**[Foreign policy test ahead](https://www.dawn.com/news/1765162/foreign-policy-test-ahead)**

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WITH general elections expected in autumn, the next government will have to deal with a slew of key foreign policy issues. This at a time when the world is in the midst of an intensely unsettled period.

Mounting geopolitical tensions and economic volatility are contributing to global instability. The most significant strategic dynamic is the [confrontation between the US and China](https://www.dawn.com/news/1760951), which has far-reaching consequences for the world. Meanwhile, power shifts continue in an increasingly fragmented international system, with multilateralism under growing stress.

At the same time, geopolitical shifts in the Middle East are realigning relations among regional states and transforming the strategic landscape there.

Given this changing international environment the next government would be well advised to undertake a broad review of the country’s foreign policy. It is unclear when such a wide-ranging review was last undertaken. Certainly, there hasn’t been one for over a decade — a period that has seen fundamental regional and global changes.

A review doesn’t mean a change in foreign policy objectives. It means adjusting policy to changes and reshaping the country’s strategy to more effectively pursue goals.

A review also enables consideration of key relationships in a wider context and not in silos, which has obvious drawbacks. This will also afford an opportunity to evolve a strategy that matches the country’s goals to its diplomatic resources and international capital. Aligning ends with means is after all the most fundamental prerequisite for a viable strategy. The foreign ministry has long needed more investment.

In recent years, Pakistan’s foreign policy has been a series of ad hoc responses to regional and global developments rather than part of a well- considered, coherent approach. It has been reactive and lacking in initiatives.

A review will help to inject clarity in policy and encourage a proactive approach. It will offer a chance to Pakistan’s diplomatic missions to make policy inputs. Usually, inputs are intermittently sought on single issues, not a wider canvas. It could generate new thinking to strengthen the country’s diplomatic efforts, which need to be more imaginative and go beyond worn-out talking points.

Importantly, as some critical foreign policy areas are being dealt with by the military, a review should help to initiate a substantive conversation on these issues between civilian and military officials. This could promote better coordination and perhaps enable the foreign ministry to persuade the army leadership to see it as the country’s first line of defence and competent to handle issues on which they have sometimes had little say in recent years.

A broad review will help adapt strategy to regional and global geopolitical changes.

A major foreign policy concern for Pakistan will be to navigate the US-China confrontation and avoid getting into the crosshairs of big power rivalry.

Relations with China will remain Pakistan’s overriding priority, as this offers the best hope for the realisation of its security and economic objectives. But relations need consistent reinforcement to keep them on a positive trajectory and close collaboration to ensure the China Pakistan Economic Corridor is fully developed in line with mutual interests.

As the pivot of China’s Belt and Road Initiative — the 21st century’s most ambitious geoeconomic project — CPEC’s timely progress is critical to reinforce Beijing’s interest in strengthening Pakistan, economically and strategically.

Ties with the US continue to be among Pakistan’s most critical bilateral relationships. But relations have been at an inflection point since the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. For almost two decades, Afghanistan was the principal basis for relations, which were largely shorn of bilateral content and marked by both cooperation and mistrust.

Now that this context has changed the relationship needs to be redefined and this at a time when the overwhelming US strategic priority is containment of China.

The challenge for the two countries is to find space between the Pakistan-China strategic relationship and the growing US-India partnership to identify areas of cooperation on which to reset and rebuild ties. Pakistan also needs to raise its diplomatic game in Washington, especially on Capitol Hill where its presence remains weak.

Stable ties with Afghanistan are Pakistan’s strategic compulsion. But despite the upsurge in trade between the neighbours, the relationship has been under considerable stress. Islamabad’s expectation that the return of a Taliban government would help Pakistan secure its western border has not been met.

Instead, concerns have grown over continuing [cross-border attacks](https://www.dawn.com/news/1725806) and the fact that the outlawed militant organisation, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, is still based in Afghanistan. Several rounds of security talks with Afghan Taliban leaders have not produced any significant outcome. The next government should therefore revisit our Afghan policy and evolve an approach, between appeasement and confrontation, that ensures Kabul responds to Pakistan’s security concerns.

Managing relations with Delhi will undoubtedly be the most vexing foreign policy issue, with India continuing to pose an external challenge to the country’s security. Relations plunged to a new low after Indian illegally annexed Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, bifurcated and absorbed it into the Indian union.

Formal dialogue and trade remain suspended with periodic flare-up of tensions. The diplomatic impasse continues with new irritants, including disagreement over the Indus Waters Treaty dispute settlement mechanism, adding to long-standing disputes.

As normalisation of ties is a remote possibility, Islamabad should consider how to put in place an agreed framework to manage tensions and prevent them from spinning out of control. The only bright spot in this otherwise bleak landscape is that the ceasefire on the Line of Control has largely held since the February 2021 re-commitment to it by both sides.

Regional reconciliation in the Middle East involving rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran offers Islamabad new diplomatic opportunities. The next government should carefully examine how to leverage these to promote Pakistan’s political, economic and commercial goals.

The landmark development also opens space to improve relations and build greater trust with Iran, with whom ties have sometimes been frosty, even testy in the past.

This is not an exhaustive list of foreign policy issues for the next government. The EU, Pakistan’s second largest trading partner, UK, other Arab states, Southeast Asian nations and Africa all merit attention. In an increasingly multipolar world, Pakistan needs an outreach strategy to engage many more countries and actors beyond governments to accomplish its foreign policy objectives.

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*Published in Dawn, July 17th, 2023*