

Strategic shift?

MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

With the geopolitical landscape of our region changing fast, many optimists say they are able to see a shift in Pakistan's geostrategic approach. Some believe this shift is largely oriented towards geo-economics, and if established, it would be a major doctrinal shift. But so far, state institutions have not hinted at that in their statements. Or perhaps, this is merely an issue of a different reading of their actions.

Pakistan's faltering economic indicators do not lend weight to such notions that the state is making some expedient efforts to strengthen its geostrategic or geo-economic approach. For one, even the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was until recently projected as a game-changer for the country's weak economy, has become a victim of the short-sightedness of state institutions. However, those seeing a shift in Pakistan's geostrategic approach do not use economy-related arguments only; they also highlight the changing geopolitical behaviour of the state, specifically towards Afghanistan.

Pakistan's role in the Afghan peace process is vital. It was widely appreciated as being instrumental in sealing the US-Afghan Taliban deal of Feb 29. But this does not reflect any change in Pakistan's strategic approach. Instead, it supports its long-standing position; it has long been advocating that a negotiated settlement between the Taliban and other Afghan stakeholders is a viable solution for Afghanistan.

Pakistan has facilitated talks between the US and the Taliban because

of several reasons. First, the US has acknowledged Pakistan's stance of negotiated settlement. Secondly, the Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC were also factors because China does not want a major, protracted conflict near a key belt of its ambitious connectivity initiative. Similarly, Pakistan's internal security concerns as well as its urge to correct its global image have proved to be critical reasons.

It requires an in-depth inquiry to examine how effectively Pakistan used these factors and to what extent they have influenced the country. However, Pakistan's strategic doctrine appears to have remained unchanged in the process mainly because the geopolitical and strategic challenges facing the country have still not been resolved. Nevertheless, these challenges have become more complicated after India revoked the special status of India-held Kashmir last year on Aug 5, which was granted under Article 370 of the Indian constitution.

Pakistan tried hard to raise the issue before the international community and on the relevant platforms — especially focusing on human rights abuses in held Kashmir. These efforts yielded results, and international media and rights groups took the atrocities in Kashmir seriously. However, Pakistan has not cultivated enough political and diplomatic support to force India to review its brutal practices in Kashmir. China supported Pakistan's stance at the UN Security Council but that was not enough to pressurise India. However, a real setback was experienced when the Muslim bloc led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE obstructed all Pakistani efforts to use the Organisa-

tion of the Islamic Conference platform for Kashmir. It showed that the religious bond is relevant in international relations only when coupled with a strong economy. South Asia is the region Pakistan considers the least essential, or perhaps it does not fit in well with the state's ideological framework. Pakistan's close bilateral relations with South Asian nations would have generated political capital to pursue its geo-economic and political interests in the region. Despite introducing structural and stabilisation reforms, Pakistan is desperately looking for economic revival. The power elites' continuing practices reflect that they are mainly capitalising on the strategic importance of the country, which they believe can perform miracles time and again by diverting international investment and aid towards Pakistan. The nuclear arsenal and strong military forces have contributed to this confidence. Afghanistan is central to this approach, from where the country can extract global support. Afghanistan is important for Pakistan not only in the context of the Indian presence in its backyard but also for strategic reasons, and the US has exploited it very well.

Pakistan's cooperation in the Afghan peace process facilitated the improvement of its global image, reduced the trust deficit in its relations with the US, and helped it get loans from international financial institutions. But Pakistan's cooperation on Afghanistan has not generated support for its stance on Kashmir. Second, in its efforts to balance its relationship with the US and China, Pakistan has significantly lost focus on CPEC, which was a rare opportunity for the revival and strength-

ening of its economy. However, Pakistan has not used the Afghanistan factor effectively. Some say the fear of being blacklisted by the FATF, the international financial watchdog, has forced it to extend more support to the US in Afghanistan. The FATF has proved a lethal factor, neutralising Pakistan's efforts to take advantage of its cooperation in Afghanistan.

Maintaining an equilibrium in its relationship with China and the US is another challenge for Pakistan. The country has a history of ups and downs in its relationship with the US, but it cannot afford a standstill with China, as the relationship has an altogether different nature in the geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic contexts. The impression, which has developed during the last two years, that Pakistan is eager to restore its relationship with Washington has created resentment in Beijing. The slowdown of CPEC has strengthened suspicions.

In a nutshell, Pakistan is struggling to adjust its geopolitical priorities, and nothing substantive has changed in its geostrategic doctrine. A geostrategic shift should have manifested itself in better trade and political relations with neighbours and aggressive pursuit of implementation of transnational energy and infrastructure megaprojects, which have already been agreed upon and just need a little push. CPEC and its connectivity with Afghanistan, as well as structural economic reforms would have substantiated such a shift. All these efforts need out-of-the-box thinking and courageous leadership. Fixing the economy through a geostrategic lens cannot be called a doctrinal shift.

The Business

Chief Editor

Irfan Athar Qazi

E-mail: editorthebusiness@yahoo.com

thebusinesslhr@gmail.com

Tijarat House, 14-Davis Road, Lahore
0423-6312280, 6312480, 6312429, 6312462
Cell # 0321-4598258

1st Floor Ahmed Plaza near Zong Office
Susan Road, Faisalabad, Ph: 041-8555582

ISLAMABAD / RAWALPINDI

N-125 Circular Road, Ph: 051-5551654,
5532761, Cell # 0300-8567331

KARACHI

3rd Floor Kehkashan Mall 172-I Block II PECHS
Opp Rehmania Masjid Main Tariq Road
Ph: 021-34524550, Cell # 0300-8251534

Fair trial

In pursuing alleged corruption cases against Leader of the Opposition and PML-N President Shahbaz Sharif, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has made itself look more and more awkward. Summoned to appear for an alleged money laundering and income-beyond-means case investigation, he had informed the anti-graft watchdog through a letter that he could not appear before a Combined Investigation Team because of precautions he needed to take due to Covid-19 pandemic, with the request that he be questioned via a video link. In view of the fact that he is a cancer survivor, it was a perfectly legitimate request. Yet it was rejected, and his arrest warrants issued with the permission of NAB Chairman, former Justice Javed Iqbal. A NAB team accompanied by a heavy police contingent raided three different properties in Lahore to arrest him, albeit without success. What followed was no less embarrassing for it.

The next day, surrounded by a large crowd of his party activists and leaders - in utter disregard of the social distancing rule, - Sharif appeared before a Lahore High Court bench headed by Justice Mohammad Tariq Abbasi to seek pre-arrest bail. The bench allowed him bail restraining NAB from arresting him till June 17. The Bureau was also ordered to make a detailed submission on the issue, but not without raising a very pertinent question as to why the arrest was delayed till June 2 whereas the arrest warrants were issued on May 28. The court offered an answer in observing "it seems that the NAB does not want to arrest the petitioner." So why stage the drama of arrest and investigations, especially when the petitioner has been cooperating all along? The purpose could only be to harass him and damage his reputation in the public eye. In fact, the pre-arrest bail has not stopped the Bureau from pursuing the case before June 17. Immediately after his bail, fresh summons were issued for him to appear on June 9 for questioning in the same case. Some critics also point out that back in October 2018, Sharif had appeared before NAB investigators in the Saaf Paani Company case but was arrested in the Punjab Ashiana Housing Scheme case and kept in custody for 63 days and then again in the Ramzan Sugar Mills case, yet it failed to establish any charge and file a reference against him. Such highhandedness not only undermines much-needed accountability, but also its own image as independent anti-corruption watchdog. Its actions suggest the real intent may be to malign certain opposition politicians rather than carrying out its responsibilities in an upright fashion. Minister for Railways, Sheikh Rashid Ahmed predicted a few days ago that a 'mopping up' would start after Eid. Whatever the reasons to go after the Leader of Opposition, NAB needs to rid itself of an increasing public perception that it serves as a hand-maiden to every government.



Online censorship

FARIEHA AZIZ

On June 4, 2020, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) held a consultation on the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020. While civil society groups boycotted it, standing by their position to first withdraw and de-notify the Rules, a separate session was held with journalists. Dawn's June 7 report detailing the discussion illustrates how there isn't even a base understanding of the scope of Section 37 and Rules under it.

According to the report, the discussion centred "on regulation of content related to blasphemy, child pornography, extremism, hate speech, character assassination and fake news — areas defined as 'priority' by the consultation committee". Section 37 lists the following content categories: "interest of the glory of Islam, or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court". These are derived from Article 19 of the Constitution since Section 37 is a direct copy-paste of it with the exception that "friendly relations with foreign states" was omitted from the final version of Section 37.

Unlike Article 19-A, under which right to information laws have been enacted by the federal and provincial legislatures, which in varying degrees specify information which may or may not be obtained, outline a process through which applications for information may be made and subject organisations to penalties for delaying or denying information, Article 19 remains unlegislated. What should be parliamentary and judicial functions have been outsourced to a telecom regulator under Section 37, to act as the custodian of speech and information in an overbroad, arbitrary and arguably unconstitutional manner. It is from here that the repeal position is derived. The ad-hoc manner in which powers have been exercised under Section 37, to stifle dissent and deny due process to those against whom action has been taken — evidence of which there is plenty — substantiate that it serves no purpose other than being a censorship-enabling provision for the state.

Discourse erroneously rests on the presumption that such powers are necessary to shield citizens against harm. Common sense and evidence suggest otherwise. There are four offences under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Peca) Act, 2016, for which aggrieved parties can apply to the PTA: Sections 20 (offences against dignity of a natural person), 21 (offences against modesty of a natural person or minor), 22 (child pornography) and 24 (cyberstalking). Subsections allow aggrieved parties to apply to the PTA for the "removal, destruc-



tion" or "blocking" of such information." While problematic, what is also criminalised under Peca is the glorification of an offence (Section 9), cyberterrorism (Section 10) and hate speech (Section 11), which criminalises advancing "interfaith, sectarian or racial hatred".

These remain even if Section 37 is repealed. Digital rights groups frequently escalate requests by aggrieved parties with platforms pertaining to harassment and breach of privacy that fall within the purview of their guidelines and rules. It is this process through which they are resolved, not government efforts. Yes, the mechanisms are far from perfect, requiring deliberation. How citizens are to be protected against breach of privacy, harassment and incitement under the laws and what more needs to be done is unconnected to the Rules and Section 37. Dealing with disinformation and 'fake news' by applying a non-Trumpian approach also requires discussion. But this must be done separately from the Rules. The government must stop obfuscating and conflating unconnected issues to seriously address citizen concerns by learning rather than dictating what they know little of.

Section 37 only exists as a tool to maintain the state's hegemony over speech and information. Since this is impossible without governing content that is available on foreign platforms also used by Pakistani citizens and journalists to express and challenge the state's view, the attempt is to establish the state's writ over foreign intermediaries.

The problem arises because only some content requests are met whereas the desire is for every content restriction and user data request to be complied with and not just by some, but all platforms. Hence the direction to companies to establish local offices so laws such as Peca become binding and direct control can be exercised over them with the ability to coerce and apply legal and extralegal pressure.

To this effect, the government and all those invested in this debate should read the Asia Internet Coalition's comments on the Rules, submitted to the PTA on June 5.

The way forward is an informed discussion, not insistence to legitimise such consultations or accede to demands for a blueprint on censorship.

Bloodbath

DR FARRUKH SALEEM

There's a bloodbath going on in our so-called Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs). PSEs are taking on additional debt of around Rs700 billion a year. The government doles out around Rs900 billion a year in so-called 'grants'. Plus, the government hands out around Rs200 billion a year in so-called 'subsidies'. That's an annual burden of nearly Rs1,800 billion.

The 200 or so PSEs are an annual burden of nearly Rs1,800 billion. Now compare that to our annual defence allocation of Rs1,300 billion, our public spending on education of Rs1,200 billion or our spending on health of Rs1,000 billion. Our so-called 'family jewels' end up losing more money every year than what we spend on defence or on education or on health.

In 2018, around the time the PTI took over government, PSE debt stood at Rs1,393 billion. In just one



year, PSEs took on an additional debt of Rs632 billion. Lo and behold, by June 2019, within one year of the PTI's taking over, PSE debt had grown to a colossal Rs2,025 billion.

Then there are the so-called 'grants'. Can anyone please explain to me the almost doubling of grants from Rs478 billion in 2018-19 to Rs831 billion in 2019-20 and to Rs904 in 2020-21? Why did the so-

called 'special grants' go up from Rs28 billion in 2018-19 to Rs86 billion in 2019-20? Why did the government dole out 'miscellaneous grants' of Rs84 billion and to whom? I do admit here that the Rs180 billion allocated to the Benazir Income Support Program is public money well spent.

Then there are 'subsidies', a whole lot of 'subsidies' — subsidies to the tune of Rs209 billion a year. Just who is getting all these 'subsidies'? What is this 'Inter-Disco Tariff Differential' of Rs110 billion? Isn't it theft, leakages and mis-governance? We have the most expensive electricity on the face of the planet then why is Wapda being given an annual 'subsidy' of Rs124 billion? Wasn't the KESC privatized in 2005? Before privatization, annual subsidy used to be around Rs9 billion a year. In 2019-20, the government paid out Rs59 billion and Rs25 billion 2020-21. Since privatization, the government has given Rs400 billion to KESC in the form of 'subsidies'. Didn't the gov-

ernment privatize KESC in order to relieve the burden on the public exchequer?

The last time I checked there were 425,000 employees and 1,377 executive directors, non-executive directors and independent directors. How about paying an average of Rs30,000 a month to every employee for a total of Rs150 billion a year and telling them all to just sit at home (as opposed to incurring a Rs1,800 billion loss a year)?

In Singapore, Temasek Holdings runs companies owned by the government of Singapore (under a set of rules). Annual profits at Temasek stand at a colossal \$21 billion. We also have the Public Sector Companies (Corporate Governance) Rules, 2013 but neither the PML-N nor the PTI wants to run the PSEs under those rules.

See how rich Pakistan really is. See how we just throw away Rs1,800 billion a year — and then cry out loud that Pakistanis do not pay taxes. Who will stop this bloodbath?

Letters to the Editor

Inaccessible

As a responsible citizen of Pakistan, I would like to draw the attention of the authorities and the common people to our students. The future of this nation belongs to the students of Pakistan. As a student, I observed and experienced that the government, students, and their parents are all in trouble these days. The pandemic has battered the economy, local industries, and education. I respect the step taken by the HEC (Higher Education Commission) to facilitate online education. Their efforts are much appreciated, with that our teachers, faculty and management are working tirelessly to provide us a quality education at our homes. Many students have left their homes because of these issues and have started living in hostels located in major cities like Islamabad, Lahore, Peshawar, and Karachi. I would like to request the

HEC to decrease our next semester fee by some percentage as we are not using respective services like electricity and even internet labs are not in use. Hopefully, my request will be forwarded via this platform and the authorities will take notice.

Saira Khan
ISLAMABAD

Biodiversity

World Environment Day is observed every year on June 5, to spread global awareness of environmental issues. The day has been celebrated every year since 1974 and it has become a dynamic platform for promoting progress on the environmental dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals. The theme for this year's World Environment Day is biodiversity — a call for action to synergize global efforts to combat the species loss and degradation of the natural

world. It merits a mention that healthy ecosystems along with rich biodiversity are fundamental to human existence as they sustain the environment in countless ways including: cleaning up air, purifying water, ensuring the availability of nutritious foods and reducing the occurrence of disasters. However, we are not taking care of nature the way we needed to do and therefore, the world is witnessing unparalleled bushfires, locust invasions, and the death of coral reefs — an underwater ecosystem. In view of the above, the whole nation has a role to play in preventing biodiversity loss and preserving nature for our future, if we must change the course of destruction. Environmental experts have urged the federal government to, in coordination with the provinces, implement environmental awareness, conservation and protection strategies.

Khan Faraz
PESHAWAR