

Analysis of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee (HAFC) Hearing on “Pakistan after the Elections: Examining the Future of Democracy in Pakistan and the US-Pakistan Relationship”

Khalid H. Chandio

Furqan Khan

Iqra Hasnat

June 2024

Executive Summary

Analysis of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee (HAFAC) Hearing on “Pakistan after the Elections: Examining the Future of Democracy in Pakistan and the US-Pakistan Relationship”

The recent US House Foreign Affairs Committee (HAFAC) Hearing on Pakistan’s general elections and the future bilateral relations offers valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of US-Pakistan relations. The Hearing emphasised that both countries should collaborate in democratic consolidation, economic partnership, counterterrorism, and regional stability. The Hearing underscored America’s concerns over electoral violence, attacks on media workers, and restrictions on access to the internet and telecom services. It also called for a full investigation of the alleged irregularities in the General Elections 2024. On the involvement of the military in politics, the “Hearing” stressed that the Pakistani military must be kept under civilian control. The US has denied the claims regarding its involvement in the cipher case or the alleged leak of diplomatic cable. The Hearing highlighted the US support for Pakistan in the form of development grants, private sector investment, and humanitarian assistance during the catastrophic flooding. However, to achieve fiscal stability and attract investment from the US, Pakistan was urged to undertake structural economic reforms. The most important trend in Donald Lu’s testimony was China to which the discussion referred many times, showing the US’ concerns over the growing relations between Pakistan and China. Lu described Pakistan as the “ground-zero” for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and criticised China’s trading practices. Given the strained relations of the US with Iran, Lu assured Congress members that he will make efforts to prevent Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline from happening and that he was working towards that goal. Secretary Lu also shared Pakistan’s concerns on the rising threats of terrorism from Afghanistan. The core of his testimony was that while aid to Pakistan will continue, no rise in defence ties was envisaged. Secretary Lu’s prioritisation of US’ goals in relations with Pakistan reflect the future trends of US-Pakistan relations. Fight against terrorism tops the list, which means despite the negotiations about diversification in relations, the relations with Pakistan will continue to remain security-centric.

Analysis of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee (HAFAC) Hearing on “Pakistan after the Elections: Examining the Future of Democracy in Pakistan and the US-Pakistan Relationship”

Introduction

A Hearing titled “Pakistan After the Elections: Examining the Future of Democracy in Pakistan and the US-Pakistan Relationship” was called by the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia on March 20, 2024. The witness was Donald Lu, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau for South and Central Asian Affairs, US State Department. A complete transcript of the Hearing is attached as **Annex-A** in the end. Following is the analysis of the Hearing:-

Analysis of the Hearing

The recent US House Foreign Affairs Committee (HAFAC) Hearing on Pakistan’s general elections and the future of bilateral relations offer valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of US-Pakistan relations. This analysis navigates the fundamental themes explored in the Hearing and its implications on future relations between both states.

It should be noted that the Hearing was initiated by the persistent efforts of Pakistani diaspora in the US. It was held to gain trust of the public for the upcoming US elections. More than 30 members of Congress wrote to President Biden not to recognise Pakistan’s new government.

Such hearings are a regular practice of the US political process and it will not make any major political difference because Biden administration is fraught with a lot of challenges, i.e. both domestic and international. So, resolving Pakistan’s domestic concerns is not a priority for the US due to the challenges it is facing regarding the Middle East crises, Russian-Ukraine war, and escalating competition with China.

The Congressional hearing was important for two major reasons. First is that the testimony was given by Donald Lu, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, who was accused by Pakistan’s former PM Imran Khan for having conspired to remove him from power in April 2022. Secondly, it came after the alleged controversial elections in Pakistan and the resistance faced by the Biden administration over

engaging with the new government in Pakistan unless the election irregularities are investigated.

The hearing underscored that both countries should work together by addressing mutual concerns and collaborate in areas of democratic consolidation, economic partnership, counterterrorism, and regional stability. The US and Pakistan's relationship is rooted in shared commitments to strengthen Pakistan's democratic institutions, support Pakistan's economy, cooperate on counterterrorism threats, and bolster respect for human rights. Since the catastrophic withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in 2021, the region has been stuck in a cycle of instability. Now that instability is further exacerbated by the domestic situation within Pakistan.

Apprehensions regarding General Elections

One of the key themes addressed in the hearing was the apprehensions regarding the recent general elections in Pakistan, which raised significant concerns about alleged electoral fraud, interference, suppression of dissent, human rights violations, etc. The Pakistani people deserve democracy, strong institutions, and a government that protects their rights. The US must support the people of Pakistan in their struggle for strong democratic institutions in the same way it supports the American interests, which are mutually beneficial to both states. The US and international election observers have expressed concerns related to both pre-election and day-of-election irregularities including the undue restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly. The US has also condemned electoral violence attacks on media workers and restrictions on access to the internet and telecom services. As a partner of Pakistan, the US has called for a full investigation into the recent elections to address irregularities. Additionally, human rights in Pakistan must be respected for democracy to thrive otherwise, the prospect of a democratic society will eventually evaporate. On the involvement of the military and the politics of Pakistan, the hearing underscored that the Pakistani military must be kept under civilian control. The hearing highlighted that the US can work with the Pakistani government to support meaningful change as democracy in Pakistan is in the interest of the US as well.

Economic Catastrophe

Pakistan currently is on the brink of economic catastrophe, caused by the massive amounts of debt and record inflation. To achieve fiscal stability and control inflation, Pakistan needs structural economic reforms.

As the US is the top destination for Pakistan's exports, both countries should work to promote economic prosperity in Pakistan. Over the years, the United States of America has provided development funds, private sector investment, and humanitarian help to Pakistan at times of need, such as the devastating flooding that occurred in 2022. For Pakistan to deal with its social, political, and issues of terrorism, it needs a strong economy. The US want growth led by the private sector that can benefit the Pakistani people. It is important to note that in July 2023, USAID announced over US\$ 16 million in additional development and humanitarian assistance to support the resilience of communities in Pakistan that experienced 2022's historically devastating floods. It highlights that both countries can work together to strengthen their communities and combat climate change.

Terrorism and Security Concerns

Terrorism and security challenges are on top of the list when it comes to the US-Pakistan bilateral relationship. The US has an interest in working with Pakistan to ensure that the terrorist organisations do not destabilise the region. Particularly, since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan has faced an increased domestic threat from *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP). US and Pakistan must continue to work together to counter terrorism.

Cipher Case

The US has denied the claims regarding its involvement in the cipher case or the alleged leak of diplomatic cable. It is important to note Asad Majeed Khan, then ambassador of Pakistan to the US, has also testified that there was no such conspiracy. Secretary Donald Lu also claimed that US respects the sovereignty of Pakistan and Pakistani people should choose their own leaders through a democratic process. It was also argued that the American ambassador should visit Imran Khan in prison and make sure that Khan lives to tell the tale of how he was wrongfully imprisoned through selective prosecution. The hearing also rejected the claim that aid

to Pakistan was suspended because Pakistan refused to vote against the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline Project

On the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, Secretary Lu also argued that US is tracking this planned pipeline as they are unaware, of which international donors are financing this project. On the other hand, the government of Pakistan also did not express the desire for any waiver of American sanctions that would result from such a project. Given the strained relations of the US with Iran as the greatest state sponsor of terror, the US government assured that it will make all efforts to prevent this pipeline from happening and is working towards that goal. The hearing also denied the reports of any ongoing conversations about increasing military assistance to Pakistan.

US Dissatisfaction with Pakistan

There are numerous reasons for the US dissatisfaction with Pakistan including political instability, continuing economic crises, and worsening law and order situation. The allegations regarding the US role in Pakistan's April 2022 regime change, even though Donald Lu had denied it, also strained bilateral relations. It should be noted that in the first three years of President Biden, he did not make any official contact with Pakistan. It was in March 2024, that Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif received an unsigned letter from Biden underlining the enduring partnership between both states and identifying the areas to further collaborate. Pakistan is an important strategic partner of the US as both countries have enjoyed 76 years of partnership. Recently, the US has approved a bill on transnational repression through which it will track transnational repression around the world including concerning allegations made about Pakistan and desires to address them directly with the Pakistani government. Pakistan enjoys a close relationship with the US and wants to sustain this relationship through constructive engagement.

US Position on Domestic Politics

The testimony of Donald Lu was an excellent example of official caution. While he expressed his admiration for the Pakistani people, he also denounced acts of violence in the run-up to the elections, internet censorship, and the denial of access to half of the constituencies by a well-known watchdog. Secretary Lu reiterated his rejections of

the charge that he conspired to oust Khan, terming the accusation as a “complete lie and falsehood.” The most startling revelation came from Donald Lu, who said that this accusation had resulted in police problems and death threats.

On the question of whether the US will recognise the new Pakistan government after alleged controversial elections in the country, Lu noted, the US does not have a “recognition” policy of this kind. It can simply decide whether to interact or not. Because of the ongoing threat posed by terrorism in Afghanistan and its aftershocks in Pakistan’s border regions, the US continues to engage with Pakistan. The Biden administration has already demonstrated this by sending a letter to PM Shehbaz, calling for a stronger US-Pakistan partnership.

Remarks on Pakistan’s Relations with Neighbours (China, Iran, Afghanistan)

While the Hearing was given widespread coverage for above-mentioned reasons, it touched on a range of aspects that would shape the future of US-Pakistan relations. Lu described the current status of US-Pakistan relations to be at an “inflection point.” He did not seem comfortable with the fact that the US withdrew from Afghanistan, without first setting new terms of engagement with Pakistan.

China

The most important trend in his testimony was China to which he referred many times, showing the US’ concerns over the growing relations between Pakistan and China. He highlighted these concerns and warned that “if the US pulls away from our relations with Pakistan, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will gain even more influence” in Pakistan. He described Pakistan as the “ground-zero” for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and criticised China’s trading practices.

Donald Lu tried to compare the western model of cooperation based on private sector-led investment that “helps nations thrive” with the Chinese model, painting it in the rhetoric of “debt-trap diplomacy.” Moreover, he tried to distinguish the investment made by the USAID, EU and its allies in microfinance projects in Pakistan from the Chinese investments that built roads, “leading to nowhere.” Lu’s rhetoric about China means a growing discontent in Washington over China’s influence in Pakistan, and a realisation that such influence has to be countered.

On a question related to countering China in Pakistan, Lu plainly suggested the US must compete, saying that “where we compete, we always win, because we have a better offer.”

Iran

Naturally, another Congressman brought up the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. In response, Lu appeared to rule out the pipeline’s ever being constructed, citing the State Department’s “reservations” on the project in addition to the absence of foreign money. A few days before to the hearing, the energy cabinet committee approved the pipeline’s segment to be built in order to link to the Iran pipeline, which had been planned since 2013 but had been put on hold because of US sanctions. In his testimony, Secretary Lu disclosed that Pakistan had not requested a waiver. It is important to note that diverging positions have come out from the Pakistani government over whether the waiver is required in this case. For instance, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry has dismissed the need for any waiver in this case. The Petroleum Minister said that the Pakistani government will put its case to the US to seek a waiver for constructing the Pipeline.

Secretary Lu’s remarks suggest that the US has serious reservations over the Pipeline and is working to prevent this from happening. He warned that the Pipeline is a “red line” and any progress on this project will be “very serious” for Washington’s relations with Islamabad. Hence, it is safe to assume that the US is unlikely to grant a waiver from sanctions to Pakistan for the project. Having said that, Lu also highlights the need for providing an energy alternative to Pakistan, which, for now, does not exist, in case the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline does not materialise.

Afghanistan

Secretary Lu also shared Pakistan’s concerns on the rising threats of terrorism from Afghanistan. Weeks earlier, Pakistan conducted airstrikes against the TTP militants in Afghanistan in response to a deadly terrorist attack on its soldiers. Secretary Lu described terrorism, emanating from Afghanistan, as the “greatest threat” faced by Pakistan. From his remarks, it also appeared that the US acknowledges the growing unease in relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the Taliban government’s inaction over the TTP and the cross-border terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Nonetheless,

he also claimed to have identified at least 12 US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs) operating on the Pakistani territory.

Main Goals of US Relations with Pakistan

Secretary Lu's prioritisation of the US' goals in relations with Pakistan speaks much about the future trends of US-Pakistan relations. Fight against terrorism tops the list, which means despite the conversation about diversification, the relations continue to remain security-centric.

The second major goal is economic stability. However, in this domain, he criticised China more for its investment in Pakistan than offering any insights on how the US will help Pakistan stabilise its economy or the possibility of any tangible investment shortly. He argued that the US wants private sector-led growth in Pakistan that benefits the Pakistani people, not growth that fuels profits by lender countries, such as China. However, he conditioned any major US investment with economic reforms to help easy repatriation of profit by the investors, cutting down bureaucratic red tape, and more predictable regulations in Pakistan.

Thirdly, Secretary Lu highlighted the need to improve people-to-people relations, which, according to him, are "critical" for the bilateral relations between the two countries.

None of these goals include Pakistan's core needs, which are major investments to stabilise the economy, an increase in defense cooperation to tackle the emerging security threats, especially from India, and a waiver for the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline to help Pakistan meet its energy needs.

Pakistan as a Future Partner

While Lu reiterated Pakistan's importance as a major non-NATO ally, considering the regional security environment, especially counterterrorism, he certainly had little to say about the prospects of improved defense cooperation or a major investment in the near future. His main point in testifying was that although aid to Pakistan will continue, stronger defence links were not anticipated. He went so far as to admit that some Pakistani military units qualified for no assistance at all. Furthermore, he emphasised that significant economic reforms and a functional economy would be necessary for

private sector investment. In conclusion, no significant investment is anticipated very soon.

TRANSCRIPT

“Pakistan after the Elections: Examining the Future of Democracy in Pakistan and the US-Pakistan Relations”

Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.

- Donald Lu, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs at the State Department (Witness)
- Joe Wilson (Chairman)
- Ranking Member Dean Phillips
- Congresswoman Kathy Manning
- Chairman of the Full Committee Michael McCaul of Texas
- Congressman Rich McCormick of Georgia
- Mike Lawler

The purpose of this hearing was to discuss the post-election landscape in Pakistan and the future of US-Pakistan relationship including the future of US security assistance to Pakistan and Pakistan’s role in regional dynamics. Assistant Secretary Lou also discussed the Biden administration’s policy towards Pakistan. Since the catastrophic withdrawal of US from Afghanistan in 2021, the region has been stuck in a cycle of instability. Now that instability is further exacerbated by the domestic situation within Pakistan. Several events reinforces the positive and mutually beneficial relationship between US and Pakistan. The people of America want a stable, positive, and democratic Pakistan. Pakistan currently is on the brink of economic catastrophe much of which has been caused by the massive amounts of debt owed to a loan shark, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). There is a cautionary tale play out where the US shifted attention away from Pakistan and the CCP stepped in to fill the void and in doing so, further destabilized the situation. The threats to democracy and Pakistan extend beyond economic threat posed by the CCP’s presence.

Just last month, there were widespread allegations of fraud and interference in the Pakistani elections. This is a critical point in defining the history of Pakistan where the country must choose between respecting democracy with rule of law or allow military establishment to continue to control direction of the government with rule of gun. The

Pakistani people deserve to have their voices heard, they deserve democracy, strong institutions, and a government that protects their rights. The US has recently seen the threat posed by dictators with rule of gun invading democracy and law including the war criminal Putin into Ukraine, the Iranian puppets into Israel, threats to the people of Taiwan, and the invasion of the US on the southern border. The US must support the people of Pakistan in their struggle for strong democratic institutions the same way to support the values and American interests which are mutually beneficial to Pakistan and America.

The hearing focused on a robust discussion about the recent elections in Pakistan and also the future of the US-Pakistan relationship which is of great importance to US and Pakistan. On February 8th, over 60 million Pakistanis voted in countrywide elections. These elections saw record numbers of women, religious and ethnic minority groups, and young people participating in elections and resulted in a range of political parties winning seats in national and provincial assemblies. Despite these successes, the US and international election observers have expressed concerns related to both pre-election and day of election irregularities including the undue restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly. The US and like-minded countries have also condemned electoral violence and attacks on media workers and restrictions on access to the internet and Telecom services. It is important that any claims of fraud or interference be fully and transparently investigated in accordance with Pakistan's own laws and procedures.

The Assistant Secretary also provided his assessment of the election and how the election fits into Pakistan's historical context. It is also important that US and Pakistan's relationship remain strong and rooted in shared commitments to strengthening Pakistan's democratic institutions, supporting Pakistan's economy, cooperating on counterterrorism threats, and bolstering respect for human rights. In addition to promoting democratic values, supporting Pakistan's economy is a key strategic goal of the bilateral relationship. After facing one of the worst economic crisis in its history, Pakistan and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) just signed a \$3 billion standby arrangement in 2023 that is set to end this April. Prior to this agreement, Pakistan's economy was marked by soaring inflation, a sharply depreciating currency, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and mounting overseas debt. To achieve fiscal stability and secure longer term IMF bailout, Pakistan will have to make structural

economic reforms that will include controlling inflation and expanding the collection of the country's tax base.

He also provided his perspective on the new coalition government's willingness to work with the IMF and tackle Pakistan's very tough economic challenges in a serious and meaningful way. Terrorism and security challenges are on top of mind when it comes to US-Pakistan bilateral relationship. There are 12 militant organizations operating in Pakistan, designated as foreign terrorist organizations (FTO) under US law, most prominent being Tahreek-e-Taliban or the TTP, the Baluchistan Liberation Army, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS Khrosan Province. US has an interest in working with Pakistan to ensure that these organizations are unable to destabilize the region or attack US homeland. Particularly, since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August of 2021, Pakistan has faced an increased domestic threat from the TTP in 2023. The TTP-led bombings and gun attacks killed over 1,000 Pakistanis nationwide, half of them were security forces, marking the highest number of fatalities in six years. Recently, the Pakistani government conducted air raids inside of Afghanistan as it claims targeting TTP hideouts in the country. This comes in direct response to a suicide bombing targeting a Pakistani military checkpoint that killed at least seven Pakistani soldiers. Beyond the threat of terrorism in Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan, this hearing also examined Pakistan's regional relationships with Iran, Russia, and China.

US is deeply disappointed that the former Pakistani government has announced that it would expel all unregistered foreigners from the country. Pakistan is home to an estimated 4 million Afghan citizens and approximately 1.7 million of those are undocumented. This leaves almost 2 million people at risk of being deported back to a country under Taliban control that is facing prolonged economic crisis that has left two-third of the entire population in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Many of these individuals have lived in Pakistan for decades, having originally fled to Afghanistan in the 1980s during the country's occupation by the Soviets. Credible claims that Pakistani authorities have committed widespread abuse against Afghans living in Pakistan to compel their return to Afghanistan are extremely alarming. But US is incredibly grateful for the important work that the State Department and the Pakistani government have done together to ensure that Afghans with a potential pathway to

US or other international partner countries are able to remain in Pakistan while their cases are adjudicated.

Pakistan and US celebrated 75 years of bilateral diplomatic relations in 2022. Although it's important, both countries continue to address the urgent issues mentioned so far. US envisions progress towards a more robust cooperation on global challenges such as health, climate technology, and trade. Pakistan consistently ranks among the top 10 most vulnerable countries on the Climate Risk Index (CRI) with 10,000 annual fatalities due to climate-related disasters and financial losses, amounting to \$4 billion annually. In July of 2023, USAID announced over \$16 million in additional development and humanitarian assistance to support the resilience of communities in Pakistan that experienced 2022's historically devastating floods. These areas of cooperation highlight the work that both countries can do together to strengthen their communities and combat climate change. US also has the opportunity to deepen people-to-people ties, strengthen Pakistan's business environment, and invest in innovative solutions to global health and clean energy. The opportunities for cooperation are endless both in the US and Pakistan. Also, a government empowered by a strong democratic mandate is critical to addressing long-standing challenges and pursuing new opportunities. US looks forward to all the ways in which the US-Pakistan relationship can advance shared interests and continue to promote and strengthen respect for democratic values and human rights.

Pakistan is a very important country but it's often fraught with problems related to terrorism and other matters. Today, Pakistan is facing many challenges as they just installed a new government after the controversial elections. Currently, Pakistan is experiencing a massive economic crisis including record inflation and an overwhelming foreign debt. Pakistan's domestic situation has a ripple effect throughout the region. It is critical that US works to promote economic prosperity and domestic stability within Pakistan. The people of Pakistan deserve a country where democracy and rule of law are protected at the highest levels. The voters have displayed their commitment to participating in the process despite allegations of fraud and interference in the recent elections. The people of Pakistan showed up to vote in unprecedented numbers which is very positive. However, US is deeply concerned by well documented instances of interference in the February elections including a terrorist attack at candidate's political office, hours before the polls opened and also a

major internet-service shut off on the Election Day. These events are serious and consequential. US has called for full investigation in any allegations of interference or corruption in their recent elections and will be watching closely to see how these irregularities are being addressed. Additionally, human rights in Pakistan must be respected for democracy to thrive. The failure to recognize basic human rights will unquestionably lead to a downward spiral. If human rights are ignored, the prospect of a democratic society will evaporate. Meanwhile, Pakistan's security is at risk as the TTP and other terror groups have become increasingly emboldened. This is a direct result of the Biden administration's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. The hearing of US with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Millie and CCOM Commander, General McKenzie that deadly and chaotic withdrawal projected weakness on the world stage and it can be seen from history that weakness always invites aggression. The adversaries are now testing resolve and when they see weakness, they do exploit it. Pakistan has played an essential role in mitigating the effects of the administrations withdrawal on regional security. It remains very important that US and Pakistan continue to work together to counter terrorism. While challenges remain ahead, US and Pakistan continue to work together to promote regional stability. If US pulls away from relationship with Pakistan, the CCP will gain even more influence and while US seeks to help nations thrive, CCP is only interested in a one-way relationship of debt track diplomacy and Pakistan is in their ground-zero for the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It's in the best interest to have a vibrant and healthy Pakistan, one of democracy, economic prosperity, and stability. By working together, both can work to make Pakistan a success in its role as a key regional security partner.

He also discussed where the elections on February 8 fell short, where there were positive elements and what lies ahead for the US policy in Pakistan. The day after the elections, the State Department issued a clear statement that they have noted undue restrictions on the freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. They condemned the electoral violence and restrictions on human rights and fundamental freedoms. They also condemned attacks on media workers and restrictions on the access to the internet and Telecom services. They expressed concern about allegations of interference in the electoral process and stated that claims of interference and fraud should be fully investigated. They were particularly concerned about electoral abuses and violence that happened in the weeks leading up to the

polls. First, there were attacks against police, politicians, and political gatherings. Second, many journalists, particularly female journalists, were harassed and abused by party supporters. Third, several political leaders were disadvantaged by the inability to register specific candidates and political parties. On the day of elections, an internationally respected local election monitoring organization said they were barred from observing vote tabulation in more than half of the constituencies across the country. Despite a high court order not to interrupt internet services on Election Day, authorities shut down mobile data services, the principal means by which Pakistanis access social media and messaging apps. There were positive elements to this election as well. Despite the threat of violence, over 60 million Pakistanis voted including over 21 million women voters elected 50% more women to parliament than they had in 2018. In addition to record number of female candidates, there were also a record number of members of religious and minority groups and young people. A range of political parties won seats in the national and provincial assemblies. Three different political parties now lead Pakistan's four provinces. More than 5,000 independent election observers were in the field. The conclusion was that the conduct of the election was largely competitive while noting some irregularities in the compilation of results.

Pakistan is an important partner of the US. The US share a commitment to strengthening Pakistan's democratic institutions, supporting the US-Pakistan Green Alliance Framework, cooperating to counterterrorist threats from groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and bolstering respect for human rights including the right of religious freedom. Most importantly, US plays a critical role in promoting economic stability in Pakistan. The US is the top destination for Pakistan's exports and one of the most important investors in critical infrastructure over 76 years of partnership. For example, the US government is refurbishing now the Mangla and Tarbella dams which provide electricity to tens of millions of Pakistani. US support for Pakistan over these decades has been in the form of development grants, private sector investment, and humanitarian assistance during the periods of its greatest need including the recent catastrophic flooding. Unfortunately, Pakistan is facing a mounting debt challenge after the past decade of elevated borrowing, including from the People's Republic of China (PRC). This year nearly 70% of the federal government's revenue is expected to go to payments to service this massive debt. Pakistan needs economic reforms and it needs

private sector-led investment that will deliver economic growth for the Pakistani people and not dig their government deeper into debt. Finally, Pakistani people deserve a country that is peaceful, democratic, and prosperous. US is working every day to support that vision. The 70% debt payment is not only catastrophic to the people of Pakistan but it's a message to other countries who think that they're working with people that they can trust, they're there for a purpose.

In responding to a question about where does the US administration see the future of the US-Pakistan relationship and what are the administration's top priorities for Pakistan, the Assistant Secretary argued that it is of great interest for Americans generally. US has lots of people who care deeply about Pakistan, But US is at a fluctuating point in their relationship with Pakistan. Afghanistan has been in conflict for 40 years and Pakistan has been a country that has been caught up in that conflict. The end of the war in Afghanistan provides an opportunity to have a relationship with Pakistan on its own terms and US is committed to doing that. One of the major goals that US have with Pakistan now is to support the Pakistani people as they face this terrible threat of terrorism. Pakistan is a country where the people have suffered under the threat of terrorism in a way that no one on the planet has had to suffer. The attacks particularly in the provinces of KPK and Baluchistan over the past three years have grown exponentially. The US continue to see attacks being launched from afghan territory and a major attack recently in which seven policemen were killed by the TTP. US calls on the Afghan Taliban to ensure that its territory is not used as a launching pad for terrorist groups. Second, US is very focused on economic stability for Pakistan. For Pakistan to deal with its social, terrorism, and political issues, it needs a functioning economy and US wants private sector-led growth that benefits the Pakistani people not growth which fuels profits by lender countries like the PRC. Lastly, US enjoys a long partnership, people-to-people with Pakistan and want to see that grow, want to see business-to-business relations improve. US wants to see the ease of Pakistani Americans to travel to Pakistan and Pakistanis to travel to the US as these ties are critical. The Pakistani American diaspora is so important and they've been as successful as entrepreneurs in the country which reflects how free market capitalism has such a positive consequence for the people of Pakistan.

About the unsubstantial allegations that the US government has conspired to remove Prime Minister Imran Khan from power, the Assistant Secretary responded to these

untrue speculations as a complete falsehood. This conspiracy theory is a lie. According to him, what is called the cipher in Pakistan, the alleged leak diplomatic cable from the embassy, is not accurate. At no point does it accuse the US government or him (Lu) personally of taking steps against Imran Khan. He pinpointed that the then ambassador of Pakistan to the US has also testified to his own government that there was no conspiracy. US respects the sovereignty of Pakistan and the principle that Pakistani people should be the only ones to choose their own leaders through a democratic process. He also argued that US is going to work with the next Pakistani government regardless of the party. The State Department has expressed appropriate concerns about human rights and democracy in Pakistan, but has never taken a position on who should lead an elected government in Pakistan.

The statement also noted that claims of interference or fraud should be fully investigated. The Pakistani people through their constitution have created a system by which the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) hears the complaints of Pakistani people, of candidates, and political parties to render judgments about election irregularities. As a partner of Pakistan, US has called for that to be done transparently and those held responsible for regularities to be held accountable. The ECP has formed a high level committee which is now sifting through thousands of petitions from people across Pakistan who have complained about the same things. The US will be monitoring that process very closely and will be encouraging the government and the election commission to make sure that it is a fully transparent process with the Pakistani public.

In responding to a question about the alarming allegations that an India official was connected to a high-plot murder targeting Sikh American on American soil and the possibility of sanctions or travel bans being considered for those who may be responsible for the attempted murder, the Assistant Secretary argued that it is a serious issue between the US and India. The Department of Justice has alleged that an Indian citizen at the behest of someone working in the Indian government has attempted to kill an American citizen on American soil. This is incredibly serious and US has raised it at the highest levels with India. US encourages India to hold those accountable responsible for this terrible crime. India itself has announced that they have created a committee of inquiry to look into this matter.

Regarding the current economic situation in Pakistan, the Assistant Secretary argued that a growing economy is good for stability, partnership, and trade. It is not only important for the Pakistani people that they have economic stability and economic growth, it's important for America also. US has lots of investments, franchises, and American businesses working throughout Pakistan. One of the issues with the Pakistani economy is a real difficulty to invest and trade there. Pakistan should reform the ways it does business with foreign partners and in doing that, they will attract American investment and Pakistani private sector. There should be reforms of regulations that will allow repatriation of profit out of the country, cutting down of bureaucratic red tape, and more predictable regulations. If Pakistan is willing to do that, large numbers of American investors will gather in Pakistan as it is an interesting place to invest if it had the right conditions. US future cannot include isolationism from the rest of the world. American leadership will be required for country's future success and to ensure America remains first in the world. US must maintain robust partnerships and alliances with nations that share interests and values. As nations like China and Russia and violent extremist organizations threaten global stability, it is critical for US interests for the countries such as Pakistan and India to continue developing stable and transparent democracies. That's why the House Resolution 901 was introduced which affirms US support for democracy and human rights in Pakistan.

Pakistan recently conducted the largest election in its history but these were unfortunately marred by allegations of fraudulent activity and violence. Watchdog groups raised the alarm over reports of political repression, suspension of internet access on Election Day, delays in election results and more. Currently, the ECP is reviewing many of the election results in individual parliamentary constituencies and the Pakistani judicial system is investigating and adjudicating irregularities. There must be full credible and independent audit of these election results. While responding to a question about whether the State Department have confidence in Pakistan's judicial process and its ability to adjudicate claims of wrongdoing, the Assistant Secretary argued that it's up to the Pakistani people to make sure that their institutions are functional and that are upholding their constitution. The ECP in past elections has rerun elections where there have been a finding of electoral abuse. In fact, in this election the ECP has already ordered the rerun of elections where there has been violence. There have been some terrible violence that proceeded the election. US calls

on the election commission to fulfil its constitutional role in Pakistan, to be the watchdog over these elections and to act in a nonpartisan way. US will be watching this process very closely.

In responding to a question about whether the Pakistani government has the ability to be a good partner as US needs them to be in that region, the Assistant Secretary argued that Pakistan is an important partner of US as a major non-NATO ally. The US has deep national security interests with Pakistan including the fight against terrorism, not only terrorism that affects Pakistanis but terrorism that affects Americans. Pakistan has been a partner in resettling of Afghan refugees to whom we owe a debt. About the treatment of women in Pakistan including female journalists and women harassed and arrested at protests and rallies leading up to the election, he highlighted how the State Department is working to address gender-based violence and improve the safety, rights, inclusion, and representation of women in Pakistan's democracy. According to him, the foreign partners aren't going to be able to change Pakistan, who will change Pakistan are the Pakistani people. There is a very strong desire of women across Pakistan to be heard and represented, and to have their rights respected by the institutions of government as well as by the rest of society. And this is happening as it can be seen from the fact that double number of women are elected to this parliament. The emergence of female leaders in Pakistan at every level will lead their society forward. At the village level in Pakistan, lives for women are incredibly difficult. But today, there are more women in senior positions in business, high court, and parliament. As foreign partners, US needs to put resources, public statements, and activism behind Pakistani female leaders. About the percentage of participation of Pakistani women in the economy and the hurdles to greater participation, one of the real issues for every business in Pakistan but particularly for women-owned businesses is access to financing. Because largely, the women-owned interest or businesses are not the massive textile mills or the steel plants, they're small businesses run out of homes or small shops in local communities. If women have access to that financing, women will succeed in business. The USAID, the EU, UK, Japan, Australia, and many of Pakistan's donor friends are investing in those types of businesses while the PRC and other countries are investing in roads to nowhere that bleed the Pakistani people of their resources year after year. So, women should be given access to more financial opportunities in the future.

About the grave challenges faced by Pakistan in recent years from flooding and indebtedness to creditors, the Assistant Secretary responded that US can compete to counterbalance what China is doing and the debt that they're helping create in Pakistan. US offers private sector-led investment for profit making enterprises that benefit local people and not just the lender countries. The different allies working with Pakistan, one that is significant is South Korea. To go from ashes 60 years ago to be one of the wealthiest countries on Earth is an example throughout the Indo-Pacific and the South Asia of achieving a per capita income of \$444,000 for each citizen. Korea has been vitally interested in developing economic ties with the people of Pakistan.

Recently, the Pakistan government has approved the plans to begin the construction of a pipeline to transport natural gas from Iran to Pakistan. Iran constructed its side of the pipeline years ago and now Pakistan has finally decided to move forward. The Assistant Secretary gave his viewpoint about this pipeline and whether Pakistan is aligning itself with Iran. According to him, Pakistan and Iran have had ups and downs in their relationship and they are at a pretty low point today due to the missile and drone strikes happened a few weeks ago. US is tracking this planned pipeline between Iran and Pakistan and they don't know where the financing for such a project would come from or international donors would be interested in funding such an endeavour. The government of Pakistan also did not express a desire for any waiver of American sanctions that would certainly result from such a project. In this case, the US administration should have a conversation with Pakistan. About Pakistan's other alternatives of non-Iranian sources of natural gas and how can US help Pakistan, he highlighted that US is in consultation with the Pakistani government on this issue. Iran is the greatest state sponsor of terror as they use the illicit Iranian petroleum oil trade to finance terrorism. The administration will uphold both the letter and the spirit of all sanction laws. The US government will do all efforts to prevent this pipeline from happening and is working towards that goal.

On Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban, the Assistant Secretary argued that US view this relationship with suspicion. It is well known that previous governments of Pakistan have had close relations with the Taliban. Currently, the greatest terrorist threat faced by the people of Pakistan emanates from Afghanistan and the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban is about the same as the relationship between US and Taliban. It is very strained and difficult. US has a very important dialogue with the

Pakistan government about the Taliban and how to make sure that Taliban upholds their commitments.

In responding to a question on whether Imran Khan has been the victim of selective prosecution, the Assistant Secretary contended that following the rioting on May 9, the day Imran Khan was arrested, the US government has raised concerns about the mass detention of members of the opposition to include the PTI and about the use of military courts. One of the members of the committee responded that the American ambassador needs to visit Imran Khan in prison and make sure that Khan lives to tell the tale of how he was wrongfully imprisoned through selective prosecution. On the involvement of the military and the politics of Pakistan, the Assistant Secretary responded that Pakistani military is the sixth largest military in the world, the largest of any majority Muslim country. US military has historically had very close relations with the Pakistani military. US generals and Pakistani generals have trained together decade after decade. Pakistan military is an important institution, they are respected in this administration and all past American administrations, the constitutional principle that the Pakistani military must be kept under civilian control. It must be answerable to the president and responsible to civilian control.

US has conducted a review of the most recent elections in Pakistan and have found a number of election irregularities. US is monitoring how the democratic institutions of Pakistan will address those irregularities. Pakistan needs to start using its economic might to correct some of these wrongs as these people are being mistreated. As there are people who believe that US is involved in the regime change in Pakistan, the Assistant Secretary categorically rejected the claim regarding the involvement of US in the removal of former Prime Minister Imran Khan after he visited Russia. I (Lu) was absolutely not involved nor were any Americans involved with that process. He also rejected the claim that aid to Pakistan being withheld because Pakistan refused to vote against the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

In early February, the elections were held after a nearly three-month delay that raised serious concerns about the democratic process in Pakistan. The State Department joined other international election observers in expressing concern that the election included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and assembly. US

uses its levers to ensure that democracy is upheld that's why it co-sponsored House Resolution 901. This resolution reaffirms the House of Representatives strong support for democracy in Pakistan and urges the government of Pakistan to uphold democracy and protect fundamental rights. The most recent human rights report highlighted significant human rights challenges in Pakistan including restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Credible threats of violence, harassment, abductions and killings by security forces, political parties and other groups have led citizens and journalists to self-censor their speech for their own safety. The State Department found that the Pakistani government's failure to investigate and prosecute attacks on free speech and the press have effectively led to restrictions on free speech on the press in a very dramatic way. US can work with the Pakistani government to support meaningful change and promote freedom of speech and freedom of the press. One of the most damaging things are restrictions on social media because like the rest of the world, Pakistanis are getting a lot of their news and information through the internet and so when internet gets pulled down or X gets throttled as it has been now for several weeks, it denies the Pakistani people from getting the kind of diversity of reporting information that they deserve. US is talking to the Pakistani government at the highest level about these issues. US is also working year after year with Pakistani civil society to help train journalists about fact-checking, responsible sourcing of their information, and journalistic standards. The development of some truly excellent journalism coming out of Pakistan cannot be denied. Some brave journalists who defy these censors and still produce things that call into question the government or the military or the Americans or any number of other institutions of authority. It's important for both the administration and the congress to say loud and clear that they are watching what happens in Pakistan including its human rights record, religious freedom, and free speech. Pakistani people deserve a country that is peaceful, democratic and prosperous. A peaceful democratic and prosperous Pakistan is not just important to the Pakistanis, it's in the interest of the US as well.

There is a deep concern about the mass deportations of undocumented Afghans back to Afghanistan where they're going to live in horrible humanitarian conditions under the Taliban. Human Rights Watch claims that Pakistani authorities have committed widespread abuses against Afghans living in Pakistan to compel their return to Afghanistan by confiscating property, destroying documents, and physically abusing

individuals. US have had discussions with the Pakistani government at the highest levels about these deportations. Over half a million Afghans have returned to Afghanistan following this effort by the Pakistani government to remove illegal foreigners. From the first day of that process, US have been in touch with the Pakistani government both about the humanitarian consequences of this mass deportation but also to try to protect those Afghans who have a pathway to coming to US. There are thousands of Afghans who worked with US, its embassy, and military who have fled to Pakistan and sought sanctuary there. Those Afghans should be allowed to stay and the Pakistan government has actually been very supportive on this one issue. On the broader issue, US is talking with the new government to make sure that the rights of Afghan refugees are respected. The Pakistani people have hosted over 3 million Afghan refugees now for over 40 years. It is historic in proportion. That sacrifice does not go unnoticed. At the same time, US hope that Pakistan work with the UNHCR as they enter this next phase where they're trying to figure out whether more people are returning, whether some of those who have returned are able to come back to Pakistan, and that needs of those refugees are being met. US looks forward to work with Pakistan to make sure that happens.

On the Pakistan-Iranian relations and the recent escalatory environment, the strikes in January, the Assistant Secretary mentioned that the strikes were not only against Pakistan, they were against three countries simultaneously by Iran. It is reprehensible and irresponsible for Iran to lash out against its neighbours for terrorism that exists in Iran itself. Tracking those three U-missile and drone strikes that happened in January followed a really terrible terrorist attack that occurred within Iran and the government of Iran clearly felt like to respond in some way. Iran responded in the worst way possible by firing missiles at targets which ended up killing lots of civilians in three countries including in Pakistan. US has strongly condemned Iran's actions. US messaging to the Pakistani government regarding their direct engagement with Iran on security matters especially in the context of mutual concerns of nuclear proliferation and Iran's nuclear program, US has warned them about the red lines also in terms of how they cooperate with Pakistan. It'll be very serious for our relationship.

Talking about credible allegations of election rigging in the Pakistani elections, US has urged that the administration withhold recognition of the new government in Pakistan until a credible transparent investigation on election interference has been conducted.

The US Embassy congratulated Mr Sharif on his assumption of the Office of Prime Minister but there is not a statement yet from the state department itself. In responding to a question on whether US officially recognized the new government in Pakistan, the Assistant Secretary responded that it is a little more complicated. The government of the US don't actually go around recognizing or withholding recognition of new governments, it decides whether it is going to engage with a government. So, US is in every interaction with this government, stressing the importance of accountability for election irregularities. It has said publicly and privately that it wants to see transparent and credible investigation of election irregularities. It has also called for accountability for mass detentions of people in the opposition. It has said loudly and clearly that military trials for civilians accused of crimes after May 9th is not in keeping with international norms. In responding to a question about what gives US the confidence that this government will have the democratic legitimacy necessary not only for the interests of the Pakistani people but for the interests of the US, the he responded that it is up to the process ongoing now in the electoral commission of Pakistan.

Most security assistance to Pakistan's has been suspended since 2018. Recently, the Pakistani ambassador said Pakistan is awaiting a decision from US on increasing military sales and financing. The Assistant Secretary denied that there are ongoing conversations about increasing military assistance to Pakistan. There is very close monitoring of where US military assistance goes around the world including to Pakistan, for example the F-16 sold to Pakistan over 40 years ago have active US technical security teams monitoring their use every day. US has identified any units of military or security forces that would not be eligible for aid.

US continues to fully investigate the election to make sure that people are let out of jail that were put in there unfairly because democracy in Pakistan of course will serve the people of Pakistan but it is so clearly in the US interest. Seeing the failures in Latin America of prioritizing military relationships over democratic relationships, it never served US there and it won't serve in Pakistan also. On a general assessment regarding the fairness of the elections in Pakistan, US shares the view of local election observers who have said that this was a competitive and orderly elections but they note irregularities in the compilation of the results that should be fully investigated. US has never used the term free and fair in the characterization of this election. It has expressed serious concerns about the pre-election environment violence that

occurred terrorism and political violence. It has expressed concern about the failure to register individual candidates and political parties, the mass arrests of those in opposition, the shutdown of internet, and the censorship and pressure placed on journalists. The election commission of Pakistan should find these irregularities, rerun elections where there's been interference, and that's the way the Pakistani people will know. It's probably unlikely that an American diplomat will know whether or how the results would turn out but they'll turn out the way they should if the election commission reruns constituencies. US has clearly said to Pakistan's leaders but also to election officials that is an expectation of all Pakistan's partners. It's not only US that they conduct elections with integrity. So, it should be fully investigated and adjudicated.

On the relationship between US and Pakistan if they are not investigated and adjudicated, if they do not decide to rerun their elections, the Assistant Secretary responded that US has enjoyed 76 years of partnership with Pakistan. It will be an impediment to relationship if Pakistan does not have a democratic process that upholds its own constitution. It will affect the ability to have the type of relationship in security matters, on business fronts, and people to people, all of that suffers if Pakistan is not a full democracy. Recently, US has marked up in the committee of Homeland Security, a bill that will soon go to the full committee in the Homeland committee on transnational repression. US is tracking transnational repression around the world including with respect to allegations made about Pakistan. It is looking very closely at the examples offered. If they are substantiated, US will address them directly with the Pakistani government.