**Military Diplomacy**

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On November 27, the Gulf News published the interview of Pakistan’s outgoing Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Related to foreign policy, the interview is quite revealing of an important facet, which spurns the necessity of bringing Pakistan’s Foreign Office in the loop.

The aspect is that military diplomacy complements Pakistan’s foreign policy. General Bajwa said, “Military diplomacy is complementary to Pakistan’s foreign policy and plays its due role in fostering Pakistan’s bilateral relations with other countries, including in the Middle Eastern region. Our intimate engagements with the Arab countries at the leadership level have continuously helped nurture the long-standing ties and translate them into practical cooperation in areas of common interests.”

In essence, the term “military diplomacy” is an oxymoron. That is, the term is contradictory in itself. In international relations, within the domain of power, “military” is a hard power personifying coercion (either war or deterrence), whereas “diplomacy” is a country’s soft power preferring talks and negotiations. Even during the Cold War (1945-1991), countries harbouring nuclear weapons envisaged a diminishing role of the military. This was why Great Britain and France – the nuclear haves – decided to sustain limited forces to defend their borders.

Pakistan was born in the initial years of the Cold War. The insecurity that Pakistan inherited with its birth got entrenched. It was monopolized. An immediate solution was sought in military-to-military relations, which kept on defining Pakistan’s bilateral or multilateral associations. Conversely, civil-to-civil relations were considered both insignificant and unfruitful. Post-1991, Pakistan refused to wean off the convention: Pakistan declined to switch over to civil-to-civil relations.

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Sometimes, it seems that Pakistan has made insecurity its valuable asset. After the departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021, marking the end of the 2001-2021 War on Terror, Pakistan is again feeling the heat of insecurity – financial insecurity. The question is this: Is Pakistan expecting direct military aid from Arab countries to its military?

Though the inclination to the Arab countries is understandable, the bent is fraught with consequences. The foremost is the question of sovereignty. Pakistan is not a country subordinate to the interests of the Arab countries, nor is Pakistan’s manpower available for fighting wars at the behest of the Arab countries. Pakistan has its plate full. Moreover, a country having nuclear weapons should not declare itself obliged to other countries.

Sending signals of willing subordination would cause harm to Pakistan’s sovereignty at any critical juncture of taking a decision in the future.

General Bajwa also said, “Pakistan remains grateful to our [Arab] brethren for their generous and unconditional support to Pakistan, especially during testing times… Islamabad has always supported the strategic interests of its Middle Eastern friends”. Many countries of the world would get interested in dictating Pakistan indirectly through the Arab countries.

In principle, diplomacy is the task invested with Pakistan’s Foreign Office. The military is an institution subordinate to the Ministry of Defence. The military cannot launch a diplomatic overture to be called military diplomacy (or defence diplomacy), which, by its meaning, permits the military to influence foreign policy direction.

Diplomacy is the prerogative of the foreign office, which has brilliant officers trained and skilled for the task of negotiation. Hitherto, neither Pakistan’s Foreign Office nor Pakistan’s Foreign Minister has ever talked about the existence of military diplomacy functional through the office of the COAS. Even retired diplomats who write books and op-eds have not made any such mention.

Does anybody know: who is the originator of military diplomacy, which is complementary to Pakistan’s foreign policy?

It is known that, after 2018, as Pakistan’s COAS, General Bajwa remained busy securing loans and getting aid from the countries which already fell into the ambit of Pakistan’s friends. However, this effort was because the military engaged itself in politics and was keen to make its extra-constitutional role successful. The work of approaching other countries for financial assistance cannot be projected as a permanent policy couched in military diplomacy.

Bypassing the civil government is not a good idea. Pakistan has paid the cost of such follies. For instance, on 25 May 1997, under the pressure of the military, Pakistan’s Foreign Office announced to have recognized the government of the Taliban in Kabul, Afghanistan. It is said that the late General Hamid Gul was instrumental in this move. Reportedly, even the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif came to know of the declaration the next morning through newspapers. On May 26, before Sharif could reverse the announcement, Saudi Arabia also recognized the Taliban government. After another two days, the United Arab Emirates followed suit.

When the world was reluctant to recognize the legitimacy of the Taliban over Kabul, Pakistan recognized them. However, Pakistan paid the price in terms of men and money after the War on Terror was launched in 2001. Pakistan found its sovereignty violated blatantly several times. This is the reason why Pakistan is not taking now any initiative to recognize the government of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Pakistan remembers the cost of its imprudent decision. Pakistan learnt the lesson the hard way.

A school of thought believes that there is no need to take such interviews seriously. Unfortunately, if history is still relevant, military-to-military relations have also devastated Pakistan, which saw perpetual wars on its western border. The wars consumed the lives of hundreds of Pakistanis. Yet, no one learns from history.

In the name of complementing, if parallel or alternative policies keep on existing, Pakistan would remain divided. The question is simple: what is the utility of the Foreign Office, if the military has to run its diplomacy to serve Pakistan?

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