

## EMERGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN 2021 AND CHALLENGES FOR PAKISTAN

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At the advent of the twenty-first century, many predictions were made about events and happenings of this millennium across a broad spectrum of scope and dimensions. These were based mostly on experiences of contemporary history, at best spanning over the last two centuries. Where those astrologers failed was the velocity of change and the absence of a logical transition. The world has changed in a magnitude and in dimensions that were unimaginable in those times. What has happened is that time difference between fiction and reality is reducing by the day.

Geo-politics is no exception in this context and has witnessed equally scintillating and unimaginable happenings in this century. Whereas there have been numerous micro-level changes, there is no dearth of transformation at the macro level also. Who could imagine that Russia, one of the states of the erstwhile Soviet Union would invade and capture Crimea,<sup>1</sup> a territory of Ukraine, member of North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO) military alliance, and that NATO wouldn't even whimper? Who could imagine that a small mound of sand in the South China Sea would be converted into a full-fledged military base by China right in the backyard of pro-Western countries?<sup>2</sup> Who could imagine that UAE would recognize Israel and the Prime Minister of Israel?<sup>3</sup> Who could imagine that killing of one black man would put whole of the United States on fire and a mass movement would engulf the globe?<sup>4</sup>

In this context, this paper scans the emerging international security environment, charts regional threats in South Asia, and highlights challenges and policy choices confronting policy-makers in Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> James Griffiths, "South China Sea: Beijing's Military Bases in Disputed Waters Would Be Very Difficult to Defend, Report Claims," *CNN*, December 7, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/07/china/south-china-sea-bases-military-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Israel, UAE Reach 'historic Peace Agreement' - World," *DAWN*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1574213>.

<sup>4</sup> Jasmeet Sidhu, "'I Can't Breathe': The Refrain That Reignited a Movement," *Amnesty International*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/i-cant-breathe-refrain-reignited-movement/>.

<sup>1</sup> Jon Rogers, "Why Did Russia Annex Crimea and What Happened on the Kerch Strait?," *The Sun*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/7843915/russia-annex-crimea-kerch-strait-ukraine/>.

## Global Security Environment

The global security environment has undergone a quantum change with numerous new dimensions and happenings. Few significant developments directly influencing international security are:

1. Exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union.<sup>5</sup>
2. Re-designation of Asia-Pacific as Indo-Pacific by the United States.<sup>6</sup>
3. *De facto* acceptance of the North Korean nuclear and strategic program. .
4. Emergence of a new security bloc involving Gulf countries, US and Israel to directly challenge Iran and indirectly Pakistan.
5. Drift of Turkey, in spite of being a NATO member, towards forming a new regional bloc.
6. Growing Chinese influence in Asia and Africa despite Western political and - economic footprint.<sup>7</sup>
7. Shift of India from being a historic Russian ally to strategic partner of the US.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Brexit: What You Need to Know about the UK Leaving the EU,” *BBC News*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-32810887>.

<sup>6</sup> Felix Heiduk and Gudrun Wacker, “From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Significance, Implementation and Challenges,” *SWP Research Paper*, no. 9 (July 2020), <https://doi.org/doi:10.18449/2020RP09>.

<sup>7</sup> Rolinhlanhla Kudzaishe Zinyemba, “China’s Influence on Africa Is Growing. Where Does It Lead?,” *News Decoder* (blog), February 28, 2019, <https://news-decoder.com/africa-china-trade-loans/>.

<sup>8</sup> Sumit Ganguly, “India and the United States Need Each Other Mostly Because of China,” *Foreign Policy*, August 3,

8. Intensifying strategic competition between China and the US with attendant consequences for the world.<sup>9</sup>

9. ‘Wheels Up’ withdrawal of US-led NATO forces from Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

10. Devastating effect of COVID -19 on security potential of many leading militaries.

11. Doubtful electoral process in the US and the transition process marred by controversy, violence and predictable anarchy.<sup>11</sup>

## Regional Security Environment

As an obvious outcome of the global geo-strategic shift, the regional security situation has also been transformed in a meaningful way. In this context developments in India, Afghanistan, Iran, China, Gulf, and smaller South Asian states have a direct bearing on Pakistan.

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2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/03/india-united-states-balancing-china-threat/>.

<sup>9</sup> Maham S. Gilani, “On Strategic Competition between China and US,” *Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS)*, November 20, 2020, <https://casstt.com/post/on-strategic-competition-between-china-and-us/273>.

<sup>10</sup> Teri Schultz, “Afghanistan: NATO Girds for US Troop Withdrawal,” *DW.Com*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-nato-girds-for-us-troop-withdrawal/a-55654045>.

<sup>11</sup> “What Is the Electoral College and Why Is It Controversial?,” *Anti-Defamation League (ADL)*, accessed December 31, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/what-is-the-electoral-college-and-why-is-it-controversial>.

First, India being the largest population and landmass in South Asia has great influence on events in Asia and world's approach towards the region. In recent years, India itself has undergone a major strategic realignment i.e. from an established Eastern bloc nation to a complete US strategic partner and a perceived bulwark against China. As a consequence, it has mistakenly started to feel and behave like a regional bully. It is, moreover, attempting to behave like a global power while it doesn't have the credentials of even a local force. In this pursuit, it has gone on a weaponization spree despite abysmal economic indicators. Moreover, misplaced 'super power status' cautiousness has tempted it to take aggressive actions against all its neighbors. The latest example being the Sino-Indian clash, in which the Chinese gave a thrashing to the Indian forces.<sup>12</sup> It was, in fact, a message to the new supporters of India i.e., the US and the West rather than a response to misplaced Indian military aggression.

As far as 2021 is concerned, India will further augment its military capabilities and redirect its defense posture from the west only to north inclusive. Meanwhile, India is in an

<sup>12</sup> Ankit Panda, "A Skirmish in Galwan Valley: India and China's Deadliest Clash in More Than 50 Years," *The Diplomat*, June 17, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/a-skirmish-in-galwan-valley-india-and-chinas-deadliest-clash-in-more-than-50-years/>.

unprecedented state of regional isolation as all its neighbors have frictional relations with it. Indian economy will further deteriorate and internal unrest will accentuate bringing it nearer to a potentially fissiparous outcome. India is likely to exploit the new US-Arab-Israel nexus and prospects of a kinetic action against Iran and attempt some sort of 'punitive' military action like a surgical strike to avenge its embarrassment caused due to the shooting down of two fighter aircraft and taking prisoner of a pilot by Pakistan.<sup>13</sup> As far as Pakistan is concerned, there is little doubt that India will massively intensify its efforts to promote internal chaos and instability along with divisive tendencies in the society.

Second, China is the most significant strategic player in the region and is likely to dominate the landscape for the foreseeable future.<sup>14</sup> In 2021 it is likely to continue its socio-economic expansion in Asia and Africa. It is also likely to emerge as a reckonable influence on the security landscape of South Asia, particularly a visible player in the Indian Ocean. The

<sup>13</sup> "2 Indian Aircraft Violating Pakistani Airspace Shot down; Pilot Captured," *DAWN*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466347>.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Lee, "The Strategic Importance of Chinese-Pakistani Relations," *Al Jazeera*, August 3, 2016, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/08/strategic-importance-chinese-pakistani-relations-160803101555719.html>.

proposed Iran-China economic cooperation<sup>15</sup> is a manifestation of its interest in the affairs of Gulf. It will try to overshadow the US-led sanctions on Iran despite reservations from other Gulf states. China is also likely to emerge as a significant factor in post US withdrawal Afghanistan. Overall, China will be a decisive player in influencing political, economic, and security dynamics in South Asia. First phase of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is in its final stages<sup>16</sup> and its design is emerging as a game-changer in the region. In 2021 BRI will expand with more visible socio-economic activity bringing direct economic dividends to the countries part of the initiative.

Third, Iran is slated to be the most happening country in 2021, and consequently, influence regional dynamics. This will primarily be driven by two factors i.e., (i) policy review, if any, by the new US administration; and (ii) Arab-Israel nexus and its designs to resort to kinetic measures against Iran. Moreover, Tehran is taking a keen interest in the outcome of Afghan Peace Process and will be

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<sup>15</sup> Alam Saleh and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, "Iran's Pact With China Is Bad News for the West," *Foreign Policy* (blog), August 9, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/09/irans-pact-with-china-is-bad-news-for-the-west/>.

<sup>16</sup> Lily Kuo and Niko Kommenda, "What Is China's Belt and Road Initiative?," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/what-china-belt-road-initiative-silk-road-explainer>.

a major stakeholder in the post Peace Accord Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> If the US, Israel and Gulf states countries continue to escalate pressure on Iran, then Tehran would be forced to act in an unprecedented manner with its attendant consequences. A major consequence of strife will be complete chaos in the Persian Gulf causing serious turmoil in the global oil market. Hence, 2021 can potentially witness a major oil crisis, with sharp up-surge in oil prices leading to economic hardship for developing countries.

Fourth, in Afghanistan, 2021 will possibly be the most significant year as the peace accord will most likely come into effect. As a result, a new dispensation can take over the reins of the country. The constitution, policy outlook and stability of the transition and peace in Afghanistan would have a direct impact on Pakistan and the regional countries. A realistic case exists of significant improvement in Pak-Afghan relations with far-reaching consequences for the internal and external security dynamics of Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> Several spoilers would do their best to scuttle the

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<sup>17</sup> Inayat Ur Rehman Saqeb, "Iran's Balanced Role in Afghanistan," *Modern Diplomacy* (blog), September 14, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/09/14/irans-balanced-role-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>18</sup> Mehreen Naushad, "Pakistan and the Afghan Peace Process," *The News*, December 23, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/762800-pakistan-and-the-afghan-peace-process>.



peace process which could plunge the country into a civil warlike situation causing serious domestic unrest and regional turbulence. In this case scenario, a large number of refugees are likely to cross over into Pakistan and Iran.

Fifth, during 2021 a major policy shift in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries external policies could be witnessed due to the new found strategic convergence with Israel. The most likely and most significant development would be direct or *de facto* recognition of Israel by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>19</sup> Such an action may cause some internal instability due to negative public reaction. As a consequence, there is likely to be a paradigm shift in foreign and domestic policies of these countries with significant implications for countries abstaining from endorsing engagement with Israel and a causality would be the expatriate population from these countries. Events in the United Arab Emirates in the last few months of 2020 are already pointing to such an eventuality.

Sixth, the smaller South Asian states of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are likely to exhibit major policy shifts vis a vis India and China in 2021. These countries will undertake such changes due to two major reasons. First,

China's efforts to initiate economic cooperation with these countries and second is the Indian arrogance undermining their national interests. Moreover, prospects of enhanced defense and security cooperation between these nations and China cannot be ruled out.

### **Challenges for Pakistan in 2021**

With changing global and regional environment likely to emerge in 2021, Pakistan cannot stay oblivious of these changes and must be prepared to overcome the resulting challenges. These will not only be unprecedented but would be in innumerable dimensions and levels. Irrespective of the field or scope each of these challenges will have a serious and direct bearing on national security. Unless Pakistan is cognizant of these challenges and has the ability to meet these upfront, it will not be able to have an effective response mechanism, which is strong enough to overcome these.

### **Geo-politics**

2021 will likely witness unprecedented turmoil in geo-politics with grave consequences for most countries at various scales. Globally the strategy of unilateralism will suffer a setback.

<sup>19</sup> Zahid Hussain, "Recognising Israel," *DAWN*, November 25, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1592222>.

Multilateralism will start prevailing<sup>20</sup> and would create a safer environment for smaller states. The chances of being coerced through military or economic means would reduce if a country is part of a larger multilateral group. Therefore, countries will have to reduce reliance on bilateral relations and revert back to larger groupings for enhancing their security. In case of Pakistan, instead of relying on one country or the other, priority should be to deepen engagement with regional organizations such as SCO. Being just part of these groupings would not accrue the required dividends, there will have to be an active and effective participation.

In 2021 the new US administration would take charge and revisit the policies towards Pakistan particularly in the light of conclusion of Afghan dialogue and reduced significance of Pakistan for Washington. This review will importantly happen under the historic and obvious tilt of the Democratic party towards India. What particularly needs to be taken into account is the fact that several Indian-Americans are slated to be assuming key positions in the Biden Administration. Pakistan will, therefore, have to recalibrate its

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Owen, David Rich, and Juliette Laurain, "The Debate - The Future of Multilateralism: Covid-19, a Game Changer for International Cooperation?" *France24*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-debate/20201112-the-future-of-multilateralism-covid-19-a-game-changer-for-international-cooperation>.

US policy and work towards building a fresh relationship in view of the changed realities. Most importantly, focus of the bilateral relationship needs to be directed towards regional peace and stability from sole attention on Afghan peace process. Pakistan should pay priority attention to the impact of American support to India for propping it up as a bulwark against China and making it the local hegemon for guarding its interests.

In the Middle East, 2021 will witness the shaping of a new security architecture rooted in close collaboration between the GCC and Israel. Such an arrangement will totally negate the decades old view of Muslim unity and pro-Pakistan leaning of the Gulf states. It would also lead to a rethink of active role of Pakistani security forces in formulating and implementing the security policies of Gulf nations. The new architecture is furthermore likely to be influenced by a pro-India lobby in the GCC elite and their efforts to support the US. In response, Pakistan should, therefore, launch a strong diplomatic effort to retain its place in the Middle East in spite of Arab engagement with Israel. Moreover, Pakistan has to engage countries such as Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia for meaningful geo-strategic coordination and cooperation.

Pakistan- Iran relationship is likely to reach a turning point in 2021 as Iran's strategic vulnerability to Gulf-Israel-US combine will compel it to recalibrate its regional policies. In such an eventuality, Islamabad would have to tread carefully in maintaining stable relations with Tehran, while not getting embroiled in any anti-Iran conflict. This will also entail critical measures on Pak-Iran borders<sup>21</sup> as well as close monitoring of situation in southern Afghanistan. Such a conflict and Islamabad's incorrect posturing would also ignite sectarian instability on the domestic scene.

Similarly, in Afghanistan a new political scenario can emerge leading to further domestic instability. Islamabad should remain focused on ensuring a successful conclusion and then implementation of the peace agreement. On its side, Pakistan must complete fencing of border at a fast pace.<sup>22</sup> In case of turmoil in Afghanistan, Islamabad must be prepared to meet the influx of nearly one and a half to two million refugees to add to the already present two and a half million. Such a storm would cause serious socio-

economic crisis for which Pakistan's resources and capabilities would not suffice. Islamabad would then have to timely seek external assistance to meet the challenge in case of such an eventuality.

Across the eastern border, India has been seeking a face-saving after strong military responses from Pakistan and China to its adventurism. Since China is too big and powerful, India is likely to again undertake small-scale intrusive kinetic action against Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> Pakistan has to be prepared on the military front as well as diplomatic. Islamabad should make it absolutely clear to New Delhi and other capitals that any Indian adventure would be responded with full force and Pakistan will not be responsible for the consequences.<sup>24</sup> This, however, necessitates complementary steps towards national unity to meet such a challenge. India is already engaged in an unconventional war against Pakistan, as demonstrated through recent dossier released by Pakistan. This should compel Pakistan to take very definite measures to identify similar such efforts and neutralize them well in time.

<sup>21</sup> Shahid Hussain, "Iran and Pakistan: Placing Border Problems in Context," *The Diplomat*, June 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/iran-and-pakistan-placing-border-problems-in-context/>.

<sup>22</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Border Fencing to Be Completed by 2020, Pakistan Says," *Voice of America*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/afghan-border-fencing-be-completed-2020-pakistan-says>.

<sup>23</sup> Asad Hashim, "Pakistan Alleges India Preparing for 'Surgical Strike,'" *Al Jazeera*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/18/pakistan-alleges-india-preparing-for-surgical>.

<sup>24</sup> "Pakistani Troops Will Respond with 'full Force' to Indian Ceasefire Violations: COAS Gen Bajwa," *DAWN*, December 2, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1300046>.

## **Military Threats**

As the Indo-US strategic relationship matures and the Gulf develops ties with Israel, India has been on an armament spree, including acquisition of power projection capabilities. Meanwhile, with growing conventional imbalance between India and Pakistan Islamabad's reliance on Strategic Deterrence has also increased, which itself faces limitations. Although there are constraints on employing conventional force there remains a space below the nuclear threshold. It is in this context that 2021 may witness a False Flag operation followed by a kinetic cross LoC adventure (Surgical Strike). Therefore, Pakistan has to prepare for an integrated joint service response, for which enhancing tri-service jointness is imperative. In this context, a strong and effective Joint Services Headquarters would be the answer, which Pakistan should establish as early as possible. It requires political will and the onus lies on the government in power.

Meanwhile, opposition parties' criticism of military is not conducive for a defensive response by the armed forces. It could weaken the trust of the people in the armed forces as well draw a wedge between the senior military leadership and the rest of the

force.<sup>25</sup> Both these efforts are unprecedented and have never ever been undertaken in Pakistan's history. It is, therefore, essential that this tide should be checked before it starts damaging beyond repair. For this introspection by political forces and military as an institution, needs to be undertaken. One of the immediate measures could be a reduction of media foot print of the armed forces and reduced exposure to the public at large.

## **Internal Security**

This will be most critical challenge as Pakistan steps into the new year. Following are some of the recommended steps for improving the internal security environment:

- Serious measures have to be taken to improve the governance standards in the country so as to bring socio-economic justice to the doorstep of every Pakistani. This is the most essential requirement for the national security.
- The political unrest is likely to cross the threshold of internal stability as the opposition parties are in a state of desperation. As the government crosses its

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<sup>25</sup> Frud Bezhani, "Pakistan's Powerful Military Faces Biggest Challenge In Years," *Gandhara*, October 23, 2020, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-s-powerful-military-faces-biggest-challenge-in-years/30909240.html>.



mid tenure benchmark and overcomes macro-economic problems and numerous corruption cases reach their culmination, the space for its constitutional overthrow has narrowed. This political instability also creates space for foreign interests to exploit the political divisiveness directly or indirectly.

- Urgent and strong measures must be taken to reduce poverty and lower the cost of living of common man because tolerance threshold is about to be crossed. Social dissatisfaction is the most exploitable factor on the national security spectrum and is already being targeted by hostile elements and forces.
- Law and order situation require a serious effort on part of all provincial governments irrespective of political affiliation. The state must fully enforce its writ across the board and, law and order should be established at all costs. This may be the year of 'make or break' significance in this context.
- While the handling of COVID-19 has been quite satisfactory in 2020, the second wave has alarmed the country and the government seems to be lagging. Spread of this pandemic would become a source of exploitable unrest thereby affecting the overall governance system.
- While the economy has seen some recovery in 2020 yet it has not reached a level

where people can experience a stable and growing economy with guaranteed future prospects. With the national economy being an essential ingredient of national security, the government has to make 2021 as the Year of Economic Recovery setting and achieving important markers in this context.

- The biggest hazard to national security on the internal front is the loss of trust by the populace in the ability of state to safeguard their interests against foreign and domestic threats, and provide a balanced social structure for one and all.

### **Conclusion**

2021 will be a critical year for security of Pakistan both on foreign and domestic fronts. As the global and regional landscape undergoes major changes Pakistan faces equally significant challenges to its security. If the state can face these security challenges and create internal strength and stability this year it will succeed in putting Pakistan on a path of long-term development and prosperity, which the people of Pakistan very well deserve.

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