

Pursuing Normalcy

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The Nawaz government has been in power now for nearly two months. Rather unusually, the prime minister has kept the foreign ministry portfolio to himself, supposedly because it is too important a matter to be entrusted to any of the 400-plus elected members of parliament.

Yet, he has so far failed to articulate a coherent blueprint of how his government will cope with the massive foreign policy challenges the country is facing, not to speak of his vision – assuming that he has one – of Pakistan's place and role in the region and the world in a fast changing geopolitical environment.

The 'guidance' given by Nawaz to Pakistan's diplomatic missions after he assumed office as prime minister and his 'directions' following a briefing at the foreign ministry on July 20 lay emphasis on the creation of a peaceful and stable neighbourhood, the promotion of trade and the "pursuit of economic diplomacy". That by itself is unexceptionable. But there is also a clear message that the Kashmir issue, long regarded by successive governments as the core question with India, has been downgraded in importance.

The foreign ministry's press release on the foreign policy 'guidance' given by the prime minister states that he "stressed the need to progressively pursue normalcy in our bilateral relations [with India], while actively seeking solutions for all outstanding issues, including Jammu and Kashmir". In other words, the pursuit of 'normalcy' has been delinked from a resolution of Kashmir and other disputes with India, bringing Pakistan's policy in full sync with the stand that India has consistently been taking and which Pakistan had always rejected.

That is not to say that Nawaz's emphasis on building a peaceful and stable neighbourhood is misplaced. What is important, however, is to differentiate between each neighbour and pursue a carefully nuanced policy with respect to each of them. A policy that ignores the fundamental divergence, if not conflict, between the regional strategic goals and interests of Pakistan and India is bound to lead us to a dead end and must be avoided. Also, Nawaz must recognise that most of the problems between Pakistan and Afghanistan are of India's making and are rooted in Delhi's persistent effort to use Afghanistan as a base to destabilise Pakistan. Regrettably, Kabul once again seems to be falling for the Indian ploy.

Nawaz was right in choosing China, Pakistan's biggest and most powerful neighbour with which the country enjoys a vitally important strategic partnership, as his first official overseas visit after becoming prime minister. That trip yielded more in strategic, political and economic benefits than the record nine visits made by Zardari to China in the last five years, most of which were uninvited. But the success of Nawaz's China visit has less to do with his diplomatic skills than with China's policy of opening up to countries to its west and exploring new trade and transit routes to the Middle East.

Nawaz seems to have peculiar notions on the importance of our relations with another neighbour – Iran. If the Zardari government did one thing right in its foreign policy, it was to try to develop relations with Iran. The agreement on building a pipeline to bring Iranian gas to Pakistan, which the US opposes, was to be the centrepiece of a vibrant economic partnership between Pakistan and Iran.

But Nawaz seems to have other ideas. A member of his cabinet is reported to have said that the project had not been altogether dropped, largely because doing so would entail a penalty payment to Iran. Instead, he said, the government “would procrastinate by trying to haggle over lower prices from Tehran”. Such double dealing, Nawaz should know, is not likely to deceive anyone and will only help Delhi in its longstanding policy of isolating and encircling Pakistan.

With Afghanistan, the prime minister seems to be on the right track. The government has done well to take the provocative statements emanating from Kabul in its stride, and continue to work patiently for an inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation process. Progress is bound to be slow but this policy offers the best hope for bringing peace and stability not only in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan.

Of all of Pakistan’s neighbours, it is Nawaz’s policy towards India that raises the most misgivings. His pre-election statements on building economic and trade links with India, while sidestepping Kashmir, have now been followed up by rapid-fire action that go far beyond his oft-repeated promise to “pick up the threads from where he left off in 1999”.

First, Nawaz has been completely silent on the right of the Kashmiris to self-determination and on the continuing atrocities being committed by Indian occupation forces against the civilian population in occupied Kashmir. The entire valley and large parts of Jammu rose up earlier this month at the fatal shootings by the BSF of four villagers who were protesting against the desecration of the Quran by Indian forces in the Ramban district. While the OIC has expressed its “condemnation” of this unwarranted use of force, the Pakistani government’s statement only expresses “deep concern” and stops short of censuring the Indian atrocity.

PM Nawaz has now appointed former foreign secretary Shaharyar Khan as his special envoy for India. Shaharyar is a highly respected and experienced diplomat but his appointment betrays a delusion to which successive Pakistani governments have fallen victim. That delusion lies in assuming that the Kashmir issue, which has remained unresolved because of Indian intransigence, can somehow be tackled better through behind-the-scenes deal-making than conventional diplomacy. What Pakistan actually needs is not leaders who are adept at making secret deals but those who possess the necessary determination and grit in the face of adverse circumstances. That, however, is not a quality for which Nawaz (like either of his two predecessors, Zardari and Musharraf) is known.

Second, while India has shown no inclination to dismantle its non-tariff trade barriers against Pakistan and while unfair competition from India threatens the viability of many sectors of Pakistan’s industry, Nawaz is pushing ahead for expanded trade and business contacts.

Third, after having pledged in the PML-N’s election manifesto to open transit routes through Pakistan to give India overland access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran, the prime minister has now been talking about opening the proposed China-Pakistan economic corridor to India. It is, therefore, no wonder that BJP President Rajnath Singh demanded last week that the Kargil-Skardu route should be opened for trade and extended further westward to give India access to Central Asia.

Fourth, Delhi has been pushing Pakistan to import electricity and Qatari gas from India. Indian's vision, clearly, is to make Pakistan economically dependent and enhance its leverage over Pakistan. The amazing thing is that Nawaz is ready to play ball and has ordered his minister for power to visit India to discuss the matter.

Nawaz has a comprehensive agenda for 'normalisation' of relations with India, much broader than is contained in his party's election manifesto. There might even be more surprises in store. Nawaz's meeting with Manmohan Singh in New York in September should be carefully watched for clues.