**Putting the foreign policy in order**

[Mudassir Saeed](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mudassir-saeed)

August 15, 2018

A little more than a year ago, while addressing the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, President Xi termed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the ‘project of the century”.

“Over 2,000 years ago”, observed President Xi, in an attempt to provide blueprints for the future roadmap of the current Belt and Road Initiative, “our ancestors, trekking across vast steppes and deserts, opened the transcontinental passage connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, known today as the Silk Road…...These ancient silk routes opened windows of friendly engagement among nations, adding a splendid chapter to the history of human progress.”

Undoubtedly, the BRI is an ambitious trade plan spanning a large part of the globe, from Asia to Africa and Europe. It portrays globalisation as its main theme. As the BRI captures momentum and brings more countries into its fold, it can be seen that the Indus Valley, along with many others, forms a crucial part of this connectivity infrastructure. Therefore, there is no wonder then that as part of the BRI, an exclusive corridor, CPEC, passes through Pakistan.

But deepened connectivity is not the only constituent of the dominant ethos prevailing in the world, as the US is witnessing a sense of increasing isolationism. The current US president, Donald Trump, seems intent upon building walls all around the US – a physical one along the US-Mexico border and a virtual one along the rest of the country’s borders. In an effort to cut trade deficits with friends and adversaries alike, the US president has put large tariffs on billions of dollars’ worth of goods of China, Canada and Europe (especially Germany). This exercise, which may lead the world to a full-blown trade war, is feared to drag more countries into trade disputes.

So what actually forms the core of the current international system then? The trade war? Or deepening globalisation? Probably a raw mixture of both, for the time being at least.

The US cannot completely shut its borders to trade, and the world needs increasing investment for the connectivity infrastructure to progress and prosper. “Peaches and plums do not speak, but they are so attractive that a path is formed below the trees” say the Chinese, meaning trade and economic activities have their own tradition of making ways and that they are unstoppable. The world is craving increased global trade to make their economies grow, reduce poverty and create jobs. Therefore, there is no alternate to global trade.

And what does this global scenario mean for Pakistan? The brief answer is ‘quite contrary to what the pessimists are saying’. The current trajectory of the international system offers a great deal of favours to Pakistan. CPEC is among its more vivid reflections. Furthermore, how can we come to miss the remarkably phenomenal changes in the EU’s position over Pakistan’s national interests? Earlier, its stance was more in line with that of the US, now it is increasingly willing to seek on its own a mutually beneficial cooperation with Pakistan.

One can speak with certain reservations though that it is only India that is trying to limit Pakistan’s political and economic role in the world. But beyond that, there exists hardly any broad array of arrangements in the design of the current international system that may work to intensify unfriendliness towards Pakistan. Unless we become our own enemy and start killing our choices, there is no greater design in the making that would push the world to form a hostile ring around us.

There is no denying that our diplomatic position around the world is very feeble, and the country’s placement on the FATF’s grey list is but its latest manifestation. But it has a lot to do with our weak governance system, which is less efficient and ill-structured: the governmental authority is essentially diffused (between civilians and military) and is not centralised.

But even then our current diplomatic position is not substantially as worse as it had been in many instances in the past. The rule of Musharraf, the military dictator (or the Quaid-e-Sani as his lickspittle would call him), is a tragic case in point. The people might remember the increasing rate of militant attacks, suicide bombings, drone attacks, cross-border infiltrations, and especially, the western mantra of ‘double game’ that devastated the country’s international standing.

Pakistan is right to criticise the US’ policies which needlessly blame Pakistan for many of the crimes that the US itself is responsible for. But even then we need to start with a deep look at the realities at home. Pakistan is badly struck with a myriad economic challenges, institutional ineffectiveness, governance failures, alienation among the youth, water crisis, and widespread extremism, that has cost us direly in our domestic and international affairs.

Unfortunately, Pakistan’s foreign policy has always depended on scenarios of threat and encirclement as focusing devices. As ours is a country with a weak economy and a strong military, we therefore respond to the threat by opting to either freeze it or stretch it out. This has been a great strategic folly as such a strategy needs to be built on unnecessary provocations. No wonder then, as part of the consequences, such efforts have contributed in strengthening the Indo-Iran-Afghan partnership.

This has to change, not only because the strategy is short-sighted, but also for Pakistan to remain relevant in world affairs. Fears of isolation and enhanced sensitiveness to some remote dangers cannot unite the nation on the need to put the house in order. In political, economic, or cultural terms, Pakistan is situated in a complex but dynamic environment. China is too economic, India too strategic and there is too much chaos on our western and north-western borders.

In such an environment, in order to chart out a prudent and proactive roadmap for our foreign and defence policies, Pakistan needs to strengthen its foreign ministry to such an extent that it enjoys formidable power and autonomy. We can act better only when our foreign ministry contains a dense network of talented career diplomats at its disposal.

As the power centres of the world are themselves embroiled in many challenges, they have less pressing wants taking our position into account. This automatically buys us greater time to take ourselves into account. Currently, Pakistan is enjoying considerable level of peace. We need to draw on it. In order to do this, we need to figure out our tremendous geo-economic potential and capitalise on it. Only more economic growth and a wider economic base can give us more leverage to ensure peace and prosperity within and without our borders.

This moment belongs to Imran Khan. He understands that a country’s foreign policy starts at home and that it is primarily the function of its internal strength and capabilities. He is also aware of the fatal and grave consequences of making serious mistakes and miscalculations.

Therefore, Imran Khan must struggle to establish and maintain partnerships with the major and emerging players of the world. Ensuring mutual interests and benefits should be the linchpin of the country’s foreign policy. While undertaking all this he must pay heed to what former Chinese president Deng Xiaoping once counselled: “Hide your strength and bide your time”. Equally important are his views about the then-stagnant conditions of the Soviet economy: “[the Soviets’] economy and the measures they have applied are not working. It is a consequence of their political system – there is a stiffness and inflexibility”.

Currently, there is no rival political party to significantly threaten Imran Khan’s rule. But how long does this political respite lasts will largely depend on his ability to put the house in order.

The writer is a freelance

contributor.