**Foreign Policy Blues**

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It’s been over six months since the unceremonious ouster of the Imran Khan-led government, which remains adamant that it was removed under directions from the DC Beltway. Contrary to this, it seems that local power politics, stemming from historical tendencies, had a primary role as pointed out in an earlier piece of mine.

One cannot deny that Khan’s popularity has skyrocketed to unprecedented levels, which were previously witnessed during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s era. Tapping into populism and religion, having concise public messaging, and a tattered economic outlook with a set of opponents whose politics is marred by tainted history has come down as a blessing for Khan and his allies.

Sections of the primary ruling party, in frustration, are implying a defeatist attitude which brings us to the key point: Are general elections on cards soon? Some say they’ll be held in due course’ while others think they’re just ‘around the corner’ given Khan’s intention to surround the capital in a matter of weeks subject to an election date announcement.

Nevertheless, if he does return to power, what kind of direction would Pakistan’s foreign policy take? Khan often boasts about an ‘independent’ foreign policy but what exactly does it entail? Islamabad’s balancing of its relations with Western and Eastern allies has remained a key hallmark in diplomacy.

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Khan gradually adopted a tone that damaged relations with the West and some Middle Eastern powers while diplomats were forced to step in for firefighting purposes. Of course, the United States (under the Democrats), was also not too keen to maintain cordial ties with Khan owing to several underlying factors pertaining to regional security. This itself remained a key cause of frostiness on both sides.

On the ground, the way Khan (in opposition) has tapped into anti-Americanism, the public is wary of America’s role. This sort of rhetoric by Khan and his party is unfruitful and they need to realise sooner than later if willing to have stable ties with Washington in the future. Apparently, some lobbying channels are open between his party and DC’s Beltway which should steer towards a positive trajectory.

Although President Biden’s recent ‘out of the blue’ remarks on the country’s nuclear weapons and ‘cohesion’ were played down by the State Department after the summoning of the US Ambassador Donald Blome and issuance of a strong dèmarche by Islamabad, this kind of statements from the US side is exactly the reason for mistrust to sustain in Islamabad regardless of who’s in power.

Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari may be from the millennial generation but his role in repairing ties with the West is noteworthy. His focus on trade-oriented ties with Washington via several interactions with Secretary of State Antony Blinken is a commendable step.

Ties with other key Western capitals such as Paris are back on track as well under the foreign minister’s watch with outgoing Foreign Office Spokesperson Asim Iftikhar Ahmed designated as the new ambassador after the post fell vacant in the summer of 2020.

It must also be pointed out that FATF may remove Pakistan from the grey list at its ongoing plenary session with State Minister for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar playing her role since the last session in June. But again, let’s not forget that most of FATF’s conditions were met by the former PTI government which should duly be given some credit.

Under Foreign Minister Bilawal, a statement by Germany’s Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock to resolve the issue of Kashmir via engaging the UN is something Pakistanis, Kashmiris or Indians don’t get to hear in normal circumstances. Of course, the German envoy in India Philipp Ackerman had to intervene to play down his own boss’ statement. A strange occurrence, to be honest.

On the other hand, the foreign minister’s statements on the Moscow-Kyiv conflict are quite similar to that of former PM Khan. Perhaps, it has something to do with state policy which all major political parties endorse. Similarly, his views on India’s receding secularism under the BJP shouldn’t be taken lightly since it has strong linkages to what’s happening in Kashmir.

Nevertheless, if Pakistan is to have a robust foreign policy in the long run, it needs to fix its domestic problems on a massive scale and for this to occur, the country’s movers and shakers need to look inwards rather than blame others for all miseries. A shift to economic diplomacy is the need of the hour in any case when history remained cruel thanks to a shaky neighbourhood and internal power dynamics that curtailed the state’s true potential.

Only then would it have a stronger standing in the international community at a time when societal, economic and environmental devastation is devouring the country like termites with national politics playing the role of a catalyst, which has spilt over to the streets of London, New York City and Washington DC.

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