

PAKISTAN 2024: POLITICAL TURMOIL AND ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

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Pakistan's general election, held on 8 February 2024, was marred by allegations of vote manipulation and delays in the ballot counting process. International observers called for thorough investigations to assess the integrity and fairness of the electoral process. Reports indicated the detention of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party leaders, including the ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan, along with their supporters. There were allegations of harassment targeting their relatives and journalists by the military, and the PTI was prohibited from utilising its symbol on ballot papers. Despite these coercive measures, independent candidates affiliated with the PTI secured 101 parliamentary seats. In contrast, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), led by Shehbaz Sharif, did not secure the requisite parliamentary majority to form a government, obtaining only 75 seats. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Bilawal Zardari Bhutto, secured 54 parliamentary seats, which were insufficient to combine with Sharif's faction to form a government. Protracted negotiations culminated in the formation of a larger government coalition, purportedly endorsed by the military establishment. While alleged military efforts were successful in preventing Khan from returning to power, they were unsuccessful in countering the growing popularity of the PTI and the widespread criticism directed at the treatment of the former Prime Minister and his party.

Protracted negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an additional bailout programme further exacerbated Pakistan's severe economic challenges. The agreement was contingent upon commitments to implement austerity measures, which adversely affected citizens' everyday lives and contributed to the diminishing popularity of the new government. Pakistan also faced security issues, particularly the resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban in the Northwestern border regions and ethno-nationalist unrest in Baluchistan. Geopolitical tensions arising from cross-border skirmishes with Iran and extensive Chinese investments in the region have compounded these issues. US concerns about proliferation have triggered sanctions on suppliers of Pakistan's ballistic missile program, particularly Chinese firms.

KEYWORDS – China; elections; Iran; non-proliferation; PTI.

1. Introduction

Pakistan's general election was held on 8 February 2024. The electoral campaign presented disturbing similarities to the one in 2018, which re-

sulted in the victory of Imran Khan. At that time, it was alleged that Imran Khan's led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) had secured the elections with the support of the military. It is widely believed that Khan's removal in 2022 followed a rift with the army's top ranks, which turned against the former cricket player due to flaws in his governance, poor economic performance, and open confrontation with the military [Corsi 2024, pp. 393-95]. Khan accused the military of orchestrating his removal through a parliamentary vote of no-confidence in April 2022. Following an assassination attempt in November 2022, he intensified his campaign against the military establishment [Corsi 2024, pp. 358-61]. Similarly, in 2024, it was reported that the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) had secured the support of the military. PTI supporters accused the military of marginalising PTI's key leaders through criminal measures driven by political motives [Schorzman 2018, 6 June; Bukhari 2018, 16 July; Zahra-Malik 2018, 21 July].

The election was marred by widespread public distrust regarding its transparency [*The Guardian* 2024, 6 February; Tharoor 2024, 7 February]. Thousands of PTI candidates had their nomination papers rejected. Khan's allies reportedly encountered significant pressure to dissociate from the party under threat of sanctions on the part of the military, with some being apprehended on various charges. Simultaneously, PTI supporters faced detention and harassment. Court decisions compelled the PTI to nominate independent candidates and revoked the party's electoral symbol [Abbasi 2023, 9 September]. Imran Khan was arrested on charges that rendered him ineligible to run in the election, and media coverage of his trial was severely restricted.

PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif stood a strong chance of securing a fourth term.¹ He returned to Pakistan in October 2023 after spending four years in self-imposed exile in the United Kingdom to avoid serving prison sentences on corruption charges [Corsi 2018, 353-56]. On 8 January 2024, the Supreme Court overturned his conviction and sentence on appeal and waived the lifetime ban on politicians with criminal convictions from contesting elections [*The Express Tribune* 2024a, 9 January].

The electoral race was chiefly dominated by the rivalry between Shehbaz Sharif, Imran Khan, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and son of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and former President Asif Zardari [Niaz 2024, 28 January; *The Nation* 2024, 27 January; Chughtai & Hussain 2024, 3 February; Peshimam 2024, 6 February]. Two days after the election, the PML-N nominated Nawaz's brother and previous premier, Shehbaz Sharif, as the party's can-

1. Sharif's first term extended from November 1990 to July 1993; the second from February 1997 to October 1999; and the third from June 2013 to July 2017 [Ellis-Petersen & Baloch 2024, 5 February].

didate for the prime ministerial position [Khan 2024, 15 February]. Khan and the PTI maintained significant popularity for their stance against a perceived corrupt elite. The party and its imprisoned leader used artificial intelligence-generated footage of Khan in their electoral campaign to encourage supporters to vote. However, the PTI faced challenges in fielding candidates after the Supreme Court ruled against the use of its electoral symbol on ballots. Consequently, many PTI politicians ran as independents and secured more parliamentary seats than any of the other major parties. Lacking a party with a clear majority, the PML-N and PPP formed a coalition government, which also included several minor political parties.

Pakistan is grappling with severe economic stress and has reached a new agreement with the IMF for a fresh US\$ 7 billion bailout program, contingent upon the implementation of various economic reforms. The recent austerity measures introduced by the newly elected government have fuelled growing discontent among the populace, amplifying the PML-N's concerns about the political threat posed by the PTI and prompting further attempts to neutralise Imran Khan and his party.

In a potentially dangerous development in foreign policy, Iran conducted missile strikes in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, reportedly targeting militant strongholds. While Pakistan responded promptly with military action, diplomatic efforts successfully prevented further escalation of the situation.

In June 2024, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with Chinese President Xi Jinping to seek additional investments; however, no new commitments were made. China expressed concerns regarding the suboptimal execution of its investments, ongoing political instability in Pakistan, and the rising number of militant attacks targeting Chinese workers. In response to these challenges, Pakistan heightened security around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crucial infrastructure and economic initiative designed to enhance connectivity and cooperation between the two countries. Launched as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the CPEC has frequently been targeted by militant groups.

Since the Taliban assumed control of Afghanistan in 2021, Pakistan has experienced a surge in militant violence, primarily from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an extremist coalition supported by Taliban leaders that frequently conduct cross-border attacks. Islamabad has repeatedly urged Kabul to take action against these groups; however, the Afghan government denies any involvement or responsibility.

Meanwhile, the US has distanced itself from Pakistan, shifting its focus toward strengthening relations with India and imposing sanctions on Pakistan's missile program. These actions have further strained diplomatic relations, particularly in the context of Pakistan's growing connection with China and Iran.

2. *The elections and the coalition government*

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's term concluded on 9 August 2023, paving the way for the establishment of a caretaker government. According to Pakistan's constitutional guidelines, elections are mandated to be held within 60 days following the dissolution of parliament under normal circumstances and within 90 days in the case of an early dissolution. However, citing the latest census data, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) postponed the elections to allow for the redrawing of electoral boundaries. As a result, the elections were rescheduled for 8 February 2024 [Corsi 2024, pp. 262–63]. The opposition and its supporters expressed concerns about the timing of the census data release, suggesting it was being used as a pretext to delay the elections, potentially granting the government – and the military – additional time to influence the electoral environment.

In early January 2024, the ECP announced the status of candidates' nomination papers. Of nearly 26,000 applicants, 3,240 individuals, primarily from the PTI, were disqualified from participating for various reasons [Waqar & Gabol 2023, 30 December; *The News* 2024, 2 January].

Initially, Shehbaz Sharif chose not to run as the PML-N candidate in this election, passing the role to his brother, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Like Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif had been barred from political activities for life due to a 14-year corruption sentence [Voice of America 2023, 29 November], and only his absence from the country prevented his arrest. In 2023, legislation was passed under Shehbaz Sharif's government, stipulating that disqualifications would only be valid for five years [*The News* 2024, January 2; *Herald Tribune* 2024, 18 May]. The PML-N successfully appealed against Nawaz Sharif's conviction, rendering him eligible for the 2024 elections and resulting in the acceptance of his nomination papers [Meakem 2024, 2 January].

In December 2023, the PTI appointed Gohar Ali Khan as its interim party Chairman, a temporary position designated by Imran Khan pending his release from prison [Hussain 2023, 2 December; Hayat 2023, 2 December]. Gohar Ali Khan, who transitioned from the PPP to the PTI, was previously part of Imran Khan's legal team [Samaa 2023, 29 November]. However, his nomination faced criticism from other founding members of the PTI, who questioned the process and claimed that the selection procedure lacked transparency. As a result, on 22 December 2023, the ECP annulled the intra-party elections and ruled that the PTI could not use its traditional electoral symbol, a cricket bat. The ECP-imposed restrictions prevented PTI candidates from contesting elections under the party's name. Following Khan's ousting, the PTI experienced significant internal discord, leading to the expulsion or departure of many members. Some of those individuals – who remained loyal to Imran Khan – chose to run in the elections as independents [*Business Recorder* 2024, 13 January].

The PTI complained about the perceived unfairness of the electoral environment and alleged biases in the scrutiny process, citing the rejection of almost 3,000 nomination papers from PTI candidates, including its leader Imran Khan, who had been incarcerated since August 2023 [Corsi 2024, pp. 356-61; *Reuters* 2023, 30 December; *The Guardian* 2023, 30 December; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 2 January; *The Express Tribune* 2024b, 9 January; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 15 January; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 16 January; Waraich 2024, 12 February].

Khan continued to galvanise his supporters and lead the PTI from his prison cell. A 2024 Gallup pre-election survey indicated that the PTI held a commanding lead with 42% support, outpacing the PML-N at 20% and the PPP at 12% [Gallup 2023]. Khan's campaign utilised digital technologies to target young Pakistanis, who comprised most of the country's population and a large portion of the PTI's voter base [Jan 2023, 3 November; Shahzad 2023, 18 December; Davies 2024, 4 February]. Additionally, the PTI capitalised on citizens' frustrations with the previous coalition government of the PML-N and the PPP, which had struggled alleviate the escalating economic distress and rampant inflation [Hussain 2023, 31 August]. As a result, PTI supporters turned out in large numbers to vote [NBC News 2024, 8 February].

The elections were marred by violence, allegations of military-orchestrated rigging, intimidation against PTI candidates, and nationwide mobile phone and internet shutdowns. PTI leaders, candidates, and supporters faced a nationwide crackdown in the lead-up to the election, and the results announcement was delayed [Gul 2024, 28 June]. Imran Khan vigorously contested the credibility of the PML-N, leading to international calls for an investigation into potential irregularities [Shweta *et al.* 2024, 11 February]. The PTI disputed the election results, claiming electoral fraud, and presented documents highlighting discrepancies between initial vote counts at polling stations and the official results. A senior Rawalpindi official also admitted to manipulating results [Rehman 2024, 18 February; Shaikh 2024, 22 February; PTI 2024]. In response, the United States House of Representatives passed a resolution urging Pakistan to conduct an independent investigation into claims of irregularities and interference in its 2024 general election [United States Congress 2024, 25 June]. However, Pakistan's lower house of Parliament rejected the US request, viewing it as an attempt at interference [Gul 2024, 28 June].

PTI-backed independent candidates prevailed over those from mainstream political parties, securing 101 seats, while the PML-N obtained 75 seats and the PPP secured 54 seats [‘Election Pakistan 2024’; Election Commission of Pakistan 2024; Government of Pakistan 2024a]. At the provincial level in Punjab, out of 297 general assembly seats (plus 66 seats for women and eight for non-Muslim candidates), independent candidates won 138, the PML-N won 137, and the PPP secured ten seats. In the Sindh Assembly, out of 130 general constituencies (plus 29 seats for

women and nine for non-Muslims), the PPP secured 84 seats, while the independent candidates won 14 seats. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, out of 99 general seats (plus 22 for women and three for non-Muslims), independent candidates secured 91 seats, with the PML-N securing five seats and the PPP four seats. Lastly, in Baluchistan, out of 51 general seats (plus 11 for women and three for non-Muslims), the PPP and the PML-N obtained 11 and 10 seats, respectively, while independent candidates won six seats [‘Election Pakistan 2024’; *Pakistan Today* 2024, 10 February; Election Commission of Pakistan 2024].

With no clear majority winner, the PML-N and PPP - having secured the second and third-highest number of parliamentary seats - formed a coalition government with several smaller parties. On 10 February 2024, senior PML-N leaders announced Shehbaz Sharif as their candidate for prime minister. This choice was attributed to his strong relations with the PPP and his familiarity with the establishment. However, the PML-N won fewer seats than anticipated, with Nawaz controversially losing one seat and winning another, which left him with little option but to withdraw [Khan 2024, 10 February; *Dawn* 2024, 13 February]. The coalition agreement between the PML-N and the PPP was finalised after the PML-N consented to support the PPP’s efforts to secure all the top constitutional positions, including a second five-year term for its leader, Asif Ali Zardari, as president, as well as the roles of speaker of the National Assembly and chairman of the Senate [AP News 2024, 9 March; Shehzad 2024, 9 March; Malik 2024, 10 March; *Herald Tribune* 2024, 10 March]. The finance portfolio was assigned to Muhammad Aurangzeb, a former J.P. Morgan executive who had previously served as the president of Habib Bank Limited. Ishaq Dar, the former minister of Finance, was appointed minister of Foreign Affairs. Despite Dar’s lack of formal diplomatic experience, his appointment highlighted the new government’s emphasis on securing financial assistance from international partners as a key foreign policy goal. The new 19-member cabinet officially took office on March 2024 [AP News 2024, 12 March].

3. *The sidelining of the PTI and the rise of political tensions*

After being largely absent in the 2008 general election, the PTI captured 17% of the votes in 2013 and increased its share to 32% in 2018. As already pointed out, Imran Khan’s 2018 electoral victory was widely perceived as being supported by the military apparatus, and during his tenure from 2018 to 2022, he initially aligned with the military establishment. However, tensions with the army surfaced during Khan’s term, particularly regarding his foreign policy and economic decisions, ultimately leading to the ousting of his administration through a no-confidence motion in April 2022 [Corsi 2024, pp. 391-97].

Since Pakistan's inception, the military has governed directly or exerted significant political control. Following General Pervez Musharraf's resignation in 2008, the military establishment facilitated a transition to civilian rule. However, senior generals have since become increasingly involved in crucial government decisions. Many believe the army seeks to uphold a democratic framework through elections while maintaining substantial influence over civilian institutions. Consequently, prime ministers have been appointed when favoured by the military and removed from office when they lose the establishment's support [Goldbaum 2024, 21 February]. The military's influence intensified further under the PTI administration after 2018 [Siddiqi 2024, 23 February]. Khan asserted that he was removed from office when he began to challenge the military's arrangement that had facilitated his rise to power, and claimed that, after his removal, the new government perceived him as a significant political threat [Behera 2024, 5 February; Yousuf 2024, 5 May; Goldbaum & Masood 2024, 12 July; Corsi 2023, pp. 397-99]. In fact, since his ousting from office, Khan has remained a persistent challenge to the military-dominated political landscape in Pakistan. Allegations of military-backed election interference, the sidelining of the PTI, and Khan's purportedly politically motivated imprisonment have fuelled a growing anti-establishment sentiment [Corsi 2024, pp. 361-68; Ellis-Petersen 2024, 31 January; Campbell 2024, 5 February].

On 20 January 2024, a special court sentenced Khan to 10 years in prison for mishandling a sensitive diplomatic document from Pakistan's then-ambassador to the United States in 2022. On 31 January 2024, Khan and his wife were each given 14-year sentences for corruption related to the retention and sale of state gifts and violations of government regulations during his tenure [Corsi 2024, p. 360]. On 3 February 2024, they received an additional seven-year sentence for violating the country's marriage laws, based on allegations that, under Islamic law, their 2018 marriage had occurred too soon after her divorce [Astier 2024, 3 February].

Khan was subjected to multiple allegations of corruption and administrative mismanagement during his tenure in office; however, many of these accusations were either inadequately supported by evidence or effectively challenged by his legal team. Following his arrest, the judiciary suspended Khan's jail sentences in June and July 2024 related to the illegal acquisition and sale of state gifts, the leaking of state secrets, and the unlawful conviction regarding marriage [Shahzad & Shahid 2024, 4 June; *Al Jazeera* 2024, 13 July]. However, Khan remained incarcerated on other charges, including those linked to violence against Pakistani military facilities following his arrest in 2023. The frequent alternation between rulings against and dismissals of charges involving Imran Khan underscores the complex interplay between Pakistan's legal, political, and institutional frameworks [Davies 2024, 5 August]. These patterns reflect the highly polarized nature of Pakistani politics, where allegations of corruption or abuse of power targeting

prominent figures, such as Khan, are often perceived as politically driven. Analysts have often argued that these charges were unfounded, while the United Nations has stated that Khan had been unjustly imprisoned in violation of international law [*Dawn* 2024, 3 June; *Al Jazeera* 2024, 1 July; *Janjua* 2024, 12 July].

On 12 July 2024, the Supreme Court upheld the PTI's eligibility for additional seats allocated to women and minorities proportionate to the number of general seats the party secured. In line with the court's ruling, the PTI was awarded 23 seats, marking a significant setback for Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's ruling coalition and positioning the PTI as the largest party in parliament. While the coalition government retained a simple majority, it lost the two-thirds majority necessary for constitutional amendments [Mo-mand 2024, 12 July; *Dawn* 2024, 15 July; Afzal 2024, 25 July]. Pakistan's judiciary faces a delicate balance between demonstrating independence and responding to external pressures. The court's acquittals and rulings emphasised the judiciary's assertion of independence from Pakistan's military and intelligence structure, highlighting its role as the last line of defence in a country where the civilian government is perceived to maintain an accommodating relationship with military leadership [Gul 2024, 27 March; Haqqani 2023, 9 August]. On 21 October 2024, the government enacted the 26th constitutional amendment, which expanded its judiciary oversight. Under the amendment, the chief justice of Pakistan is no longer required to be the most senior judge of the Supreme Court. Instead, a Special Parliamentary Committee, which includes proportional representation from parliamentary parties, recommends one of the three most senior judges, allowing the government to influence the selection process significantly. Additionally, the Supreme Court's *suo motu* powers and those of the High Court have been removed. The amendment permits the ruling coalition to appoint the chief justice, leading critics – including opposition parties led by the PTI and legal experts – to argue that it undermines judicial independence and strengthens political power [Shabbir 2024, 16 September; Hussain 2024, 17 September; Ashfaq 2024, 30 September; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 30 September; Baloch and Ellis-Petersen 2024, 21 October; Khan 2024, 22 October].

Political tensions escalated on 10 September 2010, following a large rally organised by the PTI in Islamabad, demanding Khan's release from prison. In response, the government ordered the arrest of several PTI leaders and members of parliament while they were attending house sessions, citing a law prohibiting public gatherings in the capital. PTI leaders faced charges of violating rally regulations, deviating from the designated route, and engaging in confrontations. They threatened to resort to force if Khan was not released promptly [Ahmed 2024, 7 September; Iqbal 2024, 10 September; Hussain 2024, 10 September]. On 27 November 2024, the PTI organised another protest march to Islamabad with similar objectives, which resulted in violent clashes with law enforcement agencies [Regan 2024, 27 November].

4. *The economy*

In April 2024, the IMF approved the disbursement of US\$ 1.1 billion to Pakistan, marking the final tranche of a package finalised in 2023 that provided much-needed financial relief. Inflation, which stood at 38% in May 2023, halved to just over 17% in May 2024 [Business Recorder 2023, 1 June; Khan 2024, 3 May]. Import control measures helped to ease the external account deficit and attract interest from foreign investors [Davis 2024, 13 May]. However, with looming debt repayments, Pakistan's economic and financial situation remained precarious. Credit rating agencies indicate that out of US\$ 130 billion in external debt, approximately US\$ 20 billion was due for repayment in the fiscal year beginning in July 2024. According to the IMF, half of the government's income in 2024 will be required to service this debt [Aamir 2024, 17 July].

Pakistan generates approximately US\$ 50 billion annually from exports and foreign remittances but spends around US\$ 70 billion annually on fuel and other imports. The salaried class faces heavy taxation. The struggling economy has sparked demonstrations in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, and farmers protesting the decision to import wheat despite record harvests have forced Islamabad to seek another agreement with the IMF [Kiani 2024, 17 April; Masood 2024, 13 May]. Without reforms to address structural weaknesses and relying solely on external assistance, Pakistan has pursued various strategies to manage its economic crises, including increasing the tax-to-GDP ratio, privatising state-owned enterprises, boosting exports, enhancing remittances, improving the business environment, and attracting foreign direct investment [Dunya News 2023, 20 November; The Express Tribune, 2024, 17 April; Haider 2024, 28 April].

The new government's swift action in initiating negotiations with the IMF for another loan program - the 24th bailout in six decades - demonstrated the urgency of addressing the external financial deficit and preventing a recurrence of a default scenario [Corsi 2024, pp. 355-58; The Express Tribune 2024, 16 April]. In June 2024, the new Pakistani government approved its first budget [Government of Pakistan 2024b; Shukla 2024, 18 July]. The budget was crafted with an awareness of ongoing negotiations with the IMF and the austerity measures necessary to control debt and inflation and secure a new bailout package [Jamal 2024]. The US\$ 68 billion budget aimed for an ambitious target of approximately US\$ 44 billion in tax revenue for the upcoming fiscal year, representing a 40% increase over the previous year. It also included salary increases of up to 25% for government employees, in alignment with austerity goals [Ahmed 2024, 12 June; The Express Tribune 2024a, 12 June; *Ibid*, 2024b, 12 June; *Ibid*, 2024c, 12 June; *Ibid*, 2024, 13 June]. Base income tax rates were increased, and reduced subsidies led to power charges for consumers which increased as much as 50% [DW 2024, 13 July]. The ongoing economic hardship significantly impacted

citizens' everyday lives, resulting in public discontent and a gradual decline in the coalition government's popularity.

In July 2024, the IMF announced its agreement to sign another Extended Fund Facility (EFF) of approximately US\$ 7 billion for 37 months, following an emergency loan in the summer of 2023 that averted a sovereign debt default amid numerous other challenges [Corsi 2024, pp. 355-58].

Assistance from the IMF comes with specific conditionalities, including raising taxes, reducing subsidies, and increasing interest rates. Consequently, Shehbaz Sharif's government was compelled to commit to implementing several reforms to secure the deal, including a substantial effort to increase the country's tax revenue. To fulfil the IMF's requirements for additional financial support, Pakistan also requested three key funders – China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – to reschedule its US\$ 12 billion debt for up to five years [Rana 2024, 4 September; Ansari 2024, 5 September]. The US\$ 7 billion IMF loan announcement bolstered foreign investor confidence, prompting Moody's to upgrade Pakistan's local and foreign currency ratings, citing improved macroeconomic conditions and external liquidity [Salman 2024, 29 August]. The new bailout package was approved on 27 September 2024, with an immediate disbursement of US\$ 1 million [International Monetary Fund 2024, 27 September].

5. *Foreign affairs*

5.1. *Relations between Pakistan and Iran*

The relationship between Iran and Pakistan has become increasingly strained, further exacerbating the Sunni–Shia sectarian divide that emerged following the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and during Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's leadership in Pakistan in the 1980s [Fraiola 2024, 6 March; Hijazi 2024].

Sistan-Baluchistan is a province in Iran that borders Pakistan's Baluchistan and southern Afghanistan. The Baloch, a predominantly Sunni minority group in Pakistan, constitute the majority in both Baluchistan and Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan. Despite substantial investments from China and India in the ports of Gwadar and Chabahar, the Baloch provinces remain politically marginalised on both sides of the border.

Since the 2000s, Iran has focused on targeting the Sunni militant group Jaish al-Adl («Army of Justice»), which is based in Pakistani Baluchistan. This group, which advocates for Sunni rights and has links to al-Qā'ida, evolved from the terrorist organisation Jundullah after its leader was killed in 2010. Jundullah had been active in Sistan-Baluchistan, conducting attacks on Iranian security forces and civilians.

Pakistan has been grappling with Baloch insurgencies since its independence in 1947. As a result, Islamabad has targeted the hideouts of

the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF), both of which are militant groups with ethnic and, at times, separatist agendas [Chandran 2024, 30 January]. For years, both countries have accused one another of harbouring Baluchi separatist groups along their shared border [Vatanka 2014, 24 October].

On 3 January 2024, during a state commemoration in Kerman for General Qassem Soleimani – who was killed in an American air raid at Baghdad Airport in 2020 – two suicide bombings resulted in over 80 casualties. This attack prompted Iran to launch missile strikes against strongholds of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in northern Iraq and, on 16 January 2024, against bases of the militant group Jaish al-Adl in Pakistani Baluchistan [Adams & Davies 2024, 17 January; *ABC News* 2024, 17 January; *Daily Pakistan* 2024b, 17 January; *The Frontier Post* 2024, 17 January; *The Frontier Post* 2024, 19 January]. Pakistan condemned the violation of its air space, recalling its ambassador in Tehran and suspending all high-level engagements with Iran. Iran reciprocated by recalling its ambassador [Momand 2024, 17 January; *Daily Pakistan* 2024c, 17 January]. Islamabad subsequently launched an intelligence operation named Marg Bar Sarmachar, targeting the BLA and BLF hideouts around the Iranian city of Saravan, near the border with Pakistan [Yousaf 2024, 17 January; *The Frontier Post* 2024, 18 January; *The Nation* 2024, 18 January].

The unprecedented escalation raised concerns; however, Pakistan and Iran quickly reached a rapid de-escalation agreement [*Daily Pakistan* 2024a, 17 January; *Dawn* 2024, 17 January]. The Pakistani Foreign Minister at the time, Jalil Abbas Jilani, and his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, agreed to restore diplomatic relations, with representatives from both governments giving speeches highlighting the close ties between their nations. Reports suggest that China was mediating in this process, while the regional security landscape was a significant deterrent to further escalations, as indicated by official statements [Chandran 2024, 30 January].

As Pakistani–Iranian relations improved, Islamabad approved its natural gas pipeline segment in February 2024. The 2,775 km pipeline linking Gwadar to the Iran border has been in the planning stages for over a decade. While Iran has completed its 900 km section, Pakistan has struggled to secure funding for its 80 km portion and now faces a US\$ 18 million penalty for violating US sanctions on Tehran [Jamal 2024, 26 March]. In fact, despite a commitment to complete the project by 2024, progress has been hampered by the threat of US sanctions [Zofeen 2024, 19 April].

The late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Pakistan from 22 to 24 April 2024, to strengthen regional and bilateral relations. During this visit, the two countries signed eight agreements and several Memoranda of Understanding focusing on security, judicial assistance, and establishing a special economic zone [*The Nation* 2024, 22 April].

5.2. *The impact of militancy on Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and China*

Over the past three years, since the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in 2021, militant violence has surged in Pakistan. The TTP has escalated its attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians from its bases in Afghanistan [Janjua *et al.* 2024; Hijazi 2024; Hussain 2023, 21 December; Gul 2024, 11 July]. Islamabad's repeated calls for Kabul to rein in TTP-led cross-border terrorism have been largely ineffectual. In fact, the Afghan government did intensify its ongoing repression of terrorist groups within its borders, but this had the perhaps unintended result of pushing these groups to seek refuge in Pakistan. In response, Pakistani authorities bolstered security for the CPEC, inaugurated in 2013 as part of the BRI, and continued to pressure the Afghan government to act against the TTP [Adeney & Boni 2024, 24 June]. On its part, Pakistan has been implementing a range of additional measures to address this issue, including negotiations with the TTP, domestic counterterrorism operations, the construction of a border fence, and the expulsion of thousands of Afghan refugees to increase pressure on Kabul [Kugelman 2023, 1 November]. Additionally, in March 2024, Islamabad's security forces conducted anti-terrorism operations against militants based in Afghanistan following an attack on a military post in North Waziristan [Gul 2024, 18 March; *DW* 2024, 16 March; Government of Pakistan 2024, 18 March; *Pakistan News Express* 2024, 18 March; *Deccan Herald* 2024, 1 April; Rehman & Goldbaum 2024, 10 July]. The new government of Pakistan escalated the issue by bringing it to the attention of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). During the summit held on 4 July 2024, in Astana, Prime Minister Sharif delivered a speech emphasising the urgent need to address the threat of regional terrorism, advocating for a more proactive role on the part of regional countries. He also announced a counterterrorism campaign, *Azm-e-Istehkam* («Resolve for Stability»), aimed at combating the escalating threat of militancy by seeking support from neighbouring countries [Jamal 2024, 8 July]. This military operation focused on revitalising the implementation of the revised National Action Plan against terrorism, which was originally launched in 2014 to eradicate militancy [Jamal 2024, 25 June]. In December 2024, the Pakistan Air Force conducted airstrikes in Afghanistan's Paktika province, targeting suspected TTP hideouts. Pakistani officials reported that these precision strikes destroyed insurgent training facilities and neutralized key TTP commanders. However, Afghan authorities condemned the attacks, asserting that 46 civilians, predominantly women and children, were killed. This incident escalated tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the Taliban warning of potential retaliation and emphasizing the intangibility of Afghanistan's territorial sovereignty [*Politico* 2024, 25 December].

In June 2024, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with China's leader, Xi Jinping, in Beijing to seek additional support for energy and infrastructure projects. However, no future investments were pledged, as confirmed

by the joint statement issued on 8 June 2024 [Cash 2024, 7 June; Zaman 2024, 10 June]. While China has not threatened to suspend its investments, concerns have been raised regarding continuing projects in vulnerable areas [Government of Pakistan 2024, 8 June]. Beijing has expressed disappointment with Islamabad over the CPEC due to unexpected delays and poor execution. Although Chinese companies swiftly completed the first phase, progress in the second phase has stalled since 2019. This slowdown can be attributed to Pakistan's political instability, epitomised by four different governments since the inception of CPEC, as well as corruption allegations, bureaucratic inefficiencies, natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a balance-of-payments crisis from 2017 to 2023.

The volatile security situation also poses a significant challenge [Shoab 2024, 28 June; Rafi 2024, 16 July; Janjua 2024, 14 August; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 27 August; Hussain 2024, 28 August; Najam 2024, 29 August; Jawad & Ahmed 2024, 7 October]. Chinese-funded development projects and investments under the BRI have increasingly become targets of militant violence. Since its initiation in 2015, the CPEC has brought thousands of Chinese workers to Pakistan, who have faced escalating attacks from various groups, including the Islamic State, the Pakistani Taliban – often in retaliation for the repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang – and the BLA [Hussain 2024, 20 March; Gul 2024, 25 March; Saifi & Gan 2024, 27 March; *First Post* 2024, 26 March; Haider 2024, 24 April; Kugelman 2024, 26 June].

5.3. *Pakistan and the US administration*

The US Indo-Pacific strategy serves as the cornerstone of US policy in Asia, first emerging under Donald Trump's first presidential term and primarily targeting India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan ['Remarks by President Trump' 2017, 21 August; Government of the United States 2019, 1 June]. The Biden administration has continued this approach to strengthen relations with most South Asian countries, particularly India, while countering China's expanding influence in the region [The White House 2022, February]. This shift has led to a distancing of the US from Pakistan, especially following the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan and the perceived role of Islamabad in the Taliban's resurgence. As a result, diplomatic ties have cooled, and strategic disagreements have emerged, particularly concerning counterterrorism, regional security, and Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs. In response, Pakistan has increasingly turned to China for military and economic support through initiatives like the CPEC [Mohan 2024, 6 September].

In April 2024, the US imposed sanctions on several entities linked to Pakistan's ballistic missile program, citing concerns over the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction [US Department of State 2024, 19 April]. These sanctions resulted in freezing their assets and interests within the US, requiring reporting to authorities, and extended to any entity that is 50% or more owned by the frozen entities [*Ibid.*]. This action followed a history of

US measures against entities engaged in missile technology transfer to Pakistan, which Washington views as destabilising to regional security, particularly in the context of Pakistan's rivalry with India. This situation highlights a complex and challenging policy environment, especially in light of recent US sanctions on Pakistan concerning its connections with Iran and related missile proliferation issues. Notably, during President Raisi's visit to Pakistan, the Pentagon issued warnings of possible sanctions for those engaging in business with Iran [Khan 2024, 22 April; *The Nation* 2024, 24 April].

In September 2024, the US announced sanctions on Chinese companies involved in supplying missile technology to Pakistan, explicitly targeting the Shaheen-3 and Ababeel missile systems, both capable of carrying nuclear warheads. According to a spokesperson from the Department of State, the Beijing Research Institute of Automation for Machine Building Industry collaborated with Pakistan to acquire equipment for testing rocket motors in these missile systems, with potential involvement in larger missile systems. Similar sanctions had been imposed on other China-based companies in October 2023.

While these sanctions are part of a broader US policy aimed at preventing the proliferation of missile technology, they have further strained diplomatic relations with Pakistan. In Islamabad, the sanctions were perceived as aimed to strengthen Washington's partnership with India while undermining Pakistan's defence ties with China and Iran.

During a press briefing, US Department of State Spokesperson Matthew Miller reaffirmed Washington's commitment to opposing support for Pakistan's ballistic missile program through sanctions and other measures, as well as to strengthen international non-proliferation efforts [*The News* 2024, 18 September].

6. Conclusions

The 2024 general elections in Pakistan highlighted a nation grappling with significant political, economic, and security challenges. Allegations of vote rigging and military interference marred the electoral process, effectively sidelining Imran Khan's PTI. Despite facing restrictions, PTI-affiliated independent candidates emerged as a notable parliamentary force. However, the coalition government formed by the PML-N and the PPP, which allegedly received the military endorsement, struggled to secure public trust due to its association with austerity measures and lacklustre economic performance. Meanwhile, Khan's enduring popularity highlighted a persistent divide between the political elite and the general populace.

The military's pervasive influence in political affairs continued to be a defining characteristic of Pakistan's governance, as evidenced by the military-sponsored marginalisation of Imran Khan and its role in shaping elec-

toral outcomes. Economically, the country remained fragile, heavily reliant on IMF bailouts and stringent austerity measures. Rising inflation, mounting debt burdens, and growing public dissatisfaction further compounded the coalition government's political vulnerabilities.

Security issues, including the resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban and unrest in Baluchistan, contributed to the nation's instability. Strained relations with Iran, Afghanistan, and China exacerbated regional tensions, while the United States continued to sideline bilateral relations with Islamabad.

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