**Stalemate**

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There is hardly anything ‘foreign’ about a country’s foreign policy. The internal political, economic and social indicators shape the course of action a country adopts to project and promote its national interest in the regional or international arena. Diplomacy works better in an economically sound or politically stable or socially amenable domestic milieu. No matter how carefully worded the arguments you put forth, your objectives are likely to remain elusive if these are not substantiated by an equally strong eco-political backdrop. Powerful speeches or flowery promises could earn you a day’s media coverage or perhaps someplace in ‘quotable quotes.’ However, words do not provide you with food security or a better environment. Neither do they aid in changing the mindset of a society.
The situation becomes quite enigmatic if you happen to be part of the present interim political setup in Islamabad.
It is then no surprise that Islamabad had to step back from ‘vehemently’ pleading for the ‘imminent humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Understandably, no one in the West seems concerned about the so-called ‘terrorist organisation’ ruling an opium-producing country and how it would feed forty million hungry mouths in the face of deepening poverty and a collapsing financial system. What is not understood is the fact that Pakistan still feels ‘obliged’ to defend Kabul on its ‘going the wrong way’. The Taliban have a spokesperson that might or might not be ‘cutting a sorry figure’ before the West, lamenting Afghan parents’ ‘not knowing how to feed their children’ or why ‘girls are deprived of rights to education’. Any idea why Islamabad should be answerable to the world for any so-called ‘mischievousness’ of the present Afghan government?
It is then no surprise that India got away with annexing an internationally disputed territory without facing any opposition from any corner of the world after slashing the ‘jugular vein’ of Pakistan. Remember Crimea? Besides changing the name of a highway or issuing a few open-ended strong statements through an octogenarian former diplomat or convening a couple of security dialogues, Islamabad perhaps did not have any other plausible response to offer. Any idea if the Foreign Office has updated its brief on the Jammu & Kashmir dispute?
It is then no surprise that the US, following a setback in Afghanistan, has neither forgotten nor forgiven a benign and casually uttered ‘absolutely not’ even after the man-in-charge has been demounted from center stage. The US still feels Pakistan’s importance in the region but in the context of counter-terrorism and security-related issues. Antony Blinken knew full well that his mentioning of Pak-US ‘trade and economic’ matters was just for the optics. The expected call from the White House is still pending. Islamabad may have to wait for the ‘right time’ to expect a breakthrough in its relations with the US.
It is then no surprise that the war in Ukraine continues unnoticed with ‘strongly worded statements’ emanating from the West gradually dissipating into thin air. The message was loud and clear. Ukraine must face the brunt of war by itself. Ironically, the world seemed more involved in calculating the economic and security risks for each country rather than finding ways to stop the war. Clearly, the world did not take the right steps in the right direction to manage the crisis let alone resolve the conflict. Any idea about how many people have lost their lives from both sides or how much economic or psychological damage has been inflicted upon Russia, Ukraine or the rest of the world? Under the circumstances, would the interim setup in Islamabad be expected to take a stand on the Ukraine crisis?
It is then no surprise that fear of any kind has lost its mojo. In response to any unlawful act, the United Nations and all others including the ‘neutrals’ will either look ignorant or quietly side with the oppressor while issuing strongly worded statements in favour of the oppressed. Ultimately, one will be required to safeguard one’s interests alone. It all boils down to one’s own security and welfare when it comes to taking a principled stand on any regional or international issue. Period.
The focus of PM Sharif’s government seems to rest on bringing some sanity in the economic arena so as to flash some catchy banners in the next election. Gaining additional political capital would always remain a cherished objective for any political party. Foreign Policy and that too under the stewardship of a Foreign Minister from another Party could hardly figure in the PML (N)’s checklist. Hence, one is not expecting PM Sharif’s government to pull a rabbit out of its hat on the foreign policy front. It is then no surprise that the foreign visits undertaken so far by the PM have produced no tangible results. On the other hand, the world, including the major powers are awaiting the installation of a ‘proper’ government in Islamabad to start negotiating on matters of mutual interest.
The present interim setup does not seem to even take cognizance of the grave issues facing the country’s foreign policy let alone putting Pakistan’s relations with its neighbours and other important countries on the right track. Rightly so, as presenting a comparatively non-controversial budget, acceptable to the monetarily squeezed population, was the foremost priority. The clouds of early elections also necessitate it to look toward easy targets in the domestic arena. Unfortunately, the foreign debt of Pakistan does not qualify as being odious in nature. Neither is there any plausible escape available to defraying the atrociously high oil and electricity prices. It is then no surprise that Islamabad is unable to go beyond taking baby-steps like abolishing or restoring the Saturday official holiday.
Frankly, even the present governmental setup might wish to have early elections. Then again, paradoxically, portfolio holders particularly the first-timers, are relishing the interlude and would like to enjoy the God-gifted moment of power.