

Diplomatic Dilemma: Pragmatism vs Idealism

Today the biggest challenge in diplomacy is balancing interests and morals at the same time. A scenario in which a treaty, pact or agreement that has a strong moral base and also caters for the interest of stakeholders is considered an ideal scenario. It is the best case for a country when its stance satisfies both Idealist and pragmatic approaches. In most of the cases, there is a constant tussle between idealism and pragmatism. Let's understand this with an example. On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched a vicious attack on the state of Israel. The terrorist outfit killed thousands of civilians. They have still held hostages and are persecuting them. On the other hand, the IDF has launched an offensive in Gaza. It led to the deportation of a huge population from North Gaza to South Gaza and now it is expanding its operations towards South Gaza. In such a scenario, what stance should India take? Let's quickly do a moral assessment. India is facing the same issue of terrorism and radicalization. The ideology of Hamas is the same as the ideology of any other terror outfit. It is not merely confined to antisemitism but also is intolerant towards other religions and ideologies. India's PM Modi condemned the terrorist attack on Israel but India has still not officially declared Hamas as a terror outfit. On the other hand, Israel is giving collective punishment to the Palestinians, i.e., a common man in Palestine is also suffering due to the misdeeds of Hamas. India has not yet officially condemned Israel for the death of civilians (or non-combatants). If you see things from a moral lens then India should have declared Hamas as a terror outfit and criticized Israel for the death of civilians. But India has maintained a balance in its stance and has not yet been critical towards any side.

Now, let's do a pragmatic assessment. The main reason for not declaring Hamas a terror outfit is India's relationship with Arab countries. India cannot afford to worsen its relations with Arab nations. India still imports 44% of crude oil from the Gulf countries. On the other hand, when it comes to Israel, India and Israel have deep relations and collaborations in various sectors like defence, technology, research and development, agriculture, cyber security and other state-of-the-art technologies. Both Arabs and Israel are equally important to us. If we look from the other side, India is more significant for Israel than for the Arab nations. Currently, Israel is facing a huge geopolitical isolation. There are very few countries that either support Israel or are neutral. India is one of them. Even if India slightly tilts towards Arab nations, Israel will not take any action against India. Rather, Israel cannot afford to take any action

against India at this stage. Of course, a complete shift in policy from India's side would have ramifications. But the point is if India votes against Israel at the UN, it would have a negligible impact on the relations. If we see from a pragmatic lens, then I feel we have made a correct choice and have balanced our position perfectly. Analogous to this case is the case of the Russia-Ukraine war. It has various other factors, but we can witness the tussle between pragmatism and idealism in that case as well.

If we want to summarize pragmatism in geopolitics in one word then that word would be Realpolitik. It is a word in German which means a system of politics based on practical rather than moral or ideological considerations. It's not a new term in the world of geopolitics. After World War 2, if any country has followed it religiously, it's the USA. It became prevalent in the USA during the tenure of US President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. From thereon, the US followed the narcissistic approach in foreign policy i.e., either you are with us or against us. To secure its interest, the US bombed various countries, changed regimes, imposed sanctions and destroyed their economies, killed thousands of civilians. It is said that the US bombed various countries to control oil prices. It destroyed various countries just to gain strategic points in geopolitics. I have already explained the concept of the deep state and several case studies related to it in another article. Deep State also works on the same principle of Realpolitik. The US gains billions of dollars by selling its weapons to various countries. It is called the war economy. During Kissinger's era, the USA supported China in countering Russia. The USA was always seen as the saviour and promoter of democracy. It economically supported a communist regime which oppressed its people and had dreams of expansion. It was a grave strategic mistake from the US. It awakened and fed a dormant giant in Asia which is now challenging the USA's hegemony.

In today's era of geopolitics, the term moral is quite ambiguous, vague and subjective. There are various countries which have robust information warfare machinery. It is difficult to identify misinformation or a false narrative. All the stakeholders (especially the US, West, China and Russia) are equally responsible for the global instability. China on the other hand has no moral standing. Unlike, the USA, it doesn't try to wage wars or operations on other countries in the garb of human rights. There are various other cases where pragmatism overrides the idealism. If you ask me my personal opinion, I would always prefer a moral world based on rules-based order.

But if I had to make a choice, I would choose the pragmatic approach. My country's national and strategic interests are more important to me than any moral or ethical equivalence. The idea of an idealistic society is similar to a utopian society. One unique feature of Indian Foreign Policy is its ability to balance both morals and interests. But I don't think that we would be able to balance relations any more as the world is polarizing politically. Also, if you study carefully the P5 members of the UN which have a huge influence on the world, you will notice that all of them have a bad track record of colonizing and exploiting small countries, waging wars, changing regimes in various countries, etc. India is way better than these countries when it comes to moral positioning. Hence, I think we should also adopt the approach of hardcore pragmatism. But at the same time, we should also not forget our cultural and moral roots. We must ensure that in the process of securing our interest, we are not hurting any non-combatant or civilian.

I would like to end this by giving you a scenario and asking a question based on it.

I want you to imagine yourself in the boots of an official. Suppose your country has an opportunity to earn billions of dollars but the condition is you have to wage a war against a country. (Note – Profit is way more than the cost of war) That country has enough resources to fulfil the demands of the whole region. That country is a fully functional democracy. Currently, its military is weak, but its rise might become a threat to your nation. Also, your country is currently facing an economic crisis. Would you choose to wage a war without any concrete reason to secure your national interests or would you choose not to wage a war and choose peace?

[Note: Choosing the peace would cost the national interest heavily and choosing the war will lead to deaths and casualties of the civilians and non-combatants.]