



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

Pakistan National Security Policy: Objectives vs Reality

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President Xi Jinping meeting Pakistani PM Imran Khan in Beijing on February 6, 2022.

Source: MOFA PRC

Adviser to the Prime Minister Imran Khan on Commerce, Textile, Industry and Production, and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood has said trade with India is the need of the hour, February 21, 2022. Source: NowPakistan

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Pakistan National Security Policy: Objectives vs Reality

by

Arun Sahgal and Shreyas Deshmukh

Introduction

On December 27, 2021, Pakistan's National Security Committee (NSC) unveiled the public version of its first-ever National Security Policy (NSP).¹ Prime Minister Imran Khan launched the document on January 14, 2022.² The stated purpose of the NSP is to signal to the international community Pakistan's change from an overly military-oriented security policy state to one that seeks geo-economic consolidation, while maintaining its security posture to meet security challenges.

As with most such documents, the public version does not provide specific details of the country's strategic priorities and implementation framework. The document is nonetheless useful as it outlines various components of national security and discusses in very broad terms the opportunities and challenges from which strategic options and policies can be derived. Pakistan's NSP is a short-term document that covers a five year period, from 2022 to 2026, and is amenable to amendments in tune with any significant geo-political and geo-economic changes with impact Pakistan's security environment.

We discern five factors of Pakistan's obtaining socio-economic and security environment which have led the politico-military establishment to enunciate the NSP. These are:

- Weakening social cohesion.
- Increasingly unmanageable economic situation.
- The China factor, particularly Pakistan being increasingly perceived as a client state.
- Diminishing political and economic support from traditional patrons among Gulf states, owing to changes in their own geo-political and economic priorities.
- Long-standing hostility within the immediate neighbourhood, particularly with India, Iran, and Afghanistan, severely impairing Pakistan's socio-economic stability.

Against this background, we discuss the attempted course correction in the NSP and its possible impact.

Premise

Pakistan's NSP is the product of seven years of detailed consultations among the different branches of the state establishment and stakeholders.³ This essentially means that the initiative for drafting the NSP began when Nawaz Sharif was the Prime Minister in 2014. It is important, therefore, to also take cognisance of the then obtaining environment. This was a period when violence by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was at its peak⁴ and the first transition⁵ of government in Afghanistan from Hamid Karzai to Ashraf Ghani was taking place. Importantly, the NSP has been released at a time when the Taliban, with Pakistan's overt support,⁶ have won a major victory over US-led foreign forces in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, violence⁷ by the TTP from across the border continues unabated and the political scenario remains fluid, with the Imran Khan government politically and economically on life support. Even its chief sponsor, the Military, is in two minds, as overtures towards Imran Khan's opponents indicate.



Supporters of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan party shout slogans as they block a street during a protest on April 19, 2021. Source: Dawn

Meanwhile, the country is in a deep economic crisis marked by galloping inflation, high energy prices, mounting external debt, and increasing imports which are constantly depleting foreign currency reserves.⁸ Pressure is mounting from the IMF⁹ on economic reforms, and from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to control terror financing¹⁰ by acting against terror groups operating in the country. This scenario is getting exacerbated as ethno-

religious intolerance continues to rise, with the Barelvi and Deobandi groups contesting against each other to dominate ethnic and religious politics¹¹. The lynching of a Sri Lankan engineer,¹² increasing blasphemy-related killings,¹³ and the government's surrender to the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan's (TLP) coercive "dharna" (sit-in protest) politics,¹⁴ show that the state is losing its writ. Moreover, victory in Afghanistan is becoming a millstone with the rise in TTP-related violence, failure of ceasefires,¹⁵ and differences over the boundary with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan¹⁶.

These objective realities of the Pakistani state need to be considered while analysing the recently released NSP. It is apparent that Pakistan is using the NSP to project a more moderate national profile to assure the world that the country remains politically stable as it tries to change the course of its security orientation from proxy wars, support for non-state actors, and military actions, to a more inward-looking policy aimed at economic and social correction and consolidation, which will in turn benefit the wider region as well.

The broad thematic outlook outlined above can be discerned from the NSP's policy focus on issues of social development, human welfare and economic security by "expanding national resource and a redistributive model that can transfer the benefits of greater availability of resources" to the people. Further, the NSP states that the "country wants to move away from the traditional guns versus butter debate". And yet, surprisingly, this line of argument ends with an emphasis that "adequate butter will get more guns."

Driving Forces and Conflicting Objectives

The Social Order

The motivating theme of the NSP as per Prime Minister Imran Khan has been to ensure "Human Security" for the Pakistani people, mutual coexistence in the society of Pakistan's provinces, and building the Pakistani State on the model of 'Riasat-e-Medina'.¹⁷ Interestingly, a country that has been in search of a national identity since its very inception has finally come to a juncture wherein its leader has articulated his country's vision in just one phrase, based on a vague utopian vision. That said, the NSP has been welcomed in most quarters of the Pakistani State, as it provides some policy direction for a country that is rapidly drifting towards anarchy and socio-economic collapse owing to a weak national character and a lack of internal socio-political cohesion, which has resulted in extreme social deprivation and inequality for nearly 220 million citizens.

The NSP also attempts to build an argument explaining Pakistan's identity in terms of ethnoreligious 'unity in diversity.' However, fails to recognise the various acts of the State that have suppressed diverse ethnolinguistic nationalist sentiments in an attempt to dilute these into an Islamic identity. It blames external factors for exploiting weak national cohesion, while neglecting the fact that its own constitution does not provide equal rights to citizens such as Ahmadis¹⁸ and Pashtuns¹⁹ from Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The NSP suggests a four-pronged engagement strategy with these elements, such as "separating reconcilable from irreconcilable; cutting off recruitment; constricting financial resources; and addressing governance issues".

It is well known that reforms in the education system can help build social cohesion. It is in this context that the NSP talks about radical changes in the education sector, aligning itself with "technological adaptation and innovation" to remain competitive in the global market. Reality is that this is hardly borne out by the policies introduced by the Pakistani government, such as 'single curriculum' for primary schools, which has been criticised by senior Pakistani educationists²⁰ who have blamed that this policy will further radicalise the youth. Additionally, thousands of Madrassas have refused to follow government guidelines,²¹ including of registering themselves with the authorities. In November 2021, the Pakistani government passed an ordinance to establish the 'Rehmatul-lil-Alameen Authority'²² to monitor the curriculum and watch out for any "blasphemous" content being shared in the media, in school syllabi, and on social media platforms²³. This might further empower the clerics, as Pak governments continue to play faith-based politics. These measures contradict NSP objectives.

There has been a long-standing debate in Pakistan over the preservation of its Islamic character along with a diverse civilizational heritage. As far as this dichotomy dominates debate, persecution of the population will continue and national cohesion will remain a chimera, lofty ideals of the NSP notwithstanding.

Changes in Priorities: Geo-economics will lead to Geo-politics

The core team that drafted the NSP was led by National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf who comes from an academic background, a rarity in a Pakistan security establishment long dominated by military-bureaucratic elites. In his message, Dr. Yusuf points out that priority should be given to the revival of the economy by current and future governments and that there is a need to fill the gap between national ambitions and reality. Despite the centrality of economic reforms that is highlighted in the vision statement, the policy paper throughout

emphasises "that geo-economic vision supplements the focus on geo-strategy". The implication is clear: there is little change in Pakistan's geo-political ambitions, but a change in priorities of stabilising the national economy is being sought to deal with a rapidly deteriorating fiscal situation without in any manner compromising Pakistan's strategic and security objectives.

The central discourse of the NSP remains the country's geographical location, "at the cross-roads of historic confluence and regional flashpoints which provides it unique opportunities amidst global competition of power". This suggests that Pakistan will continue its cynically opportunistic policies by exploiting regional fault lines and associated great power politics.



President Xi Jinping meeting Pakistani PM Imran Khan in Beijing on February 6, 2022.

Source: MOFA PRC

To overcome decades of economic crisis, the NSP stresses microeconomic stability, suggesting this can be achieved by implementing the second phase of CPEC, which was recently inaugurated during PM Imran Khan's visit to Beijing.²⁴ This involves a "revolution" in agriculture and developing more special economic zones across the country, focusing on improving North and Westward connectivity, while blaming India for holding Pakistan hostage for

its Eastward connectivity projects. Given dwindling trade and growing costs of imports, there is an opportunistic debate within Pakistan's policy circles on delinking its economic relations with India from the other strategic issues.²⁵ Pakistan is economically isolated within the South and Central Asian regions and has the lowest trade with the regional countries.²⁶

The NSP does not acknowledge past mistakes of its political and military leadership and blames external factors for exploiting Pakistan's fault lines. Unless the basic reasons of why Pakistan finds itself in its present economic position are acknowledged, there is hardly any scope for a course correction and the gap between the reality and NSP objectives will persist.

Foreign Policy: Old wine in new bottle

Persisting Obsession with India

The NSP considers India as a primary conventional threat for Pakistan, with Jammu and Kashmir at the core of this conflict. According to the NSP, Pakistan will continue to pursue its current policies on Jammu and Kashmir as "it remains a vital national security interest for Pakistan", while underscoring growing asymmetry in military power. Furthermore, it contends that in case "India pursues unilateral actions on outstanding issues", this can result in "negative consequences for regional stability". The NSP uses the "India" threat as the driving rationale for:

- The obsessive militarisation of the Pakistani state.
- Use of terrorism as a weapon of proxy war.
- Continuation of nuclear force modernisation.
- Upgradation as part of 'full-spectrum deterrence', including investments in asymmetric domains such as space and cyber security.

Importantly, while the NSP maintains that Pakistan does not want to get involved in an arms race, the reality is that it continues to spend large sums on arms purchases that include FC-31 aircraft,²⁷ advanced conventional submarines, drones, cruise missiles, etc. at great cost. All this is justified in terms of "maintaining a cost-effective and adaptive military.....and optimisation of force structure".



Adviser to the Prime Minister Imran Khan on Commerce, Textile, Industry and Production, and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood has said trade with India is the need of the hour, February 21, 2022. Source: NowPakistan

However, the NSP does suggest mending differences with India without resolution of the Kashmir issue. This takes into account the economic needs of Pakistan which India can fulfil, including food security, medicine, supply of cheap raw materials for industries, while also providing market access for Pakistani products. There is in fact a tacit recognition that without taking India onboard, Pakistan may not be able to attain its ambitious projects such as Central Asian connectivity, including TAPI, which is imperative for Pakistan's energy and economic security, and full exploitation of BRI. The fact that CARs are increasingly attempting to align their economic and trade future with India through Iran is apparently disconcerting for Pakistan economic planners.²⁸ With India's stated position that terrorism and talks cannot go together, Pakistan is unlikely to achieve what the NSP suggests vis-à-vis relations with India.

Policy Dualism

The pressing test case of policy dualism that is haunting Pakistan is midwifing Taliban 2.0 into an Islamic Emirate. Increasing attacks by terrorist groups like TTP and the Islamic Emirate's narrative of the Durand Line not being an acceptable border, and the use of Afghan territory for cross border attacks are adversely impacting Pak-Taliban ties. Despite the NSP's assertions that the future border policies will be focused on newly "instituted border management initiatives", skirmishes continue with casualties on both sides. Adding to the above is the growing ideological nexus between the Taliban and TTP, which could aggravate both bilateral relations as also the internal security situation in Pakistan.²⁹ Despite the catastrophic effect of such policies, the Pak military persists with the same mindset. This has also impacted relations with the US. China has also started to realise the fragile state of Pakistan's internal security after multiple attacks on Chinese workers in Pakistan³⁰ and large demonstrations in Gwadar against government policies³¹.

The NSP criticizes the US's 'camp politics', in an allusion to its growing strategic partnership with India at the exclusion of Pakistan. It blames the US for its transactional approach towards Pakistan and calls for broadening its "partnership beyond narrow counter-terrorism focus". Such remarks imply the failure of Pakistan to find a middle ground with the US. The NSP, as only to be expected, is upbeat on relations with China, which are described as based on "shared interests, mutual understanding, and strategic convergence".³² Despite the narrative of China's proximity, as recent reports suggest, the Pak military leadership is none too comfortable over distancing from the US political and military establishment and solely depending upon China for strategic and economic support. This is seen as severely restricting Pakistan's strategic space and making it virtually a China camp follower.

The NSP emphasizes new evolving partnerships with the CARs and Russia, and the need for close cooperation with West Asia, particularly with Turkey which is emerging as a key international supporter and source of advanced weapons. The underlying motivation for deepening relations with Russia lies in maintaining peace and stability post the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. In addition, the growing India-US strategic partnership has given Pakistan a Machiavellian common cause to reassess bilateral ties with Russia. For Russia, developing relations with Pakistan is a low-cost option for restraining radical forces from Afghanistan from unsettling its backyard in the CARs and the North Caucasus.



Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on February 24, 2022. Source: Twitter/@KremlinRussia_E

Traditionally, Pakistan has aligned itself with Sunni West Asia, although it has been Iran from whom it has received ideological support. The NSP has just a passing comment on Iran limited to border management, while focusing upon gaining strategic support and legitimacy for its policies from regional organisations, specifically OIC and SCO.

To survive in this environment of geopolitical flux, the NSP blandly suggests "bolstering traditional political diplomacy" for economic gains and as a means to attain its strategic interests. It also suggests leveraging Pakistan's geo-economically pivotal location "as a melting pot of regional and global economic interests". The NSP lays emphasis on projecting a "positive reality," highlighting that Pakistan has thus far received negative publicity due to disinformation campaigns run by adversaries. This is at best a self-fulfilling perspective when seen in the backdrop of Pakistan's turn towards a highly radicalised society with an increasing role of radical Islamist forces, a weak economy, and continued domination by the armed forces of its national security narratives.

Conclusion

The NSP is a primary document meant as a guide for policymakers, reminding them of Pakistan's national interests. The timing of this document suggests that there is some recognition that a country on the brink of socio-economic collapse cannot go any further with the same coercive security policies. In a sense, this indicates a structural shift from geopolitics to geo-economics,

without providing any clarity on Pakistan's strategic objectives, which are presumably outlined in the classified text. There was no effort to build a national political consensus on the suggested policies, as the NSP was neither discussed in the National Assembly nor passed by it. Thus, in reality the NSP can be seen more as another political tool for short-term crisis management than as a roadmap to lead Pakistan out of its malaise.

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