**An underwhelming foreign policy**

Touqir Hussain

Wednesday, Nov 23, 2022

Has Pakistan fared well in coping with the whole new international relations environment that has been emerging over the past few decades and the challenges and opportunities it presents? The answer is not quite in the affirmative.

Pakistan has able diplomats who generally have good conceptual awareness of the emerging international politics but this understanding has in most part remained disconnected from the policy. To be fair, diplomats do not make policies – politicians do. And that is true all over the world. But in Pakistan even politicians have a limited role in the making of foreign policy. And when they do exercise this role the vast majority of them have no understanding of issues, and little interest in solving them.

A country’s foreign policy is linked by varying degrees to the political system, social structure, power balances and interests of the ruling elite. Pakistan’s foreign policy challenges have historically been so defined as to prioritize the security establishment’s role. Legitimate security interests were over-emphasized to provide a rationale for this, leading to an imbalance between foreign policy and the domestic priorities of security, development, and political stability. Whether civilian rule or military, the system remained the same: serving the security apparatus’ strategic ambitions and politicians’ brazen pursuit of self-interest, and the class and institutional interests of both.

Pakistan’s foreign relations have no doubt had their success stories as well, which have been crowned by the Pakistan-China friendship. Pakistan has stood up well to India’s hegemony. And its nuclear capability, for which both the civilian and military leaderships are to be credited, has not only been good for Pakistan’s security but also for peace in the region. Pakistan has enjoyed a high profile in multilateral diplomacy, and also has had excellent relations with the Muslim world.

But the best days of our foreign policy are long gone as increasingly the policy has been made less out of concern about the national interest and more by leaderships’ own priorities, principally the pursuit of political power. As the same objective defined domestic policies, it led to an endemic crisis of governance. The leadership prospered but the country was left behind.

Because of poor governance, Pakistan became dependent on others and survived by serving their strategic interests – sometimes even at the expense of the national interest. There has been talk of geo-economics lately but Pakistan’s foreign relations nor its domestic conditions are conducive to realizing this aspiration.

To begin with, Pakistan would do well to study the far-reaching changes long been taking place all over the world. Let us first look at the global changes, caused by four historical developments: globalization, the end of the cold war, and revolutionary changes in technology and media. These changes have surrounded, caused, or led to: the breakup of the Soviet empire, devolution and dispersal of global power, China’s rise, nuclear proliferation, rapid industrialization, 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’, the 2008 financial crisis, the Arab Spring, refugees, populism, Covid-19, supply chain breakdowns, Ukraine, and last but not least the climate change that has been taking effect for a long time now. Not to mention, continued challenges states like North Korea pose for the West and its allies, and America’s post-9/11 wars that have been a cure worse than the disease.

Domestic conditions in many countries, especially in the West, have also been impacted. In times like this when foreign countries and foreigners are taking away your factories, jobs and personal security, there has been an economic anxiety caused by global and domestic forces. Globalization has created social discontent and income inequality, leaving the less privileged classes behind, which have felt victimized and excluded at the hands of forces they did not understand.

As a consequence of all this we now face a new geo-politics, new rising powers, new regional alignments, new alliances, increase in non-traditional threats and transnational challenges, and at the same time unforeseen opportunities. The fears of a new cold war were of course overblown as we saw from the recent Xi-Biden summit. Yet the US-China rivalry and competition will remain a new fact of life in the changed international situation. But it cannot become the sole defining issue of the 21st century, when the world is confronted with such a congregation of challenges which are affecting the life of the common man. There is now an ever tighter relationship between domestic and foreign policies. And the economy has become the salient issue. In the US, President Biden has called his foreign policy as a foreign policy of the middle class. That is one reason he turned his back on the ‘forever wars’.

In fact, every country is rethinking its foreign policy, or at least raising questions. Around the world, democracy or no democracy, governments are focusing on the economy. Look at how China’s Xi was sought after at the recent G20 meeting in Bali and APEC meeting in Thailand. And mark the statements of German Chancellor Sholz, French President Macron and Penny Wong, the Australian foreign minister. Because of strong economic relations with China these countries are trying to strike a middle way between the US and China, between geo-politics and economic interests.

It would be difficult to branch away or decouple from China’s economy. However, geo-politics cannot be wished away and will remain in the background. But the important thing is that as big powers prioritize the economy they will seek to diversify their relations with the rest of the world, opening up to as well as entering an ever greater number of markets. So there are opportunities for small and middle powers. And a country like Pakistan – enjoying strategic relations with a more globally accepted China – can potentially enjoy a good space in international relations.

But Pakistan’s foreign policy has largely remained trapped in old assumptions about the world and about ourselves. If any new relations have been sought recently like with Russia that is mainly to diversify benefactors rather than looking for partners and allies. The gap between our diminishing capability and escalating challenges has widened. With the unyielding stranglehold of the elite’s priorities over the national interest, Pakistan has put itself at a disadvantage in dealing with big powers and has often ended up making bad compromises.

Extremist outfits born of Washington’s ill-conceived wars and Pakistan’s strategic ambitions in the region have come to threaten our internal stability and economic future. And Islamabad’s fateful decision to prioritize its backing of the Afghan Taliban has backfired. It is neither solving Pakistan’s security dilemmas nor advancing stability in the region that is vital for geo-economics. As the economy continues to suffer and governance falters, social grievances and the lure of extremism are incited. Forces of instability thrive if the state is weak and too ambivalent to act.

A weak state comes to depend on others limiting its foreign policy options. Because of the dependency syndrome, even the China connection has become ever more important for Pakistan, and not for all the right reasons. It is fomenting a popular view that with China at its back Pakistan does not need to care about other relationships, inciting anti-Americanism which has become in the public mind a badge of ‘independent’ foreign policy.

Geo-economics largely remains a slogan as Pakistan is failing to recognize its shortcomings to successfully make the necessary shift. There are serious underlying and structural economic weaknesses that do not make Pakistan a good partner or an attractive market for foreign investors. Global engagement, national strength and independence are all inter-related. Without that there is no geo-economics. But the self-serving elite continues to live in the past, looking for old beaten formulae to solve Pakistan’s problem as it knows no new tricks. And another section is blaming foreign powers for Pakistan’s problems. Both are a recipe for isolation abroad, and stagnation at home, if not worse.

The writer, a former ambassador, is adjunct professor at

Georgetown University and senior visiting research fellow at the

National University of Singapore.