**New blocs**

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First of all, I would like to congratulate COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa, who was awarded the King Abdulaziz Medal of Excellent Class during his visit to Saudi Arabia in a special ceremony held in Jeddah. The highest medal from the Saudi government is intended to laud General Bajwa’s leadership efforts in strengthening and consolidating bilateral relations. Saudi Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman’s tweet in Urdu language has also gone viral, in which he expressed warm gratitude after meeting with Gen Bajwa.

Saudi Arabia is one of Pakistan’s closest and most trusted friends and has stood by us in every critical time. During the cold war, despite the majority of Middle Eastern countries joining the Soviet bloc, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were integral parts of the US camp at the time. The people of Pakistan have a special devotion to the holy land of Saudi Arabia. For the past 50 years, Pakistani troops have been in Saudi Arabia for defence purposes.

There was a time when Saudi Arabia and Iran enjoyed the status of the ‘twin pillars’ in the Middle East under the Nixon doctrine. However, after the Islamic Revolution, Iran emerged as an America’s worst enemy, and at the same time, tussle with Saudi Arabia over the leadership of the Muslim world started. According to the latest reports emerging, the two major ideological rivals in the Middle East are now coming closer for strengthening bilateral ties.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia and Turkey had tense ties but today Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan is ready to visit Saudi Arabia to restore ties. On the regional front, the United Arab Emirates has been considered a close ally of Saudi Arabia and both countries have always been on the same page on key issues, but the UAE’s decision to establish diplomatic relations with Israel under the Abraham Accord at the behest of former US president Donald Trump has strained cordial ties with Saudi Arabia.

What I am observing is that the traditional situation in our region is changing rapidly. One bloc has already emerged; this bloc includes the UAE, the US, India and Israel. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia, with the cooperation of Pakistan, is trying to form another bloc with its rivals Iran and Turkey. Apparently, the US, with the cooperation of the UAE, India and Israel wants the balance of power in the Middle East to be in America’s favour and not to allow anti-US countries, Iran and China, to increase their influence there.

Currently, Russia, due to its involvement in the Ukraine war, is not in a position to play any significant role in our region.

India, on the other hand, has silently restored its diplomatic mission in Kabul. The US has also released one of the last two Afghan nationals held at Guantanamo Bay in a goodwill gesture. Such moves indicate that the way is also being paved for the unannounced inclusion of Taliban-led Afghanistan in the new bloc.

The situation on the foreign front for Pakistan is very complicated by the fact that we have close ties with all the countries in the region except India and Israel. In my view, India’s presence in the regional bloc is a major threat to Pakistan’s interests. Most recently, India has blocked Pakistan’s participation in the Brics meeting hosted by China.

There is a dire need to devise a sensible, doable and practical foreign policy for taking correct and timely decisions, while keeping in view the current economic situation in Pakistan, especially the ongoing energy crisis.

The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.

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