**Prerequisites of an Independent Foreign Policy**

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Recently, there has been a lot of talk about honour and independence in international relations, specifically in foreign policy formulation. Imran Khan particularly has struck a chord with the population all across the country. Right or wrong, his narrative of a “foreign conspiracy” to stop his “independent foreign policy” is gaining traction within the masses. Many of his recent statements confirm this notion – two especially, “no country is respected unless it stands on its own two feet,” and “my independent foreign policy was clear from day one, if someone didn’t like it, then I don’t know about it.” While these comments are good rhetoric, they are not easy to implement. Consider.

This links back to the rebooted national security framework which I have expressed in previous opinion pieces as a “four pillar” system. The foremost is national identity. Then, comes the national purpose. The penultimate pillar is national interests. While the national security policy, along with strategies to execute this policy, is the final leg of this structure. The critical requirement for the national security framework is that all the pillars are working with each other – in harmony – as opposed to acting as contradicting forces. If the latter happens, the national security framework can come crashing down, very quickly and very gravely! This is what seems to be happening currently. Talk of a sovereign foreign policy is good but without a robust national security framework – particularly with no defined national interest – it mostly sounds hollow!

Talk of a sovereign foreign policy is good but without a robust national security framework, it almost sounds hollow!

I have elaboratively discussed all components of the national security framework in the past but national interests merit a repeat here. They are the penultimate pillar of the national security framework and can be best expressed by the French expression raison d’état, reason of state in English. National interests are generally the goals and aspirations of a nation which can guarantee its survival. These are also what states seek to protect or achieve in relation to each other. For Pakistan, the following national interests were what I listed and believe should be defined, disseminated and reiterated. One, Pakistan should become a nationally harmonious country. Two, it should become a secure state, especially with regard to its territory, citizens, and constitution. Three, Pakistan needs to be a successful economy and enhance the standard of its citizens through favourable social opportunities. Four, promote a morally stable and secure world governed by the rule of law. Five, initiate friendships globally by acting as a democratic and credible partner.

The astute amongst us would note that all five national interests are focused on the economic bounty, national security and favourable conditions. These – and the relevant national interests – are the lynchpin of an independent foreign policy! The same may be said of the complete national security framework but at least the securing of national interests – in one form or another – is key to honour and confidence in international relations! One must walk before one can run!

While it is very important to aspiring for honour, courage and respect, it is equally important to ensure that the foundations are there to enable one to do so! It just seems that at this critical juncture the cart is before the horse. No matter! At least the current political climate has opened up a national debate about what it means to have a sovereign foreign policy and that is how one progresses from idea to implementation.

It is not only Pakistan that will need to hold national interests and an independent foreign policy dear. Pakistan’s regional and global allies will tend to do the same. The recent announcement by Pakistan’s all-weather-friends to make bilateral loans conditional on IMF involvement indicates such. China, Saudi and UAE have said that they will discuss bilateral help once the next phase of the IMF programme is agreed upon. For Pakistan, this scenario contradicts the national interests espousing favourable regional and global conditions – which it should work on! For the others, it perhaps aligns with their national interest of being a credible and sensible nation on the world stage – which they should always desire to!

Glance through the global checkerboard and you would notice that countries that aim to be big players in this world are the ones who have acutely, passionately and successfully set up their national security framework – to an extent that they can now claim to have an independent foreign policy which secures their national interests further. As big a nation as the US and as small a city-state such as Singapore, both have followed the same blueprint, of national security framework first and a sovereign foreign policy second! Ultimately, it is a power-oriented world where the weak can’t demand, only plead and honour and sovereignty may not easily be the luxury of a struggling country. Therefore, it is important to get one’s priorities right and only then one can provide true impetus to an independent foreign policy!

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