

South Asia descends into terror's vortex

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South Asians will watch the year end in a pall of gloom. The region is fast getting sucked into the vortex of terrorism. The Afghan war has crossed the Khyber and is stealthily advancing towards the fertile Indo-Gangetic plains.

Whatever hopes might have lingered that Barack Obama would be a harbinger of "change", have also been dashed by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The *Financial Times* of London reported on Monday that in an exclusive interview Rice prophesied that the incoming Obama administration might have little option but to follow the current US approach on a range of foreign policy issues. Significantly, her prognosis figured in the course of a foreign policy review that primarily focused on Russia, Iran and Afghanistan.

South Asian security is at a crossroads. On the one hand, the United States made great strides in getting embedded in the region on a long-term footing. South Asia must figure as a rare exception in the George W Bush era's dismal foreign policy legacy. On other hand, the big pawn on the South Asian chessboard, India, is heading for parliamentary elections. Almost certainly, a new government with new thinking will assume office in Delhi by May. US-India ties will also come under scrutiny.

Hype of US-India ties

The Bush administration made the Indian leadership feel "special". The Indian establishment felt comfortable with the US's regional policy, which it fancied as working in favor of its aspirations to emerge as the pre-eminent power in the Indian Ocean region. Delhi had no problems with the creeping "militarization" of the Bush administration's regional policy; more precisely, the Pentagon's "muscling" or "encroachment" into a striking number of aspects of the US government, including its foreign policy, as Thomas A Schweich, former senior State Department official with hands-on experience on Afghanistan, put it in a devastating article last Sunday in the Washington Post

What mattered to Delhi was that the US regional policy regarded India as a counterweight to China. Equally, Delhi was not perturbed that the cold warriors in Washington were relentlessly pursuing a policy of encirclement of its traditional ally Russia or pressing for a regime change in Iran, India's close friend. In fact, Delhi cut adrift from the regional politics and single-mindedly focused on its strategic partnership with the US, which, it felt, if carefully nurtured, would take care of India's two main challenges on the foreign policy front, namely, its adversarial relationships with China and

Pakistan, and elevate India altogether from the morass of its regional milieu.

The US-India nuclear agreement signed in September, the burgeoning military-to-military cooperation, the prospect of “inter-operability” between the two armed forces - all this elevated US-India ties to the level of a veritable alliance.

Delhi took in its stride the status of a key “non-NATO ally” that the US regional policy ascribed to India’s arch-rival Pakistan - comfortable in the estimation that the Pakistani connection after all was a passing need of the US in the context of the Afghan war, whereas India was the US’s “natural ally”.

Meanwhile, Delhi systematically began harmonizing its own regional policies with the US’s strategy, especially with regard to rolling back its cooperation with Iran while boosting security ties with Israel, distancing itself from the trilateral format involving Russia, China and India, and reducing to a minimum its involvement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

India signed up with a “quadrilateral alliance” involving the US, Japan, Australia and India in a bizarre containment strategy toward China, which, of course, annoyed Beijing. Some in the Indian strategic community openly threatened to play a “Tibet card” against China, confident in the strength of the US-India strategic partnership. Hubris crept into the Indian mindset, which was indeed a startling sight, altogether new to the millennia-old largely benign Indian civilizational temper.

The Indian leadership paid heed to US and Israeli opposition to the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project despite its immense significance for India’s energy security, besides holding the potential of realizing a long-lost dream of making Pakistan a real “stakeholder” in good-neighborly relations. In a dramatic illustration of how much Delhi’s policies shifted, the Indian security czars took the visiting Israeli army chief in September to the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, almost signaling that India was joining hands with the US-Israeli fight against “Islamic terror”.

It was a calibrated act of strategic defiance, extraordinary for Delhi’s traditionally cautious West Asia policy or power projection in the Arab world. Delhi was showing its thumb’s up at the Muslim opinion regarding the US-led war against “Islamic terror”. It didn’t seem to care how much antagonism was building up against the US’s war on Islamic terror or against Israel’s state terrorism within Pakistan and in the neighboring regions of the Muslim Middle East.

Israel’s influence on the Indian foreign and security establishment peaked. Most important, Delhi overlooked all pressing evidence that the US-led war in Afghanistan was closely linked to the containment strategy towards Russia and Iran (and China) and the eastward advance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into the Asian theater.

In February, when visiting US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested an Indian military deployment in Afghanistan, it was received with careful attention and empathy. Some Indian analysts argued that this was actually a good thing as it would inevitably lead to the US and India joining hands to cleanse Pakistan’s body polity of its Islamic fervor and make it a truly civilized, democratic country.

Indian illusions shaken up

Then the terrorists struck on the western Indian city of Mumbai, India’s financial capital, on November 26. The horrific violence came as a chilling reminder to Delhi that the more things

seemed to change in the power equilibrium in South Asia, they have remained much the same as they were through past decades. India quickly sobered up to the realization that its security is ultimately defined by its neighborhood and there is no running away from the hard realities of life.

The past four-week period has also shaken up Indian illusions regarding Washington's regional policies. It is plain to see that the US never really abandoned its "hyphenated" policy towards India and Pakistan as South Asia's two important rival powers, both of which are useful in their own ways for the pursuit of the US's geostrategies.

Within hours of the Mumbai attacks, Rice rushed to Delhi to commiserate. She promised quick action to bring the terror machine to book. She urged Delhi to exercise restraint while she worked on the Pakistani leadership to cooperate with India. She then flew to Pakistan. Two other top US officials followed up Rice's mission in the following weeks. Delhi waited patiently though evidence began to pile by the hour that the terrorists had set out from Pakistani soil in a well-orchestrated operation of high professional skill that would have been possible only with the connivance and support of the security establishment in Islamabad.

Meanwhile, Pakistan, which is vastly experienced in handling Washington's "pressure", began ably working on Rice and the US military and political establishment. By last week, Islamabad seemed to have concluded that the US pressure had all but run its course. Actually, by gently holding out the threat to the US that the Afghan operations would grievously suffer unless Washington restrained Delhi from precipitating any tensions on the India-Pakistan border, Islamabad seems to have neatly pole-vaulted over Rice to appeal straight to the Pentagon, where there is abiding camaraderie towards the Pakistani generals.

The Pakistani generals' calculation proved correct when the Pentagon made it abundantly clear to Delhi that it wouldn't allow the Pakistani generals to be "distracted" at this juncture. Speaking from Camp Eggers in Afghanistan on December 20, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, laid down the ground rules for India. He said the overarching strategy for success in Afghanistan must be regional in focus and include not just Afghanistan, but also Pakistan and India. Continuing in this seemingly innocuous vein, Mullen explained that the three countries must "figure a way" to decrease tensions between them and the "regional strategy" here is aimed at addressing long-term problems that increase instability in the region.

Mullen then referred specifically to Kashmir as a problem where reduction of tensions "allowed the Pakistani leadership ... to focus on the west [border with Afghanistan]". He expressed apprehension that the terror attack in Mumbai might "force the Pak leadership to lose interest in the west", apart from bringing India and Pakistan closer to a nuclear flashpoint. Curiously, Mullen gave credit to the Pakistani top brass for cooperation in the Afghan war, which "has had a positive impact" on the ground.

US hinting at Kashmir mediation

Mullen probably hoped to rattle Delhi by confirming what many American "experts" have been recently suggesting, namely, the US is working on a "regional strategy" in South Asia, which grouped Afghanistan, Pakistan and India together. He virtually corroborated a recent hint by US Senator John Kerry (who is expected to chair the powerful Senate Committee on Foreign Relations) that Obama would be appointing a special envoy for South Asia in an unprecedented move.

Delhi finds such ideas completely unacceptable. Delhi traditionally rejected any outside "third-party" mediation in India-Pakistan disputes. Having said that, successive governments in Delhi tacitly

acquiesced with a US mediatory role in India-Pakistan relations in the recent years since the Kargil conflict in 1999. To be sure, Delhi's pragmatism was based on the belief that it wouldn't be a bad idea if the US used its influence on Pakistan to moderate its policies on the range of issues generating India-Pakistan tensions - Pakistani support for cross-border militancy and terrorism, in particular. In other words, Delhi preferred to selectively avail of the US mediatory role in areas where it stood to gain.

But an institutionalized US mediatory mission in South Asia hyphenating Afghanistan, Pakistan and India is an altogether different proposition. It not only linked India and Pakistan but it also held out the danger of constant US meddling in Indian policies. The intriguing thing is why the US has projected its "regional strategy" doctrine at this juncture, knowing fully well that Delhi will find it disagreeable.

One possible explanation is that the US is attempting pressure tactics by appointing a special envoy to discuss Kashmir. Washington has been strongly pitching for a fair share of the multi-billion dollar arms deals that are in the Indian pipeline. A single deal for the procurement of 126 aircraft and related supplies including co-production alone can be worth anywhere up to US\$16 billion. The Bush administration hoped to clinch the deal before year-end.

Gates visited Delhi in February with the arms merchants and unabashedly canvassed for awarding the contracts through direct negotiations rather than international tender. But the Indians are sticking to their cumbersome tender procedures which require the US companies to compete with Russia and France and other arms manufacturers.

Not only that, Delhi recently overlooked the Pentagon's sales pitch and awarded a lucrative contract for helicopters to Russia worth \$1.3 billion. A leading pro-American newspaper promptly wrote an editorial condemning the Indian government's decision.

Indeed, Mullen's statement rings a warning bell for Delhi. But then, a difficult choice lies ahead for Obama. Will he rake up the Kashmir issue as a pressure tactic? It is certain that Delhi will reject any US attempt to mediate on Kashmir. An extraordinarily high voter turnout in the current election to the provincial legislature in Srinagar vindicates Delhi's stand that there is no need or scope for any outside intervention in the Kashmir issue.

Defying all doomsday predictions and despite the prevailing impression of widespread political alienation among Kashmiris, the voters in the state have affirmed an extraordinary faith in India's democratic process. The voter turnout touched as high as 60% in the election, which has been held in a atmosphere free of violence and coercion. Therefore, Delhi will see no reason to give in to any third party mediation.

Pakistan seizes initiative

Clearly, there are several templates to the terror attacks on Mumbai. No matter who planned and executed the Mumbai attacks from Pakistani soil and with what complicated motives, the recent events have immensely helped the generals in Rawalpindi at this juncture to correct the imbalances they perceived in the US's South Asian policies during the past three to four years, which they regarded to be weighed in India's favor, despite Pakistan being the key US ally in the "war on terror" and its armed forces having taken a heavy beating with hundreds of casualties.

Also, Islamabad has exposed the fallacy in Indian thinking that it occupies the pride of place as the US's "natural ally" globally, while Pakistan was a mere collaborator in an anti-insurgency war on the

Afghan tribal tracts. In turn, the events have also helped Islamabad highlight the complexities of the US-Pakistan relationship, which is far from a client relationship. This comes particularly helpful for Islamabad since there is an air of uncertainty about the policies towards Pakistan under the new administration in Washington. At a minimum, Obama would have noted that the Pakistani generals are no easy pushover. The fact of the matter is that the Rice mission to the region in the wake of the Mumbai attacks brought out the limits to the US's capacity or willingness or both to "pressure" Pakistan.

Significantly, amid all the fracas over the Mumbai attacks and despite repeated Indian calls to isolate Pakistan in the world community as the "epicenter" of terrorism, Washington is quietly putting together a new multi-billion dollar aid package for Pakistan, and CENTCOM is drawing up a new five-year plan committing \$300 million assistance annually to the Pakistani military.

Kerry, while on a recent visit to Islamabad, made the commitment to speed up the "mid-life upgradation" of Pakistan's F-16 aircraft capable for delivering nuclear weapons. He said the US considered a "vibrant, strong, economically viable" Pakistan to be "vital for peace and stability in South Asia".

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Islamabad has weathered the US "pressure" over the Mumbai attacks. In Islamabad's estimation, the focus in Washington is turning to the gala inaugural ceremony of Obama on January 20, followed by several weeks during which no major US foreign policy initiatives need to be expected as the new administration settles in. Thus, Islamabad has shrewdly judged that sooner, rather than later, the international community will begin counseling Delhi to engage Pakistan in a spirit of dialogue.

India running out of options

With Pakistan's recalcitrance and Mullen's veiled threat of reopening the Kashmir file, a sense of frustration is gripping Delhi. Pakistan has ignored India's tough posturing. The faltering Indian security agencies, which have been in a state of appalling decline in recent years, seem to have failed to put together any hard evidence of a Pakistani involvement in the Mumbai attacks.

The Pakistani generals count on Washington to rein in India. And Delhi is fast running out of options. In the spirit of its "strategic partnership" with the US, if Delhi counted on Washington to read the riot act to Islamabad, it is dismayed to see that Washington is more interested in restraining India rather than do any arm-twisting on Pakistan. Rice increasingly looks like an angel beating her wings in vain, while the Pakistani generals have ensured that the imperatives of the Afghan war leave the Pentagon no option but to be supportive.

At the same time, India is heading for a crucial, tightly fought parliamentary election within a few months and the government cannot afford to appear to be weak and rudderless. The majority opinion in the country somehow has convinced itself that the Pakistani security establishment perpetrated the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. The government faces potentially damaging criticism in the competitive domestic politics that its US-centric foreign policy has run into a cul-de-sac. The powerful pro-US lobby in Delhi's strategic community and the corporate media already looks confused. The fizz in the US-India strategic partnership is fast vanishing. The much-touted US-India nuclear deal, hailed as a historic achievement of the government, already looks jaded and something of an embarrassment.

Obama's war priorities

Thus, the challenge facing Obama is having to reconcile the almost irreconcilable contradictions in the US's South Asia policy. Surely, his number one priority will be to stave off defeat in the war in Afghanistan. Obama's Afghan strategy is to double the level of US forces in Afghanistan from 32,000 troops at present and to try to arrest and incrementally reverse the Taliban's steady gains in the recent period. Clearly, the US intends to engage the Taliban politically and is no longer averse to accommodating the Taliban in the power structure at some point in the next year or two, but this has to be from a position of strength. No doubt, 2009 is a decisive year of the war.

At the same time, Afghanistan is heading for presidential elections in 2009. Hamid Karzai has stated his intention to seek another five-year mandate. In 2004, the US was in a commanding position and could dictate the course of Afghan politics. But that is not quite the situation today. Even Karzai is showing the gumption to openly mock at the US's Afghan strategy. Asked by the *Chicago Tribune* last week about Obama's description of Karzai as weak and spending too much time in a bunker, the Afghan president snapped back, "Bunker? We are in a trench, and our allies are with us in the trench. We were on a high hill with a glorious success in 2002 ... We must now look back and find out as to why we are in a trench, or if you'd like to describe it, as a bunker."

Four years ago, it was unthinkable that Karzai would have used such biting sarcasm against the US ambassador in Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad, let alone Bush. Karzai asked, "Why are we in a bunker?" He then went on to tear the US war strategy to pieces for its mindless and excessive use of force, and concluded, "And if this behavior continues, we will be in a deeper trench than we are in today. And the war against terrorism will end in a disgraceful defeat."

Clearly, in these troubled times ahead, Obama cannot afford to get tough with the Pakistani generals. He will need all his charm to coax them to cooperate for the successful conduct of the war, and they can be a difficult lot indeed as the recent destruction of the NATO's supply convoys amply testify. Besides, Pakistan holds the trump card in any political reconciliation involving the Taliban. Arguably, Pakistan has a crucial say in the election of the next Afghan president as well. After all, the onerous duty falls on Islamabad to orchestrate the participation of over 4 million Afghan refugees who are living in Pakistan in the election process, and these ethnic Pashtuns could be a decisive vote bank in determining who the next Afghan president will be.

Of course, much will also depend on Obama's adherence to the "Great Central Asia strategy", which aims at rolling back Russia, Iran and China's regional influence. If he is genuinely keen to work out a durable Afghan settlement, he will need to take help and cooperation from Russia, Iran and India in putting together a credible inter-Afghan reconciliation. In fact, such an approach - broad-basing the search for an Afghan settlement - will help reduce Obama's dependence on Pakistan. Delhi will welcome such an approach by the Obama administration. But would the cold warriors in Washington allow Obama to opt for a change of course? Unlikely. Indeed, against the backdrop of the Afghan war, there has been a creeping takeover of the US foreign and security policy in South Asia by the generals in the Pentagon who are probably today quite in a position to devour Obama's call for change.

Reality check for India

All this adds up to a harsh reality for Delhi: it might as well abandon any hopes that Obama will turn the screws on the Pakistani generals. On the contrary, the Pakistani generals may have concluded that it is their turn to expect that the US puts pressure on Delhi to behave with restraint. (Of course,

there is no guarantee that such terrorist attacks as on Mumbai do not repeat.) The Pakistani generals may not think it sufficient enough if the US restores an even-handed approach to relations with the two South Asian rivals. Conceivably, they may insist on US mediation in India-Pakistan disputes, especially on the Kashmir issue. They will insist that unless Pakistan is free of its threat perceptions on its eastern border, the armed forces will remain far too “distracted” to concentrate on the war in Afghanistan.

That is why, the denouement of the current crisis over the Mumbai terrorist attacks will be of critical importance for India. Delhi is beginning to feel disenchanted by the US role in the crisis. Using unusually tough language, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee hinted that India’s patience with Pakistan was wearing thin. Speaking in Delhi on Tuesday, Mukherjee made plain his displeasure with the US mediation in the current crisis. He said, “While we continue to persuade the international community and Pakistan, we are also clear that ultimately it is we who have to deal with this problem. We will take all measures necessary as we deem fit to deal with the situation.”

Mukherjee added, “We are not saying this just because we are affected but because we believe that it will be good for the entire civilized world and also for the Pakistani people and society. This terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan is the greatest danger to the peace and security of the entire civilized world.”

But all indications are that Pakistan is not impressed by the Indian rhetoric. It seems to think Indian politicians are grandstanding in an election year. But, just in case Delhi may spring a surprise, Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Kiani has warned that the armed forces would give an equal response “within few minutes” if India carried out any surgical military strikes. “The armed forces are fully prepared to meet any eventuality, and the men are ready to sacrifice for their country,” he reportedly said.

As Delhi and Islamabad dig in, Obama will have a hard time balancing the US’s regional policy. However, one positive outcome will be that the US-India relationship will emerge out of this phase as a more mature process, having shed the false expectations and the rhetorical hype of recent years. A new government will also be assuming office in Delhi by next May and it is bound to take a fresh look at the “strategic partnership” with the US.

It is highly unlikely that any new leadership in Delhi will emulate current Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s ardor for India’s strategic partnership with the US. India will also have drawn its lessons from the current crisis. The return to an independent foreign policy may become necessary - almost unavoidable. The year 2009 may well prove to be a formative year of readjustment in India’s post-Cold War foreign policy.

P.S.

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* Ambassador M K Bhadrakumar was a career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service. His assignments included the Soviet Union, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kuwait and Turkey.