

FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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In an unsettled global and regional environment, the outlook for Pakistan in 2021 will remain uncertain. Challenges to the security and economic wellbeing of the nation are likely to persist. Societies the world over are adrift, unmoored from values, norms, and traditions, and overtaken by a new cycle of regeneration of yet uncertain dimension.

Great power competition, demolition of order in various regions, resurgence of power politics, inability of institutions to cope with the rapidity of change and consequent loss of efficacy and faith in established systems of governance with no certain and credible alternatives in sight, have brought mankind to a new point of inflection. In the meanwhile, COVID-19 pandemic continues to exact a heavy toll in terms of lives lost and severe economic repercussions.

Change offers both challenges and opportunities. What must sustain and guide the nation is a 'vision' of its future. Internal cohesion, clarity of purpose, determination, and skillful statecraft are an absolute must to navigate the troubles and turn the chain of adversities to advantage. Despite evident deficiencies Pakistani people and leaders must

not give into pessimism but seek a silver lining in the gathering dark clouds.

The mettle of the Foreign Office will be tested in the months ahead. Of critical importance will be the ability of Pakistani diplomats to read the trend lines accurately and to position themselves accordingly. Pakistan will be confronted with options and choices to make. The Foreign Office will have to weigh in with other elements of national governance to make its voice heard and taken on board in policy formulation and national decision making.

In charting a path forward, the only determinant should be the 'national interest'. Strategic choices and options exercised must flow from the requirements of national interest and translate into policies, programs, and projects. All state institutions must subscribe to a single playlist and synchronize their respective instruments with a view to achieve perfect harmony.

The nation and in particular the leadership will have to contend with great clarity to the real issues and not waste time and resources on inanities. At the conceptual plane, the

perennial question will be to strike a balance between ‘idealism’ and ‘pragmatism’. An idealistic vision forged into reality by pragmatic measures implemented successfully and holistically by the nation requires executing statecraft of a high order.

The dichotomy between espoused ‘values’ and ‘principles’ and actual ‘practice’ is evident from contemporary history. The pursuit of national interests, by all means, has always been the operative norm and validated by hard and soft power, as the situation warrants. Cycles of virtue relate to interests and power. The key lesson is that ‘interests’ supervene other considerations.

Is Pakistan prepared to subscribe to such a viewpoint? Or should ‘principles’ override ‘expediency’. That freedom and justice merit supreme sacrifices. That this nation that was created in the name of Islam and will forever hold high the immutable ideals and principles of humanity and humane coexistence among all peoples.

It is to this latter aspect that the people of Pakistan have wholeheartedly subscribed. But in a world rife with hypocrisy and double standards weighing in with correct choices will take a toll on the conscience of the nation. Self-critique is good but not on

accounts of failings of the world in terms of morality and principles.

For instance, is it in anyway noble to suffer privations and poverty or live on handouts no matter how loathsome they may be from international donors or friends that tend to curtail sovereignty, are humiliating, and place a crushing burden on the poor majority?

Should Pakistan continue to subscribe to a manifestly unjust international system that forsakes the oppressed people of Kashmir to vile aggressors or should Islamabad support the Kashmiri freedom struggle by all means.¹ Answers to these questions require considerable deliberation and the choices made will have consequences. These are the sort of questions that it is no longer possible to ignore. Time for half way choices may well be nigh over.

An accurate reading of the unfolding historical dynamics that are sweeping through the globe is absolutely essential. In terms of international power politics and reconfigurations of power equations, difficult decisions have to be made. Nothing is sacrosanct in this game. The mighty and

¹ “Pakistan PM Reiterates Support for Kashmiri Self-Determination,” *Al Jazeera*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/5/pakistan-pm-reiterates-support-for-kashmiri-self-determination>.

powerful also have erred and particularly at this point seem to suffer from a gross misreading of ground realities and societal change.

Extremism, xenophobia, tribalism, and majoritarianism have been ascendant in many societies. The heretofore political and economic models of democratic and free-market capitalist governance seem to have run their course and become aberrant. Many scholars and good-hearted souls have lamented the fading of the era of liberalism.²

President Trump had an instinctive preference for patriotism over globalism.³ His recipes for *Making America Great Again* were popular. Securing almost 70 million votes in the November 2020 elections, Trump surpassed Obama's numbers and narrowly lost to Biden. The election turned out to be, in fact, a referendum on Trump, and to be fair he was close to home.

Can Biden undo the damage that was done to the international system during the past four years? He has promised to have a 'values'

based global policy. Is it doable and will this accord with US national interests? Can the twenty-first century be shaped in the mode of the previous as far as facts of global interdependence and peaceful cooperation are concerned? These are indeed, key questions.

The world will be, definitely, on a surer footing, if Biden Administration were to actually embrace a 'values' based global policy and restore faith in multilateralism and international cooperation for the common good of mankind. This would require revisiting the tone and tenor of relations with other major powers and take into account the rest. Restoring hope and renewing commitment to the ideals, principles, and purposes of the United Nations is an urgent priority.

As noted earlier, societies have changed and are changing. Old recipes will not necessarily work. Principal factors driving change are demography, technology, and globalization. Institutions are unable to cope with the effects of change and are, therefore, in disrepute. Political systems have become dysfunctional. Inequalities and iniquities of wealth and income within and between nations have become unsustainable.

² Martin Wolf, "The Fading Light of Liberal Democracy," *Financial Times*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/47144c85-519a-4e25-9035-c5f8977cf6fd>.

³ "We're Going to Make America Great Again," *BBC News*, February 10, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/election-us-2016-35537831>.

Major power relations -US, Russia, and China- have frayed.⁴ Politics and policies of exclusivity will result in exacerbating tensions. Bloc politics had been relegated to the pages of history and attempts to revive the age of alliances and counter alliances may not be possible in a highly interconnected and interdependent world.

It is naïve to imagine that supply chains could be reoriented or protectionism is the answer to national economic woes, or that technology can be monopolized. Trying such recipes will reverse the wheel of time with cataclysmic effects. The flames of fire in various regional hotspots will be further ablaze and ambitions of regional hegemons will spell gloom and doom everywhere.

It is important that US reaches a stable equilibrium in its relations with China. Beijing awaits with patience the advent of the Biden era. Interests of both US and China converge in many areas. Besides economic interdependence, regional hotspots, and global issues such as climate change can best be addressed in a cooperative mode.

Europe considers China as a 'partner', 'competitor', and 'systemic' rival.⁵ This reflects a state of uncertainty that may be influenced by the US. On the other hand, most Asian states, notably the economically strong ASEAN countries, continue to hope that they will not be asked to make a choice. The best course is to maintain a neat balance between the two. The big determinant will be the economic interests and the capacity to benefit from cooperation. Biden administration may also moderate anti-China rhetoric and realize that mutual interdependencies do not permit a complete break.

Nonetheless, as for now, marshalling of resources – political, diplomatic, military, economic, and technological – to contain and reverse China's rise is almost a standard script of Western strategic thought. The prevalence of rage over reason is a sure recipe for unfolding of disasters of horrendous magnitude. In the obtaining scenario, most developing states would prefer to distance themselves from the global strategic competition and prefer not take sides in a rejigged Cold War.

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⁴ Mikhail Troitskiy, “The Emerging Great Power Politics and Regionalism: Structuring Effective Regional Conflict Management,” *Global Policy* 10, no. S2 (2019): 14–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12677>.

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⁵ Philippe Le Corre, “The EU’s New Defensive Approach to a Rising China,” *The Conversation*, July 14, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/the-eus-new-defensive-approach-to-a-rising-china-142336>.

In the vast regions surrounding Pakistan, trouble brews with ever-increasing ferocity. India has to all intent and purposes metastasized into a Hindu extremist state.⁶ The question of whether Hinduism can accommodate other beliefs has been answered by Modi's India in a resounding No! The view that for centuries Hinduism accommodated or incorporated alien views and cultures is now drowned in hyper Hindu nationalism foisted on the poor people largely as a measure of BJP's political expediency.

Majoritarianism, tribalism, extremism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia have tarnished India's reputation as a secular democracy. Raging pandemic has added to India's economic woes. With shrinking economy, polarized polity and social upheavals, Indian Union is weakened.⁷ Its hegemonic and threatening posture has alienated its neighbors and given rise to anti-India sentiments in South Asia.

India has opted to ally itself with the US against China. The deepening of Indo-US defense partnership with an infusion of high

technology and advanced weapon systems is not much of a concern to China but poses a direct threat to Pakistan.⁸ Abandoning all caution, the Modi government's declared policy is to dismember Pakistan, using all means, especially through subversion and terrorism.

Its stranglehold over Jammu and Kashmir has reached a choking point. The Kashmiris are completely alienated.⁹ Huge military deployments in Jammu and Kashmir accompanied by atrocious human rights violations are grim manifestations of the illegal Indian occupation of Jammu and Kashmir.

India threatens to occupy Gilgit Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. It is fomenting discord in the tribal regions and Baluchistan. It is using disinformation campaigns and has brainwashed its own people through a controlled media blitz against the Muslims and Pakistan. Indian military continues to violate the ceasefire on Line of Control and holds out threats of surgical strikes against Pakistan. Worsening domestic situation lends

⁶ Sudheendra Kulkarni, "The Making of a Hindu Republic of India | Politics," *India Today*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/guest-column/story/20191223-the-making-of-a-hindu-republic-of-india-politics-1627574-2019-12-13>.

⁷ Arvind Subramanian, "India's Weak State Will Not Overhaul China," *Financial Times*, August 16, 2010, <https://www.ft.com/content/abc794aa-a968-11df-a6f2-00144feabdc0>.

⁸ Adnan Aamir, "Pakistan Alarmed by US-India Information Sharing Pact," *Nikkei Asia*, November 2, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Pakistan-alarmed-by-US-India-information-sharing-pact>.

⁹ "Indian Govt Has 'alienated' Kashmiris through Its Policy of 'Might Is Right': British Historian," *DAWN*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1572753>.

to the view that the Modi government may contemplate a military misadventure against Pakistan.

India's relations with China are strained with periodic episodes of active hostilities along the disputed borders. India has become an enthusiastic proponent of the anti-China Quad arrangement – a budding new security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. It enjoys complete Western support but is isolated in its own region. Consequently, its bid to be regarded as an aspiring global player stands diminished.

The democratic West has not held India to account for its atrocious conduct in Jammu and Kashmir. While public opinion is more discerning and the US Congress has held hearings on human rights violations by India, the US government has not chided India publicly.

On the contrary, the Trump administration served as a public apologist for India. This may change somewhat with Biden. There is not much hope that the US will seek moderate Indian attitude towards Pakistan. However, in case of active India-Pakistan military hostilities, the US will have to step in to prevent escalation.

Despite the launching of the intra Afghan dialogue, prospects of stability and peace in Afghanistan remain uncertain.¹⁰ The Taliban blame the Ashraf Ghani government for wasting precious time and attempting to stall progress towards a political settlement. The Government apparently had hoped that the incoming Biden Administration may review President Trump's policy of a complete pullout of US forces from Afghanistan.

The Taliban link the question of ceasefire with formation of an interim government and full withdrawal of foreign forces. Meanwhile, malign actors such as the ISIS and the TTP are actively seeking to retain their hold and create more space for themselves in Afghanistan by playing the proxy for outside powers, notably India, which wants to keep Afghanistan destabilized.

Stability and peace in Afghanistan are of paramount interest to Pakistan. It has, therefore, deployed considerable efforts in support of the peace process and maintained active engagement with the Afghan Government, the Taliban, and the US. Pakistan has taken steps to enhance economic engagement with Afghanistan and to facilitate

¹⁰ Aamir Latif, "Afghan Peace Process to Face Bumpy Ride, Ups and Downs," *Anadolu Agency*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-afghan-peace-process-to-face-bumpy-ride-ups-and-downs-/2012458>.

Afghan trade across its territory and ports, including allowing Afghan exports to India overland via Wagah/ Atari border crossing.

Pakistan, China and Afghanistan Foreign Ministerial mechanism can continue to play an important role in promoting collaborative efforts in the economic and trade domains. CPEC's extension to Afghanistan is a logical corollary to promoting regional connectivity and could be invaluable in building a strong economic foundation for ensuring durable peace in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's relations with Iran require mutually agreed steps to ensure stability on the Pakistan-Iran border and creating mutual comfort in related domains. It is also important to enhance bilateral trade, take steps for closer economic cooperation, and resume work on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project. It was unnecessary and unfair to pend this project of national importance to Pakistan for so long. The implications of US sanctions against Iran were perhaps a convenient excuse to delay the project. A rethink is warranted especially as the new the US Administration may review the policy of 'maximum pressure' against Iran.

Across the waterways, the new contours of strategic re-posturing by the Arab Gulf states are taking shape. An important facet is the

momentous decision of some Gulf states¹¹ to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. Normalization of Arab relations with Israel is a sequel of Trump's Middle East policy and may prove to be his main legacy.

The Arab arena has witnessed deep transformations over the past few decades. Established assumptions have been challenged and overturned. These were consequent to a reordering of power balance necessitated by US policies and its impact on the political geography of the Middle East and North Africa.

Some Arab states have accorded priority and preference to India over Pakistan. They would however, soon realize that their assessment of the ground realities of India was not correct. Nevertheless, Pakistan should continue to accord high priority to maintaining close and comprehensive relations with all Muslim states even if their vocal support for the Kashmir issue is not as forthcoming as is Pakistani expectation.

Pakistan's relations with South Asian states minus India are satisfactory. There is ample scope for further enhancing trade and

¹¹ Omar Rahman, "What's behind the Relationship between Israel and Arab Gulf States?," *Brookings* (blog), January 28, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/28/whats-behind-the-relationship-between-israel-and-arab-gulf-states/>.

economic cooperation especially with Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. Regional cooperation in South Asia minus India and plus China needs to be revived, under another rubric. SAARC has been made redundant by India.¹² Meanwhile, Pakistan should continue to signal the importance it attaches to reviving this forum.

Islamabad also needs to undertake a dedicated reach out to ASEAN states and enhance dialogue and cooperation with Japan and South Korea. Australia and New Zealand also offer many opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation in agriculture, education, marine sciences, and technology.

Africa has recently received attention and it is time that more resources are dedicated to forging closer relations with as many countries of this continent. Relations with Russia have improved significantly and there is scope for building multifaceted cooperation based on a clear recognition of increasing convergence of interests. Relations with Europe have traditionally been good. High-level dialogue needs to be deepened. The summit level dialogue with the European Union (EU) needs to be revived. Pakistan also needs to

make a reach out to South America with a view to enhancing economic, trade and cultural cooperation.¹³

Pakistan-China relations have withstood the test of time and have grown in strength and scope. All-round cooperation must be taken forward in tangible terms in 2021. Devoting full attention to completion of CPEC projects and covering new ground is essential for Pakistan's economic development. Cooperation in defense and defense industry, science and technology and in the fields of education and culture are likely to gain further momentum. China will remain a lifeline for Pakistan's security and development.

Relations with the US are also long-standing. New areas of common interests will have to be identified. There is ample scope for US to play an important role with Pakistan's collaboration in building a solid edifice of inter-regional cooperation. Pakistan will have to spell out its own geo-economic perspective to the Biden Administration and seek avenues for private sector cooperation in all sectors. The Pakistani-American expatriate community can play an important role in building bridges between the two countries. It is also necessary

¹² Muhammad Hanif, "Why India Is Undermining the Integrity of the SAARC?," *Daily Times* (blog), February 25, 2020, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/564934/why-india-is-undermining-the-integrity-of-the-saarc/>.

¹³ "South America – New Trade Horizon for Pakistan," *Business Recorder* (blog), November 16, 2011, <https://fp.brecorder.com/2011/11/201111161251557/>.

to move away from Afghanistan centric view of bilateral cooperation. a

Regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization provide useful avenues for mutually beneficial regional cooperation. Pakistan needs to utilize this forum more effectively. China, Russia together with Central Asian partners could make a huge contribution towards realizing the vision of greater regional connectivity with Pakistan providing the logistic routes over its land and seaports to this landlocked region.

Supporting the Kashmiri struggle for freedom will continue to preoccupy Pakistan for a long time. The sensitizing of the international community must continue but also tangible steps need to be taken to mobilize material support to strengthen Kashmiri civil societies and to provide humanitarian relief to the besieged people. While the Jammu and Kashmir issue is essentially about self-determination, it is also a territorial question to which besides the Kashmiris, Pakistan and China are also parties. This aspect also needs to be kept in view and utilized for the advantage of Kashmiris. Any future discussion on the Kashmir issue must include all concerned parties.

Managing relations with India is a big challenge. Now that the façade of secularism

has been removed, Islamabad needs to deal with the reality of a revanchist Hindu state that has not reconciled to Pakistan's existence.¹⁴ Resuming official dialogue with India, unless it comes around to accepting the disputed nature of the illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir is not an option. This should not, however, preclude having unofficial contacts with the RSS Hindu Council to ascertain their views on a host of issues that have bedeviled relations between the two countries.

Pakistan's national strength is the surest guarantee against any Indian military miscalculation. A robust defense posture with the full array of Pakistan's capacities and a declared will to inflict unacceptable damage must remain our established policy.

Fortunately, making socio-economic advancement as a strategic priority number one is now recognized by all stakeholders within Pakistan. The vision of a developed and progressive nation, serving as an anchor of regional stability and peace, must guide all national endeavors.

¹⁴ M. R., "The Erosion of Secular India," *The Economist*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2020/02/04/the-erosion-of-secular-india>.

CPEC offers an invaluable tool to make this vision a reality.¹⁵ Opening up CPEC to all interested and extending its scope in all directions will enable Islamabad to optimally turn geography to its advantage and be Pakistan's greatest strength. In short, a geo-economic vision for Pakistan, unconstrained by all other considerations provides a good confluence to the streaks of idealism that the Pakistani nation embodies and pragmatism that it requires.

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¹⁵ Muhammad Akbar Notezai, "CPEC 2.0: Full Speed Ahead," *The Diplomat*, September 10, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/cpec-2-0-full-speed-ahead/>.