

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE CHANGED GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

Najmuddin A. Shaikh

“Islam is vibrant and forward-looking. But more than that, we claim it is the most tolerant of faiths. How does the world judge our claim? It looks upon us as terrorists. We have been killing each other. And now we want to spread that violence and terror abroad. *Naturally*, the world regards us as terrorists”¹.

“There is no external threat which can do any harm to us. We are capable of handling any external threat. The enemy lies within and this element of religious and sectarianism may pull us down”².

“Increasingly, our image is being shaped by the extremist actions of a tiny minority that exists on the fringes of Muslim societies.

We must not allow them to hijack our religion, to preach religious and sectarian hatred with impunity, and to tarnish the image of Islam and Muslims. We must reclaim our Faith from these usurpers and project the real moderate and tolerant spirit of Islam to the world. (President Musharraf's speech at OIC summit 16th October 2003)

*"The United States is not interested in Pakistan coming under the influence of Afghanistan.... There has to be a way out for Pakistan... We are going to try and play an effective role"*³.

“He has declared that Pakistan will be an enemy of terrorism and extremism, wherever it exists, including inside his own border. He understands that terrorism is wrong and destructive in any cause. He knows that his nation cannot grow peacefully if terrorists are tolerated or ignored in his country, in his region, or in the world. He is committed to banning the groups that practice terror, closing their offices and arresting the terrorists themselves”⁴.

“Mr. Musharraf's forthright public condemnations of Islamic extremism, which began well before Sept. 11, leave little doubt that

he genuinely would like to fashion a moderate Muslim state that would resemble Turkey rather than Taliban-ruled Afghanistan... Mr. Musharraf wants U.S. help in persuading India to begin negotiations on Kashmir and the Bush administration should weigh whether it can help galvanize a peace process without compromising its longstanding neutrality in that conflict. But it must be clear, too, that continued collaboration between Islamabad and Washington depends on Mr. Musharraf's campaign against Islamic extremism proving aggressive and unambiguous in deeds, as well as in words"⁵.

"Pakistan continues to be the most dangerous place on Earth because of its mix of nuclear weapons, unstable politics, religious fanaticism and the involvement of senior military and intelligence officials in terrorist networks, including al Qaeda and the Taliban. Two recent assassination attempts against Musharraf underline the fragility of his rule"⁶.

"Last year India's economy was the second fastest-growing in the world, at 7.4 percent. Its business leaders speak confidently of becoming global players in their fields. In this Indian future, a continuing cold war with Pakistan is a drag. During the same period, however, Pakistan went down a different path, one of radical Islam and domestic dysfunction. The results? In 1985 its per capita gross domestic product was 6.5 percent higher than India's; today it is 23 percent lower. Its birthrate is soaring at a frightening 2.8 percent, while India's is 1.7 percent and dropping. Thirty percent of Pakistan's economy is consumed by its military.

President Musharraf has broken Pakistan's fall. And he realizes now that to modernize Pakistan he needs peace with India. But the country is proving hard to turn around; the rot has set in deep"⁷.

There could perhaps no more succinct or authoritative exposition of the challenges and opportunities that confront Pakistan in today's environment than was contained in President Musharraf's speech to the joint session of Pakistan's parliament on the 17th January. The President said, "**Pakistan is today facing four dangerous allegations**". He listed them as alleged responsibility

for "spreading terrorism from tribal areas to Afghanistan", "cross-border terrorism" in Kashmir, proliferation of nuclear weapons and an impression of our society as being intolerant" "Besides these negative impressions, the Muslim Ummah, of which Pakistan is an important member, is faced with difficulties and confusion and Islam is being projected as a religion of extremism"⁸. While the President did not explicitly say so it is clear that in the eyes of the world all the three issues/allegations that can be termed as relating to the outside world flow from the growth of extremism within the country.

The President's acknowledgement of the world's negative perception of Pakistan is not new. As the quotation above shows, the President had warned Pakistan's religious leaders in June' 2001, long before the events of 11th September and their dramatic fallout in all parts of the world but particularly in Pakistan's immediate neighbourhood, that our conduct internally and externally had led the world to regard "us as terrorists". When the American Deputy Secretary of State Armitage spoke in August 2001 of preventing Pakistan from coming under the influence of Afghanistan he was merely repeating what the world had been saying about Pakistan for many years. By that time we had become inured, it seemed, to allegations by Western intelligence agencies that in virtually every investigation of terrorist incidents in the West the trail led back to Peshawar or through Peshawar to Afghanistan. From the late '70s, "Religious Fanaticism", "Radical Islam", "Militant Islam", "Sectarian Strife" were phrases that appeared with regular frequency in reports on Pakistan's internal polity and even more ominously in reports on Pakistan's relations with its neighbors.

And yet there is no doubt that religious extremism was anathema to Pakistan's Founding Fathers. Pakistan was conceived as a homeland for the Muslims of South Asia- a homeland in which the Muslims could realize their full economic potential and order their lives in accordance with the precepts of the moderate and tolerant version of Islam traditionally practiced in South Asia. It was the Muslim religious parties in British India that opposed the creation of Pakistan. They opposed it on the basis of their rejection of the Nation State and implicitly of the concept of a system of rule that

was democratic. It was perhaps natural in these circumstances that after the creation of Pakistan they enjoyed little or no support from the Pakistan electorate.

The President was right in maintaining in his above mentioned address that even today after two decades of growing extremism and increasingly frequent sectarian incidents the vast majority of Pakistanis was "moderate" who totally reject extremism.⁹ While religious parties have garnered an unprecedented number of seats in the National Assembly and control two Provincial Assemblies the percentage of the total vote that they secured this time was no higher than in past elections when they went virtually unrepresented in the National and Provincial Assemblies. The turn around in their political fortunes was owed therefore not to any increased popularity but to the alliance of religious parties that, with encouragement, they were able to cobble together and to the concrete assistance they received from sources who, in a grievous misjudgment, believed that this would best serve the national interest.

The religious parties have now become a formidable force. Their rise to power with the support of the electorate cannot be questioned but there is a very real apprehension that current "moderate" leaders will give way to the extremists from whose ranks the parties derive their street power.

While there is no doubt that such misjudgments, about the use to which religious parties and religious extremists could be put, contributed to our current sorry plight there is also no doubt that external factors played, at least in the early years, an equally important part. The Americans, no doubt encouraged by their regional allies opted for the slogan of "Islam in Danger" rather than "Afghan independence in Danger" to encourage recruitment of fighters within Afghanistan and throughout the Muslim world to resist the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and to set up, with the help of religious parties, Madarasahs and training centers in Pakistan to imbue the right Islamic Jihadi spirit in Pakistani and Afghan recruits. The popularization of a regressive, rigid and doctrinaire version of Islam started here.

In a separate but related development, the Iranian Islamic Revolution with its emphasis on the export of revolution in the initial phases and subsequently the Iran-Iraq war caused fissures within the Islamic world and no where more so than in Pakistan. In the struggle for the hearts and minds of Muslims Pakistan became the secondary battle field on which the Iran-Iraq war was waged. This ominous development provoked little by way of determined action not because Pakistan had become a "soft nation" (though this is a charge that is frequently leveled by our own people as much as by outsiders) but because the ruling regime at that time felt that the arousing of strong sentiments of orthodoxy in the Sunni majority to counter the Shia bid for political power could be harnessed to perpetuate its rule which otherwise enjoyed little popular support. Sectarian strife, hitherto virtually non-existent, then became a dangerously divisive part of Pakistan's domestic scene.

The contribution of foreign forces to the erosion of the fabric of our domestic polity was undeniable. Our misfortune however was that long after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, long after the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war and the movement for conciliation between Shia Iran and Sunni Arab states, and long after the partial restoration of democracy in Pakistan, there was no diminution in the deleterious spread of extremism and sectarianism in Pakistan. Did this happen only because Pakistan had become a "soft nation" incapable of taking the ruthless action needed to eliminate these dangers or was official laxity in this regard attributable to the mistaken belief that the forces these divisive trends generated could be manipulated, despite their very different agendas to serve Pakistan's perceived foreign policy interests?

Whatever the rationale there is little doubt that in each case steps taken to serve perceived foreign policy goals- ostensibly at low cost- only helped exacerbate the internal problem. Support for the Taliban-seen as the guarantors of an Afghanistan that could provide Pakistan "strategic depth"- helped convert large swathes of our tribal areas and cities like Chaman into strongholds of the Pak-Afghan Taliban where the governments writ did not run. The support for the freedom struggle in Kashmir in the name of Islam rather than in the name of Kashmiri nationalism and Kashmiriyat, provided with or

without official support-gave fresh impetus to forces based in Pakistan that boasted of an agenda for over throwing all secular or moderate regimes in the Muslim countries.

Today Pakistan is a country under siege or at the very least Islamabad, the country's capital and Rawalpindi, its twin city and the home for the Army's headquarters are besieged. The two assassination attempts on the President, both on occasions when he was traveling from one city to the other, have occasioned the sort of security precautions that block traffic on the main traffic arteries in the two cities for hours on end. In Karachi, the only seaport of Pakistan and the principal centre of commercial and industrial activity, bomb blasts and the attendant insecurity have become common place occurrences. Sectarian killings, in mosques or in carefully planned attacks on specific individuals continue to occur at irregular intervals provoking the bitter comment that unlike fixed hunting periods for game birds it is "open season" for the killing of Shias.

Internationally, Pakistan faces the allegations that the President listed and that have been mentioned earlier. Official investigations so far have led senior Pakistani officials to offer informal briefings to western newspapers in which the venality and corruption of individuals have been identified as the motivations for the supply of nuclear technology and equipment to other states. There are nevertheless suggestions that as and when the culprits are indicted they will plead Islamic solidarity rather than personal gain as the motivations for their actions. The cost of acquiring or disseminating technology relating to weapons of mass destruction is extremely high. In Pakistan's case the officially articulated view in Washington suggests acceptance that these were the acts of individuals but such forbearance is clearly owed to the perceived need-in the light of the Afghan situation- to maintain relations with the present government in Pakistan on an even keel.

Similarly on the other allegations - Pakistan's perceived Afghan and Kashmir policies - there is a belief that the extremist agenda and vested interests are responsible for deviations from declared official policy.

Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan's Foreign Policy in the Changed Global Environment

In the United States the attack of 11th September has effected a sea change in public perceptions. In recent months, President Bush's overall approval rating has fallen. A majority now feels that the war in Iraq was wrong and many now believe that President Bush has not done well with the economy. But his stand against terrorism still has the support of a large majority.¹⁰ It is apparent that this is a facet on which Bush will continue to focus. The Americans also not only accept but insist that the war against terrorism should continue for as long as it takes to eliminate this menace and to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Given this circumstance, it must be accepted that, were it not for the Afghan situation, there would be as much of a berating of Islamabad by US officials as there is by the western press.

There are differences between the leading powers-permanent members of the Security Council and such countries as Japan and Germany on a number of issues. There is, however, unanimity on the subject of fighting the scourge of terrorism by one means or the other. There are some who argue that the root causes of terrorism need to be addressed alongside the coordinated battle against those who use terrorism as a tool for political or other ends. Some attention is being paid to this facet but as the examples of Palestine, Afghanistan and Kashmir show that the main focus continues to remain on eliminating terrorist activity and it seems to be more and more widely accepted that only when such terrorism has been eliminated would the international community be prepared to put its weight behind the search for solutions to the root causes.

This was made evident when the American perspective, mistaken or otherwise, was explained by Richard Holbrooke, the former US ambassador to the United Nations in a conference in Doha, organized by the Qatar financed U.S.-Islamic World Forum and the Brookings Institute. He admitted that "If we cannot contain and reverse the growing chasm between the West -- and especially the United States -- and the Islamic world, it will become the underlying structural flaw that will worsen many other problems," including terrorism, the Middle East problem and global poverty". But he went on to add that Americans had been shaken by the attacks of September 11, 2001, in a way that much of the rest of the

world still did not understand, and that "Every American who follows foreign policy understands your views. But at the same time, I urge you to understand that American views are for the most part quite different on this issue. As we seek progress in the Middle East, it must be understood ... that the United States will never turn its back on Israel."¹¹

In France the wearing of the Hijab or headscarf by Muslim girls has been banned along with a ban on Jewish skull caps and large crosses or other symbols of Christianity. Ostensibly designed to emphasise French secularism the ban has been seen as aimed primarily at the Muslim headscarf and has evoked protest demonstrations but there seems to be little prospect that the ban will be rescinded. Of the countries in Europe, France has the largest Muslim population and therefore the greatest concern about this issue but there seems to be every prospect that other European countries may also follow suit. In the meanwhile many of the advanced countries have followed the American example and in fact have gone further than them in restricting visas for travelers from Muslim countries. The restriction is particularly stringent in the case of Pakistan where most European embassies either refuse to entertain visa applications or suggest that securing clearance for the visas will take up to 12 weeks.

In the Muslim world Iran after protracted negotiations has signed the additional protocol to International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards agreement, thus giving the IAEA access to all its nuclear facilities and has at the same time suspended its uranium enrichment programme. It has also provided information to the IAEA regarding the sources of the nuclear equipment and material that it had acquired over the last many years. This has won them debate for the trade agreement with European Union they were looking for and has avoided a crisis in relations with the International Atomic Energy Agency which could have led to sanctions being imposed by the UN Security Council. There are also currently some contacts which may lead to the surrender by the Iranians of some Al-Qaeda leaders who reportedly have sought shelter in Iran. The current domestic crisis in Iran, occasioned by the effort of the conservatives to shut the reformists out of the

forthcoming elections and the intervention by the Rahbar, Ayatollah Khamenei is also being largely influenced by the active presence of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is noteworthy that after initial skepticism the Americans are prepared to acknowledge that the Iranians are not playing a disruptive role in Iraq. It is equally noteworthy that even the "conservatives" in their effort to eliminate or curb further the limited political power of the "reformists" are now turning a blind eye to the flouting of dress restrictions and the rules of public behaviour imposed by the clerics as part of the Islamisation of Iranian society. The manner in which the current crisis will be resolved in Iran is not clear but what is clear is that much of what was seen as "extremist dogma" will be curbed or done away with in both Iran's domestic polity and its foreign policy.

In Libya a sea change in policy has been effected with the agreement reached after months of negotiations on Libya agreeing to dismantle under international supervision all programmes for the production of weapons of mass destruction and seeking western, particularly American cooperation in the rebuilding of its oil industry.

In Saudi Arabia after some terrorist attacks that targeted prominent Saudis as much as they targeted foreigners a large scale operation appears to have been launched to identify Al-Qaeda adherents and sympathizers and those belonging to other terrorist or extremist organisations. The Saudis have displayed, while expressing their ire about the charges against Saudi Arabia in the American press, considerable sensitivity to American concerns even with regard to their internal system of education and governance. Steps are apparently being taken also to revise some of the text books that allegedly preached an extreme brand of Islam. In the latest development Saudi and American authorities are jointly approaching the United Nations to place on the "terrorist list" Saudi-based organisations suspected of funding extremist Islamic organisations in other parts of the world. While making the announcement, Crown Prince Abdullah's foreign policy adviser, Adel Jubair, said "No two countries coordinate counterterrorism efforts more closely than the United States and Saudi Arabia.". At the end of the day, we're the main targets in al Qaeda's cross hairs."¹²

Saudi and American officials are cooperating in denying diplomatic status in the USA to Saudi clerics sent by the Saudi Ministry of Religious Affairs to work in Saudi financed Islamic institutes in the USA.

In Syria, domestic extremism had been curbed with an iron hand since the days of Hafez Al-Asad but there were repeated western allegations that the Syrians provided shelter and concrete assistance to extremist organisations. The current international environment being what it is the Israelis could bomb a so-called camp of an extremist organisation in Syria without provoking anything more than token international protest.

There have also been questions about Syria's development of WMD. In an interview to the "Daily Telegraph" of the UK Bashar Al-Assad said that "Syria has a right to defend itself by acquiring chemical and biological weapons". On the other side pressure from the USA and the UK on Syria is growing. Prime Minister Blair is quoted as saying that he hoped he hoped Syria would follow Libya's example of disavowing all programs of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and that "We offer Syria the possibility of a partnership for the future. But it is important that they realize that the terms are very clear and have been set out by ourselves and the Americans many times." "The issue of weapons of mass destruction can be dealt with diplomatically if people are prepared to do so, but it does have to be dealt with,"¹³

The threat is clear and the capacity to resist is low given the fragility of the economy and relative inexperience of the new Syrian leadership. Negotiations have been going on for some time and it seems likely that there too there will be agreement reached with the Americans on the dismantling of programmes that the Americans allege are designed to produce weapons of mass destruction and to apprehend those elements suspected of being terrorists. This is the price Syria will have to pay to secure American pressure on Israel to resume negotiations with Syria on the Middle East peace settlement. In Indonesia, the Bali bombing and other less well publicized terrorist incidents have prompted a crackdown on organisations like the Jamayeh Islami termed an affiliate of al Qaeda. In the other

Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan's Foreign Policy in the Changed Global Environment

countries of South East Asia with Muslim majorities or substantial Muslim minorities initial denials of the presence of terrorist organisations there is now acknowledgement of their existence and a strong official effort-backed in many cases by the United States- to eliminate them and their networks. It also seems evident that while the religious parties had considerable support among the voters earlier the recent acts of terrorism have eroded this base of support. The elimination of extremism in Pakistan is not only therefore an imperative for repairing the damage to Pakistan's domestic polity though this is the most important reason for doing so but it is also important if Pakistan is to avoid facing international pressures that could take the form of the sort of international sanctions that brought Libya to its knees and the threat of which caused Iran to relent. This is the reality that we have to contend with.

The task is one that only Pakistanis can accomplish for themselves. The US perspective on this was spelt out when speaking to reporters in Washington, General Abizaid Commander of the US Central Command said that "The biggest threat in the global war on terrorism is the threat posed by extremists in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan". Pakistan, he added, had been a vital ally in the war on terror and should continue to receive as much US assistance as it needed to defeat extremism but this was not a matter that could be resolved by US military power. "This", he said, in a statement of the obvious, "is a battle of ideas as much as it is a military battle and we've got to help him (Musharraf) fight that battle".¹⁴ The challenge is internal but the international climate creates an opportunity for getting the international support that could help to meet the challenge.

End Notes

1. "President Musharraf's address to the Seerat Conference" June, 05, 2001.
2. "President Musharraf's Speech" October 04, 2003.
3. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, "US to Stop Pakistan Going Taliban Way", The News, August 19, 2001.
4. President Bush at Joint Press Conference with President Musharraf in Washington, February 13, 2002.
5. Washington Post, February 12, 2002.

6. Jim Hoagland, "Nuclear Resolution" Washington Post, January 09, 2004.
7. Fareed Zakaria, "Opening in South Asia" Washington Post, 13 January 2004.
8. "President Wants Jihad Against Extremism", Dawn January 18, 2004.
9. "Pakistan Leader Jeered in Parliament Speech Criticizing Extremism", The New York Times January 18, 2004.
10. Mr. Bush retains a powerful advantage on national security. Sixty-eight percent, including majorities of both Democrats and independents, gave him high marks for the campaign against terrorism, and 68 percent said the Bush administration's policies have made the United States safer from terrorist attacks. Sixty-four percent said they considered him a strong leader. (Nytimes180104 "Poll Bolsters Bush on Terrorism but Finds Doubts on Economy") The New York Times January 18, 2004.
11. "Israel at center of annual U.S.-Muslim forum Washington criticized for strategic relationship", CNN January 10, 2004.
12. "U.S., Saudi Arabia Fettering Charity Linked to Terrorism", The Washington Post January 23, 2004.
13. "Syria entitled to possess WMD: Assad" Jerusalem Post January 6, 2004.
14. "Pakistan, S. Arabia face major terror threat: US", Dawn January 30, 2004.

Author

Mr. Najmuddin A. Shaikh joined the Foreign Service of Pakistan in 1961 after obtaining a B.Com from the Sind University. He subsequently did Master's from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Mr. Shaikh served in various capacities in missions abroad and at home. These included Moscow (65-68), Tehran (68-70), Baghdad (73-77) and Washington (79-83) before his Ambassadorial Assignments in Canada (87-89), Germany (89-90) United States of America (90-91). His last assignment was as Foreign Secretary from 94 to 97. Mr. Shaikh retired in 1999 and since then has been a frequent contributor of articles on security issues to newspapers and a regular commentator on TV and Radio.