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DOES SALMAN RUSHDIE EXIST?

Lessons in Threat Inflation

by *Faisal Devji*

The political meaning of the Salman Rushdie controversy at the recent Jaipur Literature Festival.

THE recent controversy over Salman Rushdie's non-appearance at the Jaipur Literary Festival has been widely understood in the stereotyped terms of a threat to the freedom of expression. The belligerence of those Muslims protesting Rushdie's presence, of course, as well as the eagerness of some Indian authorities to humour them, was entirely reprehensible. But lost in the anodyne narrative about free expression was also the controversy's political meaning, which I will argue had little to do either with Rushdie or indeed the offended religious sentiments of certain Muslims. Instead this celebrated author has been reduced to a kind of billboard upon which almost any cause can be advertised, and it is in this purely functional guise that he is recognized in India, whether by supporters for whom "Salman Rushdie" represents the long siege of free expression in that country, or detractors who gain visibility for a variety of unrelated agendas by threatening him. In this sense Rushdie, whose literary reputation has been in decline since *The Satanic Verses*, is no longer a writer at all but more like one of his own fictional characters, Gibreel Farishta to some and Mahound for others. The one thing not at issue in the Jaipur controversy was some theologically motivated attack on the freedom of expression.

Of course Rushdie's many defenders all recognize the opportunistic element in the threats leveled at him in Jaipur, tied as these were to the calculations of electoral politics in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where a number of parties are jockeying for the support of Muslim voters. This is why Rushdie's previous appearance at the festival, in 2007, and his visits to India more generally created no stir. But instead of attending more closely to these circumstances in order to think seriously about the changing place and politics of free speech in contemporary India, its proponents have lapsed into an anachronistic narrative about circumscribing the reach of religious dogma in social life. In doing so these individuals have betrayed an attitude as "theological" as that attributed to their enemies. None have expressed a scintilla of self-doubt about this narrative or bothered to submit the position of their opponents to critical scrutiny, even as they routinely berate the latter for behaving in exactly this manner. Rushdie himself led the way here, claiming quite falsely in a television interview with the Indian journalist Barkha Dutt that the famously nationalist seminary of Deoband, whose secretary-general had sought to prevent his visit to Jaipur, was responsible for the Taliban's emergence.

Rushdie's defenders claim that India's tolerance of threats against free expression has remained unchanged since 1988, when *The Satanic Verses* was first banned, and that this tolerance is on display today in the Indian government's efforts to win Muslim votes. This shows a decided contempt for history. Neglecting as they do the

great transformations that Indian society has undergone in the last two decades for an account in which everything is timeless, they are unable to grasp the nature even of those political circumstances making for the controversy in which they are engaged. Far from illustrating yet another example of pandering to “vote banks,” today’s politics of Muslim representation in Uttar Pradesh, but also in the country as a whole, is unprecedented in the history of independent India. For the country’s large population of impoverished and marginalized Muslims, lacking any credible leadership, stands today on the threshold of its most significant transformation since the partition of British India in 1947. Having quite understandably lost their political character with the creation of Pakistan that year, India’s Muslims have in the past half-century participated in their country’s politics mostly as self-seeking opportunists, supplicants, fixers or, at most, as the holders of a balance of power at the local level.

Today these Muslims are poised for inclusion in the vast system of reservations (positive discrimination or affirmative action in education and employment) that have in the last two decades propelled lower caste groups to political power in India. Problematic and contradictory though it is in many respects, the system of reservations nevertheless constitutes the primary way in which political integration and empowerment is now achieved in the country. It is because Muslims have not been integrated into India’s political process that they are amenable to “religious” forms of mobilization as well as militancy. Integrating Muslims by invoking caste reservations as a model, however, not only risks displacing religion as a mobilizing factor, but is already beginning to fragment this “community” along socio-economic lines, with “backward” groups preferred over “forward” ones. Attempts to create Muslim solidarity on a strictly religious basis, then, might well indicate a desire among some to forestall such an eventuality, creating media-amplified controversies like the one in Jaipur to jockey for position by in effect depoliticizing Muslims. For these forms of solidarity are invariably defensive and politically negative in nature, being incapable of proposing any vision of a future for the community. Given its lack of any popular response, however, this particular attempt seems to have failed as far as India’s Muslims are concerned.

None of this is of any concern to the defenders of

free expression, who are thus unable to understand the controversy that so preoccupies them, one in which Rushdie and his writing are, strictly speaking, irrelevant. This failure of understanding, I suspect, is built into the anachronistic language of freedom of expression, which is premised upon the existence of theological and other illiberal threats directed against it. But apart from some invocations of apostasy, which lent the radical novelty of Muslim protest in 1988 a suitably medieval veneer, this was not even the case in the original “Rushdie Affair,” when the closest Muslim protestors came to a theological argument was to demand that their religion be included under Britain’s blasphemy law. In other words the only traditionally religious element of that controversy had to do with Christianity, and with the desire of Muslim immigrants to be integrated into British society. Otherwise Muslims demonstrating against Rushdie referred to their feelings of outrage at his depiction of Muhammad by using the secular language of libel, defamation and hate-speech. Even the Ayatollah Khomeini’s infamous edict made no reference to any theological point, not least because his Shiite creed gives no credence to the story of scriptural interpolation upon which Rushdie’s offending book was based.

Great writers are meant to have a privileged insight into the societies and issues they analyze, but Rushdie was alone in focusing on the religious element of the controversy that overtook him. For the weight that The Satanic Verses gave the eminently theological issue of scriptural interpolation evoked no response from his Muslim foes. These men and women were concerned instead with defending a prophet who seems to have lost his religious status and become a ward of his followers, vulnerable to attack precisely because he was no longer a theological figure but integral rather for their personal identity. Indeed one reason why even the most virulent attacks on God give rise to no upheaval in the Muslim world, something that only insults to the Prophet and his Book are capable of doing, is because the former has suffered a kind of “death” while the latter has increasingly been divested of his metaphysical attributes. Providing as it did an occasion for the first great demonstration of Islam’s globalization, the “Rushdie Affair” also signaled the breakdown of traditional metaphysics and theological modes of authority to democratize Islam, as if in a Reformation of the kind that so many critics of

Muslim radicalism yearn for without realizing the violent consequences this event had for Christian Europe.

As an admirer of Rushdie's earlier work I remember being disappointed when *The Satanic Verses* first came out in 1988. It wasn't provocative enough in my eyes, being taken up with an undergraduate reading of a theological issue that had long become irrelevant in the Muslim world. I also found the book annoying because it made no attempt to address those whose beliefs it apparently dealt with, instead situating its author in a position familiar from colonial times, as the native informant there to traduce his people for the pleasure and plaudits of foreigners. Of course this did not justify threatening Rushdie with violence or even banning his book, but what I found interesting was the fact that in the course of the controversy his Muslim critics managed to forcibly insert themselves into the exclusive conversation he had set up with their religion as its subject. Unacceptable as they were, the threats against Rushdie offered him the opportunity to become a real hero in the cause of free expression. But he has never had the courage of his convictions, first voicing his contempt of Rajiv Gandhi for banning the book in a context where Indian citizens were being killed in police firing, then apologizing to the Iranian regime for writing it, only to recant once again when his contrition wasn't deemed to go far enough.

Even in Jaipur, where there was no credible threat to Rushdie's person, as he admitted in a television interview with Barkha Dutt, the great defender of free expression chose to stay away in order, he said, to protect others from possible violence. These are noble sentiments, no doubt, but crowds can be controlled and buildings secured, with Rushdie's arrival in the city capable of galvanizing

both the government and his supporters to face the threat they so persistently inveigh against. Was it not a risk worth taking for the cause of freedom of expression? But these apostles of the principle have always shirked displaying the kind of courage by which India's own freedom was won, instead calling for the deployment of the state's repressive force against their enemies. Well, they are entitled by law to such protection, but the inability to stand up for so dearly held a principle in its absence does little to inspire confidence. The only people who behaved with dignity during this sorry affair were the organizers of the Jaipur Literary Festival, who understood their duty to the organization, its sponsors, participants and audience, and in doing so realized the shallowness of the posturing over free expression that threatened to derail the event. Perhaps the refusal of any political party in the country to weigh in on this controversy, even if only to score debating points with a rival, has little to do with some absurd fear of alienating voters. It is motivated rather by the recognition of Rushdie's anachronism in today's India, with its many new problems and great promise for a democratic future.

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I am grateful to Shruti Kapila, with whom I talked and thought this piece through.

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BURMESE DAYS

by Kit Dawnay

The spate of reforms implemented in recent months by the government of Burma has raised the prospects of the country returning from pariah status. The changes have been dramatic, and highlight broader concerns about regional security.

SINCE taking office in March 2011, President Thein Sein has released Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, introduced new rights for workers, freed political prisoners, entered into talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) about its exchange rate regime, commenced

ceasefire negotiations with minority armies and prepared by-elections for April – polls which should return Aung San Suu Kyi to parliament.

In exchange, Burma is re-joining the international community. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) acceded in November 2011 to Napyidaw's request that it chair the body in 2014, a proposition once unthinkable in light of US opposition.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton then visited the country in December, meeting both Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi. ASEAN members such as Singapore and the Philippines have also called for an end to the US and EU sanctions regimes. The US has lifted some sanctions, although the most biting, such as the 2008 Burmese JADE Act,

remain in force. Andreas Piebalgs, the European Commissioner for International Development, also announced in February 2012 a EUR150 million commitment to Burmese development over the next two years.

The speed of the reforms, though, has raised doubts. The new regime has a strong flavour of the old. The 2008 constitution enshrines the Tatmadaw (the army) in government. A quarter of the seats in parliament are reserved to soldiers, a National Defence and Security Council injects military influence into policymaking (recalling Pakistan and Turkey), and the defence budget will absorb 14.4% of government spending in 2012. U Nu Shwe, the former overall leader, retains considerable influence. Accordingly, some commentators fear the reforms are simply a charade, while others raise concerns of a conservative backlash if they are not.

In the interim, though, the race to enter the market is on, and the prospects look good. Investment into Burma increased from US \$300 million in 2010 to over US\$20 billion in 2011. Revenues from gas sales to Thailand amount to about US\$2.5 billion a year, and may climb to US\$5 billion by 2015, improving government solvency. One core initiative is the US \$50 billion Dawei plan, which will see the development of a transport corridor across South East Asia. The Dawei plan is comprised of three phases: a major infrastructure development effort from 2010 to 2015, worth about US\$8.6 billion, by the Italian-Thai Development Company; the construction of Dawei port; and the establishment of an industrial estate costing up to US\$1.3 billion in a free trade zone. Sectors such as timber, oil and gas, rice and gems all look enticing.

The road to Burma is not necessarily paved with gold, of course. New entrants to the market must compete with established investors, such as those hailing from China, which in 2010 traded to the tune of US\$4.4 billion with Burma, and invested more than US\$9.6 billion in the country between 1988 and 2010. India is another competitor. Perhaps the most intense pressure, though, will come from Singaporean, South Korean and Thai companies, with groups like Samsung enjoying both experience of Burma and intrinsic commercial strength. Furthermore, corruption is a huge impediment to companies obliged to conform to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act or similar legislation. And yet a difficult business climate is still preferable to a closed door.

Hopes for commerce, though, should not ignore the strategic risk of doing business in Burma. The US "pivot" towards Asia could ignite regional competition with China. It is worth noting that Burma was an arena for proxy contest during the Cold War, albeit one overshadowed by the Vietnam

conflicts. The US supported Guomindang armies in Burma from 1949 until an early 1960s People's Liberation Army (PLA) offensive forced a retreat into Thailand. Beijing backed the Communist Party of Burma in its conflict with the government from 1967 until 1989, the same year that Vietnam pulled out of Cambodia, reducing regional tensions and facilitating the growth of ASEAN. The divided nature of the region then was clear; South Vietnam, Thailand and the US faced off against North Vietnam, the Soviet Union and, until 1972, China.

Arguably, divisions in continental South East Asia are again becoming discernible, even if they are less overt and more complex than in the Cold War years. One potential camp might include Thailand, a quavering US treaty partner, and Vietnam, which is seeking US support in the South China Sea dispute; and on the other side, Chinese clients Cambodia, Laos and Burma. Beijing may thus see Thein Sein's reforms as part of a US "rollback" strategy, and respond in kind. After all, China has also been flexing muscles. After the murder of 13 Chinese sailors in October 2011, Beijing

requested that Vientiane, Napyidaw and Bangkok agree to patrols by the People's Armed Police of lawless stretches of the upper Mekong. China's negotiators dropped their demands in December in light of Thai claims that cross-border patrols would require parliamentary approval, but the request alone points to a new assertiveness. Beijing could take a tougher stance, though, if insecurity continues to plague the rivers, or if Burma moves clearly into an American "camp".

Of course, the region is not divided into two armed stockades as in the 1970s. By contrast, all states seek to hedge between the US and China. Furthermore, economic links, both within the region and between the US and China, may mitigate against a major contest of wills. Burma's government may thus hope to introduce its reforms and move away from China's orbit at little cost.

Yet any deterioration in US-China relations could prompt demands for greater loyalty from either great power, heightening the risk of divisions. Accordingly, western companies need to factor in not just the political risk of a policy reversal in Burma, but also the strategic risk of tensions between the US and China, as they rush to sign deals in Napyidaw.

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MIDDLE EAST FOOD SECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

by Mari Luomi

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The global problems of food insecurity and climate change are in many ways entangled. As is well known, climate change is projected to severely impact global food security. Few, however, realise that agriculture, together with forestry and land use change, is responsible for roughly a third of global greenhouse gas emissions. Both problems also have the same fundamental causes: rapid population growth and rising living standards. But population control is largely a taboo, the North can't prevent the South from eating meat, and the latest UN climate conference in Durban proved that countries are still too worried about their short-term economic adversities to care about the planet's future. So the emerging scenario appears rather Darwinian. This setting has important, although partly divergent implications for the countries of the Arab Middle East.

In the past decade, largely due to oil revenue-induced economic growth, populations have grown at record rates, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. In this largely hot and arid region, renewable water sources are already scarce, both in absolute terms and given the current populations they are supposed to sustain. Still, around 80 per cent of fresh water resources in the Arab region are currently used up by agriculture.

Owing to political, cultural and psychological factors, many Middle Eastern governments have stubbornly continued to pursue national food self-sufficiency (which is not the same thing as food security), or at the least allowed the agricultural sector to keep recklessly soaking up what is left of domestic groundwater resources. Reasons include sustaining an important source of employment and income (sometimes of key political constituencies, as in Syria), unregulated cultivation and irrigation practices (like *khat* in Yemen), and perceptions of insecurity in an unstable region mix with national pride in food self-sufficiency (as with Saudi Arabia, among others).

Fortunately, government awareness of unsustainable water consumption patterns is rising. Data and analysis on the potential threats to food security from climate change are also starting to accumulate. The report *Rising Temperatures, Rising Tensions* (2009) by Oli Brown and Alex Crawford was the first to raise the issue of climate change-related security impacts in this already insecure region. Later reports, such as that by the NGO Arab Forum for Environment and

Development, have also examined the linkages between food production and climate change.

Generally speaking, there is high scientific confidence on climate change, but high uncertainty regarding its impacts on food security. Higher temperatures and loss of precipitation lead to lower crop yield, and precipitation patterns in general are expected to change in the Middle East. But projections of future precipitation levels give a somewhat mixed picture, disagreeing even in the direction of change (more or less rainfall). Sea level rise causes soil salinisation in coastal regions. Increases in extreme weather events, weather extremes and pests and diseases can also create negative impacts. Still, current water extraction levels are already so unsustainable in most Arab countries that these alone threaten future agricultural development. On the mitigation side, biofuels could take space from food crops, but this is arguably an unlikely scenario in the region given the current fossil fuel reserves and future prospects for solar energy.

In the Middle East the growing gap between the very or relatively fossil fuel-rich Gulf and the rest is a key determinant in shaping governments' new security agendas, including their responses to water and food-related challenges. While both groups of countries face similar challenges - including rising population and living standards, profligate irrigation patterns, and bad water management and related governance - the more resource rich Gulf states are in a more fortunate domestic situation. They can afford large-scale desalination and can, therefore, significantly postpone domestic agricultural adaptation to structural water scarcity, which might worsen as a result of accelerating climate change.

Given their fossil fuel abundance, the GCC governments will be able to sustain an illusion of limitless water resources and nourish their well-fed populations as long as there is oil or gas in the ground (or seabed) and global demand for fossil fuels is sustained. This enables the Gulf states to continue trading their oil monies for food. Although climate change adaptation isn't the main concern in the GCC when it comes to maintaining near-term water and food security, troubles loom on the horizon, since there are just as many uncertainties related to future global energy demand and prices as there are to regional climate change impacts.

Meanwhile, the Gulf monarchies' poorer neighbours are left to face the challenge of adaptation much earlier than most climate change-related impacts even begin to kick in. The moment for states like Syria, Yemen and Jordan to improve water management and governance systems and structures is therefore now. Increased public participation prompted by the Arab Spring, likely to increase people's sense of accountability and responsibility, will probably be the best chance for

these states to improve water consumption patterns and management and, consequently, longer-term domestic food security prospects.

Some wealthier states are still fighting against the storm, like bone-dry Qatar, with its ambitious domestic food production plans. But food will most likely be increasingly imported to Middle Eastern states, both proportionally and quantitatively, as populations grow and water resources dwindle. Food security for the GCC states, in particular, is therefore set to continue to come from far outside their borders.

Hence, the impacts of climate change on food security in the GCC are perhaps more globalised than anywhere else. GCC states, which import almost all their food from almost every imaginable country in the world, should now be closely examining reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change while negotiating their long-term strategic food trade agreements, and planning different kinds of foreign land leases, purchase agreements and business ventures. The GCC states will need to carefully diversify the sources of their future food imports, keeping in mind climate change, among other issues. In particular, the Gulf governments should carefully consider the moral and ethical dimensions of planning long-term land leases in developing countries, especially in Africa. In addition to food shortages and crises (like in Kenya and Sudan), these are also the usually the most vulnerable to climate change impacts.

For once, despite their wealth, there is not much the GCC states can do to improve their future food security in relation to climate change impacts. They are small emitters in the global scale and, due to existing climatic patterns, there is little the GCC states can do to increase domestic agricultural production in a sustainable manner. Economic diversification into non-oil sectors will also help indirectly by providing revenue for sustaining the increasing food import volumes in a post-oil era. There is one area, however, where Gulf oil exporters can contribute right now.

Qatar, the region's new mini-superpower, recently negotiated its way to hosting the next major UN climate conference. The 18th conference of parties of the United Nations Framework Conference on

Climate Change (UNFCCC) will be held in Doha in December 2012. Qatar is seeking to profile itself internationally in the area of food security, and has even managed to develop some locally based expertise in this area. However, it lacks sufficient domestic negotiating capacity in the UNFCCC context, and has a dubious reputation in the climate regime as the number one supporter of Saudi Arabia's obstructionist positions. Here, Qatar could do both itself and the UN climate regime a favour by devising a new, more balanced negotiating position around two things: the expertise and international networks it has built since the establishment of its food security programme in 2008, and the ethos of global partnerships and solidarity that has since come to mark the programme's public relations rhetoric. The UAE, with its young and dynamic negotiating team, could also provide brotherly support, as time

is running short. This way, Qatar would gain valuable international green credentials (which it now lacks) and a reputation as a responsible global player. Middle East adaptation issues (and not only impacts related to response measures) would also gain more global attention, and might spur badly needed regional cooperation in this area. This way the multilateral climate process might just avoid another scary moment on the brink of collapse.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This essay is the second part of a two-part series about the rise of food security in the Middle East and the Gulf.

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OUR COMPLICATED LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH TECHNOLOGY

by Scott Smith

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THE official end of the Iraq war came quietly at the end of a tumultuous year, and with the now-obligatory shots of the last units to roll across the border into Kuwait, a reversal of how it started in 2003. Only, we didn't view them in just one or two dimensions. Instead, we were able to watch the convoys pass out of the country the US has occupied for eight years from behind and overhead — a drone's-eye view. In the years since we were first shown "smart bomb" perspectives of the first Gulf War, we've become socially numb to the jittery black and white video of friend and foe alike scampering across desert terrain. This may be the first episode in which the public vantage point was the machine vision aspect of a robot shutting the door behind us.

Looking back over 2011 for big themes, one common thread emerged, punctuated at the end of the year by the Iraq withdrawal: our relationship with 'bots intensified and became more complex. I'm not just talking robots as strictly defined—mechanical automata that respond to our needs and demands. I mean all of the constituent pieces that may make them up: soft bits like artificial intelligence (AI), avatars, agents, malware bots, and so on, as well as their physical forms, from service 'bots to entertaining simulacra to simple DIY contraptions. It seems as though, over the course of the last year, our love-hate relationship with robots became, well... complicated.

I've touched on aspects of our ability to create and experiment with robotics cheaply, as well as our conflicted economic relationships with AI. But if we want to put things in artificial calendar terms, 2011 may have been the year when, like young parents, we started really looking at our own creations, thinking about their and our roles and interactions,

and began interacting with the robotic world as if it is a forgotten aspect of the animal kingdom, complete with its own animal psychology, anthropology, and perhaps even sociology. Designers, artists and technologists are exploring more deeply than ever before how we can domesticate something as threatening as drones, taking our first steps toward cataloguing their culture, and learning how to build a more social interaction with them. At the same time, we continue to sterilize them, launching mechanized proxy wars on the other side of the world that effectively dehumanize conflict.

An old fear point re-emerging in this unstable economic environment is the worry about robots stepping into our jobs, effectively rendering human labour obsolete. As I argued in November, to assume this is to assume AI can handle the necessary jumps from analysis to synthesis to abstraction. Still, the march is on, and we are struggling to understand how we will relate to our new mechanical co-workers. Interesting times lie

Designers, artists and technologists are exploring more deeply than ever before how we can domesticate something as threatening as drones, taking our first steps toward cataloguing their culture, and learning how to build a more social interaction with them.

ahead when some business owners replace low-wage, suicide-prone workers with robotic substitutes, as Foxconn's Terry Gou has announced he is doing by creating, in his words, a "robot kingdom" within his factories. So while these factories are staffed with machines that can fill demands without complaining, the factories themselves are producing kinder, gentler, smarter bots, like Siri, to keep us company in our daily, perhaps less employed, lives. Maybe this will become a new type of ethics issue - a labor relations case study for the later 21st century.

We are also starting to examine how robots, cognitive infants that they are, see us and our world, in some cases to help them live more comfortably alongside us. Matt Jones of London-

based design firm BERG talks about the sensor vernacular, "an aesthetic born of the grain of seeing/computation. Of computer-vision, of 3d-printing; of optimised, algorithmic sensor sweeps and compression artefacts. Of LIDAR and laser-speckle." James Bridle of Really Interesting Group labels these digitized, processed visuals, ridden with robotic artifacts, the New Aesthetic. He, like others, senses that the insight gained from contemplating the robot-filtered landscape is going to take us somewhere in understanding this complicated relationship.

We humans are also struggling as we dip in and out of the robot's sensory environment, experiencing more and more hours inside their processed worlds. The US military is evaluating how best to handle human-drone relationships among its pilots, according to US public radio station NPR, in part because of the stresses that arise through the remote-control arrangement of drone-based warfare. Cognitive dissonance is becoming a critical issue for those who spend so much time seeing the field of combat through the eyes of drones.

We'll need to get used to seeing the benign, geometric world of the sensor vernacular, as well as the unblinking, unsleeping view of the eye in the sky, and become more comfortable making decisions in both environments. As we develop more sociable, domesticated assistants, help-meets, and even protectors, I suspect that we will find ourselves being re-programming in much the same way domestic dogs and cats have been doing since they were first domesticated, quietly nudging us into their need-states more than we do with them into ours. We already talk of an impending drought of empathy as we drift deeper into computer-mediated society, generations raised

on steady diets of simulation increasingly distanced from the realities, necessities and benefits of human socialization. As fast as we try to adapt AIs to our own needs, it's a fair bet we'll find ourselves bending to theirs.

So in addition to all of the intense human events of 2011, I think the year is going to be seen as a period where we seriously started to look at each other — us, and the bots we build — and work out how we can co-exist with this new species we've introduced into our ecosystem. As we hasten our own technological progress and release more of these denizens into our environment, it's going to be a messy relationship, increasingly like a kind of cybernetic wildlife management.

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THE STATE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION

by Stephen Saideman

The year that just passed might very well be the most equivocal in some time. International institutions performed quite ably in several cases, helping to mitigate crises and facilitate political change. They also did quite poorly at preventing crisis and facilitating political change. In reviewing 2011, I want to highlight a few key bits of international infrastructure and the mixed impact they had. Specifically, the United Nations, NATO and the European Union did both more and less than we might have expected.

The United Nations played a funky role during the Libyan crisis, giving NATO the legitimacy it was looking for, even as NATO (thanks to France) pushed the mandate beyond the expectations of those voting for it. Much lesson learning occurred, so that Russia and probably China would not vote the same way again if given the opportunity. They have clearly seen votes on Syria as just that opportunity, showing that they will not approve another *carte blanche* even if NATO is not so

interested. The UN is very heavily committed in Congo, Darfur and South Sudan, but those conflicts got much less press this year, and I only realized how big these mission were when I had to teach about them.

NATO had a mixed year. The Alliance can count the Libyan effort as a big success, but Afghanistan and member state defence cuts raise questions about future resolve and capability. The effort in the skies over and in the seas near Libya was very, very reminiscent of the Kosovo campaign: it took much longer than expected, there was much division within NATO about whether to continue the operation, some countries bore a far heavier burden, and there was great reluctance to put troops on the ground. The aftermath of the air campaign left behind more questions than answers. At least in Kosovo, the questionable Kosovo Liberation Army had sufficient unity that NATO and the UN were able to deal with one problematic organization, unlike the threat of civil war among many that they had to contend with in the Libyan campaign. Still, NATO achieved regime change, which may or may not have been its explicit goal but was certainly necessary for protecting the population.

NATO's year in Afghanistan was also decidedly mixed. A stalwart, Canada, left Kandahar in 2011

and only came back to Kabul in a heavily caveated “behind the wire” mission. Statistics about greater control and less violence seemed incredible in the face of high-profile assassinations in southern Afghanistan and spectacular attacks in Kabul. It was also the beginning of transition, of handing over cities and provinces to Afghan leadership and moving NATO forces into the background. Significant questions still exist about how this is going, but the process is inevitable as the Dutch and the Canadians are not the only countries eager to leave. Even if casualties happen, the continued budget strain on Allied militaries would be reason enough to leave.

There’s the rub. Fiscal crises throughout the advanced democracies pose a greater constraint on future NATO operations than regrets over Afghanistan. With severe budget cuts even in the traditionally expeditionary countries of Great Britain and France, it is not clear that NATO will have much capability in a few years for even a relatively limited mission like Libya.

The European Union fared worse. Despite Europe’s proximity to North Africa, it was little more than a bystander to the Arab Spring, including the Libyan version. Indeed, reactions to the protests seemed more motivated by xenophobia than anything else. France and Italy wanted to revise Schengen border processes to limit the flow of refugees, ultimately raising one of the most severe challenges to the EU response to the Arab Spring. A borderless Europe is central to the identity of the EU, but it was its common currency, the euro -arguably a bit less central than the issue of members’ national borders - that was the subject of much wrangling, domestic politics ultimately trumping the institution’s best interests. The end of 2011 will not see the end of the euro crisis, but perhaps some resolution will appear in 2012. Or perhaps not.

Unexpectedly, the Arab League turned out to be the only international organization that improved its reputation over the course of 2011. It gave the UN and then NATO essential legitimacy to use force against Libya, even if the extent of the effort went beyond what was initially expected. The Arab League, which has long been a club of countries with little interest in any political change, eventually even sanctioned Syria. Relatively modest efforts, though nonetheless revolutionary.

What lessons can we draw from how international institutions reacted to various internal conflicts,

especially those spawned by the Arab Spring? First, as always, domestic politics (that dreaded political will) trumps most other interests. Politicians must react to domestic constraints, to public opinion, to the demands of the opposition. While President Obama had a freer hand in foreign policy than in domestic policy, freer is not free. Other leaders found their hands tied by caveats imposed by legislatures, or over-reacted to potential domestic resistance (Merkel). This reality is not new, but perhaps more severe in a time of budget crises and polarized political systems.

The second lesson is that even great powers have limited influence. The threat of force and other sanctions may not cause politicians in troubled states to bend, as their incentives mostly come from within. Assad of Syria is going to resist the international community because doing otherwise would mean the end of his rule. Qaddafi fought to the bitter end perhaps because surrender would have meant being subject to another international institution, the International Criminal Court. There has been much frustration that NATO has fallen short in Afghanistan, but the reality is that there is only so much even the most powerful military alliance can do. President Karzai has his own concerns, so he will not risk his position to fight corruption enough to build good governance and rule of law. Without these key pillars, US and its allies cannot sustain their military efforts.

So, the big lesson of 2011 is humility. International institutions and powerful countries can make a difference, and often do play an important role in shaping outcomes. But they cannot simply impose their will, due to the power of domestic political incentives in intervening and host states. Recognising the limits of institutions wouldn’t be a bad way to begin 2012.

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