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Reshaping Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Beset by the spiraling Islamist violence in its border regions, pressed by the United States and allies to crackdown on the militants threatening to continue their Jihad against foreign troops in Afghanistan, and reeling under the continuing judicial crisis that revolves around the opposition demands of “unconditional restoration” of about five dozen Superior Judiciary judges, Pakistan faces the challenge of how to balance its attempt to safeguard its national interests against international demands for a more forceful and determined drive against Islamist radicals. Pursuing strategic pragmatism in ties with China; realizing a dignified peace with India over Kashmir and adopting an economy-driven foreign policy are other major challenges facing the country.

Foreign policy observers in Pakistan feel that the NATO and allied command need to “inject some sense in the conduct of Afghanistan’s state relations with Pakistan...”

In two core areas, nevertheless, Pakistan’s foreign policy has taken a paradigm shift i.e. Kashmir and Afghanistan. In pursuing peace with India, Pakistan under General Pervez Musharraf – who headed the army as well as the country as the defacto chief executive of the country until

resigning from the army - took very bold steps including to hinting the shunning of the six decades old stance on Kashmir and vowed to think out of the box.

On the Afghan front, Pakistan had to comply with the UNSC resolution, and joined the coalition against terror in September 2001, thereby shunning the long-time strategic allies – the Taliban and declaring war on them.

Continuity and Change:

As far as the war on terror is concerned, it is currently determining Pakistan’s complicated relationship with the Afghan government on the one hand and with the international community on the other, which increasingly feels threatened by the Pakistan-based

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radical supporters of the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan thus blamed for all that’s happening in Afghanistan and therefore under tremendous foreign pressure to rectify the situation, which also forced it to launch a military operation in the Khyber tribal area June 28.

War on terror is also shaping, in fact redefining, Pakistan’s ties with Washington, which had undergone several ebbs and flows until 9/11 forced the United States to engage the Muslim country for a long-term strategic relationship. Therefore, the steady stream of US Congressmen and officials to Islamabad.

War on terror aside, there are some constants also in Pakistan’s foreign policy, including the role it plays or aspires to play in the Muslim world and its ties with China. Close relationship with Beijing remains one of the cornerstones of Islamabad’s foreign policy. Neither military nor any civilian government would deviate from the path charted by the respective leaderships in the early 1970s.

Both of these shifts have manifested profound impacts on the domestic front as well as the country’s international standing.

A large segment of the Pakistani population thinks these shifts do not reflect the popular public sentiment and is thus viewed as a compromise on the national interests. Among the intelligentsia, there is no principal disagreement on these policy shifts but it is argued that President Musharraf “sold Pakistan too cheap and could not take benefits in bargain with the shifts that occurred under him.” This section of the Pakistani society also sees such unprepared moves under Musharraf as a ploy to safeguard his own personal interest in Pakistan and globally.

The critics of these shifts note that India, despite being given many discounts including dozens of “confidence building measures (CBMs)”, has refused to demonstrate any flexibility on its stated positions on major issues such as Kashmir, Sir Creek and Siachin Glacier, and thereby stalling progress in bilateral talks.

Most Pakistani analysts describe this as a disappointment for a large section of the Kashmiri population and politicians who had always viewed Pakistan as their savior. It has been a fruitless and frustrating struggle to make peace with India, they maintain.

With such complexity, the government has the tough task at hand to keep balance in rationalizing and realizing both the domestic and foreign policy agendas. This would not only involve bolstering the democracy domestically but also linking it with

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Pakistan's external image. Both are tough tasks that demand equal and urgent attention.

Weighed against the odds that Pakistan has faced

in the last decade or so despite its almost unconditional support for the anti-terror war, democracy seems to be the only system that can lend popular approval and acceptance to the foreign policies.

Skeptical Pakistanis at large expect from their government to tailor a foreign policy that also reflects public opinion, enhances parliamentary input and allowing Foreign Office to play its due role in decision making and implementation. While doing so, the government should abandon the "single issue-driven" foreign policy and an approach to external relations that reprioritizes issues, in accordance with their respective significance to national interest, must come forth.

Core Areas of Foreign Policy:

Democratizing Pakistan's foreign policy under a democratic dispensation requires bringing about changes in its core areas, including:

1. Adopting a new approach to the US-led War on Terror;
2. Pursuing strategic pragmatism in Pakistan's ties with China;
3. Realizing a dignified peace with India over Kashmir;
4. Improving the country's ties with Afghanistan and Iran;
5. Playing a proactive role in Muslim world affairs; *and*
6. Adopting an external agenda that is essentially driven by economic interests.

Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani has already declared that Pakistan will adopt a "comprehensive approach" in its policy towards the US-led War on Terror. For its part, however, probably due to American pressure, the PPP-led government in the Centre appears to be not-so-enthusiastic yet about having direct dialogue with pro-Taliban forces.

In relations with China, the new government, like all of its predecessors in the past nearly six decades, would like to build upon the already laid foundations, especially in promoting economic and energy ties. As far as the ties with India are concerned, General

Musharraf started the peace process with India at the start of 2004. However, in the process, he made unnecessary unilateral concessions to India on the issue of Kashmir. Now under democracy, Pakistan is in a much stronger position to mutually discuss and resolve the Kashmir dispute with democratic support and the signs of which have already started to show.

Improving ties with Pakistan's two other neighbors, Afghanistan and Iran, is another area of foreign policy the new government would like to concentrate on.

Recently, ties with Afghanistan got a jolt when Afghan

President Hamid Karzai declared his intentions of "hot pursuit" in Pakistan's

tribal areas for hunting terrorists that he believes are destabilizing Afghanistan out of Pakistani tribal areas. as such statements do not help. Enhancing Pakistan's ties with Iran is equally important. The basis of these ties is the proposed gas pipeline that is to reach India through Pakistan from southern Iran (also known as the IPI - Iran, Pakistan & India pipeline).

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Realizing an ever-growing role of the country in the affairs of the Muslim world is a foreign policy constant that the new government inherits from the previous regime in particular and all those who came before it. Finally, and more importantly, the government is expected to focus much of its attention on realizing turning around the economy and its economic ties with the rest of the world. Expanding trade with the European Union, greater investment from the Gulf countries, and securing more economic assistance from the United States, remain big challenges for the government.