**[Challenging agenda](https://www.dawn.com/news/1807718/challenging-agenda)**

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FOREIGN policy challenges for the next government have become even more complex after Pakistan and Iran [traded airstrikes](https://www.dawn.com/news/1807033) last week. Relations between the two neighbours have been uneasy even at the best of times. The presence of armed groups on both sides of the border has long been a sticking point.

But the [Iranian air strike](https://www.dawn.com/news/1806351/pakistan-strongly-condemns-violation-of-airspace-by-iran-killing-2-children-foreign-office) against a militant group inside Pakistani territory sparked unprecedented tensions and evoked a strong response from Islamabad. A Foreign Office statement condemned the “unprovoked violation of its airspace” and warned of “serious consequences.” Iran’s action drove relations to a historic low, compelling Islamabad to [retaliate](https://www.dawn.com/news/1806726/operation-marg-bar-sarmachar-pakistan-strikes-terrorist-hideouts-in-iran-after-airspace-violation-by-tehran) by conducting military strikes against militant targets in Iran.

This flare-up in tensions could not have come at a worse time, when Islamabad’s relations with its other two neighbours remain deeply troubled. Pakistan’s regional security concerns have shown little sign of easing in recent years. Relations with India remain frozen, with frequent eruption of tensions along the Line of Control in Kashmir.

Pakistan’s ties with Afghanistan under the Taliban have become increasingly fraught and testy. Having long sought to prevent a two-front scenario of hot borders with its neighbours, Islamabad now has to deal with this very security challenge. Despite the de-escalation in Iran-Pakistan tensions, the relationship has been damaged.

The next government will have its hands full on the foreign policy front, apart from dealing with multiple domestic challenges, especially the ongoing economic crisis. The range of foreign policy issues it will have to address makes it necessary to undertake a wide-ranging review of the entire gamut of foreign policy. Holding envoys conferences is not the same thing.

With global power shifts underway in an unsettled, multipolar world, characterised by mounting geopolitical tensions and a fraying international order, there is urgent need for the managers of Pakistan’s foreign policy to assess this big picture and take stock. Without a broad review and understanding of linkages between various policy areas, Islamabad will be unable to effectively navigate the complex international and regional geopolitical terrain.

At the global level, the key challenge would be to avoid getting into the crosshairs of US-China confrontation, the overarching global dynamic today. Much rhetoric is heard from Pakistani officials about balancing relations between two global powers. That’s declaratory policy.

The reality is that China is Pakistan’s overriding priority, with a solid economic dimension now augmenting long-standing strategic ties. Having stood the test of time, the relationship meets both Pakistan’s security and economic interests. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is the pivot of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, whose timely progress requires close coordination and addressing Beijing’s security concerns in this regard.

The next government faces an array of imposing foreign policy issues.

With the US, relations have been in flux since the American military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. This diminished Pakistan’s importance in Washington’s eyes, because, for two decades, Afghanistan was the principal basis for the relationship, which was largely shorn of bilateral content and marked by both close cooperation and deep mistrust.

The challenge for the next government is to find a new basis for ties, forge a stable relationship with Washington, and be prepared to deal with a possible Trump presidency. The US remains Pakistan’s largest export destination, a source of FDI and a global power with significant influence, especially over international financial institutions, whose assistance Pakistan’s crisis-prone economy constantly needs.

Complicating a reset in ties is Washington’s top strategic priority of containing China. As Pakistan cannot be part of any anti-China coalition, this limits the space for Pakistan-US relations. As does Washington’s growing strategic and economic relationship with India, its partner of choice in the region in its strategy to project India as a counterweight to China.

The implications for Pakistan of the US-India partnership are apparent from Washington turning a blind eye to Delhi’s illegal actions in occupied Kashmir and its augmentation of India’s military capabilities. The latter has aggravated the regional strategic imbalance and magnified Pakistan’s security dilemma. The challenge, then, is to find space between the Pakistan-China strategic relationship and US-India entente to rebuild ties for mutual benefit. There are certainly areas of cooperation to explore to reconfigure ties.

Managing the troubled relationship with India will arguably be the most vexing foreign policy challenge. Relations were ruptured when India illegally annexed Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, and absorbed it into the Indian Union in brazen violation of UN Security Council resolutions. Formal dialogue was suspended by Delhi even earlier, and trade, too, was halted.

New irritants emerged, including disagreement over the Indus Waters Treaty dispute settlement mechanism. Against this backdrop, the question is whether a fresh start is still possible if Nawaz Sharif returns to power and Narendra Modi is re-elected, given their past relationship which produced a thaw in ties.

The path to normalisation of relations, however, remains strewn with formidable challenges given Delhi’s actions in occupied Kashmir and refusal to even talk to Islamabad about the dispute. It would be difficult for Pakistan to take steps to normalise ties if Delhi rules out discussion of the issue and claims all it will talk about is for Pakistan to vacate Azad Kashmir.

As normalisation may not be a near-term possibility, Islamabad and Delhi should focus on managing tensions and consider how to put in place an agreed framework to manage tensions in order to prevent them spinning out of control.

Dealing with Afghanistan will also preoccupy the next government at a time when relations have hit a new low because of the Taliban’s unwillingness to act against the terrorist group, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, which continues to carry out cross-border attacks from its Afghan sanctuaries.

Endless rounds of talks between the two neighbours have yielded little, forcing Islamabad to adopt a tougher stance towards Kabul. There are, however, limits to a coercive approach, as Pakistan would not want a breakdown in relations. This leaves it with a difficult policy dilemma in dealing with Kabul.

There are other foreign policy challenges too, which the government will have to deal with. But it is Pakistan’s domestic trajectory — how competently it governs itself and builds a strong economy — that will determine the effectiveness of its foreign policy. All foreign policy, after all, begins at home.

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