



# STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND STATECRAFT

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**(In memory of Dr. Kissinger)**

*Baat to sach hai magar baat hai ruswai ki. – Parveen Shakir  
(The story is true but embarrassing)*

For Pakistanis in their present condition, it would be irrelevant to discuss strategic leadership and statecraft without reference to the realities that prevail in the world and their country. Constitutionally, Pakistan is supposed to be a democracy. Given the recent electoral farce, however, it is not surprising that the Economist Intelligence Unit recently downgraded Pakistan from a 'hybrid democracy' to an 'authoritarian regime' or non-democracy. As such, no national or provincial elections conducted in Pakistan can have international credibility.

Pakistan today barely pretends to be a democracy. It is, in truth, a military-led autocracy in violation of its Constitution, the Pakistan Movement, the vision of its

founding father, and the aspirations of its people. This has been abetted by an unprotecting judiciary, a managed legislature, a servile executive, a restricted media, and not least, the whip hand of the US which treats Pakistan – a nuclear weapons power with a population going on a quarter of a billion people - as a country without options.

In such a context, what can we possibly mean by strategic leadership and statecraft? Pakistan's location and size, needless to say, endow it with a certain strategic potential which can only be realised through efficient statecraft, which, in turn, is a synonym for good governance on behalf of the economic and human

development of all its peoples. The very first condition, however, for such an endeavor is a government that is seen by the vast majority of the people to represent their choice and their interests rather than those of their domestic oppressors and external exploiters. In a country whose people are, by force of circumstance, as politically aware as in Pakistan, it is all too clear how far they see this first condition being met, if at all.

Unfortunately, the people in Pakistan have been conditioned to have minimal expectations and resign themselves to accepting their priorities are not of those who govern them, and they can do very little about it. Statecraft, in these circumstances, becomes the containment of the people's expectations and the protection of domestic and external elite interests against their occasional outbursts of anger. It undermines the very possibility of strategic leadership and becomes instead the management of strategic dependence.

This requires skill, determination, vigilance, violence, and cynicism dressed up as patriotism and religious idealism. It rules out statesmanship or political leadership in the interests of the nation and the people. It constrains the freedom of the people in the name of law and order and denies them resources for the protection and fulfillment of their basic entitlements and rights. It is essentially illegal and corrupt.

In speaking about strategy, one cannot avoid discussing the late great practitioner of this art, Dr. Henry Kissinger, who combined prodigious historical knowledge and theoretical insight with a genius for negotiating realistic if not always principled compromises. As a practitioner of *realpolitik* or power politics, Dr. Kissinger relegated the moral or ethical factor to a decidedly secondary position, not because he was necessarily immoral, but because he saw strategic leadership as an essentially amoral exercise of power between nations even if it required his countrymen to see it as an expression of their unique morality.

When asked how he felt about being regarded as a genius, Kissinger said geniuses were one in a hundred whereas 'good people' were far fewer, and he would, accordingly, prefer to be regarded as a good person rather than a mere genius. Unfortunately, when he recently died at the age of 100, he was overwhelmingly remembered as a genius instead of a good person. His strategy to bring an end to the Vietnam war, which combined brutal massacres all over Indochina with brilliant bilateral and multilateral negotiations, was ultimately successful, but at the cost of his reputation as a decent human being.

The writings of Dr. Kissinger are nevertheless essential reading for anyone wishing to gain insight into what strategy and *realpolitik* entail. His book, *A World Restored*, published in 1957 when he was a young Harvard professor, is a classic. He notes, "The attainment of peace is not as easy as the desire for it. Not for nothing is history associated with the figure of Nemesis, which defeats man by fulfilling his wishes in a different form, or by answering his prayers too completely.

Whenever peace — conceived as the avoidance of war — has been the primary objective of a power or a group of powers, the international system has been at the mercy of the most ruthless member of the international community." Kissinger was, of course, writing about post-Napoleonic Europe and referring to Germany muscling itself into the front rank of European powers. But how ironic that it should apply even more accurately to his adopted country today whose foreign policy he shaped so fundamentally!

Kissinger goes on to say stability, the objective of strategic leadership, "has commonly resulted not from a quest for peace but from a commonly accepted 'legitimacy' which should not be confused with 'justice' but rather an international agreement about workable arrangements and about the permissible aims and methods of foreign policy." This is what the US today calls "a rules-based world order," with the rules framed by itself for the rest of the world to follow in greater or lesser measure in accordance with their capacity to resist its pressures.

Kissinger qualifies his statement by observing that it "implies the acceptance of the framework of the international order by all major powers, at least to the extent that no state is so dissatisfied that, like Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, it expresses its dissatisfaction in a revolutionary foreign policy." A legitimate order, he says, does not make conflicts impossible, but it limits their scope. Ironically, this essential proviso is absent from today's hegemonic rules-based order pursued by the US. Other major powers, like China and Russia, are certainly dissatisfied with the world order the US seeks to impose and are, accordingly, following "a revolutionary foreign policy" such as Germany pursued in the 19th century. Kissinger notes diplomacy as the adjustment of differences through negotiations "is possible only in legitimate international orders." Such a legitimate international order today can only be based on the United Nations Charter which the US observes largely in the breach. Diplomacy, which Kissinger defines as the art of restraining the exercise of power, cannot function in such an environment.

What Kissinger says on behalf of the world's most powerful country can be generalised to apply to smaller powers including Pakistan. He visited Pakistan on two occasions. The first was in 1971 when he made his now-famous secret visit to China from Pakistan to prepare for President Nixon's visit to Beijing. Kissinger had a seminal meeting with Chairman Mao which paved the way for Nixon's historic visit and initiated a US-China *détente* that altered the course of the Cold War. That was strategic leadership. Five years later, he visited again to dissuade Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto from proceeding with a nuclear reprocessing plant. Despite using threats, incentives, and humour, Kissinger failed to persuade Bhutto to drop the idea. Nevertheless, the mutual respect between the two leaders enabled them to engage in humorous banter at a public banquet on the word 'reprocessing' which showed the role of humor and personal relations in strategic leadership if only to soften the impact of failures which inevitably happen from time to time.

In a talk at the National Defence College, Kissinger likened strategy to a chess game in which each player seeks to control the maximum number of squares on the chessboard to retain an advantage over his opponent. This either enables him to win the game from a stronger position or at least force a draw from a weaker position, which is what Bhutto achieved in Shimla in 1972.

Dr. Kissinger is no less lucid and illuminating in his book, *On China*, where he contrasts the western concept of strategy and statecraft with its Chinese counterpart. He writes, “a turbulent history has taught Chinese leaders that not every problem has a solution and that too great an emphasis on total mastery over specific events could upset the harmony of the universe.” Only a civilisational country which sees itself as ‘Chung-wa,’ the centre of the universe, could have such a comprehensive concept of strategy and statecraft. He notes that China had too many potential enemies for it to live in total security. Accordingly, it accepted relative security which implied accepting relative insecurity, which in turn implied the “need to learn the grammar of over a dozen neighbouring states with significantly different histories and aspirations. Rarely did Chinese statesmen risk the outcome of a conflict on a single all-or-nothing clash; elaborate multi-year manoeuvres were closer to their style.

Where “the Western tradition prized the decisive clash of forces emphasising feats of heroism,” Kissinger says “the Chinese ideal stressed subtlety, indirection, and the patient accumulation of relative advantage.” He contrasts the Chinese strategic board game of “Wei-chi,” better known by its Japanese name of “Go,” with chess. Wei-chi is “a game of surrounding pieces and involves strategic encirclement. Whereas the chess player aims for total victory, the Wei-chi player seeks relative advantage. Chess produces single-mindedness. Wei-chi generates strategic flexibility. The difference between Wei-chi and chess is also reflected in the differences between Chinese and western military strategy.” Carl von Clausewitz, according to Kissinger, treats strategy as an activity in its own right separate from politics and famously said war is a continuation of politics by other means. Sun Tzu, on the contrary, merges politics and strategy and emphasises the elements of politics and psychology over the purely military in conflict situations.

As major powers, the US and the larger West European countries were able to rely more or less exclusively on the military element of strategy in their imperialist and colonial heydays. Western Europe today has chosen to be a strategic satellite of the US. The US economy is shrinking because of what Yannis Varoufakis, the famous Greek economist and former Finance Minister, calls the emergence of techno-feudalism and American economist Michael Hudson calls the apartheid nature of the US economy in which a tiny number of super-rich and huge institutional creditors rule over debtors who comprise the overwhelming majority of its population.

As for Pakistan, it cannot successfully mimic Clausewitzian strategies even towards its smaller neighbours because the US, despite its declining economy, is still a global power and strategically every country's neighbour, not to mention India which is larger than all its South Asian neighbours put together. Accordingly, Chinese strategies are far more appropriate for Pakistan. But as an ex-colonial country, our national mindset in general, and our military mindset in particular, find it difficult to accept such a conclusion despite our proximity and friendship with China.

When I was in Moscow, the Chinese ambassador, a wise and experienced diplomat, became a good friend. Later when I was in Beijing, he had retired but remained an adviser to the government on foreign policy. He explained to me the essence of Chinese statecraft over 3000 years of history. The Chinese had learned the rise and fall of dynasties depended on the Mandate of Heaven. When it was bestowed, there was peace and prosperity, the harvests were abundant, enemies were kept at bay, law and order was maintained, the country was united, the dynasty was stable and strong, and it endured. When it was withdrawn, there was war, enemies intervened and occupied Chinese territory, there was pestilence and famine, bandits roamed and plundered the countryside, the country was divided and eventually the dynasty fell.

Over the centuries, Chinese scholars sought explanations for the bestowal and withdrawal of the Mandate of Heaven. Eventually, they agreed on an explanation. In brief, all the problems and challenges that China faced fell into three broad categories: those that brooked no delay in resolving; those that were more complicated and required time to understand and devise an appropriate set of responses; and finally, those that were so challenging and overwhelming that all that could be done was to equip the next generation with the capabilities to deal with and overcome them.

Whenever China's rulers correctly categorised the challenges before them and responded accordingly, the Mandate of Heaven was bestowed and endured.

But when they incorrectly categorised the challenges before them and adopted inappropriate policies to address them, the Mandate of Heaven was withdrawn with all its consequences. He said China did not pretend to teach other people and countries how to govern themselves. All it could do was offer its own experience and it was for its friends to see whether or not it had any relevance for them. He then suggested, as an example, that Pakistan – which was more than a friend – might wish to analyse which category the Kashmir dispute belonged to. Did it belong to the first, second, or third category of challenges? What did the experience of Pakistan suggest? What do the needs of Pakistan require? Has Pakistan correctly categorised the Kashmir challenge? Similarly, with regard to other political, economic, social, regional, educational, and health challenges facing Pakistan which may belong to different categories of challenges? In classical Chinese tradition,

he left a thought over which I might ponder. I conveyed this conversation to the ministry which was probably highly amused, or bemused, or both. I never got a response.

In western discussions of statecraft and strategic leadership in the diplomatic and business worlds, one often comes across concepts such as transactional leadership, transformational leadership, visionary leadership, collaborative leadership, etc., with the implicit assumption that the best kind involves a combination of these segmented leaderships. Similarly, leaders are expected to demonstrate a variety of qualities such as vision, openness, focus, courage, prudence, balance, execution, curiosity, diligence, learning, etc. All these qualities are considered essential for zero-sum contests with adversaries in which one party wins and the other loses.

Although the concept of mutual benefit certainly exists in western cultures, it does not constitute a core element of strategic thinking, which is often seen as more a science combining mathematics, engineering, logic, inventiveness, deceit, surprise, etc. Instead, mutual benefit is considered a concept that owes its inspiration to religion, ethics, morality, philosophy, the arts, even music and poetry, in other words, the humanities which contribute to a humane and vibrant culture and civilisation despite the inescapably zero-sum quality of the struggle for dominance as a condition for survival.

In Chinese thinking, the strategic discourse is more holistic and integrated than segmented, just as is the case with its medical, political, and philosophical traditions. Chinese history and strategic thinking are, of course, replete with zero-sum games of deceit, outsmarting, outmanoeuvring, psychology, prevailing over superior numbers, etc. But all of this is integrated into a larger harmony as the condition for longer-term success and the bestowal and preservation of the Mandate of Heaven. When this harmony is broken and policies are segmented and stove-piped, all the short-term successes add up to nothing – as has frequently happened in Chinese history – and the Mandate of Heaven is withdrawn.

The US cajoles, bullies, coerces, and sanctions Pakistani governments into submission and reluctant cooperation. China achieves much more by investing in the prospect of shared prosperity and security for the people of Pakistan. It retains a relative advantage over the US despite the equivocation and unreliability of Pakistan's ruling elites. It demonstrates superior strategic leadership.

Pakistan's policies, whether external or domestic, have, by and large, been an extended series of short-term policies that never add up to a coherent and successful longer-term policy. That is strategic incoherence. This is because statecraft or good governance has been missing. In these circumstances, strategic leadership remains an aspiration divorced from reality. Economically, Pakistan has statistically done reasonably well with an externally dependent and colonially structured economy that has

little or no prospect of domestically generating longer-term stability, security, prosperity, and well-being for its people. Its massive informal economy has so far enabled it to survive as a low-level equilibrium economy. But this will not be for much longer because the youth and the poor of Pakistan are no longer ready to eke out their lives at the point of a gun and the bottom of the barrel.

These weaknesses have fed into every aspect of Pakistan's national policies, including its foreign, security, and strategic policies. The progressive militarisation of national decision-making on the basis of a fundamentally underdeveloped economy that is not allowed to be radically reformed, restructured, and developed by its ruling power elites has further exacerbated its strategic disadvantage. In these circumstances, discussions on statecraft and strategy become little more than intellectual entertainment and sterile discourse.

Where do we go from here? The newly elected government has made a number of electoral pledges drafted by experts to attract voters which are destined for the waste-paper basket. The military 'establishment,' as usual, promises to 'turn over a new leaf' after each change of government. But as the British philosopher A. C. Grayling observes, if each page has the same text then the book has only one page which may be turned over as often as you like but remain the same.

In his last book, *The Age of Artificial Intelligence*, written when 97 years old, Kissinger talks of how AI will radically alter the parameters of statecraft and strategic policy. He says AI is "integrating non-human intelligence into the basic fabric of human activity." Decision making will take place at speeds faster than human thought, and the amount of information integrated into decision making will be several orders more than what the human brain can contain. AI-assisted network platforms will outthink human decision making.

Whether this will supersede occidental and oriental strategic thinking and warfare, and whether it will enable the international community to come together to avert the elimination of human civilisation by the human misuse of non-human intelligence is today what a former US defence secretary called "a known unknown." Every country, including Pakistan, has a role to play in such a collective existential endeavour.

In conclusion, what should statecraft and strategic leadership require of Pakistan? It has to first become viable to have any statecraft or strategy worth the name. The elected or selected government should be held strictly accountable for the pledges it has glibly made. No excuses should be brooked. Electoral pledges should be time-lined. The Prime Minister must regularly brief the nation on national TV on the progress being made. He must similarly interface with the people, including media commentators, experts, scholars, women, teachers, etc. on TV to ascertain their assessments of progress with regard to his pledges.

Questions will need to focus on a whole series of radical structural and tax reforms to ensure transfers of income from the 10 percent richest families and corporations to finance the provision of basic needs and services to the poorest 90 percent of the population. This can ensure rapid progress towards debt-free development and escape from IMF structural adjustment programs and foreign investments that threaten economic sovereignty through one-sided SIFC investment protection agreements. Currently, administration, military, debt servicing and repatriation of profits and loans leave practically nothing for development expenditures which are financed by deepening the fatal debt trap.

Pakistan's experience demonstrates that none of this will even begin to happen as long as the people remain passive, resigned, uninformed, unorganised, divided and incapable of developing nationwide grassroots movements and political parties that represent their interests, and which are not led by essentially uneducated and pusillanimous politicians thousands of times richer than themselves. Today, political leaders and parties are by and large jointly arrayed against the people. Musical chairs at the top of the political food-chain accompanied by phony displays of mutual hostility are the name of the game and the 'establishment' is the impresario. All this will need to change.

If and when a legitimate political order is established the whole range of domestic and external policies can be rooted in the priorities of the people. The exhilarating task of devising, discussing, implementing, reviewing, and revising such policies can become the mission of a lifetime for a whole nation. Pakistan will progressively become a strategic player instead of an object of strategic play. This will change the political culture of the country, raise the quality of life for its citizens, elevate Pakistan to the rank of the more successful and respected developing nations, enable it to more effectively cope with the existential challenges looming over it, and enable it to exercise strategic influence and leadership. There are, however, far too many of the relatively comfortable middle-class intelligentsia who will merely shrug their shoulders at all of the above. They may not be the primary villain but they are the problem.

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