

Big, small and nasty insects

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A prophecy written ages ago in the Land of Snows said: *"In the Year of the Male Iron Dog, a war with China will occur."* In 1910, the year of the Male Iron-Dog, the Chinese entered Tibet. The 13th Dalai Lama had to flee his country and seek asylum in India. On his way to the border, he sent a telegram to *"Great Britain and all the Ministers of Europe"* informing them about *"large insects eating and secretly injuring small insects."*

Nearly a century later, reading these words from a leader who had no knowledge of the world outside the limits of his mountainous country, one is surprised by the accuracy of the description of the forces at play. How can we avoid drawing a parallel with the situation today in Iraq? Perhaps the only difference is that the "small insect" of today is a "nasty one", which does not believe in enlightenment and ahimsa.

A lot of debate has been generated in India on whether it should follow suit with the US or "condemn" the war. Most agree that the world community will not survive if the order established more than 50 years ago with the foundation of the UN is not accepted by all. It is obvious that for any conflict, the only solution is for the main players to sit together, thrash out their differences and find the best solution.

Some have argued that if the Americans are criticised today, they might not help India in sorting out the Kashmir tangle or the terrorism problem with Pakistan. On the other hand, others take a strong moral position, condemning the use of brutal force to destroy a "small insect" and take its petrol and assets.

In its wisdom, the Vajpayee Government has decided to follow the great Indian tradition of the "Middle Path". Addressing leaders of 21 political parties, he recently said that India must take the "totality" of the situation into account and adopt a position consistent with its principles and long-term national interest. While the Opposition wanted the war to be condemned because it violated "all accepted canons of international law", the Prime Minister maintained: *"Our words, actions and diplomatic efforts should be aimed at trying to achieve pragmatic goals, rather than creating rhetorical effect. Quiet diplomacy is far more effective than public posturing."*

Although one can seriously doubt that in the present circumstances "quiet diplomacy" will be effective, it is worth looking at India's interests. Analysts believe that they are two-fold: One, India might "generously" be invited after the war to participate in the reconstruction of what has just been destroyed; and, two, the US might turn their ire towards Pakistan for being a nest of terrorism and nuclear proliferation in the region.

Regarding the first, it might be a risky affair to bet too many stakes in an unpredictable scenario. On the second question: Can India expect substantial support from the US after the Iraq war to solve its five-decade old problem with Pakistan? The answer is No.

First, Pakistan has no petrol and the motivations to intervene in Pakistan will never be the same as in Iraq for the simple reason that nobody will cover the cost of military operations in Pakistan. In Iraq, there are ample possibilities for the US to get back their war investments through sale of petrol to friendly companies or reconstruction contracts, etc. If any action was ever undertaken in Pakistan who would foot the bill?

Obviously, if the US were serious about terrorism, they could easily starve Pakistan of aid instead of pouring in new rewards each time a terrorist is caught. But historically, the greatest fear in Washington has always been the collapse of Pakistan. From the early '50s, when the first military assistance reached Pakistan, till today, this has been the recurring nightmare haunting Washington. It is particularly apparent in the recently declassified documents of the 1971 Bangladesh war when Nixon was over-anxious to prevent an Indian attack on the Western front and see the disintegration of Pakistan.

The US policy has been reiterated shortly after the beginning of the Iraq war: India should resume dialogue with Pakistan. While one can easily guess what President Bush would have done if he had been in the seat of the Indian Prime Minister after 24 Kashmiri Pandits had been massacred by terrorists, "composite dialogue" is what is requested from India! The Indian spokesman could only point out that the US "regrettably" shifted the focus from the basic problem. In the national security strategy of the US, "pre-emptive strikes" by its forces are permissible. However, the same actions are not acceptable from lesser insects.

While India's short and long-term interests of stopping cross-border terrorism, finding a solution in the spirit of Shimla Agreement (with Pakistan first abandoning the concept of jihad in Kashmir) are known, it is increasingly clear that India can't depend on anybody for help. If India is to become a "big insect" and claim a permanent seat in the UN, it is time it stopped depending on others to solve its problems, through the Middle Path or otherwise.

As for the "consistent principles", it is not clear what they are today. Are they the Nehruvian principle of "non-alignment" or the vague Panchshilas which led India to the greatest disaster of her modern history or else Sardar Patel's who believe that India should "*offer himsa for himsa and ahimsa to ahimsa*"? A beautiful word existed in India to define these principles, "dharma". But who wants today to remember its real meaning?