

ing out friendship in the region, and, at the same time, seeking strategic parity with advanced nations in the military and security areas.

However, India's limitation is now evident. In Southeast Asia, to which it has begun to rebuild its bridges, India, while no doubt a friend, is still a pariah. Southeast Asian nations, which are in the process of working out a strategic balance in their relationship with China and the United States, welcome India. But India must first show its leadership in its own region. The South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), comprised of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives, has become a moribund organization, paralyzed by the India-Pakistan conflict. India, by far the largest and most powerful nation in the grouping, has failed to provide any leadership to make the SAARC effective. This has been noted critically in Southeast Asia.

In addition, the Indian economy, which is oriented more to its domestic market than foreign markets, is slowing down again. The problems are typical—poor infrastructure, low literacy levels, non-utilization of a large section of its population, lack of modernization of core sectors, etc. The economic slowdown will provide fodder to the zealous reformers, and they will exert intense pressure to lower tariffs, reduce subsidies, and privatize core sector industries, nationalized banks, services, etc. The list goes on.

But, the fact remains that the basic industries, which were built up over the decades but not modernized adequately, will be destroyed with such an economic reform. The agricultural sector, already hit, will be devastated by the inundation of food products from outside. Dumping of cheap consumer goods by the Chinese manufacturers has already put a number of small-scale industries out of business. All of them got slaughtered on the altar of competitiveness and efficiency. It is a huge price to pay, and there is no end to paying that price once reform takes that route.

With the resolution of the Kashmir issue, the SAARC, with more than 1.5 billion people, a large number of whom are highly motivated and skilled, can bring about a change. Pakistan had moved away from the subcontinent to seek its identity with the West and the Middle East. The result was an unmitigated disaster, but the tendency still exists. The reality, however, is that Pakistan is bankrupt, despite its decades of efforts to develop a friendly association among the nations of the subcontinent.

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## Afghanistan

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# A Terrible Crime, But Take a Careful Look

by Ramtanu Maitra

One of the most shocking events of recent years is the planned destruction of ancient statues and artifacts of Afghanistan, by the orthodox Taliban regime. The act was justified by Taliban strongman Mullah Mohammad Omar, who called it nothing more than the mere destruction of "stones." It is evident that the ancient Fourth-Century Buddhas in the caves of Bamiyan have been badly damaged, if not totally destroyed.

The act generated worldwide indignation, and condemnations have poured in from far and near. Buddhist-majority countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam, have expressed shock and despair. So did the Buddhist Association of China. Some Muslim nations, not quite taken in by Mullah Mohammad Omar's justification, complained, and made it clear that they do not condone this act. Missing voices were also noted, and Saudi Arabia stands out among those. Iran, the neighboring Islamic nation with a Shia majority, even offered to take in the statues for keeps. The English-language *Iran Daily* published a feature denouncing the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist statues in Afghanistan, as "un-Islamic." The daily quoted Egypt's Mufti Sheikh Farid Wassel, that "such statues are only records of history. . . . Their presence does not in the least impinge on the Islamic faith." Egypt, he noted, "has been the venue for thousands, if not millions of statues and holy relics, mostly Pharaonic and Roman, without a single Muslim scholar saying their presence violated the principles of Islam." *Iran Daily* asked: If the Taliban studied in Islamic schools (Madrasas) in Pakistan, then "what kind of institutions are these that, instead of enlightening minds, have produced brains mired in bigotry, darkness, and intolerance?"

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, no friend of the Taliban, appealed to the international community to prevent this barbaric "act by uncultured people, who are not Muslims." UNESCO showed a lot of concern but, like what the UN does best, it did nothing to stop the vicious act by the Taliban.

### Killing Afghanistan's Soul

The most agonizing aspect of this irrational act is that the Afghans, who are not only Muslims, have just destroyed

what their ancestors built, and the world admired and cherished. These statues and works of art go back to the pre-Christian era of Kushans and Huns, who came to Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent from the hills and plains of Central Asia. The cosmopolitan culture which evolved from Bamiyan and became an inherent part of the Silk Route—Jalalabad, Kapisha, Kandahar, Herat, and Kabul—having traits of Indian, Iranian, and Hellenistic (Alexander the Great) traditions, spanning the Second through the Eleventh Century, will now be wiped from the pages of history. One observer said: “By destroying these statues and artifacts, the Taliban just killed Afghanistan’s soul.”

It is, however, not important to debate whether the statues were un-Islamic or the Taliban will become better Muslims now that they have destroyed these ancient “idols.” It can be safely assumed that Mullah Mohammad Omar is fully aware of the sanctity of the Kabah in the Holy City of Mecca, the center of worship, to which every Muslim is bound to make a pilgrimage (the Haj) at least once in his lifetime. The Kabah, to an “infidel,” is merely rectangular gray and black stones put together in the form of a building, supported by wooden pillars inside. It is safe to say that no Muslim, not even a Talib, would ever have the audacity to describe the Kabah as nothing more than merely pieces of stones.

The issue cannot be drowned by arguments and counter-arguments. While there is no question that the Taliban have endangered the very identity of Afghanistan—and this will be recognized and lamented upon by the future generations of Afghans—the answer to the question of why the authorities in Kabul chose to do what they did, is not hard to find. The Taliban have, over the months, destroyed artifacts kept at Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar, but only a handful have taken note of that. What is evident is that by going for an all-out destruction of Afghanistan’s ancient heritage, the Taliban have not only joined in a vengeful act, but are also trying to draw the world’s attention to the state of affairs within the country.

### **The ‘Great Game’ vs. the New Silk Road**

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Anglo-Americans revived the British Empire’s “Great Game.” With their Islamic allies, they converted Afghanistan into a laboratory where a vicious band of criminals, under the flag of pseudo-religious urgings, came together to drive out the godless Communists. This new Great Game was looking for its own victory, but was using the “Muslims” to earn it. The process, thus unleashed, created “modern” Afghanistan, a permanent source of instability that would stop cold, any hope for development, such as the Eurasian Land-Bridge—a new Silk Road—passing through this crossroads of the world. Criminals, thieves, and killers were brought into Afghanistan from prisons throughout the Islamic world and were trained with modern weapons to fight the proxy war against the Communists. To the Anglo-Ameri-

cans, it was better that way than it had been in Vietnam. Of course, heroin and guns flowed in large amounts to supplant the war efforts.

By the mid-1990s, the Taliban in their present form emerged. Although they existed all through a large part of Afghani history, they were never a dominant force in Afghanistan. Once the mighty Soviet Red Army turned its bent back, the West’s responsibility toward Afghanistan vanished like the proverbial camphor. What the Anglo-Americans left behind, however, is not simply the debris of war, but a vicious bunch of criminals who looted, raped, and pillaged throughout the country. These criminals not only destroyed whatever social order existed in Afghanistan, but, as well, spread their tentacles into Central Asia, China, Russia, and Kashmir, while under the pretense of espousing the cause of Islam.

The Taliban, who got hold of Kabul in 1996, have condoned everything that the criminals were doing. The Taliban, however, brought back a semblance of order into Afghan society. The Taliban, though extremely religious, condoned the massive opium production and supported terrorism. It is only recently that the Taliban have condemned opium production as un-Islamic.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding the Taliban’s irrational acts, the injustice done to the Afghans by the Anglo-Americans is difficult to accept. Washington, after using the Afghans to give the Soviets a bloody nose, abandoned them and then imposed rigid economic sanctions, because the most important anti-American terrorist, Osama bin Laden, is sheltered in Afghanistan. The Russians joined the sanctions mania, and helped to organize the UN sanctions against Afghanistan, joining hands with the United States, because the mercenaries, who were fighting for a separatist Chechnya against Russia, are also sheltered in Afghanistan. Moscow knows well that those terrorists were inside Afghanistan long before the Taliban came to power in Kabul.

But the sanctions by the United Nations, United States, and Russia had a crippling effect on the country. A 12-year-long drought, a 20-year-long war, and the severity of this past Winter have forced Afghans into starvation. Millions have left the country and thousands are expected to die of starvation this year, say UN reports. While the world rightly condemns the Taliban for the destruction of the mighty Bamiyan Buddhas, it has done almost nothing to alleviate this human tragedy, which has been unfolding for more than year in Afghanistan.

If the world had been less than active in helping a devastated Afghanistan to get back on its feet, it was never slow in condemning the Taliban, or the Afghans, for being orthodox or imposing the veil on women, or being drug-runners and mercenaries, and for sheltering Osama bin Laden. The destruction of archaeological treasures will bring in another volley of abuse from the entire world. On the ground, however, things remain the same.