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Opinion – Pakistan’s Diplomatic Dilemma in Global Affairs

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MUHAMMAD RAUHAN RASHEED, DEC 20 2024

Earlier this year, Guyanese President Irfaan Ali schooled a BBC journalist, challenging the developed world’s double standards when questioned about Guyana’s plans for oil drilling amidst the climate crisis. In a display of controlled anger, the President asked the journalist about his right to lecture a country that has kept extensive forests alive, benefiting the world without receiving any value in return. This incident is neither the first time Western media has targeted the Global South for their attempts to emerge from the Global North’s dependency nor is it the first time a leader from the Global South has pushed back against Western hypocrisy. However, this instance has resonated with citizens of the Global South who feel silenced by the West’s condescending approach.

Among these citizens are individuals like myself, who belong to an economically crises-ridden state, Pakistan. Despite being a nuclear power and having years of service for superpowers such as China and especially the U.S., Pakistan constantly finds itself obliged to meet the demands of the Global North. Amid the economic dependency on IMF loans and various countries that view Pakistan as an economic basket case, perpetually pleading for assistance, Pakistanis are desperate for any sign of courage from their leadership. They long for moments, however brief, where their spineless leadership stands up to the West and gives them a taste of their own medicine when Pakistan is ridiculed on the global stage. There’s no denying that Pakistan’s insecurities and weaknesses in various sectors have contributed to this submissive behaviour. Yet, any proud nation must exhibit some backbone when taken for granted and expected to comply at every turn. Nowadays, countries across the Global South are beginning to push back despite their limited capacity to act. They are constantly highlighting Western injustices; however, when the current Pakistani PM, Shehbaz Sharif, openly calls its citizens beggars for seeking foreign loans, there is only bleak hope left that the nation’s pride can be preserved.

Historically, Pakistan’s diplomatic engagements reflect a sorrowful tale of incompetence, greed, and opportunism that has degraded the country’s global image. Pakistani leadership, both under military dictators and democratic governments, has consistently bowed to Western dominance—except for a few moments during Ayub Khan’s era when Pakistan’s stature improved, and the international media even referred to Ayub Khan as the “De Gaulle of Asia.” Whether it’s minor issues, such as addressing the plastic rice controversy, or major ones, like safeguarding national interests in diplomatic negotiations with the U.S. over the war on terror (WOT) in the 2000s, Pakistani policymakers have crumbled under pressure, revealing their ineptitude. When the U.S. pressured Pakistan to join their military intervention in Afghanistan with the ultimatum, “You are either with us or against us,” Pakistan’s government was among the first to comply. Pakistan’s academic and media discourse has long argued that neutrality was a better option, given Pakistan’s historically unreliable and turbulent relationship with the U.S. However, the false dilemma blinded General Pervez Musharraf’s leadership, who ultimately ignored this option. Unsurprisingly, the consequences of the war spilt over into Pakistan, as many had already feared. To add insult to injury, Pakistan’s compliance with the fair-weather ally the US has also caused dissatisfaction with all-weather friendship with China, which views Pakistan’s subservience to Western demands as a lack of strategic independence.

Astutely, hostile neighbours of Pakistan, i.e. India and Iran, have always avoided succumbing to Western pressure. Indian diplomats, for instance, strategically opted for technology transfer agreements when dealing with the West, even during their periods of economic hardship. Moreover, they have adeptly managed to maintain strong ties with

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the U.S. despite their close alliances with U.S. adversaries like Russia and Iran. Meanwhile, Pakistan always finds itself in a precarious position, often acting as a geopolitical football, caught in the tug-of-war between the U.S. and China, both competing for influence in the region. Similar to India, Iran has resisted Western imperialism since the 1980 revolution despite facing numerous adversities. On the other hand, Pakistani diplomats rarely displayed the necessary intelligence or courage to outmanoeuvre their Western counterparts, even when Pakistan was more robust economically or militarily than its neighbours. Due to this consistent obliging behaviour, Pakistan has turned it into a pushover on the global stage. As a result, the educated youth in Pakistan are far from satisfied with their country’s reckless modus operandi in international dealings and affairs.

A country that once was a critical player in the Global South is slowly becoming a laughing stock in diplomatic affairs. The youth long for a charismatic leader who can be at the forefront of addressing matters of sovereignty and ideological importance, such as Kashmir and Palestine, on international platforms. Despite the controversial compliance of former President Musharraf with the U.S. during the war on terror, many Pakistanis remember him as one of the last leaders who effectively silenced Indian media. Similarly, charismatic leadership traits, such as the ability to rally people around a cause, are part of the reason why convicted former PM Imran Khan continues to enjoy a cult following among Pakistani youth. His speech at the United Nations General Assembly, where he addressed the global rise of Islamophobia, was widely praised. Moreover, his engagement with former U.S. President Trump, who famously remarked that “Pakistan never lies,” was seen as a rare moment when Pakistan’s leadership contradicted the narrative of deceit that has long surrounded the country in Washington.

By contrast, politically prominent leaders like former PM Nawaz Sharif (dutiful weak civilian) and Bilawal Bhutto have failed to earn the respect of the educated youth. They are criticised for failing to influence the United Nations to take decisive action on the Kashmir issue and for embarrassing Pakistan during diplomatic interactions, such as when Mr Bilawal faced Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. In addition, the widespread perception in the West that Pakistan has not done enough to combat terrorism despite being a significant victim of it underscores the erosion of Pakistan’s diplomatic clout over the past decade.

Unfortunately, the timid approach of Pakistan’s leadership does not seem likely to change soon, especially under the current administration, which is mired with a host of unresolved issues. The weak diplomatic track record of the PML-N administration only deepens the disappointment of the country’s increasingly disillusioned youth, who expect their diplomats to push back when necessary, especially on issues of sovereignty or ideology. If this does not happen, frustrated youth may resort to symbolic protests, much like Chinese citizens who sent calcium tablets to their diplomats to strengthen their “backbones” in the face of submissive diplomacy. However, despite the grim outlook, there is still potential for Pakistan to regain its standing on the global stage. By adopting a more assertive yet strategic diplomatic approach that carefully balances national interests with global realities, Pakistan can start to rebuild its lost international relevance. A leadership that can stand firm on sovereignty while engaging in savvy negotiations with global powers rather than automatic compliance could reinvigorate the nation’s pride and honour. Such a road to recovery may be tedious, but with exemplary orchestration and a commitment to upholding Pakistan’s dignity, there is hope for a brighter diplomatic future for Pakistan.

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