**[On the external front](https://www.dawn.com/news/1429669/on-the-external-front)**

[Zahid Hussain](https://www.dawn.com/authors/966/zahid-hussain) August 29, 2018

The writer is an author and journalist.

WHILE foreign policy may not be the top priority for the new government, the challenges on the external front are no less important. The truism that foreign policy begins at home is more relevant to this country in midst of serious economic crisis and political instability. Undeniably it is vital to put our house in order.

Yet the complex external circumstances surrounding the country also demand prudent management of foreign relations. Fast-changing regional geopolitics have a direct bearing on our national security and internal political stability. Given our geostrategic position there is a greater need to take a more balanced approach.

While one cannot disagree with the prime minister focusing on the domestic front, it is hard to understand Imran Khan’s pledge not to take any foreign visit for at least three months. It’s swinging to other extreme. There are some critical capitals the prime minister needs to visit and interact with the leaders of friendly countries.

There is no decision yet whether the prime minister would attend the United Nations General Assembly session in September. The occasion provides a huge opportunity for the new incumbent to meet other world leaders. That would not divert attention from domestic priorities. It certainly makes a huge difference to have an experienced and full time foreign minister, yet some issues need to be tackled at the highest level.

*There are some critical capitals the prime minister needs to visit and interact with.*

As a norm most critical foreign policy decisions lay in the domain of the security establishment. This is certainly not just a perception but a fact. One of the major reasons for this incongruity is the country being turned into a national security state given its geostrategic situation. It is also a fact that Pakistan has been a frontline state in two wars involving superpowers across its western borders twice in the last four decades giving the security establishment a much greater role in determining the direction of the country’s foreign policy.

The long period of military rules has further increased the predominance of the security agencies in the decision-making process. The incompetence of successive civilian rules too has been responsible for this imbalance. The narrow security prism has restricted our foreign policy options. This situation must be changed.

One cannot agree more with Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the foreign minister, that it is primarily the responsibility of the foreign office and the civilian government to formulate foreign policy — of course with the consultation of the security agencies as happens in other countries. It, however, remains to be seen how the new government takes charge in determining the policy direction and conducting foreign relations.

Growing estrangement with the United States, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, tension with India and relations with China will be the major foreign policy issues the new government will have to deal with. Managing its relations with Washington is going to be the most serious challenge for the new PTI administration. The alliance that emerged after 9/11 seems to have come the full circle.

The turbulent relations between the two countries have come almost to a breaking point. Once perceived to be a strategic alliance, the relationship has long been transformed into a transactional arrangement. That relationship too is not working with the widening trust gap between Washington and Islamabad.

Now the residual transactional relationship has also come under strain after President Donald Trump announced his administration’s South Asia policy earlier this year and suspended military assistance. Like its predecessors, the Trump administration demands unquestioned cooperation, ignoring Islamabad’s interests. Yet a complete breakdown of relations between Washington and Islamabad is not an option.

It was a testy first interaction between the new Pakistani administration and Washington. The controversy over what transpired in the telephonic conversation between the prime minister and the US Secretary of State has clouded the coming visit to Islamabad of the most senior US official in years. But it is time to move forward and find some common ground for cooperation between the two erstwhile allies.

Afghanistan remains a thorny issue. The resumption of bilateral talks seems to have broken the ice and reopened a window of opportunity for Islamabad and Kabul to build an atmosphere of mutual trust and put ties on a more stable footing — the lowering of hostile rhetoric, thus paving the way for a conducive environment in which rational discussions on critical issues affecting the two countries can be held.

There is, indeed, strong reason for optimism but it would require a greater effort by both sides to remove the major sources of tension, not an easy task given the huge baggage of mutual distrust and certain adverse internal and external factors. The recent series of meetings between Kabul and Islamabad has taken the discussions forward with more concrete suggestions for evolving a common strategy to deal with cross-border sanctuaries that have been the biggest cause of tension between the two countries.

Another foreign policy challenge for the new government would be to figure out how to normalise relations with New Delhi and manage business with Beijing. Imran Khan appears serious about improving relations with India, but Indian intransigence and the Kashmir issue remain a major hurdle to a breakthrough. Also given that India is having a general election next year, there is no hope of any major development on the Indian front.

Meanwhile, the growing China-Pakistan axis reflects Asia’s emerging geopolitics and realignment of forces. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has brought a dimensional shift in the two countries’ relations at a time of significant geopolitical change. But while it promises wide-ranging benefits for infrastructure development and economic growth in Pakistan, a number of important challenges remain to be overcome if the project is to be sustainable and produce long-term benefits for Pakistanis. A major challenge for the new government is to negotiate better terms with the Chinese firms so as to reap maximum benefit from their investments.

Given all the complexities, the new government needs to diversify its foreign policy options keeping in view Pakistan’s national interest. While internal political and economic stability must remain the top priority, it is also important to take charge of foreign policy too.

*The writer is an author and journalist.*

[**zhussain100@yahoo.com**](http://mailto:zhussain100@yahoo.com/)

**Twitter:**[**@hidhussain**](https://twitter.com/hidhussain)

*Published in Dawn, August 29th, 2018*