

# INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

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## Opinion

### A people's foreign policy

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**If individuals are found peeping into neighbours' homes or violating others' privacy, we find it unacceptable and abhorrent. But if countries do the same against each other, it is considered legitimate and finds acceptance in the name of national security, acquiring the trendy tag of espionage.**

Apart from spying, many states spread misinformation, instigate violence, kidnap or kill people in covert operations, facilitate terrorist attacks and even wage wars against other states in the name of national interest and security. But if individuals or groups engage in similar acts, like rumour mongering, acts of violence or rioting, we declare them to be deviant and criminal. Somehow, all actions we hold to be illegal, decadent, savage and uncivilised when committed by a person or group, are seen as necessities, virtues and heroics when countries commit the same acts against each other. The widespread acceptance and celebration of James Bond – the legendary spymaster of Hollywood – is the iconic manifestation of this contradiction.

Foreign Office mindset: Despite all the international exposure and diplomatic sophistication, foreign affairs personnel and intelligence agencies often act as bullies – just like those commonly seen at schools and street corners, operating in packs with the sole objective of scoring over the other 'gang' without any scruples or values. You just have to win, irrespective of what it takes.

What else explains the not-so-infrequent reports about the embassy staff of a 'hostile country' being beaten up, and the almost immediate retaliatory bashing up of that country's embassy staff on the other side? Or the numerous instances of a diplomat being expelled on charges of espionage or carrying out activities inconsistent with his diplomatic status, and the prompt retaliatory expulsion of a diplomat by the other country, citing similar charges? The list goes on, to cover retaliatory killings, acts of sabotage, subversion and support to terror groups etc.

With such mindsets prevalent in the foreign services and intelligence agencies, it is unfortunate and dangerous that these very same people conceive, control, direct (and sometimes manipulate) the foreign affairs of most countries with participation of very few political leaders and no space for people.

Hence many countries unabashedly engage in all kinds of immature, illegal and inhuman acts against each other ranging from espionage to invasion, offering what they feel are perfect justifications. Most media also play along with their country's establishments. While highlighting, and at times exaggerating, the actual and imagined acts of atrocities and aggression of the other country, the

media tend to ignore or downplay their own state's acts of omission and commission. As a result, citizens are often brainwashed into believing that the other country is diabolical, and their own government is always innocent and well-intentioned.

In such a situation, where all aggression is successfully ascribed to the other country and our own country acquires the aura of victimhood and our government seen as good and cautious, there is always the danger of the opposition parties (especially in a democracy), charging the establishment of being weak and thereby pushing it to take more belligerent and unreasonable stands that could further precipitate matters. Hence the assertions and actions of governments engaged in hostilities are not based on facts, honesty and a spirit of reconciliation but often dictated by the need to appeal to and appease the sentiments of their respective publics that have been whipped up to a frenzy of vengeance by a demanding opposition (or the ruling party itself) and belligerent media.

Need for people's foreign policy: With increasing globalisation, a country's foreign policy affects a large percentage of the life of their citizens. The people's access to food, shelter, civic amenities, education, health, and social security also depends to large extent on trade relations with other countries (especially neighbours) and defence expenditures and security concerns. Better trade relations and minimal military expenditures could ensure higher standards of living for the people and eventually eradicate poverty across the globe.

Despite the significant and critical bearing that mature management of foreign affairs can have on the day-to-day lives of common people, the issue of improving foreign relations hardly ever figures in general public discourse or becomes an agenda in any election. Generally people get involved and respond to foreign policy issues when relations with another country deteriorate. And then the involvement often tilts towards endorsing and urging aggressive action (motivated by the media hype and general atmosphere of distrust and hatred that is created). Even parliamentarians and other elected representatives hardly question foreign policy formulations and actions while being belligerent or espousing violence on foreign soil, for fear of being branded anti-national and going against the projected general public sentiment.

Result: Foreign affairs are often determined by those who are trained and conditioned to believe that spying, hostility and war are inevitable and heroic.

And yet, most individuals would prefer to shun violence, abhor deceit and discourage aggression in any form. Hence, barring a few fringe elements that constitute an insignificant minority in every society, most people would generally favour tourism and trade rather than a foreign policy oriented towards distrust, deceit, weapons and war. So if ordinary citizens come to take active interest in and help to determine foreign policy matters, we can hope to initiate a new era in foreign affairs that eschews violence, promotes global cooperation and becomes truly civilised.

Truth time: Few admit it, but it is a fact that both countries send spies into each other's territory, support subversive groups and directly or indirectly engage in terrorist actions. Recruits for such activities are often the unemployed from border districts on either side, whose poverty the establishments exploit in the name of nationalism and then abandon them to their fates and long years of imprisonment across the border if they are caught. There are many such people lodged in jails on either side of the border – abandoned, forgotten and unknown.

If our governments did indeed recruit them for the noble cause of serving the nation and if they have made the ultimate sacrifice of losing their life or their freedom in the line of duty, then why are all of them not declared national heroes and their families provided for adequately? If we cannot do this, then why lure our poor into a deceptive, dangerous and disgraceful path?