

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Pakistan Elections: The United States Factor

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## **S***ummary*

In the period after Imran Khan's exit leading to the February 2024 elections, Pakistan underwent all that is anathema to the values the US claims to uphold. While President Joe Biden has not yet congratulated Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, US–Pakistan ties are likely to stabilise going forward, especially so given the bonhomie of the present government with the Pakistan Army.

Amidst post-election chaos and frenzied speculations, Shehbaz Sharif instead of Nawaz Sharif, was sworn in as Pakistan’s Prime Minister for a second term. Earlier, Sharif became Prime Minister after Imran Khan was removed by a vote of no confidence in April 2022. Sharif’s reinstatement happened following a period of political tumult fuelled by controversies of rigging the election.<sup>1</sup> The election process was controversially deferred beyond the 90-day limit after the Election Commission of Pakistan cited constitutional compulsions necessitating a delimitation exercise and the revision of electoral rolls.<sup>2</sup>

Besides, Nawaz Sharif’s return from exile in October 2023, and later, swift exoneration in almost all his legal cases, seemed to have reduced the elections to an exercise staged by the army to showcase a semblance of democratic popular choice. Conversely, the PTI was prohibited from conducting a free campaign and was even stripped of its election symbol. Similar to 2018, the Army seemed in total control before and after the 2024 elections expected to be “neither free nor fair”.<sup>3</sup>

Given the military’s indelible hold on Pakistan’s “broken politics”, the course of events following recent elections are hardly an aberration.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding, the blatancy this time seems to have aggravated perceptions on the military’s fist control. As the results tardily rolled out, the commotion was captured on live television in what looked like a “stunning moment” as “Pakistan’s military and intelligence apparatus systematically suppressed all forms of dissent”.<sup>5</sup> Notably, the bizarreness of military’s interference with the results disenchanting even the non-sympathisers of PTI in the country.<sup>6</sup>

For this scale of flagrancy, the elections result drew criticism from the US, the UN, the UK and the EU. The US administration’s stated desire to see “democratic aspiration” and “vibrant democracy” stood dashed.<sup>7</sup> More than once, the State Department has called on the new government to probe electoral irregularities.<sup>8</sup> The EU’s response, too, was to highlight “lack of a level playing field”, given “the inability

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, [“Election Turmoil Leaves Pakistan with a Weak and Unpopular Coalition”](#), *The Guardian*, 13 February 2024.

<sup>2</sup> [“Pakistan Election Commission Defends Move to Delay Polls Beyond 90 Days”](#), *Business Standard*, 19 August 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Noah Berman and Clara Fong, [“Pakistan is on Edge Ahead of 2024 Elections”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 31 January 2024.

<sup>4</sup> [“Pakistan’s Shocking Election Result Shows Authoritarians Don’t Always Win”](#), Editorial, *The Washington Post*, 11 February 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Mehlaqa Samdani, [“The Triumph of Ballots Over Bullets”](#), Foreign Policy in Focus (FPF), 13 February 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Weinstein, [“Update: Imran Khan's Party Pulls Off Win Despite Rigging Allegations”](#), Responsible Statecraft, 8 February 2024.

<sup>7</sup> [“US Supports ‘Vibrant’ Democracy in Pakistan”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 6 January 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Bhaswar Kumar, [“Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif off to a Rocky Start as US Repeats Poll Probe Demand”](#), *Business Standard*, 6 March 2024.

of some political actors to contest the elections”.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan has remained the US’s closest ally for decades. The Brief surveys US responses to the Pak elections and its likely implications on US–Pakistan bilateral ties.

## Pre-election Dynamics

The elections were held after Imran Khan’s un-ceremonial exit in 2022. Imran Khan blamed a US perpetrated conspiracy for his ouster using the cipher claims.<sup>10</sup> The disruption in US–Pakistan ties after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was credited to Imran Khan. Imran Khan made unsavoury remarks on the exit of US forces. Imran Khan’s controversial sojourn to Moscow on 23–24 February 2022 and his photo spectacle with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the occasion caused considerable heartburn in the US establishment, especially since it was on the eve of Russia launching its Ukraine military operation.

Prior to his Moscow visit, Imran Khan made a four-day visit to China, another US adversary, to attend the Winter Olympics which was diplomatically boycotted by the West led by the Americans. During this visit, Khan expressed solidarity with Beijing on issues concerning human rights situation in Xinjiang, and the political unrest in Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>11</sup> There was already an adverse build-up and a state of polarisation in US–Pakistan ties post American exit from Afghanistan amidst bloodshed and chaos. Khan’s moves seemed to have aggravated the same.

Secondly, Pakistan elections were playing out in the US at the domestic politics level as well. This was evident when a bipartisan group of the Congress lawmakers wrote a letter to the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, urging the Biden administration to persuade the establishment in Pakistan to uphold democracy and respect the due public processes.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, PTI sympathisers amongst US Congressmen also requested the UN oversight on the elections in Pakistan to ensure the electoral process is free from bias and prejudice against any one particular political party or outfit. The PTI has a significant support base amongst Pakistani citizens settled in the US. In the run-up to the elections, the world witnessed the severe clampdown against the PTI.

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<sup>9</sup> [“Pakistan Elections: US, UK, EU Urge Probe as Both Sharif, Imran Claim Victory”](#), *The Week*, 10 February 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Alind Chauhan, [“What is the Cipher Case, in which Former Pak PM Imran Khan has been Sentenced to 10 Years in Jail?”](#), *The Indian Express*, 31 January 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Hussain, [“Behind Pakistan Leader Imran Khan’s Smiles for the Beijing Winter Olympics, There’s a Cap in His Hand”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 2 February 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Anwar Iqbal, [“66 US Lawmakers Urge Blinken to Push for ‘Democracy’ in Pakistan”](#), *Dawn*, 19 May 2023.

Thirdly, discord with Imran Khan meant the US preferred to prevent his return. Asim Munir, Khan’s bete noire being the force behind his removal, visited the US in December 2023. Amongst other things, Munir reportedly was seeking US backing at a time when the army was committing gross atrocities against the PTI and Imran Khan.<sup>13</sup> Munir was increasingly under scanner for the army’s actions in delaying the electoral process, which analysts highlighted annihilated Khan’s prospects by a “systematic dismantling of PTI” and its overall high-handedness in the aftermath of the 9 May 2023 incidents.<sup>14</sup> The military in Pakistan “swayed many elections” and this time it wished to go “full tilt” using “familiar playbook” to vanquish the Frankenstein monster (PTI) it created in 2018.<sup>15</sup>

### Imran Khan’s Anti-American Pitch

The politics of Imran Khan, the flamboyant cricketer-turn-politician with a supposedly modern liberal outlook, contradictorily, banked on vilification of the West, particularly the US, for having pushed Pakistan into abyss. If Khan’s assertions were to be believed, Pakistan was coerced to intervene in Afghanistan without material returns and Pakistan’s economic, political and security woes were caused by the wars it was fighting for the US.

Much of Khan’s venom against the US came up during the Biden administration. Khan in his speech in the National Assembly on 30 June 2021 highlighted his aversion towards Pakistan becoming a front-line state in the War on Terror narrating how he opposed the move back then. Khan often blamed the US for using Pakistan and later discarding it like a “tissue paper”.<sup>16</sup> Khan’s “absolutely not” on the possibility to allow the CIA to be able to conduct counter terrorism operations against the Al Qaeda and the ISIS is known to have also sourced American ire against his regime.<sup>17</sup> After the Russia–Ukraine hostilities broke out, in March 2022, Khan at a public rally in Pakistan mocked the appeal from Western diplomats seeking to persuade Pakistan to vote against Russia at the UN, a development that supposedly “sealed his fate”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ayesha Siddiqi, [“Gen Asim Munir’s US Trip Has Limited Benefits—Pakistan Knows What it Must Do for Money, Ties”](#), *The Print*, 23 December 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Weinstein, [“Why the US is Not Weighing In On Imran Khan’s 3 Year Prison Term”](#), *Responsible Statecraft*, 6 August 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Christina Goldbaum and Zia ur-Rehman, [“Pakistan’s Military Has Swayed Many Elections. Now It’s Going Full Tilt.”](#), *The New York Times*, 4 February 2024.

<sup>16</sup> M. Khan, [“US Uses Pakistan Like Tissue Paper: Imran Khan”](#), *Jasarat*, 16 April 2018.

<sup>17</sup> [“Pakistan Will ‘Absolutely Not’ Allow Bases to US for Action in Afghanistan: PM Imran”](#), *Dawn*, 19 June 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, [“The US Toppling of Imran Khan”](#), *Common Dreams*, 1 February 2024.

In the run up to the US’s Afghanistan exit, anti-Americanism and Pakistan’s victimisation at the hands of the former, became a principle tenet/mainstay of Imran Khan’s politics. The idea may have been to deflect domestic attention from the vagaries of a sinking economy and the downturn in security. Notably, Pakistan, the US’s front-line ally is remarkably one of the most anti-US nations of the world.<sup>19</sup>

Imran Khan’s promises of a *Naya Pakistan* failed, and in this context, whipping anti-Americanism in public rallies and media interaction was an attempt to tap into what has remained a pervasive undercurrent amongst Pakistani people. Additionally, Khan justified his Russia moves using India as an example to bolster the desire that Pakistan must veer towards pursuing an independent foreign policy balancing out both ends, Russia and the US, effectively.

### **PTI’s Base in the US Diaspora**

There is broad support base for Imran Khan and his party, the PTI, amongst the Pakistani diaspora in the US. Imran Khan has in the past capitalised on the power and persuasion skills of the Pakistani American people. Therefore, when Khan participated in the Capital one event in 2019, the “political angle” became apparent, one that “shouldn't be understated” given PTI had “a big presence in US long before 2018 (and before 2013 too)”.<sup>20</sup>

After the massive crackdown on the PTI in May 2023, members of the diaspora have been associated with a campaign that was launched to advocate and raise awareness on “atrocities by the State, highlighting forced disappearances, ‘death’ of democracy and custodial torture”.<sup>21</sup> The campaign under “Pakistan under Siege” was carried out by Imran Khan’s supporters to sensitise the US and other western countries of the dwindling state of human rights and fascism in their country of origin.<sup>22</sup> The motto of ‘Say No to State Violence’ was raised by PTI supporters overseas in order to garner sympathy and support for the beleaguered PTI leadership and the outfit.<sup>23</sup>

Besides, in April 2022, as Imran Khan was forced to demit office after a no-confidence motion, there were “spontaneous” protests in the US. The supporters of Imran Khan

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<sup>19</sup> Madiha Afzal, “[On Pakistani Anti-Americanism](#)”, *Brookings*, 19 November 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Micheal Kugelman, “[The Political Angle of Imran Khan's Capital One Event...](#)”, X (formerly Twitter), 22 July 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Manoj Gupta, “[Under Siege': Diaspora Launches Campaign in US Against Human Rights Abuses, Fascism in Pakistan](#)”, *CNN-News18*, 31 May 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

came on the streets with PTI flags. The protesters were silent as there “were no posters, no banners, no placards. Just anger and frustration”.<sup>24</sup>

In March 2023, as the nation approached scheduled general elections, the PTI hired services of a lobbying firm in the US, Praia Consultants LLC to establish “good relations with the United States and the Pakistani diaspora in the US”.<sup>25</sup> The contract to avail services was carried out by the PTI chapter in Washington. The purpose was clearly to do some damage control since Khan directly blamed a US conspiracy for his removal.

The PTI overseas supporters have staged focussed protests and rallies abroad against political parties of Pakistan like the PML-N even before Imran Khan became prime minister. In September 2014, the PTI-US chapter organised a protest in front of the UN office as Nawaz Sharif was making his speech at the General Assembly.<sup>26</sup> PTI supporters protested in front of Nawaz Sharif’s London house after Imran Khan was removed from office, which they believed was a result of a deal between Sharif and the military.<sup>27</sup> After the 9 May 2023 events, as the military high-handedly cracked down on the PTI, Imran supporters thronged the Hyde Park in London where Nawaz Sharif resided. In order to prevent law and order incidents, the Scotland Yard had to intervene with a two-day ban on gatherings.<sup>28</sup>

## US Policy Stances

As noted above, the US factor remained a quintessential element in the 2024 Pakistan elections. This was particularly due to allegations of regime change by the PTI and its supporters. The US “caught in between a rock and a hard place” had a tight choice to make.<sup>29</sup> The US’s “assertive stance” on Bangladesh elections served as an example to question why it “tread softly” on Pakistan’s.<sup>30</sup> The pressure mounted from multiple vectors—the diaspora, a vigilant media, the Congress’ Pakistan Caucus and the PTI pressure groups. There was the inherent policy dilemma whether excessive public tutoring or oversight is perceived as interfering in

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<sup>24</sup> Anwar Iqbal, “[PTI Supporters in US Hope for Imran’s Return, With More Powers](#)”, *Dawn*, 11 April 2022.

<sup>25</sup> “[Pakistan: PTI Hires Lobbying Firm to Establish Good Relations with US, Diaspora](#)”, *The Print*, 23 March 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Adnan Rasool, Ibrahim Sajid Malick and Zia Ur Rehman, “[The Pakistani-American Dilemma: Guests or Citizens?](#)”, *Dawn*, 25 January 2015

<sup>27</sup> “[Imran Khan Supporters Protest Outside Nawaz Sharif’s London Home](#)”, *NDTV*, 11 April 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Danish Khan, “[Imran Fans Flood Hyde Park; Scotland Yard Bans Protests](#)”, *Hindustan Times*, 11 May 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Uzair Sattar, “[Will Imran Khan’s Arrest Change US Policy Toward Pakistan?](#)”, *Inkstick*, 9 August 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Noah Berman and Clara Fong, “[Pakistan is on Edge Ahead of 2024 Elections](#)”, no. 3.

the internal affairs of the state. Such US mindfulness could be “to avoid this perception, especially in a country mired with latent anti-Americanism, a phenomenon that holds negative implications for US interests in Pakistan”.<sup>31</sup>

Exercising caution, on being probed about Imran Khan’s Arrest after 9 May violence, the White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre noted:

“We are aware of the arrest of former Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan. As we have said before, the United States does not have a position on one political candidate or party versus another”.<sup>32</sup>

Later in August 2023, as Khan was arrested following conviction and a three-year sentence, the PTI reportedly lobbied that the US Congress must commission a fact-finding mission to Pakistan before holding a Congressional hearing on the same.<sup>33</sup>

The Pakistani American Political Action Committee (PAKPAC) ran an outreach campaign to US Congressmen and got a letter signed from at least 90 Congressmen addressed to Secretary of State Blinken urging necessary steps to protect democracy in Pakistan. The PAKPAC as a bipartisan lobby group claims it “promotes Pakistan’s interests in the US Congress”.<sup>34</sup> However, Shahbaz Gill, a PTI leader, was seen at their end engaging with the Congressmen in the wake of Imran Khan’s ouster.<sup>35</sup> A day after the 9 May violence, Blinken noted, in the presence of UK’s then Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly:

“I’ve seen the reports that you’ve alluded to and we just want to make sure that whatever happens in Pakistan is consistent with the rule of law with the constitution showing”.<sup>36</sup>

The momentum in the US on Pakistan elections gradually built up as the National Assembly’s tenure was reaching its end. In this context, a Congressional briefing on Human Rights and Democracy in Pakistan was organised in Washington on 26 July 2023. The panel was headed by Congressman Brad Sherman, member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and subject area expert, Asif Mahmood. The briefing’s agenda included: “human rights and democracy, free and fair elections, the importance of a free media, and the internal politics of U.S.-Pakistan relations”.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Uzair Sattar, “[Will Imran Khan’s Arrest Change US Policy Toward Pakistan?](#)”, no. 29.

<sup>32</sup> “[UK, US Issue Joint Statement, UN Expresses Concerns: How Nations Reacted to Imran Khan’s Arrest](#)”, *India Today*, 10 May 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Uzair Sattar, “[Will Imran Khan’s Arrest Change US Policy Toward Pakistan?](#)”, no. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Anwar Iqbal, “[Pak PAC Lobbies US Lawmakers to ‘Protect Democracy in Pakistan’](#)”, *Dawn*, 27 April 2023.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> “[Sherman Convenes Briefing on Human Rights in Pakistan](#)”, Press Release, Congressman Brad Sherman, 31 July 2023.

The event was attended by State Department officials, select Congressmen and rights bodies such as Amnesty International.<sup>38</sup> The Congressional briefing urged “free, fair, and internationally-monitored general elections in Pakistan”.<sup>39</sup>

On the multiple convictions and jail terms for Imran Khan just before the elections, the US government chose to sideline them considering it “a legal matter for the Pakistani courts”.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the State Department claimed to monitor Pakistan’s elections marred by severe “infringements” with regard to “restrictions on media freedom; freedom of expression; including Internet freedom; and peaceful assembly and association”.<sup>41</sup>

The controversially delayed results of Pakistani elections and the surprise victory of PTI- supported independents, seemed to have put the US in a fix. Questions were bound to arise seeking US response to allegations of large-scale rigging and subjugation of popular will. On the demand for an independent probe into allegations of election stealing, the State Department’s spokesperson Matthew Miller noted: “I don’t know what body they are proposing to conduct an independent investigation”.<sup>42</sup> Miller further asserted:

“Right now, it’s a matter of first course, legal system play itself out in Pakistan, that’s the appropriate first step to take, and we think that’s the step that should be taken”.<sup>43</sup>

The Spokesperson further noted that the US government was open to options that were suggestive of the Biden administration refusing to recognise the new government set-up until an unbiased probe is accomplished.<sup>44</sup>

The State Department after the elections noted:

“We will work with the Pakistani government. Regardless of political party, to advance our shared interests and strive to bolster democratic institutions and broaden political participation”.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> [“US Lawmakers Call For Free, Fair Internationally-monitored Elections in Pakistan”](#), *Pakistan Today*, 28 July 2023.

<sup>40</sup> [“‘Matter for Pakistani Courts,’ US Says on Imran Khan Convictions”](#), *Arab News*, 31 January 2024.

<sup>41</sup> [“US State Dept Says Monitoring Pakistan Election Closely As Reports Of ‘Political Crackdown’ Emerge Out”](#), *Outlook*, 6 February 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Wajid Ali Syed, [“Pak Legal System Should Probe ‘Poll Fraud’: US”](#), *The News*, 13 February 2024.

<sup>43</sup> [“US Wants Pakistan to Probe Election Irregularities”](#), *Dawn*, 13 February 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Chidanand Rajghatta, [“US in a Fix after Claims its bete-noire Imran Khan has Swept Elections in Pakistan”](#), *The Times of India*, 10 February 2024.



Similarly, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs under the State Department observed that the US government will work towards:

“Strengthening our partnership by promoting Pakistan’s democracy, the USPAK Green Alliance Framework, people-to-people ties, human rights, security cooperation, and trade and investment”.<sup>46</sup>

The State Department separately noted the “undue restrictions” on speech and assembly and reprisal against members from the media.<sup>47</sup>

Apart from this, Democrat representatives, including those that have been perceived friendly towards Pakistan, disapproved the opacity behind the election results in Pakistan. For instance, Ilhan Omar noted:

“I am deeply troubled by reports of interference in this week’s elections in Pakistan ... I call on the State Department to refrain from recognizing the results until credible, independent investigations have been conducted into the numerous allegations of misconduct.”<sup>48</sup>

Representative Ro Khanna who was once part of other Pakistan Caucus in Congress and now Chair of the India Caucus, also criticised the reported malpractices in Pakistan elections stating:

“I am deeply concerned by the growing evidence that the military is interfering and rigging the results to overturn the will of the Pakistani people. The US should not recognize a winner until all the facts are investigated”.<sup>49</sup>

Senator Van Hollen wrote to Pakistani Ambassador to US, Masood Khan, to protest elections “marred by political violence, allegations of unfair restrictions on political expression, and accusations of vote rigging” urging Pakistan to “fully investigate” all such “allegations of fraud and electoral interference”.<sup>50</sup>

There has been increasing pressure from the Congress, both Republican and Democrats, on the US government to reject the elections results.<sup>51</sup> Representatives Susan Wild and John James of the House Foreign Affairs Committee insisted the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> [“U.S., U.K. and EU Urge Probe into Pakistan Elections, Express Concerns”](#), *The Hindu*, 10 February 2024.

<sup>48</sup> [“US Says Pakistan Election May Be Rigged, Calls For Probe Against Pak Army: Who Said What”](#), *Mint*, 10 February 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Ro Khanna, [“This is a Critical Moment for Pakistan...”](#), X (formerly Twitter), 10 February 2024.

<sup>50</sup> [“Van Hollen Urges Pakistan Government to Investigate Reports of Election Fraud, Interference”](#), Chris Van Hollen, U.S. Senator for Maryland, 21 February 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Aida Chavez, [“Pakistan Democracy Hanging by a Thread”](#), *Responsible Statecraft*, 4 March 2024.

“international community stand on the side of the people of Pakistan”.<sup>52</sup> About a dozen US lawmakers led by Greg Casar wrote to President Biden to “withhold recognition” till the wrongs are fully investigated.<sup>53</sup>

The mounting pressure may have influenced the US decision to be guarded on the election results, thereby, not resulting in a congratulatory message from Biden to Prime Minister Sharif. However, the US Envoy to Pakistan, Donald Blome, wished Sharif on social media platform X expressing desire to work “closely with the government and people of Pakistan on mutual interests”.<sup>54</sup> US policymaking appears still searching for options to “calibrate a response that speaks to the political tumult and democratic backsliding” without exacerbating Pakistan’s polycrisis situation.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, a hearing titled “Pakistan After the Elections: Examining the Future of Democracy in Pakistan and the US-Pakistan Relationship” of the Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia under the Committee on Foreign Affairs, was held on 20 March 2024.<sup>56</sup> Donald Lu, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau for South and Central Asian Affairs at the U.S. State Department, whom Imran Khan accused of hatching a conspiracy in the past, was a witness at the open hearing.<sup>57</sup> Notably, Lu faced interruptions from the audience as he explained the US administration’s position against Khan’s allegations. Lu rejected Khan’s “conspiracy theory” and called it “complete falsehood”.<sup>58</sup>

## Going Forward

While the main propellant of the US–Pak strategic partnership was the Afghan matrix, the US continues to have a soft corner for Pakistan’s military, the permanent pillar/estate in Pakistan’s polity. The military’s omnipresence is unlike the sporadic civilian leadership that have struggled to survive tenures. It is the Pak military which gets the US what it desires, Zia ul Haq as it henchman in covert ops in 1970–1980s and Pervez Musharraf during the War on Terror (2021).

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> [“US Ambassador Blome Congratulates Shehbaz”](#), *Business Recorder*, 5 March 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Asfandyar Mir and Tamanna Salikuddin, [“Understanding Pakistan’s Election Results”](#), United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 13 February 2024.

<sup>56</sup> [“Pakistan After the Elections: Examining the Future of Democracy in Pakistan and the US-Pakistan Relationship”](#), Subcommittee Hearing, Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, Foreign Affairs Committee, 20 March 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Lauren Sforza, [“Audience Members Interrupt Congressional Hearing Over Pakistan, Khan”](#), *The Hill*, 20 March 2024.

Therefore, for decades, the moot question remained whether the world’s oldest democracy exercised dual standards in indiscriminately betraying peoples’ will in Pakistan despite the leverages it held on the power establishment. Given the nature of the complex transactional ties between the US and Pakistan, both are wedded in a web on mutual interests and prepared to forgo each other’s faults to unite in the hour of need. Respective ties with India, China or Russia are a factor only strong enough to cause transitory ruptures, never permanent.

In the months after Imran Khan’s exit, leading to the February elections, Pakistan underwent all that is anathema to values the US claims to uphold. Be it muzzling the press or public expression and depriving a major social faction from their electoral rights by way of dismembering the PTI, the army left no stone unturned to prevent its return and ensure PML-N’s fate.

Irrespective of the relatively harsh, though banal statements against rigging, a government of army’s choosing has obtained the reins of power in Islamabad. Calling the incumbent government as army’s puppets is standard in Pakistan’s polity. Nawaz Sharif called the Imran Khan government as the Army’s puppet not long ago.<sup>59</sup> This time, cracks are showing within as a senior PML-N member called his own party’s government a puppet.<sup>60</sup> The pattern re-establishes that the Army is supreme.

Shehbaz Sharif’s previous government was already seeking to constructively assuage the US ties then stifled by Imran Khan’s unpredictability. Going forward, US–Pak ties are likely to stabilise as the Sharifs are a safe bet at the moment, especially given their apparent bonhomie with the military.

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<sup>59</sup> M. Zulqernain, [“Pakistan Military, ISI Installed 'Puppet Govt' of Imran Khan, Says Ex-PM Sharif”](#), *The Wire*, 17 October 2020.

<sup>60</sup> M. Zulqernain, [“Nawaz Sharif’s Party Led Govt in Pakistan “Puppet” of Military Establishment: Senior PML-N leader”](#), *The Print*, 13 March 2024.

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