**March 23 Military Parade**

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I pen this column after having just finished watching the 23rd March parade on Shakarparian ground in Islamabad

I watched the tanks rolling in, the commandos descending from the skies, the fighter jets performing extreme manoeuvres and the Cobra Helicopters flying overhead.

It filled me with patriotic zeal and fervour. The parade evoked national pride in me. I felt a rush of adrenalin and an endorphin release as I vicariously experienced the military’s pomp and show.

All pumped up with patriotism, I was reeling in nationalistic pride when provincial floats appeared on my TV screen. Although they are a regular feature of the parade, they were a major put off.

It was beyond ridiculous to watch a dancing Pakistan being showcased on a Pakistan Day parade. The patriotic song with dancing children seemed ridiculous and completely out of place in the sombre atmosphere created by the military parade.

In almost 75 years since our creation have we not evolved at all? Why were the Kashmiris on their float showering rose petals while making dance moves? More than half of Kashmir—under Indian occupation—is under siege and there is certainly no cause for celebration even in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir—whose faith is tied to its Indian occupied part.

Russia’s military and nuclear power is why the western civilization is avoiding a military conflict out of fear of World War 3.

Rural Punjab represented Punjab, our biggest province. While that was disappointing to see, the greatest shock came from my province, Sindh. A tomb (Dargah) was the grandest structure with the State Bank of Pakistan diminished by it and the prestigious National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases (NICVD) almost pushed out of the float. Sindh and Punjab form Pakistan’s mainstays and their visual presentation was in line in 1922, not 2022. The hodgepodge of symbols representing Pakistan left me confused. Were they depicting the rural economy or the culture or the religion or was it just a random collage of anything that is associated with the geographical area? Why was everyone dancing?

Were we declaring that we are a primitive country with a strong military?

We are most definitely a smart nation, which has produced two Nobel Laureates. We are a nuclear power. Graduates of Pakistani universities are abundantly found in the most prestigious institutions of the US and Europe. The late Arifa Kareem achieved Microsoft certification at the age of nine. Dr Mehboob-ul- Haq pioneered the concept of the Human Development Index(HDI) in 1990, which UNDP relies upon.

We are not a nation of time-warped dancing men and women.

Coming back to the military hardware display. As the floats passed my TV screen, I yearned to see the tanks, guns and jets all made in Pakistan. I wished to see the Pakistani made JF-17 be the most sophisticated fighter aircraft, over and above the US-made F-16.

The keys to progress in this world are revealed to the believers through the Quran. They are to read (Quran 96:1), to strive for excellence (Quran 53:39) and to be prepared with military might (Quran 8:60).

In line with the aforementioned guidance from Allah, our floats should showcase military might, prominent academic institutions, meritorious publishing houses and the people of the pen as well as all centres of excellence, be it the SIUT or LRBT etc.

Encouraging meritorious higher education is imperative to progress. The steps taken during the Musharraf era under Professor Atta-ur-Rehaman were unwisely resisted and foolishly quickly undone but a country like Pakistan desperately needs top-quality higher education.

An unnamed South African University is attributed with displaying this message at its entrance gate, which I quote: “Destroying any nation does not require the use of atomic bombs or the use of long-range missiles. It only requires lowering the quality of education and allowing cheating in the examinations by the students. Patients die at the hands of such doctors. Buildings collapse at the hands of such engineers. Money is lost at the hands of such economists and accountants. Humanity dies at the hands of such religious scholars. Justice is lost at the hands of such Judges. The collapse of education is the collapse of the nation.”

Pakistan has been fortunate that despite the prevalence of cheating and the dearth of meritocracy, Pakistan still produces a sizable number of graduates with extraordinary skills and abilities. They, unfortunately, end up moving abroad to greener pastures.

The Prime Minister needs to harness this talent for Pakistan by creating centres of excellence that are able to invite back technically outstanding Pakistanis to serve Pakistan. Outstanding graduates from premier institutions should be recruited in such institutions to encash Pakistan’s technical talent.

The military can align itself to the same program and embark on the mission of creating a Military Industrial Complex. We possess the intellectual ability and the technical skills required to match Lockheed Martin Corporation. We only lack the will. A ruler who can instil the will and the resolve can achieve what seems improbable. JF-17 Thunder is a commendable first step in this direction but the momentum must not stop. It must gain speed.

In 1961, a senior bureaucrat I.H Usmani dreamt of Pakistan becoming a nuclear power. Dr Abdul Qadeer approached Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, offering his services to make nuclear weapons. Bhutto took up this impossible mission. Zia-ul-Haq continued the work after Bhutto. Nawaz Sharif eventually made the call of declaring Pakistan as a nuclear power. Today Pakistan is one of the nine countries that are nuclear powers, out of a total of 197 countries in the world.

If anything, the Ukrainian war has taught us that military might has and will always remain imperative for survival. It is also a guarantee against the hegemony of enemy states. Russia’s military and nuclear power is the reason that the western civilization is avoiding a military conflict out of fear of World War 3. Weaker states are easily overcome and destroyed. The UN, The World Economic Forum and the G-8 would be toothless tigers without NATO. NATO easily destroyed the oil-rich wealthy states of Iraq and Libya but is approaching Russia with caution.

Former US President Dwight Eisenhower wisely said: “Military power serves the cause of security by making prohibitive the cost of any aggressive attack. It serves the cause of peace by holding up a shield behind which the patient constructive work of peace can go on.”

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