



## National interests and diplomacy

By  
**Shahid M. Amin**

One hears much talk in the media these days about national interests and diplomacy, but many commentators do not seem to be clear about the meaning of these terms. Similarly, some observers think that diplomacy is a kind of exercise in futility undertaken by well-heeled diplomats. National interests are the vital interests of a state of which survival is the first and foremost interest. A state's independence and territorial integrity come above all other interests. If the state disappears, then no other interest remains. The supreme duty of the state is, therefore, to maintain itself.

Economic welfare is a key preoccupation of the foreign and domestic policies of a state. The preservation of ideological values is another important national interest, though a rather passive one. Only if these values face the threat of destruction from an external power does their defence become a vital national interest.

The primary justification of state action is national interests. Foreign policies of states are made mainly to protect and advance these interests. According to Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American naval officer, "Self-interest is not only a legitimate, but a fundamental, cause for national policy; one which needs no cloak of hypocrisy." As a principle, it does not require justification. Hans Morgenthau, a top scholar, said that the minimum requirement of nation states is to protect their physical, political and cultural identity against encroachments by other nation states.

The pursuit of a state's national interests in the international arena constitutes its foreign policy. The success or failure of foreign policy is directly related to a state's capability. Capability comes from physical, economic and other elements, including geography, natural resources, population, economic and military strength, technology, organisational efficiency and political stability. The capability of a state is often called its power.

National power is the most important of all interstate controls, and the role of power is central to foreign policy. To be successful, foreign policy must be commensurate with the power available to carry it out. Policymakers must be guided by realism, rather than by emotionalism and illusions. Prudence must be exercised in the exercise of power. Decisions concerning national interest should always be made on the basis of concrete national advantage rather than on moralistic, legalistic or ideological criteria.

Diplomacy is the art of conducting and implementing foreign policy. It is the process by which diplomats seek to achieve foreign-policy objectives, mainly through negotiations held with their counterparts. The essence of diplomacy is bargaining, which involves the use of both the carrot and the stick. A diplomat has four basic functions: representation, negotiation, reporting and protection of the interests of his country and the latter are citizens in foreign lands.

Pakistan's foreign policy, like that of other states, has sought to secure its national interests. Diplomacy has indeed acted as the first line of defence for Pakistan. The goal has always been clear, though mistakes were made in the way national objectives could be achieved, most notably in handling the Bangladesh crisis in 1971 when emotionalism and lack of realism clouded the judgment of policymakers and the nation.

Security has been an obsessive dimension of Pakistan's foreign policy. From the very outset, Pakistan's great problem was an unfriendly relationship with its neighbour India, which did everything in its power to harm Pakistan from its inception. Not surprisingly, Pakistan quickly developed a siege mentality. A sense of insecurity has profoundly influenced the formulation of Pakistan's defence and foreign policies.

Given the disparity in its size vis-à-vis India, the principal task of Pakistani diplomacy has always been to find an equaliser against India. This led Pakistan in the 1950s to join US-led military pacts that had been formed to counter communist aggression. India, on the other hand, sought to establish close ties with the Soviet bloc. However, the 1960s produced a new equation following the Sino-Indian border war, which induced India and the West to come closer. That influenced Pakistan to turn to China as the new equaliser, proving that in international relations there are no permanent friends or enemies; only permanent interests.

The 1980s would bring Pakistan close to the US again in the context of the Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan, which was seen by Pakistan as a threat to its own security and by the US and others as the latest evidence of Soviet expansionism.

When the Soviet withdrawal was achieved in 1989, Pakistan and the US moved away from each other. However, 9/11 again induced them to work in tandem in the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Pakistan's support was secured by Washington on the plank of 'either you are with us or against us'.

Opposing the US in such a scenario would have brought unacceptable consequences for Pakistan's national interests. However, unlike the Pakistani government, the Pakistani 'street' has been more influenced by emotionalism and has not supported this alliance. This dichotomy continues to create misgivings and mutual doubts even though both countries have a common objective — countering religious extremism which is destabilising Pakistan.

Pakistani foreign policy has also focused on promoting the country's economic welfare. Over the years, significant economic aid has been obtained by Pakistan from its foreign friends. The US and the West have been the principal aid givers. Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia have also been forthcoming. Significant economic and material help has been received from China, which is seen by Pakistanis as an all-weather friend. Japan too has emerged as a key aid giver to Pakistan.

International financial institutions, where US influence is notable, have also given considerable economic assistance to Pakistan. In fact, few countries in the world have received as much aid as Pakistan on a per capita basis. Pakistan occupies a key geo-strategic location, which has enhanced its importance in the international arena. Its nuclear capability, which has kept an uneasy peace in the subcontinent since the 1980s, gives it added importance. At the same time, it would be uncharitable to deny that diplomacy has played a key role in the advancement of Pakistan's security and economic interests.

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