

# Issue Brief

May 2024  
No : 396

Crystal Gazing  
Pakistan and Its  
Politico-Military  
Choices: 2024 and  
Beyond

Colonel Surjeet  
Singh Tanwar



# Crystal Gazing Pakistan and Its Politico-Military Choices: 2024 and Beyond

## *Abstract*

*The magnitude of ongoing Pakistan security and economic challenges is becoming far greater than the capabilities and capacities of its current leadership. Besides this, fear of losing the Kashmir plot in entirety post 11 December 2023 Supreme Court (SC) Verdict, wherein the SC upheld the Union Government's decision to abrogate Article 370 in J&K, further adds to its national discomfiture.*

*Since August 2019, India's approach of 'No Talks with Terror' and Pakistan's approach of 'No Talks with No Article 370' has led to a period of deadlock in relations between both the countries. However, the SC verdict is likely to have converted the situation to 'now or never' for Pakistan and placed the Kashmir issue on its highest priority.*

*In the limited strategic space available, clear indicators of 'Pakistan's Security Choices in 2024' will emerge post stabilisation of the new Government. Pragmatically, Pakistan will try and 're-invent' Pakistan's Strategic Relevance During 2024' despite a fast shrinking strategic space.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan Elections, India-Pakistan Relations

Is this the end of Pakistan we have known? Is this the Götzen-Dämmerung— the twilight of our false idols? Wise and powerful have fallen off high pedestal, national leadership bereft of ideas sucking the country to dark void. Be it Judges, Generals, Bureaucrats or Politicians, all are so consumed by their selfish struggle; they seem not to care of the looming Armageddon on Pakistan; country marching to the doom.

— DAWN Editorial on '*Fractured State*',2024

This statement aptly sums up the current situation in Pakistan.

During and towards the end of year 2023, Pakistan saw a dramatic uptick in terrorist violence by TTP, enhanced involvement of ISKP and Baluch protests reaching at the doorstep of Islamabad (Hussain, N. 2023). The magnitude of Pakistan's security and economic challenges is becoming far greater than the capabilities and capacities of its current leadership. Pakistan has been through a similar crisis since 1947 leading to the complacent belief that it has developed art/ tact of recovering through its rough times. However, many experts and think-

tanks have labelled the current economic crisis coupled with dwindling internal security as the ‘*defining crisis*’ for Pakistan (CAPS, 2023).

The year 2024 has been termed as ‘*Voldemort of Years*’ by Ian Bremmer in his analysis on ‘*Top 10 Global Risks in 2024*’. Political system in US seems more dysfunctional than ever since last 150 years undermining its credibility on the global stage. World seems to be moving towards a ‘*World Without Global Leadership*’ in 2024 and evolving US- China rivalry could be getting entangled in a *Thucydides Trap*. In such a geo-political scenario coupled with the dismal state of internal affairs in Pakistan, the possibility of Pakistan attempting blunderous act (s) in 2024 are high. *India needs to be prepared to thwart any such ill design by Pakistan during the ‘Voldemort Year’*

### **Current Crisis Is ‘Different’**

The ongoing crisis in Pakistan is an inflection point wherein dangerously divisive political situation and polarisation has taken away the middle ground. The current divide goes beyond the political arena. It includes sectarian, provincial, and economic divides and is pervasive across all possible faultlines/ fissures in the national discourse (Hussain, N. 2023).

- ***Monumental Security Challenge.*** Average TTP attacks per month have increased from 14.5 in 2020 to 45.8 in 2023 and expanded in geographical scope, reflecting increased operability and improved weaponry (Hussain, N. 2023). Terrorist attacks have increased by 60% while suicide attacks surged by a whopping 500% since the capture of Kabul by Taliban (Hussain, N. 2023).

Seemingly, Pakistan’s Afghan policy has backfired. Both, the TTA and TTP, are emerging to be two sides of the same coin and are seemingly ‘*Ideological Twins*’ drawing inspiration from the same source and thus making it a difficult conundrum for Pakistan leadership. Seeing Taliban as a ‘*Strategic Asset*’ and finding ‘*Strategic Depth*’ in Afghanistan has got totally reversed in just two years, posing lethal security challenges for Pakistan. ISKP expanding its footprint in Pakistan is further fuelling the threat to its sovereignty from ‘unexpected and unsuspecting Western Borders’. Possibility of TTP joining hands with Baluch separatists will make the security challenge to Pakistan establishment even more formidable (Hussain, N. 2023).

- ***Deepening Political Crisis.*** In April 2022, political instability fuelled by the ouster of Imran Khan and thereafter, the unholy political alliance of two historically opposing parties formed the government for the first time in Pakistan’s history. The return of

Nawaz Sharif after five years in exile, his acquittal in number of cases and formation of a coalition government under Shehbaz Sharif for the second time gives an impression that General Asim Munir has been able to create some semblance of government formation in Pakistan. Unfolding of court decisions on various cases, lodged by PTI members about rigging during elections, will give further insight into what is in store during the balance 2024 and beyond. Besides political instability, institutions in Pakistan like the Supreme Court and the Army are also jostling for supremacy. Crowds attacking Corps Commander House on 09 May 2023 at Lahore was unprecedented in its history.

- ***No Solution in Sight: Economic Crisis.*** The ongoing economic crisis got further aggravated by 2022 flood. Pakistan is yet to recover from running high inflation and Balance of Payment (BoP) crisis which are now posing monumental challenge to Pakistan's national discourse. Economic crisis is leading to a build-up of social stresses and economic distress. Surprisingly, there are no indicators of any decline in the expenditure towards the defence sector and Pakistan's efforts towards capacity and capability development of its Armed Forces. It only highlights Pakistan's '*misplaced national priorities*' at the cost of its population.

### **Three Security Priorities for Pakistan in 2024 and Likely Strategic Choices**

By virtue of its geographical location, Pakistan has been a 'Strategic Service Provider' for decades (since its birth). However, post US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, *its strategic, relevance has seen sharp decline and graduating towards irrelevance* (Pillalamarri, A. 2024). In such a prevalent geo-political scenario, new Pakistan leadership is likely to lean more towards pragmatic choices. In the ongoing security climate, Pakistan faces far more intense internal security challenges than external threats— alongwith one Front threat along its Eastern borders with India, Pakistan is gradually getting entrapped in three Fronts namely its Eastern border, Western border along the Durand Line with Afghanistan and internal security as the third Front. In 2024, internal security threat is likely to be more intense and stare at its face.

- ***Internal Security.*** Threats in Baluchistan, KPK and Sindh from various secessionist elements and radicals like TTP and ISKP are posing the biggest threat to Pakistan's internal security since 1947. It requires immediate action and any further delay will only aggravate the situation and embolden both the TTP and ISKP. The Pakistan military is likely to carry out large scale military operations against TTP and ISKP. In the near-

term during 2024, it is likely to explore strategy having a mix of regulated kinetic option including military operations across the Durand Line, exploit faultlines in the ranks of TTP and TTA, exert pressure on Afghan Taliban by measures like repatriation of Afghan refugees, economic measures etc. Nascent negotiation process led by Fazlur Rehman Khalil may also progress in parallel through the year 2024.

- **Afghanistan.** In just two years plus, Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan has started visualising its own '*strategic depth*' in Pakistan —a surprising reversal for Pakistani dispensation. Recent decision with respect to large scale repatriation of illegal Afghan migrants by Pakistan government is going to pose serious short and long-term security challenges for Pakistan. During 2024, the Durand Line is likely to get further fortified with increased border encroachments/ incidents from the Afghan side.
- **Kashmir.** Post the recent Supreme Court Verdict the threat of Kashmir issue graduating towards being 'non-issue' is becoming real for Pakistan. However, can Pakistan afford to lose its 35 years plus investment in Kashmir so easily? For Pakistan, it is going to be a 'now or never' situation. Conduct of successful elections in Kashmir by September 2024 may turn out to be the final nail in the coffin. In such a Catch- 22 security situation, the Pakistan security forces are likely to get overstretched to tackle the 'three Front security threat in 2024'.

However, it can be deduced with certainty that the Kashmir issue will be on its highest priority. Possibilities of Hamas type acts by Pakistan and its proxies must not be outrightly rejected/ ruled out by India.

### **Strategic Choices with Pakistan in 2024**

In the limited strategic space available, clear indicators of 'Pakistan's Security Choices in 2024' will emerge post stabilisation of the new Government. At this stage, likely choices which could figure in Pakistan's Strategic Calculus in varying degree are as elucidated below:

- Ideological nationalism continues with same fervour.
- Intensification of Kashmir and Hindu ideological threat narratives.
- No dilution in military capability building and preparedness.
- Nuclear space further getting interwoven and delicately entangled with conventional war rhetoric.
- Leverage China's muscularity in perceptual domain and further deepen Pakistan-China collusivity.



Pragmatically, the elected Pakistan leadership will try and Reinvent Pakistan's Strategic Relevance During 2024 (Pillalamarri, A. 2024) despite a fast shrinking strategic space.

### **Year 2024: Three Likely Scenarios in Indo- Pakistan Relations**

Post 2016, relations between India and Pakistan have hit rock bottom and there have been minimal (or no) visible effort by either side to carry out any course correction. The 'New Normal' established since 2016 is a powerful policy package and seems to be working to India's advantage (CAPS, 2023). Pakistan does understand the importance of economic advantage it will have by virtue of having better relations with a rising India. Year 2024 is likely to be 'Watershed Year in Indo-Pakistan Relations'. Key indicators towards future course in India-Pakistan relations are likely to emerge post elections in India and the nature of new Government in Pakistan. Currently, relations between both countries are at an inflection point from where it could move in either direction.

- **Scenario- I: 'New Normal' Continues.** It has been tested over last seven plus years and is working in India's favour. However, minimum (or no) engagement with a neighbour is not the desired course in bilateral relations for any rising power. This scenario is most likely to continue through 2024.
- **Scenario- II: Possibility of 'Path Breaking Initiative'.** Possibilities of 'Path Breaking Initiatives' scenario is less likely in 2024 but may emerge in later years, owing to the nature of new governments in both the countries.
- **Scenario- III: 'Middle Path'.** Middle Path initiatives could also be undertaken by new Governments in both countries with an aim to improve bilateral relations however, this situation is likely to be post 2024. To avoid repeat of Vajpayee-Nawaz Sharif engagement model of 1999 and results thereof, it would be in the interest of India to incorporate Pakistan Army for triangulation and verification of any deal during such initiative.

### **Conclusion**

Despite ongoing monumental security challenges, deepening political crisis and severe economic situation, there has been no noticeable dip in Pakistan's military capability building plan as evident from its Defence Budget 2023. The capacities of Pakistan to create trouble in Kashmir remains intact. Approximately 70% of Pakistan military hardware is of Chinese origin (ORF, 2023). Both Pakistan and China are getting isolated at the world stage and hence the degree of collusivity is likely to deepen further. Kashmir is likely to remain as one of its top

agendas with ‘New Normal’ likely to continue in 2024. However, the Pakistan Army with ‘misplaced national priorities’ could draw leaf out from Hamas type act and resort to similar act either directly or through its proxies. There is a need to continuously review national level intelligence architecture and strategy to beat any similar eventuality from the Western adversary.

## Works Cited

Bremmer, I (2024, January 8). *The US vs, Itself – and Other Top Global Risks in 2024* [Video]. Youtube. <https://youtu.be/CpaWSRLCx44?si=Hj4PYNZhkl76QcOM>, accessed on January 10, 2024.

Editorial. (2023, April 6). Fractured State. *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1746175>, accessed on January 4, 2024.

Hussain, N. (2023, December 31). The Twin-Taliban Conundrum. *Tribune Magazine*. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2451644/the-twin-taliban-conundrum#:~:text=Back%20to%20Tribune,of%C2%A0TTP%C2%A0havens>, accessed on January 4, 2024.

Centre for Air Power Studies. (2023, December 27). *Assessing the State of Pakistan and India-Pakistan Dynamics* by Dr. Shalini Chawla [Video]. Youtube. <https://youtu.be/Algh1xS2c7I?si=jQUY6Q6hjNwsLAgK>, accessed on January 5, 2024.

Pillalamarri, A. (2023, August 31). How Did Pakistan Become Geo-Strategically Irrelevant?. *The Diplomat*. [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiT4uaimP2DAXVV-zgGHRW-DQAQFnoECBIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fthediplomat.com%2F2023%2F08%2Fhow-did-pakistan-become-geopolitically-irrelevant%2F&usg=AOvVaw2Cx3aK7u\\_XBgGJOiw8Fttz&opi=89978449](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiT4uaimP2DAXVV-zgGHRW-DQAQFnoECBIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fthediplomat.com%2F2023%2F08%2Fhow-did-pakistan-become-geopolitically-irrelevant%2F&usg=AOvVaw2Cx3aK7u_XBgGJOiw8Fttz&opi=89978449), accessed on January 5, 2024.

Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi. (2023, December 14) *All Weather Friendship: Assessing China- Pakistan Defence Relations* [Video]. Youtube, <https://youtu.be/pW1mj37-7wA?si=Mz8TAZR0aj1b80wx>, accessed on January 6, 2024.

## About the Author

**Colonel Surjeet Singh Tanwar** is an alumni of RIMC, NDA, Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, Manoeuvre Centre of Excellence (MCoE), Fort Benning, USA and Higher Command Course, Mhow. The officer has served in High Altitude Area along LAC and was a part of Indian Contingent in UN Mission, Congo. Besides various career courses, the officer was nominated to attend UN 'Train the Trainer' course at Five Hills Training Centre, Mongolia under the aegis of US PACOM. He has been awarded GOC-in-C Commendation Card (Gallantry). The officer commanded a Mechanised Battalion in Semi- Desert and Developed Sector and has been an Instructor at Defence Services Staff College, Wellington. He is currently posted at IHQ of MoD (Army), New Delhi.



All Rights Reserved 2023 Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied, archived, retained or transmitted through print, speech or electronic media without prior written approval from CLAWS. The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.