

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

“ The world today is quite complex, but Pakistan has managed to balance its diplomacy, its security, and its strategic interests. The reason for this is that Pakistan, first of all, in this world of turbulence and transformation, has demonstrated its ability, willingness, and readiness to preserve, promote, and protect Pakistan's own national sovereignty and national defense ”



Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed

Former Chairman of the Senate Defence Committee
Former Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting
and Chairman, Pakistan-China Institute (PCI)

ICMA: Pakistan is often seen as a mediator in regional conflicts. How can it use its strengths to take a leading role?

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed: Pakistan is already leveraging its location in the most strategic part of the world. It plays a proactive role with broader outreach to different countries, including major powers like China and the United States, regional powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, as well as countries like Russia and the Central Asian Republics. So, using these strengths, Pakistan has the credibility that it does not carry any extra baggage and does not have any agenda of its own. Its only agenda is to strengthen unity and

harmony and promote regional economic connectivity in the most strategic part of the world.

ICMA: In today's complex world, how should Pakistan balance diplomacy, security, and its strategic interests?

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed: Yes, the world today is quite complex, but Pakistan has managed to balance its diplomacy, its security, and its strategic interests. The reason for this is that Pakistan, first of all, in this world of turbulence and transformation, has demonstrated its ability, willingness, and readiness to preserve, promote, and protect Pakistan's own national sovereignty and national defense.

“ I still feel that we have the issue of terrorism and a counterterrorism strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan in this region, and I feel that multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can play a key role because the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO, has an institution in Tashkent which is called RATS, i.e. the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. ”

And I think the key element is that you cannot outsource your security. And we have managed that very well and linked that to our diplomacy through an approach based on outreach to our friends and also the protection of our security interests. And so, in this combination, Pakistan has managed this balancing act very well and has won the accolades of its friends and distant partners, both in the region and in the East and the West.

ICMA: As founder of the Pakistan-China Institute, how might US-Iran tensions affect CPEC projects, and what practical steps should be taken to protect them?

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed: Pakistan China Institute today is the premier non-governmental institution promoting relations between Pakistan and China at the people-to-people level. And I would say that the US-Iran tensions have not affected the CPEC projects, and the CPEC projects stand on their own because CPEC was initiated over a decade back. And the main reason, if there has been some slowdown or some problems, is at our end.

We had made two commitments to the Chinese. One was that we would provide foolproof security to all the Chinese experts, engineers, and technicians living in Pakistan. And at the peak of CPEC, there were about 20,000 of them, not Chinese workers but experts, engineers, and technicians. And the other one was that we will give them a one window operation so that all their issues would be resolved in one office through that one window operation. Sadly, both these commitments have not been kept, so the Chinese are still

keen on CPEC, still committed to CPEC because of a strategic partnership, but the problem lies at our end, and it is basically rooted in the bureaucracy in Islamabad.

ICMA: From your years in foreign policy, what lessons can guide Pakistan's strategy in navigating global uncertainty?

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed: My own experience shows that at times there is a lack of strategic clarity on issues, and when personal interests take precedence over national interests, the interests of Pakistan suffer. For example, there have been times when we have lacked strategic clarity on India and we often mistake peace for virtue, and policy at times borders on appeasement. Strategic clarity on the Kashmir issue with India is sometimes not there. People say, let's open trade with India. Let's open so called peace process with India when there is no reciprocity. When India is bent on damaging Pakistan, when India is bent on isolating Pakistan, when India is targeting and oppressing the Kashmiri people, so that will not work.

The second area is that, because of the attitudes of the ruling class, there is sometimes a tendency to be closer to the West and to think we should balance between China and the West. It is not about balance; it is about protecting our interests. And at times, political or personal interests take precedence.

The fundamental lesson in today's world, demonstrated by the Iran situation, is that you cannot outsource your security to any country. The Gulf countries had vast resources and had given bases to the Americans, purchased weapons, and allowed a strong American presence, with 40,000 American soldiers and sailors and 16 bases in the region. Yet when the crisis came, they were left defenseless and in the lurch. That is a fundamental lesson, and we learned a hard lesson, well after 71.

ICMA: How can partnerships and multilateral forums help Pakistan turn regional challenges into opportunities?

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed: I would say that partnerships and multilateral forums are very important. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is extremely important in promoting Pakistan linkages with China, Russia, and the Central Asian region. Then we have the ECO, i.e. the Economic Cooperation Organization, which is very important because it provides us a platform, and that platform is important because we can turn those platforms into opportunities. I still feel that we have the issue of terrorism and a counterterrorism strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan in this region, and I feel that multilateral forums

like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can play a key role because the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO, has an institution in Tashkent which is called RATS, i.e. the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. We have representation there also. I think that can be a platform which should be put to good use in promoting a common regional, comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, which is currently missing. In that, we can involve the Central Asian countries, China, and Russia also for the common cause of counterterrorism. And that is one example of how we can turn regional challenges into opportunities.

ICMA: Looking ahead, what long-term steps should policymakers take to strengthen Pakistan's resilience and global standing?

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed: Looking ahead, I think it is very clear that Pakistan has today emerged as a major Muslim power in a world which is no longer dominated by a single superpower. And as the recent summit between President Trump and President Xi Jinping in Beijing has shown, now the world is going to be dominated by two major powers, China and the United States on an equal footing. In fact, China now has an advantage over the US because China is stronger economically and China is also stronger diplomatically in the aftermath of the Iran war. And the US and the West are overall in a situation of decline. So, in these historical changes, Pakistan should, I think, develop a more region based foreign policy. For example, the South Asian region has been largely ignored. Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, all these countries look up to Pakistan for leadership. And they are very much opposed to Indian hegemony and Indian dominance. And then it is about regional economic connectivity, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative, through CPEC, and through other mechanisms as well.

And the third area is that what is needed is also, frankly, in Pakistan, a healing touch because the polarization in Pakistan among the political forces brings about a widening chasm between the elite and the street. I think that needs to be worked out well. And finally, a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy is also needed. So, Pakistan's advantage that we have managed to establish in the last one year after the victory over India and Marka-e-Haq, and after consolidating it through diplomatic gains as a credible mediator between Washington and Tehran, I think that needs to be translated into tangible benefits for Pakistan and its people.

ICMA: From your experience with Pakistan's governance challenges, what one economic reform could best help the country withstand major geopolitical shocks?

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed: The most important economic reform, in my view, is tackling corruption in our official system, where our own investors are persecuted by our own system like the FBR and other government agencies who just persecute them because they are investors, they have money, and they try to extort that money through various means and blackmail them. I think that issue of corruption and that one reform, and establishing a one window operation, would also invite investors from outside, whether it's Chinese or Arabs or Americans, or beginning with your own investors because Dawn newspaper has reported that in the last three years, 20,000 Pakistanis have invested 12 billion dollars in real estate and other investments in the United Arab Emirates, especially in Dubai. So that money is going out and Pakistani investors are leaving and fleeing the country because they have no confidence in their own system, and the system itself is based on corruption and extortion. So, I think that is the most important thing.

And secondly, I think that given what has happened after the major geopolitical shocks like the Iran War in the Gulf region, many of the Pakistanis and the foreigners, expatriates who were living in these countries who found them a haven of security, no longer feel that way. And they are fleeing that place. People are going to Istanbul, people are going to Hong Kong, people are going to Singapore, and I think that we should open our doors. We should say welcome, come back to Pakistan, no questions asked. There should be a general amnesty for that, and a certain fee should be charged, maybe 10 percent or 20 percent as a flat fee, and we will not ask where you got the money from as long as you invest the money in Pakistan and your own country. I think that is the way forward because we have to do out of the box thinking rather than a traditional bureaucratic approach based on red tape, corruption, and restrictive rules and regulations which retard Pakistan's progress and are also a dampener on the natural talent of the people of Pakistan, especially in the field of creativity and investment.

*The Editorial Board thanks **Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed, Former Chairman of the Senate Defence Committee, Former Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting and Chairman Pakistan-China Institute (PCI)** for sparing his precious time to give an exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.*