

## The Strategy of Inaction

Roman Herzog was the president of Germany in the mid 1990s and as the first destination of his out of area visits, chose Pakistan. The hosts proposed the Institute of Strategic Studies as the venue for his public talk but he preferred the National Library because the strategic connection sounded so militaristic. Granted that some of the best and most devious minds in this field, Machiavelli and Chanakya, never wore a uniform, but it's true that the defence thinkers have dominated the evolution of strategic thought. One of our former army chiefs when elucidating a perfectly sound depth and defiance aspects of strategy was mocked because after shedding their immunity all of them are. The irony of the strategy is that the inventor of the most practiced model in history is a pretty unknown figure.

André Beaufre, a French general and a strategist, developed the concept of Piecemeal Strategy. *Take down only a bit of your target not to alarm the next enemy – and then restart after a decent pause.* Death by a thousand cut was its primitive form and effectively used by some smaller states and private militias. According to Liddell Hart, one of the best military historians, Britain eliminated its rivals with the help of a few willing allies and then dispensed them the same treatment – one at a time. Like all things British this concept was given a politically correct name: The Balance of Power. The Soviet Union took nearly a century to inch its way to Amu Darya (the Oxus). The US and Israel have pursued this doctrine in the Middle East for a long time and with spectacular success. The latest manoeuvres in Levant demonstrate how nimble footedly it has been done.

Assad's regime in Syria was toppled and since it had forcefully kept the country together, it was considered just deserts and even cheered. Erdogan, the quintessential self-server, though fully aware that the fall of the Alawites was detrimental to the Palestinian struggle in fact supported it for some measly gains. A few eyebrows were raised but only because the new marionet in Damascus, Ahmad al-Sharaa, had a dubious past. (Isn't that an asset for a hitman!). In the meantime, Iran had been practically neutralised after the US jumped into the Arena with all its might. The time was therefore right to give the new dispensation in Damascus the handling it deserved. This Salami Tactics has been at work for a long time. Saadat was tamed; most of the Arab countries either crushed (Iraq under Saddam) or those like Jordan and Saudi Arabia fiddled with their traditional system of inheritance; and the lesser Gulf States won over with a mix of force and persuasion.

I have some idea why a country like Iran and its sidekicks, Hezbollah and Houthis, do not give up. In a post 9/11 conference in Munich on *terrorism* when it became the world's foremost scourge, an Israeli general said that their main concern was how to counter the Shiite suicide bombers – and for that they were seeking a fatwa from the Sunni clerics that taking one's life was against the tenets of Islam. I do not know if they got one but the Israeli efforts to woo the Sunni world have been remarkably successful. Arabs once led the Islamic Jihad. As late as the eighteenth century their horsemanship was legend. Napoleon reportedly claimed that with French infantry and Arab cavalry he could conquer the world. No idea what caused the former's decline but the Bedouins when they dismounted from camels and horses found the new environment out of sync with their genius.

The marvel of this technique lies in the fact that even when those next in line could see the disaster in the making, they find themselves helpless or suffer from the illusion that they would prove to be proverbial exception to the rule. Countries like Turkey and Pakistan are convinced of their immunity for NATO; Nuclear; or whatever other reasons. The problem is that their unwillingness to act has to be rationalised – and that brings out the worst out of them.

“We have enough on our plate and getting embroiled in faraway disputes would not be in our national interest”. In the rare case of anyone asking them if they would you be better positioned when the threat was closer home; the most likely response would be a shrug of the shoulders or “inshallah”. Leaving to Allah was still not so bad as passing the buck – in the present case – to the Arab neighbourhood or to the “international community”, which even if it existed has amply proven that it wasn’t interested – or was actually in the other camp.

“We cannot act because it would bring us on the wrong side of the mighty US” is one of the more honest arguments. And just in case one came up with lesser powers who dared, and in cases like Afghanistan, even won; one would be reminded of women rights and TTP; lately also of the FATF. Anything that provided an excuse, even a lame one, to postpone the day of the reckoning. *Roz-e-Mehshar ko multavi kar do; ho gaei mekade main raat mujhe* (remember Adamm!). And God forbid if anyone were to remind them of the Divine edict to hang on to Allah’s rope, the chances that one would be hanged with the same rope were no more abstract.

Yes, Turkey as a NATO member would be spared as long as there was a threat on the Alliance’s eastern flank. Having known the irrelevance of the nukes in the demise of the Soviet Union, I find it pathetic that Pakistanis still invoke nuclear exception. Mercifully, no one wants to find out the threshold of an atomic power – but everyone knows the space under the nuclear overhang was large and flexible.

Only the other day I heard an illustrious diplomat tabling the most egregious argument of all times – Pakistan can do nothing to support Iran because it’s now a member of the Security Council. Didn’t know if the restraint was Pakistan specific as many others – the P5 in fact permanently – merrily go around doing whatever the hell it suits them. I can think of no better time to leave the UN. Some other “excuses” are so frivolous that one would not even care to respond. *Iran is the real enemy and let’s join hands with Israel and the US to cut off the head of the snake*; is just one. Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, once positioned Zionism as a meeting point between Christianity and Judaism in their shared stance against Islam and the Oriental barbarism. But believe it or not, I’ve heard otherwise sensible souls pontificating that we and the Jewish state could be friends.

Certainly not popular opinions they still indicate reluctance on part of our comfort loving elite and pro-status quo establishment to go beyond rhetoric. That the majority of this minority comes from my old institution and from the country’s traditional marshal areas have convinced me that the British found the right raw material to serve the Empire.

That the country must inevitably suffer because of the extra regional forces creeping towards us may be a strong possibility but fighting them away from our borders though a wiser course, we're unlikely to take it – and would rather wait for our turn. Patriotism may or may not be the last refuge of a scoundrel, national interest is clearly the last argument of a coward. There were times I used to compare our dilemma with that of the zebras who instead of taking on the predators preferred to be hunted down one by one. I think it was being too generous with our fent of heart. Zebras at least run. Our present situation is akin to a bird that has been mesmerised by the snake. When death glares in its face, it simply waits to die.

Talking of strategists, how could one not recall Liddell Hart's strategy of action. It needed our region to provide the antithesis.

One could be sure that the only potent antidote, the regional unity would remain a far cry. Didn't the historians Will & Ariel Durants warn us nearly a century ago that while the West organises, the East dithers!

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Rawalpindi 24.7.25