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**The need for strategic clarity**

The year 2021 has brought forward many challenges (and opportunities) for Pakistan. The culmination of the Afghan Peace Process where Pakistan has played a pivotal role, head-on big power competition and confrontation between the US and China, the start of CPEC’s second phase, a new administration in Washington, and the idea of talks and trade with India (formerly a red-line) present Pakistan with an opening to engage and rebrand itself.

A key buzzword that was seen in Pakistan’s narrative projection emanating from the recently held National Security Dialogue was that Pakistan’s foreign policy prism is shifting from geo-politics to geo-economics, which is a welcome development. This is a step in the right direction to fix Pakistan’s image problem, and to re-frame its identity internationally.

The National Security Dialogue also saw key policy statements from the PM where economy and economic security was included in the national security paradigm, which was also about time. To have a strong and stable economy, you can’t be engaged in too many fronts, and the COAS’s statement that it was “time to bury the past” in the context of India was significant.

However, moving forward, Pakistan must develop and hone strategic clarity that will dictate its engagement in its immediate neighborhood and the rest of the world. While messaging that Pakistan wants peace is positive, we have to understand that it is a process, which entails incremental progress, not an event that comes out of a wish. The messaging coming from Pakistan should not be drastic and sudden, where at one point the state wishes to take back the annexed territory by the Modi regime and launch an offensive in all major capitals of the gross human rights violations being wreaked in Occupied Kashmir, and on the other hand announce trade or resumption of political dialogue. First, there has to be a dialogue for a dialogue – the terms and conditions on which Pakistan is willing to sit on the table with India.

If it were not for Pakistan, the US would not be able to make the advances it has in the Afghan Peace Process, where it has tried to wean away from the quick-sand like situation it has found itself in from when it first invaded Afghanistan. Pakistan’s transactional relationship with Washington has for the most part been one-way, with occasional interludes when Washington has given Islamabad minor baits.

US Defense Secretary Gen Austin visited Delhi and Kabul but was conspicuous by his absence in Islamabad. President Biden’s Special Envoy on Climate Senator John Kerry is visiting Dhaka and Delhi, but not Islamabad, despite Pakistan being the seventh most affected country by climate change. Moreover, Pakistan has also not been invited to the Climate Change conference that President Biden is hosting, when climate change is one of the top priorities of the current government, and the strides it has made in it are being replicated by the likes of Saudi Arabia.

Clearly, Pakistan’s exclusion seems not to be driven by climate change indicators but politics. At a time when Pakistan is playing a key role in Afghanistan, which advances US (and Pakistan’s) interests, such exclusion is unacceptable and should be communicated as such.

As the Biden Administration ups the ante in confronting Beijing, particularly in light of the recent meeting between the top foreign policymakers of both countries in Alaska, which was nothing short of a political boxing match, Pakistan should not feel ‘pressured’ as to how to react. As per the National Security Strategy of the White House unveiled in 2017 and the US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific (de-classified in January 2021), the US gives definitive and clear primacy to India in South Asia, giving it enhanced political, military and economic support.

Pakistan is an independent country with its own foreign policy that is not linked with any one country. It should constructively engage with Washington on climate change, trade, Afghanistan, but we should not have ‘policy fog’ on where we stand in Washington’s prism – as a tactical partner that Washington cannot completely ignore, one that is potentially useful for a rainy day.

Unfortunately, Pakistan has not made too many friends that it can really count on. When Modi annexed Kashmir, China, Malaysia and Turkey were the three countries that took a stand. Considering this was a breach of Pakistan’s core interest, it was a rude awakening for Pakistan. Speaking of the much touted Muslim Ummah, the OIC refused to even convene a foreign ministers’ meeting on the issue, let alone take any policy action. A country considered close to Pakistan both politically and geographically gave an award to the Indian PM during that same time, giving legitimacy to his leadership and actions through the gesture.

In the UNSC, China has been Pakistan’s voice by deflecting sanctions and blacklisting of individuals and entities allegedly linked to Pakistan. It has acknowledged Pakistan’s counterterrorism efforts, brought a whopping 62 billion USD investment into Pakistan via CPEC which we have clung on to keep our head above water, given generous Covid-19 assistance to Pakistan, and helped keep India at bay through close coordination on Kashmir and Ladakh.

It is time Pakistan navigated its way via economic diplomacy, dialogue and engagement with the world by basing it not on emotion, solidarity, and religion but exclusively on state interest. Pakistan is a serious player in the region and can leverage its success in counterterrorism, crusade in climate change, as an investment and tourism destination, as well as a country conducive for relocation of industry from China and other countries that wish to reduce their manufacturing cost of production. It is time to embark on this journey of engagement with strategic clarity and nimble footsteps across the tight rope of nuanced statecraft.

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