**Salvaging statecraft**

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Behold the wreckage. China irritated. Saudi Arabia annoyed. US aggravated. EU infuriated. India euphoric. Muslim countries indifferent. IMF programme in jeopardy. FATF ‘grey’ list seemingly permanent. Our diplomats mauled verbally. Imran Khan (IK) has torpedoed Pakistan’s foreign relations with his lashing ego and megaphone diplomacy. It will take a massive diplomatic-salvage operation by the coming government to recover the ship of Pakistan’s statecraft.

The cliche has become horrifyingly true: IK’s loose lips have sunk Pakistan’s ship of state. During a rally in Islamabad this past Sunday, he waved a paper as alleged evidence of an international conspiracy that had been hatched to topple his government and was funding some ‘people’ in Pakistan against him. “Attempts are being made through foreign money to change the government in Pakistan,” IK said. “We know from what places attempts are being made to pressure us. We have been threatened in writing.”

There was no letter written by any country. IK’s claim was based on a diplomatic dispatch sent by Pakistan’s ambassador in Washington reporting on a conversation he had had with an American official. Pakistani security authorities have not found any evidence of an international conspiracy to oust IK. There was, therefore, neither mention of a conspiracy nor call for investigation in the March 31 communique of the National Security Committee (NSC).

The foreign-conspiracy accusation was the latest in an unrelenting series of IK’s diplomatic blunders since he assumed office. Some choice morsels: IK’s April 2019 interview to the New York Times, “Mr Modi’s government might actually be the best possible option for settling the Kashmir conflict”; and while standing with Iranian president Rouhani, “I know Iran has suffered from terrorism [perpetrated] by groups operating from Pakistan.”.

Upon IK’s return from the US in July 2019, his whole cabinet received him. Laden with garlands, he said that “I feel I have won the world cup” only for India to annex IIOJK ten days later. He announced a no-first-use of nuclear weapons in September 2019; informed the Council on Foreign Relations in New York that “The Pakistani Army, ISI, trained al-Qaida and all these troops to fight in Afghanistan. There were always links between – there had to be links, because they trained them”; proclaimed an independence referendum for Kashmir in February 2021; declared to a US entertainment channel last year that “The moment there is a settlement on Kashmir…We will not need to have nuclear deterrents”; and celebrated the US departure by lauding the Afghan people that they had “broken the shackles of slavery”.

IK’s egregiously ill-timed Russia visit on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine seems to have triggered a decisive unhinging and led to the Pakistani prime minister baiting European ambassadors publicly in a political rally of cotton-growers. The EU fracas was followed rapidly by IK lauding India publicly for having an ‘independent’ foreign policy that was favourable to its own people.

This is the very same India that IK revelled in calling fascist and the Indian prime minister as ‘Hitler’. The Indian policy allegedly favourable to its people encompasses the reprehensible repression of minorities in India, including murder of 100,000 plus Kashmiri men and women resisting India’s illegal occupation in Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK) for decades.

The wreckage of Pakistan’s statecraft roils the mind. Where and how should the new government begin the salvage operation? This salvage task must be performed in an international milieu that is Gramsci’s diagnosis writ large: “The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born.”

The principal reality of the new milieu 34 years after fall of the Berlin Wall is a United States exhausted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and weakened economically by slow growth; and a China that continues its rise unsteadily yet surely towards being the foremost rival to the US for world supremacy and has begun to flex its muscles.

Geopolitics has returned with a vengeance; the rise of China is unimpeded; the cold-war connection between democracy and economic prosperity looks more tenuous each year; the scarecrow of global terrorism has crumbled; technologies of communication are feeding conflict and authoritarianism; and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has once again put energy at the centre of global politics.

Pakistan is also facing a Gramscian dilemma. The principal factor driving our statecraft since inception has been the need for foreign aid to defend militarily against a hostile India and as support for authoritarian regimes. The foreign policy that emerged has been composed traditionally of four strands intertwined: alliance with the US, a patron-client relationship with Gulf countries strengthened conventionally by a common alliance with the US, our shallow friendship with China until 2015, and anxious relations with Afghanistan and Iran.

Pakistan is caught between its traditional alliances and present economic interests on one side and the future shape of the globe that might fracture along the China-Russia versus the West line. Pakistan has to avoid this binary, however complex and skillful the statecraft needed to achieve it. IK stumbled most catastrophically on both sides of this line and ruined Pakistan’s foreign relations.

What does the new government need to do? First of all, use the present government as a model of what not to do. Not to conduct megaphone diplomacy. Not to speak out of spite or frustration. In fact, not speak until absolutely necessary. Not harangue diplomats. Not appoint lackeys to positions demanding proficiency. Not abuse foreign policy as grist for the political mill.

What to do? Step one: appoint highly able individuals at the top posts at the Foreign Office. Two: review and analyse Pakistan’s interests ruthlessly by “fitting foundations to the ground on which they rest” as J L Gaddis recommends. This means, in the first instance, deepening the strategic and economic relation with China and nurturing simultaneously the relations with the US and Europe. Three: rebuild skillfully, patiently, and discretely our relationships with our benefactors and create relationships with future friends. Four: create a dialectic between foreign relations and security imperative. Five: make a sustained effort to open and connect the region economically. Six: begin to reinvent the Foreign Office as a 21-st century organisation that carries economic interests, democratic values, and instantaneous global communications as part of its DNA. Seven: provide adequate resources to the diplomats to do their job.

But most of all, we need a prime minister to do the impossible. As Michael Burlingame wrote of Lincoln, we need an elected prime minister “to be strong-willed without being willful, righteous without being self-righteous, and moral without being moralistic.” We need a statesman who can think and conduct statecraft simultaneously in “time, space, and scale”. We need a leader who will speak less, match our foreign-policy aspirations to our capabilities, and wield statecraft to safeguard our democracy and bring prosperity to our impoverished people.

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