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The Dilemma of Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Why can't Islamabad get its foreign policy on track?

By Muhammad Akbar Notezai
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Speaking earlier this year at the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs on “Continuing Search for Stability: Pakistan and Afghanistan,” noted Pakistani author Ahmed Rashid was quoted as saying by *Dawn* that Pakistan has made two “grievous mistakes” in its foreign policy. The first came at the end of the Cold War, he said, when Pakistan decided to “move proxy resources to Kashmir,” radicalizing the Kashmiri nationalist movement.”

The second major error, according to Rashid, came in 2003 when General Pervez Musharraf decided to resurrect the Afghan Taliban. This proved a shot in the arm for the Pakistani Taliban, and within several years local militants in Pakistan were “calling for the overthrow of the Pakistani state.” Increasingly, Pakistan was being accused by neighboring countries of providing safe sanctuaries for militants on Pakistani soil.

In the wake of the Taliban's assault on Peshawar's Army Public School at the end of 2014, it was widely believed that both the civil and military leaderships of Pakistan were keen to improve bilateral relations with its neighbors. The army launched a robust crackdown on militant groups in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and elsewhere in the country. As a result, complaints from Pakistan's neighbors eased, even if they didn't quite disappear entirely.

Meanwhile, Pakistan stayed out of the Yemen conflict, instead declaring that it would remain neutral. Then, in December last year, Islamabad surprised many observers when it announced

that it opposed any attempt to topple Syrian President Bashar al Assad's regime. Speaking with the media, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said, "Pakistan is also against foreign military intervention in Syria and fully supports the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic."

These major developments have increasingly irked Saudi Arabia, which has at any rate been tilting toward Pakistan's arch-rival India. But some independent analysts argued that Pakistan's foreign policy was now changing for the better. They claimed that the country has now realized it can no longer use militant groups as an "extension of its national security policy."

Unfortunately, the turnaround proved short-lived; militancy has once again strained the country's ties with India and Afghanistan following tragic incidents in both countries, for which Pakistan was blamed. Ironically, Saudi Arabia, which has its own links to jihad, also raised doubts about Pakistan, with the Saudi Interior Ministry identifying the Jeddah bomber as Pakistani national Abdullah Qlazar Khan.

For their part, Pakistani authorities vigorously deny any connection to the attacks, and insist that their soil is not being used against other countries. They cite the Pathankot attack, noting that the director general of India's National Investigation Agency, Sharad Kumar himself said that there was no evidence to suggest that the Pakistani government was involved.

Still, in recent months, Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Asif has spoken on television of his regret that relations with the U.S. are deteriorating, while criticizing Pakistan's entry into the war of Afghanistan in 1979 to oust the Soviet Union and its nurturing of terrorists after 9/11, when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan.

Principles

Washington, D.C.-based political analyst and author Aparna Pande told *The Diplomat*: "There are two underlying principles of Pakistan's foreign policy and these principles have remained paramount right from the creation of the country till today. The first is the desire to 'escape India' in the sense of creating a national identity that was anti-India. Thus, Pakistan has preferred to be referred to as a Greater Middle Eastern country not a South Asian one, because South Asian would mean accepting that Pakistan was part of the greater Indian civilization. The second principle underlying Pakistan's policy is the desire for parity with India – not sovereign equality which every country has but parity – and this is specifically with respect to military parity (both conventional and nuclear) and economic parity."

She continued: "While every country adjusts its foreign policy somewhat depending on changing circumstances, and Pakistan is no exception, I have yet to see any paradigm shift in Pakistan's foreign policy."

"Pakistan still continues to use jihad as an element of its foreign policy with respect to India and Afghanistan. Its policy towards the United States is still aimed at obtaining military hardware (such as F-16s), economic assistance, and making promises it is unwilling or unable to keep (like

promising talks with Afghan Taliban that have yet to result in anything concrete, promising action against jihadi groups but still differentiating between good and bad jihadis).”

China

By virtue of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China and Pakistan are moving closer to one other. Syed Fazl-e-Haider, a Pakistan-based development analyst and freelance columnist, told *The Diplomat*, “China-Pakistan economic ties have been consistently growing over the past two decades and they will continue to grow in the future at a faster pace. There is hardly a sector of Pakistan’s economy where China has not invested.”

He added that both countries signed a free trade agreement in 2006 to increase bilateral trade to \$15 billion per year by 2015. Although the trade target has not been achieved, bilateral trade is expected to rise once the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is complete, said Fazl-e-Haider.

According to Pande, Pakistan still sees China as its friend or ally of last resort, a country that will provide the assistance or investment to build Pakistan’s economy and the nuclear weapons capability to defend Pakistan. For now, Pakistan still looks to the greater Muslim world, especially countries like Saudi Arabia, for support, both diplomatic as well as economic, she said.

Asked about the China-Pakistan relationship, Pande observed: “China has a deep military relationship with Pakistan, especially in the nuclear arena. China has also promised \$46 billion in investment under CPEC. These show the strength of the relationship, especially if the entire money promised flows into Pakistan, but that will take decades and we have to wait and watch. There are challenges faced by the relationship especially with respect to radical Islam and China’s fears of radicalization amongst the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.”

For Fazl-e-Haider, “Pakistan is China’s strategic partner. The country is the China’s key energy link that enables China to cut the time and distance for its oil transport from the Gulf. China plans to build a gas pipeline from Iran to China through Pakistan, transfer LPG from Middle East by using railway carriages and set up a major oil refinery at Gwadar.”

The analyst further observed that India, as a competitor of China in both the global energy game and regional hegemony, is worried about China’s strategic goals for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project. These appear to be energy security, the policing of the energy pipelines, oil trade, and strategic dominance of the Indian Ocean.

Husain Haqqani, a noted Pakistan author and former Pakistan’s ambassador to America, said in an interview with *Newsline Magazine*: “We have always had this mythical notion that a superpower ally will come from outside, solve all our problems, improve our economy and build our military so we can stand up to India. First we looked to the U.S., but they did not do what we expected them to do. Then we turned to China and we have consistently believed China will solve all our problems.”

He went on: “China has often promised large amounts of investment in countries but rarely has all that investment actually flowed through. For example, despite announcing plans for more than \$24 billion in investment in Indonesia since 2005, a decade later China has invested only \$1.8 billion there.”

Still, as ties between China and Pakistan become increasingly warm, Pakistan is moving away from Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan is today seen as paying little heed to Saudi Arabia in particular, a stark contrast to earlier times. With China on its side, Pakistan played the role of a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia, at a time when tensions were rife between them.

Iran

However, there is a rivalry between Pakistan and Iran, too. India’s relations with Iran are improving, to Islamabad’s chagrin. “Gwadar will emerge as a competitor to the port of Chabahar in southeast Iran. The port is being developed by India to open up a route to landlocked Afghanistan where it has increased its economic and diplomatic presence. India is actually making efforts to circumvent Pakistan, its arch rival through Chabahar port,” said Fazl-e-Haider.

When Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Pakistan following the lifting of the nuclear related sanctions, an Iranian angle to the arrest of Kulbhushan Yadav also revealed that that all is not well in the bilateral relationship. Soon, the Iranian embassy noted that the media reports on the matters were based on “undignified and insulting content.” On the other hand, at a press conference military spokesman Lt Gen Asim Bajwa said he could not say with certainty, or even knew, if the Iranian government or its intelligence was aware of RAW carrying out its intelligence operation from its soil. He went on to say that Iran had assured its cooperation in this regard.

India

According to some Islamabad-based journalists, since Narendra Modi came to power, he has adopted a tough approach toward Pakistan. They cite several reasons why the Indian prime minister is trying hard to isolate Pakistan regionally and internationally.

First, Narendra Modi is building closer ties with the Arab states, evident in his recent visits. Second, following the lifting of sanctions on Iran, the Modi government is showing significant interest in Iran. Third, as ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan have continued to fray, Modi is trying to erode Pakistan’s image further in Afghanistan, and they are also trying to increase the “Indian influence” in Afghanistan. Fourth, as China and Pakistan enjoy positive relations, the Modi government is trying to build ties with America, while lobbying against Pakistan in America and in the West. Fifth, when the horrendous July 1 attack took place in Dhaka, Islamabad-based analysts noted that the Indian media tried to put the blame on Pakistan.

Afghanistan

When Afghan President Ashraf Ghani took office, he showed considerable leniency towards Pakistan, over the opposition of most of his cabinet ministers. Ghani made a number of positive overtures with both the civilian and military leaderships of Pakistan, all in vain. Following the announcement of the demise of Mullah Mohammed Omar in Karachi, Afghanistan witnessed a rise in terror attacks. Again, Pakistan was accused of providing safe sanctuary to the militants who were carrying out attacks inside Afghan territory, a charge Pakistan has denied. Ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan further soured when Mullah Akhtar Mansour was killed on Pakistani soil.

Islamabad-based analysts view relations with Afghanistan as unlikely to improve, because, they argue, U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan is winding down. The U.S. is less concerned about Pakistan now, they say. On the other hand, Pakistan has been accused by the U.S. of providing sanctuaries to Haqqani Network and the Afghan Taliban, which have been carrying out attacks inside Afghanistan.

On the other hand, when the Afghan talks have failed to produce any results, fingers were pointed at the Pakistani authorities. When asked, Pande noted: “Talks and negotiations will only succeed when there are certain underlying principles that both sides agree to and when both sides believe in a win-win situation where each side is willing to walk halfway or agree to a give and take. I am one of those who is skeptical of the peace talks. I see these talks as going nowhere because while the Afghan government and the United States may be willing to agree to a give and take, the other side – the Afghan Taliban – believe in an all-or-nothing worldview.”

She added, “Until and unless the Afghan Taliban and their supporters – whether other jihadi groups like the Haqqani network or even the state supporters they have in elements of the Pakistani security establishment – do not suffer a defeat that will force them to agree to certain preconditions and change their worldview I do not see these talks succeeding.”

Other Relations

What about Pakistan’s other key relations? In recent times, Russian President Vladimir Putin has refused to visit Pakistan, with no clear reasons given. According to some foreign policy experts, although India is tilting towards the West and America, Russia still remains one of its top defense suppliers. It does not wish to anger India over Pakistan.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s ties with America are also strained. Sartaj Aziz, a foreign affairs advisor to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, has admitted that relations with the U.S. have been under stress over the past three months because of conditions Washington attached to the funding of the F-16 sale. Also, with fraying U.S.-Pakistan ties, Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan have also gone from bad to worse, to that point that the two countries were involved in conflicts on the Torkham border, killing four soldiers and wounding 40 others.

As far as Bangladesh is concerned, Pakistan and Bangladesh have maintained mutual paranoia and anger since 1971. In the past few years, Bangladesh has prosecuted those accused of

carrying out war crimes in support of Pakistani security forces in 1971, when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan. Following the executions of BNP leader Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and Jamaat-e-Islami's secretary general Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujaheed for war crimes, bilateral ties soured, with the two countries withdrawing their diplomats. This situation shows no sign of improving.

“Main Threat”

According to Pande: “Pakistan’s leaders have always seen India as the main threat (the so-called ‘existential threat’) and Pakistan’s ties with every country are derived from how it views India. Since India is perceived as a threat, it is important that Afghanistan, the other neighbor, be Pakistan’s friend. Hence, Pakistan has always sought a pro-Pakistan anti-Indian Afghan government, whether it be the mujahideen or the Taliban.”

Pande explains that the United States was “seen as the superpower ally who would build Pakistan’s resources – economic and military – to stand up to India. When the U.S. appeared reluctant to do this, China was seen as – and is still seen by many Pakistanis – as that mythical ally who will sweep in, build Pakistan and help Pakistan be India’s equal. Pakistan’s leaders have always viewed the countries in the Muslim world, especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab countries, as ideological allies in the fight with India.”

Dr. Hasan Askari Rizvi, an independent political and defense analyst, noted that Pakistan needs smart diplomacy to deal with India, Iran and Afghanistan as well as to cope with the current trouble in its relations with the U.S. Smart diplomacy seeks to find alternative ways to deal with a situation when one option does not offer a credible path forward. You do not wait for the situation to change on its own; you invoke different diplomatic options to create space for yourself.

Most of the critics of Pakistan’s military establishment claim that it has been handling Pakistan’s foreign policy directly and indirectly since 1958. Traditionally, Pakistan’s foreign policy was oriented towards the West, notwithstanding overtures from the former Soviet Union.

When domestic opposition in Pakistan threatened Pakistan’s internal autonomy and pro-Western foreign policy direction, the military took over the country in 1958. So, each time, argue the critics, a democratically elected government takes over and tries to run Pakistan’s foreign policy independently, it has been ousted. They note that after coming to power Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif tried to improve relations with India, and wanted to put former General Pervez Musharraf on trial, but he came under pressure in the form of cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan and cleric Tahir-ul-Qadri.

Said Pande: “There have been many occasions in Pakistan’s history when people hoped that things would change but they just remained the same. Pakistani civilian leaders have sought to change the paradigm of relations with both India and Afghanistan since the return of civilian rule in 2008. However, foreign and security policy in Pakistan is the domain of the military, especially the army and the intelligence services. And the military-intelligence complex does not want any change.”

She added that real change will come only when the national narrative in Pakistan shifts, when all jihadis are seen as hurting Pakistan and there is no differentiation between the good jihadis – who fight in Afghanistan and India – and the bad ones who attack the Pakistani state. Despite some cosmetic changes and operations in the north-west this shift in thinking has yet to happen.