

Essay

Pakistan's National Security Policy: Much Ado About Nothing

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Pakistan's recently released National Security Policy (NSP) 2022-2026¹ is essentially an exercise in image-building necessitated by its being in the doghouse internationally because of its abominable human rights record, an economy perpetually in a shambles largely due to the prioritization of military spending over development, dicey democratic credentials, and being a breeding ground for terror. Accordingly, the NSP projects Pakistan as a much-maligned peace-loving state determined to pull itself up by the bootstraps by focusing more than ever before on the economy and human security. However, for a document that has purportedly been under preparation since 2014, the NSP disappoints as it is long on rhetoric and short on specifics. It fails to transcend the banal, and displays the customary animosity towards India. It is, therefore, unlikely to lead to any meaningful policy change and is no more than an effort to blunt Pakistan's negative image.

The full text of the NSP, reportedly running into over 100 pages, has not been made public and the abbreviated text which has been released, exclusive of the messages and executive summary, is about 48 pages which gets further reduced to only 36 pages if one deducts the numerous blank and cover pages for each of its eight sections. The Government's bashfulness in sharing the NSP in totality with its people is inexplicable. Does it arise from a fear that the details would be divisive or that they lack gravitas?

An Overview

The NSP, as released, has a section each on Policy Formulation, National Security Framework, National Cohesion, Securing the Economic Future, Defence, Internal Security,

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Foreign Policy, and Human Security.

The Policy Formulation section asserts that the absence of a comprehensive national security policy, covering both traditional and nontraditional security, necessitated the NSP, which was developed under the guidance of the National Security Committee based on extensive consultations over a period of seven years. It further mentions that the NSP is for five years and would be subject to monitoring as well as annual review and updates by the National Security Division.

The National Security Framework section provides an overview of the NSP, including its vision, conceptualization, and implementation principles. The vision projects Pakistan as an Islamic welfare state aligned with the universal principles of justice, equality, and tolerance, seeking a peaceful neighbourhood, ensuring fundamental rights and social justice without discrimination based on caste, creed, or belief, and promoting good governance. This is a motherhood and apple pie formulation designed to win over the gullible, far removed from the nasty brutish reality that is Pakistan.

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In terms of conceptualisation, it makes the well accepted point that national security must be viewed in a comprehensive manner, inclusive of traditional and nontraditional security. However, it further projects that “Pakistan’s vital national security interests are best served by placing economic security as the core element of national security. The country’s security imperatives in the next decade will be driven by the need to realise its economic potential while ensuring national cohesion, territorial integrity, internal security, and citizen welfare.” The importance of paying attention to the economy and citizen welfare is widely acknowledged but has historically been ignored by Pakistan. Whether any change will be made is highly debatable but flagging it serves an important purpose as a public relations exercise when Pakistan is doing the rounds of all manner of countries and institutions with a begging bowl.

On implementation principles, too, the NSP does not rise beyond the mundane by calling for a whole of government approach, inclusivity, introspection, pragmatism, prioritization, consistency, etc. But comments such as: “Pursuing our vital national security interests unapologetically will be a cornerstone of our approach to the world”, display a pervasive sense of insecurity which suffuses the entire paper.

The National Cohesion section also reveals Pakistan's sense of insecurity by acknowledging concerns about its unity being affected by "divisive discourse". It, however, as is its wont, shifts the blame for this to "disruptive external support." Simultaneously, it indulges in creative narrative building by projecting Pakistan has a "coherent national identity" based on "unity in diversity" and that it will promote national cohesion by cherishing its diversity and inculcating tolerance. The section is more upfront in acknowledging the socio-economic and geographic inequalities, and the need to address them. It, similarly, makes a pitch for improved governance and institutional capacities but, wary of ruffling feathers, makes out that existing reforms are geared to delivering the results.

The section on securing Pakistan's "Economic Future" identifies the three main challenges facing the country as: "external imbalance, vertical inequalities and horizontal inequalities." On the first, no detailed policy solution is offered other than an anodyne assertion, which could be made by any school child, that there must be an increase in exports, remittances, and revenues. Similarly, on vertical inequalities representing socio-economic inequalities and on horizontal inequalities representing inter-provincial inequalities, also referred to in the earlier section, apart from stressing the need to address them effectively, not only are no specific suggestions offered but it is blandly contended that reforms are already in place to deal with them.

In addition to the three challenges cited above, the section focusses on the following issues which have an impact on the economy:

i) **Growth and Development:** While recognizing the need for "sustainable growth and inclusive development", Pakistan is commended with references to its "economic resilience", "positive growth trajectory" and "vibrant economy". Such enunciations, totally at variance with facts, impinge adversely on the credibility of the NSP and have clearly been incorporated as an image-building exercise. Other than exhortations for the need for rapid growth, enhanced productivity in agriculture and industry, consolidation of industry, increased savings rate, etc., there is no discussion of how these commendable objectives are to be realized.

ii) **Trade, Investment, and Connectivity:** Like the entire paper, this subsection too is rich in high sounding rhetoric of which a classic example is the very first sentence, which reads: "As Pakistan supplements its geostrategic focus with an added emphasis

on geoeconomics, it envisions itself as a melting pot of global economic interests offering economic bases to its partner countries for development partnerships.” Behind all this fanciful rhetoric the short point is that Pakistan has a great opportunity to leverage its location for creating connectivity which would help promote its economic development. This is a well-worn theme in the Pakistani narrative and is by no means new. Interestingly, while the subsection, on the one hand, refers to the possibility of promoting connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia, on the other hand, it virtually rules out “eastward connectivity” on account of India’s “regressive approach”. This is a clear indicator that Pakistan’s negativity towards India will trump any effort to make its economy the core concern of its security policy. The section is, however, significant in terms of indicating an intent to harness Pakistan’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and coastline to develop its economy, and to evolve a comprehensive maritime policy to optimize the nation’s blue economy.

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iii) **Fiscal Management:** While expressing a concern on the mounting debt the section makes out that “efforts are being directed to ensure that public debt remains at a sustainable level while increasing the government’s ability to generate revenues through a transparent, responsive, and progressive tax regime.” However, no details in this regard are provided and the reader is expected to accept such bland assertions as gospel truth.

iv) **Energy Security:** Here again, while concerns are expressed about the negative performance of the energy sector and the problems of circular debt, bland commitments are made that by 2030 renewables and clean energy will account for 30 percent and 60 percent respectively of the country’s energy mix and that energy production will increasingly be indigenised.

v) **Education, Technology, and Innovation:** The projection regarding these issues, which are dealt with together in one para, is essentially that education will be modernised, making it technology-based and innovation-friendly. But how this is to be done and how it would gel with the madrassa-based education in the country is left unexplained.

The Defence section is on expected lines with a commitment to maritime and airspace surveillance, fencing of the western border, modernisation of armed forces, indigenisation of defence production, strengthening of naval capabilities, the criticality of nuclear deterrence and continued adherence to full-spectrum deterrence. As expected, it engages in much India bashing of which the following are some instances:

- “Special attention is required to manage lingering border disputes which continue to pose security threats, particularly along the Line of Control and Working Boundary where ceasefire violations by India threaten civilian lives and property while endangering regional stability.”
- “The Indian Ocean is fast becoming a space for contestation. The self-professed role of any one country as a so-called net-security provider in the wider Indian Ocean would affect the region’s security and economic interests negatively”.
- “The expansion of India’s nuclear triad, open-ended statements on nuclear policy, and investments in and introduction of destabilising technologies disturb the strategic balance in the region. Pakistan’s deterrence regime is vital for and aimed at regional peace.”

Internal Security

The Internal Security section, while noting that terrorism is one of the most “acute form of efforts to undermine stability and national harmony”, would have one believe that Pakistan has zero tolerance for terrorist activities, has fought one of the most successful wars against terrorism, and is globally acknowledged for “taking positive strides towards creating a strong financial monitoring system to prevent terror financing.” Continuing in a similar vein of palpably false narrative building, it projects that Pakistan is committed to “strengthening police forces and associated counter-terrorism agencies, undertaking intelligence-based operations against all terrorist groups, preventing any use of financial sources for terrorism, addressing structural deficiencies and sense of deprivation in recruitment areas, and promoting a pluralistic anti-terror narrative.” Interestingly, as a slip or a rare moment of honesty, there is no denial in this section of Pakistan’s use of terror as an instrument of foreign policy!

While expressing concern about violent sub-nationalism, it is projected that there is an external hand behind it. Attention is also invited to the dangers of radicalisation

and extremism. In this context, while projecting that those promoting it would be firmly put down, it is also suggested that “inculcating interfaith and intersectorian harmony and societal tolerance in all its forms will be prioritised.” If undertaken this would be the seventh wonder of the world and Pakistan, as we have known it, would be unrecognisable!

Foreign Policy

The Foreign Policy section is characterised by much high-sounding rhetoric, a rerun of themes earlier touched upon, an unintended display of insecurity, an unwitting revelation of the rationale of the nature of the NSP, and, of course, the staple of India bashing. Accordingly, there is not only a call for a greater focus on economic diplomacy but also a reiteration of the need for connectivity initiatives leveraging the country’s geo-economically pivotal location. The reference to Pakistan having adopted a “dynamic and self confident approach to a fast changing world order” smacks of a deep seated sense of insecurity which is also evident from similar quite unnecessary assertions elsewhere in the paper.

The section is also indicative that Pakistan is hurting greatly on account of its reputation being in tatters the world over. This is evident from its call for an image makeover based upon “Pakistan’s reality as a responsible state that offers an economic hub for regional and global activity while striving for peace within and beyond its borders.” On the same pattern as elsewhere in the paper it conveniently pins the responsibility for its negative image on the “sustained disinformation and influence operations by adversaries”. Indeed, quite unwittingly, the section also reveals the real rationale of the NSP by categorically stating that Pakistan will “reverse” the “unfair negativity” attached to its image by emphasising its “economic and human security-centric outlook” and projecting it “as a responsible state that offers an economic hub for regional and global activity while striving for peace within and beyond its borders.” Clearly, the call for a greater economic focus in the NSP has little purpose other than an image makeover.

The comments in the section relating to India, as detailed below, are a mix of image building and vitriolic criticism of the latter and indicate that the basics of Pakistan foreign policy remain unchanged:

“Pakistan, under its policy of peace at home and abroad, wishes to improve its

relationship with India. A just and peaceful resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute remains at the core of our bilateral relationship. The rise of Hindutva-driven politics in India is deeply concerning and impacts Pakistan's immediate security. The political exploitation of a policy of belligerence towards Pakistan by India's leadership has led to the threat of military adventurism and non-contact warfare to our immediate east. Growing Indian arms build-up, facilitated by access to advanced technologies and exceptions in the non-proliferation rules, is a matter of concern for Pakistan. Besides impacting regional stability, such policies of exceptionalism also undermine the global non-proliferation regime. India's pursuit of unilateral policy actions on outstanding issues are attempts to impose one-sided solutions that can have far reaching negative consequences for regional stability. India is also consistently engaged in an effort to spread disinformation targeting Pakistan. Pakistan continues to believe in resolving all outstanding issues through dialogue; however, recent Indian actions remain significant hurdles in this direction."

Additionally, asserting that India's "illegal and unilateral actions of August 2019 have been rejected" by the people of Kashmir, it accuses it of human rights abuses and war crimes in the State. It goes on to state that "Pakistan remains steadfast in its moral, diplomatic, political, and legal support to the people of Kashmir until they achieve their right to self-determination guaranteed by the international community as per United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions..."

Human Security

The Human Security section has a few anodyne paragraphs on population growth, health security, food security, climate and water stress, and gender security. One gets the impression that these have been included merely to tick the boxes. In most of these it makes all the right noises but, as elsewhere, it does not get into the specifics of how the desired outcomes will be realised. The basic lack of attention to specifics is illustrated by the assertion in the paragraph on water wherein it makes a case for access to transboundary watercourses in the Indus Basin as a national security imperative since nearly 80 percent of its waters originate from outside. Such assertions are prima facie ridiculous as they have no basis in law and are groundless as Pakistan receives 80 percent of the flows of the Indus Waters by virtue of the Indus Waters Treaty.

In the context of the foregoing, it would be reasonable to conclude that Pakistan's NSP is an exercise of much ado about nothing and essentially a thinly disguised effort at countering its negative image the world over. Those expecting any marked policy shift will be disappointed.

Reference

1. "National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022-2026." National Security Division, Government of Pakistan. 2022. <https://legalversity.com/pakistan-national-security-policy-2022-pdf-explained/>