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Blowback: Why Regime Change Catalyzes Anti-Americanism and Why It Won't Work in a Multipolar World

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The actions the United States took during its unipolar moment inadvertently fostered a unified front of anti-Americanism in the Global South.¹ The Cold War-era strategy of covertly intervening in non-aligned and allied countries catalyzed a shift towards multi-alignment and hedging strategies, contributing to the ascent of emerging powers.² This development has been instrumental in cultivating a multipolar world, a stark contrast to the intended unification under U.S. hegemony. In essence, America's efforts to consolidate global leadership by toppling reticent governments in the global periphery inadvertently laid the groundwork for a world increasingly inclined towards multipolarity.

The era of decolonization made evident the parallels between American foreign policy and the historical practices of colonialism. This shift turned anti-colonial sentiments into anti-American ones, especially in regions and countries that endured covert interventions or political pressure from the United States. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States rose as the unchallenged superpower, a position many in the Global South view reminiscent of the European colonial empires of the past. This sentiment is especially prevalent in places that have directly experienced American involvement in their internal affairs.

The 2022 ousting of Prime Minister Imran Khan in Pakistan and his allegations of American involvement, have not only stirred the political landscape of Pakistan but also significantly fueled anti-American sentiments in the region. The case of Pakistan today is demonstrative of how repeating America's Cold War-era covert meddling (or being perceived as doing so) can bring American adversaries closer together and ultimately sow the seeds for multipolarity.

Economic and Political Warfare

The overarching goals of U.S. policy during the Cold War-era were to expand the open market capitalist world

order and counter the Soviet Union's influence. This often-undermined non-aligned nations that sought to maintain their sovereignty without choosing sides between the United States and the Soviet Union. The direct and indirect consequences of covert U.S. interventions, such as political destabilization, civil wars, and increased likelihood of conflicts and mass killings, have contributed to enduring distrust and opposition towards U.S. influence. These outcomes often contradicted the stated intentions of promoting democracy and stability.

Covert military operations play an instrumental role for U.S. policymakers, as they often set the stage or paralleling more overt, visible efforts. A crucial objective of these covert actions is to weaken or destabilize governments or factions that oppose U.S. interests. The aim of such operations extends beyond mere destabilization; they are designed to foster an environment more receptive to the establishment of governance and societal structures that enable U.S. primacy. This often involves bolstering opposition movements, facilitating regime changes, and setting the stage for substantive political and economic reforms. William Blum aptly called this "America's Deadliest Export: Democracy."³

In the post-Cold War period, under the framework of the Global War on Terror, the U.S. military has adapted its covert operations to include drone strikes and special operations, particularly in countries like Pakistan and Yemen.^{4 5} These interventions have dual objectives: neutralizing immediate threats and subtly reshaping the political and social landscapes to align with U.S. strategic interests. Such tactics, while sometimes effective in achieving short-term goals, have long-term repercussions, including erosion of national sovereignty, fostering anti-American sentiments, and destabilization.

America's unilateral actions and its outlook (defining the world as a global competition between Western democracies and autocracies) have prompted global pushback against its dominance, accelerating a shift to a multipolar world.⁶ Nations like Russia, China, and India are now challenging U.S. influence both bilaterally and in multilateral forums, paving the way for a world that embraces diverse centers of power.⁷

This resistance manifests in new alliances and partnerships such as BRICS, where emerging economies collaborate around the principles of non-interference and exploring alternatives to U.S.-dominated financial and political arrangements.⁸ Economic strategies like the UAE's and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) moves to trade in local currencies are concrete examples of this, as these countries eschew the dollar's dominance.^{9 10} These actions indicate a collective move towards economic independence, a redefined global financial system, and alternative international institutions to the ones led by the United States.

Washington's Economic Coercion

Economic interventions serve as a pivotal foreign policy tool for the United States and are primarily employed to incentivize or compel political reforms conducive to U.S. primacy. These interventions take various forms, including aid distribution, loan provision by international institutions (the International Monetary Fund, or IMF, and the World Bank), and the imposition of sanctions.¹¹ The strategic objective is to destabilize a target regime by inducing economic hardship, fostering public dissent, and weakening governmental support, potentially culminating in leadership or regime changes.

The U.S. embargo against Cuba, instituted in 1960 following the nationalization of American assets, illustrates this approach.¹² Intended to pressure Cuba towards democratic reforms, it has been extensively criticized for disproportionately affecting the Cuban populace, contributing to widespread suffering without realizing its political aims.¹³

Highlighting global sentiment, the United Nations (UN), in its thirty-first vote on November 2, 2023, overwhelmingly supported ending the embargo against Cuba.¹⁴ In contrast, only the United States and Israel voted for its continuation, with Ukraine abstaining. Ironically, by abstaining, Ukraine effectively balanced its diplomatic stance, avoiding direct opposition to

U.S. policy while not fully aligning with it (so as not to alienate its primary military backer), reflecting a nuanced approach in its foreign policy and the broader practice of hedging in international relations.

Political Subversion: “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare.”¹⁵

In the broader context of strategy, George Kennan’s 1948 concept of political warfare, which he described as “the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace,” marked a pivotal shift in understanding diplomatic interactions. This approach bridged the gap between military theory and peacetime diplomacy, suggesting that the principles of strategy, coercion, persuasion, and tactics, traditionally associated with warfare, could be effectively applied even in times of peace. Kennan’s idea fundamentally altered the perception of diplomacy, underscoring the continued relevance of war principles and power dynamics in shaping political landscapes during peacetime.

Key to these strategies was the concept of political subversion, which involved the U.S. government engaging in various activities to mold political landscapes in other nations to suit its interests. This ranged from backing pro-democracy movements and financing militant dissident groups to conducting information campaigns to influence public opinion. The goal was always to shape political outcomes in a way that favored U.S. primacy and to prevent the emergence of regimes hostile to the United States.

“The Jakarta Method” is an example of a worst-case scenario for this. The government-sponsored mass killings in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966, which resulted in the deaths of an estimated 500,000 to one million people. The United States primarily provided covert support to the Indonesian army. The U.S. government, viewing the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as a significant Cold War threat, facilitated the army’s campaign against suspected communists and sympathizers, contributing to the scale of the violence. This involvement also included diplomatic and propaganda efforts to shape global perceptions of the events in Indonesia.¹⁶

A more recent instance of U.S. political warfare is discussed in John Mearsheimer’s analysis “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault.” Here, Mearsheimer attributes the crisis’s root causes to NATO expansion, EU expansion, and the West’s efforts to promote democracy in Eastern Europe, actions perceived by Russia as threats to its vital strategic interests.¹⁷ By continuing to push enlargement in Eastern Europe despite widespread Russian opposition, U.S. policy combined with Russian nationalism contributed to a complete collapse of U.S.-Russia relations (ultimately culminating in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine). When America goes abroad in search of monsters to destroy, in service of grandiose ideological projects, it risks manifesting the coalitions of rivals it ostensibly seeks to prevent.

Regime Change

Both political subversion and economic coercion are designed to weaken a regime internally, making it more vulnerable to change without the need for direct military intervention. However, these means can have far-reaching and often unintended consequences, affecting not just the targeted regime but also the broader population and regional stability.

The Jakarta Method by Vincent Bevins offers a profound analysis of the Cold War-era strategy. He argues that the Indonesian model, characterized by mass killings and the establishment of a pro-Western authoritarian regime, was not only a response to the perceived threat of communism but also a means to ensure the dominance of Western economic interests in these regions (thereby growing American global power). He draws connections between the events in Indonesia and subsequent U.S. interventions in Chile, Brazil, and other countries, where similar tactics were employed to overthrow or destabilize leftist governments.

In *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War*, Dr. Lindsey O’Rourke of Boston College examines the U.S. government’s history of covert operations aimed at regime change during the Cold War. The

book provides an in-depth analysis of the tactics and strategies employed by the U.S. to influence or directly alter the governments of other nations, often to align with American interests. O'Rourke identifies 70 instances of such interventions, with the majority being covert operations conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

O'Rourke identifies three types of regime change interventions:

1. **Offensive Regime Change:** This involved twenty-three covert and two overt operations, part of the broader strategy to roll back Soviet influence by replacing communist regimes with nationalist governments aligned with Washington.¹⁸
2. **Preventive Regime Change:** The U.S. government conducted twenty-five covert operations in Western Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa. These aimed to support underground resistance groups, guerrillas, and anti-communist elements in targeted countries, with only one instance escalating to overt action: the 1958 intervention in Lebanon. This intervention, aligned with the Eisenhower Doctrine, aimed to counter Soviet influence and Pan-Arab nationalism in the Middle East.¹⁹ This pattern of conflating authentic, organic nationalism with Soviet communist subversion ultimately led the United States to overestimate the threat posed by the Soviet Union to the United States in peripheral regions of the world.
3. **Hegemonic Regime Change:** Comprising eighteen covert and three overt changes, these were about maintaining regional hierarchies. These operations, transcending the Cold War-era, were framed within the superpower conflict but primarily pursued broader U.S. foreign policy objectives.²⁰

These classifications highlight the varied strategies and objectives underpinning U.S. interventions during the Cold War, reflecting a complex interplay of

geopolitical goals and ideological battles.

O'Rourke's analysis reveals the success rate of covert regime changes varied based on the type of target state. According to O'Rourke's analysis, 42.9% of covert missions against non-aligned nations were successful, while a higher success rate of 69.6% was observed in missions against U.S. allies. Additionally, O'Rourke notes a 10.3% success rate in operations against Soviet allies, suggesting the challenges of operating in a bipolar world and the need for a more restrained foreign policy in a multipolar global landscape.

O'Rourke's analysis implies post-Cold War U.S. covert interventions are predominantly hegemonic, focusing on maintaining global dominance rather than countering a Soviet-like rival.²¹ This indicates a strategic continuity from the Cold War-era, where the explicit methods and ideologies have evolved, but the underlying objectives of shaping international relations to favor U.S. hegemony persist.

Pakistan: A Case Study

Pakistan's relationship with the United States illustrates the complexities of international alliances shaped by strategic needs over shared values. Historically, Washington's "most allied ally" (and a major non-NATO ally, or MNNA) was valued by American policymakers first as a counterbalance to Soviet influence and later for its critical location during the War on Terror, leading to military and intelligence cooperation.²² The disproportionate scale of this cooperation elevated Pakistan's role on the global stage, often overshadowing public acknowledgment of U.S. influence within the country.²³

Today, Pakistan is the fifth-largest country by population with more than 220 million people, "and has a functioning, albeit flawed democracy."²⁴ Pakistan's economy is fragile, as it is heavily dependent on foreign loans from bilateral and multilateral lenders. This financial dependence

constrains Pakistan's ability to pursue a completely independent foreign policy. Moreover, the divergence of interests between Pakistan's political and military establishments further complicates its ability to execute a cohesive foreign policy.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto: American Intervention Breeds Discontent- and Dictatorship

Pakistan's history since its independence in 1947 has been marked by a series of coups and frequent changes in leadership, reflecting a turbulent political landscape where civilian governments have often been interrupted or overthrown by the military. This significantly impacted the country's political stability and development. In 1967, after being dismissed from President Ayub Khan's government, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto founded the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) with a socialist-oriented agenda, advocating for a populist and nationalistic government.^{25 26} In the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War, Bhutto, was appointed President of Pakistan in December 1971, taking over the reins of a troubled and fractured nation.²⁷

Bhutto's perceived anti-American stance during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War was a reaction to the U.S. policies in the region, which he felt favored India and did not provide sufficient support for Pakistan.²⁸ This perception influenced Bhutto's subsequent foreign policy decisions, including seeking closer ties with the Soviet Union to counterbalance U.S. influence.²⁹ Bhutto's visit to Moscow in 1972 aimed to improve relations with the Soviet Union.³⁰ However, Pakistan's relations with the Soviet Union were limited by its membership in the now-defunct Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), its alliance with the United States, and its strong relationship with post-Sino-Soviet split China.³¹

In 1973, Bhutto oversaw Pakistan's adoption of a new constitution, transitioning from a presidential to parliamentary democracy.³² As Prime Minister, Bhutto implemented various reforms aimed at reducing socioeconomic disparities. This included nationalization of major industries and land reforms.³³ One of the major points of contention between Bhutto's government and the U.S. was Pakistan's

nuclear program. Bhutto's pursuit of nuclear capability, particularly after India's 1974 nuclear test, led to tensions with the U.S.³⁴ "I was told in August 1976 by Dr Henry Kissinger (the then Secretary of State) that if you (Bhutto) do not cancel, modify or postpone the Reprocessing Plant Agreement, we will make a horrible example from you. For my country's sake, for the sake of people of Pakistan, I did not succumb to that black-mailing and threats."³⁵

Bhutto's PPP won the 1977 parliamentary elections, but the opposition alleged widespread vote-rigging, leading to civil unrest. This culminated in a military coup led by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, resulting in Bhutto's overthrow and subsequent controversial trial and execution in 1979.³⁶ After the coup, the U.S. engaged with General Zia's regime, particularly in the context of the Soviet-Afghan War, providing substantial military and economic aid to Pakistan.³⁷ The partnership underscored the United States' strategic interest in ensuring a stable and compliant regime in Pakistan, a key element in its broader geopolitical strategy. But this partnership came at a sizable cost, as Zia pursued several major policy initiatives at odds with stated U.S. goals, from accelerating the nuclear program and banning political parties to supporting more radical factions of the mujahideen (like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's) that would later go on to attack other factions and civilians during the Afghan Civil War (1992-1996).

The Rise and Fall of Imran Khan

The crucial role of Pakistan's military in politics and foreign policy has led the U.S. government to engage primarily with military leaders, leading to a prioritization of "military-to-military relations."³⁸ Sidelining civilian-led governments, like Bhutto's and Khan's, fuels more anti-American sentiments.³⁹ This dynamic reflects the challenges in maintaining stable U.S.-Pakistan relations amid internal political volatility and external shifts.

Imran Khan's rise to power and his subsequent policy choices represented a significant departure from Pakistan's traditional stance in international relations, especially regarding the relationship with the United

States.⁴⁰ Khan's criticism of U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan targeted specific U.S. policies. His opposition was directed at U.S. actions he saw as violating Pakistan's sovereignty and hindering the fight against terrorism. This stance, emphasizing national sovereignty and the negative impact of drone strikes on civilians, led to tensions with the U.S. government, but Khan's primary concern was the rights and security of Pakistani citizens and maintaining Pakistan's sovereignty.

In 2011, Khan led thousands in protest, "demanding an end to U.S. drone strikes on Pakistani soil."⁴¹ On the last day of 2012, Khan published "Ground the Drones in 2013," where he called for the cessation of drone strikes, emphasizing the innocent lives lost and the counterproductive nature of such military tactics. Khan's 2018 victory speech and subsequent actions indicated a focus on asserting Pakistan's sovereignty, especially in matters of international relations and national security.⁴² He envisioned more balanced ties with the United States, moving away from a relationship that he perceived as one-sided and harmful to Pakistan's interests, much like Bhutto.

For Pakistan, hedging is evident in its balancing act between the United States and emerging powers like China and Russia. Initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) exemplify this, enabling Pakistan to maximize strategic and economic benefits while maintaining foreign policy autonomy, as seen in Pakistan's continued abstention from UN General Assembly votes condemning Russia, post-Khan.⁴³ These relationships signify Pakistan's attempt to diversify its international alliances and reduce dependence on any single power, aligning with the broader global trend of non- and multi-alignment.

Plausible Deniability

"Regime change is a common and important instrument in statecraft used by states to secure their national security interests in the intense security environment of the international system."⁴⁴

Policymakers often choose regime change strategies

after a cost-benefit analysis, preferring covert operations for their lower costs and plausible deniability, reducing reputational risk if the operations are revealed. While overt operations have a higher chance of success, their significantly greater costs and visibility make them less attractive. This approach reflects a strategic balancing of potential outcomes, expenses, and international perception. A critical issue in this decision-making process is the frequent underestimation of potential blowback or unintended consequences by policymakers.⁴⁵ This oversight can lead to significant long-term implications both for the intervening country and the target state.

Khan has historically been vocal in his criticism of certain U.S. policies.⁴⁶ This included the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the use of drone strikes in Pakistan, and perceived interference in Pakistan's internal affairs. Such criticisms were in line with his government's stance of asserting Pakistan's independent foreign policy in the face of external influences.⁴⁷

Khan's foreign policy was characterized by a significant shift in Pakistan's international alliances. Emphasizing the need for an independent foreign policy, Khan's government sought to move away from Pakistan's historical reliance on Western powers, particularly the United States, which has long considered Pakistan a major non-NATO ally. Instead, Khan focused on strengthening ties with alternative powers such as China, Russia, and Iran. This strategic pivot aimed to diversify Pakistan's partnerships, reducing its reliance on any single nation and asserting its sovereignty in decision-making, especially in areas of international relations and national security.⁴⁸

Khan's administration sustained a close relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan. This relationship was crucial given the geopolitical changes in the region, particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan's role and its relationship with the Taliban are central to its strategy in ensuring regional stability and security.⁴⁹ Such a strategy centers around Pakistan's interpretation that the Taliban emphasizes Islam over Pashtun identity, meaning it is less likely that a Taliban government will pursue changes to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border status quo

resulting in a greater Pashtun homeland. Additionally, Pakistan would benefit from a pro-Pakistan Afghan government in its rivalry with India because it could counter Indian influence and provide sanctuary for anti-India jihadi groups.

Pakistan, under Khan's leadership, continued its strong objections to Israeli actions. This stance was consistent with Pakistan's historical position on the issue but diverged from the recent U.S. initiative encouraging Israeli-Arab relations. Khan's government maintained its support for the Palestinian cause, reinforcing its independent foreign policy approach.⁵⁰ Through its eventual role in Khan's ouster, Washington could well have been making the fatal mistake of underestimating the prospect of blowback and unintended consequences.

Khan's Theory

Khan attributes the fall of his government to American interference, triggered by his refusal to cancel a visit to Moscow on February 24, 2022, coinciding with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Khan maintained that the visit was pre-planned and not related to the invasion. He claimed that his adherence to an independent foreign policy angered the Americans, leading them to conspire for a regime change in Islamabad. Khan alleged that certain Pakistani lawmakers were bribed by the Americans to support a no-confidence motion against him. Despite initially having a majority, a sudden shift of some coalition parliamentarians to the opposition led to Khan losing the no-confidence vote and his position as Prime Minister, a development he blames on U.S. machinations.⁵¹

Khan's Removal Timeline

- February 6, 2022: Khan meets with China's President, Xi Jinping, while attending the opening ceremony of the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing.⁵²
- February 22, 2022: Khan, in an interview with Russian television, emphasizes Pakistan's desire to avoid bloc politics,

highlighting past instances where an embrace of bloc politics hurt Pakistan's interests, and advocates for cooperation between major powers like the United States, China, and Russia.⁵³

- February 24, 2022: Khan meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.⁵⁴ This meeting, despite have been planned in advance, coincided with the start of the Ukraine war.⁵⁵
- March 2, 2022: Khan's government abstains from voting on the U.N. General Assembly's resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁶
- March 7, 2022 (*Revealed in leaked documents on August 9, 2023*): U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu, allegedly tells Pakistan's Ambassador to the U.S. "I think if the no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister succeeds, all will be forgiven in Washington because the Russia visit is being looked at as a decision by the Prime Minister." Lu warns, "I cannot tell how this will be seen by Europe, but I suspect their reaction will be similar," adding, "honestly I think isolation of the Prime Minister will become very strong from Europe and the United States."⁵⁷
- March 8, 2022: Opposition parties in Pakistan initiate a no-confidence motion against Khan, citing poor governance and foreign policy issues, amongst other reasons. These accusations were also linked to a reported estrangement between Khan and Pakistan's military establishment, which started losing support for his government.⁵⁸
- March 27, 2022: Khan publicly displays a document at a rally in Islamabad, claiming it as evidence of an "international conspiracy" against his government, which he links to his foreign policy decisions and relationships with countries like Russia and China.⁵⁹

- April 4, 2022: A video of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu testifying to approaching Pakistani Foreign Office officials following Pakistan's decision to abstain from voting against Russian aggression in Ukraine. This admission comes during questioning by U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen.⁶⁰
- April 10, 2022: Khan is removed from office following a no-confidence vote.⁶¹
- April 22, 2022: Pakistan's National Security Council rejects Khan's claims that the United States orchestrated his government's downfall.⁶²
- May 2, 2022: Khan posts a series of tweets continuing to assert his stance on what he described as a US-led "regime change" in Pakistan, asking the Biden Administration, "Do you think you have lessened or increased anti-American sentiment in Pakistan?"^{63 64}
- July 30, 2022: Pakistan's army chief seeks U.S. assistance in securing an IMF loan, indicating continued strategic and economic cooperation between Pakistan and the U.S.⁶⁵
- August 15, 2022: The U.S. State Department releases a fact sheet on U.S.-Pakistan relations, highlighting U.S. investment in Pakistan increased by 50% in the last fiscal year, focusing on consumer goods, chemicals, energy, agriculture, outsourcing, transportation, and communications.⁶⁶
- Summer 2022, (*Revealed September 17, 2023*): A secret arms deal is made between Pakistan and the United States for munitions to be used by Ukraine, reversing Khan's neutral foreign policy stance.⁶⁷
- February 6, 2023: Russia issues a warning to Pakistan regarding its alleged arms supply to Ukraine, with the Russian ambassador to India stating that Moscow is "closely monitoring" weapons movements from Pakistan to Ukraine.⁶⁸
- May 23, 2023, (*Revealed September 17, 2023*): The Intercept reports a meeting in Washington, D.C., where U.S. approval of payments for the secret Pakistani arms deal is confirmed, a move that helps Pakistan meet IMF obligations.⁶⁹
- June 29, 2023: The IMF announces a surprise \$3 billion bailout called a "Stand-By Arrangement," for Pakistan, amid economic and political crisis.⁷⁰
- July 12, 2023: The IMF approves the bailout package for Pakistan after reversing Khan's plans to lower costs for fuel and electricity.^{71 72} Pakistan approved a substantial increase in electricity tariffs, a condition imposed by the IMF, sparking more protests in the country.⁷³
- September 11, 2023: While talking to Pakistani journalists, Senator Van Hollen says, "The United States has been very instrumental in making sure that the IMF came forward with its emergency economic relief," at the annual meeting for the Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America (APPNA), in Washington, DC.⁷⁴
- November 19, 2023: A report claims Pakistan is supplying 155mm shells to Israel amid the Israel-Hamas conflict, despite Pakistan's longstanding opposition to recognizing Israel.⁷⁵ The report cites flight-tracker data showing British Air Force involvement in the transfer, suggesting international military cooperation.⁷⁶

The "Pseudo-Covert Continuum": Perception vs. Reality

O'Rourke highlights that during the Cold War, the United States often officially denied any involvement in regime change operations, even though it was widely recognized by those involved that the U.S. government was participating. This scenario exemplifies what she terms the "Pseudo-Covert Continuum."⁷⁷ Applying this concept to Khan's situation, while there is no officially confirmed or publicly acknowledged direct U.S. involvement, there are nonetheless subtle yet significant signs of American influence and strategic maneuvers based on credible investigative reporting. This pattern suggests a level of indirect engagement or influence that is not openly admitted but is somewhat apparent to observers.

Whether or not the U.S. involvement was as direct or influential as perceived, the belief in such involvement can have real consequences. The concept of the "pseudo-covert continuum" highlights how even a hint of covert activity can impact national sentiment and policy. It's noteworthy that during the Cold War, domestic forces within the targeted states implicated the United States in over 70% of covert operations.⁷⁸ These accusations often mirror a deep-seated skepticism and mistrust toward U.S. foreign policy, especially prevalent in nations where these covert operations occurred.

The no-confidence motion against Khan and his subsequent removal from office marked a significant political upheaval. Khan's allegations of an "international conspiracy" fueled public suspicion and mistrust towards the United States. The notion that external forces are manipulating or influencing Pakistan's internal politics via the country's military exacerbate feelings of national sovereignty being undermined. The belief that the United States was involved in the political upheavals in Pakistan resonates with historical patterns of U.S. engagement in the region. This mirrors past instances where Washington has been implicated in influencing the internal affairs of sovereign nations to serve its own immediate interests, with little consideration given to long-term consequences.

The transition of power following Khan's removal echoes historical patterns of U.S. involvement in Pakistan. This shift in leadership, seemingly backed by the military and entangled with alleged foreign intervention, mirrors aspects of the 1977 military coup in Pakistan that led to a fragmented and polarized political landscape, fostering instability within the country under military rule for the next decade.⁷⁹

The IMF's \$3 billion (USD) bailout for Pakistan, agreed upon in July 2022, included conditions such as removing energy and fuel subsidies, moving to a market-based exchange rate, and increasing taxes. One of the significant consequences of these conditions was a hike in electricity prices.⁸⁰ The Pakistani government approved a new tax on electricity users to raise additional revenue, estimated to be \$2.27 billion (USD), as part of meeting the conditions set by the IMF. This move was expected to exacerbate economic hardships for the Pakistani populace.⁸¹ The perception that these measures were influenced by foreign powers, as suggested by Senator Van Hollen's statement, can exacerbate the sentiment of external economic control or manipulation. The IMF's role in providing financial assistance to Pakistan, coupled with stringent conditions, might be interpreted as a form of economic neo-imperialism, where economic sovereignty is compromised. The conditions attached to financial aid can be seen as mechanisms to enforce policies aligned with U.S. interests.

Given Khan's significant support base, any action against him might lead to widespread public demonstrations or unrest. Khan has portrayed himself as a victim of a political conspiracy, which resonates with a large segment of the population.⁸² Any "proof" of U.S. intervention could trigger serious repercussions, including heightened anti-American sentiment and political polarization. Such a development may exacerbate existing economic challenges, eroding public trust in both governance and financial institutions.

In the political arena, while Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), might not currently be the dominant force, public anger over his imprisonment coupled with widespread dissatisfaction with the current government could significantly bolster its

position.⁸³ This scenario assumes that PTI's rise is not impeded by governmental crackdowns or electoral manipulation. Ultimately, the success or failure of such alleged U.S. involvement would hinge on whether it achieves its objectives, potentially reshaping the political landscape in Pakistan.

O'Rourke's analysis suggests that countries which are weak, democratic, and allied with the United States are the most likely candidates for successful covert regime changes.⁸⁴ Considering this framework, Khan's Pakistan could be seen as a prime candidate for such interventions, given its democratic structure, historical alliance with the U.S., and the perceived weaknesses in its political and economic systems.⁸⁵ Khan's allegations about such interventions gain more plausibility, especially in nations with less stable political and economic structures.

Why Pakistan?

Pakistan's political landscape has been consistently marked by instability, with no Prime Minister since 1947 completing a full five-year term. This instability reflects the complex interplay of political, military, and judicial forces within the country. Khan was no exception to this trend. His removal from office via a no-confidence vote is a significant event in Pakistan's political history.

One of the primary reasons for Khan's removal was the loss of support within the parliament. His party faced a decline in coalition allies, crucial for maintaining a majority. This erosion of support was instrumental in the successful move against him through the no-confidence vote. Such shifts in political alliances are not uncommon in Pakistan's turbulent political arena and often signal a change in the political winds.

Khan's relationship with the military, a pivotal factor in Pakistani politics, also deteriorated. This shift was partly due to disagreements over appointments and foreign policy decisions. The military, traditionally a significant player in Pakistan's governance, moving

to a neutral stance was perceived as a withdrawal of support for Khan. This change significantly weakened his position, as the military's backing is often crucial for political survival in Pakistan.

Economic challenges also played a significant role in Khan's political downfall. During his tenure, Pakistan grappled with high inflation and fiscal deficits, leading to widespread public and political dissatisfaction. Global economic conditions further exacerbated these issues. Decisions like reducing domestic fuel and electricity prices, while intended to alleviate public burden, ended up straining the economy more. Economic distress is a common trigger for political change, as it directly impacts public sentiment and the confidence of political allies.⁸⁶

Internal party dynamics and opposition pressure contributed to Khan's ouster. There was dissent within his party, and the opposition had long been seeking his removal, forming an alliance in 2020 against his government. These elements collectively contributed to a political environment that led to his eventual ouster.

Historical Projections

- If a U.S.-backed covert operation succeeded, the chance of a militarized dispute with the U.S. was 5.6%, just above the normal expectation. However, if the operation failed, the chance of such a conflict increased dramatically to 50%.⁸⁷
- The chances of a civil war in the target country were 37.5% following a successful U.S. intervention, nearly doubling the baseline risk. In cases of failure, this risk slightly increased to 41.2%, indicating a persistent vulnerability to civil conflict post-intervention.⁸⁸
- Successful U.S. interventions led to a 45.8% chance of a mass killing event in the affected country, nearly tripling the baseline probability. Failure of the intervention pushed this chance even higher, to 61.8%, more than three times the baseline likelihood.⁸⁹

* O'Rourke, Lindsay A. *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War*

The research indicates that U.S. covert interventions

often lead to increased chances of conflicts and disasters in the affected countries. These interventions frequently result in significant impacts on global stability and the internal affairs of these nations, as well as severe negative consequences for civilians in the target countries. Additionally, countries subjected to covert U.S. operations were more prone to civil wars or mass killings and, in many cases, became less democratic as a result.

Libya and Syria's recent histories resonate with the Cold War trend of increased civil conflict following U.S. interventions. In Libya, the initial objective of ousting dictator Muammar Gaddafi was achieved, but the country still descended into civil war. In Syria, where U.S. covert operations were less successful, the situation has similarly deteriorated into a political and humanitarian crisis.

There should be concerns about the potential for new rounds of political instability in Pakistan, a country with a history of military coups and significant military influence in politics.⁹⁰ If U.S. involvement in Khan's ouster is confirmed, it would reflect the Cold War pattern of supporting military or opposition forces against leaders viewed as unfavorable to U.S. primacy.

The economic situation in Pakistan following Khan's removal is quite precarious. The country is dealing with significant economic woes, particularly highlighted by the severe depreciation of its currency. The Pakistani rupee's all-time low against the U.S. dollar signals a broader economic instability.⁹¹ This currency depreciation is a critical concern as it has a cascading effect on various aspects of the economy, including increasing the cost of imports and exacerbating inflation. Pakistan faces soaring inflation, a depreciating currency, and growing poverty. Essential commodities like food and fuel have become increasingly unaffordable for the average Pakistani.⁹²

Khan's removal led to varied political responses. PTI and its supporters have expressed strong opposition to the move, leading to protests and the voicing of anti-American slogans.⁹³ On the other hand, the opposition celebrated this change as a victory for Pakistan's constitution and democracy.⁹⁴ The situation reflects a

deep division within the country's political landscape, with Khan's supporters viewing his ouster as unjust and politically motivated, while the opposition sees it as a necessary step for upholding democratic and constitutional principles.

Interestingly, Khan's popularity has surged since his removal from power in April 2022, with the PTI winning 28 out of 37 by-elections by April 2023.⁹⁵ This was evident in the results of by-elections held for the National Assembly and Punjab Assembly seats. Winning six of these seven seats indicated a strong level of public support for him and his party.⁹⁶ This is significant in Pakistani politics, as it is relatively rare for a candidate to contest multiple seats simultaneously, and even rarer to win the majority of them. Khan's victories in these constituencies were seen as a reflection of his and his party's popularity among voters following his ouster from power.

The situation escalated with Khan calling for nationwide "freedom" protests, urging his supporters to protest across the country, leading to blocked roads and damage to properties, particularly those associated with the military, during a countrywide "shutdown."⁹⁷ This call led to further confrontations with the police, culminating in violence and political chaos. Khan, blaming the military for his arrest, remained firm in his demand for immediate elections, positioning himself as the country's most popular leader despite the challenges he faced. He survived an assassination attempt during one of his rallies, further complicating the political landscape.⁹⁸

In response to these protests, more than a hundred supporters of Khan are currently on trial in military courts for their alleged roles in the protests.⁹⁹ These trials have been subject to criticism from local and international rights groups, which argue against the military trials of civilians. The military also acted against its own officers, dismissing three senior officers and disciplining fifteen others for failing to maintain the security of army sites during the unrest. Despite Khan's distance from the attacks against the military, the new government (backed by the military) initiated a nationwide crackdown on the PTI, arresting thousands of its members, including women, former lawmakers, and ministers.

Pakistani authorities have detained over 4,000 people, and amongst them, seventeen senior PTI leaders.¹⁰⁰ The government, led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, took strict measures to control the situation, including restricting social media access and instructing the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to suspend mobile internet services.¹⁰¹ Human rights organizations, including the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and Amnesty International, have criticized the use of military courts for trying civilians, highlighting that these trials lack transparency and the right to appeal to civilian courts.¹⁰² Khan himself is currently serving three sentences at a high-security prison in Rawalpindi.¹⁰³

Similarly, U.S. support for the Pakistani military can be seen as an endorsement of military influence over civilian political movements, particularly those led by figures like Khan, who challenge U.S. interests or traditional power structures. Just as the United States viewed Sukarno in Indonesia and Bhutto in Pakistan as a threat during the Cold War, it may view Khan's independent and potentially non-aligned stance as a challenge to its strategic interests in the region.

While the scale of potential violence in Pakistan might not mirror historical precedents like Indonesia, the risk of increased political violence and instability still looms. This pattern of U.S. interventions, often prioritizing great power competition over human rights and democracy, contribute to anti-American sentiments and perceptions of U.S. foreign policy as imperialistic or hypocritical in regions affected by similar interventions.

The Past, Present, and Potential Future of Anti-Americanism in Pakistan

Anti-Americanism in Pakistan has been a persistent sentiment, influenced by both U.S. actions and internal political maneuvering.¹⁰⁴ This sentiment stems from various factors, including the history of U.S.-Pakistan relations, U.S. foreign policy, cultural differences, and strategic manipulation of anti-American sentiment for political gain. Politicians have often used anti-

American rhetoric to unite a fractured internal political landscape. This dynamic is evident in the public condemnation of U.S. actions like drone strikes, even as these actions were tacitly approved by the Pakistani government.¹⁰⁵

Khan utilized existing anti-American sentiments for political purposes, suggesting that while his narrative may amplify such feelings, it is not the root cause of them. Anti-Americanism in Pakistan is partly due to America's military-first approach and perceived disregard for Pakistan's sovereignty. Over two-thirds of Pakistanis view the United States as an enemy, a sentiment that has remained consistent over the past two decades. This reflects a deep-rooted skepticism and opposition to perceived U.S. neo-imperialism.¹⁰⁶

Historically within Pakistan, anti-American sentiment can be interpreted as blowback against U.S. neo-imperialism. It reflects opposition to the perceived cultural, political, and economic dominance or the "indirect colonialism" of the U.S.¹⁰⁷ The "pseudo-covert continuum" highlights the subtlety of neo-imperialist influence, where direct involvement is avoided, but the impact on domestic and foreign policy is still significant. The belief in U.S. involvement, whether substantiated or not, plays into narratives of neo-imperialism, influencing both public opinion and national policy.

Research by organizations like the Pew Research Center indicates a correlation between global perceptions of the U.S. and its foreign policy actions. As per Pew's findings, international attitudes towards the United States are more significantly shaped by American policy decisions rather than by the country's intrinsic values or identity.¹⁰⁸ In simpler terms, foreign leaders and publics that express anti-American sentiments are motivated less often by America's values, but rather more often its actions. It is not what America is or stands for, but what it does that matters.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In reflecting upon the geopolitical consequences of

past U.S. actions, it is evident that the Cold War-era interventions, both covert and overt, have shaped a world that is increasingly multipolar and characterized by strategic multi-alignment. This historical context serves as a cautionary tale for contemporary foreign policy. Continuing such interventions today not only reinforces the unity among current adversaries, potentially solidifying opposition to U.S. interests, but also accelerates the fragmentation of global power structures. Therefore, a thoughtful reassessment of America's role on the international stage is imperative to foster a more cooperative and stable global environment in an era where the concentration of power is no longer unilateral but widely dispersed.

The persistence of anti-American sentiments globally, and the need for a directional shift in U.S. foreign policy, necessitate a comprehensive reevaluation of the United States' approach to international relations. It is essential to critically examine and challenge the entrenched beliefs and practices of the foreign policy establishment that has historically advocated for expansive U.S. involvement in global affairs. By defining U.S. national interests more narrowly and reducing reliance on coercive and covert methods, especially military force, the U.S. can bolster its own security by diminishing anti-American sentiments globally.¹⁰⁹

To encourage trust and reduce anti-American sentiments, the United States must adopt transparent, consistent policies of restraint, particularly in relations with nations such as Pakistan.¹¹⁰ This strategy necessitates a profound understanding of specific regional nuances and a commitment to sustainable strategic partnerships. U.S. policy should prioritize long-term strategic objectives over immediate tactical gains, fostering lasting alliances and clear communication of goals. Moreover, the U.S. should uphold the principle of non-interference, respecting the sovereignty and self-determination of other countries, while remaining skeptical about the capability to create lasting, positive change in faraway nations through the use of coercion.

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