

## THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

By

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What a difference a week makes? Two weeks ago there was talk among the chattering classes in the West, spearheaded by the liberal media in the US, the anti-American media in the UK and the usual suspects in Europe that the American Imperium had got stuck in the Iraqi quagmire, and the anti-war Democratic candidate Howard Dean was ready to harness an increasingly skeptical and war weary American public to unseat President Bush. Then Saddam Hussain was captured in his ditch, and that great Muslim warrior Col. Qaddafi meekly agreed to unilaterally dismantle his weapons of mass destruction and join the US 'war on terror', in exchange for the promise of foreign investment to rejuvenate his decaying economy. While in Iran the mullahs accepted intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency to prevent them from developing a nuclear bomb. President Bush's popularity ratings, which had fallen to the low forties soared to the mid 60s, and the plethora of Democratic wannabees were left scurrying to find some issue on which they might be able to unseat George W. Bush. Most tellingly Hilary Clinton finally called off her implicit bid for the White House by congratulating the President on the capture of Saddam Hussain.

The most important effect of the demonstration of US imperial might in Iraq has been the volt face by Col. Qaddafi. We now know that the negotiations with Qaddafi only began in serious in March, when the US led coalition was poised on the borders of Iraq to take out Saddam Hussain, and the final agreement was only accepted by Qaddafi last week, at a secret meeting of British, US and Libyan officials held at the Travellers Club in London- the club of choice of British spooks- after he saw the vivid pictures of a bedraggled Saddam, looking like a hobo, being dragged from his lair by US soldiers. He had clearly learnt the lesson. Unlike his predecessor Bill Clinton's impotent sabre-rattling, when Saddam threw out the weapons inspectors in 1998, George W was serious and meant business. Qaddafi did not want to end up like Saddam in a smelly hole.

Similarly, the mullahs in Iran, seem to have decided to abort their desire to develop nuclear weapons, partly because with the US led coalition in Iraq the threat posed by Saddam's weapons of mass destruction has been removed, and in part because they do not want to risk the type of military action which has removed one of the spokes in Bush's axis of evil. I would not be surprised if young Assad sitting insecurely in Damascus also soon has a Pauline conversion. This leaves the unpredictable megalomaniac Kim il Jung in North Korea. The Americans have rightly tried to bring him to heel with the aid of the Asian powers he most threatens- China, Japan and South Korea. But do these seeming diplomatic triumphs in Libya, Iran and possibly North Korea and Syria suggest, as Tony Blair and the European multilateralists are claiming, that these benign results are the result of diplomacy and not, as in Iraq, of military might?. Hardly.

The failure of George Bush Sr. to topple Saddam after the first Gulf war, and the turning of the blind eye to his bloody suppression of the Shia and Kurd revolts the Americans themselves

had asked for, many in the Middle East rightly came to believe that the Americans bark was worse than their bite. It was a mere paper tiger. George Bush, jr., has dramatically changed that perception. The big stick he has wielded, together with the visible signs of the US' military might in the heartland of the Middle East, has allowed the diplomats to convince hitherto recalcitrant regimes that as they cannot beat the empire, they must at least learn to live with, if not join it.

This has consequences for two long standing allies of the US, who are increasingly seen as having nurtured the jihadis against whom the war on terror was proclaimed- Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Here again, partly in their own self-interest, as their rulers are threatened by these very jihadis ( as witness the Al Qadia suicide attacks in Saudi Arabia, and the assassination attempts on President Musharaff) but also, because they see that they can no longer count on the past strategic considerations which had led the US to turn a blind eye to their promotion of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, they are now becoming open to friendly persuasion to tackle the very jihadis they had created and promoted.

The Saudi -US relationship was based on US support of the Saud dynasty in exchange for secure oil supplies. With the US in Iraq, and with Libya now joining the globalization bandwagon, Saudi oil is of relatively less importance. Whilst the role of the Saudis in the spread of Wahabism around the world is seen as a major cause of terrorism. With the US having moved its main military base to Qatar from Saudi Arabia, and with the Saud dynasty under increasing pressure to curb the Wahabbi fundamentalists, its future looks highly uncertain.

But, it is the consequences of the show of US imperial might for Pakistan which is most significant for India. Pakistan was seen by the British and then the US as an essential strategic ally in the continuance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's Great Game to prevent the southward expansion of the Russian and then the Soviet empire. With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet empire, and the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia and Afghanistan, this strategic imperative has disappeared. Pakistan, is increasingly seen as the major source of the jihadis, not least in the recent bombings in Istanbul. Though Gen. Musharaff has pledged to curb the jihadis and joined the US war against terror in Afghanistan, he is an unreliable ally. For, he has relied on riding two horses: supporting the jihadi groups operating in Kashmir and trying to suppressing the Islamist violence threatening him and Pakistan. But, this is becoming increasingly untenable.

In an important article in the Financial Times (Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003), Selig Harrison the veteran news correspondent reported that both the US and China had put pressure on Gen. Musharaff to stop Pakistani sponsored insurgent groups based in Kashmir and Afghanistan from providing training and help to the regrouping Taliban in Afghanistan and the Uighur separatists fighting Chinese rule in Sinkiang. This was why he declared a unilateral ceasefire along the LOC in response to the Indian government's peace proposals in October. Similarly, Russia too is threatened by Islamist terrorists, many of whom trained in the Wahabbi madrassas in Pakistan. With this pressure from the major powers in the region, there is some hope that beginning with the cease fire, a final settlement between India and Pakistan will be possible. As we now know from Prof. P. N. Dhar's memoirs ("Indira Gandhi, the Emergency and Indian Democracy", Oxford, 2000) the secret unwritten understanding in the Simla Agreement between Bhutto and Mrs. Gandhi envisaged the LOC ( the de facto border since the 1<sup>st</sup> Indo-Pak war ended in 1949) would in time become the de jure border. This, as Dhar states was recognised by Bhutto as being

the only feasible solution to the long standing Kashmir dispute.

Apart from its military presence, the US also has formidable leverage with Musharaaf, with its offer of \$3bn in economic and military aid in June, in addition to earlier US loans and grants totaling \$1.5bn and the \$4bn in debt rescheduling by the US led aid consortium. Hopefully, President Bush will use this leverage to settle the long standing Kashmir dispute by the conversion of the LOC into the de jure border. With the border dispute with China also likely to be settled in the near future, and in my view the growing possibility that Osama bin Laden is a handful of dust in the caves of Tora Bora, in this new US imperium India and the world can look with greater confidence to a Happy New Year.