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HIGHLIGHTS

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I Overview

Pakistan: Friction in relations with India and bouts of turbulence with the United States formed one axis of Pakistan's external relations over the month. China and Saudi Arabia were in contrast to this as also the focus of intensified Pakistani diplomatic efforts. On the domestic front the economy's poor external numbers in terms of rising current account and trade deficits were the cause of much concern. Politically the ongoing contest between deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the superior judiciary remained at the center of the political radar. The Supreme Court ruled in mid-April that the former Prime Minister stood deposed for life from political office in terms of its original judgement of 2017 that had removed him for office. These and other setbacks have made no perceptible difference to the postures of defiance of the former Prime Minister and to the generally receptive crowds he continues to gather in his public meetings. In general a markedly higher level of judicial activism also characterized the Supreme Court's functioning during the month. Posturing by the Chief of Army Staff on political, social and constitutional issues was equally noteworthy as also the Army's efforts to control criticism in the media especially from the deposed Prime Minister.

Two new features merit being flagged. Firstly, despite a generally static position as far as its poor external image is concerned, occasional positive developments on the domestic side in Pakistan are accumulating underlining to many in Pakistan that military action has restored public confidence as far as internal security is concerned. Secondly the process and activity associated with the 'Pashtun Long March' in February 2018 has not subsided and is drawing responses not anticipated either by the Government, the military or even mainstream civil society.

Afghanistan: No perceptible improvement in security is discernible with terrorist attacks continuing with regular monotony. There has also not been any discernible response from the Taliban or any of its major factions to the package announced by the President last month. One area where activity was most discernible was in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and clearly this is the result of US pressures although definite results are still not clear.



II Developments in Pakistan

External:

India: On the LOC the earlier trend of tensions punctuated by cross LOC firings and skirmishes continued. If there was no major escalation in this trend, no significant diminution of ceasefire violations is also reported.

As is often the case during long periods of India-Pakistan tensions or periods of unrest in J&K, frictions in the bilateral relationship get manifested in different ways. Allegations and protests on both sides that their respective diplomats were being harassed in different ways had surfaced in March and these continued till end March when both Foreign Offices announced that an agreement had been reached "to resolve matters related to the treatment of diplomats and diplomatic premises, in line with the 1992 'Code of Conduct' for treatment of Diplomatic/Consular personnel in India and Pakistan". The thaw this agreement represented was however relatively short lived with fresh protests and counter protests over the fact that an Indian consular team was prevented from meeting Sikh pilgrims visiting Gurudwaras in Pakistan on the occasion of Baisakhi. The Ministry of External Affairs protested to the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi of inflammatory statements and displaying posters at various places and shrines where the pilgrims are visiting from April 12 to 21.

This acrimony was also underwritten by developments in J&K. Security operations in Anantnag and Shopian in south Kashmir led to the elimination of a number of militants (13) on 1st April with three army personnel also being killed. In Pakistan the action was portrayed as the indiscriminate use of force on innocent civilians with strong condemnations from the Prime Minister downwards. The Pakistan Prime Minister's statement of 2nd April termed the action as 'vicious killing', apart from touching the expected points of self determination, appointment by the UN of a Special Representative etc. The Cabinet also adopted a resolution on the subject that inter alia decided that 6 April 2018 would be observed as Kashmir Solidarity Day and that some members of the cabinet members would participate in the Joint Session of the "AJK" Legislative Assembly on 4 April 2018. The Prime Minister thereafter journeyed to Muzaffarabad for the special session. Pakistani media and official accounts have described the killing as the highest death toll for a single day in almost two decades.

Indus Waters Treaty: The Prime Minister inaugurated the Neelum-Jhelum hydropower project in POK on 13th April. The run-of-the-river power scheme is designed to divert water from the Neelum River to the power station on the Jhelum River and will produce 969MW of electricity. Construction had begun in 2008 after numerous delays for both financial and technical reasons. One of the main contractors of the project is a Chinese construction company. The Kishenganga hydroelectricity project in J&K is also described as substantially complete although its formal inauguration and commissioning is yet to take place. The Government of Pakistan had earlier approached the World Bank with regard to the design of the Kishenganga project but the proceedings there remain inconclusive. The completion of the NJ project is a considerable achievement for Pakistan.

The 114th meeting of the Permanent Indus Commission was held in New Delhi on 29-30 March- another indication that the treaty regime has remained insulated from the turbulence in bilateral relations.

Sri Lanka: The President of Sri Lanka Maithripala Sirisena paid a visit to Pakistan 22nd-24th March and attended the Pakistan Day parade on 23rd March as guest of honour.

Saudi Arabia: The Prime Minister visited Saudi Arabia for attending the concluding ceremony of Joint Gulf Shield-1 military drill on 16th April. He was accompanied by the Defence Minister, the Chief of the Army Staff and the ISI Director General. Twenty-four countries participated in the month long exercise.

United States: The fractious state of US-Pakistan relations was demonstrated by leaks and numerous reports from early April that the US was preparing to impose travel restrictions on Pakistani diplomats stationed in the embassy and consulates in that country so that they face the same situation as is faced by US diplomats in Pakistan. Earlier reports were first denied but it has since been confirmed that if Pakistani diplomats in the US wish to travel outside a 40-kilometre radius from the embassy or consulate they are posted to, they will have to send a request to US authorities at least five days in advance. The travel restriction will come into force on May 1. In Pakistan security considerations since 9/11 have

required the obtaining of a no-objection certificate by foreign diplomats prior to travelling to certain parts of the country. The travel restrictions now being put in place in the US have however to be seen in the broader context of long drawn out tussle over visas — the US alleging that either the vetting of visas for its diplomats takes too long or the visas are issued for shorter durations than requested. The hardening of US attitudes may well be related, although this has been denied, to the case of a US diplomat being involved in a road accident leading to the death of a motorcyclist and the Government of Pakistan seeking a waiver of his diplomatic immunity.

Internal:

Nawaz Sharif: The Supreme Court on 13th April ruled that ineligibility is for life for politicians disqualified under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution that such. This at the minimum means that former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif chances of running for re-election after being disqualified last year are now over. This was the unanimous decision of a five-judge SC bench comprising Chief Justice and others. This was the latest blow to the embattled Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz even as even as Sharif continues to travel across the country gathering major crowds across Punjab in particular. The Court had observed the introduction of Islamic provisions in Article 62 of the Constitution in 1985 was retained even as other amendments introduced have since been discarded. These clauses carry Quranic qualifications under Islamic law for establishing eligibility to hold public office of trust or authority, laying down conditions for election to parliament such as good character, observance of Islamic injunctions, knowledge of Islamic teachings and abstention from major sins.

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif while reacting to the judgement said, "I was expecting such a verdict from the Supreme Court because I am their sole target." For many of his supporters the latest development has to be seen in context of his earlier dismissals and his capacity to fight back. Nevertheless the legal vice has tightened and the stakes for all players in Pakistan today are all the more high on the outcome of the General elections later in the year.

What has also not changed is the former Prime Minister's posture of defiance or indeed the popular support he is drawing. On 23rd April he is quoted as having said that he feels ashamed to call Pakistan a democratic country, that there is no democracy in the country that is suffering from what he described as "the worst kind of dictatorship". "The existing situation is not less than judicial martial law," he said.

Judicial Activism: The stand on the Nawaz Sharif case is accompanied by an unusual extent of Judicial activism by the Chief Justice reminiscent in many ways of steps taken by the former Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhury during the earlier PPP government. The Chief Justice has been inspecting hospitals, directing Inspectors General of Police to withdraw security to 'non entitled persons', dismissing Vice Chancellors etc. in exercise of the Court's suo moto powers. Some other judges and high courts can be seen following this lead.

Media Restrictions: There are other signs of what is being called the 'judicialisation of politics' in Pakistan. On 16th April the Lahore High Court on Monday directed the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) to ensure no anti-judiciary speeches are aired on television channels — a decision that could lead to a bar on the speeches by ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz. The court also asked Pemra to decide pending complaints against Mr. Sharif, Ms. Maryam and other leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and submit its report to the court.

What however is not being reported in the mainstream media are steps being choreographed by the Army and the ISI on curbing reporting in the electronic and print media from those outlets regarded as being close to deposed PM Nawaz Sharif. The GEO TV group and the Jang group of newspapers (same owner) faced the brunt of this although other newspapers too have complained of pressures with columns of well-known writers being pulled.

Economy: A State Bank of Pakistan report stated that the trade deficit grew to \$26.15bn during July-March FY18 against \$21.35bn in the corresponding period of 2016-17. Exports increased by \$1.95bn to \$18.26bn in the nine months while imports jumped by \$5.77bn to \$40.57bn in the same period. The total deficit of \$26.15bn is against \$21.35bn in the same period of last year. One consequence of an increasing current account deficit is erosion of foreign exchange reserves of the SBP. According to the report neither remittances nor foreign direct investment have shown any significant improvement during

the 2017-18. The SBP report shows the imports amounted to \$48.278bn during July-March, higher by \$6.3bn, versus \$41.986bn in the corresponding period of last 2016-17. The average per month import figure stood at \$5.346bn which means the total imports at the end of FY18 could be around \$64bn. According to some estimates, the fiscal deficit for the current year is estimated at 5.5pc of GDP — far higher than the budgeted target of 4.1pc — while the target for next year is being set at 5.3pc of GDP. Comments are increasing that the high twin deficits — fiscal and current account — could pose challenges on the external front as the country moves into the next fiscal year especially in a situation of heightened political uncertainty. In brief while moderately high growth rates have been restored to the economy the rising current account deficit seems to suggest that the growth may not be sustainable in the absence of structural change.

Meanwhile on 9th April four ordinances were promulgated to implement an Economic Reforms Package (ERP) envisaging “one-time” amnesty scheme to for regularizing undeclared assets domestic and abroad, reduction in income tax rates, issuance of dollar-denominated bonds and barring cash transactions in certain accounts. The ERP was announced by the Prime some days earlier- the stated focus of the new scheme is to facilitate taxpayers and expand the tax net to at least three million people from less than 1.2m in a population of 207m. Through the ordinances, the government has increased the threshold for income tax exemption to an annual income of Rs1.2m from Rs400,000. Tax rates on higher income brackets have also been substantially reduced. As such, annual income between Rs 1.2m and Rs 2.4m will attract a tax rate of 5pc, while the tax rate will be 10pc on an annual income of Rs 2.4m to Rs 4.8m. Any income beyond Rs 4.8m will attract 15pc tax rate.

Pashtun Street Protests: Something being discussed a great deal although not figuring in the mainstream media to the same extent is the aftermath of the Pashtun Long March of January February 2018. Following the extrajudicial killing of a 27-year-old model hailing from FATA's South Waziristan Agency, in a fake 'police encounter' in Karachi on 13 January, a street level protest gained traction and attracted enormous attention as a 'Pashtun Long March'. The core of the protest is formed by the Mehsud tribe of Pashtuns but wider participation from other tribes in the FATA and from other parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province are being reported. The movement has now acquired the name Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM, Pashtun Protection Movement). On 8th April a large rally in Peshawar demonstrated that the momentum created then has not died out and seems to have galvanised a peaceful, rights-based Pashtun movement that, two months in, continues. Later in the month a large rally was held in Lahore demonstrating Pathan street power beyond Karachi and Peshawar. The star speaker in these rallies is an educated young Mehsud, Manzoor Pashteen, demonstrating considerable charismatic qualities of his own. The larger factor that underwrites these protests is the sense that Pashtuns have been caught between the militants and the military for years and this must now change. Resentment towards the military establishment is very visible in these rallies and expressed by the slogan, "The ones responsible for terrorism are the ones in uniform". ("Yeh jo dehshat gardi hai, iske piche vardi hai")

The larger implications of this movement remain unclear. Manzoor Pashteen has said that they have no intention to participate in electoral politics. These positions may change. The attention being paid to this movement further increase when the Chief of the Army Staff Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa in Peshawar on 12th August said that “engineered protests” would not be allowed to reverse the gains of counterterrorism operations and cautioned the nation against forgetting sacrifices of “real heroes”.

The PTM was not specifically named but given the references, in the army chief's statement, to its demands for clearance of mines and removal of check-posts, the implication was clear. It would appear that the Army's suspicion of the movement and its leaders has grown with PTM leaders talking about seeking “international guarantees” for redressal of their grievances and taking their issues “to the United Nations” and appealing “to the global society” as equally the sympathetic noises coming from Kabul in support of the movement and praise for its leaders.

Speaking about PTM's demands for removal of what they call “mines” and “check-posts”, Gen Bajwa said: “Measures to facilitate general public at check-posts without compromising security and clearance of unexploded ordnance were already in process on completion of kinetic operations”. He cautioned against haste in the process. “No one is more interested than security forces to have such peace and stability environment which allow their complete de-induction. However, threat is still residing across the border and some disorganised residual potential including the ones morphed into Afghan refugees. Therefore we still need to move with caution”.

He also said that the military's concern was that "no anti state agenda in the garb of engineered protests etc aimed at reversing the gains achieved at heavy cost in blood and national exchequer succeeds".

Other Developments: Amidst ongoing civil military tensions, looming pre and post-election uncertainties and doubts, poor external image and regional tensions some contrasting developments merit a mention. Firstly, the confidence in China as an ally and in particular that the CPEC will play a transformational role. Secondly the shifts in nuance in Russian positions on Afghanistan are seen as significant changes in the global environment that will work in Pakistan's favor. Factors such as this lighten the load that US pressures and its poor external image place on Pakistan. More significant are purely domestic episodes that convey to some at least that all the news in their country is not bad news. In the past month three such developments merit a mention. The brief visit in end March by Pakistan's only noble laureate Malala Yusufzai is of significance given the circumstances she had to leave in and the fact that security threats prevented her from returning since 2012. Responses to Malala and assessments of her in are by no means positive in Pakistan even outside the religious conservatives and extremists. Nevertheless, her visits suggest to public opinion the steady improvement in the security situation. Similarly the holding of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) final in Karachi was the first major cricket match being held in the city since 2009. While international cricket returned to Lahore with the staging of the PSL final last year, followed by three T20 Internationals against the World XI and another versus Sri Lanka last October, Karachi has experienced a long barren run of no top-level cricket. That a visiting West Indies team toured Pakistan shortly thereafter and even played a 20-20 match in Karachi seemed to confirm the trend that the security situation has improved enough to stage high profile events unthinkable even 2-3 years earlier. The attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in 2009 had affected more than cricket and almost all international sporting events were suspended in Pakistan. That the Asian Tour in golf is scheduled to return to Pakistan with a tournament in Karachi later in the summer thus would suggest the end of this phase. While all these are incipient signs the point of significance is that the credit for the improvement in security and restoration of public confidence is given largely to the military.

III Developments in Afghanistan

External:

Pakistan: The Prime Minister of Pakistan made a day long visit to Kabul on 6th April during which an agreement on a bilateral dialogue framework — Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) — was reached. The visit was not unexpectedly preceded by acrimony over allegations of cross border infringements and Afghan protests that the Pakistan Air Force had bombed areas in bordering Kunar province of Afghanistan. The Pakistan Foreign Office had in turn responded that the air strikes were against terrorist targets within the Pakistani territory that enabled cross-border attacks from sanctuaries on the other side of the border. A Pakistan Foreign Office statement after the visit said that Pakistan will ".. support the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation (efforts)," and "the two countries will undertake effective actions against fugitives and the irreconcilable elements posing security threats to either of the two countries." Under the agreement, the statement said, "both the countries (are required) to commit to deny use of their respective territory by any country, network, group or individuals for anti-state activities against either country." The two sides will also be required "to put in place a joint supervision, coordination and confirmation mechanism through liaison officers for realisation of the agreed actions," and that both the countries had committed to avoid territorial and aerial violations of each other's territory. The Pakistani statement also said that both Pakistan and Afghanistan had agreed "to avoid public blame game and instead use APAPPS cooperation mechanisms to respond to mutual issues of contention and concerns."

India: The new Indian Ambassador Vinay Kumar presented his credentials in Kabul on 23rd April.

Internal:

Security: A bombing on April 22 in a heavily Shia populated area in western Kabul, killed at least 57 people and wounded 119 others, although officials said the death toll could rise. The Islamic State (IS) extremist group claimed responsibility for the attack. This was the most recent of major terrorist

incidents in different parts of the country underscoring the delicate security situation even as the country prepares for long-delayed parliamentary elections currently scheduled for October 2018 and due to be followed by a presidential election in 2019. The latest attack was on a voter registration centre. Pakistan and Afghanistan on Friday agreed to finalise their bilateral dialogue framework as the former reaffirmed support for the Afghan government's offer of peace dialogue to the Taliban and urged the militant group to join the reconciliation process without any delay.

(The views expressed are personal)
