

US-backed Military Once Again Targets Deposed Pakistani PM Imran Khan

By [Ahmed Afzaal](#)

Global Research, May 15, 2023

[Dissident Voice](#) 12 May 2023

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

In-depth Report: [PAKISTAN](#)

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Imran Khan poses the greatest threat to Pakistan's military monopoly on political power.

The arrest of former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and leader of the Pakistan Movement for Justice (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or PTI) caused thousands of Pakistanis to take to the streets and protest. However, Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered on May 11 his release, offering a significant victory for the onetime leader responsible for bringing Islamabad closer to Moscow and away from US dominance until his removal from power.

On May 9, Khan was detained and arrested for the alleged embezzlement of 50 billion Pakistani rupees (\$240 million). This unleashed a wave of violent demonstrations in several cities in the country and threatens to unravel the fragile state.

The current situation is taking place against the background of several military coups because the army continues to play an essential role in the critical decisions of state policy. These internal factors had an even more substantial effect on the situation than the fact that Khan was trying to pursue an independent course in foreign policy, particularly with Moscow, whilst deepening his country's dependency on Beijing. In addition, his domestic policy is rejected by elite military circles that maintain close ties with Britain and the US.

The former prime minister at first did not depend on any political party, and, in fact, he challenged traditional political and military circles. In Pakistan, there are two older parties: the Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party, which, apart from the military, have maintained political power.

Khan, a former cricket star, emerged as a "revolutionary" by deciding that Pakistan needed to choose another path and divorce itself from Western dominance.

Pakistani voters protested after Khan was removed from power in a soft coup on 10 April 2022 and continued to support him vehemently. Now, the protesters continue to demonstrate against his targeting. Through imprisonment, Khan would have been prevented from participating in the political struggle because the military had already made its position clear — preserving the status quo, i.e., their own personal interests.

As for the US relationship with Pakistan, the latter is vital for the Americans as it is a state that directly borders Afghanistan and influences what is happening there. In particular, they are interested in and very concerned about the multiple links between the Pakistani military and the Afghan Taliban. It is recalled that Pakistan was even part of the bloc that the Americans had created against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Imran Khan brought Islamabad closer to Moscow, and for this reason, the Americans needed him removed. However, due to his immense popularity, the Americans want assurances that he will never return to power so that Pakistan can stay in its orbit of influence. For this reason, the Pakistani military is using every method to keep him out of politics.

Given that Pakistan is at the crossroads between India, China and Iran, the Americans must keep the South Asian country under its control. In addition, Washington wants the Pakistanis to stop cooperating with Russia or limit their association. Effectively, Khan wanted to stop depending on the Americans and sought to develop a relationship with Russia, but he was prevented from doing so.

As for China, it is Pakistan's traditional "all-time" ally, as the Pakistanis call it. Only on May 10, China delivered two Type 054A/P frigates to Pakistan, meaning that all four warships of this class, first announced in 2018, have been commissioned into the Pakistan Navy. *Global Times* reported that the program marks the China-Pakistan friendship and the high-level defence cooperation between the two countries.

In fact, the relationship between Pakistan and China is so deep that the latter objected to a recent proposal from India to add the leader of the Pakistan-based terror organisation Jaish-e Mohammed to the UN Security Council's 1267 ISIL and Al Qaida Sanctions list. It is also recalled that China last year put on hold proposals to blacklist Pakistan-based terrorists Hafiz Talah Saeed, Lashkar-e-Taiba leader Shahid Mahmood, and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba terrorist Sajid Mir under the Al Qaeda Sanctions regime.

Although the Americans will find it difficult to break the Pakistan-China relationship, especially as the East Asian country is one of the few states around the world willing to invest in the financial blackhole that Pakistan has become, it will be an even more difficult task if Khan was in power. His arrest is related to the fact that even though the US-backed Pakistani military removed him from power, there is every chance he could return as Prime Minister if free and fair elections are held, which would be intolerable for Washington.

Khan's arrest came hours after the military rebuked him for alleging that a senior officer was involved in a plot to assassinate him, something the army has denied. Crucially, criticism of Pakistan's military is considered a redline, as the state apparatus is effectively controlled by it. Khan poses the greatest threat to their political monopoly, which is why his continued persecution should not be considered surprising.

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Ahmed Afzaal holds his doctorate in Religion and Society from Drew University, and is an assistant professor of Comparative Religion at Concordia College. Dr. Afzaal was born in Pakistan, where he studied science and attended medical school, and is the author of numerous articles on subjects including religion and social change. [Read other articles by Ahmed.](#)

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