**The coin has two sides**

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Medieval Europe viewed the first diplomats as inviolable and sacred angels or messengers from heaven to earth. Early traces of diplomacy could be found in Western Africa around the ninth century, Middle East, China and India. Modern diplomacy began in ancient Greece in Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey. First professional diplomats were produced by Byzantium ‘when their role as gatherers of information in their host states in the 12th century became increasingly vital to the survival of the Byzantine state.’ Around the same time, the envoys started getting written instructions. The emergence of NATO and the Warsaw Pact rightly placed a premium on the diplomatic art of strategic communication before, during and after any crisis. The term ambassador first appeared in Italy and subsequently in English in 1374 in Troilus and Criseyde by Chaucer.
Fast forward to the contemporary regional and international environment and one would realise that diplomacy still remains the wisest way of handling crises. Sun Tzu perceived that the supreme art of war was to subdue the enemy without fighting. Will Durant observed that to say nothing, especially when speaking, is half of diplomacy. But Churchill’s famous quote ‘Diplomacy is the art of telling people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions’ went a bit too far in explaining the true sphere of diplomatic influence.
To the dismay of diplomats of yesteryears, diplomacy and diplomats have been seen making headlines lately particularly in Pakistan and now in the US but for all the wrong reasons.
In the process of redefining the role of diplomats abroad, former PM Imran Khan, in May last year, gave a proper on-line bashing to Pakistani ambassadors mainly focusing on their indifferent attitude and delays in routine services particularly in the Middle East. However, a week later, Khan conceded that his address to the envoys should not have gone live but should have been rendered in closed doors. Then in March, the European diplomats based in Islamabad attracted severe criticism from Khan, denting relations with the EU, the number one export destination for Pakistan.
A few weeks later, Khan was seen brandishing a diplomatic cable or ‘letter’ at a rally accusing the US of hatching a ‘conspiracy’ against his government and ‘interfering’ in the internal affairs of Pakistan. The ensuing ‘cablegate’ involving a Pakistani diplomat still keeps resonating with the political landscape even after a new government in Islamabad has been put in place and the NSC has reconfirmed that there was no conspiracy to topple the PTI’s government.
Another diplomatic bomb has just been detonated. This time, the center of attraction is a career diplomat from the US. According to Chanakya, an envoy’s duties entail, inter alia, sending information to his king, acquiring allies, instigating dissention among the enemy’s friends and ascertaining secret information and upholding his king’s honour. However, former US ambassador to Pakistan, Richard Olson had some other ideas about diplomacy. He has added a different flavor in the field of diplomatic norms by going beyond his specified duties as the representative of his country and working only to promote his own country’s national interest. Olson has recently pleaded guilty to undisclosed lobbying for Qatar while still in service and soon after his retirement thus clearly violating a restriction on lobbying for a foreign country while in service and within a year after retirement.
Richard Olson joined the US State Department in 1982. Three-time recipient of the State Department’s Superior Honor Award, Presidential Distinguished Service Award and the Secretary of Defence Exceptional Civilian Service Award, he was a frequent visitor of Washington’s think-tanks on South Asian affairs, after retirement. Unlike his predecessor in Islamabad Cameron Munter who resigned soon after the 2011 US-raid in Abbottabad, Olson was charged for courting foreign work while in office; using his political influence to advance Qatari interests in Washington after his retirement; making false statements in ethics paperwork; violating laws restricting foreign lobbying by ex-federal officials; and, accepting a lavish trip to Qatar while still serving as a US envoy. Allegedly, Olson received $20,000 monthly payments from an unnamed Pakistani American lobbyist for the work.
Media reports further suggest that the lobbyist also flew Olson to London in early 2015 to meet an unidentified Bahraini businessperson who offered him a $300,000/-per-year contract at their company. In 2015, he was still serving his country as its envoy. ‘I wish to plead guilty to the offences charged, to waive trial in the Central District of California, and to dispose of the case in the District of Columbia in which I am present’, Olson wrote in a consent letter submitted by his lawyer to the court.
Not long ago, joining the Foreign Service was like a dream come true. Owing to a number of reasons, a CSS exam candidate in Pakistan might now put the Foreign Service at number four or five while mentioning his preferences to the FPSC. Stories about the treatment meted out to diplomats or how they are treating themselves are not helping either. Ambassador Olson’s voluntary guilty plea of the offences charged, leaves no doubt about his crossing the established limits of diplomatic norms and practices.
Nevertheless, looking at the long history of diplomacy, such sad incidents are few and far between. Similarly, the cablegate is also an exceptional incident and must be taken and construed as such. Serving one’s country as its representative abroad still remains an honourable profession in Pakistan and elsewhere. Working as a diplomat for thirty-five years in the Foreign Office, one knows for a fact that Pakistani diplomats are striving for excellence. Against all odds.