**Correcting the national narrative**

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In the clutter of daily breaking news, political mudslinging, and the no-holds-barred social media, it is easy to lose track of what is important to us as individuals, and as a nation. It is easy to confuse the important with the irrelevant; the meaningful with the useless.

So let us attempt to sort out some of the wheat from the chaff and try putting in perspective the myriad of issues that consume our public debate in Pakistan.

First, our politico-media machine, over the past some weeks, has been obsessed with the Jehangir Tareen saga, and how it has resulted in the creation of a ‘forward bloc’ in PTI. First, we were all told that the Jehangir Tareen issue has created insurmountable fissures inside PTI. That Imran Khan, flanked by a band of unelected advisors, had been led into a dead-end ally, where his supporters and long-time loyalists were going to get alienated. We were told that this was going to be the ‘biggest’ news in the muddy waters of politics. That it would result in the collapse of the Federal and Punjab government, resulting in midterm elections, on the far side of which was going to be an entirely different set-up, which would be acceptable to all political parties. The media spent countless hours discussing Tareen’s sugar empire. Newspapers were aflush with analysis on how Tareen and his supporters were the thing to watch in Pakistan. Stories were spun about how the entire ‘establishment’ is consumed in this rift. This drama reached fever-pitch, some days back, as Tareen loyalists made fiery speeches against their Prime Minister. And then, one day, with a little help from ‘friends’, members of Tareen group meet with the Prime Minister and Chief Minister Punjab, resulting in an unceremonious dissipation of the entire matter.

[Malian military arrests interim president, premier: Media](https://nation.com.pk/25-May-2021/malian-military-arrests-interim-president-premier-media)

Next, our media-politico machine told us all that the issue of Shehbaz Sharif’s going abroad—with permission from the Court—is of cataclysmic importance to our national polity. One group of analysts argued that the future of governance, of democracy, in this land depends on it. He would be carrying important messages for Nawaz Sharif, at the behest of the ‘establishment’, we were told. That these messages, and the resulting ‘settlement’ of political and accountability issues, would chart the future of Pakistan’s politics. It would impact us all, they claimed. It would determine how we all live our lives for the foreseeable future. At the other end of the spectrum, the likes of Shehzad Akbar told us that Shehbaz Sharif leaving for London would be the biggest catastrophe the country has faced till date. That it would be an anathema. That the future of Pakistan depended on the government stopping Shehbaz Sharif, they claimed. The conversation between Shehbaz Sharif and FIA officers, at the airport, were portrayed as a dialogue between good and evil. In the middle of the night, all televisions covered it live, as the most important ‘news’ in Pakistan.

[Biden sends top diplomat to Middle East amid Gaza ceasefire](https://nation.com.pk/25-May-2021/biden-sends-top-diplomat-to-middle-east-amid-gaza-ceasefire)

Truth be told, none of this is as important—in the larger scheme of things—as the politico-media machine makes it out to be. At this point, these episodes are nothing more than a badly orchestrated drama, which happens to be stuck on the same episode. The same PID press-conference. The same brandishing of cross-cheques. The same threats to sue in British courts. The same attempts to arrest. The same Lahore High Court. The same bail proceedings, with the same counsels, the same arguments, and identical results. Not a dime recovered. Not one asset confiscated. And all of the allegedly ‘corrupt’ elements (from Nawaz Sharif to Shehbaz Sharif, Rana Sanaullah, etc.) roaming free. None of it, really, is the most important news or challenge facing Pakistan.

What is important then? Two things: 1) COVID-19 epidemic, and Pakistan’s response to it; and 2) the new Great Game in this region, and Pakistan’s alignment with China in the post-COVID-19 world.

[French media praises Burak Yilmaz for leading Lille to Ligue 1 title](https://nation.com.pk/24-May-2021/french-media-praises-burak-yilmaz-for-leading-lille-to-ligue-1-title)

Take the first of these issues—of COVID-19 and Pakistan’s response to it. For all intents and purposes, this issue can be divided into two further parts: 1) What is Pakistan’s ‘policy’ response to COVID-19?; and 2) What is Pakistan’s ‘economic’ response to the epidemic? Pakistan’s ‘policy’ response to COVID-19—including provision of adequate resources to front-line doctors, observing a lockdown, and enforcing the SOPs—has yielded admirable results. The people of Pakistan, despite having moderate resources, have not suffered from the sort of panic that has stricken some of the more developed countries in the West, and our neighborhood. In fact, taking lessons from the recent ‘second wave’ of COVID-19 in India, Pakistan’s government proactively put in place a lockdown during the last few days of Ramazan (including the Eid break), which has quelled immediate fears of a nationwide COVID-19 breakout. However, we are not out of the woods yet. Pakistan still needs to articulate a short or long-term policy for this crisis. Our provinces and institutions continue to issue disparate instructions to their residents, and keep oscillating between varied policy options—fruits of the 18th Constitutional Amendment.

[Pakistan set to introduce home-made 'PakVac' COVID vaccine](https://nation.com.pk/24-May-2021/pakistan-set-to-introduce-home-made-pakvac-covid-vaccine)

With regards to Pakistan’s ‘economic’ response to the epidemic, the Prime Minister—from the very start—has insisted that Pakistan cannot afford a prolonged lock-down for economic reasons. That we will not be able to feed our poor, resulting in rampant poverty, which could cripple our economy for the foreseeable future. Fair point, perhaps. But, this fear cannot be used as a hindrance in implementing strict policy guidelines for the pandemic. We cannot fall in the kind of ditch that India threw itself into. Not even at the cost of incurring immediate economic slowdown. Saving lives has to be preferred over political activity and (short-term) economic prosperity.

Away from the immediate impact of the epidemic, Pakistan must plan for the post-COVID-19 age. And for this, two important questions need answering. First: what is our ‘regional’ strategy for the post-COVID-19 world? We are committed to CPEC, of course; but are we willing to go against the United States’ interests in the region, if they conflict with CPEC? Have we formulated a concerted policy for withstanding the pressures of the coming Cold War? If the West splits atom with China, along with threat sanctions against anyone siding with China, will we still stay course? And what about Afghanistan? As we help orchestrate withdrawal of US troops, what will our future role in the region be? Will we go back to the policies of the 1990s, or is there a fresh plan in place? How will we counter India’s distortions in the equation? And speaking of India, are we leveraging China’s regional position to reach a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue? The plan does not have to be disclosed, for strategic reasons—but is there a plan at all?

[Pak rejects speculations over presence of US military, air base inside country](https://nation.com.pk/24-May-2021/pak-rejects-speculations-over-presence-of-us-military-air-base-inside-country)

Second: what is our internal strategy going to be in the post-COVID-19 world? Are we still going to be plagued by issues of systematic mismanagement in the governmental machinery? Will the 18th Amendment continue to serve an impediment in developing a coherent national strategy? Will organizations such as PTM, funded in part by foreign sponsors, continue to wage war against State institutions? Will organizations such as the banned BLA continue to serve as a threat to the safety of CPEC routes? Will our alliance with China have the stomach for such issues? Will our response to national security issues remain short-term tactical, or is there a vision/strategy for the next decade of regional Cold War?

These are important policy questions. And Pakistan, as a nation, will have to answer them sooner or later. For now—amidst menial partisan bickering—we seem to be stuck in reverse gear. It is time we sifted the important from the irrelevant. And set sails for the inevitable future in this region.