**Bhutto on foreign policy**

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Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (BBZ) has started his official career in the same position as his grandfather, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (ZAB). Given the geo-strategic challenges BBZ faces, it might help to revisit and reconsider the original thoughts of ZAB on sovereign equality and pragmatism in foreign policy that he so eloquently articulated in his book ‘The Myth of Independence’. The book was written in 1969, an odd period of crisis in Pakistan’s foreign policy. It was published by Oxford University Press and well received by Western policy circles and academia. Numerous academic reviews of the book were published in several journals.

The prose of the book is lucid, and seamlessly interlaces the passionate poetics of world politics and the steady logic of international relations. Interestingly, many of his future insights of world affairs are astounding. For example, he daringly predicts that US-China relations will witness “a turn in events in the middle seventies…. the intensity of the United States-China confrontation can not endure beyond the seventies.” His other three projections are also worth alluding to. They include the emergence of China as a paramount global power, the relative rise of a united Europe as a new power block and, lastly, the gradual weakening of the erstwhile Soviet Union. (The disintegration of the Soviet Union was perhaps unimaginable in the milieu of the late 1960s). His views on the dangerous consequences of the waning of the cold war are also closer to present reality.

The core issue of the book, however, revolves around the question of how weaker states should conduct their foreign policy in the age of ‘Global Powers’. Interestingly, notwithstanding his deep fascination and commitment to the idea of sovereignty, he appears to be more of a staunch realist in his approach towards international relations, foreign policy, and diplomacy. For example, he asserts that “history has not, so far, blessed any part of mankind with absolute tranquility.” Similarly, he underlines the fact that smaller and weaker states of the post-imperial era are confronted with the stark reality of sovereign inequality. The whole concept of ‘Great Power’ has been changed after the emergence of ‘Global Powers’, which are unprecedented in terms of their military, economic, territorial, and technological prowess.

His recommended conduct of foreign policy with a ‘Global Power’ is neither populist nor pessimist. The underlying message is that the independence of foreign policy lies in neither international isolation nor head-on collision with a ‘Global Power’. Rather, he argues that any meaningful chance of exercising independence in relations to a ‘Global Power’ is only possible by acquiring objective knowledge of their hard interests and keeping in mind the fluidity of international conflicts. Indeed, he vehemently criticizes old dogmas and lazy habits, subjective conclusions, predetermined positions, and one-dimensional diplomacy in international relations and foreign policy.

His three directions about the dealing of weaker states with a ‘Global Power’ are very instructive and worth pondering. First, he emphatically suggests an utmost avoidance of head-on collision with a Global Power. Except for certain unavoidable instances, an outright confrontation with a ‘Global Power’ is highly dangerous and hence counter-productive to the interests of weaker states. In his own words, “It is safer and more prudent to avoid a head-on collision with a ‘Global Power’… It is wiser to duck, detour, step aside, and enter from the back door.” He further illuminates, “The simple fact of the matter is that, in the long run, a Global Power is not likely to be outwitted, so it is better for a small nation to take a realistic attitude and evolve both policy and strategy on rational rather than on subjective lines.”

Second, in the case of unavoidable conflict, he suggests adopting the method of insulating or putting aside the point of conflict to establish working equilibrium and assume normal and friendly ties with a “Global Power….This would enable the state in question to enjoy rational latitude in maintaining better relations with those Global Powers whose interests coincide with its own.”

Third, as a point of caution, weaker states must not completely align themselves with the total interests of a ‘global power’. Rather, under no circumstances should their bilateral relations assume the character of multilateral obligations. In other words, bilateral relations of weaker states with any global power must not become a liability in terms of their relations with other nation-states. This principle is especially true in the context of Pakistan’s relations with America and China – the two bigger global powers increasingly drifting towards mutual confrontation and hostilities.

The book also offers curious insights about the fact of physical geography and the role of neighbourhoods in shaping the foreign policy of any country. It asserts that “many relations can be changed or influenced, but not the reality of the presence of a geographical neighbor. This is a permanent factor in the shaping of foreign policy.’”

Given this context, ZAB doesn’t see India as a permanent enemy but rather as a jingoistic neighbor that is incapable of accommodating the legitimate interests of Pakistan. He grudgingly says that Indians are not able to recognize “that the existence of Pakistan that keeps India in one piece…. If the evenly balanced scales of Pakistan tilt one way or the other, India’s equilibrium cannot remain unaffected.”

His second observation, that the US would never give preference to Pakistan over India, is also worth noting. In his own words, “neither during the darkest period of United States-Indian relations, nor during the brightest phase of the United States-Pakistan relations, did the United States take a stand as an ally of Pakistan in the Indo-Pakistan disputes.” Hence, Pakistan needs to keep in mind this stark reality and avoid any kind of triangulation while formulating her foreign policy towards both India and the United States. Perhaps, similar is also true with respect to China. It is dangerous and would invite intervention from the United States if Pakistan triangulates her relations with India and China.

Professor Hafeez Malik, one of the scholarly reviewers of the book in the 1970s, terms ZAB as a Prince Metternich like character of Pakistani politics who “demonstrates an acute sensibility to the concept of the balance of power”. Perhaps it is imperative to return to ZAB’s insights of foreign policy in the present time of crisis. Who else is best placed to do so than BBZ?

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