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Pakistan in the Face of Internal and External Challenges

Over the past two months since our last discussion on the internal and external aspects of the evolving situation in Pakistan, several noteworthy events have occurred that warrant individual commentary.



The Development of Pakistan's Internal Situation

First and foremost, let us once again highlight the extreme complexity of the internal situation in the country. This situation is shaped by a number of factors – often interconnected – stemming from challenges in political life, the economy, inter-ethnic relations, and Sunni-Shia conflicts. Despite 75 years of independence, modern Pakistan continues to resemble a “melting pot” that has yet to reach a “crystallization” phase. The prospects for achieving such a phase remain under serious threat from various challenges.

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One noteworthy aspect is the “unique” position of the Army on Pakistan's political stage. Successive governments, including the current one, consistently feel compelled to signal their

special respect toward the military leadership. On January 1, 2025, while unveiling an ambitious five-year [economic development plan for Pakistan](#), current Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif did not miss the opportunity to emphasize close cooperation with the current Army leadership. Similarly, his chief geopolitical rival, former Prime Minister Imran Khan, has made similar acknowledgments – both during his time in office and now, as he sits in prison. However, during Khan’s tenure, the leadership of the Army was represented by different individuals.

At this juncture, it seems appropriate to offer a personal assessment of the series of dramatic events that, on the surface, create an impression of chaos. These events began in the spring of 2022 with what resembled a coup: [the procedure to remove Imran Khan](#) from his position as head of government. This was followed by almost constant judicial proceedings against Khan himself, his wife, and close allies from his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), as well as changes in the Army leadership. A key milestone in this sequence was [the general elections of January 2024](#), whose procedures and outcomes remain a point of serious contention for the opposition.

It is quite possible that everything that transpired after Khan’s removal represented the implementation of a certain concept (we shall refrain from using the term “plan”) by the so-called “establishment”. The aim appears to have been the initiation of long-overdue radical reforms in the functioning of the state, with a primary focus on addressing the economy, which is in a dire state. Responsibility for this task was entrusted to the Sharif clan, who were provided with “favourable” conditions by eliminating their main political rival – PTI and its leader, Imran Khan – from the political arena.

However, the opposition refused to “step aside.” Declaring the government an “usurper of power”, they launched various forms of resistance, sometimes pushing boundaries to the limit. These actions occasionally escalated into riots and clashes with law enforcement. This was evident during the mass protests of May 9, 2023, triggered by the arrest of Khan and his wife on corruption charges, as well as on November 24 of the same year, when demonstrators demanded their immediate release.

The political divide in Pakistan is compounded by the resurgence of separatist movements in Balochistan Province, which occupies half of the country’s territory, intertribal clashes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, and cross-border terrorist activities originating from neighboring Afghanistan. Adding to the tension is the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party’s control over Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, secured in the January 2024 elections. This has led to

accusations against PTI of exploiting “Pashtun separatism” as a political weapon against the central government.

Meanwhile, despite public optimism expressed by the central government about its [progress in combating inflation](#) and presenting a coherent economic reform plan – developed with the assistance, if not under the pressure, of international financial institutions – the overall outlook in Pakistan appears increasingly precarious. In light of these developments, the establishment has opted to abandon a heavy-handed approach against PTI and its leader, Imran Khan, in favor of initiating dialogue with the opposition.

For his part, Khan, still imprisoned, has approved negotiations between PTI’s current leadership and representatives of the government, led by the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). However, Khan has set two non-negotiable preconditions: an end to judicial persecution of PTI members and the establishment of a special commission to investigate the events of May 9, 2023.

The first round of talks took place on December 23, 2024, the second on January 2, 2025, and a third is scheduled for “early in the second week” of the new year. The [dialogue process](#), which remains fraught with challenges, was preceded by a notable reduction in the activity of military courts, often seen as a tool for suppressing opposition.

It is also worth noting that developments within Pakistan – an essential player in South Asia and a nuclear power – are under close scrutiny from global powers of higher geopolitical significance.

Contradictory Signals from the United States

Washington appears to be searching for an optimal framework for its relationship with Pakistan, one that does not jeopardize its larger goal of retaining India within its sphere of influence. India is viewed as a critical element of the anti-China “web” currently being constructed across the Indo-Pacific region. This broader geopolitical context, along with internal political uncertainties in the United States, likely explains the mixed signals Islamabad has been receiving from Washington in recent months.

On one hand, bilateral contacts between various ministries have significantly increased, and it seems evident that the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) disbursement of financial “tranches” to address Pakistan’s urgent economic issues would not have occurred without Washington’s approval.

On the other hand, recent months have seen a series of messages from the U.S. that Pakistan has interpreted as interference in its internal affairs. For instance, alongside European Union bureaucrats and certain UN bodies, the U.S. expressed dissatisfaction with the extension of

military court jurisdiction to civilian cases and the imprisonment of Imran Khan. In November 2024, about 50 U.S. congress members urged President Joe Biden [to take concrete action](#) to enforce a previously adopted House resolution condemning “human rights violations” in Pakistan. The same statement criticized the current U.S. ambassador to Pakistan for “inaction”.

Islamabad also reacted sharply to sanctions imposed by Washington in December 2024 over Pakistan’s [missile and nuclear modernization program](#). The U.S. believes this program will involve technological collaboration with China, further exacerbating tensions between the two countries.

On Certain Aspects of Relations with China and India

In any discussion of Pakistan’s geopolitical landscape, its relationships with China and India inevitably come to the forefront. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a monumental project launched in 2016, serves as the backbone of the long-standing formula describing the “ironclad” nature of Sino-Pakistani relations.

CPEC also plays a unifying role within Pakistan, linking the country’s diverse regions into a cohesive whole. However, this very integration has drawn the ire of separatist movements, particularly among the Pashtun and Baloch communities. Armed attacks targeting Chinese specialists working in Pakistan have become a central tactic of these groups. In response, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, like his predecessor Imran Khan, has consistently reaffirmed his government’s [commitment to CPEC](#) and pledged protection for Chinese nationals working in the country.

When it comes to Pakistan’s chief adversary – India – CPEC is [viewed in New Delhi](#) as a major obstacle to resolving the Kashmir issue. Naturally, this perspective starkly contrasts with Islamabad’s view. Pakistan’s position is bolstered by the fact that the CPEC route passes through the Pakistani-administered part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. This is why [India rejects calls](#) to participate in CPEC projects. The Kashmir conflict, however, is not the only contentious issue in Indo-Pakistani relations. Attempts to improve ties between the two nations have so far been limited to rare and largely symbolic public declarations.

Finally, it is worth noting Russia’s recent efforts to enhance its relationship with Pakistan. In this context, two important points must be considered to ensure the success of this positive development. First, Russia should remain entirely uninvolved in Pakistan’s domestic political disputes, though a clear understanding of the country’s internal dynamics would be

beneficial. Second, strengthening ties with Pakistan must not come at the expense of Russia's historically strong relations with India.

[Vladimir Terehov](#), January 23, 2025

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