**Foreign policy challenges ahead**

BY M A L E E H A L 0 D H I 2022-01-10

FIVE key areas will be the main focus of Pakistan`s foreign policy in the year ahead. Relations with China and the US while navigating the Sino-US confrontation, dealing with Afghanistan`s uncertainties, managing the adversarial relationship with India and balancing ties between strategic ally Saudi Arabia and neighbour Iran.

Pakistan has to pursue its diplomatic goals in an unsettled global and regional environment marked by several key features. They include rising EastWest tensions, increasing preoccupation of big powers with domestic challenges, ongoing trade and technology wars overlying the strategic competition between China and the US, a fraying rules-based international order and attempts by regional and other powers to reshape the rules of the game in their neighbourhood.

Understanding the dynamics of an unpredictable world is important especially as unilateral actions by big powers and populist leaders, which mark their foreign policy, have implications for Pakistan`s diplomacy. In evolving its foreign policy strategy Pakistan has to match its goals to its diplomatic resources and capital. No strategy is effective unless ends and means are aligned.

Pakistan`s relations with China will remain its overriding priority. While a solid economic dimension has been added to long-standing strategic ties, it needs sustained high-level engagement and consultation to keep relations on a positive trajectory.

CPEC is on track, but there are issues to address in its second phase. They include simplifying cumbersome bureaucratic approval procedures for investors, resolving the issue of deferred payments to IPPs and promoting more business-to-business cooperation. Chinese concerns about security of their personnel working in Pakistan also need to be addressed. As the pivot of China`s belt and road initiative the 21st century`s most ambitious economic enterprise CPEC`s timely progress is crucial to reinforce Beijing`s interest in strengthening Pakistan, economically and strategically. Close coordination with Beijing on key issues remains important.

Pakistan wants to improve ties with the US. But relations will inevitably be affected by Washington`s ongoing confront ation with Beijing, which American officials declare has an adversarial dimension while China attributes a cold war mindset to the US.Islamabad seeks to avoid being sucked into this big power rivalry. But this is easier said than done. So long as US-China relations remain unsteady it will have a direct bearing on Pakistan`s effort to reset ties with the US especially as containing China is a top American priority.

US withdrawal from Afghanistan has diminished Pakistan`s importance for Washington for now, at a time when many in the US blame Islamabad for its military debacle in Afghanistan. For almost two decades Afghanistan was the principal basis for engagement in their frequently turbulent ties, marked by both cooperation and mistrust. As Pakistan tries to turn a new page with the US the challenge is to find a new basis for a relationship largely shorn of substantive bilateral content.

Islamabad`s desire to expand trade ties is in any case contingent on building a stronger export base.

Complicating this is Washington`s growing strategic and economic relations 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 US-India entente are more than evident from Washington turning a blind eye to the grim situation in occupied Kashmir and its strengthening of India`s military and strategic capabilities. Closer US-India ties will intensify the strategic imbalance in the region magnifying Pakistan`s security challenge.

Multiple dimensions of Pakistan`s relations with Afghanistan will preoccupy Islamabad, which spent much of 2021 engaged with tumultuous developments there. While Pakistan will continue to help Afghanistan avert a humanitarian and economic collapse it should not underestimate the problems that may arise with an erstwhile ally. For one, the TTP continues to be based in Afghanistan and conduct attacks from there. The border fencing issue is another source of unsettled discord. Careful calibration of ties will be needed assisting Afghanistan but avoiding overstretch, and acknowledging that the interests of the Taliban and Pakistan are far from identical. Moreover, in efforts to mobilise international help for Afghanistan, Islamabad must not exhaust its diplomatic capital, which is finite and Pakistan has other foreign policy goals to pursue.

Managing relations with India will be a difficult challenge especially as the Modi government is con-tinuing its repressive policy in occupied Kashmir and pressing ahead with demographic changes there, rejecting Pakistan`s protests. The hope in establishment circles that last year`s backchannel between the two countries would yield a thaw or even rapprochement, turned to disappointment when no headway was made on any front beyond the re-commitment by both neighbours to observe a ceasefire on the Line of Control.

Working level diplomatic engagement will continue on practical issues such as release of civilian prisoners. But prospects of formal dialogue resuming are slim in view of Delhi`s refusal to discuss Kashmir. This is unlikely to change unless Islamabad raises the diplomatic costs for Delhi of its intransigent policy. Islamabad`s focus on Afghanistan last year meant its diplomatic campaign on Kashmir sagged and was limited to issuing tough statements.

Unless Islamabad renews and sustains its international efforts with commitment and imagination, India will feel no pressure on an issue that remains among Pakistan`s core foreign policy goals.

With normalisation of ties a remote possibility, quiet diplomacy by the two countries is expected to focus on managing tensions to prevent them from spinning out of control. Given the impasse on Kashmir, an uneasy state of no war, no peace is likely to continue warranting Pakistan`s sustained attention.

In balancing ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran, Pakistan should consider how to leverage possible easing of tensions between the long-standing rivals of which there are some tentative signs. With Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman keen to use economic power to expand his country`s diplomatic clout by making strategic overseas investments, Pakistan should use its political ties with Riyadh to attract Saudi investment through a coherent strategy. Relations with Iran too should be strengthened with close consultation on regional issues especially Afghanistan. The recent barter agreement is a step in the right direction.

In an increasingly multipolar world, Pakistan also needs to raise its diplomatic game by vigorous outreach to other key countries and actors beyond governments to secure its foreign policy goals. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.