[**Diplomatic blundering**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630981/diplomatic-blundering)

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The writer is the author of No-Win War — The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan’s Shadow.

A SERIES of gaffes by our foreign minister has caused utter embarrassment. His penchant for media attention has landed the country in a diplomatic predicament often enough. His mixing of sensitive foreign policy issues with constituency politics has been damaging. There is a reason why foreign ministers are supposed to speak less, but that wisdom has fallen on deaf ears where our foreign minister is concerned.

It’s not just about Shah Mahmood Qureshi’s almost daily appearances on local TV channels. Lately, his interviews with the foreign media have lacked the nuance and diplomatic skills needed to tackle complex foreign policy issues. With the country facing multiple foreign policy challenges in the fast-changing geopolitics of the region, one expects the country’s top diplomat to show prudence.

His [latest interview](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630566) with an Afghan TV channel in which he seemingly struggled to answer a question — whether he considered Osama bin Laden a martyr — exposes a more serious problem. In the past, Prime Minister Imran Khan had [declared](https://www.dawn.com/news/1565160) the Al Qaeda leader a martyr. It was certainly not a slip of the tongue and reflected his convoluted views on militancy.

That discretion is the art of diplomacy must be learned by the FM.

Qureshi’s floundering too was apparently not accidental. His pause before bypassing the question showed deliberate ambiguity on an issue that demands a clear answer: how can a terrorist be a martyr? Yet he would not say that perhaps out of fear of a backlash from PTI ranks and his conservative constituency. His non-committal stance on a person responsible for thousands of deaths is damaging.

**Editorial**: [*FM Qureshi's refusal to call Osama bin Laden a terrorist is perplexing and defies logic*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630829/editorial-fm-qureshis-refusal-to-call-osama-bin-laden-a-terrorist-is-perplexing-and-defies-logic)

It is not just the blunder over the bin Laden issue but also his handling of some other sensitive foreign policy issues that have raised questions about his command of the subject he speaks on. Populism should be kept out of the realm of diplomacy. The foreign minister’s public statements on foreign policy seem to be largely for domestic political consumption, but such comments often carry serious implications for our relations with other countries.

Maintaining a delicate balance in matters of international relations requires nuanced responses that are often missing from his populist rhetoric. His [recent response](https://www.dawn.com/news/1627694) to Afghan officials was also uncalled for, however provocative their statements may have been. There was no need for it after the foreign ministry’s appropriate reaction to the Afghan side’s invective.

Such trading of barbs only serves the purpose of those elements that seek to vitiate the atmosphere between the two countries. One has to be more careful in the face of the fast-changing situation in Afghanistan that should soon see the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from its territory. There may be some vested interests trying to spoil moves to get a political settlement in Afghanistan but any misstep could pull us deeper into the quagmire.

Undoubtedly, Pakistan has played a significant role in getting the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table that led to the Doha peace agreement, clearing the way for the withdrawal of American forces. But the situation is extremely volatile with the intensification of the fighting in Afghanistan and no signs of the cessation of hostilities. The looming civil war in Afghanistan will have direct and serious security implications for Pakistan.

Surely, we can still play a role in any peace process in Afghanistan, but it is not in our interest to be seen to be aligned with any one side in the conflict. Despite frequent clarifications, there is still some doubt over our claims of neutrality. This is largely so because some of the statements emanating from Islamabad are exaggerating our role. Such statements are giving the impression that we can get the Taliban to negotiate. They are causing resentment. The foreign minister’s [warning](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629302/pakistan-will-not-take-responsibility-if-blamed-for-deteriorating-afghan-peace-qureshi) that Pakistan would not take responsibility if blamed for the deteriorating Afghan peace was unnecessary. It’s not for someone in that position to react to every statement that comes out of Kabul.

Whatever role we can play should be discreet. That discretion is the art of diplomacy must be learned. It is even more important given our geopolitical and geostrategic situation. Peace in Afghanistan is vital for Pakistan as well as the region. Surely it’s a very complex situation for Islamabad with its increasingly tense relations with the Afghan government.

Another tendency is to depict Pakistan at the centre of international politics, giving one an exaggerated sense of our influence. Intriguingly, at one point in time, the foreign minister even took credit for the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Supporting Palestinian rights is one thing but otherwise we don’t have a role to play in the Middle East conflict.

We have offered to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact, for a country that confronts enormous domestic and external challenges the best policy is to maintain a low profile in international conflicts that do not directly affect us. With the economy in a perpetual state of crisis and serious internal security problems we need to look inward rather than seeking to stretch our footprint outside.

A major problem plaguing our external policy is the absence of clear direction. There is no coherence among the various stakeholders on key policies. The disarray was evident in the so-called backchannel contact with India. While the establishment appeared euphoric over the progress, the civilian government didn’t seem to have any clue about the development. Although there is now silence on the issue, there is still no clarity on the India and Kashmir policy beyond rhetoric.

Similar confusion was witnessed over counterterrorism cooperation with the US as foreign forces started withdrawing. True there is now a bit of clarity after the prime minister’s [unequivocal statement](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630278) that there was no question of providing any base to the American forces for any counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan. But some confusion still persists on how to redefine our relations with the US.

What we need is to focus more seriously on policy and the art of diplomacy rather than populist rhetoric for local consumption. Foreign policy is too serious a matter to be left to an individual’s political ambitions.

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