

Imran Khan faces tough pitch on India-Pakistan ties

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IN his very first media interaction after the election in Pakistan, flamboyant former cricketer Imran Khan, who appears well-positioned to become the country's newest prime minister, has outlined his foreign policy template prioritising the two key neighbours: China and India. Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's ascent to power is a departure from the traditional bipartisan narrative of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (N), and therefore, his remarks about the foreign policy would naturally be keenly analysed in Beijing and New Delhi.

With regards to India, Khan's statement has set out three parameters for pulling New Delhi-Islamabad ties from the nadir of the last two years since the terror attacks on an Indian air base in Punjab and an army camp in Jammu and Kashmir in 2016. The Uri attack was the deadliest on an Indian military set-up in two decades. The two incidents had left 26 Indian defence personnel dead and led to the cancellation of Foreign Secretary-level talks between the two countries as well as India's boycott of the SAARC Summit in Islamabad.

The first parameter set by Khan is that the initiative for normalisation of bilateral relations should come from India; second, Kashmir is the core issue; and third, the blame-game between the two countries must end. India is yet to officially react to his articulation. But the assessment in the Indian



Imran Khan gestures as he delivers a speech during a political campaign rally in Islamabad.

PHOTO: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

establishment is that Khan has stuck to the well-known position of both the civilian and military set-ups in Pakistan. That is quite expected in New Delhi where the general perception is that Khan has the tacit backing of the army. So large was the shadow of the army over the election in Pakistan that it was often wondered on both sides of the border whether it was the general election or the (military) "General's election".

The manifesto of Khan's party talked about the Kashmir issue. In his election speeches, he accused former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of compromising with India to protect his personal financial gains. He also

charged Sharif with trying to ensure India continues with its "thanedaari" (policing) in South Asia. Barring these, Khan had refrained from largescale India-bashing in the entire poll campaign.

However, India has reasons to be cautious in being enthusiastic about Khan and the new political landscape painted by the parliamentary elections in Pakistan. The main reasons for this are: 1) Khan is a new political product as far as its dealing with India is concerned; 2) his outreach to religious radicals; and 3) the army will never allow any civilian government in Islamabad to cross certain red lines drawn by the military headquarters in

Rawalpindi. Most Pakistan-watchers in India reckon that Imran Khan will not muster the courage to go against the army with regard to the fundamental moorings of Pakistan's foreign and security policies. That is something no civilian government in Pakistan has ever done. If Khan has to lead a coalition, he will also come under pressure from religious groups like Majlis-e-Amal to toe a hawkish line on issues related to India.

Besides, Khan has over the years tried to cosy up to the military and the religious radicals by endorsing their views on certain issues in order to consolidate his political standing against PPP and PML(N). In fact, if one looks at Pakistan's history from the reign of Benazir Bhutto in 1988 down to Nawaz Sharif in 1999 and this year, one finds that the army has always put them down if they attempted to deviate from the "lakshmanrekha" set by the men in uniform when it comes to dealing with India. A classic case was what happened in 1999. The then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee undertook a historic bus journey to Lahore to promote friendship with Pakistan in February that year, and the Pakistan army responded to that peace initiative by pushing in intruders in Kargil in Jammu and Kashmir soon thereafter. Nawaz Sharif had to pay heavily eight months later, in October 1999, by being toppled as PM in a coup by army chief Pervez Musharraf. Interestingly, Imran Khan's remarks

about ties with India came on a day when Indians were celebrating the "Vijay Divas", which marks the success of Indian troops in recapturing the Himalayan heights occupied by Pakistani forces.

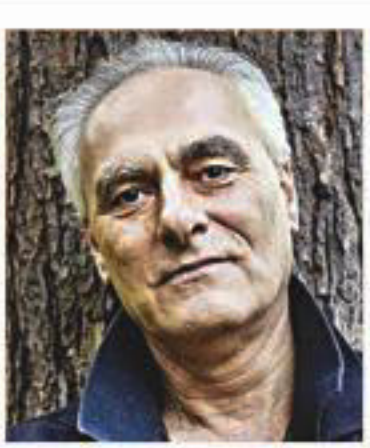
For its part, India is likely to reiterate its own parameters for any future peace initiative with Pakistan, the first and foremost being an end to sponsoring of cross-border terrorism by Pakistan. India has made it quite clear that talks and terror cannot go on at the same time. Besides, India-Pakistan relation is highly susceptible to terror attacks. Right from 1999 down to 2016, each time there was a major terror strike in India, fledgling efforts for normalisation had gone haywire.

Secondly, and this is perhaps the most important question now: will the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have the appetite for a fresh peace initiative with Pakistan when fresh parliamentary elections in India are just months away? Such a venture is politically risky as any failure may prove electorally costly for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Pakistan needs to go for a radical change in its policy if it wants a meaningful turnaround in relations with India. But as of date, that will not happen. Where, then, are India-Pakistan ties headed to is anybody's guess.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent to The Daily Star.

Will the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have the appetite for a fresh peace initiative with Pakistan when fresh parliamentary elections in India are just months away?

Lack of global leadership spurs instability in the Middle East



JAMES M DORSEY

many in the Middle East have long said privately: the UAE's recently-found assertiveness and determination to punch above its weight stems from its inability to rely on traditional allies like the United States.

What is true for the UAE is equally true for Saudi Arabia and Israel. It also shapes responses of those on the US's list of bad guys, including Iran, the Palestinians, and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Perceptions of US unreliability were initially sparked by former US president Barack Obama's Middle East policies, including his declared pivot to Asia, support of the 2011 Arab popular revolts, criticism of Israel, and willingness to engage with Iran.

President Donald J Trump has proven to be more partisan than Obama in his backing of the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel and his confrontational approach of Iran. Yet, his mercurial unpredictability has made him no less unreliable in the perception of US allies even if he appears to have granted Middle Eastern partners near carte-blanc.

"We are ready to take up more of the burden of security in our own neighbourhood. We know that we can no longer rely on the United States, or the United Kingdom, to lead such military operations," Gargash said in a speech in London.

Trump's partisan approach as well as his refusal to reign in US allies has led to

potential escalation of multiple conflicts, including the war in Yemen, mounting tension in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, a race for control of ports and military facilities in the Horn of Africa, Israeli challenging of Iran's presence in Syria, and confrontation with Iran.

To be sure, the UAE, driven by a quest to control ports in the Horn of Africa and create a string of military bases, together with Saudi Arabia, played a key role in reconciling Ethiopia and Eritrea after more than two decades of cold war.

More often however, US allies appear to be increasingly locked into pathways that threaten mounting violence, if not outright military confrontation. Bad guys help fuel escalation.

The escalatory policies of US allies as well as their opponents are frequently designed to either suck the United States and/or the international community into stepped-up support, including military intervention, or favourable mediation as a means of achieving their goals through negotiation.

Arguably, and perhaps in a twist of irony, escalatory policies often constitute a conscious or unconscious clamour for US leadership in the absence of other powers such as China, Russia and Europe, able or willing to shoulder responsibility.

This week's escalation of the Yemen war that threatens the free flow of oil with Saudi Arabia halting oil shipments through the Bab el Mandeb strait and an unverified claim by Houthi rebels to have targeted Abu Dhabi's international airport constitutes the latest fallout of US failure.

Analysts see the halt in oil shipments as an effort to get major military powers, including the United States, Europe, and Muslim allies like Pakistan and Egypt who have shied away from sending troops to Yemen, to intervene to defeat the Houthis.

Many of those powers depend on oil shipments through Bab el Mandeb. The bid



A satellite view of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which Saudi Arabia suspended its oil exports.

PHOTO: USGS/NASA LANDSAT/ORBITAL HORIZON

to suck them into the Yemen war is an effort to secure a victory that neither Saudi Arabia or the UAE have been able to achieve in more than three years of fighting that has devastated Yemen.

By the same token, Houthi rebels have sought to gain leverage in stalled United Nations peace efforts by targeting Saudi cities with ballistic missiles and making claims of attacks like on the Abu Dhabi airport that they have so far failed to back up with evidence.

"The real impact (of the halt) would be felt if other countries followed suit and halted shipments," said Wael Mahdi, an energy reporter and columnist for Saudi newspaper Arab News, referring to Kuwait, Iraq and the UAE that also ship through Bab el Mandeb.

Mahdi argued that without a total halt of the flow of oil through Bab el Mandeb "things appear under control for the (oil)

market," but, he warned, "how can the world's oil community be sure that the waterway is safe?"

In what amounted to a call for foreign intervention, Mahdi went on to caution that "countries might react too late. Will the world's powers wait longer ... before they ensure the safety of this vital waterway?"

Badr al-Khashti, chairman of Kuwait Oil Tanker Company (KOTC) disclosed that Kuwait was studying whether to halt oil exports through the strait.

Al-Khashti's statement was notable given that Kuwait has sought to steer a middle ground in Saudi Arabia and the UAE's disputes with Iran and Qatar. Similarly, Iraq, despite warming relations with Saudi Arabia, may not want to irritate Iran, with whom it maintains close ties.

External powers responded cautiously to the Saudi halt of oil shipments. US and EU

spokespeople said they were aware of the Saudi move.

Captain Bill Urban, a spokesman for US Central Command said: "We remain vigilant and ready to work with our partners to preserve the free flow of commerce throughout the region." An EU spokesman noted that attacks on vessels in the strait were "a threat to international trade movements and heighten regional tensions."

US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as well as unqualified support for Israel's hard-handed efforts aided by Egypt and the Palestine Authority to squeeze Hamas and suppress sustained protests along the Gaza-Israel border have emboldened Israeli hardliners, prompted Palestinians to refuse US mediation and, together with Hamas moves to capitalise on the mounting tension, threaten to spark renewed military confrontation that neither side wants.

The United States and Iran are locked into an escalating war of words threatening further interruptions of the flow of oil as well as doom and gloom against a backdrop of the imposition of harsh US sanctions and the US and Saudi Arabia toying with attempting to spur ethnic unrest in Iran in an effort to topple the regime in Tehran.

As political scientist Ian Bremmer said: "The lack of clear, uncontested international leadership is everywhere we look these days. Yet nowhere is the destabilising impact of this trend more obvious, and pressing, than in the Middle East... The result... will be more uncertainty, more assertive behaviour, more lines crossed and rising fears that no one has the power to contain the risk of new forms of Middle East conflict."

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ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

Banisadr (Left) inaugurated as first President of Iran in 1980.

19 JULY, 1981

IMPEACHED IRANIAN PRESIDENT BANISADR FLED TO PARIS

Abolhassan Banisadr, the first post-revolution president of Iran, fled to Paris, France after having been impeached by the country's parliament as a result of a power struggle between him and the clerics in power.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Painter Picasso
6 Collectors of DNA samples
11 Leering sort
12 West Point student
13 Slopes rider
15 Neptune's realm
16 Tavern
17 Quarterback Manning
18 Fancy homes
20 Party staple
21 -- de deux
22 Sandy hill
23 Director DeMille
26 Stood stunned
27 "Once -- a time..."
28 Neither follower
29 Drill part

DOWN
1 Sheriff's group
2 Anne Bronte's "Grey"
3 Make swollen
4 Actor Ayres
5 Like planetary paths
6 Looks over
7 Simple card game
8 Made sense

30 Favouring neither side
34 Rink surface
35 Olive of cartoons
36 Writer Tan
37 Waves rider
40 Court event
41 Glisten
42 Run-down
43 Thugs

9 Straight path
10 Like zebras
14 Wallet bills
19 Neat as --
22 Move quickly
23 Picasso and Braque
24 Food lover
25 Exclusive group
26 Meaty stew
28 "So Sick" singer
30 With dignity
31 CBer's need
32 Improve, in a way
33 Old harps
38 Craze
39 Letter after pi

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M A L T S U S E R
A M O R E P I N E S
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R O P E S T A R K

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