**The reality gap**

BY M A L E E H A L 0 D H I 2022-01-24

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan was right to assert at the launch of the National Security Policy (NSP) that for long it was military security that determined the country`s strategy. Offering a comprehensive approach by placing as much emphasis on the security of citizens as state security is a welcome initiative. This has long been urged by many in the country who pointed out that the security of a country can neither be assured nor be meaningful for citizens without human security a concept originating in the early 1990s, which Dr Mahbubul Haq translated into an implementable and measurable goal in a path-breaking UNDP document in 1994.

The notion has figured for years in power point presentations at the National Defence University here and academic institutions elsewhere. But it was never formally embraced or acted upon by Pakistan`s security managers. The key question now is whether the government has a strategy to implement human security or indeed the NSP`s other lofty objectives. Seeking to be all..encompassing the document lists numerous well-known challenges but without identifying credible and executable policies to achieve objectives. Instead, it offers a series of platitudes. A policy document must align goals with resources and capacity, and ends with means so that it is in sync with realities. That`s what makes policy enforceable.

The NSP disappoints because it states objectives without indicating a strategy, goals without specifying means to secure them and aims without identifying criteria for deliverables. Long on verbiage it is short on ideas. It is silent on allocation of responsibilities to promote the goals it sets. Who will align the varied goals? It should also have been able to show how national security challenges overlap and are interconnected and how an integrated approach is to be crafted and implemented to set off a virtuous cycle. It claims to provide an overall policy direction but does so in a generalised and superficial way. It is as if a tick-the-boxes approach is adopted, which treats issues in a cursory manner and leaves priorities unclear.

Consider the NSP`s emphasis on making the economy the pivot of national security a welcome reaf-firmation but not entirely a new undertaking as economic stability has long been paramount for policymakers. The renewed emphasis required indicating how this goal would be promoted including a commitment to take tough decisions to reorder budget priorities and launch serious reforms. But one looks in vain for this in the document. After all the structural sources of Pakistan`s chronic financial imbalances are well known. Governments have for decades lived beyond their means and relied on domestic and foreign borrowing to meet financing gaps in both the budget and balance of payments. Ruling elites have shown no political will to raise domestic resources while refusing to tax themselves.

Meanwhile, large defence expenditures have preempted spending on human development education and health in a trade-off with obvious implications for `economic security` While declaring the intent to place the economy at the core of national security, the NSP doesn`t focus on the crux of Pakistan`s economic weakness much less on how to address it especially by urging a change in budget priorities. It devotes few sentences to fiscal management and states only this about the goal: `a manageable fiscal deficit through a consistent increase in government revenues requires continued focus on tax reforms.` But it of fers no ideas, no `direction` on what this involves.

If the economy is to be the pivot of national security and it should the NSP should have spelt out how this aim would be secured. Goals such as increase exports, achieve sustainable growth and secure energy supplies are set out but these have long figured as declarations of intent in almost every official economic document. As implementation is everything, it is necessary to explain how goals are to be achieved. Absent that, objectives remain little more than a wish list.

Three other challenges with enormous economic and security impact are dealt with in passing population growth, extremism and the education deficit. The demographic challenge is consequential to Pakistan`s security for reasons that need little elaboration. But the NSP doesn`t prioritise population control. Even though it cites annual population growth at 2.4 per cent it refers only fleetingly to`population management` in the context of sustainable development. Extremism is dealt with in a perfunctory manner despite being among Pakistan`s top security challenges. A few prosaic phrases are offered as a response. Education, which lies at the heart of most of Pakistan`s problems, is mentioned in the section on securing the economic future but it too doesn`t receive the priority it should. Pakistan still has the world`s second highest number of out-ofschool children, 22 million. Yet the NSP `guideline` simply calls for quality education to ensure global competitiveness. This aim is already compromised by the government`s controversial single national curriculum policy.

The section on foreign policy shows a lack of ideas and imagination. It would certainly have benefited from a description, albeit brief, of the unsettled international environment which forms the backdrop to the conduct of Pakistan`s foreign policy with wide-ranging implications for both its geopolitical and geo-economic strategies. The NSP mentions growing militarisation but as consequential for the country are trade and tech wars between big powers that are dividing the global economy and bifurcating the supply chain and the digital world. The document lists Pakistan`s principal bilateral relationships saying little about how to manage or balance them in an era of shifting geopolitics and multipo larity. It does not indicate strategic priorities while regurgit ating the old theme of leveraging Pakistan`s location to advance its interests, which however are not clearly spelt out. Surprisingly the NSP doesn`t mention the crucial role of soft power in promoting Pakistan`s diplomatic goals. Only two policy guidelines are offered which are generalised formulations of what every country seeks to do anyway, for example, `cultivate broad-based relationships`.

The NSP correctly places emphasis on national cohesion as a key determinant of security. This is ironic coming from a government that has never acted on this and failed to build national consensus for the NSP. Af ter all, if all provinces are not brought on board, implementation of any policy becomes well-nigh impossible.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.