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Nian Peng: Great Power Conflict Fuels BRICS  
Expansion Push

Nian Peng&Khurram Abbas: A Preliminary Study on the Foreign Policy  
of the New Pakistani Government

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## About RCAS

RCAS is a non-profit research organization focusing on the maritime issues and regional integration in the Indo-Pacific region. It is a newly-established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng, in Haikou, China. We, at the moment, have an international research team with resident/non-resident researchers from China and other Asian states.

RCAS seizes the opportunity that China is building Hainan Free-Trade Port in which the Hainan Island will become an important window for China's opening up to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean to become a leading research institute and think tank on maritime affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. So far, RCAS focuses on the maritime disputes and maritime cooperation in the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, and various regional cooperation mechanisms such as BRI, LMC, RCEP and so on. It is committed to promoting the maritime cooperation, regional integration and academic exchanges in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has received a number of research funding from universities and foundations, and conducted research programs of the South China Sea(SCS) dispute, China-South/Southeast Asian relations, BRI in South/Southeast Asia, terrorism/anti-terrorism in Afghanistan, and so on. RCAS researchers have won various awards from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the Hainan government.

RCAS has published nearly 10 books in Chinese and English, and more than 20 papers on SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *International Pressures, Strategic Preference and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches*(2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988*(2021); *The Budding Indo-Myanmar Relations: Rising But Limited Challenges for China*(2019).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles and been interviewed in various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum(EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Lian He Zao Bao* and *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post(SCMP)* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN* and *Global Times* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the US, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places. Welcome to visit our website: <http://www.rcas.top>.

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# **RCAS Commentary**

## **Great Power Conflict Fuels BRICS Expansion Push**

Nian Peng

Soon after Chinese President Xi Jinping's emphasized the acceleration of the BRICS expansion process at the 14th BRICS Leaders' Meeting in Beijing in late June, Iran and Argentina announced they had submitted their formal applications to join the group. Meanwhile, the foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, Senegal, the United Arab Emirates, Thailand, and other guest countries attended the BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting for the first time in May. All these positive actions are the clear indications that the expansion of BRICS is accelerating.

The main reasons for the expansion of BRICS can be attributed to the following three points: first, the intense East-West confrontation; second, the deepening of "BRICS Plus" cooperation; and third, the demands from "node" countries.

In the new context of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the intensifying Sino-U.S. competition, the confrontation between the East and the West has become increasingly prominent. Both sides, therefore, want to expand the network of friends and partners, thus consolidating their camps. As emerging economies and great powers in the region, the BRICS countries have a strong motivation to absorb other "node" countries with key strategic locations and booming economies to join the camp. The more intense the East-West confrontation, the stronger the impetus for the expansion of BRICS.

At the beginning of the establishment of BRICS, the meeting of foreign ministers was the main attraction, after which a declaration was issued. Although BRICS was later upgraded to a leaders' summit, the practice of issuing declarations after the meeting continued. It was not until

2017, when China successfully hosted the BRICS Summit in Xiamen and proposed a “BRICS Plus” cooperation mechanism, that the connotation of BRICS as something that could reach beyond its five members was gradually enriched and clear.

Another prominent event was China’s donation of reserve funds to the BRICS New Development Bank(NDB). Subsequently, BRICS Plus cooperation has gradually expanded to areas such as economic and trade exchanges, political security, and people-to-people and cultural exchanges. Especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the BRICS countries launched a vaccine research and development center on March 22, 2022, leading BRICS Plus cooperation onto an in-depth development track.

However, the continuous expansion of BRICS Plus cooperation is inseparable from the support of the regional states, especially “node” countries with considerable influence and important strategic positions in the region. Without the active participation of these node countries, BRICS Plus cooperation will lack a vast hinterland, making it difficult to sustain or become bigger and stronger. Therefore, many of the guest countries mentioned above are node countries with clear national strengths and obvious location advantages, such as Argentina and Indonesia. For these countries, being able to ride on the rapid development of BRICS with the help of BRICS Plus cooperation is simply a good deal with great profits. Therefore, these countries are also willing to join the BRICS “family.”

Compared to the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO), the expansion process of BRICS seems to be taking bigger steps at a faster pace. For example, the SCO was very cautious when it first started the expansion process, with only Iran, India, and Pakistan becoming observer states at the beginning. However, nine BRICS guest countries attended the foreign ministers’ meeting at once. Although a guest country is not yet an observer country, it is only one step away.

Nonetheless, the road to BRICS expansion will not be smooth. For example, it took 12 years for Iran, India, and Pakistan to go from becoming SCO observer states in 2005 to India and Pakistan finally becoming member states in 2017. Iran will not start the acceptance process until 2021. Based on the timing of India and Pakistan joining the SCO, Iran will not become a full member until 2023 at the earliest. This also reminds us that there are screening procedures and sequences in the evolution from observer states to full member states. Therefore, some of the guest countries mentioned above will definitely have priority to enter the observer country sequence, and then current BRICS members will select some countries from the observer countries to become member states. It will be a long journey that will take considerable time and effort.

In addition, BRICS has not yet issued any regulations or legal procedures for expansion, and these cumbersome rules must be passed through consensus. Only after all the legal and transactional systems and procedures have been prepared in the early stage can the expansion members be considered. It took six years for the SCO to accept the first observer state into the process of accepting new members. BRICS does not even have observer countries at present, so it will take longer.

It is worth noting that enlarging BRICS may not be as complicated and time-consuming as the expansion of the SCO, because the BRICS NDB has already accepted countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Uruguay, Bangladesh, and Egypt as members. Therefore, if the expansion process is carried out with reference to the acceptance procedures and existing members of the BRICS NDB, the expansion of BRICS will be faster. Additionally, as Iran and Argentina have already applied to join, BRICS will have to unveil the procedures of the expansion process as soon as possible.

In general, the BRICS expansion is supported by strong momentum and will be advanced gradually, but it will not happen overnight.

*The article was first published at The Diplomat, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/great-power-conflict-fuels-brics-expansion-push/>.*

## About Author



Nian Peng is the Director at Research Centre for Asian Studies, Haikou, China. He holds a Ph.D. in Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His main research interests are in the areas of China- Southeast/South Asia relations, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and maritime security of the Indo-Pacific. He authored/edited six books-*The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-power Rivalry*(Springer Nature, forthcoming), *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*(Springer Nature, 2022), *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Springer Nature, 2021), *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic*(Springer Nature, 2021), *International Pressures, Strategic Preference, and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988* (Springer Nature, 2020) and *Leng Zhan Hou Yin Mian Guan Xi Yan Jiu [A Study on Indo-Myanmar Relations after the Cold-War]*(Shi Shi Chu Ban She [Current Affairs Press], 2017). His refereed articles have been notably published in *Ocean Development and International Law*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asian Affairs*, *Dong Nan Ya Yan Jiu [Southeast Asian Studies]*, *Nan Ya Yan Jiu [South Asian Studies]* and *Nan Ya Yan Jiu Ji Kan [South Asian Studies Quarterly]*. He also contributes his perspectives to many think tanks and various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *East Asian Forum* in Australia, *The Diplomat* in the USA, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Lian He Zao Bao* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *Global Times* and *CGTN* in China.

# RCAS Paper

## A Preliminary Study on the Foreign Policy of the New Pakistani Government

Nian Peng\*&Khurram Abbas\*

**Abstracts:** *This paper analyzes the trend of Pakistan's foreign policy from the perspective of the realistic challenges facing the new Pakistani government and the policy preferences of the new Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif. The study concluded that Pakistan's new government faces serious internal challenges and that dealing with domestic affairs is its top priority rather than foreign affairs. Therefore, continuity will dominate Pakistan's future foreign policy. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shahbaz's policy preference for economic development and his pragmatic and flexible governing style will also bring new changes to Pakistan's foreign policy. To be specific, the new Pakistani government will consolidate its all-weather friendly relations with China and accelerate the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; repair relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and restore their close economic ties; try to reach out to India to ease the deadlock between the two countries; and adjust hostile policy towards the US and improve Pakistan-US relations.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistan; Shahbaz Sharif; Foreign Policy; China; The US; India*

In early April 2022, the political situation in Pakistan underwent major changes. The former Prime Minister and the leader of the Pakistan Movement for Justice(PTI), Imran Khan, was ousted, and the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League(Sharif)[PML-N] Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif was sworn in as the new prime minister. In view of Pakistan's strategically important position, Shahbaz's foreign policy after taking office has attracted much attention. Some analysts believe that strengthening economic and political cooperation with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates(UAE) and China is the main focus of his foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Some studies have also

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pointed out that Pakistan will maintain a balance among major powers such as China, the United States, and Russia.<sup>2</sup> This is different from the fact that Pakistan's diplomacy favored China and Russia and alienated the United States and Europe during the administration of the former Prime Minister Imran.<sup>3</sup> Based on this, starting from the realistic challenges faced by the new Pakistani government and Shahbaz's policy preferences, this paper deeply analyzes the foreign policy trend of the new Pakistani government, in order to provide policy references for accurately judging the regional situation.

### **Reasons for Regime Change in Pakistan**

This round of regime change in Pakistan have taken place from March to early April 2022, which would last for more than a month. On March 8, Pakistan's main opposition party, the Pakistan People's Party(PPP), filed a motion of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran on the grounds of poor performance on economy and governance, with the intention of removing him.<sup>4</sup> On the 28th, the opposition coalition consisting of PPP and PML-N formally put forward a motion of no confidence in the National Assembly. Imran then called a massive mass rally to fight back, saying that foreign forces were deliberately ousting him. On the 31st, Imran's office issued a statement saying that the National Security Council was seriously concerned about this and was considering making strong representations.<sup>5</sup> On April 1, Imran said in an exclusive interview with Pakistan's ARY news television that he had made representations to the US embassy in Pakistan and asked why the US interfered in Pakistan's internal affairs. The accusation that the United States was conspiring to subvert the Palestinian regime quickly spread. On April 3, Qasim Suri, deputy speaker of the Pakistani National Assembly, said that the opposition party's motion of no confidence in early March was put forward after the United

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<sup>1</sup> Khurram Abbas, "Pakistani New Government's Prospective Foreign Policy," RCAS Report, April 21, 2022, [http://www.rcas.top/?list\\_32/2165.html](http://www.rcas.top/?list_32/2165.html).

<sup>2</sup> Ismail Dilawar and Kamran Haider, "Derided by Khan as U.S. Puppet, New Pakistan PM Bets on Centrism," *Bloomberg*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-11/derided-by-khan-as-u-s-puppet-new-pakistan-pm-bets-oncentrism>.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Riedel and Madiha Afzal, "President Biden, Don't Pass Up the Opportunity for A Reset with Shahbaz Sharif's Pakistan," *Brookings*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/04/22/president-biden-dont-pass-up-the-opportunity-for-areset-with-shahbaz-sharifs-pakistan/>.

<sup>4</sup> Asif Shahzad, "Pakistani Opposition Moves No-confidence Motion to Seek PM Khan's Ouster," *Reuters*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistaniopposition-rallies-press-pm-khan-resign-2022-03-08/>.

<sup>5</sup> See Ayaz Akbar Yousafzai&Web Desk, "Pakistan to Issue 'Strong Demarche' to Country Whose Official Communicated 'threat': NSC," *The News*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/946232-pakistan-to-issue-strong-demarche-to-country-whose-official-communicated-threat-nsc>.

States issued a threatening letter a few days ago, and then they rejected the motion of no confidence on the grounds that it was unconstitutional.<sup>6</sup> AL Jazeera's analysis believes that the affirmative statement of the National Security Council on accusation that the United States conspired to subvert the Pakistani regime was the main reason why the National Assembly rejected the no-confidence motion against the prime minister.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, President Arif Alvi accepted Imran's proposal to dissolve the National Assembly and called for early elections. But opposition parties vehemently opposed the president's decision and appealed to the Supreme Court on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. On April 7, the Supreme Court ruled that the Deputy Speaker's decision to veto a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister was unconstitutional, and the President's decision to dissolve the National Assembly was invalid, requiring the National Assembly to meet on April 9 to continue voting on the motion. In the early morning of April 10, the National Assembly passed a motion and Imran was removed from office. The next day, Shahbaz was elected as the new prime minister. So far, the change of the Pakistani regime has temporarily come to an end, but the political situation continues to be turbulent.

The regime change in Pakistan has caused by the deterioration of the economic situation and the deformed political structure. During Imran's administration, due to the impact of COVID-19, poor economic management and continuous cabinet reshuffle, the domestic economic situation deteriorated sharply. These mainly include the following indications that foreign direct investment fell, foreign exchange reserves were in a hurry, the exchange rate of the rupee against the US dollar fell sharply, and inflation reached unprecedented high levels. According to a February 2022 report by the Center for Global Development, Pakistan has faced at least six major crises since the outbreak. There are two major crises, which is the rise in public debt caused by rising fiscal deficits and reduced tax collection capacity, and the weakening economy caused by declining manufacturing and its exports and low productivity. This situation

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<sup>6</sup> Liu Chang and Cui Ru, "Pakistan National Assembly rejects vote of no confidence in Prime Minister Imran Khan", *CCTV News*, April 3, 2022, [https://content-static.cctvnews.cctv.com/snow-book/index.html?item\\_id=9560829553650482630&toc\\_style\\_id=feeds\\_default&share\\_to=wechat&track\\_id=d27f0ade-36d8-4628-9d06-e316ca17ca98](https://content-static.cctvnews.cctv.com/snow-book/index.html?item_id=9560829553650482630&toc_style_id=feeds_default&share_to=wechat&track_id=d27f0ade-36d8-4628-9d06-e316ca17ca98).

<sup>7</sup> "Pakistan's National Security Council Says Imran Khan's Resignation has nothing to do with U.S. conspiracy, the political battle continues", *The Paper*, April 25, 2022, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1731085353684954306&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

has been going on for some time.<sup>8</sup> The opposition took advantage of the situation to make a big fuss, taking advantage of the worsening economic situation to try to degrade Imran's ability to govern, in an attempt to weaken the authority of the government and arouse public dissatisfaction. For example, in a motion of no confidence launched by the PPP on March 8, Imran has lost public trust due to high inflation, rising fiscal deficits and depleted foreign reserves.<sup>9</sup> In the National Assembly on the 28th, Shahbaz also formally proposed a motion of no confidence against Imran on the grounds of poor governance.<sup>10</sup>

The bad economic situation is only the last straw that broke Imran, and the more serious reason is the deformed political structure that has been formed in Pakistan for a long time. Since the founding of Pakistan, the democratically elected government and the military government have taken turns to come to power, and the political operation of Pakistan has shown an obvious "pendulum effect". On the one hand, it reflects the fragility of the Palestinian democratic system, and on the other hand, it also highlights the unique position of the military in Pakistani politics. In fact, the operators behind Pakistani party politics are the wealthy families who really control the lifeblood of the country. Pakistani political parties and their systems are essentially tools for power struggles between giants and the military and major giants.<sup>11</sup> The main political parties in Pakistan, such as the PML-N, represent the Sharif family forces that have long been entrenched in Punjab, while the PPP represents the Bhutto family forces in Sindh. Although Imran founded the PTI and quickly emerged as the main political party in Pakistan, it lacked the support of wealthy families and a deep local foundation. Therefore, although Imran has impacted the traditional political structure of Pakistan, it is still difficult to break the political tradition of aristocratic families.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the relationship between Imran and the military was cracked

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<sup>8</sup> Shahid Yusuf, "Pakistan's Crises: The Making of a Perfect Storm," Centre for Global Development, February 2022, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/pakistans-crises-making-perfect-storm>.

<sup>9</sup> Asif Shahzad, "Pakistani Opposition Moves No-confidence Motion to Seek PM Khan's Ouster", *Reuters*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistani-opposition-rallies-press-pm-khan-resign-2022-03-08/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan's Parliament Takes Up No-Trust Motion Against PM Khan", *VOA*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-s-parliament-takes-up-no-trust-motion-against-pm-khan/6505118.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ye Hailin, "The Family Politics Behind Pakistan's Political Parties", *Culture Magazine*, April 10, 2022, <http://www.21bcr.com/bajisitanzhengdangbeihoudeshijiazhengzhi/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

in the late period of his administration, so he lacked military support in the face of impeachment from the opposition, and finally failed to escape the fate of stepping down.<sup>13</sup>

### **Multiple Challenges Faced by the New Pakistani Government**

Facing the “mess” left by Imran, the new Prime Minister Shahbaz is facing a series challenges of political, economic, security and diplomatic. In terms of politics, one is that Imran is unwilling to lose; He said he would not accept the new government led by Shahbaz, and accused the United States and the Pakistani opposition of conspiring to support a conspiracy against the PTI, and he called for a new general election. Amid the stalemate, Interior Minister Rana Sanullah accused Imran and his supporters of insulting Shahbaz at the mosque and even threatened to arrest him for insulting religion. Although Rana Sanullah subsequently denied the allegations against Imran<sup>14</sup>, it undoubtedly deepened the animosity between the two sides. At present, Imran is organizing the people from northwestern Pakistan to participate in the anti-government movement starting from his hometown of Myanwali.<sup>15</sup> Before the next general election, Imran will weaken the legitimacy of the new government by mobilizing the masses, holding high the anti-American flag and accusing cabinet ministers of corruption, thereby bringing instability to the Pakistani political situation.<sup>16</sup> The other is that the new government of Pakistan is facing a complicated situation of internal party competition. In the coalition of political parties forming the new government, the PML-N, the PPP, the JUI-F and the ANP all hold different religious beliefs and ideologies. And the PML-N and the PPP have long competed, and it is difficult to prevent the rivalry between parties.<sup>17</sup> In addition, some of the appointed

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<sup>13</sup> Analysts generally believe that Imran came to power in 2018 with the support of the military. However, in November 2021, Imran delayed approving the appointment of the military’s nominee for the appointment of the new ISI chief, and a rift appeared in the relationship between the two sides. On the issue of cooperation with the United States, Imran is clearly at odds with the position of the army chief of staff, General Bawaj. See “The Deep Reasons for Former Pakistani Prime Minister Khan’s Resignation and the Impact on China-Pakistan Relations,” *BBC Chinese*, 12 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-61077681>.

<sup>14</sup> Yang Yang, “Pakistan’s Home Minister Denies Pakistani Government’s Case Against Former Prime Minister Imran Khan”, *World Wide Web*, May 3, 2022, [https://m.gmw.cn/2022-05/03/content\\_1302929440.htm](https://m.gmw.cn/2022-05/03/content_1302929440.htm).

<sup>15</sup> “KP CM Says Imran Has Launched Struggle Against ‘Imported Govt’,” *The News*, May 7, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/955862-kp-cm-says-imran-has-launched-struggle-against-imported-govt>.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Riedel and Madiha Afzal, “President Biden, Don’t Pass Up the Opportunity for A Reset with Shahbaz Sharif’s Pakistan,” *Brookings*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/04/22/president-biden-dont-pass-up-the-opportunity-for-a-reset-with-shahbaz-sharifs-pakistan/>.

<sup>17</sup> Vaasu Sharma, “From Naya Pakistan to Old Pakistan: Challenges ahead for Shahbaz Sharif,” *The Kootneeti*, April 14, 2022, <https://thekootneeti.in/2022/04/14/from-naya-pakistan-to-old-pakistan-challenges-ahead-for-shahbaz-sharif/>.

cabinet ministers have “stains” and face corruption and other serious charges. All these make Pakistan’s new government lack of stability.<sup>18</sup>

On the economic front, the new Pakistani government faces a heavy and huge external debt burden and a looming balance of payments crisis, high inflation and soaring currency depreciation. The Pakistani rupee has depreciated by 16.57% in the 2021-2022 fiscal year, the inflation rate has risen to 12%, and the total external debt has reached 130 billion US dollars, accounting for 43% of the GDP.<sup>19</sup> The poor economic performance has seriously affected the daily lives of ordinary people. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Pakistan’s food index has risen by 14.5-15.5% in March 2022 compared with the same period of the previous year.<sup>20</sup> The latest report of the World Bank (WB) pointed out that under the combined effect of external factors such as global fiscal tightening, rising world energy prices, liquidity constraints brought about by the epidemic, and the structural difficulties of Pakistan’s internal economy with low investment, low exports, and low production growth rates, Macroeconomic risks in Pakistan are quite high.<sup>21</sup> Once the new government fails to ease the economic difficulties in the short term, Imran’s counterattack is bound to become stronger, and the authority and public opinion base of the new government will be greatly weakened.

In terms of security, first, the Pakistani domestic terrorist organization “Pakistan Taliban” (TTP), and the national separatist force “Balochistan Liberation Army” (BLA) demanded greater autonomy and more distribution of wealth, leading to sectarian conflict and violence. At the end of April 2022, the BLA attacked the shuttle bus of the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi, which was the organization’s “disappointment” to the new Pakistani government. In May, terrorist attacks in Pakistan continued, with two consecutive bomb attacks in Karachi. Second, terrorist attacks in Afghanistan continued one after another and spilled over

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<sup>18</sup> Political Rivalries, “Corrupt Ministers Make Shehbaz Sharif-led New Pakistan Govt Unstable,” *The Print*, April 21, 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/political-rivalries-corrupt-ministers-make-shehbaz-sharif-led-new-pakistan-govt-unstable/924335/>.

<sup>19</sup> S Vaasu Sharma, “From Naya Pakistan to Old Pakistan: Challenges ahead for Shahbaz Sharif,” *The Kootneeti*, April 14, 2022, <https://thekootneeti.in/2022/04/14/from-naya-pakistan-to-old-pakistan-challenges-ahead-for-shahbaz-sharif/>.

<sup>20</sup> Osama Rizvi, “Economic Fallout of Pakistan’s Political Crisis,” *The Diplomat*, April 14, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/economic-fallout-of-pakistans-political-crisis/>.

<sup>21</sup> Mariam Sara Altaf and Diana Chung, “Long-standing Structural Challenges Pose Risks to Pakistan’s Sustained Growth: World Bank Bi-Annual Pakistan Development Update Report,” World Bank, April 19, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/04/19/long-standing-structural-challenges-pose-risks-to-pakistan-s-sustained-growth-world-bank-bi-annual-pakistan-development->.

to Pakistan. As Pakistan's former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Salman Bashir said, Afghanistan has become one of Pakistan's thorny issues over the past 40 years, directly affecting Pakistan's security situation, economic development and socio-cultural structure.<sup>22</sup> After the Taliban returned to power, the security situation in Afghanistan did not improve significantly. Terrorist organizations such as the TTP used Afghanistan as their base to plan and carry out terrorist attacks against Pakistan. On August 12, 2021, the Swat branch of the TTP attacked a commuter vehicle for the Dasu Hydropower Station built by the Chinese in northwestern Pakistan (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa). Later, through the investigation of the Pakistani, it was learned that the attackers in Afghanistan planned, trained and purchased the vehicles for the crime.<sup>23</sup> Third, India continues to pose a security threat to Pakistan. Salman pointed out that the BJP government's Hindu expansionist agenda, the purchase of advanced weapons and equipment and the development of nuclear weapons all threaten Pakistan's national security and force the Pakistani side to take countermeasures.<sup>24</sup>

On the diplomatic front, the first is the stalemate in Pakistan-India relations. Pakistan-India relations are ups and downs and plagued by a simmering border conflict, particularly the territorial dispute in Kashmir. In February 2019, the two countries nearly "escaped" a major armed conflict in the border area.<sup>25</sup> On August 5 of that year, India's decision to abrogate Articles 370 and 35A of the Constitution further witnessed the downward trend in India-Pakistan relations.<sup>26</sup> Actions such as the BJP government's severance of diplomatic relations with

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<sup>22</sup> Salman Bashir, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy Outlook: 2022," *ARAB News*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1994961>.

<sup>23</sup> Qian Zhongbing, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on the Progress of the Pakistani Government's Announcement of the Progress of the Investigation into the Dasu Terrorist Attack," *Xinhua News Agency*, August 13, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2021-08/13/c\\_1127756324.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2021-08/13/c_1127756324.htm).

<sup>24</sup> Salman Bashir, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy Outlook: 2022," *ARAB News*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1994961>.

<sup>25</sup> On 14 February 2019, a convoy carrying members of India's Central Reserve Police Force was hit by a suicide car bomb attack on the national highway in Pulwama District, Jammu&Kashmir, killing more than 40 people. Pakistan's Jaish-e-Mohammed acknowledged that they had planned the attack. On the 26th, the Indian Air Force crossed the Indo-Pakistani Line of Actual Control and attacked the organization's camp in Pakistan. On the 27th, Pakistan attacked a target on the Indian-controlled Kashmir side, and Indian warplanes immediately pursued to the Pakistani side, and Indian Lieutenant Colonel Abhinandan Varthaman was captured by Pakistan and released on March 1.

<sup>26</sup> Article 370 of the Indian Constitution provides that the state of Jammu&Kashmir has a high degree of autonomy in addition to defence, diplomacy and communications, but the President of India has the right to declare specific legislative powers in the state. Accordingly, India issued a presidential decree in 1954 that added Section 35A to the Constitution, allowing the Parliament of the State of Jammu&Kashmir to enact local legislation and that the permanent residents of the state have civil, property and other fundamental rights



Pakistan, as well as Imran's criticism of Modi's expansionist policies as analogous to Nazi "living space"<sup>27</sup>, have further reduced the channels of communication between the two countries and destroyed hopes for the normalization of bilateral relations; Second, Pakistan is alienated from Europe and the United States. Imran's high-profile visit to Russia "against the will of the United States" at the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War<sup>28</sup>, and his actions such as advocating the subversion of the Pakistani regime by the United States during his impeachment have seriously damaged Pakistan-US relations. After being blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF)<sup>29</sup>, Pakistan also faces challenges in improving its economic and trade relations with the EU. The third is the repair of Pakistan's relations with Muslim countries. During Imran's administration, Pakistan's relations with Iran and Turkey warmed up, but cracks appeared in relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Some of Imran's statements and decisions during his tenure were not welcomed by Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. That includes his participation in the Kuala Lumpur summit, which Saudi Arabia does not support, and a strongly worded statement after Saudi Arabia demanded Pakistan to repay its loans.<sup>30</sup>

In summary, Pakistan's new government faces many challenges and priorities. First, Pakistan gives priority to its internal affairs and continues its foreign affairs. Considering the upcoming 2023 general election, the new Pakistani government does not have enough time to immediately adjust its foreign policy, and it is imperative to deal with domestic affairs and win

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different from those of other Indian citizens. On August 5, 2019, India issued a presidential decree repealing Article 370 of the Constitution. See: Zhen Xiang, "Answering a Reader's Question: What does Article 370 of the Indian Constitution refer to?", World Wide Web, August 9, 2019, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnKm4Te>.

<sup>27</sup> On May 27, 2020, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi "arrogant expansionist policies, similar to the Nazi 'living space', are becoming a threat to India's neighbors." See: "Pakistan's Prime Minister Criticizes Modi: Arrogant Expansionist Policies Become a Threat to Neighboring Countries," *Sohu*, May 27, 2020, [https://www.sohu.com/a/398106539\\_162522](https://www.sohu.com/a/398106539_162522).

<sup>28</sup> Imran Khan believes that another important reason why the United States supported his removal was that after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, he visited Russia against the will of the United States and met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. See: Wang Zhuoyi, "Former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan Claims There Is a US Black Hand Behind the Recall, Pakistani Military Denies", *The Paper*, April 15, 2022, [https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_17628946](https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_17628946).

<sup>29</sup> "Jurisdictions under Increased Monitoring-March 2022," FATF, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/high-risk-and-other-monitored-jurisdictions/documents/increased-monitoring-march-2022.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Ejaz Hussain, "The Foreign Policy Conundrum," *The News*, May 8, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/955674-the-foreign-policy-conundrum>.

the election.<sup>31</sup> In addition, pressing issues such as the economic crisis, terrorist attacks and partisan struggles all need to be properly addressed by the new Pakistani government, and there is no time for a major adjustment of foreign policy. All this means that the Pakistani government's foreign policy will remain dominated by continuity. Second, Pakistan's foreign policy is based on two principles: money and security. Without funding, Pakistan cannot get better, broader security deals to strengthen its conventional military. Therefore, Pakistan's foreign policy discussions continue to focus on funding needs in terms of loans, investment and aid.<sup>32</sup> In the current severe economic crisis, the priority task of Pakistan's new government is to seek external assistance such as loans to alleviate the crisis and bring Pakistan's economic development on track at an early date. Therefore, at least until the 2023 general election, the adjustment of Pakistan's foreign policy will be mainly oriented towards economic recovery, that is, economic development as the driving force of future foreign policy. Under such circumstances, Pakistan is expected to issue a foreign policy to promote regional connectivity and expand trade cooperation by seeking a geo-economic center and mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation with major powers in and outside the region.<sup>33</sup> Third, the diplomatic concepts of different parties in the new government and the anti-American stance of the opposition parties restrict the implementation of Pakistan's foreign policy. Previous anti-India speeches by Pakistan's current foreign minister and PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari ran counter to Shahbaz's desire to forge close ties with India, which would be the initial stimulus for Pakistan's new government's foreign policy.<sup>34</sup> Imran's anti-US stance and his request for parliament to investigate the US conspiracy to subvert the Pakistani regime will also become an obstacle for the new Pakistani government to ease relations with the US. In addition, the severe anti-terrorism situation in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area and the tension on the Pakistan-India border also hinder the PNG government from improving relations with Afghanistan and India.

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<sup>31</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan to Seek Deepening of 'Important' Ties With US," *VOA*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-seek-deepening-of-important-ties-with-us-/6526760.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Khurram Abbas, "Pakistani New Government's Prospective Foreign Policy," RCAS Report, April 21, 2022, [http://www.rcas.top/?list\\_32/2165.html](http://www.rcas.top/?list_32/2165.html).

<sup>33</sup> Salman Bashir, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy Outlook: 2022," *ARAB News*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1994961>.

<sup>34</sup> Vaasu Sharma, "From Naya Pakistan to Old Pakistan: Challenges ahead for ShahbazSharif," *The Kootneeti*, April 14, 2022, <https://thekootneeti.in/2022/04/14/from-naya-pakistan-to-old-pakistan-challenges-ahead-for-shahbaz-sharif/>.



## Policy Preferences of Shahbaz Sharif

Although Pakistan's foreign policy is determined by the practical challenges it faces, Shahbaz's policy preferences will also affect the formulation and implementation of the country's foreign policy. First, Shahbaz is a capable administrator. He is not as charismatic as his brother Nawaz Sharif, or as striking as his niece, Maryam Nawaz Sharif.<sup>35</sup> Instead, his charisma comes from word of mouth among more capable administrators.<sup>36</sup> He served three times as chief minister of Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, and is known for curbing red tape in the bureaucracy and preferring to launch big infrastructure projects. Projects such as Lahore Metro Bus, Lahore Ring Road, Multan Metro Bus and Rawalpindi-Islamabad Metro Bus were all planned, approved and completed during his tenure.<sup>37</sup> Punjab has been dubbed "Punjab Speed" due to its faster completion of energy production and infrastructure projects than other provinces.<sup>38</sup> With the experience of "good governance" in Punjab, Shahbaz has established an image of efficiency, courage and diligence among the people. He is often seen as an administrator, a policy enforcer, not a politician.<sup>39</sup> Based on this, Shahbaz tends to formulate and implement a pragmatic foreign policy and is committed to achieving practical results. Considering that the new government is currently facing a serious economic crisis, Shahbaz will vigorously promote economic diplomacy with economic construction as the center, so as to obtain external aid, investment and trade to alleviate the economic difficulties.

Second, Shahbaz is a flexible "trader". Shahbaz was born in the Sharif family, a Pakistani political family, and his brother Nawaz served as the Prime Minister of Pakistan three times. Shahbaz entered politics in the 1980s and was first elected as a member of the Punjab Provincial Assembly in 1988, a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan in 1990, and served as the

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<sup>35</sup> Marian Nawaz Sharif is the daughter of Nawaz Sharif. With her charismatic personality and superb public speaking skills, she is seen as a future successor to the PML-N. See: Vaasu Sharma, "From Naya Pakistan to Old Pakistan: Challenges ahead for Shahbaz Sharif," *The Kootneeti*, April 14, 2022, <https://thekootneeti.in/2022/04/14/from-naya-pakistan-to-old-pakistan-challenges-ahead-for-shahbaz-sharif/>.

<sup>36</sup> Rounak Bagchi, "Explained: Who is Shehbaz Sharif, Pakistan's New Prime Minister?" *The Indian Express*, April 13, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-shehbaz-sharif-take-over-as-prime-minister-of-pakistan-7862540/>.

<sup>37</sup> Khurram Abbas, "Pakistani New Government's Prospective Foreign Policy," RCAS Report, April 21, 2022, [http://www.rcas.top/?list\\_32/2165.html](http://www.rcas.top/?list_32/2165.html).

<sup>38</sup> Amjad Abbas Magsi, "Pakistan-China Relations in Shahbaz Sharif Era," RCAS Commentary, April 21, 2022, [http://www.rcas.top/?list\\_30/2164.html](http://www.rcas.top/?list_30/2164.html).

<sup>39</sup> Lu Yifei, "People/Shahbaz Sharif: The New Pakistani Prime Minister 'Suddenly' Comes to the Stage," *Shangguan News*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=471876>.

Chief Minister of Punjab Province three times from 1997 to 2018. In March 2018, he succeeded Nawaz as the chairman of the PML-N party. Judging from his political participation experience, Shahbaz has worked under his brother for a long time, and his domestic policy and foreign policy will be deeply influenced by his brother. However, the styles of the two are not the same. While his brother's relationship with the military and political enemies has been strained at times, Shahbaz is seen as more flexible, more compromising and better at reaching deals.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, some analysts believe that Shahbaz represents the pragmatic of the PML-N party, while Nawaz and his daughter, who have actual control of the party, represent the ideological.<sup>41</sup> As a result, Shahbaz will not act arbitrarily when he is elected prime minister, but will consult with his brother and the leaders of the coalition parties, and he will formulate a pragmatic and inclusive foreign policy, and will make compromises when necessary. Therefore, it is unlikely that there will be long diplomatic impasse when Imran was in power.

Third, Shahbaz is a friendly “dove” to the outside world. Although Shahbaz has never been a diplomat, his Sharif family is considered dove in relations with India.<sup>42</sup> In his first speech after taking office, Shahbaz also expressed his desire to establish equal and friendly relations with the outside world, especially with India and the United States. This shows that Pakistan's foreign policy will change after he takes office, especially to stay away from the fierce confrontational anti-Western stance during the Imran period, thus creating a good and stable external environment for Pakistan's economic development.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Shahbaz vigorously promoted friendly cooperation with China when he was in power in Punjab Province, and achieved remarkable results in launching and building the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor(CPEC). Therefore, he will also be committed to maintaining friendly relations between China and Pakistan after taking office.

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<sup>40</sup> “People|Pakistan's new prime minister: a ‘workaholic’ with flexible means from a politically powerful family,” *The Paper*, April 12, 2022, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1729857949113204585&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

<sup>41</sup> Adnan Aamir, “Pakistan's Shehbaz Sharif Elected PM As Khan's Party Boycotts Vote,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 11, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Pakistan-s-Shehbaz-Sharif-elected-PM-as-Khan-s-party-boycotts-vote>.

<sup>42</sup> Cheng Shijie, Chen Kang, Zhao Juejun, “Pakistan Opposition Leader Shahbazz Sharif: Will Not Indulge in ‘Politics of Revenge’,” *Global Times*, April 11, 2022, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/47YYCYfuoUF>.

<sup>43</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen&Shah Meer Baloch, “Shehbaz Sharif: The Diligent Administrator Now PM of Pakistan,” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/11/shahbaz-sharif-the-diligent-administrator-now-pm-of-pakistan>.

## **Continuity and Changes in the New Pakistani Government's Foreign Policy**

Judging from the current economic crisis, security tensions, partisan struggle and other practical challenges facing the country, the new Pakistani government will have to focus on internal affairs, making it difficult to expand foreign relations. In that case, it is unlikely that there will be major adjustments in Pakistan's foreign policy for a period of time. At the same time, Pakistan's new government also needs external assistance and mutually beneficial cooperation to ease the economic woes. This will provide an important opportunity for Pakistan to improve its relations with Western countries such as the United States and Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia. In addition, Shahbaz's preference to infrastructure construction and pragmatic and flexible ruling style will also bring new changes to Pakistan's foreign policy. This is mainly reflected in the extensive expansion of Pakistan's economic cooperation with the foreign countries and the initial improvement of Pakistan-India and Pakistan-US relations.

### ***Continuity***

The continuity of the foreign policy of the new government of Pakistan is mainly reflected in the continuous deepening of the friendly and cooperative relations between Pakistan and China. Shahbaz has visited China many times as the Chief Minister of Punjab Province. Punjab Province under his rule is also a major area for the construction of CPEC, and many important projects were successfully launched and completed ahead of schedule during his tenure. He once spoke highly of the CPEC as a grand blueprint that can transform Pakistan into a major emerging economy.<sup>44</sup> His PML-N party has also maintained good cooperation with China. The Gwadar Airport and the Gwadar East Bay Expressway were all launched during the previous tenure of the PML-N.

After being elected as prime minister, Shahbaz promised to vigorously promote the construction of the CPEC. Under his leadership, the CPEC, which was slow to progress during the Imran era, will accelerate its development, and some problems that Chinese companies have encountered in Pakistan over the past years will also be dealt with in a timely manner. The importance of the project was highlighted again after he appointed Ahsan Iqbal, who has close working ties to China and witnessed the early harvest of the CPEC, as Minister of Planning and

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<sup>44</sup> Yang Sheng and Xu Keyue, "Shehbaz Sharif Elected New Pakistan PM, Vows to Promote CPEC Projects," *Global Times*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1259071.shtml>.

Development.<sup>45</sup> From the beginning of his tenure, Iqbal called for an immediate solution to the problems encountered by Chinese investors involved in the construction of the project, especially the speedy processing of their visas.<sup>46</sup> In order to demonstrate his excellent governance capabilities to the domestic public, Shahbaz is focusing on some of the completed projects, such as the 720 MW Karot Hydropower Project and the 30 MW Thar Coal Power Project. On April 13, 2022, he announced that the Karachi Circular Railway Project will be included in the CPEC and completed as soon as possible. He also successfully launched the second phase of the previously stalled Lahore Rail Transit Orange Line. This shows that Shahbaz intends to expand the construction scale of the CPEC. Under the vision of the new leadership, the cooperation between the two countries in various fields within the scope of the project will be expanded, which will benefit Pakistan's socio-economic development.<sup>47</sup> Shahbaz will also not tolerate bureaucracy in the construction of the CPEC. He will also ensure that joint coordination committee meetings are held regularly during his tenure to coordinate and smoothly advance the project construction in a timely manner.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the Pakistan PPP Party also reiterated its determination to consolidate the "China-Pakistan all-weather friendly relations" and accelerate the construction of the CPEC. President of the PPP and Minister of Foreign Affairs Bilawal said on May 9 that Pakistan will continue to enhance the level of cooperation with China through the economic corridor. Pakistan will advance the implementation of domestic sustainable development goals and actively participate in global development initiatives proposed by China.<sup>49</sup> It can be seen that during the period of Shahbaz's administration, China-Pakistan

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<sup>45</sup> Tom Hussain, "Why Is Pakistan's New PM Shehbaz Sharif So Keen to Accelerate the CPEC with Beijing?" *South China Morning Post*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/explained/article/3174875/why-pakistans-new-pm-shehbaz-sharif-so-keen-accelerate-cpec>.

<sup>46</sup> "Pakistan Attempting to Woo Back Chinese Fleeing CPEC, Says Report," *The Economic Times*, May 10, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/pakistan-attempting-to-woo-back-chinese-fleeing-cpec-report/articleshow/91446406.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>47</sup> Amjad Abbas Magsi, "Pakistan-China Relations in Shahbaz Sharif Era," RCAS Commentary, April 21, 2022, [http://www.rcas.top/?list\\_30/2164.html](http://www.rcas.top/?list_30/2164.html).

<sup>48</sup> The "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Joint Cooperation Committee" is the highest coordinating body, mainly responsible for reviewing the progress of related projects and special economic zones between the two countries. The meeting was not held regularly during Imran's administration. The 9th session was held on 5 November 2019. The 10th session will be held on 9, 2021, two years after the ninth session, which is not conducive to the coordination and advancement of the project process between the two parties.

<sup>49</sup> "Pakistan Committed to Further Strengthen Its All-weather Strategic Ties with China: Bilawal," *APP*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.app.com.pk/national/pakistan-committed-to-further-strengthen-its-all-weather-ties-with-china-bilawal/>.

friendly relations will not only be passed on, but will also develop rapidly, marked by the accelerated promotion of the Economic Corridor.

Nevertheless, considering the rising trend of terrorist attacks in Pakistan and the spillover effect of frequent terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, the pressure on Pakistan to counter terrorism will increase significantly in the future. It will also affect the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. An analysis of the collaborative project identified opposition, lack of trust and attacks as negative factors that have remained constant in corridor construction over the years. More importantly, some issues can be controlled, such as demands within the government, concerns among agencies, misunderstandings between the military and civilians, and the conservativeness of ethnic minorities. But the security risks are uncontrollable, especially the security threats to Chinese citizens.<sup>50</sup> Feeling neglected and marginalized, and mistakenly believing that local resources have been transferred to Punjab and other major cities, as well as China, the CPEC has become the main target of terrorist attacks in the Pakistan-Afghan border areas (such as Gilgit Baltistan).<sup>51</sup> Due to the backward border management by the Pakistani government and many restrictions on tribes in the area, combating terrorism in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area has always been a difficult problem. More importantly, the Afghan Taliban, which has regained power, is not only incapable of effectively fighting terrorists hiding in its territory and attacking Pakistan<sup>52</sup>, but also opposes Pakistan's cross-border air strikes against terrorists. This has largely weakened the effectiveness of counter-terrorism in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area. Under the new situation of persistent instability and deteriorating economy in Afghanistan, a large number of Afghan refugees will continue to flow into Pakistan to seek shelter, which will bring huge difficulties to Pakistan border management and provide important opportunities for terrorist organizations to take advantage of the situation. Therefore, until the situation in Afghanistan improves, the security situation in Pakistan will hardly improve, and the construction of CPEC will still face high security risks.

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<sup>50</sup> Muhammad Kashan Surahio, Shengyu Gu, Hakim Ali Mahesar, Mansoor Mumtaz Soomro, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Macro Environmental Factors and Security Challenges," *SAGE Open*, Vol.12, No.1, 2022, p.18.

<sup>51</sup> "Pakistan Attempting to Woo Back Chinese Fleeing CPEC, Says Report," *The Economic Times*, May 10, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/pakistan-attempting-to-woo-back-chinese-fleeing-cpec-report/articleshow/91446406.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>52</sup> "Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan," Asia Report N. 320, International Crisis Group, February 4, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/320-pakistans-hard-policy-choices-afghanistan>.

## *Variability*

The new changes in the foreign policy of the new Pakistani government are mainly manifested in the following three aspects: repairing relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries; easing the deadlock in the confrontation between Pakistan and India; and balancing relations with the United States. First, the financial support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and China will ease Pakistan's economic difficulties and bring better dividends to the people, so as to add points to the PML-N in the upcoming general election. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have repeatedly aided Pakistan, which is in economic difficulties, by means of deferred oil payment, soft loans and foreign exchange reserves. They are one of Pakistan's most trusted friends. In addition, the Sharif family has close ties to the Saudi royal family and has made it clear on various occasions that they support Saudi Arabia, especially Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran in the Middle East. Therefore, the outside world is highly expected that in the near future, the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will usher in a healing process. But the process is still limited to expanding economic relations between Pakistan and the Gulf states and strengthening political mutual trust. On May 1, 2022, Shahbaz made his first visit to the UAE and Saudi Arabia less than a month after taking office, and sought an extension of the repayment period for Saudi's \$3 billion loan to Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has also pledged to further strengthen financing of oil and gas products to ease energy shortages in the South Asian country.<sup>53</sup> This shows that Shahbaz is repairing relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries by taking the initiative to visit, especially restoring the close economic ties in the past, so as to bail out the Pakistani economy.

Second, Pakistan and India will re-engage, but it is difficult to normalize relations. In his first speech after taking office as Prime Minister, Shahbaz clarified his good intention to engage with India and promote regional peace and development. "Pakistan looks forward to a peaceful and cooperative relationship with India. Peaceful resolution of unresolved disputes including Kashmir is essential," he said.<sup>54</sup> Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Shahbaz and hoped that the South Asian region would become better and more prosperous, but he was

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<sup>53</sup> "Pakistani PM Sharif Visits UAE, Saudi," *Daily Sabah*, May 1, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistani-pm-sharif-visits-uae-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>54</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan to Seek Deepening of 'Important' Ties With US," *VOA*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-seek-deepening-of-important-ties-with-us-/6526760.html>.



still haunted by Pakistani terrorism.<sup>55</sup> Historically, Nawaz, Shahbaz's brother, had friendly relations with the BJP leadership. In 1999, Nawaz successfully signed the historic Lahore Declaration with the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Nawaz ignored the military's advice to attend Modi's swearing-in ceremony in 2014 and facilitated Modi's 2015 visit to Lahore. Therefore, the Sharif family maintains a friendly working relationship with Modi, which helps Shahbaz to start the process of normalizing relations with India.

However, Shahbaz's positive intention to develop friendly relations with India is not the only prerequisite for Pakistan-India dialogue. Historically, every Pakistani prime minister has always promised peaceful coexistence with India from the start, but such promises are rarely fulfilled.<sup>56</sup> A number of reasons will likely limit Shahbaz from initiating any substantive policy shifts that benefit both countries, such as legacy issues, a crisis of mutual trust, the domestic political environment and the 2023 election. First, given Imran's consistent stance on the normalization of bilateral relations that Pakistan is willing to normalize relations with India if Modi withdraws the August 5, 2019 decision to abolish the autonomy of Kashmir. While following Imran's stance, Shahbaz may approach Modi to persuade him to reverse the decision. But Modi may not reverse the decision, given the populist political environment in India. Therefore, the normalization of relations between the two countries will remain a distant dream in the near future. Second, Imran's ultra-nationalist narrative has polarized Pakistani society as a whole, and his peaceful initiative and active engagement with India carries unexpected political risks.<sup>57</sup> And given the looming general election, Pakistan's new government seems unwilling to take such political risks for the time being. The Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations(UN) and former ambassador to the United States, Maleeha Lodhi, also pointed out that since the "lifespan" of the new government is uncertain before the

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<sup>55</sup> Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Shahbaz on his election and said "hope for peace and stability in a region free from terrorism so that we can focus on our development challenges and ensure the well-being and prosperity of the people". See: Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan to Seek Deepening of 'Important' Ties With US," *VOA*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-seek-deepening-of-important-ties-with-us-/6526760.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Prakash Nanda, "'Eternal Enemies'-Will India, Pakistan Relations Under Islamist Appeaser Shahbaz Sharif Bring Peace To South Asia," *The Eurasian Times*, April 13, 2022, <https://eurasianimes.com/eternal-enemies-will-india-pakistan-relations-shahbaz-sharif/>.

<sup>57</sup> For example, Imran refused to accept the "imported government" formed by Shahbaz on the grounds that the opposition colluded with the United States to subvert the Pakistani regime, and declared that he took to the streets to protest. See: Omer Farooq Khan, "Won't Accept Imported Government, Says Imran Khan on Eve of No-trust Vote," *The Times of India*, April 9, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/wont-accept-imported-government-says-imran-khan-on-eve-of-no-trust-vote/articleshow/90736163.cms>.

general election, it is unlikely that Pakistan will introduce new measures against India, but efforts are made to ease tensions between the two countries are still possible.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, Shahbaz will be cautious about any diplomatic contacts between Pakistan and India during his administration to avoid adverse effects on the upcoming general election.

Third, military and political consensus promotes the warming of Pakistan-US relations, but US conspiracy theories are obstacles. Pakistan and the US have a tri-dimensional bilateral relationship, i.e., people to people, military to military, and government to government. The people to people and military to military relationships are balanced and consistent. The two sides seem always eager to engage with either side through various platforms for better economic cooperation. The USAID programme is exclusively designed for positive engagements with the general public of host countries including Pakistan. Except for the Trump administration, the US historically offered generous financial and technical assistance in agriculture, climate, medicine, clean water projects and other similar kinds of initiatives for the betterment of the Pakistani public. Even when the relationship between the two countries was tense, the United States did not stop providing aid to Pakistan. For example, in early April 2022 USAID announced a new safe drinking water project for two provinces in Pakistan.<sup>59</sup> However, under the propaganda of Imran's anti-American nationalism, the Pakistani people's hostility to the United States continued to deepen. Gallup's latest poll shows that although only 36% of Pakistani people believe that the United States is conspiring to overthrow the Pakistani regime, more than 72% of Pakistani people see the United States as an enemy rather than a friend. These young Pakistanis under 30 have grown up with the strongest anti-American wave since 1990.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, although the United States is committed to consolidating the public opinion foundation of US-Pakistan relations by improving the living conditions of the Pakistani people, the high anti-American sentiment among the Pakistani people is increasingly becoming an obstacle to the improvement of bilateral relations.

The military-to-military has generally remained professional. The two sides had

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<sup>58</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan to Seek Deepening of 'Important' Ties With US," *VOA*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-seek-deepening-of-important-ties-withus-/6526760.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Political Crisis Heightens U.S.-Pakistan Tensions," *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/07/pakistan-political-crisis-imran-khan-us/>.

<sup>60</sup> Uzair Sattar, "Anti-Americanism in Pakistan," *The Diplomat*, May 7, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/anti-americanism-in-pakistan/>.



opposing views about each other's policies especially on Afghanistan, the US defence cooperation with India, Pakistan's strategic partnership with China, etc. Despite the aforementioned differences, the military to military cooperation continued in arms deals, training, and military aid and maintained various communications channels.<sup>61</sup> Pakistan's generals have not lost their desire to develop close ties with the United States.<sup>62</sup> On April 2, 2022, Pakistan Army Chief of Staff Qamar Javed Bajwa not only publicly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine when he attended this year's "Islamabad Security Dialogue" meeting, he also said that Pakistan seeks to expand relations with the United States.<sup>63</sup> There is still room for security cooperation between Pakistan and the United States in the future, especially the joint response to the security threat of the "Islamic State Khorasan branch".<sup>64</sup> However, the military will also maintain a careful balance in engaging with the United States, given that Imran is stirring up American conspiracy theories at home.<sup>65</sup>

The government to government relationship between the two countries varied depending upon the nature of government in Pakistan and the security environment of South Asia. The United States seems favourable to working with military dictators of Pakistan. In the past various U.S. governments had an extraordinary level of cooperation with dictators of the country including Field Marshal Ayub Khan, General Zia-ul-Haq, and General Pervez Musharraf. These dictators cooperated and protected American interests in the South Asian region. They cooperate with the United States and defend American interests in the South Asian region. Field Marshal Ayub Khan provided air bases to the US for spying on the former Soviet Union, while General Zia-ul-Haq played a pivotal role in Afghan Jihad against the former Soviet Union. General Musharraf's cooperation on Afghanistan helped the US to consolidate power in Afghanistan in the early years of the 2000s. Unlike military dictators, civilian governments faced isolation, serious sanctions and limited access to various American

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<sup>61</sup> Khurram Abbas, "Pakistani New Government's Prospective Foreign Policy," RCAS Report, April 21, 2022, [http://www.rcas.top/?list\\_32/2165.html](http://www.rcas.top/?list_32/2165.html).

<sup>62</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Political Crisis Heightens U.S.-Pakistan Tensions," *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/07/pakistan-political-crisis-imran-khan-us/>.

<sup>63</sup> "Pakistan Doesn't Believe in Camp Politics," *The News*, April 2, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/946761-coas-gen-bajwa-addresses-islamabad-security-dialogue-2022>.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Political Crisis Heightens U.S.-Pakistan Tensions," *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/07/pakistan-political-crisis-imran-khan-us/>.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce Riedel and Madiha Afzal, "President Biden, Don't Pass Up the Opportunity for A Reset with Shahbaz Sharif's Pakistan," *Brookings*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/04/22/president-biden-dont-pass-up-the-opportunity-for-a-reset-with-shahbaz-sharifs-pakistan/>.

administrations. Since Biden took office, the two sides have been unable to hold high-level talks. The overt support of the previous Pakistani government for the Afghan Taliban and Imran's statement that "the Taliban has broken the yoke of slavery" further deteriorated Pakistan-US relations. Although the PML-N and the PPP are convinced that broader and friendly relations with the United States and the West are essential to Pakistan's economic, political and strategic interests, the new Pakistani government is concerned that Imran, the leader of the opposition, will take advantage of the Pakistan-US Relations improved to reinforce his ultra-nationalist narrative of "foreign conspiracy". This means that U.S.-Pakistan relations will heat up during Shahbaz's administration due to the military-political consensus. However, Shahbaz will not seek special engagement with the United States, possibly only a good working relationship. Pakistan's new government is likely to be cautious as it improves relations with the United States. Maliha Lodi, the former Pakistani ambassador to the United States, reminded that before engaging with the United States, the new Pakistani government must quell Imran's allegations of conspiracy by the United States to subvert the Pakistani regime.<sup>66</sup> For the US, Pakistan's cooperation on Afghanistan and its relationship with India will also determine the direction of US-Pakistan relations. Given the current tense Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and stalemate Pakistan-India relations, it is difficult for the US-Pakistan relations to completely improve.

## **Conclusion**

After Shahbaz took office, the future direction of Pakistan's foreign policy has attracted much attention. The main concern is whether Pakistan will significantly adjust the pro-China-Russia, far-American and European foreign policies during Imran's period, so as to rebalance the relationship between major powers. This paper argues that under the situation that domestic affairs are given priority and the general election is approaching, Pakistan's foreign policy will focus on maintaining continuity, so there will be no major adjustments. Nevertheless, Shahbaz's policy preferences on economic development will still bring new changes to Pakistan's foreign policy, especially the vigorous promotion of economic diplomacy. Under such circumstances, the CPEC is expected to return to the rapid development track during Shahbaz administration. At the same time, Shahbaz and his affiliated PML-N and the main

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<sup>66</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan to Seek Deepening of 'Important' Ties With US," *VOA*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-seek-deepening-of-important-ties-withus-/6526760.html>.

coalition PPP all advocate friendship with India and the United States. India and the United States also responded positively to Shahbaz's goodwill remarks. This is bound to bring a turning point in the turnaround of Pakistan-India and Pakistan-U.S. relations, and facilitate the easing of Pakistan-India and Pakistan-U.S. relations. It's just that the relationships of Pakistan-India and Pakistan-US have had long-standing grievances, coupled with the prevalence of anti-American nationalism in Pakistan, it is difficult for Shahbaz to completely reverse the dilemma of Pakistan-India and Pakistan-US relations. Therefore, during the period of Shahbaz's administration, Pakistan's diplomacy generally showed the characteristics of continuity and partial adjustment.

Of course, if Shahbaz can defeat Imran in the 2023 general election and successfully form a stable and long-lasting new government, then the room for adjustment of Pakistan's foreign policy will be significantly expanded, especially in relations with India and the United States. But it still depends on the development of the domestic situation in Pakistan and the response from the outside. In addition, considering Shahbaz's policy preferences focusing on economic development and pragmatic and flexible governing style, Pakistan's diplomacy will be marked with a deep economic imprint. It is also impossible for Pakistan to maintain bad relations with the outside world for a long time. Therefore, in the long run, Pakistan's diplomacy will adhere to the priority of economy, move towards the track of openness and inclusiveness, and devote itself to establishing friendly relations with all countries in the world.

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