**The political hitmen** [Columnist](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/)[Imran Malik](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/imran-malik/)

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John Perkins’ Confessions of an Economic Hitman lays down in great detail how the West exploits the vulnerabilities of its target states, cripples their economies and reduces them to the status of trapped vassal states. To this end they get the local stakeholders, the domestic political hitmen, be they the ruling royal dynasties, democratically elected governments, military dictators, autocrats, bureaucrats, businessmen, media personnel etc, to knowingly or unknowingly assist them in achieving their sordid objectives.  
Pakistan too has been a victim of such ruthless exploitation since its independence. The strategy all along has been two pronged. In phase one, the economic hitmen set the stage by making its economy hostage to the western countries (aid, loans, mega projects, debt diplomacy), their allies (the Gulf Arab States, Japan), the IFIs etc.

In phase two, the domestic political hitmen were exploited to help create the enabling political environment for this operation to succeed. Thus, the combined shenanigans of alien economic and domestic political hitmen have kept Pakistan eternally suffocated and shackled, its growth, progress and prosperity stunted, its economy subdued, its independence of thought and action curtailed, and its future uncertain.  
Pakistan’s political spectrum makes for a fascinating study of political ambitions, domestic political dynamics and imperatives and a convergence or clash of national and alien interests. These factors define the direction that politics in Pakistan will take and the roles that the politicians therein will play.  
Pakistan’s political spectrum depicts a rather dismal, dysfunctional, morally and ethically deficient, decrepit system where personal ambitions have trumped national interests at will. It is epitomised by a blatant lack of plausible political ideologies and philosophies. It is largely personality-centric and is by and large conspicuous only for the striking dearth of principles, character, integrity, honesty, self-respect, pride and dignity that one would normally associate with leaderships at the national level.

Our chequered political history, in the last five decades or so, has shown a damning proclivity towards corruption. It simmers top down to the lowest level. In almost all elections there has been a coterie of well-known carpetbaggers descending on the political scene with bags full of cash/dollars. They already have their targets, the weak and vulnerable elements in the body politic, earmarked. An odious sale-purchase of consciences ensues. Party affiliations change at the drop of a hat/dollar or promises of a role in government.  
This paves the political hitmen’s way into power to manipulate the system of governance (even justice) with impunity. It gives them unrestricted access to the national till. Once in power, they not only make up for their investments but also make a killing in profits—enough to finance their next elections and let them and their kin lead a privileged, ostentatious life at home and abroad.

The critical error of judgement that some prominent Pakistani political stalwarts have made is that they have plonked their ill-gotten wealth, businesses and properties in western capitals and other supposedly safe havens across the globe. This gives the economic hitmen/host countries a controlling and manipulative leverage over them. And when these politicians somehow wiggle their way into power, they invariably become susceptible to subtle or blatant coercion by these economic hitmen/countries.  
Any policies that they may make for their countries thereafter must not run counter to the interests of these economic hitmen/countries. Period. It boils down to a direct clash between their own and national interests. Their independence of thought and freedom of action is thus comprehensively compromised. This can be seen in practice in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.  
Its impact on pro-Putin Russian Oligarchs’ wealth, businesses and properties in the West has been nothing short of horrific. A lot of them have been pitilessly confiscated by the western governments under a self-styled sanctions’ regime.  
This is a classic example of how the ill-gotten wealth of many, parked in supposedly safe havens in the West and elsewhere, becomes a potent tool for coercion by the western powers. This spectre will put the fear of God, (and these western governments), in all those who have stashed their ill-gotten wealth in these supposed “safe havens”. Some Pakistanis too ought to be really worried.  
Interestingly, an age of defiance to US diktat seems to be sweeping the globe. This could be seen as a reflection of the shifting power calculus at the regional and global levels. China and Russia are now more inclined towards one another than at any other time in recent history.

We can see Russia defying the West in Europe by nonchalantly rubbishing its concerns in Georgia, Crimea and now in Ukraine. The West has not been able to go beyond meaningless rhetoric and double-edged economic sanctions. Ask the Europeans. The erstwhile friendly Gulf Arabs too have suddenly started preferring their own national interests to the US-led West’s. In South Asia, India has continuously thumbed its Hindutva nose at its strategic partners in the West by maintaining trade ties with Russia as afore.  
Has Pakistan too been caught up in this moment? It has always been pro-West, which has over the years treated it rather shabbily, arbitrarily, summarily and with scant respect and consideration. This has led Pakistan to forge a deep, abiding and continuously evolving multidimensional strategic partnership with China and is now opening up to Russia too, much to the West’s consternation.  
Furthermore, the passage of the BRI-CPEC through Pakistan on to the GMER, Africa and Europe on one side and Afghanistan and the CARs on the other has perhaps run afoul of western interests, which any sitting Pakistan Government might be required to redress. Pakistan’s large exports to the US and EU might become the leverage to influence its foreign policy options. For Pakistan it is not an either-or choice rather it is fashioning a much-needed balance in its foreign policy.  
This, in effect, could be the most defining moment in Pakistan’s evolution as a genuine, independent, self-respecting democracy or otherwise.