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Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



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 Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com).



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tel. 06 84 17 758

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PAKISTAN 2021: IN PURSUIT OF A PIVOTAL ROLE
IN POST-PANDEMIC SOUTH ASIA

Marco Corsi

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

In 2020, the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan launched an economic diplomacy project titled Economic Outreach Initiative. It aims to unlock Pakistan's growth potential and showcase national trade, tourism and foreign investment capacities through a paradigm shift of foreign policy from geopolitics to geoeconomics. The Khan administration is committed to capitalising on the ongoing strategic partnership with China and to enhancing the relationship with Washington. In parallel, Pakistan intends to strengthen connectivity with South and Central Asian countries. South Asian regional stability is the linchpin to engineering such a transition.

The United States' disengagement with Afghanistan and the Taliban's Kabul takeover have offered Islamabad the opportunity to become a pivotal player in the regional scenario. Islamabad's efforts to support the Afghan peace process include consolidating solid relationships with the new rulers in Kabul and adopting a leading role in moulding the future of Afghanistan. These efforts provide impetus to galvanising Pakistan's international legitimacy, enhancing its regional influence and fostering regional stability, allowing investments and flourishing economic relations with partner countries.

Similarly, Pakistan eased its tense relations with India and announced, together with New Delhi, a ceasefire in February 2021. In an environment where the Government is unchallenged by a political opposition mainly engaged in planning the general elections of 2023, Pakistan managed to contain the Coronavirus pandemic despite facing a resurgence of internal militancy.

KEYWORDS – Afghanistan; COVID-19; India; Geoeconomics; Geopolitics; Taliban; USA.

1. Introduction

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government of Prime Minister Imran Khan has launched an economic diplomacy drive aimed to promote Pakistan internationally by exploring and showcasing its untapped potentials and establishing flourishing bilateral ties and enhanced connectivity with strategic partner countries. Peace and stability in the South Asian region

are necessary preconditions to create a conducive environment for Islamabad to achieve its geoeconomic aspirations and a prominent regional role.¹

The US disengagement in Afghanistan marked the winding down of Washington's strategic partnership established with Islamabad in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and focused on counter-terrorism commitments. US President Joe Biden's administration has not prioritised its future relations with Pakistan while it has intensified ties with India. The United States is a strategic competitor of China and works closely with allies and partners to defend its economic interests and values.² Islamabad hopes to open a new chapter of cooperation with the United States which goes beyond security-related drives and decoupling it from Washington and Beijing's pivots in the region.

Since 2015, Pakistan's traditionally strong relationship with the People's Republic of China has been further and significantly strengthened following the planning of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of the Belt and Road Initiative.³ Beijing has also shown interest in engaging with Kabul due to the possibility of Afghanistan joining the CPEC, which would connect Pakistan to Central Asia. In addition, Islamabad has taken steps to strengthen and enhance its relationships and connectivity with South and Central Asian countries and, unexpectedly, announced a ceasefire jointly with India on 25 February 2021.

The changing circumstances in Afghanistan and the rebalancing in the South Asian regional arena have offered Pakistan an opportunity to push forward its geoeconomics agenda. Accordingly, Islamabad has promoted itself to the international community as a critical interlocutor motivated to support Afghanistan and regional stability.

Despite occasional spurts in new cases, Pakistan succeeded in containing the spread of the waves of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2, henceforth «COVID-19» or «Coronavirus») that hit the country from February 2020.⁴ Pakistan ranked first in The Economist's Global Normalcy Index, followed by Britain, Germany and the United States. The index grades countries which are returning to their pre-pandemic lev-

1. 'Pakistan kicks off PM Imran's Economic Outreach Initiative', *Daily Pakistan*, 4 October 2020; 'Aspirations for a paradigm shift', *Dawn*, 12 October 2020; 'Boosting economic diplomacy', *The Express Tribune*, 25 October 2020; Government of Pakistan, Press and Information Department, *PR No. 106 Economic Security defines the core of Pakistan's future trajectory*, Islamabad 16 December 2020.

2. U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Relations With China*, 12 May 2021.

3. The US\$ 62 billion CPEC is a project launched in 2013 as part of China's global development strategy «Belt and Road Initiative» (Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2016: Economic features', pp. 396-98).

4. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 447-52.

els using selected indicators.⁵ The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported surfacing signs of national economic recovery and praised the reform agenda advanced by Pakistani authorities. However, stagnant exports and low foreign direct investments have made Pakistan dependent on external borrowings, while uncertainties on Washington's future engagement with Pakistan could hamper Islamabad's access to other loans.

Reinvigorated militant extremism has been recorded since the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan. The impact of domestic instability and deteriorating law and order situation has been significantly negative on economic growth and investments⁶ and has represented a concern for the Government.

In the year under analysis, the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan was not significantly challenged by the political opposition – the Pakistan Democratic Alliance (PDM) – which was busy preparing for the 2023 general elections and weakened by internal frictions and conflicting agendas.

2. *Pakistan in Afghanistan: a regional player with global ambitions*

In the summer of 2021, as the US troops were leaving Afghanistan, Taliban militia launched an offensive, advanced rapidly toward Kabul and eventually took over bloodlessly the capital city on 15 August. In the weeks leading up to the fall of Kabul, Prime Minister Imran Khan did not comment on the progression of the insurgents and seemed to distance his administration from them.⁷ However, following a special meeting of the National Security Committee held the day after Kabul's capitulation, Pakistan's Foreign Office issued a statement that emphasised Islamabad's readiness to promote a political solution to the conflict.⁸ Furthermore, the official statement called on the Taliban to respect the rule of law, protect human rights, and ensure that Afghanistan does not provide a haven to terrorist organisations.⁹

Pakistan launched a widespread advocacy campaign for forming an inclusive Government in Kabul in the framework of long-term peace, security, and development building. Toward this goal, Islamabad urged the interna-

5. 'COVID-19: Pakistan tops The Economist's world normalcy index', *The News*, 8 November 2021.

6. Muhammad Zakaria, 'Effect of terrorism on economic growth in Pakistan: an empirical analysis', *Economic Research*, Vol.32, Issue 1, 2019.

7. 'Pakistan neither responsible for Taliban, nor are we their spokespersons: PM Imran', *Dawn*, 29 July 2021.

8. 'Political solution to Afghan conflict «indispensable», says Pakistan', *The Express Tribune*, 16 August 2021.

9. 'Pakistan calls for inclusive political government in Afghanistan', *Pakistan Today*, 16 August 2021.

tional community to work with the Taliban establishment without political preconditions, in order to support Afghanistan's socio-economic reconstruction and to avoid economic and humanitarian crises or a security vacuum that could destabilise the region. In addition, Pakistan was among the first countries to deliver humanitarian assistance to the population of Afghanistan.¹⁰

Islamabad has promoted itself to the international community as a responsible interlocutor motivated to support Afghanistan and the entire region's stability.¹¹ Pakistan is a member of the «Troika-plus» group, which includes Russia, China, Pakistan and the US. The grouping was initiated by Russia to facilitate coordination among the three countries that share similar views on peace in Afghanistan and that have an ongoing dialogue with the Taliban. The US is part of the Troika, given their pivotal role despite the withdrawal of their forces from Afghanistan.¹²

Islamabad has promoted a regional platform composed of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries as a consultative mechanism to agree on a common regional approach to deal with the Taliban.¹³ In this regard, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi coordinated with his counterparts in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and held meetings with the US Secretary of State and other counterparts from Turkey, the United Kingdom, Spain, India, Saudi Arabia, Germany, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. Similarly, Imran Khan liaised with Russia's President Vladimir Putin and agreed to cooperate and adopt a coordinated approach to Afghanistan also at the multilateral level within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).¹⁴ Mr. Khan also coordinated with the top Gulf leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Pakistani intelligence announced an unprecedented summit with Russian, Chinese, Iranian, Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmen, and Tajiki counterparts, signifying Islamabad's intention to raise its regional profile.¹⁶

10. Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, eStatements, *Statement by the Prime Minister of Pakistan H.E. Imran Khan to the Seventy-sixth Session of the UN General Assembly*, 24 September 2021.

11. 'Pakistan urges Afghanistan neighbours to jointly tackle challenges', *The Express Tribune*, 6 September 2021.

12. 'Pakistan, other stakeholders in «Afghan peace» to meet in Doha', *Dawn*, 31 July 2021; 'Regional approach to end-game', *Ibid.*, 11 August 2021.

13. 'Islamabad asks world to accept new Afghan set-up', *The Express Tribune*, 9 September 2021.

14. 'How can Russia help Pakistan make the best of the upcoming SCO Summit?', *Dawn*, 3 September 2021; 'Pakistan calls for «positive engagement» with Afghanistan via 'practical steps'', *The Express Tribune*, 17 September 2021.

15. 'Pakistan PM Imran Khan speaks to Gulf leaders, discusses Afghanistan, bilateral ties', *The New Indian Express*, 5 September 2021; 'PM Imran urges Gulf leaders to play role in rebuilding Afghanistan', *The Express Tribune*, 5 September 2021; 'Pakistan, Qatar seek unconditional aid to Afghanistan', *The News*, 9 September 2021.

16. 'How significant was the reported Islamabad intelligence summit?', *The Express Tribune*, 14 September 2021.

As a result of these efforts, and notwithstanding differences and a cautious approach,¹⁷ a common understanding was reached to support an inclusive political solution in Afghanistan and maintain a joint security drive to advance shared objectives of a stable region.¹⁸

At the same time, Pakistan did not recall its diplomatic representation nor expressed concern for the reversal of the situation in Afghanistan. On the contrary, sections of its society welcomed the American pull-out and Taliban takeover.¹⁹ On his part, Prime Minister Imran Khan seemed to indirectly praise the role of the Taliban in supposedly empowering cultural authenticity in the bordering country.²⁰

The events in Afghanistan have shifted the regional balance in Islamabad's favour, as a stabilised Taliban-led bordering country would allow Pakistan to gain regional influence and establish its geoeconomic footprint. Multi-fold argumentations are brought forward to support this scenario.

First, in the last two decades, bilateral trade volume between former Kabul Governments and Islamabad dropped due to tense bilateral relations.²¹ With the Taliban's return to power, the volume of Afghanistan's imports from Pakistan has surged from US\$ 890 million in 2019 to US\$ 983.29 million in 2020–2021 while Afghanistan's trade with India has decreased.²²

Second, Islamabad shares China's aim to protect CPEC investments from spill-over of potential jihadist chaos from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Beijing relies on Islamabad to ensure security to Chinese investments, and both

17. 'Can Uzbekistan and Pakistan Help Stabilize Afghanistan?', *The Diplomat*, 5 August 2021; 'Tajikistan Won't Recognize a Taliban-Only Afghan Government', *The Diplomat*, 25 August 2021; 'Taliban invite 6 nations for Afghan govt formation event. What role do they play?', *India Today*, 7 September 2021; 'As Taliban Announces New Government, Turkey & Russia Express No Rush To Recognize It', *Republicworld.com*, 7 September 2021; 'Tajik Authorities Concerned About Taliban Plots To Infiltrate From Afghanistan', *Gandhara*, 25 September 2021; 'Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan Open Channels With The Taliban', *Ibid.*, 1 October 2021.

18. Unlike in 1996, when Pakistan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia had recognised the legitimacy of the first Taliban regime, this time the international community aligned and held to grant formal authority to the new Kabul order ('Pakistan and Central Asia agree on «coordinated approach» on Afghanistan', *Gulf News*, 26 August 2021; 'FM Qureshi discusses Afghanistan situation with Iranian counterpart', *The News*, 5 September 2021).

19. 'Are Pakistanis really happy about the Taliban takeover?', *T-MAGAZINE*, 22 August 2022.

20. During a speech, Imran Khan seemed to acknowledge the credit to the Taliban for contributing to break the «shackles of slavery» of Afghan people imposed by an alien governing culture ('PM Imran talks about overpowering «shackles of slavery» at Single National Curriculum launch', *Dawn*, 16 August 2021; 'Pakistan's hand in the Taliban's victory', *The Washington Post*, 18 August 2021).

21. 'What the Taliban's Interim Government Means for Afghanistan's Neighbors', *The Diplomat*, 10 September 2021.

22. Hamayun Khan, 'Can The Taliban-Led Afghanistan Prevent Pakistan's Economic Occupation?', *South Asia Journal*, 11 November 2021.

are interested in extending the Belt Road Initiative to Afghanistan.²³ This scenario unlocks Pakistan's direct access to Central Asia and pushes forward the geoeconomics agenda of Islamabad.²⁴

Third, Washington's *débâcle* and the consequent disappearance of US presence in Afghanistan have ended the mutually distrustful security-focused strategic bilateral US-Pakistan relationship, started in the wake of 9/11. The withdrawal has also weakened the influence of the close regional ally of the United States in Afghanistan,²⁵ India, which has been accused by Islamabad of being a spoiler for peace.²⁶

Fourth, following the Afghan crisis, Pakistan is also expected to play a critical mediatory and liaising role in the interactions of Western powers with the new Government in Kabul. In addition, several member states of the European Union (EU) praised Pakistan for its crucial role in supporting the repatriation of numerous European citizens.²⁷ Islamabad is also aware of its role in averting a refugee crisis in Europe, from which it expects economic, trade and reputational dividends.²⁸

3. *Uncertain relationships with the United States*

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan became a strategic ally of the United States, initially negotiating with the Taliban for the handing over of Osama bin Laden, and later granting the support of its military bases to US

23. 'China's Afghan conundrum', *The Interpreter*, 30 July 2021; 'China, Pakistan and Russia set to increase Afghanistan influence', *The Guardian*, 16 August 2021.

24. 'Pakistan-China Relations and the Fall of Afghanistan', *The Diplomat*, 31 August 2021.

25. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, *passim*.

26. 'Pakistan's Pyrrhic Victory in Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 July 2021.

27. 'Germany lauds Pakistan role in Afghan peace process', *The Express Tribune*, 20 September 2021.

28. A resolution of the EU Parliament held Pakistan responsible for security and stability in Afghanistan reminding that its influence on the Taliban will be considered when contemplating the renewal of the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status. EU's GSP+, granted to Pakistan in 2014, removes import duties from products entering the EU market from vulnerable developing economies. As a result, almost 80% of Pakistan's exports, nearly 20% of Pakistan's global ones, enter the EU duty and quota-free. To maintain such status, Pakistan must keep ratification and implement core international conventions. Pakistan's GSP+ status will expire in 2023 ('Pakistan seizes chance to be Europe's best buddy in Afghan crisis', *Politico*, 4 September 2021; The European Commission, *Generalised Scheme of Preferences – GSP*; The European Parliament, *Text Adopted, Resolution on the situation in Afghanistan*, 16 September 2021; 'GSP+ status for Pakistan extended', *The Express Tribune*, 23 September 2021; 'Pakistan not given blanket GSP Plus extension', *The Express Tribune*, 1 October 2021).

military operations on Afghan soil. As a result, Washington lifted pre-existing sanctions imposed on Pakistan,²⁹ cancelled Pakistan's debts and declared Pakistan a non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally in 2004.³⁰ By 2010, Pakistan was one of the world's leading recipients of US aid.

Subsequently, US military support started declining over growing mistrust, accusations and Washington's use of aid and coercive diplomatic methods to end the alleged «double game» of Islamabad.³¹ Pakistan was repeatedly accused of maintaining a friendly relationship with Afghan insurgent groups, providing sanctuary to Taliban leaders and – while formally supporting the international coalition forces' war on terror – allowing the presence of jihadist training camps in border regions.³² The year 2011 marked the pinnacle of US suspicions against Islamabad. In that year, Osama bin Laden was killed in a military operation conducted by the US Navy SEALs in Abbottabad, namely in Pakistan, where he had allegedly found a haven.³³ Nonetheless, in 2017, President Trump, while announcing his new South Asia strategy, reiterated Pakistan's critical counter-terrorism role.³⁴ The following year, however, the US Government announced the suspension of most of its security assistance to Pakistan over its failure to deliver on its anti-terrorism commitments. That suspension remained in effect throughout 2019, when civilian aid was also narrowed.

Islamabad has repeatedly rejected these accusations as well those blaming Pakistan for supporting the Taliban's final offensive.³⁵ Still, the *Country Report on Terrorism* of the US Department of State issued in 2020 reiterates how modest have been the steps taken by Islamabad to counter terror financing and militant groups. On the one hand, the report confirms that Pakistan remains a safe harbour for terrorist groups, including the Afghan Taliban operating from Pakistani territory;³⁶ on the other, it acknowledges Pakistan's contributions to the Afghanistan peace process

29. 'Pakistan's Sanction Waivers: A Summary', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 29 October 2001.

30. 'Timeline: History of US-Pakistan relations', *Dawn*, 4 July 2012.

31. 'Are Pakistanis really happy about the Taliban takeover?'

32. 'Afghan vice president accuses Pak Air Force of trying to help Taliban', *Hindustan Times*, 16 July 2021; 'Afghanistan VP Saleh slams Pakistan over its denial of Taliban presence on its soil', *Ani News*, 16 July 2021; 'Afghan, Pakistani Officials Lash Out As Tensions, Insecurity Mount', *Gandhara*, 22 July 2021.

33. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan: tensioni con gli USA e instabilità politica a dieci anni dall'11 settembre', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXII/2011, pp. 107-08.

34. White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, 21 August 2017; The US Department of Defense, *President Unveils New Afghanistan, South Asia Strategy*, 21 August 2017.

35. 'As the Taliban Advance in Afghanistan, Pressure on Pakistan Grows', *New York Times*, 14 August 2021; Tallha Abdulrazaq, 'Sanction Pakistan? Try blaming America for Afghanistan', *South Asia Journal*, 14 August 2021; Hussain Nadim, 'Is Pakistan fuelling a Taliban takeover?', *Ibid.*, 15 August 2021.

36. US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.

and improvements toward meeting the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) requirements.³⁷ US President Trump requested Pakistan's intervention to negotiate with the Taliban at the intra-Afghan peace negotiations in Doha, Qatar, which started on 12 September 2020.³⁸ Pakistan advocated for a political settlement and the Taliban's inclusion in power-sharing arrangements to end the conflict; meanwhile, the United States had started withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan as part of the agreement.

The post-9/11 US–Pakistan bilateral relations have been strategic and transactional, centred on Islamabad's support to stabilise Afghanistan. Recently, Pakistan has mainly granted logistic support, air corridors, land and supply routes to the coalition forces to implement their withdrawal. Washington explored the possibility to extend further such cooperation with Pakistan following US military drawdown. In late May 2021, Pakistani and US national security advisors met in Geneva to discuss counter-terrorism cooperation to meet Washington's needs to retain intelligence capability following the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Sources report US attempts to persuade Pakistan to use its military bases, including arguments related to possible US help in unlocking FATF reservations and supporting IMF-related decisions.³⁹ However, Prime Minister Imran Khan repeatedly rejected the option publicly.⁴⁰

37. The FATF is an intergovernmental body that was established to counter money laundering, terrorism-financing and other related threats. In 2018, the FATF placed Pakistan on the «Improving Global Anti Money Laundering/Countering Financing of Terrorism Compliance». Following the review held in June 2021, the FATF decided to keep Pakistan on its «increased monitoring» list until Islamabad takes steps to investigate and prosecute senior leaders of UN designated terror groups. In October 2021, the FATF extended Pakistan's «grey list» status until February 2022 ('FATF Will Pakistan Get Off FATF's Grey List?', *The Diplomat*, 17 June 2021; 'FATF keeps Pakistan on 'increased monitoring' list until action on one item complete', *The News*, 25 June 2021; Azimul Haque Rifat, 'FATF Grey List: What Pakistan has to do', *South Asia Journal*, 15 August 2021; 'Pakistan continues to be on FATF's grey list', *The News*, 21 October 2021).

38. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', pp. 457-59; Lindsay Maizland, 'U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 3 March 2021; 'The Taliban in Afghanistan', *Ibid.*, 3 August 2021.

39. 'Pakistan & Regional Undercurrents', *Pakistan Tribune*, 4 July 2021; Syed Zain Jaffery, 'Pakistan And The Politicization Of The Financial Action Task Force (FATF)', *EurAsia Review*, 29 August 2021.

40. 'With Afghanistan's Future at Stake, US Courts Pakistan', *Voice of America*, 25 May 2021; 'Taliban warn Afghan neighbours against allowing US bases', *Dawn*, 27 May 2021; 'C.I.A. Scrambles for New Approach in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 9 June 2021; 'Don't Expect Pakistan to Host US Military Bases', *The Diplomat*, 10 June 2021; 'Will Pakistan Get Off FATF's Grey List?', *The Diplomat*, 17 June 2021; 'Pakistan is reminding the Taliban that it will continue supporting the group if it protects Pakistan's interests across the Durand Line', *Ibid.*, 29 June 2021.

Joe Biden's cabinet has not assertively redefined the US–Pakistan relationship. For example, the Democratic Party 2020 Platform – the document of guiding principles and policy promises prepared in the run-up to the 2020 presidential elections – does not mention Pakistan and decouples it from Afghanistan compared with the 2016 version.⁴¹ Moreover, since Biden took office in January 2021, no contacts have been established by the new US President with Imran Khan.⁴²

The US military withdrawal from Afghanistan ignited Islamabad's concerns about the further decline of US involvement in Pakistan.⁴³ For Pakistan, maintaining its partnerships with the United States remains a key political objective.⁴⁴ Beyond counter-terrorism and security commitments, Islamabad aspires to engage in a broader relationship with Washington⁴⁵ given that the United States is a significant source of foreign direct investment and Pakistan's largest export market.⁴⁶ The special assistant to the Prime Minister for national security, Moeed W. Yusuf, called for a paradigm shift in the US-Pakistan bilateral relationship from a geopolitical and geostrategic to a geoeconomics focus,⁴⁷ reiterating Pakistan's readiness to play a critical role in regional trade, business, and connectivity-related activities. Islamabad endeavoured to reassure Washington that the economic cooperation with Beijing and China's supply of arms to Pakistan⁴⁸ are driven by domestic priorities and do not reflect a geopoliti-

41. Democrats.org, *2016 Democratic Party Platform*; *Ibid.*, *2020 Democratic Party Platform*; Khalid H. Chandio, 'Biden Presidency and Pakistan', *Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, February 2021.

42. Madiha Afzal, 'An uneasy limbo for US-Pakistan relations amidst the withdrawal from Afghanistan', *Brookings*, 6 August 2021; Aquil Shah, 'What Will Happen to Afghanistan and Pakistan's Uneasy Border?', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 August 2021; 'US finds Pakistan useful only to clear mess in Afghanistan: PM Imran', *Dawn*, 15 August 2021; 'Washington to reassess its ties with Pakistan, says Blinken', *The News*, 14 September 2021.

43. 'Amid US-China confrontation, Pakistan faces strategic geopolitical dilemma', *The Economic Times*, 18 March 2021.

44. Syed Mohammad Ali, 'The U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry and its Implications for Pakistan', *Stimson*, 1 December 2020. An analysis of the impact on Pakistan strategic behaviour of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy is provided by the article of Rahat Shah, 'Pakistan's quest for balance in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy', *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, 7 May 2021.

45. Touqir Hussain, 'United States-Pakistan Relations: New Opportunities and Old Challenges', *South Asia Scan*, Issue No. 4, October 2019; 'The Misunderstood History of Pakistan-US Relations', *The Diplomat*, 30 March 2021.

46. K. Alan Kronstadt, 'Pakistan-U.S. Relations', *Federation of American Scientists*, 8 July 2021.

47. 'PM aide calls for building Pak-US ties around economic security', *Dawn*, 13 February 2021.

48. 'Pakistan biggest importer of Chinese arms: report', *The Express Tribune*, 18 October 2018.

cal alignment against the United States. Therefore, Pakistan's cooperation with China should not preclude US investments.⁴⁹

The unenthusiastic reaction of the United States to Pakistan's offers of cooperation reflects Washington's perception of Islamabad primarily as a partner for counter-terrorism and security-related issues.⁵⁰ However, Pakistan's connectivity plans must be reality-checked against longer-term Afghanistan scenarios⁵¹ and still-tense bilateral relations with Delhi.⁵² Additionally, six years after its inception, the CPEC's enhancements to Pakistan's transit and trade have not yet made it the turning point for the country's geoeconomics.⁵³ Moreover, realigning its relations with the United States along economic parameters would improve Pakistan's prospects of stability and the credibility of its investment climate for international investors. However, to be more attractive in a global market, Pakistan must undertake domestic economic reforms including tax and regulatory systems, which presently deter foreign investment.⁵⁴ Finally, the Paris-based FATF is still monitoring Pakistan against the threat of money-laundering and terror financing, which constitute additional risks for international investors.

49. Madiha Afzal, 'Under Biden, Pakistan and the US face a dilemma about the breadth of their relationship', *Brookings*, 12 April 2021; Katharine Adency & Filippo Boni, 'How China and Pakistan Negotiate', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 24 May 2021; 'US talking to Pakistan, others for maintaining access to Afghanistan', *Dawn*, 26 May 2021; 'Redefining Pak-US relations', *Dawn*, 2 June 2021; Madiha Afzal, 'At all costs: How Pakistan and China control the narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor', *Brookings*, June 2020; 'The China-Pakistan Partnership Continues to Deepen', *The Diplomat*, 9 July 2021; 'Pakistan-China Strategic Ties for Regional Stability', *South Asia Journal*, 17 August 2021.

50. Khalid H. Chandio, 'US Presidential Election: Impact on Pakistan and Way Forward', *Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, December 2020; Asif Durrani, 'US Pullout from Afghanistan: Concerns of Civil War, Implications for Pakistan and the Region', *Ibid.*, July 2021; Madiha Afzal, 'Post Afghanistan, US-Pakistan relations stand on the edge of a precipice', *Brookings*, 13 October 2021.

51. Abdul Basit, 'Pakistan's Perspective of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan', *Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, 6 July 2021.

52. 'US welcomes resumption of 4G internet in Kashmir, claims no change in J&K policy under new administration', *First Post*, 11 February 2021; 'No change in US policy on Kashmir, says State Dept', *Dawn*, 11 February 2021; 'Pakistan disapproves US tweet referring IIOJK not as «disputed region», *The Express Tribune*, 11 February 2021.

53. 'Pakistan's Geoeconomic Delusions', *Foreign Policy*, 5 April 2021.

54. 'Realizing the U.S.-Pakistan Geoeconomic Pivot', *South Asian Voices*, 14 June 2021.

4. Transactional distension with India

Pakistan's coveted foreign policy shift requires enhanced connectivity ties with target partner countries.⁵⁵ Accordingly, Islamabad's efforts have been directed towards exploring closer relationships with South Asian neighbours⁵⁶ and deepening its engagement in Central Asia.⁵⁷

Intervening at a Pakistan Air Force Academy ceremony in February 2021, the chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, spoke about Pakistan's commitment to maintaining peaceful relations with India.⁵⁸

On 25 February 2021, the Pakistani and Indian Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) issued a joint statement announcing a ceasefire and the observance of all agreements and understandings along the actual border, the Line of Control (LoC), «in the interest of achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace along the borders».⁵⁹ The announcement came unexpectedly as just two years earlier, in February 2019, Indian and Pakistani warplanes had conducted airstrikes against each other's territories after a terrorist attack had hit a convoy of the Indian Central Reserve Police Force in the Pulwama district in Kashmir.⁶⁰ Moreover, New Delhi's August

55. 'Pakistan's focus shifting from geopolitics to geo-economics, Qureshi informs Hungary Dialogue', *Dawn*, 25 March 2021.

56. 'Pakistan Prime Minister Khan arrives in Sri Lanka to boost ties', *Al Jazeera*, 23 February 2021; 'In rare call to Hasina, Imran urges closer ties with Bangladesh', *Dawn*, 23 July 2021; 'Are Pakistan-Sri Lanka Ties Emerging From India's Shadow?', *The Diplomat*, 30 July 2021; 'Sheikh Hasina desires stronger trade ties between Bangladesh, Pakistan', *South Asia Journal*, 2 November 2021.

57. In February 2021, Pakistan signed an agreement with Afghanistan and Uzbekistan for a trans-Afghan railroad which will connect Central Asian transport network with Pakistan's Arabian seaports ('Strategic plan signed for 573km trans-Afghan railway', *International Railway Journal*, 9 February 2021; 'Trans-Afghan Railway Line project to transform geo-economic dynamics: Sanj', *Daily Times*, 1 June 2021; 'Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed roadmap for Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway project', *The Tashkent Times*, 2 August 2021; 'Can Uzbekistan and Pakistan Help Stabilize Afghanistan?', *The Diplomat*, 5 August 2021). An agreement was also reached with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and the US focused on establishing a new quadrilateral diplomatic platform aimed to enhance regional stability and connectivity, the «PAKAFGUL» (U.S. Department of State, *Announcing the U.S. - Afghanistan - Uzbekistan - Pakistan Quad Regional Support for Afghanistan-Peace Process and Post Settlement*, 16 July 2021).

58. 'Pakistan-India agree to cease firing along the LoC and all other sectors', *Ananta Centre*, March 2021; 'Time to end this human tragedy and resolve Kashmir issue', *The Express Tribune*, 13 May 2021.

59. 'Pakistan-India agree to cease firing along the LoC and all other sectors'; 'India-Pakistan Ceasefire Details Emerge - Along With Possibility of Joint Military Exercises', *The Diplomat*, 23 March 2021.

60. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2019: The Challenges of the First PTI Government', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, pp. 465-68.

2019 decision to abrogate Jammu and Kashmir's special autonomous status⁶¹ had exacerbated further bilateral relations.⁶²

According to speculations, contacts of the intelligence agencies had preceded the DGMOs statement. Moreover, Joe Biden's new US administration⁶³ and the UAE⁶⁴ reportedly played an instrumental mediatory role.

Soon afterward, while attending a two-day Islamabad Security Dialogue, both Prime Minister Imran Khan and General Bajwa stressed that peaceful relationships with India were critical to unlocking South and Central Asia's untapped growth potential. They both highlighted the Kashmir dispute as the only irritant preventing friendly bilateral relations and stressed Pakistan's readiness «to bury the past and move forward», wishing for a dedicated bilateral dialogue to be launched.⁶⁵

Analysts concurred in considering the ceasefire a tactical move serving the short-term interests of both countries.⁶⁶ Pakistan needs to consolidate its financial situation and prioritise external and internal stability given COVID-19 pandemic economic implications and its longer-term growth

61. This topic was extensively addressed in 2019 by Asia Maior (Diego Maiorano, 'India 2019: The general election and the new Modi wave', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, pp. 327-34; Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy; building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Ibid.*, pp. 345-97).

62. India's Ministry of Defence informed the country's parliament in February that 5.133 instances of ceasefire violations had taken place along the LoC and other areas in Jammu and Kashmir in 2020, and these had resulted in 46 deaths. The Pakistani review Dawn, quoting figures made available by Pakistani authorities, reported that there had been over 3.000 ceasefire violations last year, in which 28 people had died. On this subject, one can refer to Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', p. 460; 'The India-Pakistan ceasefire has revived hope in these times of gloom and uncertainty', *The European Foundation for South Asian Studies*, 5 March 2021; 'Lessons From Balakot: One Year On', *The Diplomat*, March 2020.

63. 'Hot takes: Ceasefire on the LoC', *South Asian Voices*, 4 March 2021; 'UAE helping India, Pakistan reach «healthy and functional» relationship, says senior diplomat', *GeoTV*, 15 April 2021; 'Indian media reports on rumours of backchannel talks between India and Pakistan in UAE', *GeoTV*, 18 April 2021; 'India and Pakistan should demonstrate political will to resume talks: Qureshi', *Mint*, 18 April 2021; 'Our country underscores the need for «meaningful» dialogue with India: Pakistan Foreign Office', *New Indian Express*, 23 April 2021; 'Pakistan offers to help virus-ravaged India', *A News*, 25 April; 'View from Dawn: India-Pakistan backchannel talks are at a standstill and may fall apart', *Scroll.in*, 7 May 2021; 'India-Pakistan: The pros and cons of backchannel diplomacy', *GeoTV*, 8 May 2021.

64. 'Secret India-Pakistan Peace Roadmap Brokered by Top UAE Royals', *Bloomberg*, 22 March 2021; 'UAE Brokered India-Pakistan Ceasefire: Report', *The Diplomat*, 22 March 2021.

65. 'Pakistan seeks specific actions for India talks to move ahead', *Al Jazeera*, 23 April 2021.

66. 'There is hope for Pakistan-India peace process', *Dawn*, 24 March 2021.

plans.⁶⁷ Furthermore, peaceful bilateral relations with India have a positive impact on the volume of trade, recently reduced to about US\$ 2 billion from the potential of nearly US\$ 40 billion.⁶⁸

The Pakistani public diplomacy narrative presented the ceasefire as an opportunity to create confidence-building measures, including cooperating to combat the Coronavirus⁶⁹ and restore peace on humanitarian grounds.⁷⁰ The ceasefire was also told to provide the momentum for more India-Pakistan engagement within multilateral settings.⁷¹ However, substantive engagement between the two countries was not visible. Pakistan was not offered to benefit from New Delhi's bilateral vaccine diplomacy and it did not request vaccine doses to India,⁷² although both countries' media repeatedly made that announcement. When the second pandemic wave severely hit India in the spring of 2021, Islamabad offered medical equipment and supplies and called for bilateral responses beyond political consideration.⁷³ New Delhi, nonetheless, did not seem ready to accept such offers, even when requested by the governments of the states of the Indian Union.⁷⁴ Likewise, an intense Pakistani social media activity displaying empathy towards the bordering rival did not result in actual foreign policy and diplomatic actions. Bilateral diplomatic relations, which had been downgraded in 2019

67. 'Pakistan-India agree to cease firing along the LoC and all other sectors', *Ananta Centre*, March 2021; 'The India-Pakistan ceasefire has revived hope in these times of gloom and uncertainty', *The European Foundation for South Asian Studies*, 5 March 2021.

68. 'Pak-India trade is only \$2 bn against \$37 bn potential', *The News*, 6 March 2019. An analysis of the economic implications of militancy and terrorism in Pakistan is provided by Noman Ahmad, Faiz Ur Rehman, 'Does Terrorism Reduce Trust?: Empirical Evidence from Pakistan', *Defence and Peace Economics*, 30 November 2020.

69. 'Pakistan's Untapped Soft Power Potential', *South Asian Voices*, 22 June 2021.

70. 'Prime Minister for SAARC medical visa', *The Tribune*, 19 February 2021.

71. Amna Nisar Abbasi, 'The quandary of SAARC in the backdrop of COVID-19', *Institute of Regional Studies*, Islamabad, February 2021.

72. In January 2021, India launched the Vaccine Maitri («Vaccine Friendship») initiative, a diplomatic effort to supply made-in-India COVID-19 vaccines to low-income and developing countries globally (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *COVID-19 Updates*).

73. 'Pakistan PM Imran Khan expresses solidarity with India over COVID-19 crisis', *The Hindu*, 25 April 2021; 'Pakistan offers essential supplies to help India amidst COVID-19 crisis', *The New Indian Express*, 25 April 2021; 'Pakistan offers relief materials to India to help fight COVID-19', *The Tribune*, 25 April 2021; 'India-Pakistan solidarity trends on social media amid worsening COVID-19 crisis in India', *Global Times*, 26 April 2021; 'Pakistan reiterates its offer to provide relief materials to India to help fight COVID-19', *Times of India*, 29 April 2021.

74. 'India welcomes COVID-19 support from partner countries', *The Hindu*, 29 April 2021; «Smokes and media»: Public Diplomacy in India-Pakistan', *The Diplomatist*, 29 April 2021; 'Punjab gasps as India's Modi refuses to seek oxygen from Pakistan', *Al Jazeera*, 19 May 2021; 'Across the Fence: Cyber Solidarity Between India and Pakistan', *South Asian Voices*, 29 July 2021.

with the expulsion of the Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan and the recall of the Pakistani envoy to India, had a faint improvement when the issuance of diplomatic visas was resumed after 28 months of suspension.⁷⁵

5. *The resurgence of militant extremism*

Afghanistan's stability is critical for regional peace. The Taliban have co-existed with Pakistan's extremism, epitomised by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) fight against the national Government. The TTP movement originated in 2007 as a loose affiliation of militant groups traditionally based in Pakistan's tribal areas. The movement increasingly violent activities culminated in the killing of 132 children at a school in Peshawar in 2014. This event triggered the Zarb-e-Azb military offensive on the part of the Pakistani armed forces, which badly mauled the TTP.⁷⁶ Afterward, the Army declared the border region with Afghanistan «militant-free». However, extremist activities resumed in 2018, and recently the TTP has stepped up attacks both in tribal areas and elsewhere in Pakistan.⁷⁷ Fearing a resurgence of domestic jihadism, Islamabad sealed its side of the border before the Taliban's takeover to reopen it soon after for trade and restricted movement.⁷⁸ In fact, following the progressive re-appropriation of control of Afghanistan by the Taliban, a surge in attacks has occurred in the provinces bordering Pakistan.⁷⁹

In 2021, the TTP had a more decentralised organisation than previously and had revamped its operations in cooperation with other militant outfits operating beyond the North-Western tribal areas.⁸⁰ Recently, the TTP has opened a new front against Chinese interests in Pakistan, particu-

75. 'India withdraws staff as Pakistan dithers on visas', *The Times of India*, 25 May 2021; 'Pakistan, India issue diplomatic visas to each other after 28-month hiatus', *The Express Tribune*, 22 August 2021.

76. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan: gli attacchi al governo di Sharif e le tensioni con i militari', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXV/2014, pp. 370-73; 'Operation Zarb-e-Azb', *The Diplomat*, 9 March 2021.

77. 'TTP puts its weight behind TLR, calls for joint struggle against govt', *Pakistan Today*, 14 April 2021; 'Pakistan Targets a Resurgent TTP as Uncertainty Looms in Afghanistan', *The Diplomat*, 5 June 2021.

78. Gavin Helf, Donald N. Jensen, Garrett Nada, Tamanna Salikuddin, Andrew Scobell, 'How the Region is Reacting to the Taliban Takeover', *United States Institute of Peace*, 19 August 2021.

79. Tushar Ranjan Mohanty, 'Afghanistan-Pakistan: Snakes In The Backyard – Analysis', *Eurasia Review*, 24 September 2021; 'Violence surges in Pakistan's tribal belt as Taliban, IS-K go on attack', *BBC*, 13 October 2021; 'Police Officer Killed By Pakistani Taliban After Guarding Polio Vaccination Team', *Gandhara*, 24 October 2021.

80. 'The Pakistani Taliban is Back', *The Diplomat*, 9 March 2021; 'What Is the Significance of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Latest Attack in Quetta?', *The Diplomat*, May 2021.

larly the CPEC. The TTP claimed responsibility for the suicide attack on an international hotel in Quetta, the capital of south-western Baluchistan province, which killed five people on 21 April 2021.⁸¹ The hotel was hosting the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, who was not present when the blast occurred. It is believed that the militant group has formed a tactical alliance with secular Baluch separatists' groups.⁸² In November 2021, a temporary ceasefire between the PTI Government and the TTP entered into force amidst talks for a possible deal to end 14 years of conflict allegedly facilitated by Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers.⁸³

In July 2021, another attack launched against Chinese installations in Pakistan involved Chinese and Pakistani nationals working at the CPEC construction site of the Dasu hydropower project in the Upper Kohistan area of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.⁸⁴ Shortly thereafter, in August 2021, a suicide attack targeted a vehicle carrying Chinese nationals in Gwadar, Baluchistan.⁸⁵

The TTP offered its support to the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The TLP is a hard-line political-religious organisation not associated with jihadist groups. TLP was founded in 2015 by Khadim Hussain Rizvi after the execution of Malik Mumtaz Hussain Qadri – the police guard who was found guilty of the murder of the former governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer.⁸⁶ Opposing the blasphemy laws, Taseer had called for their reform as he considered them a tool used to persecute religious minorities. In the 2018 general election, the TLP won more than two million votes and three provincial assembly seats in Sindh.⁸⁷ In November 2020, the TLP launched a protest against the French Government following statements by President Emmanuel Macron, who had defended a publication's right to republish

81. 'Bombing in hotel parking lot kills at least 4 in SW Pakistan', *The Washington Post*, 22 April 2021; 'Pakistan hotel bomb: Deadly blast hits luxury venue in Quetta', *BBC News*, 22 April 2021.

82. Baluchi militants have been opposing CPEC projects and have organised attacks on Chinese installations and interests in the province in the past. They claim that Pakistan and China are exploiting resources in the region to colonise the province with little benefit and jobs left to locals ('The Rise Of The New Pakistani Taliban', *Gandhara*, 18 May 2021).

83. Cease-Fire Between Pakistan, Banned Extremist Group TTP Begins, *Ibid.*, 9 November 2021.

84. 'Terrorists Target Chinese Nationals Working on a CPEC Project', *The Diplomat*, 19 July 2021.

85. 'China urges Pakistan to «severely punish» perpetrators of Gwadar attack', *The Express Tribune*, 21 August 2021.

86. Maheen Ahmad, 'Rise of Barelvi Extremism: Policy Options for Pakistan', *Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, May 2021.

87. 'TLP inflicts loss to PML-N in 13 constituencies', *The News*, 30 July 2018; 'Despite in opposition, TLP and JI votes may go to PPP in Senate polls', *The News*, 21 February 2021.

caricatures of Islam's Prophet.⁸⁸ Some, including Prime Minister Imran Khan,⁸⁹ interpreted Macron's statements as encouraging Islamophobia. The TLP demanded Pakistan to expel the French Ambassador and boycott French goods; conversely, the French Government asked its citizens to temporarily evacuate Pakistan.⁹⁰

On 12 April 2021, radical Islamist Saad Hussain Rizvi, TLP leader and son of Khadim Hussain, was arrested by the Pakistani government in Lahore. Following Rizvi's arrest, TLP activists organised a week of violent protests in Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi and elsewhere, demanding his release. As a result, a police station in Lahore was attacked, and eleven police officers were abducted and later released.⁹¹ Following these events, on 15 April 2021, the Government banned the TLP under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997.⁹² In parallel, Imran Khan's Government engaged in negotiations with the TLP. To end the protests which had also led to the killing of four police officers, the Khan Government agreed to debate the expulsion of the French Ambassador in the national Parliament. The resolution was tabled on 20 April 2020 without reaching a consensus about the fate of the French diplomat,⁹³ while Rizvi and hundreds of TLP supporters were released.⁹⁴ Khan also called on Muslim-majority countries to lobby European and other countries on perceived blasphemy-related issues.⁹⁵

Despite having banned it, the government allowed the TLP to contest the by-election for a National Assembly seat in Karachi on 29 April 2019. While the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) defeated the Pakistan Muslim

88. 'Teacher killed in France after showing blasphemous sketches in class', *Dawn*, 17 October 2020.

89. 'Pakistan PM: Insulting Islam's Prophet Should Be Same as Denying Holocaust', *Voice of America*, 17 April 2021; 'Imran Khan seeking to impose Pakistan's murderous blasphemy laws across world', *Wion*, 2 May 2021.

90. 'Explained: Why France has asked its citizens to leave Pakistan', *The Indian Express*, 22 April 2021; 'Barelvi assertion looks ominous for Pakistan', *The Tribune*, 4 May 2021.

91. 'Pakistan's Police Brave Islamist Violence – Alone', *The Diplomat*, 15 April 2021; 'Banned: What does the TLP want?', *Dawn*, 20 April 2020.

92. 'Government bans TLP under anti-terrorism law', *Ibid.*, 15 April 2021.

93. 'Pakistani Parliament Debates Whether to Expel French Envoy', *The Diplomat*, 21 April 2021; 'France sends its envoy in Pakistan to Egypt', *The News*, 29 October 2021.

94. 'Islamist party Tehreek-e-Labbaik fuels anti-France violence in Pakistan', *France 24*, 17 April 2021; 'Pakistan: TLP protesters free abducted policemen after violence', *Al Jazeera*, 19 April 2021; 'Violence erupts in Karachi as TLP workers clash with police', *Dawn*, 20 April 2021; 'Pakistan opens talks with outlawed Islamists behind violent anti-France protests', *Reuters*, 20 April 2021; 'Pakistan frees 669 TLP supporters', *The Hindu*, 22 April 2021.

95. 'Explained: How radical outfit forced Pakistan hand in move to expel French envoy', *The Indian Express*, 22 April 2021; 'TLP is no Lashkar-e-Taiba, its agitation no civil war. Yet Pakistan is losing a battle', *The Print*, 22 April 2021.

League-Nawaz (PML-N) by a narrow margin, the TLP emerged as the third political force in the electoral contest, performing better than the PTI.⁹⁶

On the same day, the EU Parliament adopted the resolution on «Blasphemy laws in Pakistan, in particular, the case of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel».⁹⁷ Kausar and Emmanuel are a Christian couple who had been on death row in Pakistan from 2014 to 2021, after being convicted of blasphemy.⁹⁸ The resolution noted that Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws incite harassment, violence and murder against those accused and that blasphemy is a crime punished with the death penalty in Pakistan. The resolution also stressed that Pakistan's blasphemy laws are «incompatible with international human rights laws and are increasingly used to target vulnerable minority groups in the country». The EU Parliament called on the Pakistani authorities to release Kausar and Emmanuel, overturn their death sentence and review and ultimately abolish the blasphemy laws and their application. Moreover, the resolution referred to the debated expulsion of the French Ambassador and called for a review of Pakistan's eligibility for the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus status (GSP+). As mentioned in section 2, the GSP+ status removes import duties from products entering the EU market from specific countries. With Pakistan's GSP+ status expiring in 2023, close monitoring will be applied for its possible further extension until 2034.⁹⁹

The PTI Government decided not to compromise on the blasphemy law.¹⁰⁰ However, in June 2021, the Christian couple was acquitted on appeal at Lahore's Supreme Court, which ordered the release.¹⁰¹

TLP's protests and violent demonstrations continued in October with a march to Islamabad following clashes in Lahore demanding the release of TLP leader Saad Hussain Rizvi and the expulsion of the French Ambassador.¹⁰² Following the new wave of disturbance, the Government reached

96. 'PPP retains Karachi's NA-249 seat after recount', *Dawn*, 9 May 2021; 'Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan: From Street Power to Electoral Force?', *The Diplomat*, 18 May 2021.

97. The European Parliament, *Text Adopted – Blasphemy laws in Pakistan, in particular the case of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel*, 29 April 2021; *Ibid.*, *News – Human rights: Pakistan, Bolivia and the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America*, 29 April 2021.

98. 'Pakistan court again delays appeal of couple convicted of blasphemy', *The Guardian*, 24 February 2021.

99. European Union External Action Service, *Pakistan: Speech on behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP debate*, 29 April 2021.

100. «No compromise» on blasphemy law, decides Pakistan despite EU resolution', *Hindustan Times*, 4 May 2021.

101. 'Pakistan overturns Christian couple's blasphemy death sentences', *BBC*, 3 June 2021.

102. 'Pakistan Releases Hundreds Of Protesters Detained During Violent Clashes With Police', *Gandhara*, 25 October 2021. 'Deadly Violence Erupts As Banned Pakistani Islamist Group Renews March', *Ibid.*, 27 October 2021; 'Pakistan Beefs Up Security As Banned Islamist Group Resumes March On Capital', *Ibid.*, 29 October 2021.

a secretive agreement with the TLP, lifting part of the measures adopted against the organisation under the Anti-Terrorism Act.¹⁰³

6. *The economy*

Stagnant exports and low foreign direct investments have made Pakistan dependent on external borrowings.¹⁰⁴ In addition, US disengagement from Afghanistan and uncertainties about Washington's plans with Pakistan have affected the domestic economy.¹⁰⁵ In October 2021, Pakistan's 39-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF)¹⁰⁶ arrangement, approved on 3 July 2019, was completed. Islamabad has also raised additional debt with bonds, for which repayment additional debt is required.¹⁰⁷ The IMF expected Pakistan to implement the COVID-19 response plan and stabilisation measures as announced in 2020.¹⁰⁸ These measures included lower interest rates, subsidised credit for industry from the State Bank, increased power tariffs, revenue hikes and other measures. The Government of Imran Khan seemed inclined to focus on growth incentives and micro-finance social protection interventions, addressing the most disadvantaged sections of society.¹⁰⁹ An intense debate in the country on the EFF's stringent conditions led to Islamabad's decision to renegotiate them to boost economic growth. In this regard, in May 2021, Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin reported that the government had communicated to the IMF that utility tariffs and taxes could not be raised due to COVID-19 pandemic-related hardships suffered by the people of Pakistan.

In 2020, widespread agreement among economists anticipated an economic shock in Pakistan due to COVID-19 outbreak-related disruptions.¹¹⁰ On 6 April 2021, the World Bank issued the Pakistan Development

103. Details of agreement with TLP to be disclosed within few days: Shaikh Rasheed, *The News*, 13 November 2021.

104. 'Pakistan's debt rose to Rs 149 trillion during Imran Khan-led govt', *Ani News*, 3 September 2021.

105. 'Waiting for Biden', *Dawn*, 2 September 2021; 'Pakistan's economy is facing a testing moment. It needs US support to pull through', *Scroll.in*, 4 September 2021.

106. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2019: The challenges of the first PTI government', pp. 461-65.

107. 'Pakistan raises \$2.5bn via Eurobonds', *The News*, 9 April 2021; 'Pakistan raises another \$1bn through Eurobond issued in March', *Dawn*, 7 July 2021; 'Pakistan receives \$1b in Eurobond proceeds', *The Express Tribune*, 14 July 2021.

108. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', pp. 450-452.

109. 'Kamyab Pakistan Programme', *The Express Tribune*, 17 August 2021.

110. 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', pp. 450-52.

Update, a six-monthly report that examines economic developments and prospects in the country. The report highlights that after two decades of uninterrupted decline in poverty, the COVID-19 pandemic had reversed the trend in Pakistan. The analysis showed an estimated increase of poverty by 2.3% in FY 2020 (July 2020-June 2021), with 5.8 million additional people falling into poverty.¹¹¹

The report, nonetheless, also showed signs of economic recovery and provided optimistic, although uncertain, projections of GDP growth (from -1.5% in 2019/20 to 1.3% in 2020/21, to 2.0% in 2021/22, to 3.4% in 2022/23) and declining inflation (from 10.7% in 2019/20 to 9.0% in 2020/21, to 7.0% in 2021/22, to 6.0% in 2022/23).¹¹² According to the World Bank, the Pakistani financial sector remained resilient despite the economic slowdown, primarily due to its reconfiguration toward national securities rather than private-sector credit. Nevertheless, the Washington-based international financial institution highlighted the importance of the private sector in the recovery of the country and its vulnerabilities, requiring the support of specific policies aimed to facilitate the establishment of a conducive business environment.

The World Bank's trends and projections echoed the results of the February 2021 IMF's reviews of the EFF programme for Pakistan.¹¹³ The IMF attributed economic signs of recovery in Pakistan's post-pandemic period to its adherence to the conditions accompanying the EFF programme.¹¹⁴ While the COVID-19 shock disrupted Pakistan's progress under the EFF, the IMF acknowledged that the Pakistani authorities continued advancing their reform agenda. In particular, the IMF referred to fiscal stimulus, expansion of social safety nets, monetary policy support and targeted financial initiatives as having been critical to containing the impact on the economy since the first wave of the pandemic.¹¹⁵ As a result, the IMF assessed as satisfactory the programme performance and cleared a tranche of about US\$ 500 million for disbursement.¹¹⁶ However, despite the good notes, the

111. The World Bank, 'Pakistan Development Update. Navigating in Uncertain Times', April 2021.

112. *Ibid.*, Table 3.1: Pakistan Macroeconomic Outlook (FY21-23).

113. The International Monetary Fund, Press Release No. 21/41, 'IMF Staff and Pakistan Reach Staff-Level Agreement on the Pending Reviews Under the Extended Fund Facility', 16 February 2021; *Ibid.*, Press Release; Staff Report; Staff Supplement, and Statement by the Executive Director for Pakistan, IMF Country Report No. 21/73, 'Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Reviews Under the Extended Arrangement Under the Extended Fund Facility and Request for Rephasing of Access', April 2021.

114. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2019: The challenges of the first PTI government', p. 463.

115. 'Economy pivoting towards growth', *The News*, 2 June 2021.

116. The International Monetary Fund, 'Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Reviews Under the Extended Arrangement Under the Extended Fund Facility and Request for Rephasing of Access'.

IMF recommended further efforts to remove structural impediments and strengthen economic productivity and private sector investment. As a result, according to the Bretton Woods organisation, growth slowed to -0.4% in FY 2020, while was expected to grow to 1.5% in FY 2021.¹¹⁷

In May 2021, the PTI Government announced an estimated higher-than-expected GDP growth of 3.94% in FY 2021 – about three times higher than the projection of 1.3% made by the World Bank in the South Asia Economic Focus report – and set the GDP growth rate target to 4.8% for FY 2022.¹¹⁸ These claims were received with scepticism by independent economists and opposition politicians.¹¹⁹ According to analysts, actual reforms were not being implemented in Pakistan.¹²⁰ Experts considered the structural adjustment policy followed under the IMF aegis as being primarily focused on domestic growth financed by debt while no structural approach or sustainable mechanism was ensured. At the same time, Pakistan's high defence spending (about 20% of overall expenditure) is a feature of the country's economy which goes significantly beyond the global average of 2% of GDP and leaves a narrow margin of manoeuvre to use fiscal resources on development.¹²¹ Despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Islamabad increased its defence budget by 11% to US\$ 7.85 billion compared to US\$ 151 million allocated to healthcare.¹²²

7. *The plight of COVID-19 pandemic*

Pakistan succeeded in controlling the spread of the first and second COVID-19 waves that hit the country in February and October 2020, respectively.¹²³ As of December 2020, Pakistan recorded about 480,000 Coronavirus

117. *Ibid.*

118. 'Pakistan Reports Higher-Than-Expected Economic Growth', *Gandhara*, 22 May 2021; 'Economy pivoting towards growth'.

119. 'How Pakistan's Economy Is Failing Its People', *Gandhara*, 25 May 2021; 'Leading Pakistan economists doubtful over country's 3.94 per cent GDP rate', *The Economic Times*, 29 May 2021.

120. 'How Pakistan's Economy Is Failing Its People', *Gandhara*, 25 May 2021.

121. An article of interest is written by Ilhan Niaz, 'Pakistan's search for a successful model of national political economy', *Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 110, 2021, Issue 2, pp. 232-249, 30 April 2021. The article focuses on Pakistan's attempts to identify a political economy model to meet the national objectives of industrialisation and national defence. The author's thesis is that this dichotomy has been plunging Pakistan into a permanent political and economic crisis resulting in the failure to mobilise government resources to achieve national goals.

122. *Ibid.*

123. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', pp. 447-52; 'As Pakistan Braces For Second Wave, Health Officials Warn More Measures Needed', *Gandhara*, 6 November 2020.

cases and more than 10,000 related deaths.¹²⁴ In early 2021, about a year after the first recorded case, Pakistan's COVID-19 toll stood well below what had been feared, reportedly 92% less than the worst-case scenarios that had been simulated.¹²⁵ Experts have identified multiple concurring factors that might have contributed to containing the first two waves of the pandemic's toll.

The Coronavirus disease's impact on the elderly population in Pakistan was detected since the pandemic onset, yet 70% of the Pakistani population is below the age of 29.¹²⁶ In addition, COVID-19's death toll has been found to increase with certain comorbidities that occur at a low rate in Pakistan. In addition, it has been observed that Pakistanis have a non-specific immunity to the Coronavirus, due to multiple exposures to various vaccines.¹²⁷ On the response level, the government of Pakistan showed a strong political will to combat the pandemic.¹²⁸ In 2020, the military took the lead in the COVID-19 response.¹²⁹ To oversee the pandemic response, the National Command Operation Centre (NCOC) brought together public health experts and representatives from all provinces. A programme of selected (smart) lockdowns was initiated, which has been found to reduce the risk of transmissions.¹³⁰

Pakistan's PTI Government entered agreements with several vaccine makers.¹³¹ In January 2021, the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan (DRAP) approved the first three COVID-19 vaccines for emergency use: the vaccine produced by the Anglo-Swedish multinational pharmaceutical and biotechnology company Oxford-AstraZeneca;¹³² the Beijing Institute of Biological Products (BBIBP) CorV – or Sinopharm – produced by the Chinese state-owned enterprise China National Pharmaceutical Group

124. World Health Organization, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*.

125. Usman Chohan, 'Coronavirus v. Pakistan: Early Successes in the Epidemiological Battle', *Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies*, Islamabad, 1 September 2020.

126. Ignacio Artaza, 'Utilizing the untapped potential of Pakistan's young', *UNDP*, 12 May 2020.

127. 'Health expert attributes drop in cases to non-specific immunity', *The News*, 19 July 2020.

128. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', pp. 447-50.

129. 'How COVID-19 Changed Asia', *The Diplomat*, 12 March 2021.

130. Ibarra-Vega Danny, 'Lockdown, one, two, none, or smart. Modeling containing covid-19 infection. A conceptual model', *Science of The Total Environment*, Vol. 730, 15 August 2020.

131. 'China-India Vaccine Diplomacy – Will Pakistan Learn from Neighbors?', *Modern Diplomacy*, 23 February 2021.

132. 'All you need to know about Covid vaccines in Pakistan', *Dawn*, 15 May 2021; 'Pakistan approves AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use', *Reuter*, 16 January 2021.

Corporation;¹³³ and the Russian COVID-19 vaccine, Gam-COVID-Vac, or Sputnik V.¹³⁴ Half a million doses of the Sinopharm vaccine were provided free of cost and reached Pakistan in February 2021.¹³⁵ Soon afterward, Pakistan reached an agreement to purchase the vaccine from Sinopharm.¹³⁶

A national COVID-19 vaccination drive was launched on 3 February 2021 with China-supplied shots, starting with frontline healthcare workers.¹³⁷ The inception of the national vaccination campaign faced challenges with vaccine uptake,¹³⁸ storage and distribution and some hesitancy of the population.¹³⁹ In addition, the immunisation campaign was initially slow amidst an initial shortage of supplies.¹⁴⁰

On 12 February 2021, Pakistan approved the emergency use of the fourth vaccine, the single-dose Convidicea, developed by the Chinese pharmaceutical company CanSino Biologics (CanSinoBIO).¹⁴¹ Later, Pakistan reached an agreement with CanSinoBIO to import three million

133. 'All you need to know about Covid vaccines in Pakistan'; 'Chinese pharma Sinopharm's Covid vaccine becomes 2nd to be approved for emergency use in Pakistan', *Dawn*, 18 January 2021.

134. 'All you need to know about Covid vaccines in Pakistan'; 'Pakistan receives first shipment of Russian Sputnik vaccine for coronavirus', *Geo TV*, 18 March 2021.

135. 'Pakistan: China to gift half million doses of Sinopharm vaccine', *Arab News*, 19 January 2021; 'Pakistan receives first batch of Chinese COVID-19 vaccine', *Geo TV*, 1 February 2021.

136. 'Coronavirus: Pakistan finalises deal to buy vaccine from Sinopharm', *The News*, 16 March 2021.

137. Adult citizens (18 years and above) are vaccinated free of cost at public health facilities on a voluntary basis; vaccinations are mandatory for public and private sector employees ('COVID-19 vaccines mandatory for all public, private sector employees: NCOC', *Dawn*, 9 June 2021; 'Why Isn't Pakistan's COVID-19 Death Rate Falling as Quickly as Infections?', *The Diplomat*, 21 June 2021; 'COVID-19: How Pakistan plans to vaccinate its way out of pandemic', *Gulf News*, 13 July 2021).

138. 'COVAX to provide 15mn doses of coronavirus vaccine to Pakistan by May', *The News*, 12 April 2021; 'Pakistan to receive 13.2M COVID vaccine doses by June', *Anadolu Agency*, 3 May 2021.

139. 'Pakistan's COVID-19 Battle Is Missing a Crucial Ingredient: Public Support', *The Diplomat*, 23 April 2021; 'Pakistan's COVID-19 Vaccine Campaign Crawls Along', *Ibid.*, 27 April 2021; Rubal Kanozia, Ritu Arya, '«Fake news», religion, and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh', *Media Asia*, 17 May 2021; Waqas Ejaz, Muhammad Ittefaq, Hyunjin Seo, Farah Naz, 'Factors associated with the belief in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories in Pakistan', *Health, Risk & Society*, Vol. 23, Issue 3-4, 19 May 2021, pp. 162-178.

140. 'Pakistan to get first shipment of COVID-19 vaccine by Jan 31: Qureshi', *Geo TV*, 21 January 2021; 'Pakistan secures 17 million doses of AstraZeneca', *Dawn*, 31 January 2021; 'Pakistan to get 17m COVID-19 vaccine doses from UK', *The Express Tribune*, 6 March 2021; 'COVAX to provide AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine for free to Pakistan', *The News*, 24 March 2021)

141. 'All you need to know about Covid vaccines in Pakistan'; 'Pakistan approves China's CanSinoBIO coronavirus vaccine for emergency use', *Geo TV*, 12 February 2021.

doses of the vaccine.¹⁴² Simultaneously, it was announced that 17 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine would be provided to Pakistan by the COVAX facility.¹⁴³

As of April 2021, a slow vaccine rollout was recorded, with about 2% of the population having been inoculated.¹⁴⁴ In the meantime, the nationwide positivity ratio of Pakistan increased amidst a relaxation of basic health standard operating procedures to contain COVID-19 reaching 10.62% against 10.15% recorded in April 2020.¹⁴⁵ The so-called «third wave» of the pandemic was traced back to the spread of three variants of COVID-19¹⁴⁶ and portrayed a different, deadlier scenario in Pakistan. With over 137,000 cases and 3,000 deaths, April 2021 surpassed any precedent monthly averages and imposed the government of Islamabad to adopt restrictions to mobility and public facilities.¹⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the DRAP approved the fifth vaccine against the virus for emergency use, the Coronavac, popularly known as Sinovac, developed by the Chinese company Sinovac Biotech.¹⁴⁸

Pakistan was one of the first countries to allow private imports of COVID-19 vaccines.¹⁴⁹ In March 2021, the pharmaceutical company AGP

142. 'Pakistan to import Chinese Cansino COVID vaccine in bulk to package 3 million doses locally: minister', *Reuters*, 30 March 2021.

143. COVAX is an alliance co-led by the Vaccine Alliance (formerly the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization), the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. COVAX is one of the three pillars of the «Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator», an initiative started in April 2020 by the WHO, the European Commission, and the government of France as a response to the pandemic. The initiative aims to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines and coordinate international resources to enable the equitable access of COVID-19 diagnostics, treatments, and vaccines. In 2020, the alliance pledged to provide free vaccines for 20% of the population of around 190 countries including Pakistan (Gavi Vaccine Alliance's web site).

144. 'Pakistan to get over 15 mln doses of COVID vaccine in next two months – minister', *Reuters*, 30 April 2021.

145. 'Coronavirus in Pakistan: Alarm bells ringing as positivity ratio crosses 7%', *The News*, 16 March 2021; 'Pakistan's COVID-19 Vaccine Campaign Crawls Along', *The Diplomat*, 27 April 2021.

146. The B.1.617.2 known as «Indian variant» or «Delta variant»; the B.1.351 or «Beta variant»; and the P.1 one or «Gamma variant», sampled respectively in India, South Africa and Brazil ('In last three months, 90% of Punjab's COVID-19 cases were of UK variant', *The News*, 2 May 2021; 'Delta variant making up 50% of COVID-19 cases in Pakistan: Dr Nausheen Hamid', *Geo News*, 13 July 2021).

147. 'Pakistan Army to Enforce Pandemic Protocols', *The Diplomat*, 28 April 2021.

148. 'All you need to know about Covid vaccines in Pakistan'; 'Covid-19: Pakistan approves China's Sinovac vaccine for emergency use', *Business Standard*, 10 April 2021.

149. 'In Pakistan, COVID-19 vaccines go on sale', *Devex*, 18 March 2021; 'Pakistan to start private imports of CanSino COVID-19 vaccine for sale', *Reuters*, 22 March 2021.

Pharma received the first shipment of 50,000 doses of privately imported Sputnik V.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Pakistani AJ Pharma – CanSinoBIO’s local partner – imported the Chinese Convidecia. The first batch of bulk CanSinoBIO vaccines was formulated, sterilised and packaged by the National Institute of Health (NIH). This step preceded NIH local vaccine manufacturing of the first batch of Chinese CanSino named PakVac.¹⁵¹ In addition, Pakistan’s Searle Company concluded an exclusive licensing and supply agreement with the Chinese firm Livzon Mapharm Inc. for the manufacturing transition, licensing, and supply of the V-01 Coronavirus vaccine in Pakistan following trials. This contract was the first one signed by Pakistan with a pharmaceutical company aimed to start the domestic production of the COVID-19 vaccine. It offered the opportunity to speed up the vaccination process and develop domestic biomanufacturing capacity.¹⁵²

Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine¹⁵³ was the sixth vaccine approved for emergency use by the DRAP after its first shipment reached Pakistan at the end of May 2021 under the COVAX programme.¹⁵⁴ Later, in July, the seventh vaccine, Moderna,¹⁵⁵ was also approved by the DRAP.¹⁵⁶

Presenting the 2020–2021 federal budget, federal Minister of Finance Shaukat Tarin announced the Government’s allocation of US\$ 1.1 billion to procure Coronavirus vaccines and plans to vaccinate 100 million people by July 2022.¹⁵⁷ Islamabad undertook such efforts both under bilateral agreements, such as the agreement with the United States,¹⁵⁸ and multilateral agreements such as with the World Bank. The latter allocated over US\$ 150 million to the pandemic response in support of the ongoing national vac-

150. ‘Vaccines sell out in Pakistan as the private market opens, raising concerns of inequality’, *CNN*, 12 April 2021.

151. ‘COVID-19: Pakistan begins formulation, packaging of CanSino vaccines’, *Gulf News*, 21 February 2021; ‘Pakistan to begin local vaccine production from May’, *The News*, 28 April 2021; ‘Covid-19: Pakistan to launch locally-made Chinese vaccine from next week’, *Ani News*, 25 May 2021.

152. ‘Pakistan firm signs COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing agreement with China’, *Gulf News*, 2 April 2021; ‘Pakistan purchases two million doses of China’s Sinovac vaccine’, *Geo TV*, 23 May 2021.

153. See WHO’s website.

154. ‘Regulatory body in Pakistan rushes to register Pfizer vaccine after shipment arrives without clearance’, *Ani News*, 30 May 2021; ‘Covid vaccine: Pakistan approves Pfizer jab for emergency use’, *Kaleej Times*, 1 June 2021.

155. See WHO’s website; ‘Moderna to be available at designated vaccination centres across Pakistan starting Monday’, *Geo News*, 4 July 2021).

156. McGill University, School of Population and Global Health, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, *COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker*.

157. ‘Pakistan commits \$1.1 bln for COVID vaccine to cover eligible population’, *Reuters*, 9 June 2021.

158. ‘2.5m doses of Moderna vaccine from US arrive in Pakistan’, *The News*, 3 July 2021.

cine drive in Pakistan.¹⁵⁹ The measures taken by the Government succeeded to contain the Coronavirus third wave. As a result, despite some peaks, by summer 2021 the infection rate started declining and both reported cases and deaths decreased.¹⁶⁰ As of December 2021, over 150 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines were administered, with about 70 million people – about 30% of the population – fully vaccinated. In the same period, Pakistan registered a total of 1.3 million cases and nearly 30,000 fatalities.¹⁶¹

8. Weakened political opposition

In 2021, the PTI administration concentrated mainly on foreign policy. Struggling with internal frictions and geared towards preparing for the 2023 general elections, the political opposition did not represent a significant cause of concern for Imran Khan.

In 2020, eleven opposition parties – the PDM – joined forces on an anti-Government plan to oust Prime Minister Imran Khan. The alliance included the PML-N, the PPP, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party and the Awami National Party (ANP). They challenged the PTI Government under the leadership of Maulana Fazlur Rahman of the JUI-F.¹⁶²

As had occurred in previous attempts to coalesce political opposition groups, the PDM was undermined by the diverging agendas of the two leading parties, the PPP and the PML-N.¹⁶³ Any effort to give substance to an alliance that existed only in theory did not lead to any concrete results, allowing Imran Khan's government to fend off all opposition challenges, remaining in power without too much difficulty.¹⁶⁴ Eventually, even this

159. The World Bank, 'World Bank Redeploys \$153 Million to Support Pakistan's COVID-19 Vaccine Drive', 13 May 2021; 'Pakistan gets \$2.77b from IMF's Covid fund', *The Express Tribune*, 24 August 2021.

160. 'Pakistan reports less than 4% positivity rate for seventh consecutive day', *The News*, 7 June 2021; 'Pakistan continues to report decline in COVID-19 cases', *The News*, 19 September 2021; 'Coronavirus in Pakistan: Massive decline recorded in active cases', *The News*, 25 September 2021.

161. World Health Organization, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*; Johns Hopkins University, *Coronavirus Resource Center*.

162. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', pp. 454-57.

163. *Ibid.*; 'Fazlur Rehman parts ways with PML-N, PPP alliance', *The News*, 5 February 2020.

164. 'Pak's ex-premier Gilani defeats finance minister in Senate election', *Business Standard*, 4 March 2021; 'Imran Khan becomes 2nd prime minister to seek voluntary vote of confidence', *The News*, 5 March 2021; 'Pakistan's prime minister survives confidence vote', *Financial Times*, 6 March 2021; 'PDM delays long march as PPP mulls assembly resignations', *The News*, 16 March 2021; 'PDM decided opposition leader in Senate would be from PML-N', *The News*, 21 March 2021; 'With Scandals And Dynasties, Pakistan's Political Parties Struggle To Stay Relevant', *Gandhara*, 24 March 2021; 'PDM chief Fazlur Rehman says PDM's doors open for PPP', *The News*, 30 April 2021.

largely theoretical opposition unity broke down when the ANP and the PPP quit the PDM, respectively, on 6 and 11 April 2021.¹⁶⁵

In the lead-up to the 2023 general elections, frictions surfaced inside the PML-N party on matters concerning leadership and opposition parties.¹⁶⁶ PML-N President Shahbaz Sharif, former chief minister of Punjab and brother and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif,¹⁶⁷ was released in April 2021, after being arrested in September 2020 in a money laundering case.¹⁶⁸ In Shahbaz's absence, Nawaz Sharif's daughter and PML (N) Vice President Maryam Nawaz Sharif and former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi adopted a rigid stance on the relations with the members of the PDM alliance. Also, Maryam espoused her father's fierce anti-establishment narrative.¹⁶⁹ The PDM's failure to oust Prime Minister Imran Khan and its fragmentation over the hard-line PML (N) positions¹⁷⁰ favoured Shahbaz's strategy aimed at recompacting the opposition as the only way to successfully challenge the PTI Government in view of the general election, due in 2023. The majority of the PML (N) party seemed to favour Shahbaz Sharif's positions,¹⁷¹ and a change of the party's political approach, highlighting it, became visible. However, Shahbaz's positions did not obtain Nawaz's agreement¹⁷² as the former Punjab Chief Minister's aim appeared to be the elimination of Maryam from the political arena, in order to be the only candidate for the office of prime minister.¹⁷³

165. 'Senate of Pakistan: Political storm brews up as Yusuf Raza Gilani becomes opposition leader', *The News*, 27 March 2021; 'ANP quits PDM, says alliance «hijacked» by some parties', *Dawn*, 6 April 2021; 'Fazl makes PPP, ANP's comeback to PDM conditional', *The News*, 25 May 2021; 'PDM had no clear-cut strategy in meeting yesterday; seems to be confused, says Bilawal', *The News*, 30 May 2021.

166. 'Ahead of 2023 polls, Pakistan's biggest opposition party is grappling with question of leadership', *Scroll.in*, 8 September 2021.

167. On Nawaz Sharif's judiciary vicissitudes and his disqualification from public offices due to his family's involvement in the Panama Papers scandal one can refer to Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2017: Vulnerabilities of the emerging market', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVIII/2017, pp. 353-56; and Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2018, 'General elections and the government of Imran Khan', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX/2018, pp. 359-62.

168. 'Shahbaz Sharif released from Kot Lakhpat Jail', *The News*, 24 April 2021.

169. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', pp. 455-56.

170. 'The PML-N's change of tack', *Dawn*, 26 May 2021.; 'Fissures in PML-N becoming visible', *The News*, 28 May 2021.

171. 'PML-N leaders parted over Nawaz, Shahbaz stances', *Pakistan Observer*, 28 May 2021.

172. 'Nawaz rebuffs Shehbaz's views on political reconciliation', *The Express Tribune*, 3 August 2021; 'Shehbaz arrives to iron-out internal rifts before political muscle flex', *The Express Tribune*, 27 August 2021; 'Sharif brothers on collision course', *The Express Tribune*, 4 September 2021.

173. 'Future of PDM: Shahbaz Sharif, Fazl to discuss Opposition alliance in meeting today', *The News*, 28 May 2021; 'PML-N leaders parted over Nawaz, Shahbaz stances', *Pakistan Observer*, 28 May 2021.

9. *Conclusions*

Pakistan's Economic Outreach Initiative puts the economy at the centre of the country's external affairs and reflects national aspirations to play a prominent international role. Domestic and regional peace and stability are preconditions to creating a conducive environment for Islamabad to achieve its goals. With this backdrop, Islamabad has strengthened bilateral ties with strategic partner countries. On the one hand, Islamabad enjoys an ongoing bilateral partnership with China, which is enhanced by the CPEC, and shares joint interests with Beijing in engaging with Afghanistan. In addition, Islamabad has corroborated its relationships with South and Central Asian countries in the period under review. Notably, following the military leadership's decision to «extend hand of peace in all directions», a ceasefire was announced jointly with India in February 2021. On the other hand, American disengagement in Afghanistan was accompanied by the weakening of the strategic partnership with Pakistan, based on anti-terrorism commitments undertaken after the 9/11 attacks. The United States has not prioritised future relations with Pakistan while intensifying those with India, and Islamabad has not yet succeeded to convince the new administration in Washington of its vision of economic partnership.

Although the US military withdrawal from the neighbouring country caused Pakistan's concern as Washington's support is critical to ensure continued IMF assistance, the changing circumstances in Afghanistan offer Pakistan a chance to push forward its geoeconomics agenda. This is because Islamabad has promoted itself internationally as a credible interlocutor, engaged in supporting Afghanistan and the entire stability of the region.

Pakistan has achieved good results in containing the spread of the pandemic. Also, financing institutions have reported surfacing signs of national economic recovery, although structural deficiencies persist. Furthermore, the Pakistani administration's attention to foreign policy and the national implications of the global health emergency has been accompanied by the absence of significant challenges posed to Imran Khan by political opposition, who are primarily focused on preparing for the 2023 general elections.

