

Countering the strategy of irrelevance

By

Ali Shah

The author heads policy research and analysis at the NUST Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, and can be reached at ali.shah78@gmail.com.

Yuval Noah Harari, the best-selling author of *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*, points out in the beginning of his third book – *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* – that digital divide may condemn global masses to irrelevance in future which he considers far worse than exploitation.

This caveat, for different reasons, needs to be taken seriously by the decision- and policy-makers of Pakistan in the context of the ongoing crisis in the region sparked by India's recent actions on and in Indian-Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

Pakistan has become a target of what can be described as a full-blown strategy of irrelevance. Irrelevance in international relations works not by directly confronting the target but by refusing to engage them and by behaving as if what they had to say or do did not matter or as if they did not exist. This imagined absence makes for a potent paralytic agent against the target state.

The strategy derives one part of its strength from its theatrical quality and the other part from the reactive role it assigns to the target country. Like the play's audience in a theater, the target country can protest and heckle if it does not like the spectacle but is powerless to change the course of events so long as it remains under the mental influence of irrelevance.

It is imperative to understand that irrelevance is an offensive strategy and a form of deliberate aggression meant to wrong-foot the target. It can also be seen as the diplomatic equivalent of guerilla warfare.

While every move has been decided in advance by those who planned this strategy, the target is left reeling and dazed simply because in their heart-rending good-natured naivety they did not expect the adversary to ignore them. As a result, the target of irrelevance, just like that of a guerrilla attack, becomes exasperated, disoriented, and desperate, rushing headlong into disaster by taking largely ineffective and incoherent steps. But irrelevance is like a bog. It sends to the bottom the quickest those who flail the hardest.

Irrelevance occupies the middle range on the spectrum of aggression whose two extremes are covert and overt aggression. Moreover, it is a strategy that one state alone cannot use against another state. It needs a concert of states to be effective.

Irrelevance is also not deployed against strong or weak states but against those states which are somewhere in the middle. It is an ideal strategy against states that are militarily strong but economically fragile.

Its purpose is two-fold. First, it aims to prolong and even make permanent the non-realization of the development potential of the target state. It usually works by creating an extreme provocation

followed by calculated detachment and non-engagement, especially, during the critical takeoff phase of the target country's development process. The aim is to engineer multiple repetitions of this process so that the takeoff is approached and missed a number of times leading to what can be called development fatigue. Second, it aims to create deterrence failure by tempting the target state into inept and botched utilization of its deterrence capabilities.

Pakistan, therefore, needs to act in the current regional imbroglio with calm vigilance and prepare dynamic action rather than frenetic reaction. It needs to remember that nothing defeats irrelevance like irrelevance. Therefore, Pakistan can consider the following suggestions to craft its own strategy of irrelevance for forces that have endangered regional peace and progress.

First, Pakistan needs to be confident of the fact that so far it has, by and large, dealt with the situation correctly. It has based its response on a smart combination of proactive diplomacy and masterful restraint backed by the credible guarantee of sure, swift, and powerful measures, as was demonstrated in the post-Pulwama events. Pakistan should keep its options open without ruling out proactive action.

Second, Pakistan needs to complete China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) more expeditiously and steadfastly than before. Regional integration and connectivity should be prioritized in concrete terms as a part of this completion. Pakistan should move forward with a South Korean resolve so that the next-door hostility becomes a driver rather than a deterrent of our progress.

Third, the formulation and finalization of an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace should continue to be assisted so that all sections of Afghan society can prosper simultaneously in a peaceful, stable, and secure Afghanistan. Pakistan should continue facilitating all parties, including the U.S., so that they can bring the conflict to an end.

Fourth, we must know that state-society cooperation and national resilience can offset economic vulnerability by enabling people to rally together in times of crisis and by allowing the state to seek consultation and help from the people. Lest what is proposed here is misconstrued, it does not mean at all that economic strength should be given up as a national goal. It only means that cooperation and resilience will enable a country to live through economic travails as well as develop faster.

Fifth, Pakistan should not be discouraged by the lukewarm response of the international community on IOK. It should also not feel surprised by the current actions of certain brotherly Muslim countries. We should understand their priorities before we judge them, and take things in our stride. In international relations as in interpersonal relations, we should do unto others as we would have others do unto us.

Sixth, we should not allow the ongoing crisis to be adduced as a proof of the misbegotten notion of the death of the global fraternity of Muslim countries. We need to see how this so-called extinction is first announced and then used to decry Pakistan's policy of non-recognition of Israel. It needs to be stressed that this reasoning is specious at best. The said fraternity is surely in disarray but certainly exists.

More importantly, Pakistan's non-recognition of Israel is not only an appropriate policy but also a corollary of the legacy of the unparalleled statesmanship of Quaid-e-Azam which should not be parted with. With due apologies to Emerson as well as to the supporters of recognition, this consistency at least is neither foolish nor the hobgoblin of little minds. As Hamlet said to his friend, Horatio, we can say to our pro-recognition friends, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Seventh, while Pakistan should play its due role, like before, for fostering regional cooperation and stability, it should also work indefatigably for the formation of a vibrant domestic market that draws upon the resourcefulness and ingenuity of its peoples for domestic business creation, innovation, and job creation.

In sum, it needs to be understood firmly that Pakistan's problems exist mainly because of its fragile economic position. Therefore, national development needs to be as comprehensive and durable as the country's conventional and strategic deterrence if it wants to avoid falling into the trap of irrelevance sprung by its rivals. The great enemy of irrelevance is normalcy. Being mindful of these suggestions may help bring about normalcy in the domestic order and contribute to regional normalization.

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