

Is 9/11 a turning point in history?

9/11 / Afghan

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WHAT is the point of a revolution if it has not crossed my door? Everyone looks at a turning point of history through his own rear-view mirror. In 1776 the world changed for the United States; in 1789 for France; in 1918 for Russia. Too much changed in the 1940s: Germany, Europe, Japan in the big league; while India spearheaded the anti-colonialism revolution, China seized hold of a post-Marxist revolution, and America stepped up the slow drive to take over the world.

In 1967 the Middle East became another equation. In 1971 the map of South Asia was renamed. In 1972 the destiny of South East Asia was reshaped, releasing it for phenomenal economic growth. In 1973 the oil-rich and leadership-poor countries got their opportunity, only to fritter it away in waste and theft. Later in that decade, by tactically slow steps, characteristically imprecise in dates and precise in intention, China changed. In 1992 the Soviet Union became another country.

Does September 11 belong to such a calendar? One year ago, there was hype, and there was also hope. Twelve months later, it is time to sift the evidence. Much depends on whether history swivelled on a point of principle, or merely an axis of action, ambition, cause and consequence.

If September 11 means that America was wounded, both in spirit and flesh, and wants satisfaction for its injuries, then September 11 is no more than an awful day for the principal power of an emerging world. But if it means that international relations will be conducted henceforth on

NOTES FROM DELHI

By M. J. Akbar

remained alive instead of dying in a still-undeciphered military plane crash? Impossible to answer, but there is a clue in the pace that they acquired despite the fact that power passed into the hands of General Zia's *bete noire* Benazir Bhutto, not once but twice.

Which government in Islamabad could resist the temptation to convert one troublesome border into a fire-free zone, the better to ensure that all of the country's resources were concentrated towards the "real" enemy, India? The Taliban were organized, financed, armed and sent to Afghanistan via Kandahar not by some fundamentalist military dictator in Islamabad but by the freely elected government of the liberal, democratic Benazir Bhutto. She applauded their success as

vention in Afghanistan, its indifference to what it had spawned, and a parallel rise in Muslim anger against what the community saw as American neo-colonialism, picked up a momentum that inflamed more than one hidden, or smouldering, ember. The most volatile element of this syndrome was a psychological one. The success of the jihad against the Soviet Union, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet empire, gave the idea the intoxicating veneer of invincibility. If the Soviet Union could fall, how long before the United States began to tremble? As for a regional power like India, that was like walking on cake.

A child born in the year that the guns came out in Kashmir would be a teenager today. It is a long while to test the ground.

Quite obviously, for different people 9/11 has different connotations. For me the most important fact is the exactly one year later Jammu and Kashmir is holding an election that has already acquired the frisson of popular will. A free and fair election cannot be held under the rule of a gun, whether the gun is trained on you by the state or by

an insurrection. The government of Farooq Abdullah has begun to display the edginess that makes democracy what it is; intemperance of language is an indication of collapse of nerve. There is a visible surge among the people. Hope is too strong a word for a land benighted by misfortune, but there is an expectation in the air.

This is not a text without a context. The context is the new reality after 9/11. The message that terrorist violence is not acceptable as a means of change has travelled down to those roots in the grass from where anger tends to bubble. If that is the central concern of Pax Americana, then terrorism can only be counterproductive to whatever cause the Kashmiri might dream of. And once terrorism, and its

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produced nomenclature on the basis of principles that had been cloaked by pragmatism, then we may have the beginnings of a different story.

Unsurprisingly, the life-and-death tensions of post-World War Europe made South Asia a primary focus for the United States. If the Soviet Union had not seized Kabul, Afghanistan would have remained nothing but a collection of rocks to Washington. The United States was too engrossed in the cold war against the Soviet Union and the hot war in Vietnam for it to care about the peripheral problems of South Asia.

It treated China with indifference, Japan with patronage, and East Asia as secure staging grounds for operations in South East Asia. Israel lifted the profile of West Asia. Latin America belonged to the superpower backyard and therefore needed attention. It is safe to say that South Asia occupied a place somewhere below South Africa and somewhere above Nigeria on the American attention span. One blink and it was forgotten.

Very logically, therefore, when America intervened in the region, it arrived with an abysmal knowledge base. The problem was resolved in typically American fashion, direct, honest and with implications about which Washington was clueless during the war and uninterested after it. America and its allies supplied the money, weapons and intelligence operatives to the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

They left the problems of knowledge, analysis and priority to Pakistan. This last should be amended. It was not just Pakistan; it was General Ziaul Haq's Pakistan. He had an agenda for his country, for Afghanistan and for South Asia that was way outside anything the Americans could have conceived, let alone wanted. But they played a critical part in keeping that agenda alive.

What pace would events have taken if General Zia had

her success. The Taliban did not quite return the compliment.

Perhaps there was some unexpected residual embarrassment in the American position. Having used jihad themselves, they were hardly in a position to preach its demerits to others, even when the latest champions of the idea imposed a savage regime that sneered at international opinion and remained comfortable in the cocoon provided by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Washington reverted to type. It contracted out Afghan affairs to Islamabad; and since South Asia once again had retreated from its radar screen, complacency could easily be confused with diplomatic virtue.

President Bill Clinton's knee did jerk once, and in either a display of pique, or in an effort to make America forget about Monica Lewinsky, he bombed an empty medical shed in Sudan and a few rocks in Afghanistan (theoretically in search of Osama bin Laden). But when nothing happened for one full day or so, Washington went back to sleep. In any case, there were other things to worry about.

Despite at least a dozen serious reminders, America always treated terrorism as, essentially, someone else's management problem. The insularity of America is not an accidental growth. It is a deeply cherished thing. Perhaps it lies in the fact that the Americans who control the continent now are all immigrants or refugees, peoples who have left a world that they rejected behind them, literally and emotionally. They do not want to return to the hatreds and grubbiness of what they spurned; they want to get on with their chase for more toys, trinkets, sparklers, food, clothes, celebrities, highways and, of course, skyscrapers. There is an obvious contradiction in an insular people taking charge of the world. But facts do not change just because they are distorted by paradox.

The logic of American inter-

once terrorism, and its sponsorship, is out of the way, all sides to the problems are committed to a dialogue to break the three-generation deadlock. That will not be easy. That dreadful lock will take time to pick open. But a process will begin. That is the expectation that gives this election its special energy.

If there is a solution it will lie in flexibility. The hard lines of the past must melt into realistic options for the future. Two words need to be eliminated from the dictionary of dialogue: victory and defeat. Victory and defeat mean a vindication for one side of positions it held in the past. The future must evolve from what is possible, not just from what has happened.

Easier said than done? Sure. But better said than never said at all.

One key to the war against terror is to ensure that India and Pakistan are at peace with each other. One presumes that Washington is not so naive as to believe that the Taliban are finished. The assassination attempt on Hamid Karzai is only one indication. This war is larger than an individual, even one as determined as Osama bin Laden. Nor is this war going to be won by pamphlets shaped like dollar bills promising millions in reward for information about Mulla Omar. This is not bounty territory of the Wild West. Mark Antony may have got it only half right when he said that the evil that men do lives after them while the good is oft interred with their bones.

Sometimes the evil is also interred with their bones. Time induces a hallucination, distancing the worst memories as today's tensions blur the past. This is a war in the mind. Its most effective weapon is going to be, therefore, intelligence. Its biggest need is going to be patience. Many more solemn anniversaries must come and go before an outcome begins to glimmer in the distance.

The writer is editor-in-chief, Asian Age, New Delhi.