**The Conjoined Twins**

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That’s how Hamid Karzai, a former Afghan President, used to describe the AfPak Enigma. Yes, the conjoined twins are a lifelong pain in each-other’s neck, but there were still some who found a reasonable modus vivendi. Our two countries did much better: we covered each-other’s back. Afghanistan’s role in our wars against India is legend. We played our part by affording them access to our territory and to the rest of the world. One day the Afghans made optimum use of this model of co-existence.
After the Soviet invasion, millions of them sought refuge in neighbouring countries – primarily in Iran and Pakistan. We got the lion share for reasons of geography and cross- border links. The state of Pakistan was now confronted with a whole range of issues. While the Zia led government was struggling to cope with this cataclysmic development – aptly described as Pakistan, with an unfriendly neighbour in the East and now an India friendly superpower in the West, having fallen into the jaws of a nutcracker – we also had a humanitarian crisis on our hand.
For some of us the arrival of a large number of displaced people was a Godsent opportunity to fulfil a religious obligation. For the Establishment though it was a monumental task of logistical, financial, and political dimensions. The traditional hospitality of our masses, especially in the border areas, provided some succour. In due course, our policy to help the Afghan Resistance got us considerable aid – also for the refugees.
Kohat had a large refugee camp. Though discouraged by higher headquarters, as the Brigade Commander there I did occasionally authorise employing Afghan Labour since it was more productive. One also heard about a doctor of sports medicine who left a good practice in Kabul and was now advising his Pakistani hosts what exercise bicycle would suit them the best. My old Grundig radio had to be sent to Wana in Waziristan because only an Afghan there knew how to put it back in operation. Then there was an article in a local paper highlighting the Afghan culinary habits. Some of them could afford only one meal a day but it was always well balanced.
The late Arif Bangash was then our GOC and greatly admired the spirit of the immigrants. His most favourite story was about a young refugee overrun by a local delinquent but the victim’s relatives refusing to pursue the matter as they were “guests” in our country. The policeman on watch was however not impressed by their special status and levied import surcharge when extracting tax for his services. Obviously, some of the natives were not very happy with these intruders providing better and more reliable services. Our first preference when moving goods was an Afghan truck.
Jealously with the immigrants is a global phenomenon. Many countries in the Middle East had a serious problem when the Palestinians imbued with the migratory zeal outshone the sedentary locals – who were becoming couch potatoes as the black gold oozed out of ground and the petrodollars started falling from the sky. Paradoxically, when one generation of migrants having worked hard settles down in the host country, it feels threatened by the next tidal wave. Most of us, decedents of refugees, have yet another reason to get rid of the Afghan raiders.
As long as there was some aid trickling in for them, many state organs took their cut. Even when it ceased, they could still fleece the refugees who now had to work harder to feed their greedy watchdogs. Reminds me of an advice for anyone who had to walk the streets of Chicago at night: must keep enough cash on you otherwise the mugger might be disappointed. All ploys have a shelf life and therefore we had to keep inventing fresh ones. Scapegoating the hapless refugees for all our ills was the new mantra and the “unregistered” amongst them our latest target. Some bloodsuckers must now be waiting to pounce upon the worldly goods the expelled Afghans would leave behind. Karachi became the largest Pashtun city in the world long time back. I’m sure it must in the meantime be a top-ranking Afghan habitat. Those who’re raring to cleanse the country from these troublesome foreigners might like to learn the technique of fighting in built-up area.
Looking at their faces I get an eerie feeling. We will be back but not as refugees – most likely in the footstep of Ahmad Shah Abdali who often responded to the call of the oppressed in the Subcontinent. An old friend from an illustrious Pashtun family has warned me that in their code of conduct taking revenge even after hundred years was not too late. And then there is the belief that the burden of another million would pressurise Kabul to crack down on the TPP! When was it last that the Afghans relented under pressure. Incidentally, has anyone any idea how a country could round up thousands of militants like a herd of cattle!
Another recipe to bring around these maverick Afghans had a better chance: “you cannot push a Pashtun even in heaven; but can lure him into hell”. The earthly purgatory is presently divided right down the middle. It would be prudent to trap them on our side of this infernal Divide. Time again for the two countries to tango together.