

Yousaf rebuked over COP28 meeting

Humza Yousaf: how to understand the first minister's spat with David Cameron over his COP28 meeting with the Turkish president

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No one likes being given a public telling-off. But that is exactly what happened when foreign secretary David Cameron decided to flex his [“muscular unionism”](#) by directly and openly rebuking the Scottish first minister Humza Yousaf for holding his own bilateral meetings with national leaders at the COP28 summit.

The main point of tension relates to a meeting with the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, at which no UK diplomats were present. Only a month into his new job, Cameron has made a clear statement of intent by reminding the first minister openly of Scotland's “proper” place in international relations. Such direct engagement with another national leader can only be carried out at the largesse of the British state.

Under the hierarchical nature of the devolution settlement, responsibility for international affairs remains the preserve

of the UK's central state authorities. Other areas of policy are then "devolved" to the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The problem is that there is a very blurred line between what is domestic and what is international politics in the contemporary world. The first minister emphasised that his meeting with the Turkish leader had focused on the climate crisis.

As environmental policy is a devolved matter, he therefore argued that private talks are a legitimate international dimension to the Scottish government's work on climate issues. Yousaf's attendance at COP28 in the first place is potentially evidence in support of such an argument.

The UK devolution framework stresses, in legal terms, a protectionist vision of the scope for sub-state governments such as Yousaf's to conduct foreign relations. It says that while "reserved" to the UK government, sub-state international interactions are permissible, as long as these do not commit the UK state as a whole to [obligations in the international arena](#).

The UK government's concern is the potential damage arising from a multiplicity of "UK" voices contradicting one another, causing confusion amongst international partners, with the risk of undermining the UK position on the global stage.

Yousaf's meeting with Erdoğan was not the first time he had been criticised by the UK government for contravening protocol. In September, he met with the Icelandic prime minister Katrin Jakobsdóttir [without a UK diplomat in the room](#) and was issued a warning by the then foreign secretary James Cleverly.

Scotland secretary Alister Jack has told the [Scottish affairs committee](#) in Westminster that there were four other unescorted meetings with foreign dignitaries at COP28. That suggests a

more strategic approach than Yousaf admits.

‘Protodiplomacy’

Despite the threats from Westminster, the opportunity to grab a few pics at such a significant global forum (all of which can be posted on [social media](#)) is hard to pass up.

Such public interactions [project an image](#) of a Scottish leader who is on a level playing field with global figureheads. They combine to present a subtle communication to the wider world about the SNP government’s ambitions for statehood.

Yousaf’s tactics are therefore an example of “protodiplomacy” – a prototype for Scottish international diplomacy. He is signalling what a Scottish foreign policy would look like after independence.

These visuals plant the seed of an idea – of Scotland being competent in its own international affairs – into the mindset of the watching world, priming the audience for its acceptability.

Such strategies of protodiplomacy [rarely produce the results expected by its proponents](#). Rather than producing the results these governments want, namely to secure significant international support for secessionist claims, they are much more likely to lead to international isolation, with consequent economic, social and political costs.

Yousaf calls Cameron’s reaction to his meeting ‘petty’. Cameron’s threat to withhold UK diplomatic support for the Scottish government overseas if there are further breaches of protocol comes at a time when relations between the UK government and the SNP-led administration in Edinburgh are at a new low. There are major disagreements over the legality of Downing Street’s unprecedented veto of Holyrood’s contentious

[gender recognition bill](#) and Scottish moves to repeal the [UK Internal Market Act](#).

Like many others, Yousaf has vocally criticised the UK government's controversial Rwanda bill, which he [described](#) as “the most disgraceful piece of legislation in modern UK political history”.

These tensions form the mood music to much of the daily business of intergovernmental cooperation that is a requirement of the proper functioning of a devolved state. If there is real fear at the UK government level that sub-state interactions with leaders like Erdoğan risk undermining national positions in the global arena, then solutions which are more meaningful than threats to withhold diplomatic support ought to be developed.

Embedding sub-state voices fully and more effectively in an internal conversation on what the UK's international priorities should be is much more likely to contain that risk than public rebukes of the kind delivered by Cameron.

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