



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXI / 2020

Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light brown color, partially visible on the right side of the cover. It features complex geometric and organic shapes, including concentric circles, teardrop shapes, and floral motifs.

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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ISBN 978-88-3313-827-5 (Paper) ISBN 978-88-3313-828-2 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXI, 2020

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

| | | | | |
|---------------|---|---------|--------|---------|
| Paper version | Italy | € 50.00 | Abroad | € 65.00 |
| Subscription | abbonamenti@viella.it www.viella.it | | | |

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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Nicola Mocci (nicola.mocci@unifi.it) and Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk); book reviews should be sent to Oliviero Frattolillo (oliviero.frattolillo@uniroma3.it) and Francesca Congiu (fcongiu@unica.it).



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PAKISTAN 2020: THE PTI GOVERNMENT AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Marco Corsi

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

Austerity measures tied to disbursement of the bailout programme that Pakistan agreed upon with the International Monetary Fund in 2019 helped Islamabad progress towards macroeconomic stabilisation. After the COVID-19 outbreak hit the country in February 2020, related disruptions strained economic activity and put pressure on Pakistan's fiscal position.

The Government of Prime Minister Imran Khan came under criticism for mis-handling the health crisis. The intervention and the progressively prominent role played by the Army in coordinating the response to the pandemic resulted in a decline of the spread of the virus. It also showed that the military establishment had extended its control over aspects of the jurisdiction of civil power. Commentators defined Pakistan as a «hybrid martial law regime», while opposition parties joined forces against the Government over allegations of mismanagement and military interferences.

US-China rivalry and the post-9/11 security challenges that have impacted South Asia characterised Pakistan's foreign policy. A priority for Pakistan is to continue benefitting from its relationships with Beijing and Washington, while containing the international pressure it is under to restrain alleged involvement with terrorism. The role played by Pakistan in the peace talks with the Taliban was welcomed by the USA. Tense relationships with India over Kashmir continued in 2020, while frictions arose with Saudi Arabia as Islamabad is diversifying its international partnerships.

KEYWORDS – Army; austerity; COVID-19; economy; Pakistan Democratic Movement.

1. Introduction

Two years after the election that gave the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its leader, Prime Minister Imran Khan, the mandate to govern Pakistan,¹ many have questioned the appropriateness of their electoral choice. High expectations of the people of Pakistan were triggered by Mr. Khan's

1. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2018: General Elections and the Government of Imran Khan', *Asia Maior*, XXIX/2018, *passim*.

electoral pledges under the slogan of a «new Pakistan»². Yet, many of them were left unfulfilled.

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2, henceforth «COVID-19») epidemic led to questioning the PTI Government's capacity to address all the challenges that Pakistan faced. The country's precarious economic situation was evident when the Economic Survey 2019-20 and the budget 2020-21 were presented in June 2020. A 0.4% GDP growth rate reduction was highlighted for fiscal year 2020 (1 July 2019 - 30 June 2020), together with the increased cost of living, unemployment and risen inflation.³

Crises affecting the ruling party PTI powerbase made public by the airing of internal fragmentations underlined that Imran Khan did not have control of the divided house. In parallel, a new alliance brought together opposition political parties united by the intention to oust Khan from power over accusations of mismanagement and alleged interferences by the military establishment.

The pandemic deteriorated Khan's governance performance, who was blamed for the inefficient and indecisive response to the crisis. The military establishment showed the ability to control the emergency and filled the gap left by the Government.

Pakistan maintains its strategic relevance for Washington vis-à-vis the stabilisation of Afghanistan. This is due both, to the importance of its ports, land, and air routes for conducting USA operations in Afghanistan and for its influence on the Taliban forces. The US welcomed the role played by Pakistan in the talks and peace negotiations with the Taliban. It is of critical importance for Islamabad to continue benefitting from its ties with Washington while containing political and economic consequences of its alleged involvement with terrorism. Yet, in the period under analysis, Islamabad's inclusion in the Financial Task Action Force's (FATF)⁴ grey list of terrorism financing was confirmed.

Pakistan relies on its strategic alliance with China for military hardware. At the same time, the Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)⁵ is an un-

2. The party's manifesto, titled «Road to Naya (New) Pakistan», focuses on job creation, poverty alleviation measures, protection of minorities, gender equality-oriented policies and a better-quality justice to all citizens. PTI agenda is centred on fighting cronyism and corruption. *Ibid.*

3. 'Economic Survey 2019-2020', *The News*, 12 June 2020.

4. The Financial Action Task Force is an intergovernmental organisation founded in 1989 on the initiative of the Group of 7 («G-7», the forum which brings together the leaders of the world's leading industrial nations) to develop policies to combat money laundering. In 2001, its mandate was expanded to include terrorism financing (<https://www.fatf-gafi.org>).

5. The US\$ 62 billion CPEC is a project launched in 2013 as part of China's global development strategy «Belt and Road Initiative». On this subject, see Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2016: Economic features', *Asia Maior*, XXVI/2016, pp. 396-398.

precedented economic and development opportunity, with Beijing investing in Pakistan much more than the US.⁶ Despite the downward spiral in relationships between Washington and Beijing, the USA has not hindered China-Pakistan relationships. The two competing economic powers share common security interests: China strives for the stabilisation of Afghanistan for the sake of the Belt and Road Initiative's success, while Kabul remains an important partner of the United States in the fight against terrorism.

Pakistan has voiced its discontent over New Delhi's 2019 decision to revoke Kashmir's semi-autonomous status and has tried to bring the issue to the attention of international fora and of its allies. Yet, the international community has not sided with Islamabad against India except for China, Turkey and Iran. Lack of support from Riyadh on the Kashmiri issue and Islamabad's attitude towards exploring new partners was an irritant in Pakistan's relationships with Saudi Arabia.

2. *Tensions in the Government alliance*

The latest Gallup survey published before the pandemic outbreak advised that only about one-third of the population was satisfied with the Government's performance.⁷

The post-2018 election period was characterised by the capacity of Imran Khan to forge alliances, which allowed him to form the current Government.⁸ Contrasts appeared, both at federal and provincial levels, allegedly due to agreements reached with the allies that the PTI did not respect.⁹ In January 2020, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) Minister for Information Technology and Telecommunications, Mr. Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, announced his resignation from the federal Cabinet. Siddiqui explained that the PTI had not addressed his party's demands as agreed upon before the elections and related to ensure completion of development projects in Sindh.¹⁰ Siddiqui resigned after PPP Chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's offer of ministries in Sindh to the MQM-P in exchange of the party's withdrawal from the Government alliance.

6. As reported by the Board of Investment, Pakistan's premier investment promotion body, responsible for attracting, facilitating and promoting both local and foreign investment in Pakistan (<https://invest.gov.pk/statistics>).

7. '62% Pakistanis feel country not heading in right direction: Gallup survey', *The News*, 1 March 2020. Gallup Pakistan is the Pakistani affiliate of Gallup International and the oldest national research and public opinion organisation and leading survey research and consultancy firm in Pakistan (<https://gallup.com.pk>).

8. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2018: General Elections and the Government of Imran Khan', pp. 367-370.

9. 'Is Imran Khan under pressure?', *The News*, 31 January 2020.

10. 'MQM-P's Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui announces resignation from federal cabinet', *The News*, 31 January 2020.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid Minister for Housing and Works, Mr. Tariq Cheema, protested against the unmet pre-electoral agreement reached with the PTI according to which his party would be given two ministries at the federal and Punjab government-level.¹¹ Similarly, the Grand Democratic Alliance, the electoral alliance which is part of the federal Government and the provincial one in Sindh, voiced complaints. The GDA presented a 15-point charter of demands aimed to defend the interests of the Sindh province. One claim entailed the request to withdraw federal institutional jurisdiction on natural resources constitutionally owned by the provinces.¹²

The Baluchistan National Party led by former Chief Minister Akhtar Mengal was also discontented over alleged PTI's negligence in ensuring law, order and respect of human rights in Balochistan and over its lack of commitment to developing the province.¹³

The internal divisions within the PTI led to the emergence of multiple hostile currents within the government, making it difficult for Imran Khan to give the impression of overall political unity within his party. PTI members of the National Assembly made accusations against Ali Zaidi, the Minister of Maritime Affairs, over his alleged involvement in corruption cases.¹⁴ A trust deficit among the ruling party's leaders arose, and their discontent was aired publicly affecting the PTI's cohesion.¹⁵ In an interview with «Voice of America»,¹⁶ federal Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry made public the PTI Balkanisation and existing conspiracies among its members.¹⁷ The ruling party was also hit by a scandal in January 2020 when an inquiry was initiated for the sudden rise in prices of sugar and flour. Two committees, constituted by the office of the Prime Minister and the federal Ministry of Interior of Pakistan, issued reports¹⁸ which dis-

11. 'PML-Q Leader Tariq Bashir Cheema Expresses Indignation at Govt Attitude', *92 News*, 22 January 2020.

12. 'The GDA's demands', *The News*, 15 December 2019; 'GDA Places Piles of Complaints Before Govt Committee', *Abblakk*, 17 January 2020.

13. 'Govt decides to reach out to BNP-M, GDA', *The News*, 8 December 2019; 'BNP-M chief announces withdrawal from PTI coalition govt', *Dawn*, 17 June 2020.

14. 'PTI MNA accuses govt of selling jobs for money', *The Express Tribune*, 22 January 2020.

15. 'Ministers see red after Fawad spills the beans about rifts', *Dawn*, 24 June 2020; 'Red Zone Files: PTI's festering fault lines', *Dawn*, 25 June 2020; 'The writing is on the wall: Pakistan's Imran Khan govt is on the edge of collapse', *The Print*, 29 June 2020.

16. The video of the interview is available at the link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70X39IQ_k88.

17. 'Imran Khan not out, Jahangir Tareen disqualified for being «dishonest»: Supreme Court', *Dawn*, 30 January 2018; 'Infighting between Asad Umar, Tareen, Qureshi the biggest blow to PTI: Fawad', *Daily Times*, 24 June 2020.

18. Government of Pakistan, Directorate of Electronic Media and Publications (<https://www.demp.gov.pk/reports>).

closed violations and irregularities done by sugar and wheat lobbies which availed of public subsidies. The documents referred to the involvement of Khan's close cabinet aides in cartels formed to create a fake sugar and flour shortage crisis in Pakistan and to earn profits.¹⁹ Mr. Khan issued orders to make the reports public in the attempt to take distance from the scandal, yet, he had to acknowledge the involvement of political allies. Overall, the scandal undermined the PTI government's anti-corruption narrative behind its «Naya Pakistan» manifesto and was an additional element of a disappointment for those who had hoped for a change triggered by the new Administration elected in 2018.

3. *The pre-pandemic economic scenario*

In July 2019, Pakistan entered into a US\$ 6 billion-worth 39-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF) bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).²⁰ The EFF triggered fiscal positives, and until February 2020, Pakistan made significant progress towards macroeconomic stabilisation.²¹ In the first half of fiscal year 2020, the fiscal deficit stood at 2.3% of GDP, compared to 2.7% in the same period in 2019.²² The current account deficit dropped by 80%;²³ a significant rise in foreign direct investment was recorded;²⁴ the Karachi Stock Exchange reacted positively to the new economic scenario;²⁵ and Moody's Investor Service upgraded Pakistan's economic outlook from negative to stable.²⁶ The World Bank acknowledged the improvement in the «Ease of Doing Business Index» as Pakistan climbed the ranking from 136 to 108 in the scale indicating how close an economy is to the best global practices in business regulations.²⁷

19. 'Sugar crisis report: Jahangir Tareen spill the beans', *The News*, 7 April 2020; Sushant Sareen, *The bittersweet politics of Pakistan's sugar scandal*, The Observer Research Foundation, 15 April 2020.

20. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2019: The Challenges of the First PTI Government', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 461-464.

21. 'Is Pakistan's Economy Recovering?', *The Diplomat*, 7 February 2020.

22. The World Bank, *South Asia Economic Focus, Spring 2020: The Cursed Blessing of Public Banks*, Washington 2020.

23. 'Pakistan's current account deficit narrows to 41-month low', *The Express Tribune*, 19 October 2019.

24. 'Foreign Direct Investment witnesses increase of 111.5%: PM Imran', *The Nation*, 19 October 2019; 'Six-month foreign direct investment jumps 68.3pc', *Dawn*, 17 January 2020.

25. 'Market watch: KSE-100 hits 16-month peak as CDNS cuts rates', *The Express Tribune*, 2 January 2020.

26. 'Moody's upgrades Pakistan's outlook to «stable» from «negative»', *The Express Tribune*, 24 February 2020.

27. 'Ease of business: Pakistan up 28 places on World Bank index', *The Express Tribune*, 23 February 2020.

Development and social spending were reported to be accelerated, the current account deficit declined, and international reserves increased at a pace faster than anticipated.²⁸

Some EFF spending targets were reported as being missed, like the ones related to health and education programmes and indicators associated with a reduction in circular debt, external debt, and tax collection.²⁹ On this specific aspect, as of February 2020, the tax collecting authority had recorded an increase of tax returns for fiscal year 2019 (1 July 2018 - 30 June 2019) of over 45% as compared to the previous year. The tax collected in February 2020 was 17% more than in February 2019.³⁰ Yet, only 31% of the targeted 1.7% of the GDP was reached,³¹ and the IMF agreed to reduce the ambitious objective set in July 2019 – a 45% increase in the budget. Overall, the IMF review conducted in February 2020 reported progress made by Islamabad in advancing reforms and enhancing economic policies, which enabled disbursement of the US\$ 450 million EFF tranche.³²

Adjustments required by the IMF bailout programme dampened economic activity and contracted growth with noteworthy repercussions on the masses. Inflation was recorded at 14.6% in January 2020 up from 12.6% in December 2019, and prices of primary commodities rose. For example, in January 2020, the average retail price of wheat increased by about 10%; in one year, the price of vegetables hiked by 95%, gas increased by 55%, fuel by 25% and electricity by 14%.³³ In response to the rising prices, the State Bank of Pakistan increased interest rates to 13.25%.³⁴ Austerity measures triggered discontent and scepticism among the population

28. The International Monetary Fund, *Statement at the Conclusion of the IMF Mission to Pakistan*, Press Release No. 20/51, 14 February 2020; 'Pakistan's implementation of economic reforms', *Profit*, 21 April 2021.

29. 'Pakistan's foreign debt sustainability indicators worsen', *The Express Tribune*, 19 January 2020; 'Executive Summary of the Economic Survey 2019-20', *Business Recorder*, 11 June 2020.

30. 'The Federal Board of Revenue received 2.44 million tax returns until Feb 28, 2020 for Tax Year 2019, it was learnt', *Business Recorder*, 29 February 2020.

31. 'Pakistan, IMF consider additional tax measures for mini-budget', *The Express Tribune*, 6 February 2020.

32. 'Pakistan asks IMF to reduce tax collection target', *Ibid.*, 3 February 2020; The International Monetary Fund, *IMF Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on the Second Review of Pakistan's Economic Program under the Extended Fund Facility*, Press Release 20/73, 27 February 2020.

33. 'January inflation surges to 14.6pc, highest in 12 years', *Dawn*, 2 February 2020; 'Pakistan Market Monitor Report - February 2020', *ReliefWeb*, 29 February 2020; 'Food price spike pushes January 2020 inflation to nine-year high', *The News*, 30 October 2020.

34. 'Pakistan sees highest inflation in the world during 2020: SBP', *The Economic Times*, 8 June 2020.

on the effectiveness of the PTI Government's economic policies and on its limited capacity to deliver on its electoral pledges.³⁵

4. *The PTI Government and the COVID-19 pandemic*

Pakistan reported its first Coronavirus case on 26 February 2020. Confirmed cases of viral contagion grew after a religious congregation («Tablighi Jamaat»), attended by about 80.000 people, was held on 10 March 2020 at Raiwind Markaz, near Lahore.³⁶ Shortly after, 20.000 people who had attended the congregation were quarantined, and over 60% of the contagions in Pakistan were found linked to people who had participated in the Raiwind gathering and pilgrims having a travel history in Iran.³⁷ By 10 May 2020, Pakistan ranked as the 20th country in the world for the number of confirmed case (above 30.000), 27th for fatalities (648 deaths)³⁸ and as one of the countries with the fastest rate of infections, according to the World Health Organization.³⁹

Containment measures were imposed in Pakistan in response to the pandemic: international flight operations were interrupted and borders sealed;⁴⁰ public gatherings were banned, except ones at mosques or congregational prayers;⁴¹ social distancing was advised; schools and universities and not essential businesses were closed.

In his first public speech since the outbreak of the pandemic in Pakistan, Mr. Khan rejected implementing an actual nationwide lockdown of the country because of the feared economic consequences given the incidence of the population living below the poverty line.⁴² Pakistan's federal

35. 'Bilawal demands revisiting terms of IMF bailout package', *The Express Tribune*, 5 February 2020.

36. 'Pilgrims First: How Islamists Are Undermining Pakistan's Fight Against COVID-19', *The Diplomat*, 24 March 2020; 'Coronavirus Outbreak: Pakistan places Raiwind city under complete lockdown after 40 Tablighi Jamaat preachers test positive', *First Post*, 2 April 2020.

37. 'Pilgrims First: How Islamists Are Undermining Pakistan's Fight Against COVID-19'; «God is with us»: Many Muslims flout the coronavirus ban in mosques', *Pakistan Today*, 14 April 2020.

38. 'COVID-19: Pakistan is the 20th most affected country from virus', *The News*, 10 May 2020.

39. 'Smart lockdown' in Pakistan to target 500 coronavirus hotspots', *Al Jazeera*, 23 June 2020.

40. 'Pakistan suspends international flights for two weeks', *The Guardian*, 21 March 2020.

41. 'Amid COVID-19, Pakistan Launches an «Islam Friendly» Action Plan to Keep Mosques Open', *The Diplomat*, 21 April 2020.

42. 'PM appeals nation to observe self-discipline and quarantine to fight Coronavirus pandemic', *Radio Pakistan*, 22 March 2020; 'Pakistan's Fight Against the Coronavirus Threat', *The Diplomat*, 31 March 2020.

Government did not announce a clear strategy on how to handle the crisis, nor did it take a firm position on imposing a lockdown. Lack of aligned official statements by the Government aimed to inform the masses systematically and scientifically turned into an overall underestimation of the COVID-19 pandemic and its risks.⁴³ As of June 2020, the registered COVID-19 cases in Pakistan were above 120,000 units.⁴⁴ Imran Khan's Government faced criticism for mishandling the COVID-19 crisis⁴⁵ and for having had an alleged lackadaisical approach to it, which deprived the country of a clear sense of direction.

Provincial administrations decided to enforce individual lockdowns. They sought the Army's intervention as per provisions of the 18th constitutional amendment,⁴⁶ which gives a semi-autonomous administrative status to the provinces, and as per Article 245 of the Constitution of the Republic of Pakistan, according to which armed forces can be called to act in aid of civil power.⁴⁷ On 24 March 2020, troops and the military's medical resources were deployed in support of the local health infrastructures. Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan imposed restrictions,⁴⁸ as did the territories of Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir.⁴⁹ On 25 March 2020, the Capital Territory of Islamabad was also placed under lockdown.⁵⁰

Mr. Khan continued to oppose the partial lockdown that the Army was deployed to enforce until 1 April 2020, when, after a meeting with the Chief of Army Staff, senior generals and cabinet ministers, it was announced that the military establishment would oversee the coordination of

43. 'Pakistan Struggles to Fight COVID-19', *The Diplomat*, 15 April 2020; 'Pakistan's Confused COVID-19 Response', *The Diplomat*, 9 June 2020.

44. As reported by the portal of the Ministry of National Health Services Regulations & Coordination (<https://www.covid.gov.pk>).

45. 'Pakistani Prime Minister Faces Turmoil', *Gandhara*, 7 April 2020; 'Are Imran Khan's Days as Pakistan's Prime Minister Numbered?', *The Diplomat*, 21 April 2020; 'Covid-19 is the ultimate test of Imran Khan's leadership of Pakistan', *The Strategist*, 22 April 2020.

46. Enacted in 2010, it provides guidance for the devolution of political power [National Assembly of Pakistan, *The Constitution (Eighteenth Amendment) Act, 2010*, 20 April 2010].

47. 'Two more provinces seek army's help to fight virus', *Dawn*, 23 March 2020; 'Pakistan's Fight Against the Coronavirus Threat', *The Diplomat*, 31 March 2020; 'Coronavirus epidemic: Army called out to help civil admin', *The News*, 25 April 2020.

48. Sindh decides to go into COVID-19 lock down', *Express Tribune*, 21 March 2020; 'CM Punjab Usman Buzdar announces lockdown in Punjab', *Ibid.*, 23 March 2020; 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir PM announces three-week lockdown to combat virus', *Ary News*, 23 March 2020; 'Coronavirus epidemic: Army called out to help civil admin', *The News*, 23 March 2020; 'Balochistan goes into lockdown until April 7', *Express Tribune*, 25 March 2020.

49. 'GB Govt decides to observe lockdown for indefinite period', *Radio Pakistan*, 22 March 2020.

50. 'Islamabad placed under virtual lockdown to curb spread of coronavirus', *The News*, 19 April 2020.

the national response to prevent the spread of COVID-19.⁵¹ An ad hoc joint civilian-military body – the National Command Operation Center (NCOC) – was established to synergise and articulate a unified national effort against COVID-19. The Center is composed of representatives of federal and provincial institutions and territories, coordinated by the Lt. General Hamood Uz Zaman Khan, and headed by the Minister for Planning, Development, Reforms and Special Initiatives, Mr. Asad Umar; its meetings are often attended by the Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Bajwa.

The NCOC enforced selective («smart») lockdowns in COVID-19 hot-spots in 30 cities to control the pandemic while minimising its economic impact. The military intelligence agencies led surveillance and contact tracing,⁵² deploying tracking systems and technologies originally used against terrorism.⁵³ When the decision was made to lift the lockdown on 9 May 2020, Pakistan had a daily average of over 5.000 cases. By mid-June, the outbreak had hit nearly 7.000 new cases a day.

A seroprevalence survey conducted in July 2020 by the Health Services Academy and the World Health Organization reported higher seropositivity among adults than among children and elderly, with prevalence in urban areas. The infection rate was found to be higher among people below the age of 60 (81.4%), while more than 50% of casualties were concentrated among people aged 60 and above.⁵⁴

By September 2020, the transmission had reduced drastically, and only about 300 cases were reported daily.⁵⁵ According to the Health Services Academy study, 11% of Pakistanis had developed immunity for COVID-19 while between 60% and 70% of the population had applied basic hygienic practices recommended to prevent disease spread. Experts could not identify a specific reason for the decline, but testing, contact tracing and behavioural changes were acknowledged as being the measures slowing down the spread of the vi-

51. 'Armed forces to guard border between people and COVID-19: COAS', *The News*, 2 April 2020; 'The coronavirus outbreak may hurt Imran Khan's political future', *Al Jazeera*, 8 April 2020; 'Coronavirus crisis makes it clear who is calling the shots in Pakistan-Military, of course', *The Print*, 25 April 2020.

52. 'Pakistan using intelligence services to track coronavirus cases', *Al Jazeera*, 24 April 2020; 'In Pakistan, the Army Tightens its Grip', *The Economic Times*, 11 June 2020.

53. 'Pakistan uses military spy technology to track Covid-19 cases', *The Telegraph*, 25 April 2020.

54. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, *Population Dynamics and COVID-19 in Pakistan*, PIDE COVID-19 Blog No. 31.

55. 'Pakistan Celebrating Victory Against Coronavirus Pandemic As COVID-19 Cases Go Down', *Eurasian Times*, 16 July 2020; 'Pakistan sees COVID-19 decline after enforcing smart lockdown', *South Asia Monitor*, 23 July 2020; 'The pandemic deals a blow to Pakistan's democracy', *Brookings*, 6 August 2020. 'Coronavirus: Why is Pakistan doing so much better than India?', *Scroll.in*, 13 September 2020.

rus.⁵⁶ Pakistan's age distribution (two-thirds of Pakistan's population is younger than 30) and robust immune systems spurred by regular immunisations were considered to be possible reasons for the trend.⁵⁷ The decision to set up the NCOC coordinating provincial responses with military help and localised lockdowns were also considered significant game-changers.

After a notable downturn in cases since July, signs of a resurgence of COVID-19 indicated the onset of winter with a second wave of the outbreak from October 2020 raising fears of a spike in contagions across Pakistan.⁵⁸ The Government planned to implement «micro-smart lockdowns» to build-ins, streets, and other small localities with more than two positive cases.⁵⁹

5. *The economic consequences of the pandemic and the relief package*

Global deterioration in the economic, disruption of local labour-intensive supply chains and downturn of financial conditions triggered by the pandemic outbreak affected Pakistan.⁶⁰ The Government of Islamabad estimated that at least eight million people were affected by the shutdown in a country where the informal sector accounts for more than 70% of all jobs.⁶¹

The World Bank anticipated an economic slump in the region and a contraction of the real GDP growth for fiscal year 2020.⁶² The institution of Bretton Woods noted that Pakistan could fall into a recession and that the almost 1% GDP contraction – from 2.2% to 1.3% in fiscal year 2020 – would trigger a significant decline in per-capita income.⁶³

56. 'How Did Pakistan Flatten the Coronavirus Curve?', *The Diplomat*, 24 August 2020; 'Pakistan COVID-19 Update: Current Trends and Future Projections', *South Asian Voices*, 9 October 2020.

57. 'Scientists mull mystery of Pakistan's falling Covid-19 death rates', *The Telegraph*, 20 August 2020.

58. 'As Pakistan Braces For Second Wave, Health Officials Warn More Measures Needed', *Gandhara*, 6 November 2020.

59. As of December 2020, Pakistan had reported almost 460.000 positive COVID-19 cases and over 9.300 deaths. Among multiple sources, an updated situation on the pandemic in Pakistan is provided by the websites of the Ministry of National Health Services Regulations & Coordination (mentioned earlier); the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>); the World Health Organisation (<https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/pk>).

60. 'Spread of COVID-19 and Pakistan's economy', *The Express Tribune*, 23 March 2020; 'Covid-19 is killing Pakistan's economy', *The Economic Times*, 24 March 2020 'Coronavirus inflicts Rs30bn loss on Pakistan's economy', *Profit*, 27 March 2020.

61. 'Pakistan Has A Plan To Keep Millions From Going Hungry During Shutdown. Will It Work?', *NPR*, 14 April 2020; 'Pakistan's 70pc labour force «working without formal paperwork»: report', *Profit*, 17 April 2020.

62. The World Bank, *South Asia Economic Focus, Spring 2020*, Washington 2020.

63. 'Pakistan may fall into a recession due to COVID-19: World Bank', *The Express Tribune*, 18 April 2020.

Projections of the IMF anticipated a decline in the GDP growth rate for Pakistan that would reach 1.5% in 2020, with a rise in unemployment from 4.1% in 2019 to 4.5% in 2020, and a further rise to 5.1% in 2021.⁶⁴ The IMF forecast a cut in imports from Pakistan in various countries as well as the reduction of remittances and tax collection.⁶⁵ Data provided by the Washington-based institution indicated that inflation had increased to 11.8% from 6.8% of the previous fiscal year. Similarly, the current account deficit narrowed to 1% of GDP from 3.5% in 2019 due to a substantial 17.5% decline in imported goods.⁶⁶ The State Bank of Pakistan recorded dwindled forex reserves to less than US\$ 17 billion as of May 2020,⁶⁷ while public debt rose from 87.5% of GDP in 2019 to 98.2% in 2020.⁶⁸

The second 2020 quarterly report of the State Bank of Pakistan on the state of Pakistan's economy⁶⁹ acknowledged the challenges for the country and that the pandemic imposed revising the 4% GDP growth target for 2020 to 3%. The national central bank adopted measures, including a lowering of the interest rate from 12.5% to 11% (a week after the rate had been reduced from 13.25%), financing facilities and regulatory relief measures.⁷⁰

In March 2020, the Ministry of Finance of Pakistan allocated US\$ 151 million to the National Disaster Management Authority to purchase equipment to deal with the pandemic. About US\$ 2 million was allocated to quarantines and US\$ half million to the Directorate of Health Establishment. A meeting of the Cabinet chaired by Imran Khan at the end of March approved a US\$12.2 billion economic relief package for businesses, small and medium enterprises and vulnerable people.⁷¹ Of this, about US\$ one billion was allotted for low-income groups whose livelihood has been severely affected by the outbreak, while US\$ 1.76 billion was assigned for wheat procurement. Loan interest payments for exporters were deferred temporarily, while a package of US\$ 63 million was provided to support small industries and the agriculture sector. Additional subsidies

64. The International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook, the Great Lock-down*, Washington, 14 April 2020; 'IMF projects sharp decline in growth', *Business Recorder*, 15 April 2020.

65. 'IMF cuts FBR's target by Rs895bn', *Profit*, 18 April 2020.

66. *Ibid.*

67. State Bank of Pakistan, *Forex Reserves*.

68. 'Pakistan's debt, liabilities close to GDP size', *Profit*, 13 May 2020.

69. State Bank of Pakistan, *The State of Pakistan Economy, Second Quarterly Report 2019 - 20*; 'The State of Pakistan's Economy Remains Subdued: 2nd Quarterly SBP Report', *Business Recorder*, 15 April 2020.

70. 'Pakistan Cuts Interest Rates, Sets \$6 Billion To Offset Economic Impact Of Virus', *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 24 March 2020; 'SBP to provide cheap loans to industrialists who will not lay off employees: PM', *Profit*, 31 March 2020.

71. 'COVID-19: Pakistan unveils economic relief package', *Atlantic Council*, 24 March 2020; 'The Pandemic and Economic Fallout in South Asia', *The Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. IV, No. 46, 21 November 2020, pp. 13-18.

entailed financial support to utility stores, for health and food supplies, and electricity bill payments relief.⁷² There was also a significant reduction in gasoline and diesel prices.

While reaffirming the commitment to the reform policies included in the current arrangement under the IMF EFF, on 26 March 2020 Pakistan sought almost US\$ 4 billion additional financings from the IMF, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. US\$ 1.4 billion were granted by the IMF as part of a global US\$ 50 billion emergency financing facility, the Fund's Rapid Financing Instrument.⁷³ The World Bank and the Asia Development Bank approved US\$ 1 billion loan and US\$ 1.5 billion in aid, respectively for Pakistan.

Of the total US\$ 27.8 billion Pakistan's external public debt maturing in the period 2020–2023, US\$ 19 billion is due to the IMF, the World Bank, the Asia Development Bank and China. Imran Khan appealed globally to national and multilateral institutions to write off loans of the developing nations and called for debt relief as a means of support in the COVID-19 period. The G-20 (the forum of the largest economies of the world, which discuss financial and socioeconomic issues), the World Bank Group and the IMF suspended debt payments in 2020.⁷⁴

6. *The growing military role in the civil Administration*

In 2018, Imran Khan became Prime Minister of Pakistan by winning the election overshadowed by the alleged assistance provided to him by the military establishment. Allegations of interference by the generals have intensified since then.⁷⁵ In 2020, Mr. Khan needed to regain the confidence of the Army. Rumours were that the military establishment was dissatisfied with the Prime Minister's performance across multiple issues and that he

72. 'PM announces record economic relief package', *The Nation*, 25 March 2020; 'Coronavirus hits Pakistan's already-strained economy, and its most vulnerable', *Atlantic Council*, 30 March 2020; 'ECC approves Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package', *Geo TV*, 30 March 2020; 'Pakistan approves Rs 1200-bn relief package as coronavirus cases rise', *Business Standard*, 31 March 2020; 'Coronavirus relief fund approved by federal cabinet', *The News*, 5 April 2020.

73. The International Monetary Fund, *Statement by IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva on Pakistan*, Press Release No. 20/113, 26 March 2020; 'Pakistan likely to get IMF support to fight economic stress from COVID-19', *Gulf News*, 28 March 2020; 'IMF to give Pakistan \$1.4bn in 'budgetary support' next week', *Profit*, 9 April 2020.

74. 'Pakistan seeks rollover of half of \$28b debt', *The Express Tribune*, 14 April 2020; 'COVID 19: Debt Service Suspension Initiative', *The World Bank*, 19 June 2020.

75. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2018: General Elections and the Government of Imran Khan', pp. 362-365 and 'Pakistan 2019: The Challenges of the First PTI Government', pp. 456-457.

could be removed from office. However, no evidence showed that this would happen. Instead, the Army seemed to be inclined to let Mr. Khan continue his tenure while supervising him.

In August 2019, the term of the Chief of Army Staff of the Pakistan Army, General Qamar Bajawa, due to retire on the following November, was extended by Imran Khan by three years. The Government was not able to convince the Supreme Court of Pakistan as to why the extension was necessary and was granted a six-month-long one and suggested seeking the advice of the Parliament or appointing a new Chief of Army Staff. The military establishment was irritated by the PTI Government's handling of the extension case. Later, in January 2020, the PTI succeeded in having legislation approved by the Parliament that gives the Prime Minister the power to extend the tenures of the higher offices of the armed forces. Yet, the relationship of the Executive and the military was reported to have deteriorated due to other ongoing frictions.⁷⁶ Another element for disappointment for the military establishment was the inability of the PTI Government to remove Pakistan from the FATF grey list on terrorism financing. In 2018, the Paris-based FATF placed Pakistan on the «Improving Global Anti Money Laundering/Countering Financing of Terrorism Compliance» list. Being on the list makes it very difficult to obtain international financing and investment. Since then, Islamabad's progress has been acknowledged in the implementation of the plan advised by the FATE, yet not enough to convince the international watchdog to upgrade Pakistan's position. The FATE, after having acknowledged Pakistan's progress in addressing anti-money laundering and terror, nonetheless, in October 2020, again announced the decision to keep Pakistan on its grey list until February 2021.⁷⁷

The PTI civilian Government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic weakened Mr. Khan, amid a progressively more assertive role played by the military,⁷⁸ which coincided with the flattening of the pandemic curve. The way the pandemic response was publicly communicated had an important role in showing the efficiency of the ongoing NCOC coordination. In May 2020, the military's control in the management of COVID-19-related information and narrative was strengthened as retired General Asim Saleem Bajwa, former Director-General of the military's media wing, the Inter-Services

76. 'The extension fiasco: Who won, who lost?', *The Express Tribune*, 29 November 2019; 'PML-N, PPP agree to support legislation on Army act', *Bol News*, 2 January 2020; 'PTI lobbies opp for amendments in Army Act PPP insists on following democratic process; PML-N lends «unconditional support»', *Pakistan Observer*, 3 January 2020.

77. 'Pakistan Will Remain in the FATF Grey List – But That's Not Enough', *The Diplomat*, 21 October 2020; 'To remain on grey list: FATF urges Pakistan to complete action plan by Feb 2021', *Dawn*, 23 October 2020.

78. 'Civilian Supremacy not possible with the quality of current Parliamentary and Provincial Leadership: Fawad Chaudhry', *Pildat*, 21 July 2020.

Public Relations, was appointed by the PTI Government as Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Information & Broadcasting.⁷⁹

Concerns have been raised that Imran Khan's Government has transferred most of its civilian Government's powers to generals. According to analysts, interference by the military establishment has gone beyond matters of national security and foreign policy extending over aspects including finance, domestic affairs, and commerce.⁸⁰ The military establishment controls strategic positions in Pakistan.⁸¹ General Asim Saleem Bajwa also holds the chairmanship of the CPEC Authority; the PTI Government appointed two military officers as Deputy Chairman and Executive Director of the Naya Pakistan Housing and Development Authority, the social welfare project aiming to provide five million housing units for disadvantaged Pakistanis; ex-military personnel serve as Chief Secretaries at the provincial government level; numerous ministers are linked to the military; and retired military officers hold positions in state-owned enterprises, including the Pakistan International Airlines.

7. *The Pakistan Democratic Movement*

In the period under analysis, the PTI was challenged by opposition parties.⁸² There have been several attempts in the last two years to bring together opposition groups on a common anti-government agenda,⁸³ but they had failed mostly because of the diverging agendas of their two leading parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N).⁸⁴

79. In October 2020, General Bajwa submitted his resignation from the post in the wake of allegations regarding him having used his offices to help his family set up several off-shore businesses. On this, one can read: 'Pakistan PM's top aide Asim Saleem Bajwa resigns following reports of corruption', *The Print*, 12 October 2020; 'Asim Saleem Bajwa quits as SAPM after PM finally accepts resignation', *Dawn*, 12 October 2020.

80. 'The Military's overbearing shadow over Pakistan', *European Foundation for South Asian Studies*, 15 May 2020.

81. 'Why are Pakistan's generals taking up top civilian posts?', *Deutsche Welle*, 28 May 2020; 'Army Tightens Grip on Pakistan as Imran Khan's Popularity Wanes', *Bloomberg*, 10 June 2020. On this topic, one can read: Paul Staniland, Adnan Naseemullah & Ahsan Butt, 'Pakistan's military elite', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 43, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 74-103.

82. 'The same old story', *The Express Tribune*, 22 February 2020; 'Covid-19 failures make change in Pakistan inevitable', *Asia Times*, 14 April 2020.

83. 'Protests in Pakistan could shake prime minister's mandate', *Brookings*, 18 November 2019.

84. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2019: The Challenges of the First PTI Government', p. 457; 'Fazlur Rehman parts ways with PML-N, PPP alliance', *The News*, 5 February 2020. On the ecosystem of political parties in Pakistan, their role and the way in which they both, contend and work with Pakistan's military-bureaucratic

Mr. Khan's focus on accountability and his pertinacity against the opposition using the judiciary system to fight corruption and cronyism has been perceived as having political aims. Political leaders who were jailed gained support from their judicial vicissitudes and were often freed. For example, Nawaz Sharif was allowed to travel to London for health-related reasons,⁸⁵ and PPP former President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari was released on bail on medical grounds in an alleged money laundering case in December 2019.

On 20 September 2020, the leaders of four big opposition parties, the PML-N, the PPP, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), and the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party, and some smaller ones joined forces and announced the creation of a new, unitary organisation, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), under the leadership of Maulana Fazlur Rahman of the JUI-F.⁸⁶ The anti-government PDM – which aims to polarise public discontent over Mr. Khan's alleged misgovernment – issued a 26-point charter which spells out the goals of the movement, main ones being to end the military establishment's interference in politics and to oust the Prime Minister.⁸⁷ The PDM planned rallies and public meetings aimed at organising a long march to the Parliament in the capital city, Islamabad, in January 2021, to demand Khan's resignation. The opposition leaders also announced that they would use votes of no confidence in Parliament to take down the Government.⁸⁸ Speaking from London during a PDR rally held in Punjab in October 2020, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif accused Army Chief

establishment to assert and expand their power one can read: Mariam Mufti, Sahar Shafqat & Niloufer Siddiqui (ed.), *Pakistan's Political Parties: Surviving between Dictatorship and Democracy (South Asia in World Affairs)*, Georgetown University Press, Washington DC, 2020.

85. 'Nawaz Sharif travels to London from Lahore in air ambulance', *Dawn*, 19 November 2019; 'Asif Ali Zardari granted bail on medical grounds', *The News*, 12 December 2019; 'How Pakistan's Politicians Help the Military', *The New York Times*, 23 January 2020.

86. On the PDM one can read: 'No, Fazlur Rehman Cannot Protect Pakistanis' Democratic Rights', *The Diplomat*, 10 October 2020; 'Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM): All you need to know', *Jagran Josh*, 29 October 2020.

87. 'In a Rare Show of Power, Pakistan Opposition Elites Challenge the Generals', *The Diplomat*, 9 October 2020; 'Pakistan's Hybrid Regime: The Army's Project Imran Khan', *The Diplomat*, October 2020. On the nature of the current PTI-led coalition government, either an electoral democracy or a hybrid case of democracy, one can read: Philip Oldenburg, 'Loyalty, disloyalty, and semi-loyalty in Pakistan's hybrid regime', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 55, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 82-103; Katharine Adeney, 'How to understand Pakistan's hybrid regime: the importance of a multidimensional continuum', *Democratization*, Vol. 24, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 119-137.

88. 'Pakistanis Remember Military Coup Two Decades On As Opposition Still Struggles Against Its Dominance', *Gandhara*, 12 October 2020; 'Pakistan's united opposition protests against Imran Khan's rule', *The Guardian*, 17 October 2020.

General Qamar Bajwa and Inter-Services Intelligence Chief Lt. General Faiz Hameed of subverting democratic institutions. This was a significant shift in the opposition's focus on the security establishment, believed to be the actual power behind the Government of Imran Khan. Although the opposition has challenged the generals in the past, Sharif's assertiveness against the Army was unprecedented.⁸⁹

After having held rallies in Gujranwala, Karachi and Quetta, in November 2020 the PDM announced a 12-point charter, sharpening further the goals of the alliance. These include ensuring the supremacy of the Constitution, the independence of Parliament and the judiciary, distancing military and intelligence agencies from politics, implementing reforms for free and fair elections, freedom of expression and media, etc.⁹⁰

The PDM is not the first alliance of opposition parties coalescing against rulers both, civilian and military ones, as similar experiences took place since the '60s.⁹¹ Overall, such coalitions in Pakistan were unable to achieve their ultimate targets over old rivalries and battles for political power. Yet, they provided noteworthy contributions to the democratic system.

The previous Charter of Democracy was signed in 2006⁹² by the PML-N and the PPP. The two opposition parties led the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy⁹³, bringing together political forces to restore the democratic process and oppose the rule of General Pervez Musharraf, President of Pakistan and Chief of Army Staff. The Charter of Democracy laid the foundations for subsequent political engagement, and its spirit provided the bulk of the content of the 18th constitutional amendment. In addition to the reforms introduced by the amendment of the Constitution aimed to reinforce parliamentary democracy, the Charter of Democracy included a pledge of opposition political forces to defend democracy despite partisan differences and never to support the military to overthrow an elected government.⁹⁴ Violations of the Charter of Democracy started soon with pow-

89. 'Breaking an old taboo, Pakistan begins to reckon with its powerful military', *The Washington Post*, 22 October 2020; 'The Viability of the Pakistan Democratic Movement', *South Asian Voices*, 22 October 2020; 'The Azadi March in Pakistan: Testing the PTT's Prudence', *Ibid.*, 8 November 2020; 'Pakistan's Powerful Military Faces Biggest Challenge In Years', *Gandhara*, 27 October 2020.

90. 'PDM approves 12-point «Charter of Pakistan»', *The Nation*, 18 November 2020.

91. 'Outcome of opposition alliances, resignations, long marches', *The News*, 22 September 2020; 'The Rise of the Opposition?', *Dawn*, 4 October 2020; 'Pakistan Democratic Movement: Heralding chaos or change?', *The Pioneer*, 8 November 2020.

92. Marco Corsi, 'L'Asia negli anni del drago e dell'elefante', *Asia Major*, Vols. XVI&XVII/2005-2006, p. 128.

93. Marco Corsi, 'Crescita economica e tensioni politiche in Asia all'alba del nuovo millennio', *Asia Major*, XI/2000, pp. 56-59.

94. Sheila Fruman, *Will the long march to democracy in Pakistan finally succeed?*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 2011; 'Text of the Charter of Democracy', *Dawn*, 16 May 2006.

er-sharing talks held by Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto, at that time leader in exile of the PPP, already in 2007. The Charter was also disregarded over rampant corruption, tax evasion and other such crimes by the political and business elite.

Past experiences show that inhomogeneities and rivalries, varying agendas of the member parties of alliances have led such movements to fail to achieve their goals. Signals of lack of cohesion within the PDM have been already shown. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari distanced himself and the PPP from Sharif's tirade about the military establishment at rallies.⁹⁵ Similarly, the PDM has not reached a consensus on how to address the grievances of ethnic groups in the country.⁹⁶ Unlike the past, now the ruling Government benefits from the support of the Army; hence today PDM's action can gather traction and public support by opposing both, civilian and military establishments. While time will advise on the unity of PDM, the achievement of its primary goal to ousting the ruling PTI Administration seems to be inevitably linked to the capacity of the latter to keep enjoying the support of the military establishment. At the same time, any attempt of the opposition to ousting Khan by negotiating with the generals will involve them further in politics, invalidating the purpose of the PDM and further weakening the democratic process in Pakistan.⁹⁷

8. Relationships between Pakistan and the USA and the Afghan backdrop

In September 2020, the Congress of the United States of America issued a report titled «Military and Security Developments in China»⁹⁸ suggesting that Beijing has plans to enhance engagement with Pakistan to build military installations. The report also notes that China's CPEC entails pipelines and port construction having the main aim to «decrease China's reliance on transporting energy resources through strategic chokepoints, such as the Strait of Malacca».⁹⁹

A peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan is a key element to the stability of the region, which is essential to the development of the CPEC and

95. 'Bilawal Bhutto shocked by Nawaz Sharif's statement about top military leadership', *The News*, 6 November 2020.

96. 'Pak Army retains influence in Pakistan Democratic Movement', *The Sunday Guardian*, 21 November 2020.

97. 'Pakistan: Is Political Change in the Air?', *The Wire*, 2 October 2020; 'After slamming the army for political meddling, Nawaz Sharif's party wants it to meddle in politics', *Scroll.in*, 19 November 2020; 'Charter of Pakistan. Instead of hitting the streets in protest it's better for the opposition to adopt the mode of negotiations', *The Express Tribune*, 19 November 2020.

98. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, Annual Report to Congress, 2020.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

of paramount importance in the context of Washington's plans for military withdrawal from the country.¹⁰⁰

Despite US diplomacy's voiced concerns over the BRI and the CPEC,¹⁰¹ Beijing's assertiveness in South Asia and its impact on regional stability¹⁰² prevented China-USA tensions from affecting bilateral relationships between Washington and Islamabad notwithstanding strong ties between Pakistan with China over economic and security interests.¹⁰³

Washington has attributed much of the Afghan insurgent's longevity to Pakistani support. Just at the beginning of 2018, President Trump blamed Pakistan for «taking money and doing nothing»¹⁰⁴ in countering terror and cut off security assistance. In contrast, 2020 was a smooth period in the USA-Pakistan relationship amid cooperation on the Afghan peace process.¹⁰⁵ On 29 February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed in Doha, Qatar, an agreement that appeared to pave the way for intra-Afghan peace talks despite its many challenges.¹⁰⁶

100. 'Pompeo lauds Pakistan's efforts for Afghan peace', *The Express Tribune*, 17 January 2020; 'Resolve Kashmir for South Asia peace, Qureshi tells Pompeo', *Pakistan Today*, 17 January 2020; 'CPEC and U.S.-Pakistan Relations', *South Asian Voices*, 12 November 2020.

101. 'FO defends CPEC after Alice Wells' criticism', *Dawn*, 23 May 2020.

102. Happymon Jacob, *China, India, Pakistan and a stable regional order*, European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2020; Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, *Modi's approach to China and Pakistan*, *Ibid*.

103. Daniel Markey, *How the United States Should Deal With China in Pakistan*, Canergie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, April 2020. On Beijing's decision for active engagement in Afghan affairs and the strategic Sino-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan one can read: Ghulam Ali, 'China-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan: assessing key interests and implementing strategies', *The Pacific Review*, 13 November 2020. On the evolution of Sino-Pakistani relations and how it has played out in Afghanistan one can refer to: Filippo Boni, *Sino-Pakistani Relations: Politics, Military and Regional Dynamics*, London, Routledge, 2020.

104. 'Did Pakistan Win the Afghanistan War?', *The Diplomat*, 31 March 2020; Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2018: General Elections and the Government of Imran Khan', p. 374.

105. 'Pakistan Attempts to Balance Ties With China, US', *Voice of America*, 27 August 2020.

106. US Department of State, *Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, 29 February 2020; 'Next Steps for the Afghan Peace Process', *Center for International Cooperation*, 18 March 2020; 'Afghan-Taliban talks over prisoner swap collapse, threatening to upend U.S. peace deal', *The Washington Post*, 8 April 2020; 'A Failed Afghan Peace Deal', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 July 2020; 'Afghan War Casualty Report: October 2020', *The New York Times*, 8 October 2020; United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, *Afghanistan Peace Talks Fail to Slow Civilian Casualty Toll*, 27 October 2020; 'Nearly 6,000 civilian casualties in Afghanistan so far this year', *Al Jazeera*, 27 October 2020.

Islamabad had a pivotal role in facilitating the peace deal,¹⁰⁷ as shown by the presence of the Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Pakistani officials who attended the signing ceremony in Doha. Pakistan's role as a facilitator of the peace deal was also acknowledged by Taliban's deputy leader and chief negotiator on behalf of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.¹⁰⁸ Pakistan supports a power-sharing arrangement involving the Taliban as functional to contribute to establishing a friendly government in Kabul.¹⁰⁹ Islamabad also has to gain (e.g. military aid) from a scenario that leaves involved parties, the United States in particular, dependent on Islamabad for its enforcement.

Over the years, Pakistan's link with the Taliban¹¹⁰ has become its greatest asset and has helped preserve bilateral relationships with Washington, not to mention US military and economic aid received.¹¹¹ The role played in facilitating the peace deal with the Taliban allowed Islamabad to establish itself as a regional influencer, and analysts acknowledged that the US-Taliban deal had brought Pakistan diplomatic, financial and strategic dividends. It is worth stressing that Pakistan's increasingly cordial link with the Taliban has been coupled by its struggle against the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant group generally known as the Pakistani Taliban. According to military sources, by 2018 the TTP, which had targeted Pakistan since the formation of the group in 2007, had been defeated by the multiple Army's counter-insurgency campaigns carried out in the North West areas of the country.¹¹² The militant outfit, however, appeared to have found a haven in Afghanistan and were in the process of reorganising in the South and North Waziristan districts of the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakh-

107. 'Pakistan constructed roadmap to Afghan peace, says Qureshi', *Pakistan Today*, 23 February 2020; 'After 18 Years, Is This Afghan Peace, or Just a Way Out?', *The New York Times*, 29 February 2020.

108. 'US-Taliban sign historic peace deal', *The News*, 1 March 2020; 'Peace gets a chance', *Daily Times*, 1 March 2020; 'Pakistan wants «responsible withdrawal» of US troops from Afghanistan: Qureshi', *Ibid.*

109. 'Is Pakistan Ready To Crack Down On Afghan Taliban Sanctuaries?', *Gandhara*, 10 June 2020.

110. 'The Tangled History of the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan Triangle', *The Diplomat*, 16 December 2016; 'What Has Pakistan Gained From the US-Taliban Peace Deal?', *Ibid.*, 6 March 2020; 'The Future of Pakistan-Taliban Ties in Afghanistan', *South Asian Voices*, 5 August 2020.

111. The US was, again, the top donor country of on-budget, grant-based assistance during Pakistan's 2019/20 fiscal year. On this see: Don McLain Gill & Jovito Jose P Katigbak, *Pakistan and the Rogue State Narrative*, Royal United Services Institute, RUSI Newsbrief, 5 June 2020.

112. 'Defeating TTP: An Appraisal of Pakistan's Counterinsurgency Operations', *Pakistan Politico*, 12 December 2018.

tunkhwa.¹¹³ Several TTP leaders have been killed in Afghanistan during operations of the Afghan and US military forces, allegedly in exchange for Pakistan's supportive role in the Afghan peace process.¹¹⁴

9. *Relationships between Pakistan and India*

In February 2019, Indian and Pakistani warplanes crossed the Line of Control, the de-facto Pakistani-Indian border, and conducted airstrikes after a terrorist attack had hit a convoy of vehicles carrying Central Reserve Police Force security personnel in the Pulwama district of Kashmir.¹¹⁵ Since then, bilateral relationships between Pakistan and India remain tense.¹¹⁶ In 2020, countless violations of the ceasefire along the Line of Control were recorded, with casualties among civilians and soldiers.¹¹⁷

Pakistan has opposed the decision taken by New Delhi in August 2019 to revoke Kashmir's special semi-autonomous status and to split the state into two Union Territories – Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Pakistan considers Kashmir a disputed territory and has called for international intervention. Prime Minister Imran Khan has tried to internationalise the Kashmir issue by bringing it to the attention of international fora and condemning both the decisions taken by the Government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi¹¹⁸ and the actions of the Indian security forces in the state.

On 15 January 2020, the UN Security Council (UNSC) met and discussed the ongoing situation in Indian Jammu and Kashmir.¹¹⁹ The meeting

113. 'In Waziristan, Locals Worried Over Taliban Regrouping', *Gandhara*, 16 September 2020; 'Attacks surge in northwest Pakistan amid Afghan peace', *Al Jazeera*, 18 September 2020; 'Taliban Reemerges In Former Pakistani Stronghold', *Gandhara*, 27 October 2020.

114. 'The Regional Implications of the U.S. Taliban Agreement', *South Asian Voices*, 5 March 2020.

115. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2019: The Challenges of the First PTI Government', pp. 465-468.

116. 'Lessons From Balakot: One Year On', *The Diplomat*, March 2020.

117. 'India violated ceasefire 1,595 times in 2020: Pakistan', *Anadolu Agency*, 7 July 2020; 'In first 7 months of 2020, Pakistan violated ceasefire 13 times a day; 8 personnel among 23 killed: RTI', *Indian Express*, 1 September 2020; 'Pakistan summons Indian diplomat to register protest over ceasefire violation', *The Express Tribune*, 26 November 2020. A list of ceasefire violations is reported by the Dawn at the website: <https://www.dawn.com/trends/loc-attacks>.

118. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2019: The Challenges of the First PTI Government', pp. 468-470; 'PM Imran warns India against misadventure in UNGA address', *The News*, 25 September 2020.

119. 'UNSC discusses situation in Indian Occupied Kashmir for a third time', *The Express Tribune*, 16 January 2020; 'FM Qureshi discusses Kashmir issue with United Nations boss', *The News*, 16 January 2020.

was called with a different agenda, and the issue was brought in under the request of the representative of China. In August 2020, the UNSC discussed the topic again, but no statement was issued.¹²⁰ Addressing the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 25 September 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan called India's Government a «sponsor of hatred and prejudice against Islam»¹²¹ and denounced New Delhi's nationalistic ideology leading to alleged discriminatory policies, Islamophobia and repression in Indian-administered Kashmir.

The international community has not taken a defined position over the ongoing situation in Kashmir, and apart from concerns related to violations of human rights, appears to be inclined to espouse India's position, namely that the issue must be settled bilaterally, through direct negotiation between Pakistan and India.¹²² Only China, Turkey and Iran have sided with Pakistan, criticising India's move in Kashmir.

China has been observing the events in Kashmir with a level of concern. In particular, the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan is geographically strategic in the context of the CPEC, and the Belt and Road Initiative at large¹²³ as Chinese investment, which provides Beijing with access to the Indian Ocean, passes through this region. Against this backdrop, in November 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced his Government's decision to grant provincial status to Gilgit Baltistan, which will give the territory Pakistan's constitutional rights and representation in the Pakistani Parliament.¹²⁴ It is widely believed that Pakistan's PTI government has acted under Chinese pressure in granting the status of the fifth province

120. 'UN discusses Kashmir for third time since India ended autonomy', *Al Jazeera*, 6 August 2020.

121. 'Indian gov't «sponsors Islamophobia», Pakistan PM tells UN', *Al Jazeera*, 25 September 2020.

122. 'Pakistan's Kashmir Narrative Is Falling Flat. How Might That Change?', *The Diplomat*, 10 September 2019; 'The UN stance on Kashmir', *Ibid.*, 15 March 2020; European Union External Action, *European Union-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue 5th Round: Joint Press Release*, 4 November 2020.

123. Gilgit-Baltistan, located on the border of China's Xinjiang province, has been administratively controlled by Pakistan since 1947 but not formally integrated into the Pakistani federation and does not take part in constitutional political affairs. A reader can refer to the following articles: 'Why Pakistan is keeping mum about India-China LAC conflict', *The Print*, 4 July 2020; 'Ladakh: The Anatomy of a Surprise', *The Diplomat*, September 2020; 'Gilgit-Baltistan: China's Golden Opportunity', *South Asian Voices*, 8 October 2020; 'The Complex Calculus Behind Gilgit-Baltistan's Provincial Upgrade', *The Diplomat*, 14 November 2020.

124. 'Pakistan grants provisional provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan', *The News*, 2 November 2020; 'Provincial status for Gilgit Baltistan: What does it mean for India, Pakistan?', *Business Today*, 2 November 2020.

to Gilgit-Baltistan.¹²⁵ The move upset New Delhi, which firmly rejected it reinforcing that Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, comprising Gilgit and Baltistan, are an integral part of its territory. While the vicissitudes of Gilgit Baltistan could be a response to India's decision in August 2019 to revoke the special autonomy of India-controlled Kashmir, they have domestic implications. The decision to grant provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan has been a longstanding demand of its population which the PTI Government embraced just before the local election which was then won in November 2020.¹²⁶ The PTI formed a government in the semi-autonomous state after striking a deal with six independent candidates strengthening the federal Government against the protests of the opposition.

Turkey raised the issue of Kashmir at the UNGA in September 2019. Later, in February 2020, during an official visit to Pakistan, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated Turkish support to Islamabad on the Kashmir dispute. A joint Pakistan-Turkey declaration made a specific reference to Kashmir and called for settling the issue under UNSC resolutions.¹²⁷ In September 2020, Erdogan spoke in support of the rights of the Kashmiri people during his address at the UNGA.¹²⁸

Iran commented against India's move over Kashmir, and Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Alavi Gorgani called on all Islamic Ummah to respond to this «major insult»¹²⁹ while calling on India and Pakistan to establish a dedicated dialogue on the Himalayan region.¹³⁰

Disputes over Kashmir have affected bilateral relationships between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which has maintained neutrality over the issue. Islamabad and Riyadh have a long-time partnership and economic and geo-strategic ties, and Saudi Arabia has repeatedly come to Pakistan's financial

125. 'Pakistan to Strengthen Its Control Over a Disputed Part of Kashmir', *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 November 2020; 'Saudi Arabia angers India and Pakistan over Kashmir status', *Middle East Monitor*, 30 October 2020; '«Perfect Storm» Could Compel Pakistan To Change Status Of Disputed Territory In Kashmir', *Gandhara*, 25 November 2020.

126. 'Gilgit Baltistan election 2020: PTI wins nine seats, independents seven', *The News*, 17 November 2020.

127. 'India's Quiet Responses Against Turkey's Diplomatic Offensive', *The Diplomat*, 7 March 2020; 'Turkey's anti-India stance exposed! Country using Pakistani terminology on Jammu and Kashmir', *DNAIndia.com*, 19 August 2020; 'Turkey's tilt toward Pakistan provokes India's ire', *Al Monitor*, 27 August 2020; 'Pakistan lauds Turkey's support on Kashmir', *Anadolu Agency*, 28 August 2020.

128. 'PM Imran lauds President Erdogan for supporting Kashmiris', *The News*, 23 September 2020.

129. 'Iran issues rare criticism of India over Kashmir', *Atlantic Council*, 30 August 2019. On Teheran's position on Kashmir one can see <https://www.tehrantimes.com/tag/Kashmir>.

130. 'Iran urges India-Pakistan dialogue over Kashmir', *Anadolu Agency*, 7 August 2019.

rescue.¹³¹ In 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan did not attend the Kuala Lumpur Summit after Riyadh had not been invited. Instead, Malaysia invited Iran, Turkey, Qatar, and Pakistan.¹³² Yet, in August 2020, on the first anniversary of New Delhi's revocation of the special status of territory to Kashmir, the long-time relationship of Islamabad and Riyadh was undermined by a comment of Pakistan Minister of Foreign Affairs Shah Mehmood Qureshi, who complained about the perceived lack of Saudi support in the Kashmir issue.¹³³ Qureshi called for the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation – headquartered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia – to convene a meeting on Kashmir.¹³⁴ Otherwise, the Pakistani Minister proposed that Pakistan should call a meeting of the Islamic countries that support Islamabad on the issue of Kashmir, mentioning Riyadh's rivals Iran, Turkey, Qatar and Malaysia where, earlier, in February 2020, during a visit, Imran Khan had insisted on the same issue.¹³⁵ Shortly after, media reported that Pakistan was forced to repay US\$ 1 billion of a US\$ 3 billion loan it had received from Saudi Arabia in 2018.¹³⁶

10. Conclusions

In 2020, the Government of Imran Khan has faced significant threats. Internal PTI strains and tensions inside the ruling alliance have weakened the political powerbase of the Prime Minister. Austerity measures, consequences of the July 2019 IMF EFF bailout programme, triggered higher inflation,

131. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2018: General Elections and the Government of Imran Khan', p. 373.

132. 'Pakistan won't undermine Saudi interests, PM Imran assures MBS', *The Express Tribune*, 15 December 2020; 'The Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019 Shows Pakistan's Diplomatic Subservience to Saudi Arabia', *The Diplomat*, 20 December 2019.

133. 'Pakistan's «Brotherly» Ties With Saudi Arabia Hit «Rock-Bottom»', *Gandhara*, 13 August 2020; 'The Downward Spiral in Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Ties', *South Asian Voices*, 28 September 2020.

134. 'OIC urges UN to ask India to end human rights violations in Kashmir', *The News*, 21 September 2020.

135. 'Pakistan-Turkey-Malaysia Bloc to Challenge Arab domination of Islamic World', *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper No. 6543, 20 February 2020; 'Pakistan-Iran Relations', *Modern Diplomacy*, 3 March 2020; 'Pakistan's Endeavour to Internationalize Kashmir', *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper no. 6663, 17 August 2020.

136. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2018: General Elections and the Government of Imran Khan', p. 373; 'Pakistan Foreign Policy Reorientation Debate 2020', *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper no. 6583, 22 May 2020; 'What Does the China-Iran Deal Mean for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor?', *The Diplomat*, 14 August 2020; 'Pakistan Rethinks Saudi Ties In Changing Region', *Gandhara*, 26 August 2020; 'Pakistan pays back \$1b Saudi loan', *The Express Tribune*, 31 August 2020; 'Turkey ready to work on CPEC projects, says President Erdogan alongside PM Imran', *Dawn*, 13 September 2020; 'Pakistan repays \$1b Saudi debt', *The News*, 17 December 2020.

unemployment and an increase in prices for primary commodities. Adverse economic impact on the masses caused discontent and scepticism about the PTI Government's capabilities to deliver on its electoral pledges. Opposition parties joined forces and launched a campaign of mass protests determined to oust the Prime Minister.

COVID-19-related disruptions worsened the country's precarious economic situation and challenged the PTI Government further. Khan's performance deteriorated, and he was blamed for the lack of an effective response to the crisis. The military establishment came to Khan's aid and took control of the Coronavirus outbreak but, in doing it, also appropriated the Government's civilian prerogatives. This, in turn, fuelled further protests by the opposition.

Peace talks with the Taliban were an asset to Islamabad in light of the importance of Afghanistan as the nerve centre of political and economic developments in South Asia for both Washington and Beijing. Relationships between Pakistan and India were tense but stable. Pakistan failed in focusing international attention over Kashmir's dispute; although, it could benefit from the support of China, Turkey and Iran. Saudi Arabia kept a neutral position on the issue, which undermined its relationships with Islamabad.