

## Pakistan Binges on IMF Loans

Pakistani Finance Minister Ishaq Dar said Islamabad had agreed to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) demands for economic reforms after the fund's 10-day visit to Pakistan. These reforms will bring Pakistan closer to unlocking funds from the IMF's bailout program, which Pakistan needs in order to prop up its depleted foreign exchange reserves and avoid default. But the implementation of various austerity measures, which the government is expected to enact amid the ongoing economic crisis risks widespread social unrest against the government. On Feb 14 Islamabad increased taxes on natural gas by 16%-112% for both domestic and industrial consumers as part of its effort to revive a \$6 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Islamabad is also expected to announce a similar increase in electricity prices in the coming days. Pakistani Finance Minister Ishaq Dar said Islamabad had agreed to the IMF's demands for economic reforms despite apparently failing to finalize a deal on a new bailout during IMF officials visit. Pakistan is now on its 23<sup>rd</sup> IMF package, the first was back in 1958, after binging on IMF loans for decades, little has improved in the country.

## Taliban Interior Minister Criticises Leadership

The Afghan Taliban's acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani make veiled criticisms on Feb. 11 against the Taliban's leadership, describing the country's situation as intolerable and criticizing the movement for its inflexibility and alienation of the public. The Taliban's spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid responded on Feb. 12 by stating that criticisms of those in charge should be leveled privately and not denigrate one's dignity. Haqqani's comments represent the highest-level public criticism from within the Taliban of the group's governance since it took over Afghanistan in August 2021. Haqqani's comments and Mujahid's response underline continued disunity within the Taliban movement amid disagreements over governance and policy that have developed over the past year and a half. Reports also confirm disagreements within the group's leadership worsened after the government issued decrees banning women from universities. Haqqani reported that "The current situation is intolerable. If the public situation becomes worse and unstable, it is our responsibility to bring them closer to us." Haqqani also noted the importance of the Taliban's international relations, stating, "We want interaction with the world community for the sake of our people, we want ease for people, we want to heal the wounds of people." The Taliban won on the battlefield but have struggled to make the transition from a resistance movement to governing over Afghanistan. Divisions are deepening as some member of the movement want to gain international legitimacy, whilst others feel the group is compromising too much.

## Balloon Politics

The US military shot down three unidentified flying objects over North America since Feb. 10, ever since a Chinese spy balloon was identified over the US continent. The head of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) said it was too early to classify the objects, whilst US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan called them UFOs balloons. The incidents indicate the US is increasing the sensitivity of their filtering on spatial data to flag more balloon-like small objects in North American airspace. The incidents also reveal that the US has changed some of its parameters around UFO identification and rules of engagement, meaning future incidents are possible. If any of the three UFOs are determined to be Chinese — as the balloon shot down on Feb. 4 was — it will further complicate U.S.-China relations and shed light on how active and expansive China's balloon program has become over North America. If this is China's way to respond to US provocations over Taiwan and its expansion in the South China Sea, then the Chinese are achieving their desires impact.