

LATEST TRENDS

February's disputed elections have heightened tensions between the government and military, on one side, the opposition, on the other. Deadly militant attacks are surging in the provinces bordering Afghanistan, fuelling disputes between Islamabad and Kabul.

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS AND MONTHS

1 A climate of extreme political polarisation could spur unrest

The authorities will likely continue to seek a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to avoid sovereign debt default; should such a deal be reached, food and energy prices could soar, exacerbating hardship and fuelling unrest.

Former Prime Minister Imran Khan's opposition movement could exploit such turmoil to call anti-government protests that might turn violent, which in turn could obstruct parliament's functioning and destabilise the economy further.

The ruling coalition could unravel in the face of such public anger.

TO WATCH Government's ability to secure longer-term deal with the IMF; opposition's street mobilisation; military crackdown on protests.

Potential Consequences

Political upheaval will further sap the government's legitimacy, fuel widespread discontent and heighten risks of violence in a country already reeling from insurgent attacks. That could further damage civil-military relations and undermine the functioning of, and faith in, Pakistan's elected institutions.

2 Insurgencies could intensify in the provinces bordering Afghanistan

The Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) and Baloch separatists will likely continue their attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces; TTP could further expand operations into Punjab province.

The Islamic State's local franchise could launch mass-casualty attacks on Shia Muslims, targeting cities with large Shia populations.

TO WATCH Major militant attacks killing numerous civilians, notably in Balochistan's capital Quetta and Sindh's capital Karachi; major military/police casualties fuelling renewed counter-insurgency operations.

Potential Consequences

Surging militant attacks could challenge the state's writ in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, take a devastating human toll and place Islamabad on a collision course with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers, whom Islamabad accuses of supporting the TTP.

3 Tensions with Kabul could escalate into armed conflict

A major militant attack attributed to Afghanistan-based militants could spark Pakistani retaliation, potentially in the form of cross-border airstrikes. Islamabad could forcibly deport an additional 700,000 Afghan nationals, or else resort to economic pressure, closing cross-border trade routes.

In reprisal, the Taliban authorities might target a post along the disputed border.

TO WATCH Major militant attacks in Pakistan; harsh rhetoric; Pakistan's deportation of Afghan refugees; prospect of Islamabad-Kabul dialogue; TTP attacks on Chinese nationals and their impact on Islamabad-Beijing relations.

Potential Consequences

A blocking of cross-border trade routes could lead to violent clashes between security forces and local communities and further strain relations with Kabul. Pakistan's forced repatriation policy risks precipitating a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan, which is ill prepared to deal with a massive influx.

Should there be major Pakistani military casualties, confrontation could escalate along and across the border.



Flashpoint

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On the Horizon sounds the alarm about conflicts and crises that may emerge over the next three to six months. It identifies key actors and dates to watch in support of global conflict prevention efforts.

