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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala-like pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the dark green background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Elena Valdameri (elena.valdameri@gess.ethz.ch).



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PAKISTAN 2023: MULTIPLE CRISES IN THE LEAD-UP
TO THE GENERAL ELECTIONS

Marco Corsi

Asia Maior – An Italian think tank on Asia
macorsi@gmail.com

The salient events that characterized Pakistan in the period covered in this article (January – December 2023) were the political and economic crises that occurred in the lead-up to the general elections and the postponement of these elections to 2024. Former Prime Minister, Chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and top opposition leader Imran Khan was in a dire stand-off with the coalition government led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). After being ousted by a no-confidence vote on 9 April 2022 – which Khan attributed to a military plot aimed at pleasing the United States – the former premier clamoured for snap elections. Khan faced multiple trials on charges of terrorism, sedition, contempt of court and corruption. His imprisonment in May 2023 triggered mass protests on the part of angry mobs, which were followed by mass arrests and resignations from PTI leaders and workers in an alleged military-led effort to dismantle the party – the same party which had helped bring to power Khan back in 2018. In August 2023, Imran Khan was arrested again and sentenced to three years in prison, disqualifying him from running for public office for five years. The verdict was later suspended. Khan's detention, the postponement of the provincial and general elections, and the promulgation of laws that weakened civilian institutions in favour of the military were viewed with concern by many observers of the Pakistani political scene. The political turbulence occurred against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis, aggravated by delays in disbursements from the stalled bailout plan reached with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2019. However, an agreement with the institution was eventually reached, allowing for the resumption of short-term financial assistance in exchange for the adoption of new austerity measures. At the same time, Sharif's government began pursuing a prudent foreign policy aimed at consolidating or maximising the economic benefits derived from its relations with the leading world powers.

KEYWORDS – Army; Economic Crisis; Election; Imran Khan; International Monetary Fund; Political Crisis.

1. Introduction

In April 2022, after losing the military establishment's support, the *Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI) government faced a no-confidence vote from the opposition and lost its parliamentary majority. Former professional cricketer Imran Khan was ousted from the prime minister's office in a motion that – he argued

– was orchestrated in a plot hatched by then-political opposition and the United States [Corsi 2023: 396–397]. The events coincided with increased political instability in Pakistan, which continued in 2023 through the harsh confrontation between Khan and the 13-party coalition government, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) with Shehbaz Sharif as premier [*Ibid.*: 397-400]. The political dispute primarily pertained to elections, which were constitutionally required by the end of 2023. Following the ouster, Khan mobilised his die-hard supporters to call for early voting amid the weakening of Prime Minister Sharif’s administration following the PTI’s electoral victories in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Punjab, a traditional stronghold of the PML-N. In January 2023, the PTI dissolved the two provinces’ assemblies to force the federal government into early elections, while the Supreme Court of Pakistan ordered the Electoral Commission of Pakistan (ECP) – in vain – to comply with the constitutional provisions and hold elections within 90 days of the assemblies’ dissolution.

Many leaders and members of the PTI faced legal cases. Imran Khan was arrested while attending a hearing at an Islamabad Court on 9 May 2023 related to a controversial lawsuit filed by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). His brief detention triggered nationwide protests, some of which involved violent mob attacks on military installations and clashes with police [Ali 2023, 21 June]. In turn, there were mass arrests of PTI officials who were allegedly involved in the unrest.

Since his deposal, Imran Khan has adopted a firm anti-establishment stance, and his growing popularity has become a thorn in the side of the Army. In particular, he repeatedly accused the high ranks of the military establishment and Prime Minister Sharif of being involved in the assassination attempt against him in November 2022 [Singh & Rawat 2023, 26 May]. Amid this political instability, much attention was paid to the Army’s involvement in political matters under the new Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir, who replaced General Qamar Javed Bajwa at the end of 2022 [Afzal 2023, 13 January].

Critically, the vicissitudes of the PTI leader did not impact his influence on the masses. In fact, if Khan had the opportunity to participate in the upcoming election, he would have had a strong chance of returning to power [Wallen 2023, 16 May]. However, this possibility seemed to vanish on 5 August 2023, when Khan was arrested again after a court sentenced him to three years in prison for corruption, disqualifying him from politics for five years. Although this verdict was later suspended, Khan wasn’t released from prison due to an indictment for another case – and the disqualification persisted.

When the legislative session ended on 9 August 2023, the assemblies were dissolved, and a caretaker government was nominated. Almost simultaneously, it was announced that the election – constitutionally due within

90 days of the assemblies' dissolution – would be deferred to 2024 due to the need for new constituency delimitations, made necessary by the completion of the updated census. The postponement of the election to 2024 opened a period of guaranteed power for the caretaker government. In November 2023, the voting date was set for 8 February 2024.

Analysts have argued that the government and the armed forces shared the goal of sidelining Khan and rendering his party politically ineffectual prior to the general election and that this goal was the main reason behind the legal prosecutions of PTI leaders and the postponement of the election [Afzal 2023, 26 May]. In line with this, two laws passed by Parliament prior to its dissolution provided for the further militarisation of Pakistan's politics and judicial system and countered Khan's popularity [Sheikh 2023, August 2023].

This political confrontation occurred against the backdrop of a dire economic crisis triggered by the country's structural weaknesses and exacerbated by both the negative externalities of Russia's war in Ukraine and the 2022 Pakistan floods, which caused more than US\$ 30 billion in damages [Soumya & Ghosh 2023, 31 May; IMF 2023, 18 July]. Despite attempts to decline further IMF aid packages, Islamabad ultimately reached a new agreement with the international institution, resulting in new austerity measures [Butt 2022, 13 December].

Islamabad went on to adopt a policy of prudence towards the leading world powers. It strengthened its economic relations with China, continued its energy cooperation with Russia, and maintained the interlocutory status quo in its bilateral ties with the United States and India.

2. *The economy*

Long-standing structural bottlenecks holding back Pakistan's socioeconomic development, growth-enhancing investment and job creation included inadequate social spending, corruption, a weak business climate and excessive regulation and licensing requirements [IMF 2023, 18 July]. Pakistan has long relied on an economic model grounded in foreign loans, leading to an inability to repay its foreign debt and a high risk of bankruptcy [Anees 2023, 2 May; Naqvi & Mushahid 2023, 7 June]. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC; the flagship project of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013 aimed at creating trade routes to China and addressing Pakistan's infrastructure gaps) has contributed to Pakistan's economic distress. In fact, it has made Islamabad heavily reliant on Chinese equity holdings and loans, widened Pakistan's unsustainable external debt and current account deficit and has further decreased foreign exchange reserves [Ahmad & Gul 2023, 21 November; Boni 2023, 23 May; Bhowmick 2023, 24 June]. As of December 2022, Pakistan – with a GDP of about US\$ 350

billion – had a total external debt and liabilities count of US\$ 126.3 billion, of which US\$ 97.5 billion belonged to the federal government. Approximately 30% of the central government's total debt stemmed from private and bilateral Chinese lending. Pakistan also had a US\$ 45 billion debt with multilateral institutions (the World Bank, the IMF, and the Asian Development Bank) and US\$ 8.5 billion with Paris Club countries [The World Bank 2023, April; Rana 2023, 6 April; Ahmad 2023, 14 April].

Islamabad has approached the IMF 23 times since 1980 [IMF 2020, 29 February]. Experts have repeatedly warned that IMF assistance would not solve Pakistan's economic challenges, as they require long-term structural reforms of the country's macroeconomic framework [PIDE 2022, September]. They have also stressed that the conditions attached to IMF loans have worsened Pakistan's fiscal position, resulting in tariff hikes, high inflation, and the devaluation of the Pakistani rupee [Asim 2022, 23 September]. In May 2019, the IMF and the government of then-Prime Minister Imran Khan agreed to a 39-month US\$ 6 billion bailout package for Pakistan under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) programme, which was formally launched in July that same year [IMF 2019, 3 July]. The associated funding was later suspended, however, when Prime Minister Khan refused to adhere to some of the programme's conditionalities [Corsi 2023: 390]. After Khan's government was ousted in April 2022, the new Shehbaz Sharif government sought to unlock the funding and started a confidence-building process with the IMF. At the same time, a further spike in inflation hit the country, and the country's foreign reserves dwindled to less than US\$ 4 billion [State Bank of Pakistan 2023; Mangi 2023, 5 February; Somro 2023, 1 May; *Reuters* 2023, 30 June].

In August 2022, the IMF approved the seventh and eighth reviews of the EFF bailout programme, allowing for the release of over US\$ 1.1 billion and extending the programme by one year. The parties discussed raising fuel, electricity, and gas prices; however, with the election set for 2023, Sharif's administration resisted adopting austerity measures [*Outlook* 2023, 14 March; *The Nation* 2023, 10 May]. In November 2022, Pakistan and the IMF began engagement on the ninth review of the loan programme. However, the two delegations didn't meet until February 2023 due to differences in programme targets. The energy subsidies that the PTI government had granted amid the shock to global energy markets triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the new government's indecision regarding the turnaround of such assistance significantly hindered economic performance [Corsi 2023: 389–391]. In January 2023, inflation soared to 47%, and the value of the rupee plummeted by 54%, pointing to a potential default [*The Friday Times* 2023, 4 April]. The country's foreign exchange reserves fell, the fiscal deficit grew, the balance of payments deteriorated, and public debt rose by approximately 74% of the GDP, leading external debt to exceed about 45% of the GDP [Rasul 2023, 2 April]. The State Bank of Pakistan

announced that it would raise interest rates from 16% to 17% – the highest rate in 26 years – in order to address high inflation [*The Patriot* 2023, 4 July].

On 15 February 2023, the federal government presented the Finance (Supplementary) Act, 2023 («mini-budget») to the National Assembly [Hussain 2023, 16 February]. The tax-loaded mini-budget aimed to meet the global lender's conditions to allow for the release of the US\$ 1.1 billion loan tranche by holding down the country's deficit and generating about US\$ 643 million in four months.¹ In April 2023, Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves were boosted by the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China's disbursement of US\$ 300 million, the latest of three tranches of a credit line collectively worth US\$ 1.3 billion. Around the same time, the United Arab Emirates confirmed to the IMF a commitment of US\$ 1 billion in financing to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia committed US\$ 2 billion, China committed an additional US\$ 2 billion, and Qatar, the United States and Iran committed themselves to some additional financial support [*Daily Mail* 2023, 1 April; *Daily Pakistan* 2023, 6 April; *Business Recorder* 2023, 14 April; *The Current* 2023, 27 April]. The IMF mandated that to restart the bailout program assurances of financial support from primary creditors had to be secured, and austerity measures aimed at boosting government revenue had to be implemented [Rana 2023, 30 May]. However, the ninth review had yet to be concluded by May 2023. On 9 June 2023, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar presented the budget for the new fiscal year (July 2023 – June 2024) to the National Assembly. The budget, which featured a spending target of US\$ 50 billion and a tax revenue projection of US\$ 32 billion conflicted with EFF conditionalities and favoured spending over austerity measures [*Dawn* 2023, 9 June]. Even if the forthcoming elections could justify the government's choices, this rationale did not satisfy the IMF [Shahid 2023, 15 June; Brewster 2023, 22 June]. Soon after the presentation, Pakistan reviewed the budget and raised projected tax revenue by US\$ 752 million, putting forward a primary surplus of around 0.4% of GDP. Additionally, Islamabad curtailed non-essential expenditures and withdrew its guidance on import prioritisation, demonstrating its commitment to adhere to complete market determination. Pakistan's Central Bank raised interest rates further to 22% to reduce demand and ease strain on Pakistan's foreign reserves [Government of Pakistan Finance Division 2023; *The Economic Times* 2023, 24 June; *Leather* 2023, 26 June].

These steps taken by the government allowed Pakistan to reach an agreement with the IMF on 29 June 2023 to release US\$ 3 billion under a

1. Salient features of the taxation measures included raising the General Sales Tax (GST) from 17% to 18% on imported goods (and to 25% for luxurious items); increasing the prices of natural gas and oil, which was one of the preconditions of the IMF to release the tranche; and increasing federal excise duties on several goods, including tobacco, aerated water, sugary drinks and cement [*Times of India* 2023, 5 February; *First Post* 2023, 16 February; *Irfa* 2023, 28 February; Jain 2023, 26 March].

nine-month-long Stand-By Arrangement (SBA).² This SBA was agreed to a day before the EFF expiration, while Islamabad was awaiting the release of the remaining US\$ 2.5 billion from the bailout package agreed to in 2019. The approval allowed for an immediate disbursement of US\$ 1.2 billion, with the remaining instalments subject to quarterly reviews. This deal gave Pakistan temporary economic relief and the government a pre-election political boost [IMF 2023, 29 June]. Notably, the new loan made Pakistan the fourth-largest borrower from the IMF globally, behind Argentina, Egypt and Ukraine [Imdad 2023, 3 July; Janjua 2023, 3 July; Shahnawaz 2023, 4 July].

3. *Khan's arrests and the weakening of the PTI*

After completing investigations triggered by a report filed by PDM members in August 2022 (the «Toshakhana» case pertaining to Imran Khan's declarations of annual assets), the ECP disqualified the opposition leader, on 21 October 2022, from holding public office for five years on corruption and terrorism charges [Corsi 2023: 400]. Since then, the government has launched over 100 cases and investigations against him, ranging from corruption to terrorism, blasphemy and sedition [Gul 2023, 25 March].

Following accusations of violating a ban on public gatherings by organising a rally, a first information report was registered against Imran Khan in October 2022 for allegedly receiving suspicious foreign funding through a PTI account [*The News* 2023, 14 March; Gul 2023, 19 March]. Another arrest warrant delivered to Khan pertained to his alleged threatening of a judge, Zeba Chaudhry, after she had approved the remand of Kahn's aide, Shahbaz Gill [Corsi 2023: 400]. Again, in October 2022, Khan was charged under Pakistani anti-terrorism law for his remarks about filing cases against political opponents and top police officials. Khan encountered additional legal trouble for failing to attend required court hearings. In January 2023, the ECP issued a fresh bailable arrest warrant against the former premier and other PTI leaders in a contempt case based on statements against the poll body and the Chief Election Commissioner.

After postponing it twice because of a ban on public gatherings in the provincial capital, on 13 March 2023, Khan organised a rally in Lahore to kick off his election campaign despite security and arrest threats [*The News* 2023, 12 March; *Ibid.*, 13 March]. On the day of the rally, Islamabad police reached Lahore to arrest him on charges stemming from the judge-threatening case. Khan's supporters clashed with police, who ultimately walked off without making an arrest. Nonetheless, the attempt to arrest Khan ap-

2. Details of the IMF's Stand-By Arrangements can be found in the IMF's fact-sheet, available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2023/Stand-By-Arrangement-SBA>.

peared to be a show of force, aimed at intimidating the PTI Chairman, as it came just before the suspension of his arrest warrant by an Islamabad court the following day and the conversion of several other non-bailable warrants to bailable ones [*The Express Tribune* 2023, 31 March; *The Daily Patriot*, 4 April].

However, on 9 May 2023, Imran Khan was arrested on a warrant issued by the NAB, pertaining to the Al-Qadir Trust case, dating back to 2019. The arrest was made during Khan's court appearance in Islamabad for unrelated corruption charges. In 2019, real estate tycoon Malik Riaz was investigated in the United Kingdom for money laundering. A few months earlier, the Supreme Court of Pakistan had fined Riaz's company, Bahria Town, US\$ 3 billion for illegally acquiring and disproportionately profiting from land in Karachi. A settlement was reached whereby Riaz's assets would be transferred from the UK to Pakistan instead of a fine being levied. Khan and his wife were accused of obtaining land from Riaz to facilitate the US\$ 240 million repatriation [Mallik 2023, 12 May]. The land was then allocated to the Al-Qadir Trust, a charitable organisation founded by philanthropist Abdul Sattar Edhi, which was established in Islamabad a few weeks after the Imran-led government approved the agreement with Riaz [*Daily Patriot* 2023, 9 May; *Dawn* 2023, 9 May; Niazi 2023, 9 May; *The Friday Times* 2023, 10 May; *The Express Tribune* 2023, 10 May; *Reuters* 2023, 10 May; *The News* 2023, 10 May].

Khan's popularity has only risen since his ouster in 2022, as demonstrated by the PTI's successes in provincial elections in Punjab and KP [Mangi 2023, 7 March; *The News* 2023, 4 April]. For this reason, according to the former Premier, all the charges and allegations against him were politically motivated and aimed at keeping him from leading PTI's election campaign [*The News* 2023, 7 March; *The Express Tribune* 2023, 31 March]. After his arrest, protests erupted across Pakistan, and military installations were raided by angry mobs.

Similarly, the Supreme Court ruled the arrest of the PTI chairman unlawful and unconstitutional because it violated the petitioner's right of access to justice and «the sanctity and safety of the court as he had already surrendered to the court for seeking judicial relief against the action taken by NAB» [Fraser & Davies 2023, 10 May; Bhatti 2023, 11 May]. Imran Khan was then granted protected bail, which prevented him from being re-arrested on the same charges. Despite the rulings, the corruption charges against Mr. Khan persisted [Shafiq 2023, 12 May].

Police also arrested close aides of Imran Khan. PTI Vice President Fawad Chaudhry was jailed and later released on charges of threatening the chief of the ECP and other government officials after he criticised the appointment of the caretaker chief minister in Punjab. Awami Muslim League Chief Sheikh Rashid, a close aide of Imran Khan, faced charges for his allegation that Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Co-Chairman Asif Ali Zardari

plotted to assassinate Khan in 2023 [Zake 2023, 4 February]. In April 2023, Punjab police and anti-corruption officials conducted an arrest operation at the residence of PTI President Parvez Elahi as part of a case being handled by the Lahore High Court. The police operation was unsuccessful, as Elahi was absent, but he was arrested in a corruption case later in June 2023 [*The Express Tribune* 2023, 28 April; *The Nation* 2023, 3 June].

On 5 August 2023, an Islamabad trial court declared Khan guilty of corrupt practices in the Toshakhana case and sentenced him to three years in prison. The case was named after the treasury («Toshakhana») where gifts handed to government officials from foreign officials are kept [Joles 2023, 5 April]. Allegedly, in his asset declarations, Khan concealed details of money that he earned – about US\$ 635,000 – from selling gifts that he had received while in office [*NDTV* 2023, 14 March]. Again, Khan defended himself and denied the charges, arguing that he used the proceeds from selling the gifts for public purposes. He was arrested by Punjab police from his residence in Lahore and transferred to Attock Jail [Gul 2023, 6 August]. This time, Mr. Khan urged his supporters to stage peaceful protests, and he was taken into custody without any significant resistance [Masood & Goldbaum 2023, 4 August]. At the end of September, Khan was transferred to Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi, which offered better facilities.

Again, the judiciary – the Supreme Court Bar Association – expressed reservations about the legality of the judgment leading to Khan's arrest due to its alleged blatant violation of the Islamabad High Court's order, in which the trial court judge was asked to re-examine the jurisdiction of the ECP's complaint. According to Khan's lawyer, the trial had been conducted without allowing the accused to defend himself [Davies & Walsh 2023, 6 August]. In response to his appeal, on 29 August 2023, a federal court suspended Imran Khan's corruption conviction and three-year jail sentence, ordering his release on bail. The federal court motivated the decision, arguing that the sentence was unlawful and breached Khan's fundamental right to due process and a fair trial.

Despite the suspension, the verdict disqualified Khan from holding public office for five years under Article 63(1)(h) of the Constitution [Yusuf 2023, 8 August; Radford 2023, 9 August].³ Additionally, Khan was not released due to a separate case registered by the Federal Investigation Agency against him for allegedly violating the Official Secrets Act and sharing information on a «cypher» cable, for which he was indicted on 23 October 2023.

3. An amendment passed by the National Assembly in June 2023 limited the disqualification of a parliamentarian to a maximum of five years, enabling those who had been barred for life from public office to pursue a potential return [Satti 2023, 25 June]. Among those who could benefit from the amendment, it is worth mentioning not only Imran Khan himself but also the PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif, who was disqualified in 2017 and who returned to Pakistan in October 2023 after four years of self-exile in London [Corsi 2018: 353–356].

The case referred to a cable, leaked in early August 2023, that documented an alleged conversation between US State Department officials and the then-ambassador of Pakistan to the US about ousting Khan from power over his neutrality on Russia's war in Ukraine in exchange for better relations between Islamabad and Washington [Grim and Hussain 2023, 9 August; Gul 2023, 29 August; *The News* 2023, 29 August; *DW* 2023, 23 October].

4. *The alleged interference by the military establishment in the political space*

Khan blamed the Pakistani Army and its chief – General Asim Munir – for ordering his arrest and repeated allegations that Major General Faisal Naseer, a senior military figure, and Prime Minister Sharif were behind the November 2022 assassination attempt against him [Baloch & Ellis-Petersen 2023, 14 May]. Following Khan's release on the Al-Qadir Trust case, the military announced that it would prosecute protesters who attacked military facilities following Khan's arrest [Shirazi 2023, 15 May]. Many PTI leaders left the party – or even politics altogether – under the pressure related to their alleged role in the turmoil, while others were taken into custody [*The Current*, 11 May; Hussain 2023, 24 May; Samaa 2023, 24 May]. Formally, PTI leadership confirmed the party's non-involvement in the protests and claimed that Pakistani intelligence agents were among the protesters, suggesting a plot between the military and the government aimed at dismantling the PTI, arresting Khan and having him tried by a military court to prevent him from contesting Pakistan's general election. Analysts have largely concurred with the PTI's assessment, tracing the reason for the arrests and consequential *en masse* resignations among PTI leaders to Khan's attacks on the military leadership. Friction between Imran Khan and General Munir dates to the latter's removal from his post as Director-General of the ISI in 2019, during Khan's government [Siddiq 2023, June; Ellis-Petersen & Baloch 2023, 3 June].

The concerns regarding the rise in military influence in the country's political life were corroborated in August 2023, when the National Assembly – with a coalition majority including the PML-N and the PPP – passed two bills granting additional power to the armed forces.⁴ The Pakistan Army (Amendment) Bill 2023 criminalised criticism of the military establishment and enabled the military to act against such criticism [National Assembly of Pakistan 2023, 18 August]. The Official Secrets (Amendment) Bill 2023 gave security agencies unlimited discretionary powers to arrest those deemed a threat to national security and try them before military courts [Senate of

4. Both parties are signatories of the 2006 Charter of Democracy, through which they pledged to refuse military support for political ends by reaffirming the supremacy of civilian government [*Dawn* 2006, 16 May].

Pakistan 2023, 18 August]. In the context of the forthcoming election, the two laws ensured the continued political weakening of the PTI and provided the military with the tools to counter Khan's attacks. Compounding allegations of military interference in the political space, the military reportedly requested media silence on Imran Khan – including just the utterance of his name – and his campaign against the Army [Grim *et al.*, 2023, 2 June; Davies 2023, 8 June; Mir 2023, 21 June]. As a by-product of the events of 9 May 2023, General Munir consolidated his position in the Army by ridding the top ranks of pro-Khan elements [Haqqani 2023, 9 August]. Sympathetic senior officers were removed, and disciplinary measures were taken against lower-ranking officers accused of not acting effectively to stop the Khan-induced turmoil [*The Dawn*, 26 June; Katju 2023, 29 June].

5. *The postponement of the election*

In January 2023, after the assemblies of both provinces under PTI control – Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – were dissolved and caretaker governments were appointed, the PTI called on the ECP to schedule fresh elections [*Ani News* 2023, 18 January; *The News* 2023, 26 January; Ahmed 2023, 26 January; Hussain 2023, 13 March]. In March 2023, the ECP announced the delay of the elections in the two provinces until 8 October in Punjab and a to-be-determined date in KP on account of economic stress and the rising threat of terrorism. The Supreme Court of Pakistan rejected this ECP decision as a violation of the Constitution, which stipulates that elections must be held within 90 days of an assembly's dissolution. Still, the PML-N government rejected the ruling of the Supreme Court, as only three judges reached the verdict after the other six recused themselves [*The Washington Post* 2023, 4 April]. Soon after, the National Assembly passed a resolution urging the Prime Minister not to accept the Supreme Court's decision [*Dawn* 2023, 6 April]. In April 2023, talks began between Pakistan's coalition government and former Prime Minister Imran Khan's PTI, ultimately leading to an agreement to hold provincial and general elections on the same day [*The Tribune* 2023, 6 May].

On 9 August 2023, the national assemblies were dissolved [*Daily Pakistan* 2023, 18 July; Abrar 2023, 19 July]. After the results of the first-ever digital census were approved by the Council of Common Interests (the constitutional body that coordinates the relationship between the federal and provincial governments) in August 2023, the ECP announced that the general election would be delayed to 2024 due to the new constituency delimitations [Amilbhatti 2023, 6 August]. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif confirmed this shortly before the dissolution of the assemblies [Shahzad 2023, 5 August; Khan 2023, 18 August; Nawaz 2023, 30 August]. On 12 August 2023, Prime Minister Sharif and opposition leader Raja Riaz announced

that Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, a senator from Baluchistan, had been chosen as caretaker premier to steer the country until a new government was elected. Kakar, a former PML-N member, left that party and formed the Baluchistan Awami Party in 2017, becoming its spokesperson. He has been a member of the Senate Standing Committee on Defence, Foreign Affairs and Parliamentary Affairs and the Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resources. His close relationship with the military establishment led political analysts to allege that his nomination had come from the Army [*The Guardian* 2023, 12 August].

On 2 November 2023, Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja and the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Arif Alvi, agreed that the general elections would take place on 8 February 2024 [Yusuf 2023, 2 November]. Two days after the announcement, Fawad Chaudhry, once allied with Imran Khan, was arrested with no public explanation despite having distanced himself from the PTI [*Dunya News* 2023, 4 November]. Soon after, another top leader of the PTI party, Asad Umar, announced that he was quitting politics [*The Express Tribune* 2023, 11 November].

Analysts of the Pakistani political scene pointed out that both the accusatory fury against Imran Khan and the postponement of the elections in violation of the Constitution promoted the political objective of the PML-N – and of the PDM in general – of weakening the PTI in preparation for the voting process. Some analysts also stressed that the reduction of the PTI's electoral reach could not have happened without the consent of the military establishment [Bokhari & Parkin 2023, 8 August]. In this regard, the alleged presence of a common political objective shared by the government forces and the military establishment was considered alarming as further militarising Pakistan's political and judicial system [Sheikh 2023, August 2023; Khawar 2023, 24 August].

6. *Foreign affairs amid internal instability*

6.1. *The relations with China*

Beijing and Islamabad maintain a strong relationship despite the slow progress of the CPEC, the surge in extremism – which often targets Chinese nationals residing in Pakistan, triggering concern about the future of Chinese investment – and political instability [Shoab & Basim 2023, 7 July]. Chinese authorities have repeatedly called for national political stability as a prerequisite to protect their investments under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, security and investment interests do not impact China's broader strategic geopolitical interests in Pakistan, which serve to counter Indian power and facilitate Chinese economic prospects in Afghanistan. Thus, Pakistan's instability does not pose a particularly serious threat to the China-Pakistan relationship. Since the CPEC was launched in 2013, Pakistan has had four

prime ministers – Nawaz Sharif, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Imran Khan, and Shehbaz Sharif – from two different political parties. However, none of these political transitions led to a recalibration of the country's partnership with Beijing; in fact, political cooperation with China has only grown over time, especially under the CPEC [Shannon 2023, 16 May]. The China-Pakistan partnership has proven to be resilient, as demonstrated by Beijing's decision to grant a US\$ 2 billion loan to Pakistan in August 2018, just days after Imran Khan's election to the prime ministership, whose repayment, due on March 2023, was delayed by China in that date [SCMP 2018; Shahzad and Shahid 2023, 31 March]. Also, cooperation in energy, military, security and counterterrorism matters between the two countries has been ongoing and was only reinforced by Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang's visit to Pakistan in May 2023 [Hussain 2023, 27 April; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023, 7 May; Shahzad 2023, 20 June]. On 31 July 2023, He Lifeng, the vice premier of China and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, visited Pakistan to participate in events commemorating the 10th anniversary of the CPEC. During these events, representatives from Pakistan and China signed several agreements to enhance bilateral cooperation and economic relations [*Independent News Pakistan* 2023, 31 July; Jamal 2023, November].

6.2. *The relations with Russia*

Sharif's government has also pursued energy deals with Russia, following up on energy cooperation that was already on the bilateral agenda when former Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Moscow in 2022 [Corsi 2023: 391–392; Krishnankutty 2023, 13 June]. In April 2023, Sharif's government finalised an agreement with Moscow on 100,000 metric tons of discounted crude oil imports – predominantly supplied by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – to provide its citizens with some relief in the lead-up to elections.⁵ Energy cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad has been economically challenging. Pakistan's economic crisis reduces Islamabad's long-term financial capacities and, therefore, the sustainability of the energy deal. Although not objected to by Washington, the arrangement and its modality – Pakistan used the Chinese Renminbi to pay Russia – raised concerns among US officials about the deal's geopolitical implications. Pakistan continued to balance relations with Russia and the West, maintained a position of neutrality on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and avoided antagonising the US, which strongly

5. Reportedly, Pakistan planned to import two-thirds of its oil requirements from Russia [Jamal 2023, June]. However, after receiving the first Russian oil tanker, Islamabad suspended crude oil imports from Moscow, as local refineries failed to extract as much petrol and diesel out of imported crude as they extract from Gulf crudes [*Daily Pakistan* 2023, 13 August]. At the end of September 2023, the first shipment of liquified petroleum gas from Russia reached Pakistan [*The Frontier Post* 2023, 27 September].

influences global financial institutions. At the same time, Pakistan's purchase added a buyer to Moscow's sales of redirected oil from Western markets to India and China because of its invasion of Ukraine [Shahzad 2023, April 20; *Business Recorder* 2023, 26 April; Syed 2023, 28 April]. The April 2023 energy deal with Russia sealed the solid strategic partnership between the two countries, as confirmed by the statement of Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs commemorating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic bilateral relations with Pakistan [Government of Pakistan 2023, 1 May; Krishnan-kutty 2023, 13 June; Ali 2023, 21 June].

6.3. *The relations with the US*

Pakistan-US bilateral relations have resumed and slowly improved since the tensions following Imran Khan's accusation that the US contributed to his ouster in April 2022. As before, they have primarily focussed on transactional and security-related cooperation [Corsi 2023: 396–397; Jamal 2023, March]. Shifting US foreign policy priorities towards the Indo-Pacific and the war in Ukraine have reduced Islamabad's ability to obtain economic or strategic advantages from Washington in exchange for security cooperation [Kapur 2023, 3 March; Ijaz *et al.* 2023]. However, Pakistan remained a valuable US ally. A series of communications and meetings between representatives of the two governments reiterated the mutual commitment to deepening bilateral ties, particularly after the humanitarian crisis that followed the 2022 floods [Yousaf 2022, 7 July; Hussain 2022, 8 July; U.S. Department of State 2022, 26 September; *The News* 2022, 27 September; *Pakistan Observer* 2023, 26 June]. Washington worked with the Pakistani military on counter-terrorism efforts and other defence-related matters, including in Afghanistan, as demonstrated by the US State Department's approval of a US\$ 450 million sale of F-16 aircraft and related equipment to Pakistan in September 2023 [*Reuters* 2022, 8 September; Jamal 2022, October]. In February 2023, Pakistan and the US held high-level talks in Washington to coordinate security-related issues and explore potential new areas of cooperation. Nonetheless, in the year under review, the White House did not engage yet in a substantive «reset» of its bilateral ties with Islamabad, made necessary by its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. The Biden Administration continued to support Pakistan's democratic institutions while taking no position on the country's domestic political disputes [Congressional Research Service 2023, 22 May]. The centrality of democratic principles and respect for the rule of law in US-Pakistan relations was reaffirmed by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a telephone conversation with Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in July 2023 [U.S. Department of State 2023, 24 July]. Still, the US remains mindful of the deepening political instability in Pakistan, public support for Khan and Islamabad's efforts to strengthen its bilateral relations with China [Mishra & Sharma 2023, 23 June; Syed 2023, 9 August; *The Frontier Post* 2023, 9 August].

6.4. *The engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*

On 4 and 5 May 2023, Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Zardari Bhutto attended a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) hosted by India in Goa ahead of the SCO leaders' summit scheduled for July 2023 in New Delhi. Bhutto's visit was the first to India by a Pakistani Foreign Minister in 12 years [*The Patriot* 2023, 4 May; *Business Recorder* 2023, 5 May]. For Islamabad, the visit marked an opportunity to strengthen engagement with the SCO – led by China and Russia – and advance its foreign policy interests with the Central Asian member states, with which Pakistan had started intensifying relations under Khan's government to expand trade and connectivity [Pandita 2023, 7 May]. From the perspective of India-Pakistan bilateral relations, Pakistan's participation in the meeting was unsuccessful, as Bhutto Zardari only briefly met his counterpart, Minister of External Affairs of India Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and did not have any substantial discussions with him. In fact, after their encounter, Jaishankar criticised Zardari's statement on the weaponization of terrorism for «diplomatic point scoring» [Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, 5 May; Adil 2023, 8 May; Tiezzi 2023, 9 May].

The recent political and, allegedly, military-related crises in Pakistan have diminished the legitimacy of Pakistan's government as a credible interlocutor of New Delhi. At the same time, it can't be said that Pakistan's crises significantly impacted ties with India, given that there was already a lack of ongoing dialogue and political will to repair the difficult relation with Islamabad on the part of New Delhi [Sobhan & Sham 2023, 16 May]. Addressing a presser to highlight the achievement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during his tenure, Bilawal Zardari Bhutto reiterated that Pakistan's stance on bilateral relations with India was unequivocal and consistent; unless New Delhi revoked its illegal and unilateral acts of 2019 over Jammu and Kashmir, there was no space for meaningful engagement [*The News* 2023, 10 August].

7. *Conclusions*

The most prominent developments in Pakistan in 2023 revolved around the intersection of political and economic crises, particularly in the lead-up to the general elections.

In April 2022, Pakistan's PTI government lost the support of the military and faced a vote of no confidence, leading to the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan. This political turmoil continued in 2023 with a dispute over the timing of constitutionally required elections. Khan found himself embroiled in a dire standoff with the coalition government led by the PML-N and marred by multiple legal battles. Many PTI leaders faced legal cases, and Khan himself was arrested in May 2023, leading to nationwide

protests, clashes, and the resignation of PTI leaders and members. Khan remained popular despite the attack on him, but his political future dimmed when he was arrested again in August 2023 and sentenced to three years in prison, which disqualified him from holding public office for five years.

The detention of Khan, the postponement of provincial and general elections to 2024 and the strengthening of the military over civilian institutions raised suspicions of a military-led effort to side-line Khan and triggered concerns over the militarisation of Pakistan's political and judicial systems.

Amid this political turmoil, Pakistan grappled with a severe economic crisis that was exacerbated by delays in receiving funds from the stalled bailout agreement reached with the IMF in 2019. A solution was eventually reached, facilitating the resumption of short-term financial assistance in exchange for the adoption of new austerity measures. Sharif's government pursued a cautious foreign policy aimed at enhancing economic cooperation with various major powers.

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