

Changing International Order and West Asia

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Introduction

Big powers have big ambitions and the efforts to realise them often lead to disaster for themselves and others around them. They are guided by their prejudice that their worldview is the most rational and just, which needs to be adopted by the 'less-civilized' people in other corners of the world. This theme is inherent in the campaigns of Alexander, in the Roman conquests, in the conquests of Napoleon, Hitler, Nebuchadnezzar, the European Imperialists in the 19th and 20th Century and now the American endeavour to impose its worldview by force or persuasion. One has seen Napoleon III bragging in late 19th century that he had an interest in the Trans-Danube region for France had an interest, "wherever there was a just, civilising cause to promote". The European imperialists had taken upon themselves the responsibility of civilising the colonies, which they called "the white man's burden". And human history is a pathetic record of celebration of such arrogance.

On the contrary, the arrogance of the big powers have been matched by the 'ignorance' of the smaller ones, which, development theorists would say, has been sustained by the poverty they have inherited from the days of imperialism and colonialism. While one may thus argue that the disaffection of the people in such underdeveloped terrain is justified, the faulty channelisation of disaffection has led throughout history to events like the one on September 11, which have, more than anything else, provided the powerful with the excuse to use all potential at its command to run its writ around the world.[1] The political leadership in the underdeveloped corners, rather than quietly justifying such acts of vengeance, should take note of this clear message of history that such steps only drive them deeper into underdevelopment and subject them to the sport of the big ones. They should indeed try their best to focus on developing their economies and societies and harness such disaffection to good use and divert it towards development of their resources— human and otherwise. After all by diverting the suicide airbuses one can spare the Daisy Cutters. In the context of the tragedy of September 11 that led to the other tragedy of the Afghans, the present paper seeks to analyse the contours of the emerging world order and the role of West Asia in it.

The Black Tuesday and After

The Black Tuesday (September 11, 2001) has changed the contours of International politics, many commentators would suggest. They would say that the conventionally called 'post-cold war era' that started with the fall of Berlin Wall has ended rather too abruptly with the fall of the Twin Towers in New York.[2] The states in the existing international state-system are challenged from without (rather than only from within) and the enemy, the so called war against terrorism is up against, is "amoeba like"[3] and the threat it poses is much more "diffuse" and almost untraceable even with the most competent of intelligence penetration by satellite and radar systems.

American analysts would even say that they are faced with a "hybrid strategic landscape" which is part-terrorist and part-conventional and it will require a Grand American Strategy that will involve clever use of "its military strength, its productive competitiveness and its

diplomatic skills”.[4] The emergence of terrorism, a non-state factor that seeks to wreck havoc with the existing international political order, has been recognised as a fundamental feature of the coming world order, that is yet to assume any definite shape, as the strategic thinkers in the US are growing aware of the crevices within the global alliance against terror and trying their best to forge a lasting alliance until the menace is curbed.

The New Political Order

Various elements of the new international political order are being recorded by social and political scientists the world over— like violence as a mode of political resistance has lost its legitimacy and appeal; there is greater emphasis on democratisation of politics in developing and under-developed societies and liberalisation of economies; a multilateral consensus is slowly emerging on fighting fundamentalism; the zeal of conservative Islamisers is being replaced by the sober effort of the liberal thinkers within Islamic societies to rediscover the enduring appeal of Islam as a religion of peace and not of avenging suicides, the event has ushered in the “return of the state”[5] whose authority was on the wane in the wake of the overriding financial concerns of a globalising world, etc.

Continuity or Break?

At another level, the horrendous prospect of coercive non-state actors emerging as chief determinants of civic (which includes the political) existence may have stirred the states—the monopolisers of (the so called) ‘legitimate’ coercive power— into collective and cooperative action. But the march of history does not show any epistemological break even then. The continuities in world politics are for all to discern— continuities understood as the culmination of a process that nourished what Benjamin Barber would call “tribalism” or “retribalisation”[6] in an overarching zeal to defeat and wipe out communism. It is as if the self-fulfilling prophecy of Huntington has suddenly realised itself and the clash[7] between Islamic civilisation, surging with a relatively numerous young population driven by a ‘consciousness without cohesion’ and beset with economic crises and the Christian one, brimming with self-confidence after the end of the Cold War and in the driver seat of the world economy, is going to define the context of the international politics in the days to come.[8]

As Mahmood Mamdani would assert, the fundamentalist violence that the US is so much perturbed about was a strategic weapon it had forged in its “crusade” against communism. He would say that “contemporary fundamentalism is a modern project, not a traditional leftover.”[9] It reminds one of the analysis of Eqbal Ahmed who had pointed out that the terrorists of today were welcomed by US as “moral equivalents of America’s founding fathers”.[10] Mamdani raises a very important point that if “terrorism was an official American Cold War brew”, should we consider the states in Southern America, Africa and South Central Asia plagued by civil strife as “hosts of terror” or “hostage to terror”? The enthusiasm to join the mightiest nation in its avenging exercises must not cloud reason and the responsibility for the present mess lies squarely on the shoulders of the same nation that is waging a war against terror.

There are many who would look at the emerging reality in a more cynical vein. Some would suggest that the present “social scientific theories are unsuited for the kind of political investigation” demanded by the emergence of what they would call “a military-industrial-media-entertainment network”, a conceptual improvisation on the

“military-industrial complexes” that Eisenhower talked about in 1961.[11] And there are profound observations such as that of Michael Ignatieff who would say that the “apocalyptic nihilism” exemplified by the suicide hijackers was indicative of efforts directed towards “the violent transformation of an irremediably sinful and unjust world”. He would go on to say that such terror “does not express a politics, but a metaphysics, a desire to give ultimate meaning to time and history through ever-escalating acts of violence which culminate in a final battle between good and evil”. [12]

Even if there is a tendency to characterise September 11 as the starting point or end-point of an era, in the world that has survived the suicide attacks on the WTC and Pentagon, the continuities are more visible than the breaks. One has to bear in mind two most important lessons from the post-September-eleven international politics— the preponderance of the US in international politics and the dwarfing of United Nations as a Multilateral Forum. The nature of international politics at the moment suggest that the US will continue to remain as the most powerful state and try its best to impose its will on others, through force or persuasion. It will go to any extent to protect its interests around the world. In fact, the multilateral foreign policy of the US threatens to replace the UN as an effective multilateral forum.

Breaks

As far as the breaks are concerned, many would suggest we are in for a major paradigmatic shift in international relations. Rather than revolving around the ‘politics of the nations’ [13], the contours of international politics will be determined by non-state actors, who are increasingly playing a more active and important role in international politics. In fact, the concept of international security has been redefined in the wake of the September-11 tragedy, keeping these actors in mind. The efforts of the states— like US, Russia and China, who were until then unable to shed the cold war hangovers and pursued their old strategic agendas— to cooperate among them to uproot the menace of non-state or sub-state violence will characterise the nature and scope of international politics in the days ahead. Analysts have put it metaphorically: “Big shocks change perceptions. Actions and results follow. Today, thanks to Osama bin Laden, the world is in play.... Shake the system sufficiently, and new patterns emerge. Threaten it sufficiently, and historic enemies may sheathe their hatchets.” [14]

And there are equally convincing theorisations that explain the phenomenon of violent resistance movements that lead to terrorism. A huge panoply of causes is isolated, analysed, understood and shared among the analysts to diagnose the phenomenon of terror. Factors like globalisation, communication revolution also feature in this construct along with more visible causes like American hypocrisy in its pro-Israel policy, in its support to repressive and certainly undemocratic regimes even when it championed the cause of human rights and democracy in its overt foreign policy posture, its military presence in the oil-rich west Asian region, the rising tide of unemployment among youth in the region that get attracted by the call of the Wahabites to Jihad etc. etc.

At another level, one finds the multi-ethnic multi-national democracies devising the means now to handle internal dissent through peaceful means. A political consensus is now emerging slowly but surely over the need to attend to political dissent within state frontiers by means other than active and open coercion, even as social scientists apprehend that in spite of such devolved power sharing in various societies, democracy (defined as relatively broad

and equal citizenship, binding consultation of citizens, and protection from arbitrary actions by governmental agents) will decline across the world.[15]

The case of Human Rights

It is also being apprehended by many that the thrust of foreign policy of the most powerful nation, the USA, which is very likely to determine the nature of the coming order in International relations, will shift its focus from Human Rights and thus international political landscape will have enough space for regional injustices. Analysts and thinkers like Michael Ignatieff would sound an alarm that the US has already reduced its emphasis on human rights issues in its endeavour to broad-base the alliance against terror.[16] And so have other powers like Germany, Australia and UK. Grieving that national security has trumped Human rights, he would say “divided between horror at the attacks and alarm at being enlisted as moral cheerleaders in a war on terror, many European human rights groups are sitting on the sidelines” and go on to suggest that the human rights activists “will have to engage soon in the battle of ideas” and have to “challenge directly the claim that national security trumps human rights. The argument to make is that human rights is the best guarantor of national security.”

The War against terror has also brought about a sense of interest and moderation in scholars taking renewed interest in Islam more as a religion than as a corrosive world-view like the one championed by Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden. While the intelligence agencies the world over are gearing up for snapping the financial and material links that has sustained this terrorism, these scholars are engaged in study of Islam as a religion of compassion and this has encouraged “intercultural learning” which will certainly play a big role in bridging up the civilisational faultlines that provide theoreticians like Huntington, “the clumsy writer and inelegant thinker that he was”[17] with excuses to ignore the massive “traffic” that moves across “carefully maintained, even policed” cultural and civilisational boundaries with often “terrifying ease” and build their grandiose self-fulfilling conceptual ‘gimmicks’ that are “better for reinforcing defensive self-pride (of the West) than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time”, as Said would say.

Situating the Middle East

It is in this context that politics in the Persian Gulf needs to be perceived in the changing international political order. While the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of the region will continue to invite international attention, it is certain that the following features will mark the politics of the region:

Energy Interests of the US

US will protect its energy interests with lot of caution in the region. In fact, many American scholars have already started arguing about the imprudent dumping of the cold war strategy that laid an emphasis on ends rather than the means. They have urged the establishment to give due attention to “shared interests” rather than “shared values”. Thus the energy interests that drove the US to war in the Gulf against Iraq, will this time guide the Americans more vigorously in designing their policies towards the region. One has already seen the US issuing orders for its women workforce stationed in Saudi Arabia to abide by the Saudi regulations.[18] Through a mix of diplomacy and force, the US will seek to improve its image in the region and perpetuate its hold on oil. The relative importance of the region in Asian politics will depend on how the Persian Gulf states recast their oil policies and come

together to address the issues that confront them. The states in the region will also have to strike a bond of unity to harness their collective energies to tackle the issue of fundamentalism at home and take care to explore the possibility of evolving a collective strategy to handle domestic dissent in a spirit of accommodation rather than confrontation. And in their internal security matters they should avoid external help.

The evolving inter-relationship among the states in the geo-politically important regions of Central Asia and West Asia can be facilitated by the US. The US interests in the region now expands beyond the terrain that is known as West Asia. The recent appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad, the Afghan American ex-oil-adviser to the oil giant Unocal, by President George Bush as his special adviser on Afghanistan suggests that the US is determined to move into Central Asia in a more strategic manner. Mr Khalilzad had earlier drawn up a risk analysis of a proposed gas pipeline from the former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan across Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. He participated in talks between the oil company and Taliban officials in 1997, which were aimed at implementing a 1995 agreement to build pipe line across west Afghanistan.[19] Khalilzad's appointment as an important member of the National Security Council is to be seen in more strategic terms. Even more significant is Bush administration's appointment of Condoleezza Rice as National Security Adviser, who was also in the Board of Directors of the oil concern, Chevron Corporation and served as its principal expert on Kazakhstan. Frank Vivian, a staff writer of the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote on 26 September 2001: "The hidden stakes in the war against terrorism can be summed up in a single word: oil. The map of terrorist sanctuaries and targets in the Middle East and Central Asia is also, to an extraordinary degree, a map of the world's principal energy sources in the 21st century.... It is inevitable that the war against terrorism will be seen by many as a war on behalf of America's Chevron, Exxon, and Arco; France's TotalFinaElf; British Petroleum; Royal Dutch Shell and other multinational giants, which have hundreds of billions of dollars of investment in the region." This is largely true and the West Asian countries in the neighbourhood have to be particularly cautious about the nature of US-driven world order slowly emerging from the rubble in Afghanistan. Wisdom consists in enhancing their collective bargaining power vis-à-vis US, so far as the American interests are concerned. The oil companies may carve out a favourable political condition in their own interests to facilitate laying down of oil pipelines.

Wiser handling of Internal Dissent

The incumbent powers in various states in the region will be more circumspect in dealing with internal dissent. The case of export of terrorism from the region as elaborated in US newsmagazines in the case of Saudi Arabia may compel both the establishments in the region as well as external powers to advocate caution while dealing with internal resistance and internal dissent. The case of Saudi sponsored extremism as a policy alternative to divert domestic disaffection outward is being closely followed by the international media and states labouring under terrorism.[20] As the investigations will make the links more and more visible, the pressures will mount on the sponsoring states and they will evolve their strategies to contain the tide within their frontiers, which will definitely cause lot of turbulence within some of the states in West Asia.

Keeping in mind the configuration of the non-state actors that are propelling international terrorism, the West will revise its policy towards the region. There might be more persuasion

from the West to democratise the societies to restrict dissent within territorial limits of the states concerned. The policy of the US in the coming years will be to convince the establishments about the use of democratising the administration within many of these societies. In fact, many scholars in the West have started focussing on Iran as a successful example of an Islamic state coming up as a democracy. This is a welcome diversion from earlier theories that viewed Iran as an exporter of Islamic revolution. In fact, even though an Iranian scholar goes to the extent of establishing the conceptual links between the apocalyptic vision of martyrdom championed by Ayatollah Khomeini's Shi'ite revolution[21], among American scholars Iran is fast shedding its 'rogue state' status may be in line with the improvisation of American image among the Iranians. Some have even hinted at the prospect of taking Iran as an ally in the ongoing war against terror.[22] The sight of young Iranians staging large candle light vigils in honour of the victims of the September-11 tragedy has been particularly mentioned in this context as a sign of humanitarian gesture from Iranian side.[23]

Re-evaluation of Palestine crisis

One of the most encouraging effect of the September-11 has perhaps been the surge in intellectual activities in the United States and other Western countries to identify the potential bases of antipathy towards the US and the West. And there has been, if at all the US establishment is listening, a consensus among the scholars and policy analysts that American policy towards the Palestinians has been the chief cause of the crystallisation of popular antipathy against the Americans. International opinion thus shows signs of crystallising more effectively in favour of the Palestinian struggle. The demonstration of Israeli anger against the Hamas, which was once raised by the Israeli Mossad, could be an act of desperation to convince the US that Israel had no other choice in the face of assertion of Palestinian guerrillas. However, Israel may not cash in on the initial televised show of celebrations of the tragedy of September-11 by certain section of Palestinians. Analysts have said that "even some long-festered regional conflicts—the Middle East, Kashmir—may have greater potential to be finally solved, despite posing greater short-run dangers." [24] It is encouraging that the US administration has shown less enthusiasm for the first time to Israel's prodding for close alliance with Israel against Muslim fundamentalism. Israel's friends in Washington are pushing for just such a policy in order to cover up Israel's continued and accelerated aggression against Palestinian civilians in Khan Younis, Rafah, Beit Jala, Nablus, and continued humiliating closure measures all over the West Bank and Gaza. Collin Powell was seen to be distancing himself from such an idea.

Common front against Terror

The post-Gulf-war years saw states in the region moving beyond pan-Arabism and there was a pleasant communion between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Even Turkey was seen to be engaging itself in the West Asian political theatre. The present era of international politics with the consensual recognition of terrorism as a common threat may forge larger cooperation among the States in the region so far as their policy towards tackling the menace of terrorism is concerned.

Peaceful resolution of internal problems

The region, in spite of the ethno-cultural diversities and religious unity has adapted remarkably well to the post-colonial state system which was largely carved out of the

European colonies that pretend to be nation-states, with heterogeneous ethno-cultural populace. The post-September-11 political order has been particularly harsh to minorities in many of the states in the region, who were being fed with fond dreams of carving out mono-national territorial sovereign states world through violent rebellion. They will have to recast their method of resistance. The authorities in these states on the other hand will have to concede maximum possible autonomy to accommodate their demands to avert escalation of violence through coercive state action.

Conclusion

All said and done, from the perspective of political geography the region will remain as important as ever. But the only way the region could enhance its influence in the international politics is: (i) by forging stronger inter-state bonds across the ethno-national and cultural divides that weaken the unity among them, (ii) by consciously breaking out of the sense of dependence on the West by forging new bases of legitimacy to the existing regimes in the region. The powerful states of the world will continue to involve themselves with added caution and enthusiasm in the politics of the region that will include the Central Asian Republics as well. It is thus time for the states in the region to consolidate themselves internally and promote “distributive justice” within their frontiers and create conditions for peace and harmony which will shield the prospect of external interference. This will require a Jihad-e-Akbar or Greater Jihad infused with the zeal and determination that ironically drove Atta and his allies to rather un-Islamic deaths on September-11, that perhaps led to the end of an era and beginning of another.

Endnotes

1. John Lewis Gladdis wrote in this vein: “it can hardly have been their purpose to give the U.S yet another chance to lead the world into a new era, together with the opportunity to do it, this time more seriously”, in his article “And Now This: Lessons from the Old Era for the New One”, in *The Age of Terror: America and the World after September 11*, edited by Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda, Basic Books, Yale Centre for the study of Globalisation, New York, 2001, p.21
2. John Lewis Gladdis, *Ibid.* p.3
3. Paul Kennedy characterises forces of terror like this in his article, “Maintaining American Power”, in *The Age of Terror: America and the World after September 11*, edited by Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda, Basic Books, Yale Centre for the study of Globalization, New York, 2001, p.60
4. *Ibid.* p-62-63
5. John A. Hall, “Return of the State”, <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/hall.htm>
6. Benjamin Barber, “Jihad as McWorld”, *Atlantic Monthly*, 1992
<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/foreign/barberf.htm>
7. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order”, *Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 1993.
8. Also see Huntington’s interview with Michael Steinberger in *New York Times*, 20 October 2001 where he says that the youth in the Muslim world “are intelligent, ambitious young people who aspire to put their educations to use in a modern, developed economy, and they become frustrated by the lack of jobs, the lack of opportunity. They are cross- pressured as well by the forces of globalization and what they regard as

Western imperialism and cultural domination. They are attracted to Western culture, obviously, but they are also repelled by it.”

9. See Mamdani’s article “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: An African Perspective” on <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/index.htm>
10. Eqbal Ahmed’s address at Colorado University which was later reproduced as an article on “Genesis of Global Terrorism”, in daily *Dawn*,
11. James Der Derian, “Before, After and Inbetween” on <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/index.htm>
12. Michael Ignatieff, ‘It’s war - but it doesn’t have to be dirty’, *Guardian*, 1 October, 2001
13. Hans J. Morgenthau’s book of the same name, *Politics of the Nations*, projected a realist perception of international politics and such realism was founded upon the post-second-world-war state system that seemed to stabilise as the most desirable, if not perfect, system in the realm of international politics. The very nomenclature ‘international politics’ (rather than inter-state politics) did leave the space open for new nationalities to emerge as political units and this has in turn punctured the notion of the inviolability of the existing state system. However, that will require a completely different discussion.
14. Achilles Zalar and Richard J. Zeckhauser write that “predominantly Muslim nations shifted strategy, attacking or at least shunning Islamic extremism rather than appeasing it. Quiet efforts by the United States and Cuba turned the Al Qaeda holding pen at Guantanamo Bay into an olive branch. President George W. Bush became a formidable world leader.... it is now recognized that terrorist groups have the potential to undermine any nation, including those that have hosted or supported them..... This common enemy and common threat generate a strong confluence of interest among nations, even among traditional adversaries. Armed conflicts between Russia or China and the United States now seem more remote.”, in their article “Sensible Patterns Since September 11: A Shaken World”, *International Herald Tribune*, February 14, 2002
15. Charles Tilly, in his article “Predictions”, on <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/index.htm>
16. However Ignatieff has some consoling points when he says that “Human rights has gone global by going local, anchoring itself in struggles for justice that can survive without American inspiration or leadership. The movement does not have its headquarters in Washington” but still expresses his dismay at America’s latest vacillation and admits, “but, if Washington turns away, the movement loses the one government whose power can be decisive in stopping human rights abuses.”, Michael Ignatieff, “Is Human Rights Era Ending?”, *New York Times*, 5 February, 2002
17. Edward Said, “Adrift in Similarity”, Weekly *Al-Ahram*(Cairo), 11-17 October 2001.
18. The highest-ranking woman pilot in the US air force, Lieutenant Colonel Martha McSally, posted in November to the Prince Sultan Air Force Base, has sued the defence secretary of US for orders that make her wear the abaya and head scarf when she goes out of her base in Saudi Arabia, prohibits her from driving, and directs that she should always be escorted by a male. The pilot argues that the instructions given to her amount to asking her to abandon American values “that we all raised our right hand to die for”. (Tahir Mirza writes about it in his column in daily *Dawn*(Karachi), January 10, 2002.)

19. Unocal was the company that played a leading role in the formation of the Centgas consortium, whose main purpose was to bring to market natural gas from one of the world's largest reserves, the Daulatabad Field, in southeastern Turkmenistan. The \$2 billion project involved the laying down of a 48-inch diameter pipeline from the Afghanistan-Turkmenistan border, passing near the cities of Herat and Kandahar, crossing over into Pakistan near Quetta and linking with existing pipelines at Multan. An additional pipe-line extension to India which would cost around \$600 million was also under consideration. (See Patrick Martin's views in World Socialist Website, run by the International Committee of the Fourth International.)
20. In fact, Saudi Arab has been characterised by many commentators in the West as a crucible of Islamic terror. As this article was being sent to press, media reports suggested that Americans are pulling out of Saudi Arabia. This is perhaps to accommodate the voice of dissent within Saudi society rather than the demands of the Saudi monarch. In fact, Saudi monarch would have wished American security machinery to stay on in the country strengthening their hold on power. But now the Saudis will have tough time handling dissent within their country. It will be interesting to see how the Americans, the self-proclaimed champions of democracy and human rights, will contribute to the Saudi efforts of management of dissent within Saudi society and stall the process of exporting Islamic wrath to other countries in the region.
21. Abbas Amanat, "Empowered through Violence: The Reinventing of Islamic Extremism", in *The Age of Terror: America and the World after September 11*, edited by Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda, Basic Books, Yale Centre for the study of Globalization, New York, 2001, pp.23-52
22. John Lewis Gladdis, op. cit., p.19
23. Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda, in the introduction to the book edited by Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda op.cit.
24. Achilles Zaluar and Richard J. Zeckhauser, "Sensible Patterns Since September 11: A Shaken World", *International Herald Tribune*, February 14, 2002