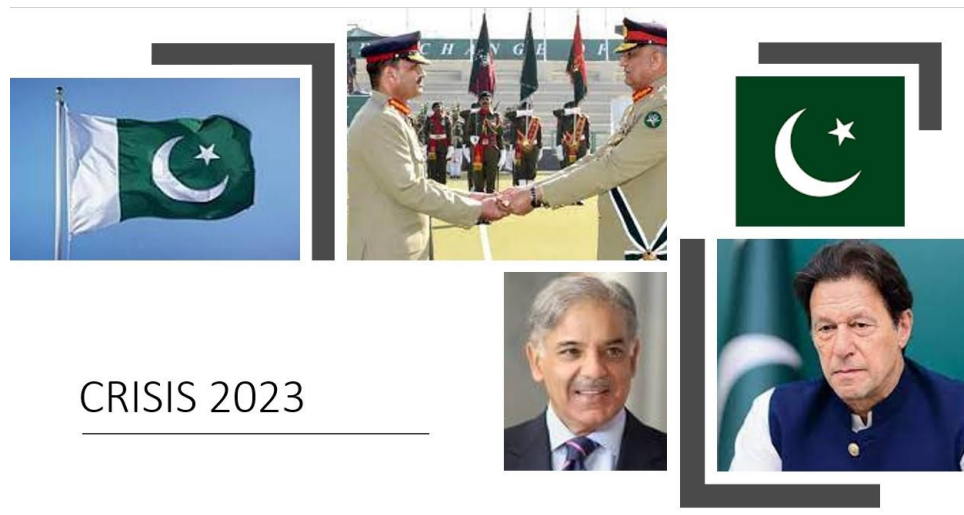




## Pakistan: State and Security in Peril

By: Mohammed Rizwan | Jan 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023



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Pakistan is notoriously difficult place to understand. Its de facto power structures are opaque and its de jure/constitutional structures are weak, undefined, and tentative. Military (read army) wields [real power](#) but [is not accountable](#). It is shielded by a façade of civilian institutions and structures that do not have power but are accountable. Complicated? Yes, because it is.

Over the last 75 years of its existence the state struggled and failed to answer two fundamental questions. 1) Who holds the political power? People or its military and civilian bureaucracy? And the power struggle amongst politicians and military rages on till today with generals always winning and consolidating. 2) how will the economy work and how the economic resources will be distributed among the federating units? This question never saw closure since military after grabbing and amassing political power took complete control of economy as well.

Failing to address these key questions cost the state half of its territory in 1971 when Bangladesh was born and today the rest of Pakistan is undergoing a political and [economic meltdown](#) that has the potential to turn state of Pakistan into the Pakistan Question for the rest of the world. Before we take a look at what ramifications Pakistan question could have for the regional stability, let's have a quick glance at where Pakistan is at now in terms of its economy, political power, national cohesion, and external threats, and why it is likely to degenerate further through examining two scenarios.

**Economy:** Currently, Pakistan hardly earns [43 per cent of its total budget requirements](#). The rest comes from loans. Pakistan's total external debt portfolio is around [\\$130 billion](#). For an economy of approx. [\\$270 billion](#), that's a lot. Lately, most of bilateral and multi-lateral loan pipelines are [drying up](#) over the concerns on viability and repayments. Pakistan has one of world's lowest tax-to-GDP ratio so it's hard to imagine its survival from its own revenues. The foreign aid/grants underwritten by the US and Western IFIs are hard to come by due to complex geo-political games the country's military plays. Another problem is structure of economy and share of black economy. Almost all the revenues generated by the state around 43-45 per cent are [gobbled up by the military](#) for defence expenditure leaving the state dependent on foreign loans to do debt servicing and run the government. The inflow of loans has created an exclusive economy where top one per cent [military-aligned elite](#) takes the lion's share leaving almost nothing for the people development. The economic fundamentals currently are deteriorating so quickly that during the last fiscal year [alone rupee lost 37 per cent](#) of its value while inflation rose to 34 per cent. An average Pakistani earns [\\$1200-1500 a year](#).

**Political power:** Within the first decade of its creation, military had slowly usurped power from the civilian politicians and by 1957 was in charge of political power in the country. By 1990 it had completely devoured the political power leaving the civilian institutions like parliament and judiciary under-developed shells that worked as façade. However, the concentration of power rendered military vulnerable to divisions and factionalism. Today, military is facing [deep divisions](#) and factionalism within its own ranks with a weakened chain of command. In the absence of any real grown civilian institutions, there is [no other power structure](#) that could replace military. If military falls, state falls. This is where the roots of Pakistan Question lie.

**National cohesion:** Pakistan was a state created upside down. First the state was created, and then decades-long effort was launched to find the reason to create it. The state today comprises the territories where there was no political demand to create one in 1940s. So, till today, military finds it difficult to hold the regions, that were indifferent to demand of Pakistan, together. Though the units agreed to a constitutional framework in 1973 but that never worked due to several military takeovers and shenanigans of political and economic power the generals created. Today in the absence of economic viability of the state and due to a military-controlled political economy, the national cohesion is at its lowest and it is hard to see a new constitutional framework acceptable to all federating units.

**External threats:** Ironically, for Pakistan the [biggest threat](#) today is not projected from eastern front of India but from the Western badlands of tribal areas and adjoining Afghanistan. Pakistan ran its Jihadi networks of Mujahideen and Taliban in 1980s and 1990s as an insurance policy against its eastern and powerful neighbour India but clearly after the Taliban takeover of August 2021, Afghan regime is posing a far greater threat to Pakistan's stability than India. For state of Pakistan and its military, the resurgence of Afghan Taliban and their Pakistani proxy TTP, is the

biggest threat especially at a time when military is riven with internal divisions and lack of operational focus.

If Pak military fails to bring a focused unity of command in its ranks and the country's economic woes don't end soon (both are highly unlikely given the extent of the rot), the state may melt quicker than expected leaving the region scrambling for protections against the fallout.

**Scenario One:** If the new army chief who took over in the face of high drama and opposition from within the institution, fails to root out dissent amongst the ranks. Then this threat posed by Taliban resurgence backed by Afghan Taliban govt will be hard to handle for this military – that even in its finest days struggled to fight the Islamic resurgence. In this case, the new army chief would resort to protracted [negotiations](#) with Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. In the absence of any US or NATO backing, however, the negotiations are not expected to bring dividends as Taliban would likely to stick with their demand [of ceding the control of Fata](#) and broader region to them. This would amount to ceding the writ of government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) resulting in a dramatically reduced military influence on the politics and administration of the country.

For India, it would be a decisive moment. Whether to opt for containment measures making sure the instability and Taliban don't spill over the border or to engage in kinetic measures to push Pak military as deep as possible from the border areas of the Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). Whatever it chooses to do, what happens in Pakistan in the next year or two would have far reaching consequences for Indian role in the region and its economic stability. The problem for India or for that matter any country looking to shield against the Pakistan Question is that the country is not a homogenous or a monolith entity. Punjab and Sindh have different demographic and economic structures while KP and Balochistan have different histories and dynamics. So a single approach for the whole state of Pakistan may not work. If Taliban push forward towards east, it can throw a situation for Delhi where it would be looking at dealing with Afghans on its borders without the benefit of a buffer created by state of Pakistan. Having clearly defined goals and objectives that could serve at least medium-term, would be vital for India's security.

Like India, this scenario can also have serious implications for Iran and China. Iran, like Pakistan, is facing a couple of existential questions of its own. The old structures of Islamic revolution are decaying and perhaps dying. Moreover, it is isolated and having a destabilized regional environment can expose it to various kinds of vulnerabilities. The regime grappling with internal turmoil may not be able to project outwards influence, but it would be deadly against any internal destabilization that could happen if Balochistan goes out of Pak military's orbit.

For China, it will be an expensive end to its CPEC ambitions as there will be no security guarantees available from Pakistan. China, as past suggests, would not be very keen to do the security job in that environment. China would be very concerned if GB slips out of Pak military orbit. Beijing would be looking at the possibility of dealing with Jihadists or other various non-state actors on its western borders – a situation it always sought to manage and deflect. For Chinese military strategists it would be a

nightmare scenario – having to project power in South China Sea and keeping a watch at the backyard.

**The Nukes Question:** The mother of all worries for everyone including the US, Europe and regional powers will be what to do about the Pak nukes? This question will hang above all other geo-political calculations for the region for the regional players and international community at large. The bright side of this question is this would be one area where even US, China, Russia, and Iran could see eye to eye.

**Scenario Two:** Though Scenario One is a likely scenario, scenario two deals with what happens if none of the above happens? If the new army chief restores order in his organisation and economy (I don't know how just a hypothesis) starts breathing a bit again? Then it would mean that Pakistan as a state would survive for the time being. But would it be the same state bankrolled by Western IFIs, hostile to India, friend of Taliban, orbiting Beijing? I don't think so.

Because for all practical purposes the US and the West cannot bankroll Pak's military state given the emerging new world order. The country's economy, even it starts breathing again, would not have enough juice to sustain a war machine capable of fighting India. The question of staying friends with Taliban is directly linked to if new Army chief restores order in the ranks. If he does then Taliban can be managed and a kind of trade partnership with Taliban and central Asia, expounded by the ex-army chief Bajwa, could be dreamt of (not saying if and for how long it will work). It can happen IF and this is a defining IF, Pakistan finds a way to sustain itself economically out of its own resources – and that is unlikely to happen until military completely downsizes itself and gets out of country's political economy for good.

Lately, we have seen the foreign minister of the new civilian dispensation Bilawal Bhutto attempting to woo back the US and the West with a pivot to the Indo-Pacific (as he toured the US and Asia). The main thrust, though, is trade but the message he would be carrying is – to bet on Pakistan's stability. If Pakistan is stable, there is far less headache for India, the US, and China than if it's not. A stable and India-neutral (if not friendly) Pakistan would mean its 600,000-strong military could keep all the bad actors in the AfPak region in check, delivering stable and peaceful borders in the east (India) and West (Iran). China, too, would be happy to see its South-Western borders peaceful and stable even if a US-friendly Pak military cannot deliver much on its BRI ambitions. However, the stability dream could only materialize if Balochistan and FATA regions were Taliban-free. Suppose not the idea of trade through Afghanistan to Central Asia would go bust. Again, a Pak military that does not have friends of the Taliban in its ranks could play a role here to either seek peace with the Taliban through negotiations or force.

This scenario is a possibility, however weak. But it can only see the light of day if the Pak military changes its decades-old mindset, voluntarily or through compulsion, and Pakistanis quickly find a way to make their economics work.

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