

The PM should listen more and talk less: David Miliband

Daily Times

Monday, August 02, 2010

David Cameron's big splash on India, Israel and Afghanistan is no substitute for informed and considered foreign policy

David Cameron has used the past two weeks to make a verbal splash on foreign policy. Like a cuttlefish squirting out ink, his words were copious and created a mess. The cancellation by the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, of a security meeting with our services shows that, in foreign policy, words can be our most powerful tool. But the Prime Minister's have been destructive. The mindsets in Israel, Pakistan and Britain have all been given the once-over. But making a splash is not the same as making a difference. Mr. Cameron either has a loose tongue – his comments about Gaza, terrorism and the Second World War were made off the cuff at press conferences or in interviews – or he is desperate for headlines. Neither is encouraging.

The Pakistan issue is the most important. It is the region's tinderbox. We have 10,000 young men and women at risk in Afghanistan. Only a political settlement can bring an end to the war. For that we need Pakistan; and they need our economic and military support. David Cameron is right that terrorist groups have launched attacks from Pakistan, and links into parts of the Pakistani state have been an open secret over the past 20 years. Militants have moved with comparative ease across the Durand Line, and the insurgencies in the south and east of Afghanistan are directed partly from Quetta and Peshawar.

But that is only part of the picture. Pakistan has also been the victim of terror. A few days before David Cameron's visit, a suicide bomb near Peshawar killed seven people near a gathering mourning the death of a Pakistani cabinet minister's son. His death, too, was claimed by the Taliban. Bombs and attacks blamed by the Pakistani government on Taliban and al-Qaida-linked militants have killed more than 3,500 people in the past three years. Benazir Bhutto was killed by terrorism in her own country.

But the Prime Minister, in attacking Pakistan for "looking both ways", did not tell this side of the story. In highlighting attacks originating from areas like Peshawar, he ignored the murder of people from Peshawar struggling to prevent them. And he showed no understanding of Pakistan's path back to democratic rule in the past two years.

It would have been better for the Prime Minister to talk about ways we can support Pakistan. The level of EU funding in Pakistan is just half a euro per person compared to five to 10 times as much in other parts of the world not only more developed, but less crucial to global security.

For an Afghanistan settlement we need regional peace, and Pakistan is the key player in achieving that, along with India, Russia, Turkey and China. For that to happen it is vital that the political and military effort that Pakistan has shown is recognized. Then he would have been in a stronger position to argue for the Pakistani authorities to do more – to tackle the infrastructure of front organizations for terrorist groups in Pakistan, to complete the prosecution of those linked to the Mumbai attacks, to act with full complementarity with Afghan and Isaf forces at the Afghan border.

The Conservatives are putting domestic politics before sound foreign policy. The truth is they are continuing Labour's policies on Turkey's membership of the European Union, on the need to open up Gaza and on trade with India. After all, it was the British presidency of the EU in 2005 that opened membership talks.

Trade with India became a priority for the British government when Robin Cook announced a bolder policy in 1997, and between 1998 and 2008 inward investment from India into the UK increased by 3,559 per cent. That the Prime Minister wants to build on this is to be welcomed. But to laud this idea as being revolutionary, and righting a policy wrong, is just spin.

The real worry is that Mr Cameron has a shriveled notion of Britain's role in the world. We are not a superpower. But our open, creative economy and society is the essential counterpart to our strong role in the worlds of ideas, diplomacy, culture and security, from our handling of the economic crisis to climate change, from development to Afghanistan. We break this link at our peril.

The Prime Minister's trade drive in India was overshadowed by a self-inflicted wound: his heralding of a cap in skilled non-EU immigration as the answer to "uncontrolled" immigration. It doesn't add up – at home, where the cap is a minor part of the immigration numbers, or in India, where it was received with bemusement.

Equally he says he wants to export culture and British identity, but we have a government policy at home that seems to not care about British culture at all. For example, the UK Film Council is to be axed without consultation. For every pound the UK Film Council invested in British film-making, £5 was made at the box office. As an export alone it is worth £1.34bn; and as a cultural export it reflects Britain's history and way of life.

If Britain shrinks at home, and if we make the wrong decisions for expansion in our economic and cultural identity, then there is quite literally less to export. Britain needs strong partnerships in the world. We depend on stronger international cooperation and stronger international institutions. We don't need bluster. We all have two ears and one mouth. Foreign policy demands that we use them in that proportion. COURTESY THE INDEPENDENT.

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