**What independent policy?**

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When Prime Minister Imran Khan waved a piece of paper in a public rally held on March 27, claiming that it was a threat letter from a foreign power and that a conspiracy was being unfurled against him – similar to that against the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – for pursuing an independent foreign policy, it sounded quite bizarre to me.

The way Imran Khan built this narrative strongly implied that it was a threat directly from the highest echelons of the country concerned. I have been assigned to diplomatic assignments in a number of countries and know for sure that no country would ever threaten another country in writing, because it is not a diplomatic norm to indulge in such rash activities.

Later, it was revealed that the letter was not from the government of the country concerned, but a telegramme sent by our ambassador in the US and was based on his meeting with an assistant secretary of state where the situation in Pakistan and relations between the two countries came under discussion. The secretary reportedly expressed his annoyance over Pakistan’s stance on the Russian-Ukraine conflict and Imran Khan’s open criticism against the US and the EU.

It is diplomatic practice that ambassadors keep their governments informed about the developments in the country of their accreditation, particularly regarding issues of bilateral and multilateral concern, through telegrammes which are classified as secret documents. I think it was wrong on Imran Khan’s part to indulge in such theatrics. He probably does not understand the repercussions of his indiscretion.

If the US was really angry with him for his previous rhetoric, his recent tactics to reap political advantage through this alleged threat would annoy it even further, with Pakistan bearing all the accompanying consequences. Relations between any two countries are not maintained this way, and the preferred choice is to deal with all issues through diplomatic channels.

I am also intrigued by his assertion that he is being targeted for pursuing an independent foreign policy. It may sound a brave approach to his die-hard followers who are never tired of singing his praises for having challenged a superpower, but the fact is that it is a careless action by the chief executive of a country to rile a superpower in such a manner. Whoever says that Pakistan can afford to follow an independent foreign policy is either unaware of the current global situation or trying to fool his target audience. Bellicose blustering in the domain of diplomacy has a price, particularly when it is done against a superpower and its powerful allies.

Handling relations with other countries, particularly a superpower like the US, needs utmost caution and pragmatism. If the US and the EU really feel incensed by Imran’s indiscretion, it could prove harmful for the country in many ways. Pakistan is also likely to find it difficult to come out of the grey list of the FATF, without a nod from the US. Also, the superpower could easily use its influence on international lending agencies to stop loans to Pakistan, and above all the EU could withdraw Pakistan’s GSP plus status, ruining our textile industry.

Countries like Pakistan cannot afford to pursue an independent foreign policy. How far a country can manipulate and manage its foreign relations depends on its worth in the comity of nations, reflected through its economic strength, military prowess and soft power. A country with a begging bowl simply cannot think of pursuing an independent course, unlike what Imran Khan is trying to make the nation believe to advance his political agenda on the internal front. He is a complete failure on the external front as he lacks the acumen to understand the dynamics of global politics.

Even on the internal front, he has extremely disappointed his followers and earned the ire of millions of people who have been hit hard by double-digit inflation. He also has a dismal record with regard to having working relations with the opposition, an essential requirement in a democratic setup. The result is the perennial political instability in the country. He has lowered the prestige of parliament by ruling the country through ordinances. The media has been on the receiving side of the harshness of such actions. The much-hyped accountability process proved to be nothing but political vendetta against the government’s political opponents. This impression has been reinforced by repeated observations by the superior courts. There could not have been a more serious indictment of the PTI regime for its foul play than this.

The current situation is surely a sequel to his attempts to push the opposition to the wall. Imran Khan’s transition to a traditional demagogue with the uncanny propensity to reach the corridors of power and then cling to it by all means – fair and unfair – does not endear him to the public. However, he is still under the impression that he is the country’s most popular political leader and has ignored the fact that the PTI lost all the 17 by-elections that were held for both NA and PA seats. The party also lost cantonment elections and also suffered defeat in the first phase of the local bodies elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

Imran Khan is facing revolt in the ranks of his own party. At least 22 PTI lawmakers attended the recently held dinner hosted by the opposition. The PDM now enjoys the support of 197 members of the National Assembly, after some of the allies of the government including the MQM-P decided to support the no-confidence motion against the prime minister. Now that he is on his way out, one hopes that he will learn lessons from the experiences he has had as the chief executive of the country and from political blunders he committed.

Even though the PDM is trying to use its constitutional right to oust the prime minister from power, the move is not desirable from the perspective of reinforcing democracy and the much-needed political stability in the country. Our politicians need to rise above their vested interests and refrain from destabilizing a sitting government before the completion of its mandated tenure.

If a government fails to perform, the people will give their judgement in the next polls. This vicious circle of undermining the mandate of the people must stop.

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