



Much stock is being placed on cricket star-turned-politician Imran Khan, chairman of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the single largest party in the National Assembly after last week's general election, to stabilise the country and improve relations with its neighbours Afghanistan and India. PHOTO: REUTERS

Why Imran Khan offers hope for a new South Asia

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For *The Straits Times*

He is not yet the prime minister of Pakistan. But Mr Imran Khan's emergence as the leader of the single largest party in the National Assembly from last week's general election in Pakistan is resonating at home and abroad. Whatever might be the allegations of "match-fixing" in these elections, there is no question that he has raised expectations of change in Pakistan.

For the large numbers of the urban middle class, who abandoned their old political affiliations and tuned into Mr Khan's call for a "new Pakistan", it is a moment of great hope.

Although Pakistan's voters have been repeatedly let down in the past by their leaders, many are willing to bet that the status quo is not forever and believe that the nation is at an inflexion point.

Unlike domestic audiences, external interlocutors of nations everywhere tend to be ruthlessly cynical. If Pakistan has disappointed many of its traditional friends in recent years, Mr Khan has promised a course correction. More impossibly though, his first comments on foreign policy have hinted at the prospects of a long overdue easing of tensions in the north-western part of the subcontinent. Over the last four decades, simmering conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir have put Islamabad at odds with Kabul and New Delhi.

In his victory speech on July 25, Mr Khan spoke of improving ties with both Afghanistan and India. Soon after, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated him over the phone and affirmed their desire for a "new beginning" with Pakistan.

Mr Ghani, who has struggled to get Pakistan's support to end the insurgencies against his government, is hopeful that it would be different with Mr Khan. After his talk with Mr Khan, he tweeted: "We both agreed to overcome the past and to lay a new foundation for a prosperous

political and social future of both countries." The new Pakistani prime minister is expected to make an early visit to Afghanistan.

Mr Modi, when he took office in 2014, began with great enthusiasm to reset relations with Pakistan. However, he has had to preside over an extended political chill with Islamabad since the end of 2015. In his phone call to Mr Khan, according to India's foreign office, Mr Modi reaffirmed his hopes for peace and development in the subcontinent. Mr Khan's spokesman was far more effusive about the conversation, saying the two leaders were now ready for a "new era" in bilateral relations and open to developing a "joint strategy" to promote peace and fight poverty.

REALITY CHECK

Are we then headed for a new and productive phase in South Asian regional politics?

Sceptics demur. They point to rising hopes for regional peace after every recent regime transition in Pakistan and how they have been repeatedly dashed. The last two civilian governments headed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and President Asif Ali Zardari sought improved relations with Afghanistan and India, but could make no breakthrough.

Pessimists point to the fact that Pakistan's foreign and security policies have long been the preserve of the army rather than those of the prime minister. Meanwhile, Mr Khan, short of a majority in the national assembly, will have to cobble together a coalition to govern. He will also face intense hostility from the traditional parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan Peoples Party.

While the constraints are real, Mr Khan, one of the few modern heroes of Pakistan, could be luckier than his predecessors in finding pathways to peace in the region. Central to such an outcome would be a measure of convergence with the Pakistan army on regional goals and sustained policy coordination.

The army suspected that Mr Zardari was using the United States' raid on Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May 2011 to

undermine the primacy of the army. The military leadership was deeply wary of Sharif's enthusiasm to normalise relations with India behind its back. The reports that Mr Khan is close to the army might help some of the difficulties that we have seen in Pakistan's civilian-military relations.

WRONG QUESTION

It has been tempting for many to dismiss Mr Khan as a creature of the army. That would be more than unfair, for his popularity with the masses is genuine. Asking if Mr Khan is a free agent might well be the wrong question. The fact is that Mr Khan and the army need each other to succeed.

Whatever the salience of the army in Pakistan's society, it cannot thrive without a reasonably competent and relatively clean government to run the country. If the army was fed up with the corruption of the Zardaris and the Sharifs, Mr Khan could possibly provide the platform to improve domestic governance.

The international community, including the US and China, is eager to see a political settlement in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's help in producing a reasonable arrangement with the insurgent Taliban will be widely appreciated. A pause in the conflict with India, let alone a major breakthrough, can have a powerful and positive impact on the region.

Externally, the challenges have become graver than before for Pakistan. While the dominance of the army over external relations is real, there are growing pressures on it to change course. Among these factors are the growing international backlash against Pakistan's prolonged support for violent religious extremism, deteriorating relations with the US and the West that have long been empathetic to Pakistan, China's interest in a more stable South Asian frontier and an economy that is tanking.

Persistent conflicts with Afghanistan and India hardly make it easier to address Pakistan's multiple immediate national goals.

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If the quest for peace in Afghanistan is akin to exploring an unmapped region, the path to detente with India has been walked before. On-again, off-again peace efforts in the last decade, although not successful, have left behind a wealth of negotiating experience between the two national security establishments. Among the low hanging fruits ready to be picked are previous understandings on humanitarian issues, easing of visa norms, trade liberalisation and cross-border power and energy trade.

The restoration of the ceasefire on their frontiers, the reduction of cross border terrorism, and the resumption of negotiations on difficult political issues and territorial disputes could facilitate movement on a range of problems that will be immediately beneficial to the people in both countries. This, in turn, could make it easier for the leaders on both sides to show some progress on complex and emotional issues.

The differences on regional policy between the army and civilian leaders were not perhaps on the need for good relations with Afghanistan and India. It was about terms and conditions. Mr Khan, blessed as he is with popularity and the army's trust, may be better placed than his predecessors in producing the much-needed internal consensus in reconciling with Kabul and New Delhi. He can easily count on much goodwill across Pakistan's eastern and western frontiers. And there is expansive international support for any idea on positive change in the region.

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