

Lime sugar water is provided by volunteers to residents of Karachi, Pakistan on May 25rd (Photo by AP/Fareed Kahn)

INDO-PACIFIC

# Pakistani Protests amid Power Outages during Heatwaves

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In the midst of heat waves sweeping across Pakistan, protests have once again erupted after prolonged power outages in Karachi and Peshawar. The Pakistan-administered part of Kashmir was the scene of protests earlier in May against rising energy prices, leaving four people dead and 100 wounded. In addition, hundreds of former Prime Minister Imran Khan supporters protested in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, demanding new elections. Now, protestors are demanding an end to power outages across the nation. With temperatures around 120°F (50°C), demand has risen, power infrastructure has faltered, and hundreds of Pakistanis are suffering from heatstrokes.

## Climate and Energy Issues Escalate

The heat waves especially affected Sindh province, where temperatures rose to 123°F (51°C) on May 29th. Load-shedding of power plants left residents without power for approximately 12–18 hours. Mohenjo-daro, a town in Sindh, saw temperatures climb as high as 126°F (52.2°C). Hundreds were hospitalized for heatstroke, and volunteers distributed water across various cities. Although temperatures will reportedly subside in Mohenjo-daro, other parts of Sindh are expected to have high temperatures again this weekend.



People buy blocks of ice from a vendor in Jacobabad (Photo by Reuters/Ahktar Soomro)

Pakistan, ranked as the 5th most vulnerable country to climate change according to the Global Climate Risk Index, has experienced catastrophic floods and rainfall in the past few years. Last month, 59 people were killed by floods, and thousands more were killed in the 2022 floods.

Pakistan has suffered power outages across its provinces for years, including a nation-wide blackout in 2023. Now regions are experiencing outages again. Just recently in Karachi, where temperatures hit 106°F (41.5°C), protestors took to the streets in response to extended power outages, blocking roads. In Landi Kotal in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, protestors demanded the six hours of electricity they had been promised by the local government. Protests also occurred in Usta Muhammad, and in Nasirabad in Balochistan province. Load-shedding of power plants took place all across Pakistan, prompting Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to hold an urgent meeting on May 28th. Reportedly, K-Electric, a Pakistani electricity company, threatened to cut off power supply to certain parts of the Sindh government after it failed to make its monthly payments.

In Chilas, a city in a part of Kashmir administered by Pakistan, there were also protests over power outages, according to local media.

## More Protests Earlier in May

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province on May 9th, Pakistani supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan protested over his imprisonment and election results. Supporters say the election in February, which reelected Shehbaz Sharif as Prime Minister, was rigged after when certain Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf party candidates lost seats. The PTI party supports Khan, who was imprisoned in 2022 following charges of corruption. Since the protests, videos have emerged depicting violence from local authorities against the protestors.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sharif quelled protests on May 14th, promising \$86 million in subsidies to combat rising prices of electricity and flour. Electricity prices had risen in spite of outages still occurring. Thousands of Pakistanis in Kashmir had taken to the streets to protest high costs and unreliable power, and at least two people died after paramilitary troops opened fire. The protests echoed similar ones that occurred in August last year after energy costs inflated.

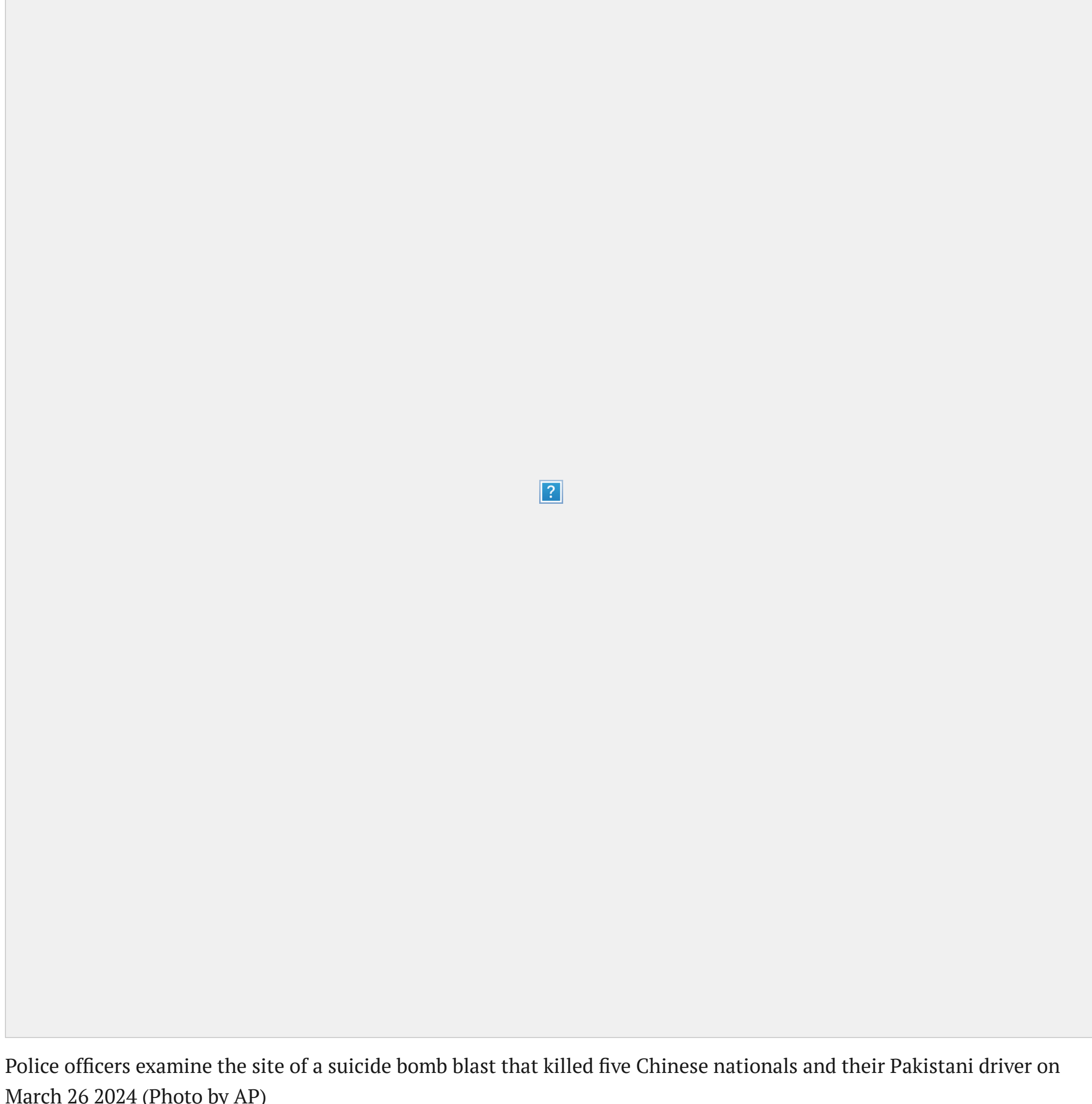


Protesters in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (Photo by BBC/Mahtab Ashraf)

## What's Next?

Protests could continue this year as high temperatures return, potentially overexerting Pakistan's power grid again.

Next week, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif will travel to inaugurate the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)'s next phase, which will further develop the power grid. However, Pakistan has received criticism from Beijing for increasing militant attacks that targeted Chinese workers and investments. Last year, there were reportedly 129 attacks, mostly carried out by Pakistani jihadist groups and Baloch separatist groups. Two Chinese companies, China Gezhouba Group Company Ltd. and China Power Investment Corporation, both suspended work at hydroelectric dams in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in March, following a terrorist attack targeting Chinese engineers that killed six.



Police officers examine the site of a suicide bomb blast that killed five Chinese nationals and their Pakistani driver on March 26 2024 (Photo by AP)


The CPEC slowed significantly after the pandemic and Pakistan's financial crisis. Pakistan narrowly avoided defaulting last year, saved only by a \$3 billion bailout package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The CPEC's first phase projects, meanwhile, are worth about \$25 billion. Some of the bigger projects were imported coal-powered plants, completed in the first phase, but incapable of delivering power to many because of poor electricity distribution infrastructure. Since the government has failed to make payments to some power distribution companies, instead of generating revenue for Pakistan, the power plants have become a debt trap. Nonetheless, the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority recently marked 13 CPEC energy projects as "outstanding" in performance. Future projects hope to increase connectivity and infrastructure. In addition, although billions have poured into Pakistan from Chinese investment, some complain that local workers are not supported, according to local media, with China importing its own, cheaper labor.

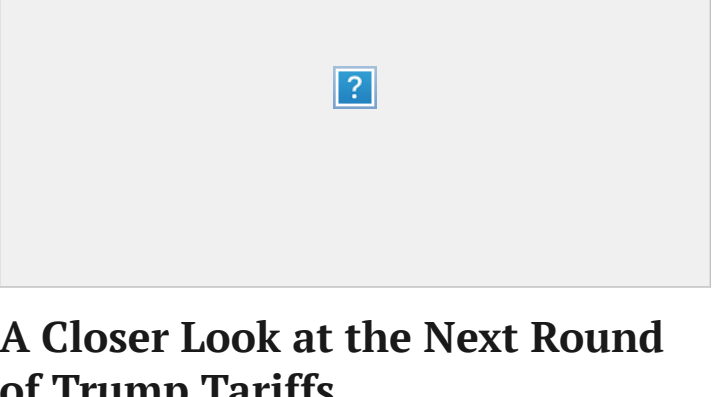
In general, dissatisfaction from Pakistani communities with the government's inability to provide reliable services and job opportunities could lead to more demonstrations across the country, adding civil unrest to Pakistan's list of woes.

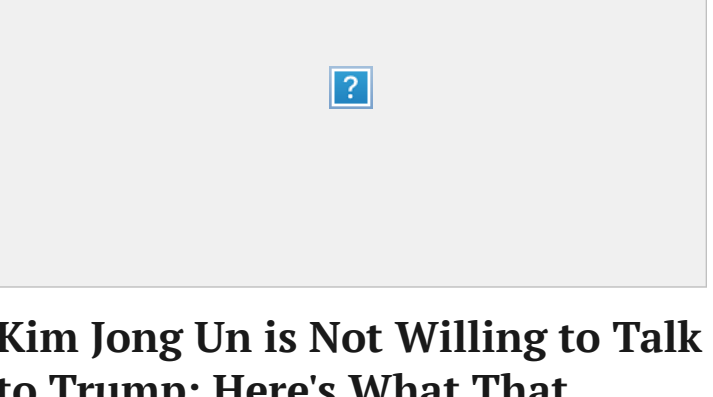
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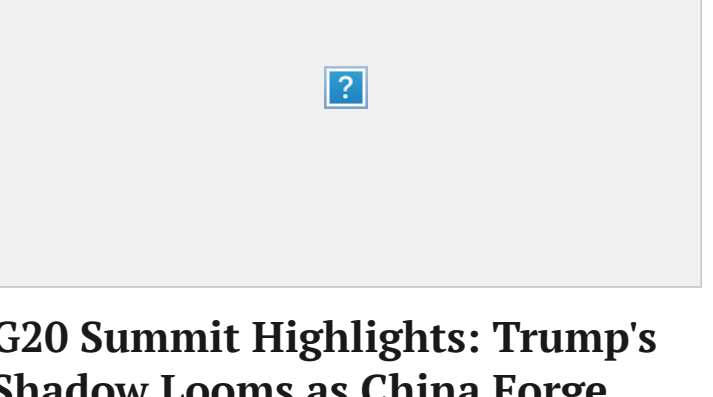
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