

COMMENT 231 - A window of opportunity in India-Pakistan relations?

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12 May 2022– DOI: [10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C231](https://doi.org/10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C231)



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Last month, Pakistani Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan was ousted in a [parliamentary no-confidence vote](#), ending several weeks of political crises. Khan had faced [public discontent](#) with his mismanagement of the economy and foreign policy – which were combined with a growingly authoritarian style of governance. The removal from office of the former PM – who used every available means, mostly both [unconstitutional and illegal](#)¹, to stay in power – through parliamentary proceedings was made possible by Supreme Court action. The phenomenon was widely described as ‘[a step forward for Pakistan’s democracy](#)’. Nevertheless, there is a common understanding among experts that the army top brass played a crucial role in toppling Khan’s government. It is argued that Khan - who initially enjoyed much goodwill – ended up losing support by the military leadership.²

Severe tensions in civil-military relations and the removal of “restive” civilian leaders, most notably former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, are common phenomena in Pakistan. Usual triggers for confrontations include struggles over shared decision-making powers in specific policy fields – or issues regarding the distribution of economic prerogatives in general – more than major disagreements over policy directions. At least so it was in the past. It is also not new for civilian leaders to attempt to intervene in matters of military organisation, namely the

¹ For example, when ‘[subduing Pakistan’s constitution by blocking a no-confidence vote against him, and trampling the country’s shaky democratic process by dissolving Pakistan’s parliament. Khan even attempted to prolong parliamentary proceedings so as to further stir political chaos and possibly to convince Pakistan’s powerful military to declare martial law.](#)’

² There were accusations that the military had ‘[tilted the field](#)’ during the 2018 elections so as to favour Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf/PTI.

appointment of top-brass positions of both the Chief-of-Army-Staff (COAS) and Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). However, the confrontation between Khan and the army holds a much larger dimension. It is argued that Khan's Islamisation and openly anti-US/West policies contradicts not only the traditional view on national security interests³ -and subsequent policy parameters – both domestic and foreign – but also the evolving strategic thinking among the military's top echelon. There are several indications hinting at changes in threat perceptions – which could lead to a transformation in the foreign policy envisioned by the Army Headquarter in Rawalpindi.

It also becomes obvious that Pakistan has no control over the Taliban in Afghanistan, and this despite their decade-long support for those religious extremists. The security situation on Pakistan's Afghan border is worsening and the attacks by Afghanistan-based terrorists on Pakistani soil are rapidly increasing. That Chinese people and assets on Pakistani territory continue to be the victims of militant attacks (for example the latest [Karachi University attack](#)⁴) create additional concerns – considering the increasing dependence of Islamabad on Beijing. The inability of the country's security forces to provide full protection for Chinese workers is increasingly perceived as a burden in bilateral ties – and might hamper the success of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

It seems that Rawalpindi finally started to identify internal extremism as a larger threat to the country than arch-rival India. As such, Khan's hesitation to constructively interact with New Delhi was also seen as adverse to the army's evolving approach towards India. In fact, Khan used all available international platforms to unleash his anti-Indian rhetoric⁵ – thus undermining the COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa's apparent goal of “normalising” relations between New Delhi and Islamabad. Such a process of “normalisation” of bilateral ties would not include

³ Besides the exploitation of anti-Indian sentiments, Khan's refusal to condemn Russia's war against the Ukraine, combined with his simultaneously reproachment towards Russia, further alienated the European Union from Pakistan and created additional burdens in the ties between Islamabad and Washington. The US is appreciated by the Pakistani army's leadership as a donor and supplier of military hardware, as well as a crucial interlocutor in times of severe tensions with New Delhi. This gained importance when Pakistani-based terrorists carried out attacks on Indian soil and brought both neighbours at the brink of a fully-fledged war.

⁴ A suspected female suicide bomber killed three Chinese teachers in Karachi University.

⁵ It is also interesting to note that Khan was the only Prime Minister of Pakistan who ever publicly insulted an Indian Prime Minister.

Pakistan changing its position and claims in the Kashmir dispute. However, it could bring a halt to state-sponsorship of anti-Indian militants and cross-border terrorism. That the India-Pakistan Ceasefire agreement⁶ is holding strong for over a year now is a promising clue in this direction. Furthermore, that a Pakistani anti-terrorism court (an institution under [military jurisdiction](#)) [awarded a combined sentence](#) of 33 years imprisonment to Jamaatud Dawa (JuD) chief (and founder of the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba/LeT) Hafiz Muhammad Saeed is a landmark verdict⁷ with the potential to determine future relations between Jihadists and the army, intelligence and civilian authorities in Pakistan. However, it remains to be seen whether Pakistani authorities will also act against Hafiz's son, Hafiz Talha Saeed. Talha is accused by New Delhi of '[been actively involved in the recruitment, funding, planning and execution of attacks both in India and on Indian interests in Afghanistan](#)'. Bringing Talha to justice would send a clear message to India that the jailing of his father was undertaken not only to improve Pakistan's position vis-à-vis the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and [avoid blacklisting](#) by the AML/CFT⁸ body watchdog but also to truly improve the country's relations with its neighbour. Nevertheless, after decades of exploiting anti-Indian nationalism for partisan interests, after decades of either state-directed or tolerated militant extremism, there are finally signs that the army leadership is searching to mitigate the country's paranoia about India.

Considering the above-mentioned developments, can we state that there is a window of opportunity for true improvement in India-Pakistan ties? From my perspective, yes, there is a chance towards such an improvement. At last, we witness various actors, among both military and civilian leaderships in Pakistan, favouring positive developments in bilateral ties. For instance, Bajwa made clear that he is interested in a dialogue with India beyond Kashmir – by including trade and other issues.

⁶ On February 25, 2021, in a joint statement, the general directors of military operations of both India and Pakistan [agreed to](#) 'strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control [LoC] and all other sectors'.

⁷ [Hafiz was blamed](#) by the United States and India for the 2008 Mumbai terror. Saeed has been arrested but also subsequently released several times over the past decade. New Delhi has repeatedly [demanded](#) that Saeed be handed over for trial for his terrorist activities; however, Islamabad has always refused to do so. The appeasing treatment of Saeed by Pakistani authorities stood symbolically for Pakistan's ambiguity regarding counterterrorism.

⁸ Anti-Money Laundering/Counter-Terrorist Financing (AML/CTF).

With Shehbaz Sharif, Pakistan has now a Prime Minister known for his effective and pragmatic approach in tackling administrative problems and development challenges ([‘Punjab Speed’](#)). Like his brother and like Nawaz Sharif, he values the advantages of increased economic interactions with India. Yet unlike Nawaz, Shehbaz seeks cordial relations with the country’s army (instead of challenging their prerogatives). Of course, there are also several unknown factors which one needs to consider. The COAS’ tenure ends in November; at the moment, there is no clarity about his succession. Hence there is no insurance regarding whether Bajwa’s vision will be maintained by the next army chief. Here, it will be important to see how far the army’s Corps Commander Conference, Pakistan’s most powerful institution, shares Bajwa’s views on considering domestic security concerns as more significant than traditional threat perceptions regarding India. One also needs to be aware that Pakistan must hold new general elections in the very near future. Undoubtedly, Imran Khan will continue his populist Islamist, anti-Western and anti-Indian rhetoric so as to build-up its support base among religious conservative and radicalized sections. He will use any opportunity to further polarise Pakistan’s fractured society, stir unrest, and undermine the work of the current government. This could not only become a severe challenge for the stability of Shehbaz Sharif’s administration but also reduce his chances for re-election. Here it is crucial to note that since his removal from office, [‘Khan’s strategy rests on confronting Pakistan’s powerful Army with provocative demonstrations of populist support.’](#) Khan tries to capitalise on popular grievances regarding a perceived inability by security forces to ensure ground security, as well as regarding the army’s far-reaching social and economic domains – including a tremendous business conglomerate dominating numerous sectors such as transportation, construction, or communication.

Khan [used his tenure as PM](#) to build-up his support base. His [vision](#) of the establishment of a Muslim Welfare state (State of Madina) contrasts such Madina’s (Riyasat-i-Madina) ethical and moral principles of with the decline of the rule of law in Pakistan: [‘our country has suffered from elite capture, where powerful and crooked politicians, cartels and mafias have become accustomed to being above the law in order to protect their privileges gained through a corrupt system.’](#) When complaining about [‘elite capture’](#) of course, he is not only accusing the civilian but also the military as an institution absorbing extraordinary portions of the country’s wealth and assets. Khan is not only appealing to the Islamist elements but also

trying to alienate them from the military. Despite his removal from office, Khan could remain a major source of grievances between Islamabad and New Delhi, targeting any severe attempts by the Pakistani military and civilian leadership towards a sustainable rapprochement towards India. In sum, there is a window of opportunity for improved bilateral ties – yet there is also a strong possibility that it will narrow soon.

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[DOI: 10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C230](https://doi.org/10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C230)

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