**Reviewing foreign policy**

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August 16, 2018

As the newly elected government assumes the reins of power, it is an appropriate moment to review our foreign policy, covering both its making and its execution. Some pointers regarding both these may help the government at this stage.

Foreign policy is essentially aimed at promoting the national interest, in contradistinction to all areas of domestic policy, which are aimed at furthering, or even creating, matters of national interest. Thus, foreign policy is largely projection, while domestic policy creates or improves the product or the substance that foreign policy promotes. We often tend to apply the wrong purpose to one and the other, with the result that neither policies then deliver. But that is another discussion.

In regard to foreign policy, there are serious problems that have developed over the years, particularly those relating to the making of foreign policy. First, we do not have a supreme body for making or approving foreign policy directions or decisions. For example, there is the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet for coordination, decision-making and approval of all economic matters at the national level, but there is no corresponding cabinet committee for foreign policy. Much of our foreign policy is thus uncoordinated and often works at cross-purposes.

Secondly, all high-level government functionaries, particularly federal ministers and even provincial governors/ministers, senior officials and all sundry, who have no involvement with foreign policy, find it fit to pronounce on various issues and questions relating to it. They express their opinion of other countries as if they are expounding on the merits or demerits of some local administration of, say, Gujranwala or Sukkur or Mardan. This lack of distinction between comments on domestic matters and those on foreign affairs is not only confusing for outsiders but also damaging to our foreign policy.

Third, we do not make the effort to provide in-depth and off-the-record briefings on an on-going basis to the media, with the unhappy result that our print and electronic media tend to harm, often inadvertently, our foreign policy objectives owing to lack of understanding and information.

Although we now have a designated Foreign Office spokesman, he/she does not do more than reading out official handouts or merely elaborating upon them. The practice of intimate interaction with media leaders at a senior level is prevalent in many functional democracies and can be usefully developed in Pakistan. It does wonders with regard to correct media coverage of foreign policy issues and questions.

The new government thus, needs to take steps to develop a properly structured foreign policy approach that should provide for national-level coordination of foreign policy, introduce a degree of discipline in public discussion of policy and organise interaction with the media in greater depth and at a senior level.

In the substantive making of foreign policy, we have to keep in mind our broad objectives. Foreign policy seeks to promote national interest within a whole range of political, economic, cultural and social spheres. In the political context, we want to promote better relations with our neighbours, close and substantive interaction with Muslim countries – bilaterally and through the OIC – active cooperation with Western countries to enable us to achieve political support on our issues and concerns, and on-going contacts with developing countries, through NAM as well as bilateral dealings, for better understanding and cooperation.

In the economic field, we aim to promote trade, seek investment and joint ventures with all interested partners and, with Western countries, development assistance in addition to trade and investment. Cultural and social objectives are basically aimed at projecting Pakistan in a way that creates goodwill and a better understanding of the country abroad.

A review of our foreign policy should examine how far we have succeeded or failed in achieving the objectives that we have before us. The problems that we have encountered in the political context are well-known. Our difficulties in developing and maintaining good relations with our neighbours are part of our history.

With India, we have to labour under the baggage of mutual distrust, occasional mutual hostility and a mindset of doubts and suspicions. If perceptions matter, the negative perception of one another that India and Pakistan hold is a major impediment to good relations. There is a need for both the countries to try and extricate themselves from the heavy baggage of the past and move towards a mature and more realistic bilateral relationship. This trend needs to be encouraged and promoted.

There, of course, looms the question of Kashmir over the entire India-Pakistan equation. However, Pakistan can move towards interacting more with India without compromising its principled stance on Kashmir, and work towards an eventual resolution through a composite dialogue process. Perhaps we can achieve better results in a congenial rather than a hostile bilateral climate.

Such an approach can also enable us to pursue better bilateral relations with other countries without the demand to support us on the Kashmir issue. This approach had reduced our foreign policy to a one-item agenda, which got precious little support. Even in a sympathetic forum like the OIC, we have always had to go through a painful process of persuading and pressing our Muslim friends to even adopt mere resolutions on the Kashmir issue. If an assessment is made of the time and resources spent on seeking international support on Kashmir, and the results obtained, it will be apparent how futile this exercise has been.

To be continued

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