**The letter controversy**

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Pakistan has some unique similarities with Turkey, particularly in the context of their bilateral relations with the US. Because of their prized geo-strategic locations, both countries have remained key US allies throughout their respective histories.

Both Pakistan and Turkey have had US military bases on their soil, have remained under military rules for a long time and have remained among the largest recipients of US economic and military aid as well as have had reasonable access to US military-industrial complex. It is worth remembering that, like Pakistan, Turkey was also a key US ally and a member of the US-carved defence alliance: Cento (Central Treaty Organization, originally known as the Baghdad Pact but renamed in 1959 after Iraq pulled out of the coalition following a bloody military coup that overthrew the Hashemite monarchy in 1958).

Another strange parallel is that like Pakistan, Turkey also had to face US sanctions and an arms embargo when it carried out military action in Cyprus, despite being a Nato member. The US enforced an embargo on Pakistan during the 1965 Pakistan-India war despite the fact that Pakistan was the only South Asian country with membership in two US-sponsored military alliances: Seato and Cento.

Now there is another addition to this uniqueness of Pakistan/Turkey-US engagements and estrangements: the ‘letter-gate’ controversy which will have lasting constitutional, political, economic and diplomatic implications for Pakistan. I come to the US ‘letter diplomacy’ with Turkey later.

Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Qasim Suri had dismissed the no-confidence motion against the PTI, calling it a US-hatched conspiracy for a regime change in Pakistan. The whole matter was based on a communication between Pakistan’s envoy to the US and US State Department official Donald Lu. While US authorities have rejected the accusation as baseless, PTI diehard supporters will have none of it as whatever their leader utters, it turns out to be a holy grail for them. While the contents of the said memo have been shared with the some cabinet members and the National Security Committee, the nation is still in the dark whether the PTI leadership has made a mountain out of a molehill or was there actually some foreign-aided foul play involved in bringing the no-confidence motion. The PTI, however, has made it a ploy to whip up nationalistic sentiments claiming to be the only party that defends sovereignty against foreign dictates and manipulation.

For a country like Pakistan with over 220 million people, where “64 percent of the country’s population is under the age of 29, with some 30 percent between the ages of 15 and 29”, where there are 23 million out-of-school children and 22 million enrolled in low-quality government schools, nothing sells better than ‘religion’ and ‘anti-Americanism’. These two commodities are enough to absolve you of all your failings and blunders. Anything against the US sells very well and particularly if it comes from the tongue of a populist demagogue like Imran Khan Behold my dear gullible countrymen, here comes part II of the IK show: a new era of ‘exclusivism’ and ‘otherisation’. Fortunately, the Supreme Court, in its landmark verdict has restored the National Assembly and nullified Deputy Speaker Qasim Suri's ruling, which has been termed by PTI lawmakers as ‘a judicial coup’.

In contrast to the threat letter publicized by the PTI as well as the actual contents and the message therein (explicit or implicit) remains shrouded in mystery, the two letters delivered to Turkey from the US stand in stark contrast as they were open and public.

In October 2019, the White House released a letter duly signed by former president Trump and addressed to President Erdogan of Turkey. The administration offered it as tangible evidence that the American president was neither complacent nor complicit in what was happening in the region in the context of increasing Turkish ‘belligerence’ in Syria.

“Let’s work out a good deal!”, president Trump had written his in(famous) letter of October 9, the day Turkish security forces pounded northern Syria. “You don’t want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don’t want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy and I will”. Trump, an equally populist rabble-rouser, advised President Erdogan not to act rashly as “History will look upon you favorably if you get this done the right and humane way…It will look upon you forever as the devil if good things don’t happen. Don’t be a tough guy. Don’t be a fool!”

As expected, Turkey was deeply offended by this blunt and threatening mode of correspondence. Turkish officials disclosed to some media outlets that the letter was an insult to the Turkish nation and it so infuriated President Erdogan that he threw it in the bin. Also, President Erdogan accused former president Trump of having broken with “diplomatic and political courtesy”. He told reporters in Istanbul that “We will not forget this lack of respect”.

While the overall situation somehow remained normal as sanity prevailed and the crisis did not balloon to an unmanageable situation, this letter was reminiscent of another historic letter of US president Johnson that he had sent to the-then prime minister of Turkey, Ismet Inonu on June 5, 1964.

In the midst of the Turkish-Greek dispute over Cyprus, Turkey was thinking of a military intervention to contain the Greek Cypriots and protect the rights of the Turkish Cypriots. However, on June 5, 1964, in his letter to Turkish PM Inonu, US President Johnson dissuaded Turkey from a military incursion in Cyprus. This open and blunt gesture of no-help-in-crisis seriously strained bilateral ties between the two allies. The letter clearly stated that Turkey’s military intervention could lead to a war between Greece and Turkey, two Nato members. Furthermore, the letter argued that if Turkey’s military campaign led to a direct Soviet involvement on behalf of Cyprus, then Nato had no liability to intervene in the matter on behalf of Turkey.

The Johnson letter was a deep shock to the Turks and created a furore in the country about the trustworthiness of the US as an ally. There were ‘anti-American demonstrations by Turkish students’ in universities and various cities across the country. In his research paper titled ‘The Johnson Letter Revisited’, Bolukbasi states that “the impact of the Johnson Letter was so powerful that most Turks considered it a solemn indication that the US controlled everything in Turkey, and that it even directed Turkish foreign policy”. Although Turkey was among the largest recipients of US economic and military aid during these years, there was also a deep sense of patriotism and nationalism that Turkey must not compromise on its sovereignty and core national interests.

While IK and his party are hell-bent to exploit the diplomatic cable and make it a narrative in the coming polls, there is no comparison of the three letters. The veracity of the letter (its actual contents) Mr Khan and his aides have been claiming as a US-backed conspiracy to put an end to his ‘illustrious’ regime is still wrapped in several layers of mystery. In contrast, the two letters dispatched by Washington to Ankara were a real and clear ‘message’ of how to coerce an ally.

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