

Geopolitics 2019 and Pakistan

By

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Backdrop

The phenomenon of globalization and the transforming international order have put the nation states under a considerable test. A unique convergence of contemporary global trends necessitates astute statecraft and diplomacy by the states that seek progress and preeminence. Systems of government in every region face the internal and external challenges of quickly attuning to the state of affairs. This quandary could be best encapsulated by rephrasing Dickens – is this the time to go directly to Heaven, or directly the other way?

Imperatives like economy, sustainable development, and an increasing desire of one state to achieve supremacy over the other are challenges afflicting all countries big or small. Each one of them holds a distinctive way of thinking and behaving on these issues in line with its own strategic culture that “helps shape behavior on such issues as the use of force in international politics, sensitivity to external dangers, civil-military relations, and strategic doctrine.”¹

Geopolitical challenges, eternal geography, and a “rhyming history” thus continue to influence the options and preferences of states. Also, they are an important field of reference for determining a country’s profile by virtue of having a direct impact on an interplay of markets, economic drifts, and related domestic trends. In Pakistan, 2019 was a mixed bag of problems and opportunities for a government that recently took office amid a global economy constantly bouncing and tipping onto an uneven track. Although 2019 was not a turning point in the destiny of South Asia region, timely steps in a constructive direction could increase the shared benefits.

State of Play

A country’s [economic] development path determines how it defines its national interests, as well as the general direction of its foreign policy.

Wang Jisi.²

Seemingly typical of the last several decades, Pakistan's geopolitical fortunes witnessed various shades and remained tied to an economy that is sputtering to a start. Being a venerated element of the trinity of geography and politics, economy remains central to myriad challenges that Pakistan faces. The indefatigably optimistic Prime Minister Imran Khan has repeatedly assured that despite the challenges "Pakistan is heading in the right direction." His enthusiasm stems primarily from the unparalleled steps in economy and in addressing the endemic corruption. This optimism is also a product of flux in the geopolitical landscape that presents some opportunities.

PM's primary domestic win lied in gaining support for his vision of development through transparency, accountability, and utilizing existing resources into suitable initiatives. A first-time rendezvous of Pakistani diaspora for an offshore image-building is another achievement. The country's fortunes shall depend on how carefully Pakistanis play their collective hand in the next few years. Approaching the year 2020 with cautious optimism and steadfastly playing the innings of an everlasting geopolitical test-match will be useful, rather than initiating with haste and chances, akin to a T-20 struggle.

The Silver Lining

Five issues underscore the hypothesis that Pakistan is heading in the right direction despite geopolitical challenges. The freedom movement of Kashmiris has sprung to the forefront of global politics. There is an increasing acceptance for Pakistan's principled stance that peaceful negotiations are the only route to peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan is one of the key players in breaking some paths in addressing the turbulent relations between Iran, its Middle Eastern neighbors, and others in the West. Notwithstanding a critical focus on Belt and Road Initiative, its flagship China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is progressing apace. Lastly, the shift in the post Second World War global order and abrogation of its arms control structure carries a few challenges that could be converted into opportunities.

Perpetual Quandary in the East

Towards the eastern border, the age-old conflict with its neighbor continues to be the top foreign policy task for Pakistan. Any action by Pakistan to break the ice – that has now grown into an iceberg of distrust – requires an equally pragmatic response by the Indian side to ensure peace and development in the well-endowed but ailing Southern Asia. Contrary to the

notion, umptieth steps have been stridden by India towards the path of disputes and offenses against Pakistan – 2019 was no exception. The range varied from using the anti-Pakistan card in its domestic election campaign and oftentimes violence of the LOC, that resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties, to staging a melodrama of post-Pulwama launch of an airstrike inside Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in February.³ The statesmanship and restraint of Pakistani government and the precision of the military brought back the situation to the normal. It lasted only for a couple of months, once a calculated risk was taken by the re-elected Bhartiya Janata Party regime on August 5, to set a new normal regarding the Jammu and Kashmir territory that New Delhi illegally occupies since 1947. The abrogation of the special status of occupied J&K in Articles 35A and 370 in the Indian constitution is a bet that retains a short-term value only. The issue has brought to the limelight the seven decades of human rights abuses in the Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJ&K) that have now reached a pinnacle – one of the longest sieges in civilized world's history is underway.

By resuming the nuclear testing in 1998 after a hiatus of 24 years, BJP's Premier Vajpayee gave Pakistan a reason to break its restraint and become an overt nuclear weapon state. Vajpayee had done for Pakistan what the latter could not have done itself. Likewise, Prime Minister Modi has given a new lease of life to the freedom movement in the occupied J&K and steered his own nation towards a journey that has no destination. The ongoing clampdown cannot sustain – it will only implode becoming bloodier. Kashmiris shall neither accept the forced conversion as citizens of India nor allow intended demographic changes to make them a political minority in their own land.

The step has either mistaken Pakistan's pragmatism as its economic inability to fight another war over Kashmir or wants to pull Islamabad into a war of New Delhi's choosing. Having to resort to a bloodier genocide than the one that happened during the 2002 Gujarat riots, the inventor of the Kashmir's latest suppression move is likely to shift the blame on to Pakistan and may even trigger a war fearing to avert failure in occupied Kashmir. Such crisis can escalate to a wider conflict and in dangerous dimension. The world is growingly aware about the nuclear risk that the unsettled issue of IOJ&K poses. The only safe recourse for India is to allow a UN mandated solution in Kashmir and not to disrupt constructive negotiations with Pakistan either bilaterally or through multilateral forums.

Amidst an array of steps fueling conflict, the Indian *Modified* government added another feather to its fascist cap around the end of the year, the Citizenship Amendment Act, being termed as a common purpose enshrined in the Hindutva ideology. The decision has so far invited enormous domestic confrontation and disapproval – whether India can maintain the essence of its professed democratic values anymore.

The Indian design of sidelining Pakistan in regional politics is not a secret any longer. The inflexible stance on evading dialogue with Pakistan for dispute resolution, the habit of running disinformation campaigns and questioning each development that contributes towards Pakistan's progress, and the efforts to reduce SAARC to a mere formality, reflect myopia. Instead of utilizing natural proximities, parallel regional organizations with India at the helm tend to isolate Pakistan. For instance, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand; and South Asia Sub regional Economic Cooperation program (SASEC) includes all SAARC states except Pakistan and focuses on promoting regional linkages and trade with China through Myanmar and also with the global markets.

Besides, the bilateral Composite Dialogue process is dead and the second term of BJP government is likely to continue with its erstwhile policy of discontinuation of knowledge sharing and networking events, expos, exhibitions, visas, and any other beneficial interaction of policymakers, experts, and businesspeople. The pursuit of influence is not a mistaken vision on part of a state, provided its government is willing to undertake the responsibility that is naturally aligned with the ambition.

Recourse in the Northwest

Having been afflicted by a new war for some eighteen years now, Afghanistan remains a flashpoint in a region that was once termed as the melting pot of civilizations. The war has taken many turns and has ultimately developed into the longest war in American history. Amidst reported decision of the POTUS to withdraw 7,000 U.S. service members in 2018, all commanders placed in the country had “admitted that... war there will not end with a military victory for the Pentagon.” General Scott Miller, the commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan and Resolute Support Mission there simply commented that the “fight will go [on] until a political settlement.”⁴ The calculation by far echoed Pakistan’s longstanding stance about

bringing peace back to Afghanistan and stabilizing the region in true sense, i.e., an inclusive peace and reconciliation process, involving all segments of Afghan society, shall work. Between a hasty withdrawal and an unsustainable order over Afghans through the barrel of guns, negotiations between all stakeholders is the only credible option left now.

The end of this year witnessed President Trump's first visit to Afghanistan since taking office and a diverse stretch of diplomatic efforts by his team for reaching an Afghan solution throughout. The efforts by the Afghan-born U.S. Special Reconciliation Representative, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, in keeping peace talks with the Taliban rolling and considering Pakistan as an integral member of the process, appeared promising. Once stalled abruptly in September after nine rounds, the talks restarted in Doha in the wake of the POTUS's Afghanistan visit and around a prisoner swap between Kabul and Washington. The development raised hopes, notwithstanding the absence of clarity on whether they will lead to any peace through a ceasefire and the key disputes get resolved.

A countrywide ceasefire and troops withdrawal will be complementary to a perpetual peace in Afghanistan, but also are the leverages that no party seems to recede from. This initiative and other processes – such as the 3rd round of key trilateral meeting hosted by Pakistan in September and the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process conference in December – must work to the finest level, ultimately leading to a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

Will all the efforts be productive soon? Whether the solution is reconciliation, reintegration, or transition? What are the prospects of an Afghan ownership of Afghanistan's future? And what are the spoilers on the road ahead? The experts continue to grapple with these overarching questions as they seek to weave together pragmatic solutions for a collective good.

Pakistani perspective in this regard requires a continuous overhaul, given the variability of the issue as well as the behavior of the actors involved within and outside the region. It is a shared responsibility of all parties to the conflict in that restive country to engage constructively in dialogue, rather than a military solution. Islamabad continues to play its part – launch of round-the-clock operations at the border post at Torkham and the Afghan Friendship Hospital for providing medical facilities for visiting Afghans, in September this year, is an example of Pakistan's conscious endeavors for promoting intra-regional linkages and peace and calls for replication by other states.

The Southwestern Edge

While Iran stretched its wings under a more active diplomacy, its acrimony with the U.S. soared in 2019, and tensions mounted raising fears of a military confrontation. Possible military dimensions of Tehran's nuclear program had led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran, the P-5 states and Germany, until the U.S. withdrew from the agreement in November 2018.⁵ Several other alarms included drone strikes on Saudi oil facilities in May and on Saudi Aramco installations in September; the incident of Japanese and Norwegian ships and Pentagon's announcement of deployment of 1000 more troops to the M.E. in June; skirmishes at sea such as stopping of Iranian tanker by British Royal Marines in Gibraltar and Iran seizing a British oil tanker in strait of Hormuz in July; and so on and so forth.

Parallel to these political happenings, Iran continued its indigenous development plans such as the induction of a locally built air-defense system into its missile defense network in August, claimed to be better than the Russian S-300 system that Iran had lost to the American sanctions in 2010. Diplomacy with other states also remained intact. Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe visited for mediation and French President Macron extended a surprise invite to Foreign Minister Zarif for dialogues at the sidelines of G7 summit. The change of U.S. National Security Advisor, John Bolton, in September indicated a softening policy posture, confirmed by the ensuing drift from warmongering. Relations with Middle Eastern neighbors, however, remained troubled for several reasons that have been deep-seated into geopolitical expediencies.

Pakistan has been instrumental in bridging the intractable divide between Iran and the powerful Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia, and has maintained warm ties and influence with these states. Cognizant of the importance of a mainstreamed Tehran, PM Khan cautioned at the September UNGA that a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran would be a "tragedy for all." During his two visits in 2019, his efforts for mediation and improved relations were welcomed by Iran. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi expressed on the floor of the National Assembly that his government was trying to "remove misunderstandings" with Iran, and that it was a "delicate balance... and [we] must understand those sensitivities and concerns." While visiting Tehran in 2017, Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa termed Pakistan-Iran border as one of "peace and friendship." His November 2019 visit focused on border security mechanism and regional security

environment. On his invitation, Iranian Chief of General Staff, General Dr. Bagheri, visited Pakistan in 2018 – the first visit in forty years by an officer in this rank.

Throughout the year, a fair degree of mutual visits of the political and military leadership, trade delegations, and the intent to expedite opening of new border crossings, promote economic and cultural-artistic cooperation, and resolve long-standing issues of disturbance, such as border security and monitoring, are a few significant developments towards better relations. Pakistan has pragmatically worked for bridging the gulf between Iran and some GCC countries. Likewise, Islamabad offered to mediate between Washington and Tehran, who snapped direct diplomatic ties in 1979.

Opportunities in the North

Pakistan and China are strategic partners and preservation of cordial relations has always been the cornerstone of their foreign policies. A robust economic alliance is essential for the sustainability of this relationship. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor guarantees such an arrangement.⁶ China's Belt and Road Initiative – comprised of land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and sea-based Maritime Silk Road (MSR) – entered its sixth year in 2019, while keeping a strong focus on China's economic development and infrastructural and trade-based linkages in the region and beyond. China presents BRI as a comprehensive and focused strategy, which is personal to President Xi,⁷ expected to be completed by 2049, the year that marks the 100th anniversary of PRC.

As one of the six corridors of SREB, CPEC is integral for the development of western China and Pakistan. Both countries are equally disposed to yield optimum dividends of growth and prosperity through CPEC. China sees it as “an important loop in the larger chain of BRI” that would also “enable the possibility of a 21st Century MSR.”⁸ The second phase of CPEC envisions development of Pakistan's technical, industrial, and agricultural sectors. The 2018-19 Public Sector Development Program for CPEC included major projects like the New Gwadar Airport, construction and upgradation of highways and expressways, water supply and desalination, smart environmental and sanitation system, technical and vocational institutes, CPEC support units, and feasibility studies for upgradation and rehabilitation of railway lines and links.⁹

The establishment of CPEC Authority shall further formalize and rationalize terms and processes. While the status of CPEC generates optimism and reflects bilateral commitment, the plans and progress need to be evaluated through BRI's macro-prism. China and Pakistan are contributing to the greater region's development and prosperity through diplomatic and economic cooperation.

Shifting Poles of Geopolitics?

Regional relations are being reshaped under the overhang of changing global order, hitherto absent from the international politics. Shift towards multipolarity is a major feature of this change. China's re-emergence to global preeminence and Russia's resurgence are defining the change in post- Second World War global order. The capacity of these two states to dilute the Western primacy over global power structure is a common matter of debate. Preempting this change, the United States pivoted to Asia and besides several other measures, has created an axis with Australia, Japan, and India as a containment strategy against China that is oft referred to as the Quad. With measures such as designating India as the Net Security Provider in the Indian Ocean region, propping-up of New Delhi against Beijing shall increase security dilemma of regional states. Global stability thus hinges heavily on intentions and behaviors of the U.S.- China-Russia troika. They can either cooperate, take a mid-course of competition-cooperation, or play the conflict-ridden game of seeking domination.

Closely coupled is the new age of technological competition amongst the troika, fueling an arms race and placing multilateral arms control on backburner. To maintain mutual balance, the United States and former Soviet Union had carefully built the paradigm of strategic stability between NATO and erstwhile Warsaw Pact, which defined security of their allies. Strategic stability relied on deterrence and arms control. Nuclear and conventional military capabilities deterred both from taking any coercive measures. Alongside deterrence, an arms control regime was built to reduce risk of nuclear war and maintain a military balance. Anti-Ballistic Missile, Strategic Arms Reduction, and Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaties were the hallmark of that arms control structure that is crumbling and has created a domino effect.

Security dilemmas have increased in an environment of seeking security through domination, and building competitive strategic advantage and vertical proliferation. Pakistan faces a challenge in maintaining credible minimum deterrence posture against India. While India has

unfettered access to the Western and Russian technologies, Pakistan faces the challenge of technology denial. This technological discrimination also provides an opportunity to indigenize and build industrial capability.

While building a nuclear triad and maintaining conventional force balance against India, Pakistan must continue making efforts to pursue arms control measures such as building a strategic restraint regime in South Asia. Pending on Indian table since 1998, strategic restraint calls for dispute resolution, missile and nuclear restraint, and conventional military balance. Without such a regime, the risk of war with nuclear dimensions remains high.

A peaceful situation in a region can be created in an equilibrium of power. There also exists a close relationship between diplomacy and development. Therefore, while keeping a pragmatic eye on geopolitics, Pakistan must focus on its economy and governance and maintain a full spectrum deterrence capability. Development indicators will improve with integration of state mechanisms of action and implementation, and adoption of an elevated pace and quality of diplomatic and trade linkages in the region. Pakistan shall rise and it is indeed headed in the right direction. The nation must stay on this course collectively, guided by the characteristic determination of its founding father, Quaid Jinnah, who once said, “my message to you all is of hope, courage and confidence. Let us mobilize all our resources in a systematic and organized way, and tackle the grave issues that confront us, with determination and discipline worthy of a great nation.”

¹ Ken Booth, *The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed*, in C.G. Jacobsen (eds.) *Strategic Power: USA/USSR* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

² Wang Jisi is Dean of School of International Studies at Peking University, China. Wang Jisi, “Will China and the U.S. Go Their Separate Ways or Will They Head in the Same Direction? The Path to Building a New Type of China-U.S. Great Power Relations,” in *New Type of Great Power Relations: Opportunities and Challenges* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2015).

³ Atia Ali Kazmi, “Pulwama Crisis Redux,” *Pakistan Politico*, June 16, 2019. <http://pakistanpolitico.com/pulwama-crisis-redux/>.

⁴ Jared Keller, “Top US Commander In Afghanistan: We Won’t Be Seeing A Military Victory,” *Task Purpose*, December 26, 2018. <https://taskandpurpose.com/austin-scott-miller-afghanistan-victory>.

⁵ Atia Ali Kazmi, “De-escalating U.S.-Iran Standoff,” *Hilal*, August 16, 2019. <https://www.hilal.gov.pk/eng-article/de-escalating-u.s.-iran-standoff/MzUyMA==.html>.

⁶ Atia Ali Kazmi, "The Trajectory of Pakistan-China Economic and Commercial Cooperation and the Economic Corridor, *Journal of The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 34, 35, no. 4 and 1 (Spring 2016): 117-146.

⁷ Christopher K Johnson, "President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road' Initiative: A Practical Assessment of the Chinese Communist Party's Roadmap for China's Global Resurgence," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2016): V.

⁸ Official Message by Mr. He Lifeng, Chairman of National Development & Reform Commission (NDRC), China, <http://cpec.gov.pk/messages/3>.

⁹ Government of Pakistan, *CPEC and Related Projects (2018-2019)*, <http://cpec.gov.pk/brain/public/uploads/psdp-projects/CPEC-2018-19.pdf>.

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