

# Foreword

Pakistan's trajectory remains a cautionary tale for nations that seek to build unity on communal identity and 'muscular' governance, tending towards authoritarianism. Military-managed 'democracy' has produced another implausible electoral outcome, at a time when the country is already reeling under a multiplicity of political and economic crises. From jail, Imran Khan has managed to undermine the credibility of the entire election process, while his supporters have thrown down a clear challenge to the authority and integrity of the Army, which has never before faced a comparable challenge. Meanwhile, the unlikely coalition of long-time adversaries, the Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N), in addition to its inherent contradictions, is confronted with an economy in acute crisis, a restive population, and a rising threat of terrorism and militancy within the country, even as Pakistan sees its relations deteriorate with each of its neighbours – Afghanistan, India and Iran – with the exception of China. Moreover, with a long history of suspicion and animosity with the PML-N, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif will find the military leadership sitting heavy on his shoulders as he struggles to deal with double digit inflation, spiralling prices of essential commodities, particularly including food and fuel, and nearly PKR 63 trillion in debt, 74.3 per cent of GDP.

Adding to a long history of supporting terrorism across the South Asian neighbourhood and facilitating massive organised criminal operations for the processing and distribution of narcotics, Pakistan has now harnessed drone operations to escalate these

activities, particularly against India. The increasing exploitation of drones for drug and weapons smuggling coincides with the consolidation of a gangster-terrorist network that has manifested with particular virulence in Indian Punjab.

Across Pakistan's northwestern border, the Taliban in Afghanistan remains a pariah regime; however, with some domestic stabilization, it is proving a thorn in Pakistan's flesh, even it has intensified persecution of ethnic minorities domestically. By and large, the Taliban continues to realize the misgivings the international community had, oppressing minorities, women and critics, with little care for any censure it may attract abroad. Meanwhile, China has deepened relations with the regime, catalysing an abrupt softening of the western – particularly US – stance, as Kabul is seen at risk of being enveloped in the Chinese embrace.

Unsurprisingly, neither Islamabad nor Kabul, nor, indeed, any of the other 'Islamic' nations, have seen fit to utter even the mildest words of interrogation regarding Beijing's mounting barbarities against the Muslim minority Uighur population in China. The sheer weight of Beijing's global economic clout has secured the silence of countries that are increasingly entering into relations of dependency with China, as well as, substantially, of increasingly fragile Western states, which have failed to adequately 'disentangle' their own economies from China's manufacturing and financial powerhouse.

Meanwhile, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as multiple conflict hotspots across the Middle East and Africa, demand creative interventions to secure or maintain peace. Traditional mechanisms of peace-making are, however, rapidly failing as the old world order crumbles, and the new continues to struggle to emerge in an increasingly chaotic environment. Economic uncertainty, political destabilization and the proliferation of violent actors, including proxies of powerful states, have made the task of mediation or intervention fraught, complicated and uncertain.

Within the context of global instability and ambitious jockeying by a multiplicity of players – including fairly marginal actors who nevertheless possess disruptive capabilities – and the weakening and progressive weaponization of international institutions by the Western powers, the challenges of peacebuilding have vastly augmented.

Each of these crises are compounded by the visible lack of political sagacity, virtually across the world. The manifest collapse of stature and vision in political leadership, and the trends towards authoritarianism and extremist political ideologies in the face of rising challenges to human and national security are causes for the most acute and urgent concern in a world of deepening and multiple crises. While many, if not most, contemporary crises are amenable to resolution, the lack of political wisdom puts most of these outside the scope of foreseeable redressal. The trends of the recent past foretell an even more troubled future.

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