

9/11: Beyond our intellectual gullibility

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Yesterday's supporters are today's critics. Accusation has gradually replaced applause. As mainstream America, led by the establishment, mourns the September 11 dead and yet again sermonises about its crusade against 'terrorists', many commentators question the conduct of this 'crusade', both within and outside the US. In Pakistan, enthusiasm of those who believed that US military strikes against the Taliban in Afghanistan would help evolve a 'new, progressive and democratic' Afghanistan has turned into scepticism — as if internal sustainable socio-political development can be externally prompted. The process of societal transformation is triggered only through internal dynamics, spearheaded by a politically active intellectual class — as demonstrated in Iran. It was the South East Asian societies where in unique circumstances of defeat and destruction the external factor facilitated their transformation. Irrespective of how keen another state is to see the emergence of a 'democratic and modern state', only Pakistan's home grown dynamics can prompt that change. Meanwhile, whichever regime is found 'friendly and useful', it will get external support, irrespective of its democratic credentials.

Simply put, some Pakistani writers criticise Washington for not promoting enlightened and democratic politics in the region and the international community for not providing sufficient reconstruction assistance. As if staying the course of traditional power play in inter-state relations, any country can afford to promote such values as a primary foreign policy objective. Hence, Pakistan's correct though somewhat shoddily executed decision to not be on the wrong side of Washington.

Moralistic rhetoric notwithstanding, states generally and militarily powerful ones specifically have supported and opposed those forces abroad that actively support or oppose their national interest. Washington's military action against Afghanistan was no exception to this rule. Indeed the shocking tragedy of 9/11 removed all the legal and intellectual barriers to a US military operation that the UN's humanitarian wing and officials and opinion-makers in the international community had, even if feebly, erected.

What is the US' scorecard in Afghanistan? Measure it against its own goal of bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. On the political front, American envoy Zalmay Khalilzad ensured Washington's handpicked man President Hamid Karzai's election by the June Loj Jirga. Return of warlordism and heightened insecurity is the hallmark of today's Afghanistan. US response to increased blasts and assassination is deployment of additional troops in the ISAF operation. The critics of Taliban's human rights record remain fairly critical of Afghanistan's current situation. The US has also contributed to this negative human rights situation. Indeed the Guantanamo Bay men experienced virtual barbarism by US authorities as the Geneva Convention on war prisoners was completely ignored. The inadvertent but inevitable death of innocent civilians during the ongoing military operation too consistently violates rules of engagement, prompting American and European human rights groups and writers to critique various aspects of the US Afghan operation.



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Not surprisingly discussions on the US response to the mind-boggling 9/11 terrorist attacks did acquire a moralising tone. The logic of US interest dictated a simple reasoning — evil had unleashed itself on 9/11. Washington's bombers would now vanquish this 'evil'. Naturally a state with monopoly over the most advanced lethal weaponry and a militaristic mindset would respond to terrorist attacks in the very heart of its existence — New York and Washington. Many legal instruments for conflict resolution lay in tatters as US bombs and bullets were unleashed on Afghan territory to kill or kidnap Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda men and the Taliban leadership. Washington adopted the bullying tactics. Its anger was justified but who was there to restrain its deadly militaristic outburst?

Washington's post 9/11 policy merely reinforced its pre-9/11 policy; opting for unilateralism over multilateralism, military force over dialogue, short-term pragmatism over peace-pursuing principles, militaristic security over holistic security and ultimately the quest of domination over mutual accommodation. In pursuing such policy objectives, the American state has travelled further on the Hobbesian path where brute force becomes the decisive factor. Political roots of strife and struggle are blurred, often deliberately but also because of ignorance and intellectual incompetence.

The weak and often the wronged are crushed by the strong. Sense of justice is perpetually violated. The reactive mode of thought among the weak and the wronged is strengthened. Respect for human life erodes. Instead of banishing violence as a tool of the weak and the angry, it tends to become more popular. The underworld flourishes. The powerful calls it 'terrorism', but the angry and agitated justify it. The third category looking for negotiation and dialogue guided by humane and universal values becomes marginalised. Extremism flourishes. Ironically, the very element that the US claims it seeks to banish, its policies will reinforce.

Policy-makers and mandarins tasked with compiling and executing a response to strife and struggle overlook a key factor — that their compulsions are political; the outcome acquires an ideological texture, religious in most cases. As it did in Latin America during the seventies when the church supported and sheltered civilian resistance against US-supported military dictators.

In framing strife and struggles primarily within a religious context, policy-makers and mandarins fortify either the deliberately or ignorantly naive theories of clash of civilizations put forward by men like Samuel Huntington. With all man-made ideologies dead, the hungry spirit jarred by injustice and hate, by the ugly and the vulgar, turns into what it understands as the divine path. Also misled at a very deep structural and spiritual level by the US and Pakistan-led forces that authored post-1979 Afghan struggle into combining

lethal militarism with religion, Muslims struggling against political injustice increasingly use it as a mobilising tool — whether in Central, South-West or South Asia.

Yesterday's authors of this hugely distorting and destructive religio-militarisation are now its arch-enemy. They wish it away with bombs and bullets while ignoring the perpetuation of injustice. Irrespective of the dictates and action of powerful states, violence will forever flourish in the shadows of injustice. The gradual erosion of state's monopoly over destructive means and the advent of the information revolution have incapacitated the world's most powerful state. It can no longer adequately control both thought and action. Hence the strong and the weak conduct a parallel and often antagonistic discourse and mutually undermining actions, often merely advancing the cause of conflict. Yet the primary responsibility for advancing conflict rests with the ascendant, the organised and global power.

Suicide bombers have sabotaged the power of sophisticated weapons and the rules of conventional warfare. The key factor of the adversary's fear of death is done away with. Responding to the ruckus caused by the criticism of Palestinian suicide bombers, many in the US have raised the question — why should Palestinians be held to higher moral standards than Israelis? What high moral ground is achieved by Israelis through bombing of civilians by F-16s, blasting them by M-1 Abrams tanks or even bulldozing the homes of those whose only crime is that they are related to someone engaged in an act of resistance? Through power of independent and widely disseminated discourse, double standards of the powerful and the self-righteous stand exposed — often by western writers and admirable individuals like former UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson.

Clearly in international relations a key phenomenon that squarely emerged post 9/11 was replacement of balance of power to the deployment of sheer force by a militarily unchallenged state. The post 9/11 period saw the culmination of the process of restraint that was initiated in the Gorbachev era. A pliable Gorbachev removed the restraining impact the second superpower had had on the US in the post-war period. Unhindered by any other power or power bloc on the international scene, Washington believes it can comfortably pursue the diplomatically non-accommodating force-loaded 'knock-out' approach. As if keen to produce an annual illustration of this approach, Washington is now on the verge of using sheer force against Iraq. Egged on by a nuclear-armed Israel that is deep into state terrorism against the colonised, courageous and frustrated Palestinians, Washington plans to use its military power to militarily de-fang the Iraqi regime.

In international relations today, peace and stability cannot come through Machiavellian politics and sheer-force deployment. Irrespective of its military and economic supremacy, US will never be able to contribute to global peace and security without embracing genuine multilateralism, mutual understanding and a principled approach to resolving global conflict. Its present conduct in international affairs only adds to global chaos.