

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Roads and Routes: New Opportunities, Fresh Challenges

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The context

With apology to Charles Dickens, we are living in the “best of times”, and we are living in the “worst of times”. This is an age of high level of prosperity for an ever-growing number of people worldwide, and alongside it, astonishingly fast growing inequality (the greatest in history in terms of numbers). Over the last two decades India has pulled millions of people out of poverty, one of the rarest of such feats. However, India still remains home to the world’s largest number of the poor. Nearly one out of the world’s five poorest persons lives in India, thus negating the country’s spectacular economic growth that has benefited the top ten percent of the country disproportionately more than the rest.

One of the “best of times” features of our age is that we have inherited a globe that is getting increasingly tightly knit with each passing day. The globe has virtually shrunken to the dimensions of a village in earlier ages where everybody in the village was a shout away, within hearing distance, that is. Today, with advanced telecom, we can talk to friends and family at the farthest places in real time, seeing them talking to us comfortably on our telephone screens. We can move millions of dollars from one bank at “one end” of the earth with one command on our phone or computer in seconds, to another bank at “another end” of the earth.

With the collapsing of distance because of air travel we can go to Western Europe from India, attend a meeting and return home within 72 hours, something that would have taken 72 days a century ago. It is far easier to take foodstuff from one distant place to another. Humanitarian relief - food, medicine, doctors, paramedics, tents and other necessities - reach disaster-affected areas from thousands of kilometers within hours and large numbers of lives are saved with international co-operation and co-ordination. And, tragically, people are killed in large numbers with the same speed and accuracy with missiles launched from hundreds of kilometers away within minutes as these missiles travel at a far greater speed than sound. Even bomber planes can fly across countries and continents, bomb targets and return to their countries.

In Afghanistan, B-52 bombers flew in straight from their bases in the United States, unleashed their lethal payload on human targets below, took a U-turn and flew back to their bases in the US without landing anywhere for refueling. If only such high-tech, long-winded technology could be used to help humans rather than harming them, we wonder. Alas!

These killing machines have made war impersonal. We don't see the death agony of victims - non-combatant women, children and the old - which abolishes any chance of sympathy arising in our human heart. The unmanned US cruise missiles that unloaded the deadliest bombs on Afghan and Iraqi populations with devastating effect were not launched from US bases in Iraq or Afghanistan, but from the United States itself. They were not launched by military personnel, but by very young men and women sitting at computer terminals sending commands to the software fitted in those missiles stored thousands of kilometers away. Those commands precisely pointed out targets for these missiles fitted with GPS devices. For the computer operators it was no different from playing a computer game - only the victims were real humans. That is one dimension of living in the "worst of times".

Our times (which have both the "best" and "worst" features) are rightly seen as the age of fast-advancing science and technology. But the point is that science and technology cut both ways: they heal as much as they kill. This reminds me of a cartoon I saw in my school days. It talked about a headline in a newspaper that announced: "Eight people cut to pieces by train". In an accident eight people trying to cross rail line came under a rushing train and were "cut to pieces". After that headline in the cartoon somebody was shown saying: "I wonder whether a train is a carriage or a butcher's knife". Well, in that case it turned out to both. Science and technology are both healers and killers. They can help as well as harm. What I am saying is germane to the discourse on roads and routes in a globalised, high-tech, precariously positioned 21st century world. What I am saying is the context to the text that will follow.

Roads and routes

Roads and routes are parts of maps, connecting places, as often distant and overseas, as local. And map-making is a function of power: national sovereign power as well as colonial power. Being associated with power they are as likely to be contested by rival powers as to be accepted happily by different states. In the earlier ages, the contours of European states used to change virtually on a yearly basis because of continuous wars and territory conquered and lost by kings.

The contours of European states got relatively stable after the Treaty of Westphalia when those states began to be identified as nation states rather than

kingdoms and principalities. The conflicts between European states in the 19th century were more about territories in Africa or elsewhere in Asia. The infamous “scramble for Africa” was a conflict between European states for colonial dominance over Africa.

All this needed frequent drawing and redrawing of maps and charting of roads on land and mapping of sea routes. The twentieth century saw the emergence of another kind of routes for passengers and cargo (and often military purposes): air routes. Roads and routes have been great game changers. They bring the world closer and help trade development and exchange of scientific, religious and cultural ideas. This is evident from the rise of Muslims as great land and sea power and their dominance of sea lanes and international land routes, most of which they had developed.

However, their dominance was limited mainly to Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, Arab Sea, Red Sea and Mediterranean. The deeper and more stormy Atlantic was not tamed by their ships sailing on wind power. The Muslim sea craft were also smaller compared to European ships that replaced Muslim naval power in the late 16th century. The loss of control of sea routes to Europeans meant loss of trade, prosperity and, ultimately, freedom.

As I have mentioned already, maps and roads, and routes created on those maps, can be a great advantage for people and countries, but they can also be a perennial destabilising factor. I will give a few examples here. The Durrand Line dividing Pakistan and Afghanistan is not recognised by many Afghans. Matters are not helped by the same Pakhtoons living in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province and in Afghanistan. Pakhtoons, who are the dominant tribe in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s NWFP, claim that their homeland was divided between Afghanistan and what is Pakistan today by scheming British colonists. As the Durrand Line is an unnatural border they would not recognise it.

Similar is the case with McMahon Line which divides India and China. The Chinese reject it wholesale, complaining that the British map maker McMahon drew an “unnatural” border between India and China, without the consent of the latter during British colonial rule over India. Hence China would not accept it.

India has declared that Kashmir, at least the Indian part of J&K state, is an “integral” part of India. Pakistan, which has a sizeable part of Kashmir under its administration, insists that Kashmir is a disputed territory. The US and European Union also take it as a disputed territory. However, Western publications (including the now defunct print edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*) have been regularly confiscated by the Indian customs because maps in them show Kashmir as a disputed territory. The issue got further complicated when Pakistan parceled away some of the former J&K territory to China in a border settlement. The man who drew the line between India and Pakistan, the British mapmaker Cecil

Radcliff, is held responsible for drawing an imperfect border between the two countries.

The British historian John Key calls the border between India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as “a line drawn on water” as a long stretch of the border passes over river waters that often shift course, frequently changing landmarks. It has not been strange to find areas in India or Bangladesh going to the other country after rivers change course every few years.

The colonial powers have devastated people, countries and societies while leaving. The partition of Palestine under Balfour Declaration to create Israel has created a festering wound that refuses to heal. Since the British mandate divided Palestine to create Israel the area has not seen a day’s peace, nor did India’s partition create peace.

Good versus evil

As far as the history of discovery of new sea routes is concerned, more evil than good has befallen the humankind. A comparison between the Muslim seafarers and oceanographers and European discoverers of new sea routes like Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus is illustrative. These two left behind more evil than good.

With the discovery and colonisation of Australia by Europeans almost the entire aborigine population of the continent was wiped out. The survivors of the European scourge were few and far between. Even today the scant population of aborigines lives on the margins of Australian society.

European conquistadors from Spain destroyed the entire Maya, Aztec and Inca civilisations of South America. Millions were wiped out by the Spaniards. The epidemic of small pox, not known to the peoples of the Americas, was brought in by Europeans. It killed millions. Sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) brought in by Europeans devastated entire populations in the Americas.

Compared to the devastation wrought by Europeans’ depredations the work of other explorers was far more benign. The case of the Chinese explorer Zheng He, also known as Cheng Ho, Ma Sanbao and Ma He, provides an interesting contrast. Following is an abridged version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on Zheng He.

In Chinese language Ma stands for Muhammad. Born in a Hui (Chinese Muslim) family in 1311, he led seven expeditions, the first being in 1405. He was commanding 52 ships with 27,800 men in them. The fleet visited Champa (South Vietnam), Siam (Thailand), Malacca (Melaka) and Java, and then through the Indian Ocean to Calicut (Kozhikode) on the Malabar coast of India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). He returned to China in 1407.

On his second voyage (1408-9), Zheng He again visited Calicut, stopping in Kochin along the coast to the south. He encountered treachery from king Magonakkara of Ceylon. He defeated the king's forces and took him back to Nanjing as a captive.

The same year in October he set out on his third voyage. This time he sailed to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. On his return in 1411 he touched at Samudra, on the northern tip of Sumatra.

On his fourth voyage Zhen left China in 1413. After stopping at the principal ports of the area, he proceeded westward from India to Hormuz. A detachment of the fleet cruised southward down the coast of Ambia, visiting Dhofar in Oman and Aden in Yemen. A Chinese mission visited Makkah and continued to Egypt. The fleet visited towns along the east coast of Africa of what are now Somalia and Kenya and almost reached the Mozambique channel. On his return to China in 1415 Zheng brought to China envoys from more than 30 states of South Asia and Southeast Asia to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor.

Zheng's seventh and final voyage left China in the winter of 1431. He visited the states of Southeast Asia, the coast of India, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the east coast of Africa. Zheng died in Calicut in 1433 and the fleet returned to China that summer. These missions had an effect of extending China's influence over maritime Asia over half a century. In their wake Chinese emigration increased, resulting in Chinese habitations in Southeast Asia and the accompanying tributary trade, which lasted until the 19th century.

Now contrast this to what Columbus wrought in the Americas. The fate of this small sample from the relatively small island of Haiti on the American continent is representative of what befell the indigenous people over the entire continent. The following are excerpts from the remarkable work of historiography, *A People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn.

In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Haitians were dead. (P. 5)

By 1515 there were perhaps 50,000 Indians left. By 1550 there were 500....1650, non of the Arawaks left on the island. (P. 5)

...from 1494 (Columbus had come first time in 1492) to 1508 over three million people had perished from war, slavery and the mines. (P. 7)

Zinn takes to task historians who underplay the brutalities unleashed by Columbus on hapless indigenous people of the Americas. "This historical distortion is more than technical; it is ideological; it is released into a world of contending interests, where any chosen emphasis supports (whether the historian means it or not) some kind of interest, whether economic or political or national or sexual." (P.8)

Zinn points out that the Western lionisation of Columbus is carried out by ignoring bitter truths of history. “To emphasise the heroism of Columbus and his successors as discoverers and to de-emphasise their genocide, is not a technical necessity but an ideological choice. It serves unwittingly to justify what was done.” (P.9)

We must not forget that devastation and death of millions upon millions of indigenous people in the Americas was the direct result of Western discovery of new sea routes. The Australian continent fared no better after the European conquistadors landed on the continent. We must also remember that the Western aggression has gone nowhere as is evident from the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by Western powers. Over five million people, almost all Muslims, have died directly or indirectly because of the supposed war on terror: Robert Fisk, the best journalist to cover West Asia, had warned before the America-led war that five million people, almost all Arabs and Muslims, would be consumed by the war.

The New Great Game

To understand the new Great Game, we have to know what the old Great Game was about. It was about the “game” of great European powers involving intense rivalry between them to capture countries in Asia, Africa and the Americas, along with Australia to subjugate the locals and loot their resources using cunning, intimidation and extraordinary violence. All their diplomatic and military resources were used to this end. People of the colonised countries were set against each other in the classical divide-and-rule tradition. When such empires were finally dismantled, the colonists left behind highly divided and bitter countries. French colonial power left Vietnam divided and American genocidal aggression kept Vietnam divided. The lust for colonial control was behind World War I and World War II, which devastated Europe and, to some extent, Asia and Africa, and left Germany divided, which took East and West Germany nearly four decades to unite.

After a couple of centuries of mischief, the West (Europe and America) are tired now. It is the time of the rise of China and India as well as other Asian and African countries. This is something that the old war-mongers, practitioners of treacherous diplomacy, the dominant military-industrial complex and its globally spread networks do not like greatly. The West, according to Samuel P. Huntington, is in “relative decline” vis-à-vis China, India, Brazil and others, while according to Robert D. Kaplan, the United States is in “elegant decline.” The West wants to manage its decline (if not arrest it altogether) by setting the rising countries against each other and by redrawing the Middle East map, dividing the larger and so far the more influential countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Egypt

into three countries each so that there is no challenger left to cause worry to the Zionist state of Israel. And to make sure that Pakistani nuclear weapons do not reach Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, to counter Israeli intimidation they have also got plans for destabilising Pakistan, divide it into three parts and snatch away its nuclear weapons. According to periodically leaked reports American and Israeli commandos have been training together in Nevada, perfecting techniques for the eventual nuclear weapons snatch operation.

Now, does all this not look like the old Great Game? Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union in late 90s and the conclusion of the cold war with a US victory, the West, led by America, began preparations for a long war against the Muslim world, causing unrest and civil war in Muslim countries by setting different groups within countries against each other and also by pitting one Muslim country against the other. As if on a cue, within three years of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in 1999 came Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, virtually setting the Western agenda of war against the Muslim world. Huntington made this mischief look like a natural and inevitable course of things to follow. According to this plan the Western Christianity (excluding the Orthodox Christianity) were inevitably to clash with the Muslim world. China and the Muslim world were seen as allies in this scheme. It is of help to remember that Huntington did not treat Orthodox Church of East Europe as pitted against Islam. Even during the Crusades, the Orthodox Christianity was not a part of the Catholic onslaught on Muslims. As we notice, there is a continuity in the theme: those who were not a party to the original Crusade are not a party to the new Crusade either. I call it Crusade advisedly. In the initial moments of the putative "war on terror" even President George W. Bush called it a Crusade. After a worldwide furor he changed it to "Infinite Justice", which caused another groundswell of protest, because Infinite Justice is associated with the Day of Judgment.

Whether we call the present war on Muslim world a Crusade, "Infinite Justice," or "Enduring Freedom" (another name given to the present war by President George W. Bush), or the more secular "war on terror," it remains essentially a Crusade against Muslims. That this was going to be so was evident from US Deputy Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz's offhand remark before the launch of the "war on terror" that it was going to be a decade-long war and up to 60 countries would be brought in its ambit. It is not that difficult to guess which would be those "about 60 countries". Think about the membership of OIC and you would know who those countries are.

It is important to keep in mind that Huntington's book was not merely an academic work, but a justification and ideological ground work for the war against the Muslim world. His work directly fed into the US strategic planners'

discourse. This was further enhanced by the report of Project for a New American Century (PNAC), a work that was vehemently opposed by George Bush the Senior as a highly dangerous and incendiary project. The authors of this project, mostly Jews with roots in Israel, sat quiet during the Clinton presidency as President Clinton had other priorities. When Bush the Junior became the US president the PNAC got the fool in the White House they were looking for to launch a war against the Muslim world.

The “war on terror” is generally understood to be unleashed by 9/11, which is not the whole truth. Two French journalists published a sensational book, based on deep investigation soon after the anti-Muslim Crusade began. They had discovered that the United States had planned to wage war against the Muslim world in any case, beginning with Afghanistan. 9/11 was only a coincidence.

The war plan had been made against Afghanistan because the Taliban had refused to pay heed to American threat regarding licence to an American energy company, Unocal, to tap Afghan gas resources. The American delegation had clearly warned Mullah Omar, “If you do what we tell you to do, we will cover you with a carpet of gold. If you refuse it, we will bury you under a carpet of bombs.” The Taliban did not prefer the “carpet of gold.”

There is a genuine doubt among Muslims about the nature of 9/11. Its officially declared offenders had all risen from the aftermath of the jihad in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation. That was a time when all kinds of converts from Europe had entered the inner circle of the jihad. It is not unusual for Western intelligence services to enter such organisations via conversions and give the organisations advice that would be disastrous. We have also to keep in mind that in the past America had got its own citizens attacked with guns by its intelligence services and blamed Cubans for it before launching a war against Cuba.

The current “anti-terror” war began with US official declaration that it would be a decade long and cover up to 60 countries. This war has often been termed as the World War III and has jumped the deadline for its end by half a decade. Now they are saying it could continue for another 30 years. Earlier this year, President Clinton told *Esquire* magazine that the war could continue for another 25-30 years.

Robert Kaplan, like Huntington, has furthered the Western war agenda with his book *Monsoon*. Like Huntington, he also wrote a shorter version of the book in *Foreign Affairs* in 2004. His mischief is clear: he wants the worlds powers’ attention to shift to the Indian Ocean because 90 per cent of the world’s Muslims live here, against whom the war is being waged for one and a half decades and could continue for another three decades.

Why the Indian Ocean?

Before answering this question, let us consider the following facts. We are living in an era of “civilisational clash”, as formulated by Samuel Huntington and duely implemented by the United States and its Western allies. In other words, it is a clash envisioned, planned and enforced by Western Christianity (which does not include East European Orthodox Church or other Churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America). The second most important ideological and strategic pillar of this crusade after Huntington’s work is Robert Kaplan’s identification of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as the most strategically significant location for Western powers. There are some clearly stated and some not so clearly stated reasons for America’s and the West’s “rebalancing to the IOR.”

Among the less clearly stated is Kaplan’s innocent-sounding “90 per cent Muslims live here”. These are the people who were indicated right at the start of the new Crusade by Paul Wolfowitz as living in the targeted “about 60 countries”. For the players of the old Great Game this region is going to stage the new Great Game. This is also an area of fast-spreading Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean as well as in the littoral states. According to Huntington, the Sinic (Chinese) civilisation is going to be an ally of the Islamic in the clash of civilisations. The Chinese influence in the region and beyond has to be contained by allying with India, Japan (which has a dispute with China in the China Sea) and Vietnam (which, too, has a dispute with China over the Sprately Islands in the China Sea).

Six years ago Kaplan seemed to be hopeful of a coming clash between India and China in the Indian Ocean, with the United States as a mediator between the two. How “honest” the US is as a mediator has been seen in the Palestine-Israel dispute. Happily, this prediction has not come true and China and India have not needed US mediation. Thank God!

Instead, a healthy pattern of competition and cooperation has emerged between the two growing powers. Indian and Chinese navies have worked in tandem to counter piracy, terrorism and smuggling. The littoral states have worked in cooperation for disaster relief and cooperated in keeping the passages open.

The most important feature in the area is the development of Gwader port in Baluchistan, Pakistan. This Chinese project intends to develop a new energy hub and a swank city like Dubai. The port and allied infrastructure alone costs \$46 billion. China wants to create a massive energy pipeline through Afghanistan and Central Asia, and beyond. The energy and other goods from Central Asia would come via Afghanistan and Pakistan to well-connected high ways to China. This project, a shining example of China’s success, is creating a heartburn to America and its allies.

Instead of supporting this futuristic energy and development belt, the New Silk Road through sea and land, America has formally shown support to an Iranian port in Chabahar, another energy belt bypassing Pakistan with the support of India, which has pledged \$500 million to it. An interesting point here is that America, which would not have hesitated to launch a nuclear attack on Iran till recently (before Iran agreed to stop nuclear enrichment), is now supporting Iran to thwart China.

The Indian Ocean and the Chinese energy belt is going to be a focus of international attention for decades ahead. The people in this area have to avoid falling in the trap of the New Great Game of the US and its allies. They have to work together for disaster relief, counter piracy, smuggling and terrorism with greater cooperation and keep away from Western manipulation.

Notes

- * *Mohammad Manzoor Alam* is Chairman of Institute of Objective Studies, New Delhi (India).
- 1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859).
- 2. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).
- 3. News reports from the war.
- 4. S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997).
- 5. John Keay, *Midnight's Descendants: South Asia from Partition to the Present Day* (London: William Collins, 2014).
- 6. Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and Future of American Power* (New Delhi: Random House, 2011).
- 7. Robert Fisk's regular columns in 2001.
- 8. S. P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993).
- 9. Robert D. Kaplan, 'Centre stage for the Twenty-first century: Power plays in the Indian Ocean', *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 2 (2009).
- 10. Robert D. Kaplan, 'Pakistan's Fatal Shore', *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2009).
- 11. 'Zheng He, Chinese Explorer,' *S. V. Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- 12. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).