

The world after September 11

By Mahdi Masud

WITH September 11 around the corner, a brief review of the impact of that catastrophe on the Islamic world generally and on Pakistan particularly would be appropriate. Never in recent history has an act of violence and terror perpetrated by a militant Muslim group, had such disastrous consequences, especially for the Islamic world.

If September 11 with its tragic loss of innocent lives and the terrible psychological shock to American mind, had been a run-of-the-mill act of terror, it could have been explained as an act of bitter frustration and revenge without due thought to the likely consequences. But to the obsessed masterminds of this act, nothing mattered more than what they had set out to do, not even the terrifying backlash of their insane action, especially affecting the Muslim countries and their interests generally.

With the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US was in the throes of a "rent an enemy" psychosis to sustain its unchallenged military power for the realization of its strategic aims. The perception of Islamic militancy as the main emerging threat in the unipolar world and the propagation of the 'clash of civilizations' theory had already created a psychological climate for an assertion of this power on a wider scale. The September 11 cataclysm provided an ideal opportunity for that purpose.

How things were going to be like in the new context was summed up in the West Point address of President Bush on June 12, 2002. He spoke of using pre-emptive and unilateral force, of imposing a universal moral clarity between good and evil, uncovering Al Qaeda cells in sixty or more countries and removing governments considered repugnant.

The immediate price was paid, and is still being paid by the Afghans whose Taliban rulers had been led into abandoning the interests of their own country under the influence of a handful of non-Afghan, Al Qaeda extremists tilting at the windmills of western hegemony. A country, which had never been occupied in history by a

The European Union is a hesitant fellow-traveller with the US. The UN has never, in its fifty-seven-year history, appeared as passive a by-stander and on-looker of international events as in the post-September 11 period.

For its part, Pakistan has borne a large part of the brunt of the post-September 11 happenings. While its switch away from the Taliban ended its international isolation and economic sanctions, the expected dividends from its new role as a front-line state in the war against terror have been stymied by the fallout of the US-led military operations in Afghanistan. Foreign and domestic investment continues to be shy, while commitments on tariff relaxation for Pakistan exports and related economic benefits continue to be largely unrealized because of the unstable regional security environment.

Since September 11 India's strategy has centred on (a) blurring the distinction in western eyes between Islamic extremism and the Kashmiri freedom movement; (b) intimidating Pakistan with the threats of war into ending support for the Kashmiri struggle; and (c) using the forthcoming, managed elections in occupied Kashmir as a camouflaged device to legitimize its occupation of the disputed state, thereby securing an "internal" solution of the conflict. The efforts to rope in some APHC elements into taking part in the elections are part of the same strategy.

India is using the bogey of Al Qaeda's presence in Pakistan to highlight the chances of Pakistan's nuclear assets falling into terrorist hands and to suggest the advisability of taking out these assets or destroying these by means of a preemptive strike. India also uses the preemptive strategy of the Bush administration as a justification for its own threatened action against targets in Azad Kashmir and Pakistan.

In this scenario, how does Pakistan face up to its economic, security and political challenges? If the political and economic dividends of the post-September 11 policies and actions are to be realized, the leaders of religious parties and groups must be required to rein in their militant activists and accept the primacy of Pakistan's interests over all other considerations, including pro-Taliban and related sympathies.

presence of US military power, which has also established bases in neighbouring Central Asia.

A tailor-made opportunity has been provided to the oppressors of genuine freedom movements such as in Kashmir, Palestine and elsewhere to suppress these by fanning them with the terrorist brush. Overnight the scale of Israeli brutality has gone several notches up and the Arab-Israel peace process has been finally buried. India has lost no time in making common cause with the West against 'Islamic militancy' and using this bogey to isolate and crush the Kashmir freedom movement.

The list of targets of the anti-terrorist campaign also includes Iran and Iraq as part of the 'axis of evil' and Syria, Sudan and Libya as part of the 'gallery of rogue states.' Russia has been given a free hand in Chechnya in return for its supportive role in the anti-terrorism coalition.

political parties should refrain from exploiting the post-September 11 policy switch for partisan purposes against the government. The plain fact is that in the immediate grim aftermath of September 11 terrorist attacks, no other government in place of the Musharraf regime could have acted any differently in the matter of a policy switch vis-a-vis the Taliban. India's current bellicosity derives partly from Pakistan's failure to resolve its internal contradictions and to present a united front.

At the same time, the government must pursue and further step up its drive against militant elements in the country against whom the authorities have recently taken some tough steps but who nevertheless remain a potentially disruptive force. That some major strikes such as the attacks on the parliament building in New Delhi and the assembly building in Srinagar may have been aimed at precipitating a military clash between India and Pakistan cannot be ruled out.

Improving our image abroad depends largely on curbing religious extremism and terrorism and tackling the perennial problem of political instability. For the latter, the government should go more than half way to help conciliate the political forces and to continue efforts to reach a modus vivendi on the highly controversial question of constitutional changes.

In facing up to the Indian threat, Pakistan should continue its policy of defusing tensions and refraining from steps likely to lead to military escalation. It should give top priority to curbing terrorism, and promoting good governance and economic and social betterment.

In the event of India continuing to refuse to negotiate on a settlement of Kashmir dispute acceptable to the people of the held state, Pakistan must continue its diplomatic and political efforts for such a settlement, without, of course, provoking a military confrontation with India.

With regard to Pakistan's relations with its strategically important neighbour Iran, the ouster of the Taliban order in Afghanistan has opened the way for developing a close and trusting relationship with it. It requires a strong political will on both sides to build upon the identity of geopolitical interests between the two countries without allowing extraneous elements (including the US factor) to weaken their relationship. While Pakistan is well placed to use its good offices between the US and Iran, the latter can be helpful in smoothing Pakistan's relations with the dominant Northern Alliance elements in the Kabul regime and with certain Central Asian states.

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