**The continuing foreign policy catastrophe**

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Appeasement of India, paralysis, vacillation, attack on diplomats, and loudspeaker diplomacy – all this and more has characterised the Imran Khan (IK) regime’s foreign policy in the last three years.

IK wasted 18 months after the US-Taliban Doha agreement in February 2020 and failed comprehensively to prepare for US withdrawal from Afghanistan. His regime has diminished the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), jeopardising the nation’s economic future and imperiling the strategic Pak-China relationship.

The prime minister’s appeasement of India encouraged Narendra Modi to annex and dissect Indian Illegally-Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK) in 2019 – a step India had dared not take in the previous 72 years of Indo-Pak rivalry.

IK has blundered repeatedly in speaking ignorantly and ill-advisedly on the most sensitive issues of national security and relations with foreign countries. The gaffes are far too numerous to count, but his most egregious blunders have been to tell The New York Times in April 2019 that, “Mr Modi’s government might actually be the best possible option for settling the Kashmir conflict” and to declare to a US entertainment channel in June 2021 that "The moment there is a settlement on Kashmir…We will not need to have nuclear deterrents."

IK kept parliament in the dark on Afghanistan until a superficial security briefing was held on July 1, 2021 – hours before the United States abandoned its principal airbase near Kabul. In the ensuing six weeks that culminated in the Taliban capture of Kabul, his government remained out of its depth and isolated diplomatically.

The PM’s statement the day after the Taliban capture of Kabul – that the Taliban had broken “the shackles of slavery” – and imprudent laudatory statements by the foreign minister, exposed the nation to criticism from Western commentators who are now rehashing their old story of a duplicitous, pro-Taliban Pakistan.

Despite the PTI government’s deferential facilitation of the US in releasing the Afghan Taliban leadership in 2018, Pak-US relations are in one of the deepest troughs in three-quarters of a century.

The US has downgraded de facto its diplomatic relations with Pakistan by not appointing a full ambassador since September 2018, the last time the US secretary of state visited Islamabad. Pak-US strategic dialogue remains suspended.

The recent chest-beating on US bases by PM IK, and the subsequent US clarification that no bases were ever requested, have exposed the shambolic nature of his diplomacy. So has his regime’s circus over US President Biden not having telephoned the Pakistani prime minister since Biden took office in January 2021.

This government’s confusion and the consequent on-again-off-again relations with China have perplexed and disturbed our ‘iron friend’. Anti-CPEC statements from ministers early during IK’s tenure and the subsequent de-prioritisation of CPEC projects sent a negative signal to China that has not been countermanded since.

China is also disturbed deeply by the recent surge of terrorist attacks on its nationals, particularly in Quetta and Dasu. The relationship gives the impression of stability only because of China’s sage policy of not conducting diplomacy by media statements.

IK’s appeasement of India was exposed glaringly when India responded to announcement of the Kartarpur corridor with strikes on Balakot, when Indian fighter aircraft violated Pakistan’s international border after 48 years. Indian Flight Lt Abhinandan’s hasty release by Pakistan had an effect opposite to what was intended. It hardened Modi’s stance during his victorious election campaign two months later.

What PM IK termed as the “feeling that I have come after winning the World Cup” upon return from Washington in July 2019 in actuality turned out ten days later to be the worst foreign-policy and security crisis for the country since the Fall of East Pakistan half a century ago.

This government’s response to the annexation of IIOJK has been inept, indecisive, and intellectually bankrupt. Apart from verbal condemnation, the prime minister’s only policy response has been a one-time 30-minute stand-in, a song, one renamed road, and an old map rehashed.

The weakness before India is highlighted by the prime minister’s repeated statement that Pakistan will not talk with India until the latter rolled back the annexation of IIOJK. Then he said the two neighbours might talk even if India offered merely a "roadmap" of the rollback. Strident statements by the PM on Pak-India talks have been belied by declared talks between intelligence chiefs of the two neighbours taking place in earnest since December 2020.

The much-touted consultations at the UNSC have not produced a single word in writing to support the Kashmiris’ right to self-determination and to castigate India for violating international law.

The PM’s speech to the 2019 UN General Assembly was bluster. Instead of a well-crafted roadmap of diplomatic, communication, kinetic, and legal actions for Pakistan, his rhetoric of forming a new bloc in Islamic countries aggravated Pakistan’s Gulf friends.

The much-touted revival of Pakistan’s longstanding relations with brotherly Muslim countries in the Middle East has been exposed. Not only did these countries refrain from condemning India’s annexation of IIOJK, some of them actually supported India and have awarded their highest honours to Indian PM Modi.

Since taking power, the IK government has retreated from former PM Nawaz Sharif’s 2013-18 pivot towards China, Russia, and Central Asia, which culminated in Pakistan’s full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017. IK’s pivot towards the US has not delivered.

In its haste to conclude the 2019 IMF deal, this regime compromised on national security by agreeing to the formal mention of money laundering in the document, thus linking IMF tranches directly to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

IK’s panic in dealing with the FATF led to his government bulldozing in parliament a spate of draconian legislation that violates constitutional rights of Pakistan’s citizens and goes beyond what even longstanding FATF member-countries have themselves enacted.

The prime minister's claim of knowing the West more than anyone was betrayed as a hollow boast when in April this year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for a review of the 2014 GSP+ trade concessions granted to Pakistan due to concerns regarding human rights violations, including attacks on journalists. It is no coincidence that for the last one year, the position of Pakistan’s trade representative in Brussels has been vacant. In its September 16 resolution on Afghanistan, the EU Parliament once again instructed the EU diplomatic service to consider if there is reason to immediately review Pakistan’s eligibility for GSP+ status.

The PM’s ill-informed public attack in June 2021 on Pakistan’s foreign service stirred an uproar amongst serving Pakistani diplomats as well as former ambassadors. The furor forced the prime minister to retract his statement, but the damage is done and it is deep.

IK’s vacillating foreign policy has exasperated our longstanding allies, and comforted India. He has exposed us perilously to financial blackmail by major Western powers; and has rendered us helpless in the face of Indian aggression, and incapacitated over Afghanistan. The catastrophe shows no sign of abating.

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