**Reviewing foreign policy**

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We have spent far too long establishing our ‘influence’ in the unfortunate country that is Afghanistan; the country has been suffering from civil war conditions for decades. Our policy towards Afghanistan should honestly execute and implement what we have always declared, but never acted on, ie respect for its independence and sovereignty.

Our relationship with China represents the one positive segment in the spectrum of our regional relations. However, even here, we have to be mindful of Chinese sensitivities over certain irritations that can jeopardise the enormous goodwill that we have developed over long years of friendship and cooperation. Finally, Iran needs equal if not more focused attention, as our generally good relations can be adversely affected by minor spats and differences. In any case, our relations with the Muslim world, the West and the rest of the world will need necessary appraisals and assessments and appropriate adjustments and fine-tuning in terms of foreign policy.

This entire exercise is always undertaken by the Foreign Office. Here, the structural and organisational framework needs correction. Our Foreign Office is almost entirely geared to execute rather than make foreign policy. While it has numerous area desks, it also has a small, inadequate and often forgotten policy planning wing. This unit is so weak and poorly manned that it usually does useless things like prepare draft speeches for senior officials or the minister, rather than address policy planning matters.

This wing should not only be strengthened but even expanded and broadened. The government should create a veritable think tank within the Foreign Office to carry out research, analysis and assessment, and make policy recommendations regarding all international affairs which have a bearing on Pakistan’s foreign policy. The think tank should constantly provide policy inputs to the minster/foreign secretary on all ongoing matters.

In addition, this in-house think tank should solicit and collate inputs from all other sources in the country including universities, independent research institutes, outside think tanks and even government agencies, and assimilate the material in its own processing of policy matters. Once foreign policy decisions have been processed, they should be examined, discussed and finalised in a cabinet committee that I discussed in the previous part of this article. This would make an enormous difference to our policymaking.

As far as the execution of foreign policy is concerned, certain pointers are called for. We should examine how best our interaction with the outside world should be packaged and delivered. Our efforts often fail to achieve the desired results because of our inability to win the sympathy and understanding of our interlocutors. Diplomacy is a cultivated art or skill that has been developed over centuries. Ignoring the requirements of diplomatic conduct will result in our demarches and approaches falling on deaf ears of inattentive listeners. Our diplomatic representatives must be credible and knowledgeable. They must first create a good reputation amongst their peers and colleagues, and only then espouse our causes and position on issues.

This necessitates the hard work of making necessary efforts to win the confidence of the people they want to persuade; these include their counterparts in the Foreign Office and other ministries of the country they are accredited to, public representatives, the media and enlightened elements of society at large, not to forget their diplomatic colleagues. It is a tall order and many of our diplomatic representatives are unable or even unwilling to make such concerted efforts.

Secondly, if our foreign policy efforts are to succeed and achieve results, our diplomats will have to adopt a softer and gentler approach. Acts of bravado and loud declarations and pronouncements have a contrary effect to what is desired. We love to talk, but are loath to listen. It is said that when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the foreign minister, he had received a telegram from one of our senior ambassadors of the time, in which the latter had narrated all that he had said to an interlocutor. After reading the letter, Bhutto wrote on the margin: “And what did the other man say?” The telegram had apparently not mentioned the response of the man to whom the ambassador had conveyed his precious thoughts.

Our foreign policy, as always, faces considerable challenges. We live in a rough neighbourhood, and are often obliged to deal with developments not of our own making. Furthermore, we live in a world that has become even more competitive with globalisation and the revolution in communication. We need to develop our trade and secure external investment for achieving sufficient economic progress to raise our living standards and attain economic well-being.

We also need to project our cultural and social values favourably and correct the perception that we are a violence-prone, terrorism-ridden society that lacks the sophistication and virtues of the civilised world. It is the responsibility of the democratic government to try to deal with these challenges. The review that our foreign policy needs should take into account both substantive questions and issues, as well as the manner and style in which we conduct our foreign policy.

The result should be the establishment of a well-structured and disciplined foreign policy approach and a foreign policy execution apparatus that delivers and so promotes our national interest in a serious and meaningful way.

Concluded

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