**[Foreign policy formation](https://nation.com.pk/13-Feb-2020/foreign-policy-formation" \t "_new)**

Atle Hetland February 13, 2020

It had been a sunny late winter’s day in Islamabad, and the slightly colder and more crisp evening was coming when Oxford University Press welcomed participants to a book discussion about the fifth edition of ‘Pakistan’s Foreign Policy 1947-2019. A Concise History’ by Abdul Sattar (1931-2019). He served as a diplomat for thirty nine years, and was twice a minister and ambassador to New Delhi. The book is updated till 2019, close to the time of the author’s passing. The 400-page book is a detailed account of Pakistan’s foreign policy since 1947, and it forms a basic reference book, or a textbook, said Imtiaz Gul, who was one of the speakers at the event, before rushing to catch a flight to Karachi, leaving more space for Ashraf Jahangir Qazi, a retired Pakistani ambassador and UN representative, and the moderator, Salma Malik, a young teacher at the Quaid-e-Azam University.

Ambassador Qazi’s analysis and comments became as crisp and clear as the evening’s weather. He was eloquent, although sometimes he also said things that may not have been popular by all, yet, thought-provoking. When discussing policy formation, both domestic and foreign, the best one can do is to present issues so people can continue thinking themselves.

Besserwissers, the know-it-all locals and foreigners, sometimes ask; what went wrong and when, in Pakistan’s foreign policies – and in domestic policies for that matter? But then before asking such questions, one should explain what it is that has gone wrong, and what alternatives that existed when decisions were made. I believe that Pakistan has done the best out of it all in the main sectors and broader policies in foreign affairs; in domestic policies, choices have been more and other decisions could have been made, indeed in education and the other social sectors. In most foreign policy sectors, what decisions to take have been given, based on historical direction and orientation of the country. In Pakistan’s case, much of the course was laid at independence in 1947, and even before. In recent decades, better economic development would have given more choices.

I believe that in overall policies, few countries can easily change the ship’s course; a country continues what is given in accordance with the country’s history and its relationship with its neighbours, region, super- and major powers, and the wider world, in trade, culture, religion, and other fields. At Pakistan’s independence, there were two superpowers, USA and USSR. Pakistan was from the outset Western-oriented, but it also had contact with the then Soviet-Union, the Central Asia republics, and other countries in the region, Muslim or otherwise. Due to geography, history and other reasons, Afghanistan will always remain a particularly close neighbour. China has become more important. Iran, too, remains a close neighbour, and there is also cooperation with the Arab World. In his comments on Saudi-Arabia, Ambassador Qazi said that at the seminar that it is supported by its close Western cooperation, even with Israel (against Iran), and that its future situation as a leading power depends on how well it will be able to solve its domestic politics and change.

Since I am a Norwegian, I often make (unequal) comparisons with and draw lessons from my home country. For example, after WWII, Norway became an essential member of the United Nations, with its first Secretary General being the Norwegian Trygve Lie. Norway was a founding member of NATO in 1949, whisked into the Western defence alliance without much public debate, probably by American order. From that time, the Norwegian foreign policy course has not been changed much, although it allows opposition and debate. In North-South issues, the soft-spoken Norwegians usually support the developing countries in their struggle for greater equality and fairer trade, and they support the Kashmiri and Palestinian people. As for NATO, it is out of question to allow Norway to leave. However, I believe the Norwegians only reluctantly support the illogical increase in NATO’s budgets, spending ten times as much as Russia.

Pakistan’s relations with India, and certainly its policies on Kashmir, have remained unchanged and it seems, unchangeable, since 1947, yes, in similar ways as the Norwegians, too, are locked in their opinions in those fields I mentioned above. A former Norwegian PM, Kjell Magne Bondevik, who visited IOK just a while before India annexed it last autumn, said last week that he wanted Kashmir higher on the political agenda. He being a theologian by training, I am sure a major reason was the terrible human rights situation on the Indian side.

None of us do enough and the right things to change the Kashmir situation for the better. It is not realistic to expect any outcome of the seven-decade old UN resolutions because they cannot be forced implemented by anyone, sadly. We must look for other, new ways. Also, the three wars between Pakistan and India were unfortunate, to say the least (as I would, being a pacifist). The military must proactively work for peaceful resolutions of conflicts. Can we not begin serious efforts to create more trust and cooperation between the two countries (if not under PM Narendra Modi’s regime, then as soon as he is gone)? I hope PM Imran Khan will be able to begin tentative talks, as he has spoken about. More trust between the two countries, more trade and cooperation, is needed for the Kashmir issue to reach some kind solution. Is it a dream? Maybe, but I want to keep the dream – until it comes true, as it will!

In the seminar I referred to above, I was not the only one who suggested that we must select more carefully the issues we talk about when discussing foreign affairs, in Pakistan, Norway and other countries. In addition to ‘standard topics’, where we say what is expected of us, we must also speak about new, important issues.

Ambassador Qazi said that the most important issue in foreign affairs now is climate change. Pakistan is at the foot of the Himalayas, where there will be major climate changes that will affect all life in the sub-continent. In Norway, too, one of the ten largest oil-exporters in the world, situated on the way to the North Pole, many climate change issues must be debated, but they are not quite as urgent at the issues in Pakistan.

Foreign affairs issues of the kind I have mentioned must be discussed by all in democratic states, not just by staff in foreign affairs ministries. Besides, foreign affairs issues are also domestic issues. For example, the American foreign policies would have been quite different and better for all of us if people had a democratic say.

In Scandinavia, we are proud of having the Swedish Greta Thunberg reminding us and the rest of the world that there is no time to slumber any longer. Malala Yousafzai is another role model. But shouldn’t it first of all be the politicians in the political parties who put issues on the agenda? It is a shortcoming if it takes 17-year old teenagers, albeit very smart, to sound the alarm. In other political fields, domestic and foreign, maybe young people will more and more help us change course and do new things, not just drift along.