Imran’s Foreign Policy Challenges

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What is the issue?

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- Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chairman Imran Khan sworn-in as the 22nd Prime Minister of Pakistan.
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- It is essential at this juncture to look at the various roles and challenges before him.
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What are the opportunities and challenges ahead?

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- **Situation -** The new Pakistani PM Imran Khan is likely to be confronted by daunting challenges on assuming office.
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- The country has a balance-of-payments crisis, the judiciary is in a hyper-activist mood, and water & climatic woes are being felt in some regions.
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- The hard-won gains against a decade-long terrorist campaign have to be consolidated, which is threatening to resurge again.
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- **Hope -** Many Pakistanis have traditionally blamed an incompetent and corrupt political class for most of these chronic problems.
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- Having built his politics on an anti-corruption platform, Imran has vowed a transparent and accountable administration for Pakistan.
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- Further, for forex and investments, he intends to bank heavily on the Pakistani Diaspora which is already a major source of remittances.
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- Despite Mr. Khan allegedly rose to power with military support, he had already sent out a conciliatory call on global policy.
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- **Challenges -** Improving ties with the U.S., Afghanistan and India, was a feat none of his predecessors has managed successfully.
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- He spoke about improving relationships with the United States, pursuing dialogue with India and helping usher in peace in Afghanistan.
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- While this is a positive start, overlooking the military to sustain goodwill with foreign powers (particularly India) will be a tough path ahead.
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- If Pakistani new PM Imran Khan can persuade the military to enable him to better Pakistan's international ties, it would be a significant achievement.
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What is Imran's political stand on Afghanistan?

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- **Personal -** Mr. Khan takes pride in his Pashtun ethnic identity with familial roots in Waziristan, on the troubled border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
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- Pashtuns constitute the majority in Afghanistan and the Afghani Taliban's rank and file are largely Pashtuns.
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- In this context, Imran has a long history of towing a soft line on the Taliban and their apparent struggle to resist outsider rule in Afghanistan.
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- This common ethnic bonding and tacit political support for Taliban has earned Imran the notorious moniker "Taliban Khan" in the liberal press.
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- **Political -** Mr. Khan's "Tehreek-e-Insaf party" came to power nationally with its base in "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province" bordering Afghanistan.
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- It is the province that suffered the most in the U.S. invasion of 2001 and the subsequent insurgency and counterinsurgency operations.
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- Mr. Khan's rivals in the province — the religious right and the secular nationalist Pashtuns — will tear into him for failure in Afghanistan.
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- **Diplomacy -** Considering all this, Imran is likely to argue for a sustained

peace process in Afghanistan, which includes the Afghani Taliban.
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- As both the U.S. and Afghan administration are currently open to direct talks with Taliban, it is only likely to make it easier for Imran.
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- Nonetheless, balancing the expectations of Afghani government, the Taliban and the U.S. is likely to fall on the Pakistani PM, which would be a challenge.
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What is the situation in Indo-Pak ties?

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- It is difficult for any Pakistani PM to improve ties with India as there are multiple vested interests.
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- The Pak Army have the power to derail any progress in this regard.
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- The Kashmir conflict remains an unsolvable case with highly polarised positions that both countries currently hold.
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- Despite distrust ranging high, Pakistan's Army Gen. Bajwa had indicated that he was positively inclined to better ties with India.
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- Further, he is largely been credited for the current lull in relentless firing across the "line of Control" in Kashmir.
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- The back-channel negotiations between Pakistan and India that Gen. Bajwa is reported to have supported may signal a rare new detente.
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- If the civilian Imran government and the powerful military are indeed on the same page as far as India is concerned, it will mark a promising start.
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What is the context in U.S.-Pak ties?

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- Mr. Khan also wants to improve Pakistan's relationship with the U.S., something the previous administrations haven't been successful with.
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- But the military has resented this and even Mr. Khan's own nationalistic

campaign against American policies might hinder any significant progress.
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- **Economy –** Pakistani foreign exchange reserves are dwindling to very low levels and it desperately needs $10 billion to save its economy.
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- Hence, Pakistan is likely to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as it is the most viable option, where the influence of U.S. is crucial.
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- Currently, U.S. officials have stated that they won't support any direct bailout package to save Pakistan from ill thought out Chinese investments and loans.
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- In any case, Mr. Khan is unlikely to embrace austerity cuts that would be mandated by the IMF for borrowing due to various economic concerns.
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- **Security –** U.S. and Pakistan remain at odds over how the Pakistani state deals with militants on multiple international and bilateral forums.
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- Pakistan was recently placed on the gray list of the "Financial Action Task Force" (FATF) for failing to shut down UN-sanctioned terrorist.
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How does the future look?

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- Mr. Khan has never held executive office before and will quickly realize that quick fixes and transparent government aren't easy to realize.
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- While he won't be able to keep pace with public expectations, the military, which operates in the background, suffers no such constraints.
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- If Mr. Khan can make the military a partner and enabler of his foreign policy ambitions he will pull off a significant feat.
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- If that succeeds, it will help establish an unprecedented era of regional peace and stability, an outcome all will be positively inclined to.
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Source: Business Standard

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