Instability and uncertainties at the local, regional and global level would continue to pose challenges to Pakistan’s diplomacy in the times ahead. The success of diplomacy in protecting and promoting national interests is dependent on accurately reading the trend lines and thereby correct positioning. It is a never-ending task for the Foreign Office that has been made more difficult by a situation of constant flux in the global societal environment.

At home, issues, both old and new, continue to impact the decision making and governance structures. A pervasive sense of paralysis and loss of direction compounded by fragmentation in thought and actions and a visible deterioration in established societal values is an aspect that merits close attention.

The political and governance system are unable to cope with today’s requirements and are under assault from within and several quarters. This together with a sharp dip in economic productivity remains a matter of immense concern. Institutional responses to local societal needs and challenges are often disparate. In the age of social media and instantaneous communication, the weaknesses of the system are amplified many folds and create an impression of incoherence bordering on anarchy, which the result in concern and despondency.

The Foreign Ministry is being impacted by the local environment and is obliged to play a compensatory role to cover the inadequacies all around. The Foreign Service of Pakistan has the requisite capabilities. It consists of talented professionals with high motivation and commitment to serve the nation. But it would be unrealistic to expect the Foreign Office to perform wonders abroad in the absence of a consensual well-defined national agenda at home.

At the regional plane, challenges abound. South Asia remains in the vortex of global power play, which is being accentuated by US rivalry with China. There is a real apprehension that bloc politics may play on regional issues leading to exacerbation of tensions among regional states.

India has opted to join the US camp and is being actively wooed by the US to serve as its security pole in the Indian ocean region against China. US is working to forge a strategic relationship with India that will span many generations. This has bipartisan support within the US. It is prepared to overlook India’s reckless conduct in the region and increasing polarization within Indian society.

US support for India ignores the conduct of the Modi government that is violative of all norms of civility, international norms and principles. The biggest challenge in 2020 for Pakistan will be to manage the fall outs from the US-India nexus. There are indications that the US is inclined to extend its Indo-Pacific strategy beyond India to cover Pakistan. The US critique of the CPEC raises justifiable concerns. It matches squarely with India’s objections to CPEC. In fact, Indian strategists consider CPEC to be a primary threat to India.

Pakistan will have to redouble its efforts to convince the US that there is a wide convergence
of interests between US, China and Pakistan and therefore the need to develop mutually beneficial cooperation between all three. The development and future direction of CPEC must become a product of collaboration for greater regional good in terms of stability, peace and development. Pakistan sees its relations with China and the US as not zero sum. Such mutually beneficial cooperation can be hugely useful in ensuring stability and development in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, unfounded propaganda against CPEC and the politicization of this mega initiative during the past year has caused a setback to national interest. It was a serious lapse to allow such perceptions to persist and to make CPEC controversial. Lack of strategic clarity and proclivity to slow down if not totally upend CPEC development on specious political grounds speaks volumes for the state’s inability to handle strategic development projects correctly. These problems have also been compounded by woes that afflict governance and complexities of rules and procedures.

The relations with the US also hinge on developments relating to Afghanistan. President Trump has been keen to seek an exit for US troops from Afghanistan. There is now a clear realization that the war in Afghanistan is unwinnable. Direct US-Taliban talks almost succeeded in reaching an interim government. Pakistan has been helpful in facilitating the process. But prospects of sustainable agreement that will yield durable peace is questionable, given the magnitude of problems in Afghanistan.

In this respect it is important to give attention to economic development of the country. Without a normal economy, it is hard to visualize peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan can play an important role in collaborative ventures for development in Afghanistan with the support of US, China and other interested states. CPEC can become a conduit for Afghanistan’s economic development. An imaginative policy needs to be crafted by Pakistan to promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation for development with Afghanistan. This should be an urgent priority in 2020.

The foremost threat to Pakistan’s security is posed by India. This threat has become dire with transformation of India as a Hindu state under the BJP/RSS sponsored agenda. The second Modi Administration has thrown all caution to the wind in its reckless pursuit of Hindu Rashtra based on expansionist ideological lines. Modi has succeeded in stirring militant Hindu nationalism and used Pakistan and Muslims as targets for whipping frenzy among the masses.

The most ominous development has been India’s annexation of Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. The people of Jammu and Kashmir in the Indian occupied territory are being subjected to inhuman cruelties, humiliation and are under a brutal military lock down. The Kashmiri alienation against India is complete. The Kashmiri anger and total resentment against India have further strengthened their determination to resist occupation by all means.

Pakistan has been extending moral, political and diplomatic support to the Kashmiri cause. The situation in Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IOJK) will continue to demand close attention of Pakistan in 2020. The immediate priority should be to get international humanitarian assistance to the besieged Kashmiris. The civil society movement in Kashmir also needs to be supported materially.

The Indian violations of the ceasefire on the Line of Control and overall strained relations would
require vigilance and dexterous handling. The opening of the Kartarpur Corridor in 2019, despite high tensions with India, was a significant development. A dedicated reach out to regional political parties in India, which are opposed to the BJP/RSS needs to be considered.

The BJP has passed the Citizenship Amendment Bill and established a National Register of Citizens. These developments have created a political storm within India. Muslims are being discriminated and marginalized. Although these matters are internal to India but will have implications for neighbors including Pakistan. Increasing polarization of Indian society could unfold with disturbing effects on the very fabric of the Indian Union. Pakistan must also remain wary of the expansionist designs of the BJP/RSS.

Iran, a brotherly country has remained under a severe US economic sanctions regime. The US has walked away from the nuclear deal and seems to be pursuing regime change in Iran. Iran- Saudi Arabia relations are tense and the state of tensions in the Gulf continues to pose considerable concern. Pakistan has sought to play a mediatory role between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The border situation with Iran is not entirely satisfactory and requires closer cooperative efforts by both sides. Prospects of mutually beneficial economic, trade and energy relations with Iran have been impeded by the sanction’s regime.

Pakistan would have to pay greater attention to its relations with China. There is an increasing mismatch in bureaucratic capabilities of the two sides. To make optimum use of China’s desire to help Pakistan’s development the red tape will have to be cut and premium placed on delivery of projects and programs. The special relations with China should not be taken as given and require constant reinvigoration.

At the global plane, we need to have a dedicated reach out to Africa and Latin America. The ASEAN states are important and bilateral visits to the region should be planned in 2020. The relations with Europe are also important and requisite attention needs to be given to the EU. Relations with Russia have improved and offer promising opportunities of cooperation in technology, energy and defense.

The multilateral organizations notably the UN system, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as well as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) also require constant attention in these times when multilateral cooperation is being upended by power politics. Pakistan has consistently maintained quality profile in multilateral diplomacy. We need to begin paying attention to economic diplomacy and equip the Foreign Ministry and our Missions abroad to contribute to national economic, trade and technological development.

The year 2020 and the ensuing decade will bring new challenges to Pakistan’s diplomatic ability and national capacities. Pakistan has all the requisite resources to meet these challenges and contribute meaningfully to promotion of world peace and prosperity. By renewing our faith in the purposes and principles of the United Nations and a resolute commitment to high ideals and values, Pakistan along with like minded states can make a difference to humanity’s future.

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