**Us vs us**

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er Shah Mehmood Qureshi’s press conference was twice the duration of his meeting with the visiting US delegation led by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. This alone tells you how much fluff is floated to mask a tragic downturn in Islamabad’s relations with Washington – and this at a time when the country can really do without external wrangling and bad blood.

The force of this fact is such that even a pastmaster at stretching words and spinning yarn by the tonnes like the foreign minister could not pull off the one message he so desperately wanted to convey: that the Pompeo visit was not another signpost on the road to nowhere, and had been useful. That the next day newspapers had positive headlines had less to do with the substance and reality of these relations than with the fact that we are living in an age of self-deception that is deliberately promoted at the cost of the truth.

And it did not take long for the truth to bare itself. The joint statement at the end of the US-Delhi 2+2 dialogue made it clear that all that Foreign Minister Qureshi was at pains to press home before TV cameras was worth no serious consideration. Both Delhi and Washington have trained their guns towards Islamabad on the counter-terror front. They have held, without mincing words or hiding intent, Pakistan responsible for spread of terror through proxies. They have named groups with Pakistani connections and have recalled past events like Mumbai, Uri, Pathankot to point to the alleged plots of terror whose perpetrators need to be brought to the book.

This is a hefty charge-sheet and runs totally counter to the idea FM Qureshi and others have propounded at home: that Washington had to restrain Delhi’s aggressive designs on the eastern border in order for Pakistan to play a more effective part in stabilising its border with Afghanistan and focusing undivided attention on engaging the Taliban for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Far from restraining Delhi, US secretaries of state and defence Pompeo and General Mattis, along with US Chairman of Joint Chiefs Gen Dunford, all nurtured Delhi’s narrative that if there was one problem in the region that needed to be sorted out it was Pakistan.

So whatever Secretary Pompeo had been conveyed by Islamabad’s ruling elite had zero impact on Washington’s view of the situation. It did not prevent the Trump administration’s highest-ranking representatives from singing in unison with Delhi and in demonising Islamabad. If this is not a downturn in bilateral relations, it is hard to imagine what else could qualify this designation.

Where do we go from here with the US? Part of Pakistan’s decision-making machinery is high on emotion and tilting heavily in favour of letting Washington do what it pleases to do without bothering too much about diplomatic niceties. This school of thought points to the potential of building a more productive network of bilateral relations with closer neighbours (Russia, Iran and of course China) and focusing on the domestic agenda of reform and economic progress to ward off American pressure. For now, proponents of this idea seem to pull a lot of weight and dominate discussions about the future of relations with the US.

Admittedly, this is a tempting stand to take. This seems to take on the same colour as the chief justice’s fund-raising for dams: let’s do it on our own, folks; chip in, break the begging bowl and build a truly sovereign nation. However, the problem is that building dams with our own money is hard (so far there are under two billion rupees in the fund and we have raised in terms of basic construction cost around 400 billion). Even harder is to create dykes against a superpower that is conniving with a regional power to make life difficult for a country that is cash-strapped and embroiled in big perpetual domestic political dramas that involve battles against its own citizens and their representatives.

So far, our antidote to Delhi-Washington’s toxic behaviour has not gone beyond running up to the Chinese and getting them to say a few nice words in our favour. True, there is a China card, and to some extent there may also be a Russia card, but these are cards that the Chinese and the Russians control and not us. They will decide the extent to which they will respond to our need to have an alternative, an option of productive friendship other than Washington’s which has become manipulative and exhausting.

The Chinese of course are the real alternative and but anyone who has even superficially studied the Chinese way of working in the past three decades would not put too many bets on Beijing sticking its neck out for Pakistan every time we hit a bump against India and the US. The burden of their relations with Delhi and Washington – while too much – is something that the Chinese are too happy to carry because their economic and commercial interests bind them in a tough-love situation with these countries. Beijing will not rock the boat with India and the US because of us.

So the grandstanding on ‘we have alternatives’ needs to be squared with ground reality, and false ego trips need to be curtailed. We have a serious situation with both Delhi and Washington and we aren’t really in a position at the moment to pretend otherwise. These pressures could be better managed had the new government shown a real desire to take charge of foreign policy – and not become a prisoner of its own rhetoric that domestic affairs are more important than external affairs.

It was a small yet instructive peep into the government’s interest in pressing foreign affairs challenges when cameras caught PM Imran being directed to shake hands with different members of the visiting US delegation as he was casually taking his seat after greeting just Secretary Pompeo out of the entire lot. Generally, leaders prepare themselves for meaningful meet-and-greet exchanges and mark all individuals in the entourage, to give the impression that they know who they are meeting and why.

The implications of this outsourcing of foreign policy debate under the false pretext of domestic compulsions are quite deep. This means that there cannot be any substantive debate in parliament or in the ruling party about the way forward with Washington or Delhi. There can be no new ideas or out-of-the-box thinking because the government in charge simply isn’t interested in leading from the front on this crucial front.

More to the point, the absence of debate is bound to either promote the type of useless fluff FM Qureshi is prone to churning out or lead to the meaningless rhetoric of ‘Down with America’ to guide policy. Very few minds will be focused on the substance of the problems on our frontiers that are connected with growing international consensus that we have not done enough to choke trouble-makers at home.

While the US did manoeuvre our grey categorisation in the Financial Action Task Force meeting, the reality is that even better friends – our alternatives – were unable to save us from this shock. Clearly, we have learnt no lesson from that setback and we are back to making the silliest possible excuses for a floundering foreign policy.

Believe it or not, the top-most among these excuses is that our diplomatic disasters are the responsibility of the media in Pakistan, which does not fully support the state. This is another way of saying that a storm would be sunshine if only the headlines had said so. What Washington and Delhi are doing against us is not half as bad as what we are doing to ourselves – drowning out calls for sane debate in childish game shows and entertainment.

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