**Words matter in foreign policy**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-07-05

FOREIGN policy is serious business and rightly described as a country`s first line of defence. Policy formulation and policy articulation both require careful thought and judgement. How policy is publicly articulated can make it more or less effective and impact on relations with other countries. In diplomacy it is essential to know when not to publicly say something and when to speak. Words have consequences, intended or unintended. Words on foreign policy can affect for good or ill Pakistan`s diplomatic relations, how the world sees us and international opinion. As no line separates what is spoken for domestic consumption and what is heard abroad it is important to carefully weigh words and be judicious in making foreign policy assertions.

These considerations seem to have been ignored in foreign policy statements and interviews by the government`s top leaders, causing unnecessary confusion and slip-ups, which are unhelpful for the country. For a start, too many PTI ministers, whose portfolios are unrelated to foreign affairs, voice public views on international issues often at variance with what their colleagues are saying.

Consider the recent FATF meeting. At least three ministers in addition to the foreign minister commented on its outcome. One minister even said Pakistan`s retention on the `grey list` was due to its nuclear status! This isn`t the only issue on which differing voices have been heard. At a perilous moment in Afghanistan whose f ate involves serious implications for Pakistan some ministers have been airing views which don`t necessarily accord with of ficial policy.

Consistency in of ficial pronouncements is essential so that clarity in policy is conveyed which leaves no room for doubt about Pakistan`s interests and goals and position on specific issues. But this aim is compromised when those holding other portfolios mount the airwaves with little knowledge and only to seek publicity.

Even those responsible for articulating foreign policy should consider if speaking too often a presser or TV appearance every day is prudent or productive. Making daily statements minimises their significance. It also heightens the risk of making mistakes and gaffes that result in avoidableembarrassment. This is evident from the frequency with which remarks by some ministers have had to be clarified or disavowed. Wise political leaders strike a balance between raising their profile and engaging in overexposure. This also apphes to those with foreign policy responsibilities. Some explanations are best left to spokespersons.

Another aspect to enunciation of foreign policy by the government has to do with its populist politics and the seemingly irresistible compulsion to play to the public gallery. This phenomenon is also evidenced in other countries where populism holds sway. Of course, it is important to explain policy to the public and build national consensus on foreign policy goals and initiatives. But that is quite dif ferent from making bombastic or provocative pronouncements aimed only at the local audience, which have direct implications for Pakistan`s ties with other countries.

Again, playing to the gallery is neither new nor exclusive to Pakistanileaders. Butlike elsewhere,it creates avoidable problems and complications. A populist approach to foreign policy that involves excessive recourse to statements designed to appeal to people`s emotions at home can end up with the country being. perceived abroad as unpredictable and non-serious in its international dealings.

Casting aspersions or attributing malign motives to erstwhile friendly countries hardly helps to advance the country`s goals. What is said to a local audience resonates abroad and is consequential.

Another tendency of some ministers is to publicly criticise, even castigate, an otherwise friendly country or multilateral body when they are not supportive of Pakistan`s position. At times an assessment reached in in-house discussions that should stay in-house is publicly voiced. An example is public criticism of the OIC not long ago. The question is whether a public attack, rather than privately conveying misgivings and mounting pressure, will urge an organisation or country to change course? Or will a public rebuke further reinforce their position? This also happened with a state with whom Pakistan has a crucial relationship and resulted in a setback that took a year to rectify. The most recent case in point concerns a multilateral body, FATF. For senior ministers to publicly denounce itfor being politically motivated a view that may be well-f ounde d is not the way to elicit a positive future outcome from that body. Predictably it prompted a European official (speaking anonymously) to caution Islamabad against making such statements which `were not only counterproductive but also harmful for Pakistan`s interests`. This is not to say that disagreement with statements or reports should not be voiced but it must be done in a purposeful and measured way.

The tone of foreign policy statements sends important signals abroad. Whining is not a strategy. Whining about a decision or lack of international response on an issue of importance to Pakistan will not change the minds of others. But it will expose the country`s frustrations and vulnerabilities to its adversaries. Moreover, a constantly complaining tone is self-denigrating and tiresome for others. Whining only advertises weakness and does nothing to enhance Pakistan`s reputation.

Even worse are statements that give an impression of playing victim a helpless target of `international conspiracies` or unfair policies of others.

Again, such sentiments even if justified, are best raised in private because playing victim shows a lack of self-confidence.

A penchant to keep invoking the past and lament how the country was (mis)treated in a relationship has also been evidenced. This is fine for internal assessments about the historical context of a bilateral relationship but it seems pointless to go on and on about it in public speeches. It signals an inability to get past the past and equally the lack of meaningful thinking about the future. Narratives pre dicate d on public lamentations are neither helpful in rebuilding a relationship nor do they mobilise public support for any reset.

Public enunciation of foreign policy in a coherent, confident and dignified way is an essential part of statecraft. It should not be made subservient to populist politics or scoring political points at home at the cost of jeopardising Pakistan`s important relationships with other countries or indeed with multilateral organisations.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.