**Pakistani Diplomacy A Gathering Storm**

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If President Biden’s phone call to Prime Minister Imran Khan, infamous for not having taken place so far was a matter of concern, Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s recent congressional testimony was tantamount to an indictment with the punch line, “Pakistan has a multiplicity of interests, some that are in conflict with ours.”

When asked to specify what he meant, he elaborated, “It’s one that involves hedging its bets constantly about future of Afghanistan, it’s one that’s involved harbouring members of the Taliban.” Asked whether it was time to reassess the relationship with Pakistan, Blinken said, “It is one of the things we’re going to be looking at in the days and weeks ahead – the role that Pakistan has played over the last 20 years, but also the role we would want to see it playing in the coming years and what it will take for it to do that.” He also advised Pakistan “to line up with the broad majority of the international community.” Presumably, the majority had already lined up behind the US policy.

While there was a routine riposte from the Foreign Office’s spokesperson, the reality of where Pakistan stands in Washington’s estimation is out in the open; and so is the efficacy of its diplomatic outreach.

But interestingly enough, when the Blinken testimony was making global headlines, the main headline in Dawn’s September 14 edition was about an interview given by Pakistan’s Ambassador to the US, Dr Asad Majeed Khan, noting that, “Pakistan would recognise the Taliban regime if it would uphold its commitments on human rights.”

Initially, I was pleased by the story as I thought that the ambassador had finally landed an interview on Afghanistan with a leading US newspaper such as USA Today, New York Times, the Wall Street Journal or even Washington Post that had merited such a superfluous coverage. But instead, I discovered that the interview was done and published by The Washington Diplomat – a newspaper owned by one Victor Shiblie, whose circulation is mainly focused on 180 diplomatic missions and international organisations in Washington DC.

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This raises several questions about not only the media outreach of Pakistani embassies abroad but also the news coverage policy of the leading lights of media in Pakistan, such as: What is the level of ingress in the host countries media by key embassies? Are statements by ambassadors abroad meant for the audience in Pakistan that they are carried as main headlines by Pakistani newspapers? And does an interview in an insignificant newspaper in the US merit such coverage in a leading Pakistani daily?

Pakistani diplomatic stations in key capitals abroad maintain sizeable information wings to assist envoys with a projection of Pakistan, and in promoting its viewpoint on important issues. To accomplish that, they are required to build contacts among the host country’s media and opinion-makers. When beset with a major challenge, like the evolving situation in Afghanistan, their media outreach becomes crucial to conveying Islamabad’s perspective to the world. Sadly, in many diplomatic missions, these information wings are asked to instead divert their energies to projecting the envoys in the Pakistani media where they have longstanding contacts. Even routine activities of ambassadors, such as the monthly or fortnightly holding of “Khuli Khatcheri,” which is now done online anyway, are sometimes covered as a major event in Pakistani media. This needs to be set right and the focus of the information wings should be redirected to the host country’s media and opinion-makers.

On the other side, major newspapers and media houses also need to see what events, activities, or goals achieved by an ambassador abroad have real news value for readership or audience in Pakistan. In this instance, incidentally, the statement by the Ambassador was based on what had been already stated by a couple of federal ministers and extensively covered by the media.

At a time when there is a gathering storm before the country in terms of misgivings on Pakistan’s Afghan policy among key players in the West, as borne out by the Blinken testimony and the more recent EU resolution on Afghanistan specifically mentioning GSP Plus -and yes they do have the leverage to make things difficult for Islamabad if they would resolve to do so-Pakistan needs a quality effort by its envoys abroad to dispel misperceptions and build a better understanding of its policies. Effective outreach to the media would be a key component of such an endeavour. This is not the time to play games.

Yet, it’s sad to see that a top mission in terms of potential for outreach to the world media, where hundreds of thousands of dollars of funds-beyond the decent remuneration and posh residences paid by the government-are yearly made available to the envoy and officers working under them, just for cultivating ties with host officials, media and opinion-makers, have put up such a modest show. This has been actually bested by former ambassador Maleeha Lodhi through her extensive engagement with global media in recent times, without a cent of government funds at her disposal.

The prime minister and the foreign minister, who have both been exceedingly active on diplomatic and international media fronts, need to take stock of the situation and see how it could be rectified. One wonders if there is some monitoring mechanism in the Foreign Office to assess the performance of its key envoys and embassies in such crucial times. If there is, it is clearly not working, and if there isn’t then there has to be some. The envoys, particularly the ones in key capitals, have to deliver and earn the confidence reposed in them by the institution. The country cannot afford a mediocre effort in these critical times.

On the other hand, the practice of taking a press corp during the prime minister’s and/or foreign minister’s visits abroad could be revived since the expertise and foreign contacts of leading journalists could come in handy in ensuring appropriate international coverage of these visits now that the limitations of the embassies’ media outreach are known. The Indians are doing it to a great effect, after all.

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