
Interview: Mirza Aslam Beg



Create regional areas of economic interests

Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg (ret.) is the chairman of the Foundation for Research on National Development and Security (Friends) in Pakistan. The former Chief of Staff of Pakistan, General Beg is respected throughout the Islamic world as a military expert and a strategic analyst. He stood out in 1991 for his principled stand against the U.S.-led aggression against Iraq. General Beg was a participant in the Popular Arab and Islamic Conference, held on Dec. 2-4, 1993 in Khartoum, Sudan, where he was interviewed by our special correspondent.

EIR: General Beg, in your paper to this conference, you talk about the need to reawaken the “spirit of inquiry” among Muslims, through the establishment of think-tanks in the Islamic world. How do you see their functioning?

General Beg: Such think-tanks should primarily be in the private sector. There are a number of such private institutions in Pakistan and other Muslim countries, but they function practically under the government. Funded by the government, they naturally speak the same language as the government, and say what the government wants to hear. Such institutions, if they are independent, could contribute a lot. After having seen that there are many think-tanks in the United States (I counted 137), I decided to establish Friends, the Foundation for Research on National Development and Security.

EIR: What is the focus of your work?

General Beg: Ours is probably the only such institution in Pakistan which has found a place of its own and is functional. We have to our credit a number of publications, including books. We have developed working relationships with other institutions, in Jordan and Iran, for example, but these are under government control. What I’m suggesting is to develop institutions which could formulate independent considerations.

EIR: What does such cooperation entail?

General Beg: At the moment, it is limited to exchange of scholars, published material, periodic symposia, conferences, and seminars.

EIR: One aim of this conference, which you address in your

paper, is the search for Islamic unity. How should it proceed?

General Beg: They have been chasing Islamic unity in the entire Islamic world, and it has been very elusive. I think this will not be possible in the foreseeable future, but I think it is possible to achieve unity in a different way. If we create regional areas of economic interest, in the [Persian] Gulf, North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, etc., we can easily identify as a region geographically and politically, where there is so much commonality of economic interest. This would be in line with the modern trend of developments, such as the European economic market, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), of which Pakistan is also a member. Such economic groupings are fundamental to regional harmony and security. It is on the basis of this idea that we held an international seminar last November to bring countries of the ECO (Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey) together with China and the Central Asian countries, which are countries of unlimited resources, and share much in common because of their proximity.

EIR: We have drafted several economic development proposals for several of the regions you are referencing, including a “Productive Triangle” program for the development of the Eurasian continent, based on vast infrastructure projects, such as high-speed rail lines tracing the historic trade routes. These are projects to be undertaken as cooperative efforts by agreement among sovereign nations. Are you talking about something in this direction, or only trade relations?

General Beg: We combine both. Infrastructure is, of course, basic to such cooperation, to facilitate the movement of goods for trade between the countries, for example in the area of the Asian Regional Cooperation (ARC), which includes Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and China. These involve traditional trade routes that have been used throughout the known history of the region. The only thing is to apply modern technology; that would be fundamental to the idea of development. I go beyond that. I believe that such cooperation is a very strong element of security, because it links the interests of the cooperating countries so vitally that the security of the countries is guaranteed.

EIR: Can you talk about the concrete projects discussed at

your last meeting?

General Beg: There are bilateral and multilateral working relations among the ECO countries. The original ECO members—Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey—have been working together for the development of the region. Last year they brought new members into it, their next-door neighbors, the Central Asian republics. There have been a number of bilateral agreements between Iran and members of the Caspian Council. Turkey has established bilateral relations with some of the Central Asian countries, dealing with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The countries are bound together under the agreement to cooperate with each other according to the ECO concept; this does not inhibit them from establishing bilateral relations with other states.

The Central Asian states, which have resources, have suffered from lack of foreign exchange. Turkey has provided funds for development in Central Asia, also bringing in 10,000 people to educate them. The same with Iran, which has plenty of foreign exchange, and has provided \$4 billion for economic cooperation with Central Asia. They have also brought in a lot of people to educate and train them, introducing banking and modern methods of marketing. As for Pakistan, I think that the process has been slow because our approach and access to these countries have been difficult because of the difficulties obtaining there; the other reason is that we just do not have the foreign exchange to provide for Central Asia. Comparing ourselves to Iran and Turkey, we have these problems. Nonetheless, we have signed a lot of protocols with Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries.

EIR: Is there discussion of a development fund, to pool capital for such projects?

General Beg: There has to be an institution for financing by the participating countries. I think they are working out a central banking system that will be common to all the countries of the ECO. It has not yet materialized, but a lot of thought has been given to it. But otherwise there is the Islamic Bank which can help development of certain projects I have identified.

EIR: What is the role of advanced technologies in this perspective? Are you promoting nuclear energy?

General Beg: Yes, of course. But because of the problem we have, I think every country is shy of sharing their nuclear technology with participating countries. Pakistan has nuclear technology, as does Iran, but we have no program for nuclear technology. They have their pressure, too. Pakistan and Iran are both approaching China for this; Turkey, I don't know. Meeting the gap in energy through nuclear technology development is important, I think.

EIR: What other areas are you concentrating on in science and technology; are there specific areas for special research?

General Beg: No, we have not yet gone into specific areas, but we have concentrated in general on the need for acquiring modern technology and our ability to have it, whether nuclear, or electronics, or space technology. If we can acquire it, we can apply it for the good of our country.

EIR: How is Pakistan facing the "technological apartheid," i.e., denial of advanced technology, practiced by producer countries against the developing sector?

General Beg: My own experience with the western coun-

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tries, the United States, when I retired, is that it is very difficult to get technology. Or, it is very easy to get technology (it may not be the best) from neighbors such as China and from the ECO countries. Some western countries, not all, have been able to give us limited technologies which we have been able to absorb. That's why we have developed the idea that it is better to take the technology from within the family of members that we have, and not get involved in problems. There is essentially no technology which we cannot get, it is only a problem of spending the money and buying it.

EIR: You speak in your paper about seeking Islamic unity, but at the same time preserving and protecting national interests. Those who should be part of the Islamic unity, *Umma*, are nations. Pakistan is a nation-state. How do you reconcile the two realities? There are some here at this conference who reject the idea of the nation *tout court*.

General Beg: When we talk of a country like Sudan, it is a deprived nation. It has been exploited over the centuries and continues to be. . . . they have first to absorb the modern technologies. . . . date their national identity, as with all developing countries. But once they have reached stability, consolidated the national identity, and the values of democracy—in Islamic states it is the Islamic notion of democracy, and we have achieved a great deal of success in Pakistan (although we still have a long way to go)—then state by state, we will come to a point where we will want to involve ourselves in a larger community, placing less emphasis on the physical borders of

the country and depending more on economic cooperation in various fields. Then the concept of regional cooperation comes into focus.

EIR: Is this the "Islamic commonwealth" that you mention?

General Beg: This is an association of Islamic organizations, joining hands, for example with Malaysia, Brunei, and Bangladesh. Similarly, we can have regional arrangements for northern Africa, for the Central Asian states, which are a good example, because of their common economic and political background.

EIR: How do you view the dramatic developments in Russia, which is also an important player in the area?

General Beg: We believe Russia still maintains the potential of a great power, militarily and economically. It is a temporary setback it has suffered. I think the old ambitions will return and that it will be a matter of concern and conflict between Russia and the Central Asian republics and the Baltic nations as well. We have to see how it will be controlled. In this context, the element of the Central Asian states is very important. I mean, our interest must be *not to destabilize*. Give them a time of peace, to let them consolidate what they have, before they lose whatever they have gained in the last two years.

Boris Yeltsin still thinks that the external borders of the Central Asian states are the borders of Russia. From that point of view what has happened in the Central Asian republics, such as the changes of government in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, is not good for the stability of the countries. Out of their fear of the Muslim states of Central Asia trying to reassert their identity, I think the West has gone wrong to help the forces to bring back communist governments in those two states, which are very important. I think this has created an element of instability in the region. You have seen what has started in Tajikistan, in Azerbaijan. Unless we correct it carefully, it is bound to have an effect on the adjoining states. We have to be very careful about the implications of only caring for Russia. The European countries all join hands and give \$24 billion for aid to Russia. But what have they given the Central Asian republics? Only \$1 billion. They need much more aid than Russia.

EIR: How do you view the situation in Pakistan after the elections?

General Beg: They say it is stable, but in my judgment, it is not stable. We're bound to have repercussions, because the way political changes have been brought about makes all forces suspect. A man who enjoyed a great majority slowly has been ousted from power, which has been handed over to the opposition. It is a well-known fact that the opposition has the support of the United States. Mr. Nawaz Sharif made some major mistakes, but he did give a good fight and he stands fairly strong, politically. These factors, taken together,

will create problems for the new government. The new government depends on external sources and draws strength from those sources rather than doing something at home to strengthen the democratic setup. I think they will be creating problems for themselves.

EIR: What is your impression of Sudan?

General Beg: This is the first time that I've visited this part of the world. Sudan, and what I've seen in the last 4-5 days, depresses me. The Sudanese are struggling and trying to face the challenges posed to their security. You may realize that they have suffered a very, very long life of deprivation, for centuries, and for the first time now they have a sense of realization, to assert themselves as a nation, as a people. This has to be understood by the West. Putting pressure on them, by declaring them a terrorist state, is an error. This is their way of life, their style, to assert themselves. What does the West want? Do you want a socialist revolution, such as the one brought in by [Gaafar Mohamed] Nimeiri? Or an Iranian kind of revolution?

This is *their* way of life, asserting their will as a people, as a nation. It may not be the only way. But they have decided to do so. And they are a set of people who have achieved a great deal by uniting the nation. They will be able to work on their problems. This should be a matter of happiness for the rest of the world. But putting pressure on them, by cutting off all the foreign aid and assistance, which they need now, will be a crime as great as that of colonialism and exploitation.

This is a beautiful country, if you only bring technology here and give them the modern techniques of animal breeding, they can produce meat and wheat, and milk and cheese and butter, and export to the whole region and the world. But nobody's going to bring them technology. They may get the technology, but they don't have the money. Poor fellows, they just don't have the foreign exchange to buy anything. Their agricultural growth is 11%, unparalleled by any other country. But industrial growth is almost nil. They need to be helped. They have a future, particularly in this part of Africa, where they could have an impact on the entire region.

EIR: What is your view of the recent PLO-Israel agreement?

General Beg: No one knows what the intentions of [Prime Minister Yitzhak] Rabin are. But what is positive is that it has at least brought the Palestinians and the Israelis to reach a point of agreement which has not been there for the last 45 years, and if they can consolidate what they have, in the scope of finding greater peace in the region, perhaps the Palestinian state would be created, with high technology, as a window for the Arab world. This could show to the world, that countries that have been fighting for so many years, if they can sit together, they can create wonders. That's what they should try to achieve. Many hurdles lie in the way, of course.