

## Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

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In 1947 India was the country of the future – a light unto the emerging post-colonial nations. In 1992 when far too long delayed economic reforms began under Narasimha Rao, India was again the country of the future. Today it is still the country of the future. If you wish to understand why India may always be the country of the future, you need look no farther than the bizarre response of large sections of its political, strategic and media elites to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> in the United States and to their aftermath.

### What happened

Objectively, India gained enormously from these awful events.

- The American columnist George Will likes to say that the best thing that happens to those afflicted with a problem is when celebrities are afflicted with it for they then bring great resources to bear upon it. (Mr. Will himself is the parent of a Down's syndrome child and has written often and movingly on the dignity of his son's life.) On September 11<sup>th</sup> the United States came face to face with the risks to modern, complex, open societies in an age when technology has shrunk the globe and enormously enhanced networking, while placing much greater destructive technology at the disposal of small numbers of individuals. As the world's most powerful nation comes to grips with these risks it will, inevitably, make the world a safer and more predictable place for other modern(izing), complex, open societies such as India. Some of this will happen by a direct crackdown on terrorist groups that threaten both the United States and India. Some by action against groups that do not threaten India, but with the indirect benefit of leaving a smaller number of terrorist organizations worldwide that are able to network (as they do) and share techniques and weapons, especially those of mass destruction. Above all, by the United States pushing for a more stringent norm against the use of violence against civilian populations, no matter what the provocation. While the US will not seek to enforce the norm on all occasions against all comers, for that would be foolish given the nature of the international state system, the strengthening of the norm can only benefit India's infinitely complex society where terrorist violence always runs the risk of igniting a far wider conflagration.

I should remark parenthetically that while there is no question that these developments will be in India's best interests, the same cannot be said for sectors of its power elite. An American attempt to reduce *hawala* transactions (a phrase now available on American TV) will require that large numbers of India's senior politicians find other ways of ill-getting their gains, greater financial transparency

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in banks worldwide will make it necessary for them to keep much more of their wealth in cash and kind. Furthermore, Indian intelligence agencies and its foreign policy elite may never again have the satisfaction of creating their own pet suicidal terrorists (the LTTE) against a weaker, democratic neighbor (Sri Lanka) only to find it turn against them. Something to keep in mind when your friends are ranting and raving against the folly of the United States in creating a situation in Afghanistan that turned against it.

- The US is currently engaged in toppling the Taliban in Afghanistan and destroying the set of camps that trained *jehadis* for action in Kashmir among other things. This is consummation that India has devoutly wished but lacked the power to bring about.
- The Government and Army in Pakistan have turned their back on their policy of “strategic depth” in Afghanistan, on the maintenance of the Taliban and on manufacturing *jehadis* in that country. They have also, for the first time in twenty years, put themselves on the side of Pakistan’s moderate middle class and its ambition to have Pakistan be something other than a militarized, extremist polity, against blackmail by the Islamist fringe that wants to rush headlong in precisely the opposite direction. This is another consummation that India has devoutly wished but found itself unable to do very much about.
- There is every reason to believe, that as the dust settles, the United States will come to see the belt of authoritarian states across the Middle East ending in Pakistan as fundamentally inimical to stability. For example, it was one thing to overlook the ideological extremism of Saudi Arabia when it was a distant land visited occasionally by Secretaries of State, it is another to ignore the nature of its Faustian governing bargain when planes zip around the world and large numbers of Saudis are in a position to fly to the United States (9 out the 19 that hijacked planes on September 11<sup>th</sup>). The *New York Times* and more thoughtful politicians such as Senator Joseph Biden have already spotted this and once the current crisis subsides, others will too. Perhaps the process will begin with Iraq with its Anthrax stocks being traded for elections, perhaps not, but its time has come. The main beneficiaries of this process will be Israel and India, too long lonely sentinels of democracy in this part of the world. Once they have more predictable and transparent neighbors, they will find it easier to live with them.

Were it not for its unseemliness on human grounds, these would be cause enough to celebrate in New Delhi. What about the attack on Srinagar, you say? I can’t improve on Dr. Farooq Abdullah’s heart rending speech in the Assembly in its evocation of the terrible fate of the Kashmiris, but the attack represents the last stretch of a period when Pakistan was able to operate on Kashmir at full tilt – it simply will not be possible to do this in the near future in the same fashion. That doesn’t mean that the security problems are solved, but that the balance has moved in India’s direction by a sizeable amount which makes the problem much more amenable to a solution.

## **What New Delhi Thinks Happened**

Contrast this with the actual reaction in New Delhi. India feels

- Confirmed in its self-righteous belief that no other country has been victimized as it has by terrorism (Israel, Sri Lanka, Bosnia? Never mind) and that it is therefore owed an apology by the world
- Betrayed by the United States since the latter has, sensibly, chosen to seek Pakistan's help in going after Bin Laden and the Taliban. Nervous that somehow the 1950s and 1980s are going to be repeated all over again with a Pakistan Army flush with American arms gunning for us, and as part of that, deeply distressed that Powell agreed with Musharraf that Kashmir is a central issue between India and Pakistan which it surely is, although not the fundamental one.
- That this is a good time to turn its back on the Lahore-Agra process and start firing at the Pakistanis, if nothing else, to get Mr. Powell's attention.

As a result instead of celebrating, New Delhi is depressed and feels that the United States does not love it anymore.

*Is there anything excusable that can account for this complete incapacity to compute one's own true interests and to therefore feel defeated when victory is in plain sight?*

## **What New Delhi Should But Probably Won't Do**

- First and foremost, stop whining about how the US has not declared war on Pakistan. About all this accomplishes is to give Americans struggling to deal with 6000 dead, the specter of bioterrorism *and* a war in Afghanistan, the sense that India has no common sense and would rather fight Pakistan than do almost anything else.
- Enter the debate on Afghanistan, not by running down the Taliban but by offering ideas on Afghan reconstruction. For instance, why not propose a constitutional monarchy under Zahir Shah and send Mr. Jaswant Singh off to call him "my friend Zahir" at a joint press conference in Italy? A silly insistence on nailing India's flag to the mast of the Northern Alliance continues to infuriate the Pashtuns and is hardly constructive. India could also propose to the US a consortium of countries that would rebuild modern institutions (schools, universities, hospitals) in a post-Taliban Afghanistan. The US will surely provide the money for such ventures, but India has manpower that could be usefully deployed in this cause.

- Enter the debate within the United States on the aims of the anti-terror campaign by making the argument that what the world (with the Middle East in mind) needs is more democracy and a greater dose of pluralist values. A general statement to this effect would be a fine declaration to issue along with Mr. Bush during Mr. Vajpayee's coming visit to Washington. In less official settings a more crisp message can be broadcast, and a working alliance with Israel is surely the need of the hour. A year from now, the gains may be immense.
- And finally, reach out to Pakistan at this most opportune of moments – there will be time enough to take the war in Kashmir to them later, if warranted.

### **Musharraf and Gorbachev**

General Musharraf is as close to a Gorbachev as a Pakistani leader has ever come in a while. Like Gorbachev, he is a product of the system, the architect of Kargil no less, but again a man who has come to realize that Pakistan is in danger of not being worth defending. I personally decided that he was not so bad when he said to a gathering of Ulema, *"In the entire Muslim world there are some 380 universities of which only 25 are of a world ranking. In Japan 1000 universities award PhD degrees. The entire Muslim Ummah can boast of a total of 500 PhDs. In England, each year 3000 PhDs are awarded and in India 5000. It is this that should engage our attention."* As an academic, it is hard not to have a soft corner for a man who proposes to create a large number of jobs to which one's students can go.

But more seriously, these were the beginnings of *glasnost* and in the about face on Afghanistan we now have a full-fledged *perestroika*. Gorbachev set out to make the Soviet Union a worthier competitor to the West but realized along the way that there was no way to reform the Soviet Union without withdrawing from the imperial overstretch that had led it to annex Eastern Europe, build a global military, march into Afghanistan and generally attempt to reinvent the wheel when it came to economic growth. He wasn't planning on the Soviet Union's own dissolution and perhaps that was not inevitable, but short of that he went along with what he realized had to be done to preserve a future for the Russians. (In retrospect, it would have helped if he had displayed a better grasp of economics and used the last days of the authoritarian system to reintroduce capitalism *a la* Deng Xiaoping – a lesson Musharraf should heed. Really, he needs to be Pino-chev!)

Musharraf began in a similar bind. Like the Soviet Union, Pakistan is a nuclear-armed state with an aggressive military culture but with an impoverished civil society underneath. Imperial overstretch was plain to behold a month back – a client state in Afghanistan and a perpetual standoff with India. He has retreated from the Afghan adventure with the assistance of American pressure. (It is worth remembering that India's economic reforms were sold as inevitable adjustments to external, IMF, pressure.) While it will be impossible for him to retreat unilaterally from the Kashmir adventure, it is not out of the question that a co-operative minuet between him and Mr. Vajpayee can effectively accomplish this. *This is the great opportunity that India should not fail to explore.*

Going back to the other Cold War for a moment, in Gorbachev a failing system produced a young, energetic leader who looked good on television and succeeded in putting his counterpart Ronald Reagan – an older, less crisp leader with a talent for personifying his country's virtues, but not for debate – on the defensive at their first few summits. America's elite was annoyed at this reversal of the roles they had come to expect based on the underlying realities and many remained deeply suspicious of Gorbachev till late in his tenure in office. But a year into the first Bush Administration, the penny dropped – the chap was for real - and the US and the Soviet Union were able to manage the disengagement of the Soviets from Eastern Europe.

At Agra, another failing system produced a young, energetic leader who looked good on television and succeeded in putting his counterpart – an older, less crisp leader with a talent for personifying his country's virtues, but not for debate – on the defensive. This is annoying, but hardly any reason not to see how far the chap is willing to go. The ground realities are that Pakistan has a recovering fundamentalist nation on one (Iran), a beginning recovering fundamentalist nation on another (Afghanistan), an authoritarian, culturally alien state on a third (China) and a pluralist democracy with an irresistibly attractive and subversive culture on the fourth (India). By far the fastest way for Pakistan to find its way out of the dead end in which it finds itself is to give up on the notion that it can reinvent the wheel when it comes to social arrangements in the subcontinent and to settle down to an independent but interdependent existence with its larger cultural kin, much as other nations elsewhere have done at earlier times in history (Canada with the United States, Austria with Germany). It strikes me that crafting a process that accomplishes this with Pakistan's dignity intact may persuade Musharraf, like Gorbachev before him, to go an extra mile. Pakistan's middle class may feel a symbolic loss (much as the Russians miss being a global military power) but in their heart of hearts, and in the writings of some in their media and academia, they know that this is a lost cause and one that is keeping them from a more normal existence that they would find compensation enough.

Twice before, events on a larger scale have produced opportunities for India to make substantial progress on its relationship with Pakistan. The first came when the entry of Chinese forces into Tibet led Ayub Khan to offer a mutual defense pact to India and the second when the entry of the Soviet Union into Afghanistan led Pakistan to fear for its own existence. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> have again caused Pakistan to wonder where it is headed. For India to retreat to a reflexive pessimism and to fail to seize this moment would be to accept defeat when an even greater victory is possible. This failure will be a great loss for Pakistan, which desperately needs a return to cultural normality, but it will also be a great loss for India. Not merely because its influence in the world will continue to have Pakistan's hostility subtracted from it. It will be a loss, above all, because a distorted Pakistan will continue to mask India's own failings in the eyes of its political and strategic elite, which will therefore continue to have its imagination hemmed in by the natural geographical boundaries of the subcontinent.