

Import of 9/11 Against Beslan Backdrop

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Beslan, till recently an unknown small town in Russia, has become the latest 'victim-symbol' in the global pattern of terrorist violence. The manner in which innocent young children were slaughtered on September 3 marks a reprehensible low even by the standards of the terrorist. The death toll at the time of writing this comment is in excess of 350 and still climbing. The shocking and gruesome Beslan images that repeatedly screamed across millions of television screens the world over were reminiscent of the enormity of 9/11 three years ago. September has been doubly bloody and cruel for the former Cold War adversaries. September 3-9 will be etched on the Russian psyche in much the same manner that 9/11 has indelibly scarred the US consciousness.

In an unintended but ironic twist to the vagaries of history, President Vladimir Putin declared that Russia is at war after Beslan, while only a few days earlier on September 1, US President George W. Bush in a NBC "Today" programme in reply to a question about the war against terrorism conceded: "I don't think you can win it. But I think you can create conditions so that those who use terror as a tool are less acceptable in parts of the world."

Given the compulsions of the US Presidential elections in November, Bush was quick to retract his NBC statement adding that luckily he was inarticulate. Reiterating that what he meant was something else, he asserted that the war against terrorism would be waged relentlessly and that it would be won - with Bush at helm of US affairs and by extension global affairs. In short, both the former superpowers of the Cold War vintage now have Presidents of a democratic dispensation who have cast themselves in the mould of the steely, indefatigable Commander-in-Chief in this phase of the war against terrorism - the big T that has entered the global security lexicon even as the twin towers collapsed on millions of television screens three years ago.

The import of 9/11 is complex, contradictory and dynamic. Many strands are tangible and linear while others are intangible and such non-linear perception will

be comprehended with the passage of time, for we are still too close to it. However, some inferences and paradigmatic shifts are discernible three years down the road. At the macro-strategic level, state as an entity - whether it is the US at one end of the spectrum or Nepal at the other (that inadvertently became the victim of the fall-out of 9/11 when Nepalese hostages were killed in Iraq by a group of abductors) - have now become more insecure and an inchoate uncertainty grips those responsible for state and societal security.

Thus the first big transmutation that has taken place is in the mutation of state DNA apropos the concept of security. The long cycle of history that has been telescoped in recent decades with the advent of relentless technological modernity is witnessing a transformation in the way in which states see themselves and their interpretation and prioritisation of security. The colonial period of modern history that began with Vasco de Gama in 1498 and ended notionally with the end of the Second World War and Hiroshima saw the emergence of the classical *nation-state* wherein states were occupied in preserving and defending their territorial integrity and national sovereignty. It was axiomatic that the citizen would be safe and secure within these parameters.

This was also the beginning of the 46-year long anomalous phase of the Cold War and the nation-state was quickly divided into blocks identified by their correlation to the undercurrents of bi-polarity. The nation-state was supreme in the security discourse, though ironically the seeds of the emergence of the non-state actor and religious zealotry were sown in the Afghan war of the early 1980s by the erstwhile superpowers. The nuclear weapon lashed to a frighteningly accurate and lethal missile became the symbol of major power security contestation, but the winds of change were astutely recognised by Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev. The Cold War ended in the most unlikely manner notwithstanding the irrational doctrinal commitment to mutually assured destruction and the image that is abiding is of a defiant Boris Yeltsin standing atop a Soviet tank.

The post-Cold War period was brief - from 1991 to 2001 (9/11) - but the euphoria it generated was intense. History, it was averred, had ended for there was little to contest and the free-market and normative liberal values were deified at the twin altars of consumption and profit cocooned in the IT bubble. The *market-state* was born and for a heady moment, Bill Gates became more important than Bill Clinton. The centrality and efficacy of the state in the production and distribution of the concept of security was questioned and venerable pundits heralded the onset of a golden period in global history when finally the Cold War swords would

be turned to bio-tech ploughshares. Borders it was averred had become passé and the global citizen armed with a laptop wafted atop the IT balloon, as it was carried upward forever (?) by Fukuyama and a booming stock market.

However, 9/11 dramatically and tragically punctured this nascent bubble of euphoria. The world as we knew it would never be the same and in the three years what we now witness as part of the mutation of state DNA is the emergence of the *besieged-fortress-state* and a bewildered and angry citizenry. Beslan is only the most recent example of what may follow in this trail of violence, bloodshed and anguish.

To compound the complexity of the 9/11 spoor, states more often than not respond predictably. Military force is invoked - as was the case with the US and now Russia - and the spiral will follow the melancholia of the Yeatsian gyre. The 'other' is demonised in the post 9/11 security discourse and hence the Muslim becomes suspect in the West and the Chechen now in Russia. The American death toll in Iraq has crossed the 1,000 mark despite 'victory' having been triumphantly declared in Iraq and the determined insurgency is veering towards a nationalist movement. In the proximate vicinity, notwithstanding the elections in early October, Afghanistan seems more and more likely to slip into fiercely contested enclaves with the Taliban and their supporters back in circulation. In short, the neat military resolution that installs the 'good guys' while the US can ride into the sunset with a sense of moral satisfaction appears elusive.

At the domain of the global systemic, where states are located in their inevitable jostling in the furtherance of individual national interest, one may posit that the brief unipolar moment is now past. The US as the exemplar of the West that had won the Cold War is now besieged by its own anxieties from both within and without. Its pre-eminence as the world's most potent military power is not in doubt. Its ability to stay the course and pump in more resources - both human and material - in the war against terror is also not in doubt. But in an unintended asymmetry, the post-9/11/post-Iraq war domain pits state against non-state and pre-eminent military power embodied in the US state is repeatedly contested by the determined terrorist/insurgent/nationalist in Iraq and beyond. From all accounts, over-whelming, standoff, hi-tech conventional military power has reached a glass ceiling as the attacks in Falluja and Najaf have demonstrated.

Society is already paying a price for the post 9/11 fallout. The rhythms of normalcy whether within the US or Russia have been irrevocably disturbed and the socio-political ozone layer has been punctured. At one level the terrorist has

prevailed for the response of the besieged fortress state has been to accord unto itself the role of ensuring the 'security' of its citizenry - at whatever cost. Consequently, the normative liberal values that are embodied in the US Constitution (and other liberal democratic states) now stand trampled or shrunk against the ever-widening police ambit of the state machinery. The imposing military machine at the command of the C-in-C appears formidable but ineffective in the inchoate post-9/11 security landscape. And civil society alas, is becoming increasingly inured to the macabre rhythms of the post-9/11 world as it surfs from wardrobe dysfunction to the Olympics, maybe Darfur and the US Presidential elections - and occasionally stopping at Beslan.

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