

How Peking is linked to the Bangladesh coup attempt

by Daniel Sneider, Asia Editor

The South Asian nation of Bangladesh was shaken at the end of May by an attempted military coup, a coup that failed to take power but succeeded in murdering President Ziaur Rahman and is threatening to precipitate chaos in Bangladesh—and all of South Asia.

While the evidence is far from complete at this point, the trail of linkage to the coup attempt leads first of all to Peking. The coup leader, General Manzur Ahmed, was a longtime pro-Peking man. He also reportedly has ties to right-wing Islamic fundamentalist groups who share with pro-Peking elements a strong anti-Indian ideology. The only statements made by the coup makers, during the brief period they held the port city of Chittagong, were anti-Indian.

All this must be viewed against the pattern of events in the region, particularly Chinese backing for the arms buildup of the anti-Indian regime in Pakistan and the recent rise of India-Bangladesh tensions, sponsored in part by President Ziaur's government. The coup in fact took place only two days before Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang arrived in Pakistan, the first such high-level visit in 16 years, for a tour that is to take him to all three of India's immediate neighbors including Nepal and Bangladesh. Even before the events in Bangladesh, Indian analysts viewed the visit as an escalation of Chinese attempts to "encircle" India with hostile regimes.

Reviving the 'America Card'

The Chinese leadership in Peking has two related strategic concerns at this moment. Foremost is to restore their strategic alliance with the United States: Peking's "America Card" policy of encouraging U.S.-

Soviet tensions and drawing an American nuclear umbrella over their pursuit of their own Great Han objectives. The advent of the Reagan administration and the uncertainty in Peking over the China policy of the new administration is a problem for China and for the leadership faction around strongman Deng Xiaoping, the foremost advocate of the "America Card" policy.

Peking's second major concern lies in southern Asia, with focal points in Cambodia (Kampuchea) and Afghanistan, the two points Peking has identified as "front lines" against the Soviet Union. Peking's military axis with Pakistan and its backing for the anti-Vietnamese forces of the ousted genocidal regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia are the two most important objectives of current Chinese external policy.

It would be a mistake, however, to see these as merely part of China's anti-Sovietism—that is a tale to fool barbarians. The Chinese desire for domination of the entire rim to their south requires the destruction in particular of the two powerful nations who stand in the way of that aim—India and Vietnam. The Chinese policy of mass depopulation, carried out with such horrible effectiveness by their clients in Cambodia, requires chaos aimed at those two Asian powers.

Equally key is the fact that Pakistan and the anti-Vietnam front in Southeast Asia are points of convergence with current U.S. strategic policy. They represent the back door through which the Reagan administration, with Secretary of State Haig leading the way, can be dragged back into the illusory "China Card" policy.

The Chinese are effectively setting the agenda for Haig's visit to Peking, slated to start June 10. While

Peking continues to rail against the minor expressions of concern by the Reagan administration over the fate of Taiwan, the Taiwan issue is chiefly a bargaining point. Peking will demand an expression of Washington's faithfulness—not on the Taiwan question but by joining hands with Peking in a de facto military alliance around Pakistan and Southeast Asia. Haig will follow his visit to Peking with attendance at the foreign ministers' meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN—Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia) where the major topic on the Manila agenda is to be policy toward Cambodia.

Zhao Ziyang's visit to Pakistan is part of this convergence. China is the strongest backer of the military dictatorship of General Zia in Pakistan, and there has been a continual flow of Chinese and Pakistani high-level military delegations back and forth for the past six months, including most recently the visit of the Pakistani naval chief to China. At his opening banquet Zhao told his Pakistani hosts that history will prove "the Chinese are the most reliable friend of the Pakistani people."

Immediately following his departure from Pakistan, U.S. Undersecretary of State for Security Assistance James Buckley will fly in. The purpose of his mission, according to informed sources in Washington, is to settle the details of a proposed five-year, \$2.5 billion arms assistance package from the United States. This deal has already brought strong protests from New Delhi, which fears that, as in the past, U.S. arms to Pakistan will only be used against India.

The Trilaterals come to Peking

China prepared for Haig's visit in a manner that reveals Peking's actual approach to the Reagan administration: they invited the Trilateral Commission to China for an unprecedented three-day conference between the Trilateralists and the top Chinese foreign policy think tank, the People's Institute for Foreign Affairs. Led by David Rockefeller, the Trilateral delegation included among its American members Robert Ingersol, former U.S. ambassador to Japan and Kissinger assistant secretary of state; Winston Lord, president of the Council on Foreign Relations; and Bruce MacLaury, president of the Brookings Institution in Washington. They met with Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese leaders, holding wide-ranging talks on the strategic situation, particularly Southeast Asia.

The Chinese were clearly recruiting the Trilateralists as their "agents" in the task of maneuvering the Reagan administration back into the China Card policy, which Haig also favors. Just before the Trilateral meeting, two former top Carter administration officials, Treasury Secretary Blumenthal and Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, who was in charge of East Asia policy, were also in Peking for talks. The *Frankfurter*

Allgemeine Zeitung reported on a Chinese Politburo meeting around this time, apparently following the Trilateral meeting, in which Deng won the support of the majority on the Chinese Communist leadership group for the continuation of his strategy of alliance with the West. This information was probably leaked through the West German daily to signal Peking's readiness for the Haig visit, and also to indicate that opposition exists to the policy.

The failure in Bangladesh

Against this strategic setting, the failure of the coup in Bangladesh appears to be a setback for Peking. The political situation within Bangladesh was primed for such an event. President Ziaur was increasingly unpopular, finding himself caught between opposition from the Awami League (the party of independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman murdered in 1975), on one side, and pressures from a combination of Maoists and right-wing Islamic fundamentalists on the other.

The events that brought the failure of the coup attempt were the strong support provided to the constitutional government in Dacca by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the support delivered within the country by the leadership of the Awami League, despite its strong opposition to President Ziaur's rule.

The two-day coup was centered in Chittagong, where General Manzur commanded the 24th Division of the Bangladesh Army (he had been previously head of the General Staff and was downgraded by Ziaur). Ziaur was visiting Chittagong when the rebel units under Manzur's command struck, murdering the president and eight aides in a gunbattle. Though the coup was isolated to the units in Chittagong, the evidence is clear that Manzur, who is generally described as a highly intelligent officer, had planned coordinated actions in other parts of the country.

In fact, according to reports from New Delhi, there were simultaneous revolts in four other major military bases around the country—in Dacca (the capital), Jessore, Sylhet and Comilla. Loyal troops succeeded in putting them down, particularly in the capital, where Chief of Staff General Ershad remained loyal to the constitutional government.

The ability of the Dacca government, now headed by Vice-President Sattar, to hold the situation in check is credited by close observers of the scene to a strong statement issued by Prime Minister Gandhi while the coup attempt was still going on. The Indian statement declared full support for "democratic institutions" and the "democratically elected government" in Dacca against the coup-makers. That statement was broadcast widely and frequently by the official radio in Dacca; and officers considering joining the coup had to face the implied threat of Indian intervention in support of the Dacca government.

The firm and prompt actions of the Indian government in defense of stability in Bangladesh can be contrasted with the curious behavior of the Chinese. While the coup was still on, the Chinese embassy announced that the planned visit of the Chinese premier would continue as planned, a move widely interpreted as a signal of Peking's acceptance, if not approval, of the coup leaders. After their rout, the embassy announced the cancelation of the visit. And perhaps most curious of all, it was reported as of June 3 that Zhao announced in Pakistan that he will go to Bangladesh after all.

India has consistently assisted the Dacca authorities. The latest reports are that the Indian government announced that its Border Security Forces would act to seal the border, at the request of the Dacca government, to stop the flight of some 3,000 rebel soldiers who have fled into the hills around Chittagong (which is near the Burma and India borders in the southeast). Sources in New Delhi add that Indian forces were placed on precautionary alert to prevent any foreign intervention into Bangladesh during the coup attempt.

The Awami League and General Manzur

The immediate political context within Bangladesh before the coup had been shaped by two determinants. One was the return to Bangladesh in the middle of May of Sheikh Hasina Wased, the daughter of Bangladesh founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. She had been living in exile in India since her father's murder in a 1975 coup (thought by many to be Kissinger-inspired) and had returned to assume the chairmanship of the Awami League, which, although the largest opposition party, had been hampered by internal factionalism. Her return was greeted by huge and enthusiastic crowds, demonstrating the weakness of the Ziaur government.

Around the same time, the Dacca government sparked a massive anti-Indian campaign (Mrs. Wased having been also labeled an "Indian agent") around the issue of a recently formed sedimentary island in the Bay of Bengal controlled by India and claimed by Bangladesh. The dispatch of Bangladesh gunboats to the island and a massive propaganda campaign had considerably inflamed passions while Maoists and followers of the Jamaat-e-Islami (the leading pro-Pakistan group tied to the Muslim Brotherhood) were given encouragement to stage anti-Indian demonstrations.

The timing of General Manzur's coup attempt is understood by observers in the region to be linked to the return of Hasina Wased, to the obvious shift in the political dynamic it caused, and to the deliberately created anti-Indian atmosphere. Rebel broadcasts from Chittagong attacked the government for failing to seize the island from India and issued strong anti-Indian attacks.

According to Bangladeshi sources who know him personally, Manzur in his student days had been a member of known radical leftist groups of a Maoist character. Those groups later formed the JSD (National Socialist Party—see accompanying article), a left-fascist organization with a decidedly anti-Indian character that was involved in the overthrow of the pro-Indian government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. There are also several reports that Manzur had more recently developed ties to the Jamaat-e-Islami Islamic fundamentalists. Manzur's readiness to lend himself to this mission may also have been the result of a rivalry with Ziaur and the failure to gain promotion from his number-three army post to that of Chief of Staff. Yet, clearly, the line now circulating in the press of a "personal" motive for the coup is nonsense. Manzur is reported (though not confirmed) dead, shot by government troops who captured him.

At this point there is relative calm in Bangladesh, yet no one predicts it will stay that way. Elections should be held within six months for a new president, but there are doubts the situation will remain stable that long.

Documentation

An Indian journal foresaw the Dacca destabilization

The following article is reprinted from the May 3 issue of the respected Indian weekly newspaper New Wave. Although it appeared before the recent coup attempt, the article almost precisely predicts those events and provides a detailed breakdown of the various political forces now operating in the country. It is worth noting for the reader that the article focuses on the role of the right-wing Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party and that the leader of the coup attempt, General Manzur, is reported to have had strong links to that group. One explanatory note—Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the leader of the Bangladesh independence movement (from Pakistan), assassinated in 1975 and the Awami League is the party which led that movement.

Despite apparent stability the Bangladesh political scene remains confused and tense. A conspiracy case now in progress in the Field General Court Martial in Dacca cantonment is a proof of the inherent weakness and instability of the political system. . . .

While Zia [Ziaur Rahman] survived last June's attempted coup, he may not be as lucky always. With the political system in doldrums and people in general thoroughly disillusioned and bitter because of serious economic crisis manifesting itself in rising prices and growing poverty and unemployment, Zia's popularity is now at the lowest ebb. The alleged infiltration of the armed forces by extreme right-wing elements, specially pro-Pakistan Jamaat-e-Islami elements, poses a serious threat to the political stability of the country.

President Ziaur Rahman, apparently conscious of this danger and provoked by the excesses committed by Jamaat elements, lashed out at them immediately before the 26th March Independence day. Zia, who not only rehabilitated the traitors and collaborators in national politics but also allowed them to share power with him, discreetly signaled his loyal Mukti Joddhas (freedom fighters) to wage a political war against Jamaat-e-Islami. Mukti Joddhas as well as other pro-liberation forces geared up a vigorous campaign against Jamaat and its leader Golam Azam, chief of the notorious Al Badr group which killed hundreds of most distinguished Bangalee intellectuals on the eve of independence in December 1971, and now a citizen of Pakistan, is living in Bangladesh for the last three years. But the weakness of Zia government is well known because Jamaat-e-Islami is openly backed by Saudi Arabia and Ziaur Rahman is in desperate need for precious petrodollars. He cannot go beyond a point against Jamaat for fear of annoying the Saudis.

Ziaur Rahman's own political party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has failed to grow as a political organisation able to create the necessary support base for his regime. Zia is reportedly spending about three crores of Taka every month to keep the party going, over and above liberally using public resources like wheat meant for "food for work" programmes. But he has only been able to collect a bunch of opportunists and self-seekers of all shades. . . .

In the process of creating the BNP, Zia has successfully disrupted almost all established political parties, big or small, right or left. Moulana Bhashni's traditional National Awami Party liquidated itself and merged into BNP under the leadership of Masiur Rahman. The JSD (Jatiya Samaj Tantrik Dal—National Socialist Party) suffered a serious setback when a small section of its leadership, followed by the powerful students wing, quit the party to form their own Bangladesh Samaj Tantrik Dal (Socialist Party of Bangladesh). The significance of the split lies in the fact that JSD is basically a party of the students and youth without any mass bases in towns or in the countryside. So this split has left JSD practically crippled and unviable.

The Communist Party and other parties of the left like NAP (Muzaffar) NAP (Harun), Workers Party

(Menon), Ekota Party (Surajit Sengupta), etc. are too small and ineffective to be counted in national politics.

The so-called pro-China parties like Samyabadi Dal (Communist Party) of Touha, or Democratic Party, a conglomerate of various small and insignificant left and pseudoleft parties are directly or indirectly playing the second fiddle of the ruling party. Kazi Zafar Ahmed's United Peoples Party, once projecting a left image, is now seeking alliance with Mushtaq's Democratic League.

Parties on the right and far right include Khondakar, Mushtaq Ahmed's Democratic League, Khan Sabur's Muslim League, Moulana Rahim's Islamic Democratic League and Golam Azam's Jamaat-e-Islami. Mushtaq after coming out of the jail last year started his political campaign with a bang, but it appears that it has ended in a whimper. His only hope remains that some foreign power may some day put him into power through a conspiracy. The ML and IDL are organisationally inactive and ineffective though they have some members in parliament.

The only thriving party and growing menace is Jamaat-e-Islami. They are abusing the fair name of Islam to advance their dubious political cause.

They are spending lavishly and reportedly providing armed training to their fanatic cadres. They have killed many freedom fighters recently in various parts of the country and openly justified their antiliberation role in 1971 at press conferences and public meetings. Their activities have created serious tension in the political atmosphere and many people are openly expressing the fear of a civil war being imminent in Bangladesh.

The only organised political force in the country is Awami League. Notwithstanding some desertion at the top, the rank and file has demonstrated commendable organisational unity as well as loyalty and dedication to the progressive ideals of their late leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But the vacuum in leadership created by the assassination of Mujib and his close associates put a serious limitation to the growth and effectiveness of the organisation. The pro-imperialist and pro-status quo lobby in Awami League leadership, hand-in-glove with Mushtaq and Zia, prove to be a stumbling block in the development of the party both politically and organisationally. While paying lip-service, they are politically and ideologically opposed to Bangabandhu's Baksal concept and would like to retract from Mujib's path except for fear of being totally isolated from party workers. The last conference of Awami League also failed to give the party a clear sense of direction. . . . However one positive aspect of the conference is that unity of the party has been preserved and election of Sheikh Hasina as chairman of the presidium has ensured that the progressive political course set by the late Bangabandhu will be faithfully pursued. . . .