

# “Regime Change” in Pakistan? Washington’s Plan to Reverse Imran Khan’s Alliance with China and Russia?

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*Pakistan’s opposition is trying to overthrow Prime Minister Imran Khan with a no-confidence motion. Khan says the US sent him a threatening letter and he has proof of foreign funding for a regime-change operation, aimed at reversing his independent foreign policy – like his alliance with China and Russia and support for Palestine.*

While the world’s attention is understandably focused on the [crisis in Ukraine](#), equally grave developments are taking place elsewhere. Perhaps the most consequential – and underreported – is a regime-change operation underway in Pakistan.

This March, opposition lawmakers in Pakistan’s parliament launched a “no-confidence” motion aimed at overthrowing Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Khan, who was democratically elected in 2018, has warned that an “effort is being made to topple the government with the [help of foreign funds](#) in our country.”

“Our people are being used. Mostly unknowingly, but some knowingly are using this money against us,” Khan said at a rally on March 27. He added that the government had proof of these payments.

Khan argued that these external interests seek to reverse his independent foreign policy. He recalled his predecessor Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a Pakistani prime minister who was overthrown in a US-backed coup in 1977, then executed following a show trial.

Bhutto was punished “when he tried to bring in a free foreign policy to the country,” Khan declared.

Khan specifically [singled out the United States](#) for meddling to try to remove him from

power. He said he received a letter from Washington that threatened him for refusing to allow it to establish US military bases in Pakistan.

He cautioned that the opposition is collaborating with the United States and other foreign countries in its no-confidence motion against him.

These warnings came just over a month after [Khan publicly criticized the US government](#) for cynically using Pakistan to advance Washington's interests. He also simultaneously praised China for always acting as a "friend" of Islamabad.

"Whenever the US needed us, they established relations, and Pakistan became a frontline state [against the Soviet Union], and then abandoned it and slapped sanctions on us," Khan complained.

On the other hand, "China is a friend which has always stood by Pakistan," he contrasted.

The idea that a regime-change plot could even be conceived of, let alone attempted, in a nuclear-armed country of more than 220 million may seem shocking and preposterous. On the surface, it strikes as incredulous considering that Islamabad is a major power, arguably the most powerful within the Muslim-majority world.

Nevertheless, it is precisely these characteristics that make Pakistan so geopolitically important.

The following is an analysis of the principal reasons for why hostile foreign elites have decided that Prime Minister Imran Khan must go:

## 1. Imran Khan opposes US foreign policy

Imran Khan was always dubbed a "fanatic" – i.e., overly critical of US foreign policy.

Khan strongly opposed Washington's so-called "war on terror," and especially the war in Afghanistan, arguing that military solutions were both immoral and counterproductive. For this he was long disparagingly referred to as "Taliban Khan."

What bruised Washington's ego even more was that Khan turned out to be right. The American debacle in Afghanistan that ended with Kabul falling to the Taliban was perceived by the US as a victory for Pakistan, and for Khan in particular.

The US is unwilling to forgive Khan for its own humiliation in Afghanistan, even though he had little to do with it.

## 2. Khan's anti-colonial voice on the international stage

[Imran Khan's speech](#) at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019 was condemned as overly audacious. A Pakistani leader speaking so strongly on issues of global injustice made Western elites feel that he had become way too big for his shoes.

At least three of the points that he emphasized in his remarks rubbed Western supremacists in the wrong way.

First, Khan condemned powerful Western countries for enabling elites of the Global South to plunder their own societies.

Second, he highlighted Islamophobia as not a marginal affair, but as a dangerous phenomenon structuring our global order – and one that the world must take seriously.

Relatedly, Khan scathingly criticized the insidious characterization of some Muslims as “moderate” and others as “radical.” These maliciously constructed distinctions have been essential to the political lexicon of the “war on terror.”

Third, Khan spoke passionately about the Kashmiri struggle against Indian occupation in a way that few Pakistani (or any other) leaders have.

His rhetorical performance seemed to be a page out of the anti-colonial playbook of the 1960s.

### 3. Khan deepened Pakistan’s friendship with China

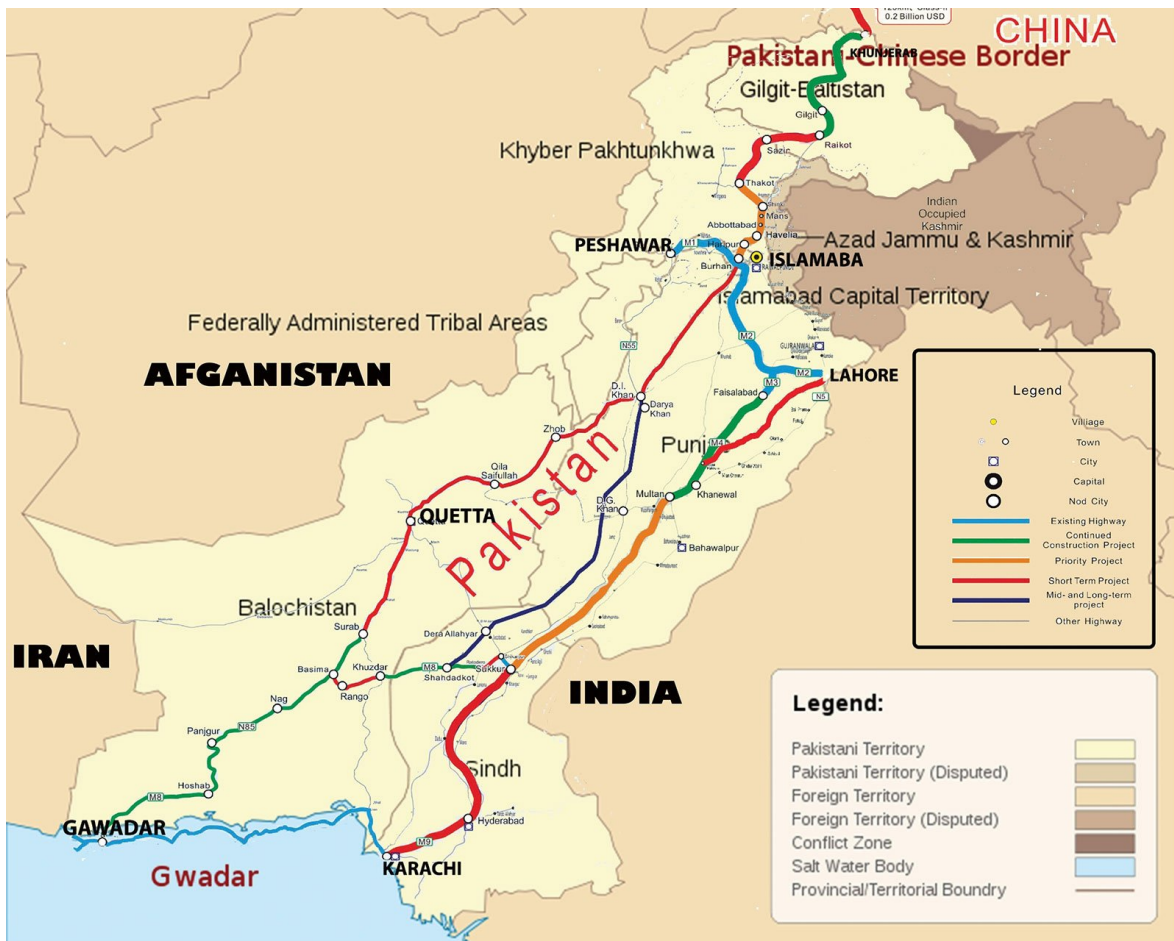


Xi Jinping Meets with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC](#))

Perhaps most concerning to Western elites is how Imran Khan has strengthened Pakistan’s decades-old relationship with China.

Islamabad and Beijing are key partners in infrastructure projects aimed at connecting the region. They work together in the [China Pakistan Economic Corridor](#) (CPEC) and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Pakistan is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)



Khan received a very warm reception at the Beijing Olympics this February. It was a clear affirmation that Islamabad remains Beijing's close ally.

In addition, President Xi Jinping and the Chinese leadership deem Khan to be a Pakistani leader genuinely interested in cooperation for Pakistan's development, free from the enormous corruption and incompetence that characterize other political forces in the country.

Whether this is true or not, Beijing believes it. And Xi has built a very close relationship with Khan personally.

Furthermore, the fact that China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi attended the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit in Islamabad this March spoke volumes to China's embrace of Pakistan's leadership within the Muslim world.

#### 4. Khan improved Pakistan's ties with Russia

The recent breakthrough in the relationship between Pakistan and Russia seems to have been the straw that ultimately broke the camel's back.

Islamabad never had a close relationship with Moscow. On the contrary, Pakistan and the Soviet Union had been adversaries during the first cold war, and retained a level of bitterness and distance. Moscow was always considered a strong ally of New Delhi.



But on the sidelines of the Beijing Olympics, Russian President Putin extended an invitation to Prime Minister Khan. Seeing an opportunity to at least neutralize a regional powerhouse that has historically been Islamabad's foe, he agreed to the visit.

However, as soon as Khan landed in Moscow, Putin launched his military assault against Ukraine. Khan was lambasted by Western capitals for not condemning Russia then, and this continued when he returned home.

Khan received a strongly worded letter from European ambassadors demanding he denounce Moscow. The prime minister's response, "[we are not your slaves](#)," became quite popular not only in Pakistan, but in many parts of the Muslim world and the Global South.

Khan noted that his requests that these same Western countries condemn India's behavior in Kashmir or Israel's crimes in Palestine routinely fell on deaf ears.

Since then, Khan has consistently called for an end to the war in Ukraine and a diplomatic solution.

At the OIC summit he hosted, Khan specifically called on China to help mediate between Russia and Ukraine.

But the rapprochement with Russia appears to be where Khan crossed the rubicon.

As the global geopolitical battle lines are being rigidly drawn, Khan's Pakistan seems to increasingly be on the "wrong side," according to Washington.

## 5. Khan's leadership in the Muslim world

The decision to host the 48th Session of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Islamabad this March crystallized Imran Khan's role as one of the most popular Muslim political leaders today.

Khan seemed to be trying to mimic the performance and standing of Pakistan's prime minister in the 1970s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who similarly hosted an OIC meeting in Lahore, with great fanfare and purpose.

Whatever one's feelings about Islam and politics, there is no question that powerful external forces detest those Muslim actors that they cannot control.

Washington has continued to work closely with brutal exclusivist forces such as al-Qaeda in Syria and the House of Saud. It has also cultivated a class of "moderate" Muslims since 9/11

that have faithfully delivered an empire-friendly Islam.

There is one factor that unites all of these disparate Muslim actors: their servility to Washington.

Unfortunately, Khan does not fit these imperial categories – as much as both Western and Pakistani liberal elites would want to portray him as a “fundamentalist.”

Khan’s invocation of an Islamicate civilizational ethos that centers social justice, however incoherently articulated and scarcely implemented, also advanced a politics of countering Western supremacy.

## 6. Pakistan’s gradual challenge to Saudi-led hegemony in the Muslim world

Imran Khan has demonstrated a gradual tilt toward countries that, on the whole, represent a counterweight to Saudi-led hegemony throughout the Muslim world.

The 2019 Kuala Lumpur Summit called by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad marked a milestone in this project. Nations such as Turkey, Iran, and Qatar participated.

Everyone knew that this was a significant attempt to challenge traditional Saudi dominance and influence.

Mahathir, who is very fond of Khan, invited Pakistan, and the participants understood how important the Pakistani prime minister’s presence would be.

Yet in the last minute, Islamabad pulled out.

Days before the Kuala Lumpur Summit, Khan was summoned to Riyadh, where he was warned in no uncertain terms: You are not to go to Malaysia, and if you do, the House of Saud will begin the deportation of Pakistani laborers, halt all oil subsidies and supplies, rescind any and all loans, and so on.

Khan was humiliated, but had to comply. He did not go to Kuala Lumpur.

## 7. Khan can’t be simply controlled by the military

Imran Khan came to power with the blessing of the Pakistani army. The commonsense understanding was that he and the military have a snug relationship and are on the same page – to the point that Khan was for a time portrayed as a puppet of the military establishment. That has turned out not to be true.

The military has always been in control of Pakistan’s national security and foreign policy. To the extent both Khan and the generals viewed things the same, all was fine.

However, Khan turned out to be no pushover. He has firmly asserted his right to be a part of any crucial national security issue – a right most previous civilian governments readily relinquished.

When the Pakistani media now incessantly reiterates “Khan has fallen out of favor with the military,” it simply means that the cat is finally out of the bag: Khan is no lackey of the men in khaki.

For Washington, this is a huge problem. Having militaries to “set things straight” when leaders of the Global South become disobedient has been standard American operating procedure.

## 8. Khan’s unequivocal support for Palestinian liberation

One of the most important reasons why imperialist forces demand Imran Khan’s ouster is the obvious: his consistent and unequivocal support for the Palestinian struggle.

His position became all too well-known and “controversial” when an intense campaign of pressure and threats came Islamabad’s way in 2020 and 2021.

After several Gulf monarchies normalized relations with [apartheid Israel](#), and the extent of their coziness was finally paraded publicly, what followed was painful arm-twisting of other Muslim countries to follow suit.

For Tel Aviv, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and of course Washington, Islamabad was the real prize.

For months, Pakistanis experienced an onslaught of information warfare geared to make the public more amenable to the idea of recognizing and accepting Israeli apartheid.

Very quickly, it became obvious that not only the major national political parties, but also significant sections of the military high command all conveyed a willingness to entertain the idea of normalization.

The motive of Pakistan’s ruling elite was obvious: such a step, they believed, would get them into the good graces of Washington, and enable their private coffers to exponentially grow.

But Prime Minister Khan did not give in.

Prior to the hoopla around normalization, in May 2020, Khan vocally condemned Israel’s war on Gaza. He did not mince his words: “We are with Palestine. We are with Gaza.”

At the OIC summit this March, even at the risk of embarrassing some of his guests (especially from the Gulf), Khan consistently spoke about the failure of Muslim countries to stop Israeli brutality against the Palestinians.

There is no doubt that if Khan had avoided touching the Palestinian question, he would not be in so much trouble.

## Criticisms of Imran Khan

While the reasons enunciated above explain why antagonistic global elites desire regime change in Islamabad, for the sake of clarity – especially for sincere liberal-progressive critics of Imran Khan – it is also worth acknowledging criticisms. Suffice to say, these are decidedly not reasons motivating this hybrid war on Pakistan:

- 1) Khan’s patriarchal views
- 2) Khan’s poor governance
- 3) Khan’s mismanagement of the economy

Whether any of the above is true or not – (and they certainly may be – it ought to be self-evident that these issues have never been the real motivations of global elites in their imperial interventions.

From the time that Khan first took power, we have been subject to an eerily familiar narrative. In the dirty war aimed at regime change in Syria, for years we heard the same refrain: the Assad regime is falling any day now.

We have been fed the same slogan for the past three-and-a-half years in Pakistan as well: the Imran Khan “regime” is just about to fall.

And since Khan has not “moderated” his views to be more palatable to the interests of Western capitals, the latter’s low-intensity hybrid war has been increased to full throttle.

The standard falsehoods recycled against all targets of regime change, including Latin American countries like Venezuela, now prevail in the narrative on Pakistan.

Claims that Khan is guilty of “increasingly authoritarian” rule, characterized by harsh repression of dissent and the media, fit an all too well-trodden script.

Yet it just so happens that the overwhelming majority of both the print and electronic media in Pakistan have been incessantly anti-Khan.

The hybrid warfare being waged against Pakistan – including information warfare, psyops, and the engineering of something like a “color revolution” – in no way means that there is not genuine opposition to the current government.

But in Pakistan we saw a coordinated campaign emerge this March, leading up to the opposition’s “no-confidence” motion in the parliament.

Virtually all of Pakistan’s media, dominant sections of elite civil society, and the opposition leaders and their moles in Khan’s political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), all of a sudden united in a full-scale blitzkrieg against Khan.

That this came right at the moment when Western condemnations of the prime minister had reached their peak does not seem like a mere coincidence.

As we witness geopolitical transformations of a world-historical importance, the international fault lines in this interregnum are becoming more visible.

Pakistan’s growing proximity to China and Russia and the country’s commitment to the Eurasian integration project has activated the wrath of American ruling elites.

At this particularly precarious conjuncture, Washington views Islamabad as a, if not the, major Muslim capital that needs to be controlled and severely disciplined if an independent Khan-type leader arises.

The turmoil afflicting Pakistan is the outcome of a well-coordinated strategy to discipline and punish Khan.

The opposition demand for a no-confidence vote in the National Assembly reflects the amalgamation of domestic and foreign machinations.

This vote will be a reflection of the balance of forces, resulting either in a victory for Washington and its political quislings, or the retention of at least quasi-sovereign Pakistan with Khan still in power.

The shenanigans of politicians and their maneuvering to be on the “right side” of the political winds are the games of corrupt, power-hungry elites.

None of this has anything to do with genuine grievances of Pakistanis, and is largely a diversion from the real global power play inside the country.

Hostile global elites are trying desperately to find a new, Pakistani version of Juan Guaidó (the Western minion chosen unilaterally by Washington to replace Nicolás Maduro as supposed “interim president” of Venezuela).

Whether or not Khan survives, anyone even vaguely familiar with global regime-change operations will see exactly what is going on.

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