

The sober society

By Dr Usman W Chohan

PAKISTAN has begun to realign its strategic orientation from traditional geopolitics towards contemporary geoeconomics.

In this regard, it has begun to build what I term the sober society, which is to say, a society that strives pragmatically and with sobriety towards peace, both inside and outside its borders, with inclusive prosperity as the goal.

To achieve this, Pakistan is signalling to the world that it acts in good faith and in a sober manner, facing the challenges of the world together with others when it can, and facing them alone when it must.

This idea of the sober society is not one to posit merely from stoic philosophy, but can be seen in the concrete actions that Pakistan has taken in the three major crises of the past three years: the India-Pakistan Standoff (2019), the coronavirus pandemic (2020), and the Fall of Kabul (2021).

In looking at these three examples, I seek to argue that Pakistan is sending a signal to the world, including its immediate neighbours, that it is engaged in the reinvention of its image and its reality towards one of even-handed, well-intentioned, and patient sobriety.

In 2019, India concocted a flimsy pretext to engage in violent kinetic aggression towards Pakistan, but the false-flag operation and the jingoism of the Indian leadership was met with the professional response of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), which neutralized their fighter jets and captured a pilot alive. Pakistan then gave the captive to India as a gesture of peace and an act of mercy.

Pakistan was telling India that it was willing to forgive India's temporary madness, and would let the vanquished go, since it is a peace-seeking and sober society.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic began to decimate populations all over the world and even those countries that often try to exude a more scientific persona (as some Western countries do) fell prey to a fake news epidemic (infodemic), while mismanaging their economies as well as their public health systems.

By contrast, despite its resource constraints, Pakistan mustered a comprehensive economic and public health response that was driven by field data and international best-practices.

Pakistan therefore stood out, particularly when compared to its neighbours, as a country that achieved a high degree of socioeconomic normalcy in the middle of a global health crisis; a feat achieved in no small part because it took the challenge of the virus seriously and acted with scientifically-driven sobriety.

In 2021, the government of Ashraf Ghani collapsed during a hasty American retreat, and his subsequent flight caused an international crisis that left Afghanistan at the total mercy of Taliban forces.

Yet as its well-intentioned neighbour, Pakistan was at the forefront of evacuations of expatriates and foreign residents, as well as many Afghans themselves, thus providing a lifeline during a period of extreme regional distress.

In fact, the PIA, an airline that was treated harshly by foreign countries in terms of access and flight permissions, emerged as the hero of the Afghan debacle, spearheading constant flights to rescue untold numbers of people from the chaos.

This was the airline that certain foreign countries considered an unsuitable flight-carrier, and yet now they clasped for dear life to its seats that took them safely and securely towards their homes.

In the meantime, Pakistan has acted as a cooperative regional partner in promoting an international solution to the Afghan crisis that takes all stakeholders on-board.

As such, Pakistan has behaved responsibly and soberly during three significant crises that have occurred in three consecutive years, and each of which might yet pose a renewed danger to regional and international security.

But if Pakistan envisages a sober society, and also demonstrates this through its actions, will Western liberals, who still monopolize the mediums of international discourse, feel sympathetic towards reevaluating the country? It is tough to say, because there is no audience as jaundiced or ideologically hamstrung as the Western liberals; and so, despite the weight of evidence demonstrating Pakistan's reformulation as a sober society, there are only fragments of recognition here and there.

The international community expressed muted praise for Pakistan's restraint during the Pulwama War, but India's la-la-land denialism meant that it did not even accept the outcome of the standoff and still rambles on with venal hatred towards Pakistan.

The WHO and The Economist were among the institutions that have recognized Pakistan's excellent Covid-19 response, especially when compared to its Delta variant-exporting neighbour, but the size of its success relative to the scant endowments which it had at the time of the first outbreak must receive wider international recognition.

Similarly, foreign officials have been tweeting their gratitude to Pakistan for assisting their evacuations, but whether the PIA will be given due recognition by foreign countries, including for flight permissions, is yet to be seen.

Yet the greatest buy-in that is required for Pakistan's strategic realignment is from its own people, who must be able to see the sobriety in its comprehensive efforts, and even more importantly, thru must act with sobriety towards one another.

Across social classes, one sees a sort of madness simmering beneath the surface, but which has increasingly reared its vicious head in incidents such as the tragedy of Noor Mukkadam, as well as in the

molestation at the Minar-i-Pakistan in Lahore, and in a torrent of cases of abuse of the innocents in seminaries, schools, factories and other places of vulnerability, not to mention at the very doorsteps of the innocents themselves.

One is bombarded with reports of such incidents, and it creates a disquiet in the spirit, as one is then compelled to ask: “can this ever be a sober society?” It certainly can, but one must draw the linkage between the strategic goal of inclusive prosperity through intercommunion with the outside world, and the demented evils that hide in plain sight.

These evils must be confronted with all seriousness, so that the people are provided the psychological relief to then proceed with their lives, now assured that they can live in a truly sober society.

Insofar as the strategic realignment goes, one must remember that geoeconomics rests on the principle that the world perceives a country as a safe, well-situated, and reliable place to engage in intellectual, cultural, and commercial.

It is premised on a dependable professional climate that offers various forms of tangible and intangible infrastructure.

While a great deal of effort and investment is required to build such an architecture, it takes only a single incident to sabotage those efforts, in the same way that a beautiful toy house built by one child can be smashed in the blink of an eye by the awful problem-child next door.

In fact, the next door problem-child is itching to smash our house, even though its own toy house is increasingly falling into utter disrepair.

The challenge ahead is, therefore, to persuade our people, as well as audiences abroad, that we are engaging in good faith and are constructing a new home through a sober effort.

I contend that this speaks to the aspirations that the Quaid also articulated in his vision for Pakistan: being premised on patience, hard work, selflessness, and a sober outlook towards the long road ahead.

As such, in confronting our challenges while proceeding with sobriety, we can ultimately attain a sober society.

The writer is the Director for Economics and National Affairs at the Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS). This article was first published in Pakistan Observer. He can be reached at cass.thinkers@gmail.com.