First Document on National Security to Be Published in Pakistan

At the end of December last year, the National Security Council of Pakistan, chaired by the Prime Minister, adopted the National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022-2026 (or NSP), apparently the first such document in the country’s history.

However, its originality was immediately questioned by representatives of highly influential army circles in Pakistan who say that a similar report is issued by experts from the National Defense University on an annual basis. But the civilian leadership of any country tends to interpret the concept of national security much more broadly than the military, and commentators on the document under discussion have already drawn attention to the fact that it focuses primarily on Pakistan’s economic development.

The “published” version of the NSP, which is most likely redacted, with parts of the text remaining classified, is an extensive (62-page) document with eight chapters. The text is preceded by a brief introduction by Prime Minister Imran Khan and his National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf.

Perhaps the content of both the document as a whole and the introductory articles can best be understood in the context of the upcoming general elections, scheduled for October 2023. Imran Khan and his Movement for Justice Party will then be faced with the challenge of repeating the success which they achieved in the summer of 2018, when they brought about what experts described as the “second democratic transfer of power” in the country’s history. Naturally, this description of the event is an exaggeration (to put it mildly), especially in view of the way that the military (which remains the main manager of “democratic processes” in the country) treated Nawaz Sharif, a
member of one of Pakistan’s most powerful political clans. But still, it did not involve any shooting, attempted assassinations of political rivals or resounding court hearings.

And although Pakistan’s domestic politics are never free from a certain amount of turbulence, hopes remain high that the next electoral campaign will stay within the bounds of acceptable democratic procedure.

The Prime Minister’s comments in the preface to the NSP are clearly aimed at voters in next year’s elections: “... the security of Pakistan rests in the security of its citizens. Such a citizen-centric approach to national security prioritizes national cohesion and the prosperity of people... Realizing the symbiotic relationship between economic, human, and traditional security is now imperative for Pakistan’s long-term development.”

These introductory statements from the Prime Minister were further developed by his national security adviser in the latter’s comments on the “archaic guns versus butter debate.” “Our national security thinking seeks to identify means ....such that Pakistan can simultaneously strengthen its traditional and non-traditional security.”

It should be noted that experts have always been aware that the concept of national security is highly complex and cannot be reduced to a “basic” formula (such as the “traditional” security element). In recent decades, the catastrophic collapse of the USSR provided an impetus for rethinking the concept of national security: the collapse was the kind of event that could not have been prevented by the “main” component in a traditional security system, such as a nuclear missile shield. The shield remained untouched and in full effect, but the nation it was designed to protect just disappeared. That, of course, does not in any way detract from the importance to a state of having (or not having) nuclear weapons in its arsenal. This factor is reflected in the document under discussion.

However, the realization that national security depends, to put it broadly, on “everything”, that is, on all aspects of the functioning of a country, dramatically complicates the task of developing a national security policy that can be used by the government when drawing up plans for any given time period. The available resources are always limited, and thus the inevitable question arises - if “everything” is important, then what should be prioritized? It is not even easy to imagine (and express in a concise form) what this “everything” might consist of. In the words of the NSP, “Pakistan faces innumerable internal and external factors that impact its security.”

It is therefore no surprise that, according to the document itself, it has been under development since 2014, with input from all major state institutions and hundreds of specialists. Moreover, it appears that its authors do not consider it to be a final version, and it may therefore be updated to take into account new circumstances, both internal and external, that may arise.

And yet the authors still needed to define their own vision of the problematic concept of national security, which lies at the very hear of the document. Otherwise, all their hard work over many years would be effectively pointless. So, in the National Security Framework section, they define their terms of reference as follows: “Pakistan’s vital national security interests are best served by placing economic security as the core element of national security.” It is this element that can ensure “national cohesion, territorial integrity, internal security, and citizen welfare.”

However, the document has a whole section dedicated to the problem of “National Unity”. Among the various security challenges related to this issue, that of “socio-economic inequalities” is particularly significant. Based on the principle of “unity through diversity”, the Policy emphasizes the importance of strengthening the federal structure of the nation.

Challenges to national security from abroad are also considered in detail. These include threats both from Pakistan’s neighbors and from further afield. Important aspects of Pakistan’s relations with such leading world powers as China, the USA, Russia, and India are considered.

In the words of the Policy, “Pakistan’s deep-rooted historic ties with China are driven by shared interests ... mutual understanding ... and strategic convergence”. It also describes the continuation of the long-term China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” project as being of exceptional importance for Pakistan’s development. That statement seems particularly significant in view of the increasing propaganda attacks from Western countries against China’s vast Belt and Road Initiative generally, and specifically in the a–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which forms an important link in that project.

The Policy also describes relations with the United States fairly cautiously. Readiness is expressed to develop these relations in the areas of “trade, investment, connectivity, energy, counter-terrorism, security, and intelligence cooperation.”
Relations with Russia are described in positive terms. Russia’s role in the Central Asian region in general and especially in Afghanistan is emphasized. Recent developments in this region have been of particular concern to Islamabad.

Naturally, however, the views of Pakistan’s leadership on the general state of the country’s relations with India are of particular interest. Their ongoing tensions between these two neighbors remains the main challenge to maintaining strategic stability in the entire South Asian region. Without ignoring the existing problems in bilateral relations, especially the situation in Kashmir, which has its roots in the partition of that former Principality back in the 1940s, the authors of the Policy express the hope that they will be resolved peacefully.

In India, of course, Pakistan’s publication of the NSP has been the subject of considerable comment, and its content has been closely studied. There, assessments of the Policy’s implications for the future of bilateral relations range from cautious optimism to “nothing fundamentally new.”

But this brief commentary is unable to do full justice to such a wide-ranging document as Pakistan’s National Security Policy, which deals in depth with a wide range of ideas and is the fruit of many years of work by a large number of specialists. There is insufficient space here to focus on all the important points made in the Policy, and readers are recommended to seek out the original. Anyone with an interest in modern international politics today will find that the time they spend reading this document is amply rewarded.

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