**Where is the foreign office headed in 2020?**

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Since taking over the helms of diplomatic affairs in August 2018, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has steered Pakistan’s [foreign policy](https://dailytimes.com.pk/532345/pakistan-emphasises-need-for-maximum-restraint/) in a rather unconventional manner. As per policy analysts and former high-ranking diplomats, many important matters pertaining to economic diplomacy, crisis in Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IoJ&K) and the potential collaboration with Kuala Lumpur and Ankara were mismanaged.

At the same time, Islamabad managed to reset its ties with Washington DC and Tehran, pursued the Afghan reconciliation process, launched the Kartarpur Corridor initiative and actively garnered financial support from key allies.

In terms of managing the Foreign Office itself, there has been an interesting pattern. Decisions are delayed for months at end resulting in key diplomatic missions staying vacant, unusually long stay of some officers in missions abroad and long wait for officers posted at the headquarters resulting in a loss of morale and organisational disequilibrium. Moreover, when the ambassadorial posting plans have been somehow finalised, they have contained some shocking decisions.

As noted by former High Commissioner to India, Abdul Basit, amongst others, relatively junior and/or unimpressive diplomats have been posted as envoys to key diplomatic stations across the world. Many of these decisions have reflected favouritism and sifarish, since these envoys ‘managed’ their postings by lobbying with the right quarters and pulling the right strings and not on any merit.

Envoys to key stations were appointed in three phases over the course of a year and a quarter, specifically to London, Washington, Riyadh, UN-Geneva, UN-New York City, Moscow and Berlin.

What was quite conspicuous was that in most of these important stations, capable and relatively senior diplomats were ignored while junior diplomats, who had exhibited unusual skills of politics and lobbying were preferred. As a result, grade 20 officers will now be heading some of the biggest diplomatic missions including Geneva,Moscow, Berlin etc. This is like appointing brigadiers as corps commanders.

This has never happened in the entire history of Foreign Office and is remarkable given that it has 12 posts of grade 22 and over 30 posts of grade 21.

On the other hand, a controversial retired diplomathas been posted as Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations in New York City a while back after months of intensive lobbying with the powers that be. Ever since taking over the UN mission, his performance hasn’t been up to mark. Though he failed to secure a regular UNMOGIP briefing at the UN Security Council (UNSC)/session on IoJ&K in December 2019, reportedly an effort is being made to secure a briefing in the coming days in coordination with Beijing. However,unlike the special August 16 UNSC meeting held last year, nothing substantial has occurred yet. Is the envoy even serious to pursue tangible diplomacy at a global forum like the UN or is rather focused on pursuing personal interests? Only time will tell.

A ‘tabdeeli’ has definitely come in the Foreign Office, but not in the right direction.

This is unfortunate given that more than ever before Pakistan needs a capable and dynamic diplomatic establishment that could not only address the current international political challenges, but also contribute to economic development by pursuing a vigorous economic diplomacy

So, what are the expectations from the Foreign Office in 2020? Any possibilities of recovery from this deep morass?

Like many other state institutions in Pakistan, Foreign Office has become a victim of personal agendas and politics. The institution with a great past which was headed by extraordinary capable people in the past such as SahabzadaYaqub Ali Khan, Aziz Ahmed and Agha Shahi is now on a slippery slope manifesting the ultimate triumph of mediocrity, from which it is unlikely to recover any time soon.

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It is high time that Prime Minister Imran Khan should give some attention to what is going on in the Foreign Office. One possible step for improvement in the situation would be to set up a high-powered committee of at least three federal ministers (including the foreign minister) and some eminent parliamentarians and former foreign secretaries to select ambassadors to top 20 important diplomatic missions abroad. Anything short of that, the Foreign Office is likely to continue its journey to becoming a pale shadow of its glorious past.

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