussain Afzal and Iftikhar A. Khan, op. cit.

⁷ Staff reporter, “Little security for Nato supply convoys”, *Dawn*, October 2, 2010, <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/local/little-security-for-nato-supply-convoys-200>

⁸ The supply line was finally reopened on October 6 after scores of more such vehicles had been torched in various parts of Pakistan – and not before the United States had made a public apology for the outrage which was described as “unprecedented” by a leading Pakistani daily, *Dawn*, <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/front-page/us-apologises-at-last-for-kurram-intrusion-700>

⁹ “Attack on NATO supply a public reaction”, *The Nation*, Pakistan, <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/Politics/03-Oct-2010/Attack-on-NATO-supply-a-public-reaction-FO>

¹⁰ The most serious incident of this nature, resulting in many more lives of Pakistan’s security personnel had, indeed, occurred in June 2008 while General Musharraf was still the president. Pakistan had then not taken any retaliatory step apart from the military’s public relations department issuing a statement of condemnation at the killing of 11 personnel, including an army major, when, reportedly, NATO warplanes had targeted a check post. For details of the incident, see, Staff Correspondent, “11 FC soldiers killed in attack by US-led forces in Mohmand”, *Dawn*, June 12, 2008, <http://www.dawn.com/2008/06/12/top2.htm>

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of this aspect by the present writer, see, Ghani Jafar, “Iran: Unravelling the Global Nuclear Order”, *Regional Studies*, IRS, 24(4) Autumn 2006: 3-75.

- ¹² Bulent Gokay, "Iran nuclear deal exposing the shifting distribution of power", *Axis of Logic*, May 24, 2010, http://axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/Article_59994.shtml
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Mary Beth Sheridan, "U.N. foresees dramatic cuts in poverty", *Washington Post*, September 20, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/20/AR2010092005974.html?wpisrc=nl_headline
- ¹⁵ Carol Morello, "About 44 million in U.S. lived below poverty line in 2009, census data show", *Washington Post*, September 10, 2010.
- ¹⁶ David DeGraw, "That 'official' poverty rate? It's much worse than you think", *AlterNet*, September 23, 2010, <http://www.alternet.org/story/148255/>
- ¹⁷ Editorial, "CBO's deficit forecast shows need for early action", *Washington Post*, July 30, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/30/AR2010073005985.html?wpisrc=nl_headline
- ¹⁸ Anatole Kaletsky, "Blaming China won't help the economy", *The New York Times*, September 27, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/27/opinion/27kaletsky.html?pagewanted=1&th&emc=th>
- ¹⁹ Terrence McNally and Andrew Bacevich, "America's Empire and Endless Wars are Destroying the World, and Ruining our Great Country", *AlterNet*, September 6, 2010.