

SPREAD OF COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON PAKISTAN: A NEED FOR PROSPECTIVE PLANNING

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Abstract

COVID-19, a global pandemic, has spread in about 215 countries of the world. It has caused enormous damage to the lives, economies, and socio-political fabric of the societies. More than 14 million people stand affected world-wide, with death toll crossing 0.75 million. The expert virologists apprehend that the worst situation is yet not over. The IMF, World Bank, and WTO have issued warnings about the impending global recession. It has also been reported that low-income countries and weak segments of the societies have been the major victims of this malady. Keeping in view the fragile economy and unsound healthcare system of Pakistan, WHO and experts of various fields have predicted multiple effects on various aspects of our national life. The paper in hand attempts to analyze the magnitude of the spread of COVID-19 in Pakistan and its implications for our national security, with a view to offering policy recommendations.

Keywords: COVID-19, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Affected-Persons, Projections.

Introduction

Covid-19, which surfaced in December 2019 in China, has rapidly spread in the world and affected about 215 countries and territories so far.¹ Dr. Tedros, Director General of WHO, says, “The global spread of the virus has overwhelmed health systems, and caused widespread social and economic disruption.”² Over 16 million people worldwide stand affected by this dangerous virus, with over six lacs and fifty thousand deaths (as of July 2020). The most advanced countries of the world, with relatively better health systems, seemed helpless, at least in the first two months, to cope up with the magnitude and lethality of this virus. The most powerful nation of the world, the US, is struggling to cope up with the situation. The striking features of this malady, which has been declared as ‘a global pandemic’ by WHO, are rapidity of its spread, non-availability of any authentic cure or vaccine, and severity of damage to the human respiratory system, particularly, to the people above-fifty years of age and those suffering from other diseases. Social distancing was seen to be the only means to prevent the spread of the virus. Three guiding principles were spelled out by WHO, accordingly, to control the spread of this virus, viz: *Speed, Scale, and Equity*.³ Most of the affected countries responded with massive lock-downs, causing all sorts of movements virtually to halt.

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The first COVID-19 case in Pakistan was reported on February 26, 2020. As of July 2020, over two lacs and seventy-five thousand confirmed cases have been reported in various parts of Pakistan. Since the testing capacity is too limited, which has just crossed twenty thousand per day, for the population of more than 200 million people, it can be inferred that the actual number of affected persons is likely to be much higher.⁴ Pakistan has been categorized by WHO at level-2, in terms of its health system to sustain the effects of such a pandemic, only above a few Sub-Saharan countries. South Asia is home to 40% of the world-poor, i.e., living on less than \$1 per day. The official figures of 32% people living below the poverty line in Pakistan are likely to go beyond 40% because of COVID-19, as predicted by none else than the Prime Minister of Pakistan.⁵ The severe economic recession has been predicted worldwide by the IMF, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank. The policy-makers in Pakistan are facing a difficult situation to confront two-fold challenge: one, to control the fast-spreading COVID-19 pandemic; second, to save the economy from complete melt-down and, thereby, overcoming impending socio-economic crises.

The paper in hand explores the magnitude of this challenge and implications, thereof, for the state of Pakistan, covering the domain of national security as well. The underlying assumptions of the study are: a) Pakistan was already facing a straitened economic situation which seems to be exacerbated by the rapid spread of COVID-19; b) virus is fast spreading in the society but due to low testing capacity the exact number of affected persons is unknown; c) notwithstanding the fast spread of the virus, Pakistan had to ease out restrictions on economic activities and movement of people mainly because of extremely weak socio-economic conditions; d) health of the people and economic soundness of the country are significantly related to the concept of comprehensive national security, and; e) national approach to meet this challenge reflected some sort of disharmony indicating severe political polarization in the face of this challenge. The purpose of the study is to present an analysis of the situation, with a few to offer some policy recommendations for prospective planning to offset the negative impacts of COVID-19.

Significance of the Study

A comprehensive review of the literature indicates that few serious efforts have been made by academics and intellectuals in Pakistan to carry out research and analysis of the spread of COVID-19 and its impact in Pakistan; whereas, volumes of papers are appearing on daily basis all around the globe which do not only focus on analyzing various effects of this pandemic but also projecting the short and long term impacts on individuals, societies, and nations. It is expected that the paper in hand will help generate further research on the subject.

Research Methodology

The paper primarily follows a qualitative approach with sufficient use of statistical tools, tables, and graphs. Data consists of secondary resources; mainly, reports of international institutions, such as WHO, IMF, World Bank, and Pakistan's

state institutions. International literature, specifically papers published after COVID-19 spread, has extensively been used. The paper aimed at exploring questions, such as what is the magnitude of the spread of COVID-19 in Pakistan as compared to other countries of the world; what are the major findings and directions of WHO, so far, about the spread of the COVID-19; what will be the effects of this pandemic on various aspects of our national life; and what can be the impact of this pandemic on the national security of Pakistan, particularly, the areas of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK).

The COVID-19 is spreading so fast that it has become difficult even to compile reported figures, let alone the exact figures, which are estimated to be far greater, in the wake of the low testing capacity of most of the countries in the world. The situation is changing every hour and every day. However, for this study, data up to July 22, 2020, is being included and security aspects of only AJK and GB have been discussed to delimit the study as a manageable academic endeavor.

The Present State of Spread of COVID-19

Over 14 million people have been affected worldwide and the death toll has crossed the figure of six lacs and fifty thousand. Pakistan has also been witnessing a gradual increase with each passing day. The state of COVID-19-affected people in Pakistan is given in Table-1.

Table-1: Number of Affected Persons⁶

Regions	Population	Confirmed Cases	Active Cases	Deaths	Recoveries
AJK	40,45000	1,937	615	47	1,275
Balochistan	12,344,739	11,469	1,953	135	9,381
GB	21,20530	1,878	348	45	1,485
Islamabad	2,001,579	14,701	2,517	161	12,023
KP	35,519,927	32,523	5,788	1,153	25,582
Punjab	110,017,465	90,816	22,296	2,095	66,425
Sindh	47,893,244	114,104	17,766	2,041	94,297
Total:	21,39,42484	267428	51283	5677	210468

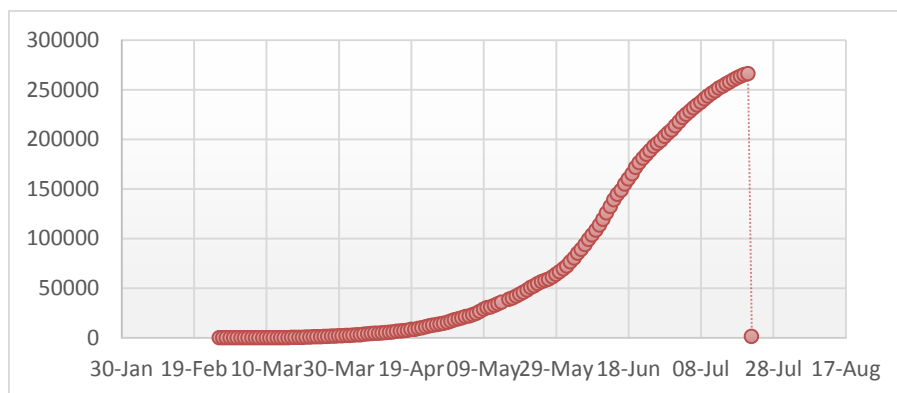
Source: Authors' Compilation by retrieving data from <http://covid.gov.pk/>

Trend and Scale of Spread of COVID-19

The first case of COVID-19 in Pakistan was reported, a 22-year-old man, Yahya Jaffrey from Karachi, who had returned from Iran on February 20, 2020, and made a swift recovery. The number of affected persons till the 8th of April was negligible, i.e., less than 500 persons in total. However, after the 22nd of April, there has been an exponential increase of about an average of 2000 to 4000 persons daily. Fortunately, the number of deaths as compared to the US and European countries is

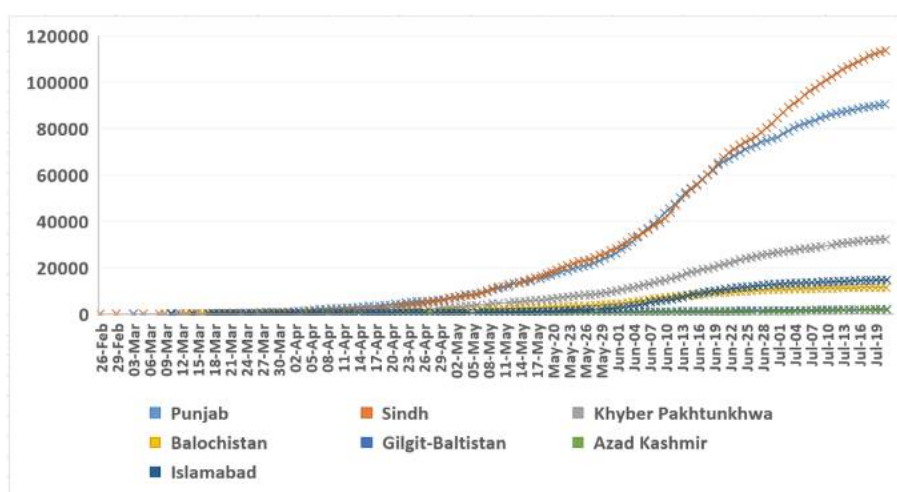
yet not so high. Figures 1 and 2 depict general trend and scale of the spread of COVID-19 in Pakistan based on the data available at official website.

Figure-1: Cumulative Cases



Source: Authors' Compilation by retrieving data from <http://covid.gov.pk/>

Figure-2: Province-wise Cumulative Cases



Source: Authors' Compilation by retrieving data from <http://covid.gov.pk/>

State of Health Facilities in Pakistan

Pakistan is counted among those countries, which have low human development indices (HDIs); and COVID-19 has massively exposed such vulnerabilities especially in the health sector of Pakistan. 70% of health services are being provided by the private sector because the public sector health system has been neglected over the years due to incoherent government policies. The twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi are the case in point where only six public sector hospitals, excluding military hospitals, are available to treat Coronavirus patients. These

hospitals were constructed more than fifty years ago and no other general hospital has been added for decades. Pakistan spends only 2% of its GDP on healthcare against a 10% global average; not taking the factor of mismanagement into account. It also spends much less than its neighboring countries, Iran and India.⁷ In such a state of affairs, the present federal and provincial governments have tried hard to establish temporary health facilities amid COVID-19, which is reflected in Table-2 below.

Table-2: State of Health Facilities in Pakistan amid COVID-19⁸

Regions	Designated Hospitals	Lab Testing Capacity	Isolation Facilities (Beds)	Quarantine Facilities (Beds)	Ventilators
Islamabad	1	12	10	350	100
Balochistan	10	5	534	5897	49
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	7	14	856	2760	150
Punjab	6	30	955	10948	1775
Sindh	4	19	151	2100	800
Azad Jammu & Kashmir	3	3	310	530	12
Gilgit-Baltistan	4	3	126	972	6
Total:	35	86	2942	23557	2892

Source: Authors' Compilation by retrieving data from <http://covid.gov.pk/>

Approach of Government to Meet the Challenge of COVID-19

The federal government took some important initiatives to meet the challenges of COVID-19. Formulation of the National Command and Operation Center headed by the Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives was an important step in this regard. However, the disharmony between federal and provincial governments seem to be more of a political nature than the administrative one, as all major decisions are taken through consensus. It has been observed by the analysts that both federal and provincial governments could not gauge the magnitude of COVID-19, thus, precious time was lost, which could have been utilized for rapid testing, tracking, and isolating the affected individuals at the initial stage. However, the Prime Minister's decision of smart lock-down aimed at mitigating the economic fall-outs has generally been well received by the public and also the international community.

Directions of WHO about COVID-19

The localized outbreak of COVID-19 soon evolved into a global pandemic with three defining characteristics: *Speed and Scale, Severity, and Social and Economic Disruption*.⁹ The disease has spread worldwide with over six million cases as of July 2020; overall, 20% of cases are severe or critical with crude clinical Case Fatality Rate

(CFR) of about 3% (hence, increasing in older age groups and those with certain other ailments). The world health, social, and economic systems have gone through serious setbacks, which would have deep socio-economic consequences. Whereas, the lockdown strategy has helped affected countries to control or slow down the spread of this pandemic. Various reports and studies indicate that such restrictive measures would have negative impact on individuals and societies, particularly, disadvantaged groups including poor, migrants, internally displaced persons, and refugees.¹⁰

An extensive report by WHO on the spread of COVID-19 substantiates the finding that “due to rapid pace of changes, the extent of the spread and lack of real-time testing and reporting systems and multiple levels of management, collection, validation, and aggregation of data, none of the available resources can provide accurate real-time data at the national level,” let alone the global level.” WHO has, however, spelled out the following guidelines/directions to combat COVID-19:

- WHO laid down three guiding principles for controlling the spread of COVID-19; a) Speed: the explosive nature of Covid-19 costs lives every day that demands increased-level of implementing effective response and building capacities); b) Scale: “Everyone in the society has to play a role in building the capacities to control this pandemic;” and c) Equity: “Everyone is at risk, till the time virus is controlled everywhere in the world.”¹²
- Since COVID-19 is a truly global crisis, the only way to overcome it is by staying together and directing collective resources, where there is a greater risk.
- There is an urgent need to plan for a phased transition away from restrictions associated with COVID-19 in a manner that will enable sustainable suppression of transmission.
- Without careful planning and in the absence of scaled-up health and clinical capacities, the premature lifting of physical distancing measures may result in an uncontrolled resurgence of the pandemic and amplified second wave of cases. “The risk of reintroduction and resurgence of the disease will continue and will need to be substantially controlled through the rigorous application of public health interventions.”¹³

WHO has also spelled out strategic objectives to tackle COVID-19, which are: mobilize all sectors in communities to take ownership by participating in the controlling measures, control the sporadic cases and clusters, and prevent community transmission, by rapidly testing, isolating and providing appropriate cure; suppress community transmission through infection prevention and control measures; reduce mortality by providing appropriate clinical care; and develop safe and effective vaccines and therapeutics. To reduce chances of being infected or spreading COVID-19, the suggested precautioning measures are: regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water; maintain at least 1 meter (3 feet) distance between yourself and others; avoid going to crowded

places; avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth; make sure you, and the people around you, follow good respiratory hygiene; stay home and self-isolate even with minor symptoms such as cough, headache, mild fever, until you recover; if you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical attention; and keep up to date on the latest information from trusted sources.¹⁴

Projections of Further Spread of Pandemic

Numerous mathematical models have been used to project the spread of COVID-19 around the globe. The Susceptible-Infectious-Recovered Model was introduced in 1927 by W.O. Kermack and A.G. McKendrick, which is considered a comparatively more reliable model about the prediction of the spread of infectious diseases.¹⁵ The Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) was introduced by a group of engineers led by Norbert Wiener in the 1930s-1940s.¹⁶ It is used for forecasts, using time series data. Similarly, some studies on COVID-19 have been conducted based on environmental forecast models. The environmental models allude towards a positive relation between cold and dry weather and the spread of COVID-19, whereas, inverse relation with hot and humid weather.¹⁷

Most of the predictions and forecasts about the spread of COVID-19 have proven the abortive world over. The spread and effects of this pandemic remained asymmetric so far. The study conducted in the context of Germany recommended that restrictions and curfews in European countries should continue till the end of December 2020.¹⁸ Many mathematical model-based studies projected very optimistic estimates about the worldwide spread of COVID-19, which have later proved wrong, similarly, the highly exaggerated forecasts about the US have equally been proved wrong. Therefore, it is evident that there is hardly any reliable model available to date to predict the exact number of persons with even the tentative timeline. Governments world over are relying on estimations and common-sense analyses to plan about this pandemic. WHO has warned on May 14, 2020, that COVID-19 would stay for a longer time, like HIV.¹⁹

In the context of Pakistan, the Ministry of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination submitted a report on April 11, 2020, to the Supreme Court of Pakistan regarding COVID-19, which predicted that the number of affected persons would rise to 50,000 by April 25. However, this report proved incorrect as numbers of affected persons by May 12 were 32000. A mathematical-based study predicted that COVID-19 would be reversed in Pakistan by the first week of June, which was also proved incorrect.²⁰ Whereas, a study says, “an integration and analysis of various research studies and numerous reliable data reflect that the COVID-19 pandemic will not be as devastating in Pakistan as it has been seen in the US, Italy, Spain, France, the UK, Belgium, Iran, and the Netherlands.”²¹ The SIR model is considered as a comparatively more reliable model. A study based on this model predicts that the number of infections in Pakistan will peak on Day 91 (the 26th of May), where 5,921,1209 (59 million) individuals could be potentially infected.²² The number of infections would rapidly decrease and by the 120th day (the 24th of June) when the number of infected

cases stands at 369, 8192 (3.6 million), whereas, 198,761,399 (198 million) cases would have recovered, which is approximately 90% of the Pakistani population, which is also proved as incorrect. Another study conducted by the Kohat University says, “The cumulative number of infective persons in the lock-down scenario is predicted to be in the range of 57651-153100, whereas, numbers can rapidly double or triple if the spread of the epidemic is not contained through strict preventive measures. To keep the cumulative Infective Persons around 60,000, it is proposed to keep a strict lock-down situation intact till mid-June 2020. The pandemic is expected to fade away completely with 97% Infective Persons recovered by August-September”.²³ As discussed earlier, all predictions about COVID-19 seem to be an illusion. A senior officer of the National Command and Operational Control, on consultation, said that there were no projections available in Pakistan. Policymakers analyze based on available numbers and plan for a maximum of 20 to 30 days. No one can safely predict when Pakistan will attain plateau and at what numbers, he said.²⁴

China’s Response to COVID-19 Outbreak: A Model for Epidemic Preparedness and Management

It is a fact that the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 caught China by surprise. However, it was China's unrelenting response to the outbreak which made a difference. The Chinese government and its people adopted a whole-of-the-nation-approach and remained undaunted as they took on this formidable task relentlessly. Following a human-centric approach, the Chinese government put people's lives and health first thing first, right from Day One. They acted according to the overall principle of shoring up confidence, strengthening unity, ensuring science-based control treatment, and imposing targeted measures. They mobilized the whole nation, set up collective control, and acted with openness and transparency. Some of the important steps taken by the Chinese government to fight against COVID-19 were enhancing epidemic response capacity, identifying cases through large-scale surveillance, locking down cities and ensuring social distancing, putting national reporting system in place, establishing new healthcare facilities within no time, and preparing medical teams for fighting the epidemic.²⁵

Socio-Economic Effects of COVID-19

Economic turmoil associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has wide-ranging severe impacts upon financial markets. Major events included the Russia–Saudi Arabia oil price war that resulted in a collapse of crude oil prices and a stock market crash in March 2020. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) expects a \$220 billion reductions in revenue in developing countries and expects COVID-19's economic impact to last for months or even years. Some financial experts are also expected a fall in global GDP and growth rate. According to the World Bank’s electronically-published report “The Global Economic Outlook during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Changed World,” the COVID-19 has spread with disturbing velocity, contaminating millions and carrying monetary action to a close stop as nations forced

tight limitations on development to end the spread of the infection. As the wellbeing and human cost increases, the financial loss is as of now apparent and speaks to the biggest monetary shock the world has encountered in decades.

The June 2020 Global Economic Prospects portrays both the immediate and short-term outlook for the impact of COVID-19 and the drawn-out destruction it has managed to the possibilities for development. The benchmark gauge imagines a 5.2 percent withdrawal in global-GDP in 2020, utilizing market conversion standard loads, the most profound worldwide downturn in decades, regardless of the exceptional endeavors of governments to counter the downturn with financial and money related arrangement-support. Over the more drawn out skyline, the profound downturns activated by the pandemic are relied upon to leave enduring scars through lower investment, a disintegration of human capital through lost-work and tuition, and fragmentation of worldwide trade and supply linkages especially maritime.

This emergency features the requirement for a critical activity to pad the pandemic's wellbeing and monetary outcomes, secure weak populaces, and set up for an enduring recuperation. For developing business sectors and growing nations, a significant number of which face overwhelming weaknesses due to the spread of COVID-19, it is basic to reinforce general wellbeing frameworks, address the difficulties presented by casualness, and actualize changes that will bolster solid and manageable development once the wellbeing emergency decreases. This course of action is precisely the biggest consideration of Prime Minister Imran Khan, right now, to fight COVID-19 just to ensure reaching of riches to poor and low-middle classes struggling hard for their subsistence. At the moment, almost all international financial media houses are indicating severe contractions of global economies and forecasting the worst kind of economic recession in the world, even severe than the Economic Depression of the 1930s. Some indicators include:²⁶ WTO is expecting world trade to fall between 13% to 32%, and economies of underdeveloped regions and Asia will be badly hit.²⁷ Experts agreed that COVID-19 has brought third and greatest economic shock of the 21st century post-9/11 and financial crisis of 2008. The GDP of China, the evolving economy of the world, has already felt shockwaves of dropping financial markets worldwide. The US stock markets have also been jolted by the crash of oil prices amid restrictions of lockdown with a sudden decline of 20%. Global oil prices are down to 21-year low and US oil turned negative for the first time in history.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has projected a reduction in global GDP growth from 2.9% to 2.4% for the year 2020. International Air Transport Association (IATA) has estimated a loss of \$63 billion to \$113 billion to the aviation industry. The global film industry is expected to lose over \$ 5 billion.²⁸ More than 30 million people have filed for unemployment benefits in the US since COVID-19 spread. Unemployment in the world has also increased manifold and keeps on increasing dangerously. Many advanced economies are expected to enter a recession this year. Shares in internet-based (especially 5G) telecommunication industry and weapon manufacturing giants have dramatically surged as more people are using electronic gadgets while using social media as a pandemic-lifestyle. For instance,

Online-shopping companies' shares are at their peak. There is one silver-lining visibility of an impressive fall in world pollution.²⁹

COVID-19 is likely to cause major economic damage to the world in the days to come. In South Asia, India seems totally clueless about how to confront this pandemic, both in terms of health crisis and severe economic recession amid a hostile environment of Sino-Indian Standoff. On the other hand, economic challenges being faced by Pakistan during the pandemic, as highlighted by various analysts, are contraction in aggregate demand for goods and services, disruption in production activities and supply chain management, and substantial reduction in trade volume, both domestic and external. A massive fall in investors and consumer confidence in economic activities is a disturbing phenomenon portraying a tightening of financial conditions leading to the complicated situation related to retiring of foreign debts. Piling up of debt is directly affecting government spending, thereof, further contraction in the economy, which is already facing lesser imports and exports. Table-4 highlights Pakistan's major economic indicators and their impact on the national economy.

Table-4: Effects of COVID-19 on Pakistan Economy

Economic Indicators	IMF			World Bank		ADB	
	FY 2020 (Pre COVID)	FY 2020 (Post COVID)	FY 2021	FY 2020 (Post COVID)	FY 2021	FY 2020 (Pre COVID)	FY 2020 (Post COVID)
Real GDP Growth (%)	2.4	-1.5	2.0	-1.3	0.9	2.6	3.2
Inflation (%)	11.8	11.3	8.0	11.8	9.5	11.5	8.3
Fiscal Deficit (% of GDP)	7.2	9.2	6.5	9.5	8.7	8.0	-
Exports Growth (%)	5.6	-2.1	4.7	-19.7	-5.3	-	-
Imports Growth (%)	-8.8	-16.0	3.0	-26.3	-7.7	-	-
Remittances Growth (%)	3.4	-4.8	-1.5	6.5	-6.0	-	-
Current Account Deficit (% of GDP)	2.2	1.7	2.4	1.9	2.0	2.8	2.4
Debt (% of GDP)	84.6	89.8	87.8	90.6	91.8	-	-

Source: Economic Affairs Division³⁰

IMF is of the view that a fall in oil prices and weaker import demand provide some support to the current account, but the COVID-19 shock would have a severe impact on the balance of payments, especially because of declined remittances and exports. It will result in new external financing needs of about \$2 billion in the last quarter of FY-2020. According to IMF, Pakistan's debt as a percentage of GDP would reach to 89.8 percent in FY-2020 and would be slightly reduced to 87.7 percent of GDP in FY-2021. As per the World Bank, Debt to GDP ratio will reach 90.6 percent in FY-2020 and 91.8 percent in FY-2021. Additionally, the volatility of oil prices and difficulty in rolling-over of bilateral debt from non-traditional donors (China, KSA, and UAE) would compound Pakistan's external risks and contribute to higher financing gaps.

Social Effects of COVID-19 on Pakistan

International media is regularly airing the views of experts of different fields, who foresee unprecedented socio-political, psychological, and cultural effects caused by prolonged isolation and economic deprivation. A separate study for each aspect is required to evaluate the impact. The effect on the education of children is the case in point. The pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading to the widespread closures of schools, colleges, and universities. According to the data released by UNESCO on March 25, 2020, school and university closures due to the spread of COVID-19 were implemented nation-wide in 165 countries including localized closures, which affected over 1.5 billion students worldwide, accounting for 87% of enrolled learners. The state of affected students in Pakistan is given in Table-5 below.

Table-5: State of Affected Students – Pakistan

School Type	Females	Males	Total
Preprimary	3,865,068	4,771,315	8,636,383
Primary	10,093,144	12,838,161	17,609,476
Secondary	7,478,381	5,879,237	13,357,618
Tertiary	842,222	1,035,879	1,878,101

Source: UNESCO³¹

Impact of COVID-19 on National Security

COVID-19 has impacted every aspect of national life including national security in an intimidating way. It has been indicated by leading experts of various fields that nations all across the globe will have to struggle collectively to offset the impact of COVID-19. The estimated impacts of COVID-19 on global, regional, and national security are:

Global Security

It is an emerging notion of worldwide predicting discussions on COVID-19 among international economists, social scientists, and political analysts that the world will pass through the worst kind of economic recession even greater than the recession of the 1930s, which is likely to exacerbate the existing socio-political fault lines posing serious security challenges. Amidst the spread of Covid-19 and ongoing Indo-Pacific skirmishes between China and the US-led regional powers, experts are alluding to the issues of security concern that there would be an increase in the number of the poor in the world, further widening the gap between the developed and the least developed countries. It has been apprehended that some of the developing countries may slip from the ladder of development and fall in the least developed countries. Economic and trade wars are likely to ensue, particularly, between the US and China, in which other countries will also be entrapped. It will become difficult for countries like Pakistan to maintain a balance. Unprecedented unemployment in the US, Europe, and East Asian countries would result in visa

restriction on immigrants, thereby, squeezing the scope of employment for the labor of developing and underdeveloped countries. Laid-off employees are being deported by Middle Eastern, European, and other countries.

70% of loans from international financial institutions are taken by developed countries. With contracted economies and liquidity crunch, they are likely to bid for more loans, thus, further squeezing the opportunity for developing and the least developed countries. Loans, if offered, will be on very inflated interest rates, thus, compounding the issue of debt-trap. Weakened economies of the countries would have impacted their sovereignty, forcing them to make compromises in external affairs. It is also apprehended that to sustain the war industry of global powers, more proxy wars will likely be initiated. Debt accumulation of over 80-90% of GDP, as indicated by leading donors, is a big security concern.

Regional Security Dynamics

The South Asian region is usually considered as a disturbed region, once seen in terms of peace and stability as both nuclear states of the region, India and Pakistan have a history of mutual distrust, enmity, and armed conflicts. The post-pandemic scenario does not seem to provide any positive security perspective for the region, which is, at present, confronted with *Hindutva* nationalist agenda, Sino-Indian standoff at Ladakh, rising atrocities of Indian armed forces in Indian occupied Kashmir, unceasing shelling across the LoC, and emerging border dispute between Nepal and India. In such a disturbing situation, the spread of COVID-19 further harms the existing regional security environment.

Heightened trade rivalry between the US and China would increase the relevance of India for the US in the region, which may accelerate hostile subversive activities against Pakistan (being a partner of China's Belt-Road initiative). Such activities are likely to increase, particularly, in adjoining areas of India and Afghanistan borders, such as AJK, GB, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and Baluchistan to hinder CPEC projects. Recent terrorist attacks in Pakistan during pandemic and arrest of two Indian-launched terrorists on June 12, 2020 in GB allude to the impending danger of more sabotage activities. Due to contracted world economies, the supply chain of different commodities would be affected. India would try to take advantage of it, as hinted by Indian Prime Minister Modi in his speech on May 12, 2020, to prevent China and Pakistan to take advantage of increasing demands in foreign markets by using US' clout. The recent stand-off between China and India in Ladakh indicates the precarious security scenario of South Asia, where three nuclear states are at loggerheads with each other.

AJK and GB have recently become a focus of Indian military organs as reflected by the disclosure of retired Major Gaurav Arya of Indian Army on May 9, 2020, and arrest of two Indian-launched terrorists in GB, one month later. In such a hostile situation, COVID-19 may result in extreme unemployment in that region due to repatriation of labor, joblessness, a decline in tourism, and vulnerability of people

regarding hostile foreign agencies' pre-planned subversive activities. It has been highlighted at numerous forums that there has been a conspicuous ideological drift, particularly, among the youth in AJK regarding the future geographical-outlook of the region". As the use of electronic devices is increasing manifold especially among youth amid pandemic, it is likely India will take advantage of an increasing trend of using social media to disseminate its false-propaganda through anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan approach. *Hindutva* mindset is dangerously alarming the bells of the deceptively-erected temple of Indian-secularism. India's consistent false and hostile propaganda against Pakistan's longstanding ideological narrative "*Kashmir banay ga Pakistan*" by using social media platforms must have been strongly contested and blocked with a clear rejection of BJP-driven RSS Hindu-nationalist agenda *Hindutva*. It must be highlighted that Kashmiri leaders never accepted the Indian occupation of Jammu and Kashmir as Sardar Ibrahim, General Hayat Khan and more significantly Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan were ardent supporters of the Two-Nation Theory. Indian psychological warfare approach towards AJK and GB while taking the full advantage of COVID-19 is dangerously pacing up against Pakistan.

Recommendations

Foregoing in view, the Government of Pakistan should direct all ministries and autonomous bodies to undertake analytical studies about the impact of COVID-19 on various aspects of national life. A similar exercise needs to be carried out at the provincial level. It will help in identifying the affected areas for future policymaking. However, this paper posits the following recommendations to reduce the impact of COVID-19:

- Since healthcare has been neglected for decades, COVID-19 may be taken as an opportunity to revamp this sector. The 18th Amendment should also be revisited to enhance the role of the federal government in national health and education planning and spending. It is, indeed, an irony that nuclear Pakistan is being bracketed with African Saharan countries as far as healthcare standards are concerned.
- Twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi may be taken as the case study for assessing the provision of health services to the general public and bringing about discernible improvement in the shortest possible time.
- Since lock-downs have been eased out, there is a greater need for effective surveillance and media campaign for motivating the public to adhere to SOPs. Arrangements should be made for announcements in markets and places of gatherings. Religious scholars, educationists, and volunteers may be engaged to educate the public regarding injurious effects of COVID-19 and how to take precautionary measures.
- CPEC projects including the construction of planned water reservoirs need to be accelerated to boost the economic activities

amid COVID-19. These megaprojects should be completed in time, particularly, the projects in AJK, GB, and KP, which can help generate job opportunities and reduce unemployment. Pakistan should not wait for normalcy rather taking the advantage of major players' involvement in COVID-19 activities.

- The Government of AJK should be pushed to initiate and complete projects of infrastructure development, i.e., roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals instead of wasting time and funds on non-developmental expenditures. It is crucial for national security as well as mitigating the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. The Government of GB along with the AJK government should also be encouraged and engaged to counter hostile propaganda and subversive activities. Serious efforts need to be made to promote national narrative through the production of relevant literature, plays, movies, and also organizing seminars, lectures, and workshops.
- Universities and research institutions may be asked to pick-up themes related to impacts of COVID-19 for serious academic research to help future policymaking as well as people's wellbeing.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is an unprecedented and catastrophic pandemic befallen on mankind. It has overwhelmed even the best health systems of the world, shattered economies and left unimaginable socio-economic effects on the societies. It will take years to gauge the damage caused by this pandemic, whatever statistics are available; they allude to a dismal picture of the near future. As per the assessment of WHO and other UN agencies, the developing and the least developed countries are the worst hit. Even in the developed countries, the weaker segments of the societies suffered the most. Pakistan has been struggling for the last so many decades to climb the ladder of development, but still, it is counted slightly better than the least developed countries as about 40% of its population is living below the poverty line. COVID-19 is likely to leave long-lasting impacts on various aspects of our national life. The paper in hand has attempted to provide a policy perspective on the prevailing situation. It is expected that the paper will help policy-makers and research scholars to carry out further research, which is so important for improvement in the process of policy formulation and implementation, particularly, in the wake of the spread of COVID-19.

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