



Policies & Perspectives



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An Octopus that Pressler Failed to Overcome

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One of the most important accomplishments of the Narendra Modi Government has been in convincing the Western world, especially the United States of America, about Pakistan's duplicity in fighting terrorism. It was partly a result of New Delhi's success in the matter that the global community refused to criticise the Surgical Strikes the Indian Armed Forces conducted late last year on militant bases in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Not only was there no censuring from the US, but that others such as Russia and France unambiguously backed the move.

Barely months into office, got the Trump Administration cracking on the issue. Islamabad can no longer take for granted the flow of American monetary aid for its military and civilian needs. In recent weeks, that money pipeline has been choked with various objections of and demands from Washington DC, and President Donald Trump appears in no great hurry to unclog it. The US sale of new F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan, for instance, remains uncertain. The Trump regime seems unwilling to subsidise the Pakistanis for the purchase. True, as things stand, Islamabad can still buy the planes at their market price, but the message has gone home. In any case, if Pakistan does shell out the full amount, it will lose face. Besides, it may not have that kind of money.

While all of this is a matter of great satisfaction for New Delhi, it would be simplistic to presume that the trend will remain irreversible. There have been instances in the past when the US went back on its tough posture and opened up its purse-strings to Pakistan without any real change for the better happening on the ground with regard to compliance by the latter. For many years since 9/11, Pakistan has played truant in the fight against global terrorism — while it mouthed its resolve after President George W Bush delivered the famous ultimatum to President Pervez Musharraf, that either Pakistan was with the US in the battle or against it — Islamabad in cahoots with the Pakistan Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) continued to provide safe havens to terrorist outfits such as the Taliban and the Haqqani network. Additionally, it continued to extend patronage to the likes of Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Hizbul Mujahideen which targeted India. And on the rare occasion when a truly belligerent US confronts it, Pakistan makes a couple of placating gestures. In the most recent case, after Washington DC raised strong doubts of Islamabad patronising the Haqqani network, a senior Pakistani Minister claimed that his forces will assist the US in neutralising the terror outfit provided the US gave specific evidence. More than a decade ago, it demonstrated much valour in supposedly joining the US global fight against terror, but that facade was ripped when the US located Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden in a Pakistani military township, and its Special Forces neutralised the prime 9/11 suspect.

The US had for long known of Pakistan's Janus-facedness and yet it continued to generously provide monetary help, of which a good part — according to several experts — went in fortifying the terrorist



outfits. *Why would any nation indulge in a self-defeating act? Why did the US? And why are there concerns that the new steely resolve of the Trump Administration may yet dissipate? Some answers to a few of these concerns are provided by former Senator Larry Pressler in his recently (July 2017) released book, 'Neighbours in Arms'. The context to his narrative is different but the key players that allowed Pakistan a free hand are the same. The lessons to be learned too are similar. Pressler's book deals with how and why the US turned a blind eye to Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, which led to an Indian response and eventually heightened the nuclear crisis in the Indian subcontinent. Quite in the same way, successive American administrations — from those of Presidents George HW Bush to Bill Clinton to George W Bush to even Barack Obama — deliberately ignored Pakistan's doublespeak on combating terrorism and lavishly funded it, often at American taxpayers' cost. In his book, Pressler identifies a host of vested interests which worked to keep the money flowing into Pakistan's coffers despite every reason flagged by respectable voices within and outside the US — and despite the famous Pressler amendment which he as Senator had brought and had been endorsed by US policy-makers. He has collectively called these interests the 'Octopus'. Decades ago, President Dwight Eisenhower had referred to much the same stranglehold when he spoke of the military-industrial-Congressional-scientific combine in influencing the course of political decisions.*

The Octopus which allowed American money to flow into Pakistan even as that country clandestinely (though not with much secrecy) developed its nuclear weapons capability, had also been active in propping up the failing state which Pakistan is, through large doses of monetary aid and military hardware on the pretext that they were needed to empower Islamabad to take on terrorists and enhance the ordinary Pakistanis' living conditions. Evidence that Pakistan was using the money and the imported equipment for anything but that, was brushed aside. American politicians needed funds for their expensive electoral campaigns, and that came, apart from other sources, through donations by industry (including the defence industry). For the defence manufacturing sector, Pakistan was an important market. Monetary aid gave the Americans some leverage which they used to try neutralising India. In the context of nuclear weapons' proliferation, Pressler says that even certain think-tanks and lobbyists became part of the Octopus. These may well have played a role in bailing out Pakistan on the issue of terrorism as well. Pressler's critics may argue that the former Senator's outbursts are the result of frustration. His eponymously named amendment had been cast aside, he lost a bid to the Senate as an independent candidate in 2014 from his home State of South Dakota, even as a serving Senator his strong and often controversial views had made him many enemies, he was biased in favour of India and against Pakistani — which created foreign policy hurdles for the US which was seeking to balance its interests in Pakistan and India. Allegations, like opinions, are free; facts are sacred. Pressler's anger over the ineffective implementation of the law which bears his name, is justified since it was hardly applied (just once) to the nuclear-proliferating Pakistan, and then later watered down and given a burial. His opposition to Pakistan and support for India were based on evidentiary material. Besides, there is some merit in his claim that the mighty Octopus had the last laugh when it conspired successfully to get him defeated in his 2014 bid for the Senate.



It's important, as mentioned earlier, to not just read Pressler's book in the context of the nuclearisation of the Indian subcontinent but also see it as a mirror to Pakistan on its promotion of terrorist organisations and the US's obstinacy in recognising the dangers ahead. Writing an introduction to the book, Pakistan's former Ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, says, "Within months of the Pressler Amendment's adoption, the US Defence Intelligence Agency reported that Pakistan had produced an atomic weapon on October 1985 'with onsite technical assistance' from China. The US intelligence community believed that Pakistan was producing enough highly enriched uranium for at least one atomic weapon. But still the (US) administration committed itself to providing \$4.02 billion in aid to Pakistan over the next six years, including additional F-16 aircraft." He also writes, in what is a linkage to the ratcheting up of Islamabad's backing to terror groups, that by the time the amendment was slapped against Pakistan after President Bush refused to certify that Pakistan didn't possess nuclear weapons, the damage had been done. "...Pakistan had already expanded support to radical Islamist groups fighting India in Jammu and Kashmir while continuing the fight in Afghanistan, eventually leading to the rise of Taliban there. Ironically, most American officials took years to recognise that their singular focus on Afghanistan, while ignoring other aspects of Pakistan's policy, was mistaken".

Nothing expresses better the influence of the Octopus than the years of the Reagan Administration, because it was during that tenure that the Pressler Amendment was signed into law. The initial signals were encouraging enough as Senator Pressler, who by then had become Chairman of the Arms Control Sub-Committee of the powerful Foreign Relations Committee, advanced his view to President Ronald Reagan that "we are helping Pakistan get nuclear weapons — and in fact our Pentagon is helping Pakistan pay for its nuclear weapons!" In one of his candid moments, President Reagan had said, "I've only heard one opinion in reducing nuclear weapons — everyone else wants limited increases. Why on earth don't we accept Senator Pressler's views?" But the Octopus was not to be underestimated. Before the Senator's views came to be accepted in the form of the Pressler Amendment, the tentacles were at work, even reaching the President. There then existed the Glenn-Symington Amendment which restricted aid to Pakistan and linked it to the latter's conduct on a responsible nuclear policy. Pressure writes, "Despite what the President said publicly and in those meetings with me, containing communism was far more important to him than Pakistan's efforts to get a nuclear weapon... He also made his priorities clear when he sought an exemption to the Glenn-Symington Amendment restrictions. He wanted to provide a steady stream of aid money and weapons to Pakistan. Lots of it." And so, a new section to the amendment was added which allowed the President to exempt Pakistan "in the national interest of the United States". This exemption was quickly put to use, with the Congress authorising a "six-year \$3.2 billion package of military and economic assistance to Pakistan". This was towards end-1981. Despite this fact, the Reagan Administration wanted a new law that would give him a permanent waiver from the Glenn-Symington Amendment.

Pressler was asked to draft a new law that would meet the approval of the Congress with regard to waivers based on strict conditions. The Senator wanted to give his amendment "more teeth" to prevent Pakistan from going nuclear. And thus came the final text of Section 620E of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961



(that Section is what we know as the Pressler Amendment). It was signed into law by President Reagan on August 8, 1985, but Pakistan, with the “help of the Octopus”, in Pressler’s words, “took our aid and flagrantly ignored the Pressler Amendment restrictions”. Pressler, in his book, offers another example of the power of the Octopus. He relates the story of Kenneth Edelman, then the Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Alderman had written a memo to President Reagan that the Pressler Amendment be enforced against Pakistan over its dubious nuclear programme and that all US aid should be suspended. In another communication, Edelman stated, “I recommend against any certificate now. It would be seen as ‘business-as-usual’ and take the pressure off Pakistan...” Pressler believes that Edelman’s stand “against the Octopus probably cost him the chance of advancing to the highest levels in the government. He stood up for what was right and he paid a price for it... he could have been a Secretary of State or Secretary of Defence if he had played the Octopus’s game”. The former Senator no doubt finds himself in the same boat.

While there are several other instances of this Octopus’s reach, which the former Senator offers in his book, just one more should suffice for now. He cites the flurry of activity after the Pressler Amendment was first enforced against Pakistan by President George H.W. Bush in 1990. A new organisation called the Pakistani American Congress was formed which not only took up Pakistan’s pet theme of ‘atrocities in Indian-occupied Kashmir’ but also the Pressler Amendment’s application. Syeda Abida Hussain, who became Pakistan’s new Ambassador to the United States, aggressively pleaded her country’s case. She “repeated her country’s official denial of their nuclear weapons programme”. Pressler then adds, “The best advocate Pakistan had during this era, however, was the Octopus, especially its friends in the Pentagon (the heart of the Octopus). Despite the Bush administration’s public punishment of Pakistan, the Pentagon continued to try to funnel aid and arms to Pakistan, using every back door and grammatical twist it could to squirm its way around the Pressler Amendment’s restrictions. In some cases, it just manipulated and downgraded intelligence reports about Pakistan’s covert efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Sometimes, Pentagon officials outright lied to Congress... They were, essentially, covering up for Pakistan.” Here, Pressler gives the example of another official, Richard Barlow, who went the Edelman way. An expert on weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Barlow exposed how Pakistan was “illegally procuring dual use components from all over the world and in the US. He discovered that they were doing it with the help of US officials”. The former Senator observes that Barlow was “publicly disgraced and had his reputation ruined by the Octopus — all because he dared to speak the truth”. Barlow was fired from the Pentagon. “They accused him of infidelity, they accused him of being an alcoholic, and they accused him of being psychologically unstable. They stripped him of his security clearance... The squeeze of the Octopus can be deadly.”

Pressler ends the book with a few prescriptions, two among them being: “Create a super US-India alliance”; and, “Declare Pakistan a terrorist state”. While these sentiments find resonance in India, New Delhi would want to wait and watch the next steps of the Trump Administration. After all, the Octopus is not dead — perhaps it never will die. But President Trump can keep it under check. Meanwhile, there is an Octopus in India too, though of a different kind, which seeks to promote misplaced neighbourly amity at the cost of this



country's interest. The campaign is led by out-of-work politicians, certain intellectuals and sections of the media. The monster needs to be contained.

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About VIF

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