

## The pawns in international disputes

Among the many hazards that diplomats face today, the most ancient one is expulsion, also known as declaration of a diplomat as *persona non grata*. It is the most effective bloodless punishment as the person concerned is removed lock, stock, and barrel from the scene, never to return. The diplomat concerned may not be guilty of omission or commission or even aware of the reason why he is being expelled. He becomes a mere pawn in international disputes or he may even be a victim of a symbolic protest or a reciprocal action.

### The Russia example

Russia now, like the erstwhile Soviet Union, may well be the country whose diplomats have perhaps suffered the largest number of expulsions. The recent coordinated expulsion of over 100 Russian diplomats by more than 20 countries is huge even by the standards of the coldest days of the Cold War. Basically, it was an act of solidarity by the U.S., the European Union and some others with the U.K. after an alleged attempt by Russia to murder a former Russian spy and his daughter. Russia had denied any hand in the attempted murder, but responded with expulsions symmetrically in accordance with diplomatic practice. Generally, the countries involved do not go beyond these diplomatic gestures. Slowly and gradually, the vacant posts in the Russian embassies will be filled and diplomats will return to their posts in Moscow.

### Russia, a rogue nation?

Austria did not join some of the other EU members to expel Russian diplomats because it felt that communication channels should be kept open, particularly during crisis. The Austrian Foreign Minister recalled the several occasions when Austria had organised historic meetings which paved the way for peace and understanding. Russia welcomed the Austrian position and even expressed willingness to hold talks on the issue of suspected poisoning of the former spy. But for the U.K., the Austrian decision was unfriendly as it revealed the chinks in the European armour.

Russia gloated over the fact that a majority of nations in the world, including China and India, wanted concrete evidence about Russian complicity. It was also a relief for them that U.S. President Donald Trump did not tweet about Russian involvement even though he ordered the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats.

### U.S. expels 60 Russian diplomats, orders closure of Seattle consulate

Russia has a tradition of assigning expelled diplomats to an agency called the UPDK, which takes care of the needs of diplomats posted in Moscow. Diplomats cannot function in Moscow without the UPDK which alone can maintain diplomatic residences. You cannot even drive a nail on the wall without the permission of the UPDK. Domestic staff have to be appointed by it and the same person will come back even if sacked by the diplomat. The Russians at the agency are good diplomats and they seem to have the capacity to relax rules to please Ambassadors.

### India's stand

India takes recourse to expulsion of diplomats only in extreme circumstances when it has clear evidence of wrongdoing. When it expels diplomats, it does expect reciprocal action and accepts it as a necessary evil. India has expelled Soviet diplomats even during the heyday of India-Soviet friendship. In retaliation, Moscow had technically expelled Indian diplomats, who were already under orders of transfer from Moscow. In a rare case, one of India's diplomats who was expelled in this manner was allowed to visit Moscow as a member of the delegation accompanying the

Prime Minister of India. This violation of the code of conduct was later explained as a conscious decision not to hurt India-Soviet relations.

### Russia expels 23 foreign diplomats as spy crisis escalates

I have the dubious distinction of being the only Indian Head of Mission to be expelled. We invited the expulsion after a military coup in Fiji ousted a Fiji-Indian dominated government in 1987 and changed the Constitution which effectively disenfranchised Fiji Indians. India refused to recognise the military government, imposed sanctions and got Fiji thrown out of the Commonwealth. Even in the face of such a position, I was allowed to remain in Fiji for two years before they asked me to leave in 72 hours. I left in 48 hours, saying that I would like to use the remaining 24 hours to go back on a holiday. As it happened, the wheel came full circle and I was invited back to Fiji after 25 years.

Expulsion of diplomats is very often like shooting the messenger for the message. In modern times, expelling diplomats has become the instrument of weak nations to show displeasure to stronger ones even at the risk of facing retribution. Nauru, a little island nation in the Pacific, once expelled the only resident envoy of Australia over a petty quarrel, but restored its vital link in a short time.

The expulsion of Russian diplomats should be seen as part of the emergence of a new Cold War, resulting from the assertive policies of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the aggressive posture of Mr. Trump and his love-hate relationship with Russia. Among the many diplomatic devices countries possess to express outrage, expulsion is the least disruptive, though it plays havoc with the lives of diplomats and their families.

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