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**In the eye of the storm**

Pakistan is once again in the eye of the storm. The country’s external challenges are assuming ominous proportions because of India’s growing belligerence, annexation of Jammu and Kashmir, and its relentless drive for hegemony in South Asia.

The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), recently signed between the US and India to allow sharing of high-end military technology, classified satellite data and critical information between the two countries, will encourage India further in the pursuit of its aggressive designs vis-à-vis Pakistan.

Despite the commencement of the intra-Afghan dialogue, the goal of durable peace in Afghanistan remains elusive. Needless to say, the outbreak of an all-out civil war in Afghanistan in the wake of US military withdrawal from Afghanistan will have grave consequences for Pakistan’s security and economic well-being.

Internally, there is a dire need for political stability and a government capable of successfully dealing with the daunting internal and external challenges. What we have instead is growing political instability in which the government and the opposition are at each other’s throats in pursuit of narrow personal and party interests rather than being engaged in a constructive dialogue for the promotion of Pakistan’s security and economic prosperity.

The signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement was the latest development in the steady growth of Indo-US strategic cooperation which commenced in real earnest in 1995 with the signing of the Agreed Minute on Defense Relations Between the US and India. This was followed by the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2002, the New Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship in 2005, Indo-US nuclear cooperation agreement in 2005, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016 and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018.

Over and above these agreements, which have significantly enhanced Indo-US strategic cooperation, the US formally declared in 2005 its intention “to help India become a major world power in the 21st century”. This was followed by another major move by the US in 2016 designating India as a “Major Defense Partner”. Just to make sure that Pakistan understands that the strategic scenario has radically changed, Washington ‘de-hyphenated’ its relations with Islamabad and New Delhi under the Bush administration, thus indirectly placing its relations with India at a higher plane in terms of priority and importance.

The US wishes to build up India as a counterweight to China as part of its grand strategic design while India needs US support for hegemony in South Asia. This convergence of strategic interests also explains India’s membership of Quad, an informal alliance of the US, Japan, India and Australia, to counter the expansion of Chinese power and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The steady development of Indo-US strategic cooperation, which has now encompassed four US administrations, is likely to continue under the incoming Biden administration.

This inexorable process has the potential to upset the strategic balance between Pakistan and India, underscoring the need for Pakistan to develop its strategic partnership with China. The challenge facing our policymakers is to do so while maintaining friendly relations and cooperation with the US which will remain the most powerful country in the world for quite some time because of the formidable combination of economic and military strength, soft power and worldwide alliances.

The prospect of US military withdrawal from Afghanistan poses its own set of challenges for Pakistan whose vital interests demand the restoration of durable peace in that brotherly country through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. This is not going to be an easy task because of the history of internal fighting and ethnic, tribal, ideological and political fault-lines in Afghanistan aggravated by regional and global rivalries.

In the Middle East, continued Iranian-Saudi rivalry, political instability and armed conflicts in several regional states, growing political influence and economic presence of India and Israel, and great power rivalries present their own set of problems for Pakistan. Over and above all of this, Pakistan faces a world in disorder marked by growing great power competition, diminished importance of international law and the UN in strategic issues of peace and security, civilizational fault-lines, and shifting alliances.

In the face of these daunting external challenges, Pakistan badly needs internal political stability and social cohesion, economic strength and progress, cultural vitality, a credible security deterrent and proactive foreign policy. Even a cursory look at Pakistan shows that it is far from meeting these essential requirements. We have become a deeply polarized society lacking tolerance and moderation thanks to the immaturity of our politicians, whether in the government or the opposition, over-reach by institutions, the perennial tussle between democratic and non-democratic forces, and an oppressive and exploitative system of government.

Our economy is in dire straits marked by a negative GDP growth rate in the year 2019-20 and high levels of unemployment, inflation and poverty. Our cultural identity as an Islamic welfare state is being undermined by the identification of modernization with over-Westernization, thus, confusing symbols and appearances with substance and reality.

Right now, political polarization and intolerance are perhaps the most serious problems confronting the nation. The need of the hour is for national unity within the constitutional framework in which each national institution plays its due role within the limits prescribed by the constitution. Solutions to national problems must be sought through dialogue and discussion among the stakeholders in an atmosphere marked by freedom of speech.

The destiny of the nation must be in the hands of its representatives chosen through fair and transparent elections in accordance with the principle of civilian supremacy. Unfortunately, however, the latest developments are pushing the country in the opposite direction.

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