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The Coming Test of Civil-Military Ties in Pakistan

The Pakistan Army is reputed to be a coherent force, but obedience to the political master by its Chief has not always been its hallmark. Should, therefore, the passage of command from the present Army Chief be effected smoothly, and there is every reason to believe such would be the case, then it would buttress Pakistan's fledgling democracy.

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A quip making the rounds in many concerned capitals is whether in the case of Pakistan, it is a country with a military, or is it the military with a country. That is obviously an unkind jest. Nonetheless, it does indicate the importance of the role of its armed forces, both in terms of perception and reality, at home and abroad. As of 2015, the forces numbered 640,000 in active service and approximately 500,000 in reserve. Though a majority is still drawn from the Punjab province, the Pakistan Army's aspiration, as a former Chief of Staff General Jahangir Karamat had described it, should be that of being "the mirror image of the society from which it is drawn". This necessary implies a larger recruitment from the other major ethnic populations such as the Pathans or Pashtuns, Baluchis and Sindhis. This is of course easier said than done, because these ethnic groups are at times up in arms against the central authorities. So the Punjabi domination is likely to continue, and the province of Punjab likely to remain "the sword arm of Pakistan".

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There are several reasons why the Army commands such an important position in the Pakistani psyche. First, it is seen as the main deterrent to the existential threat to Pakistan that India is seen to pose. Since the inception of Pakistan and independent India, there have been major wars between the two countries in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999. In none of these was there a 'famous victory' on the Pakistan side, and 1971 resulted in a clear defeat; yet the supposed martial spirit imbued in the national ethos led to a public perception that it was the ineffectual civilian leadership which was to blame rather than any failure on the part of the Pakistan Army and its commanders. Now of course given the fact of nuclear capabilities on both sides, an all-out conflict is pretty much ruled out, and so the reputation of the Army is unlikely to be sullied by any massive discomfiture.

Second, the politicians in Pakistan have not been able to generate much confidence among the public as to their effective leadership capabilities. Many are seen as corrupt, and most as incapable. If war, to the French leader Clemenceau, was seen as too important to be left to the Generals, governance in Pakistan was seen as too important to be left to the politicians. This is what enabled the rise of General Mohammed Ayub Khan (who later declared himself a Field Marshal) to the office of President in 1958 on grounds that "democracy without education is hypocrisy without limitation". Since then a string of military commanders – Yahya Khan, Zia ul Haq and Pervez Musharraf – have seized power without serious opposition, and indeed oftentimes with tacit public consent. Today such a phenomenon might have become irrelevant because the Army can rule the roost from the backrooms, and also queer the pitch vis-à-vis major international partners such as the United States and the United Nations.

Third, the Army, which was primarily responsible for the break-up of the original Pakistan because of its repressive policies in present-day Bangladesh, is now ironically seen as the major protector of territorial integrity and societal stability in the face of attacks from extremists and terrorists, including secessionists, for instance, in Baluchistan. Though the burgeoning religiosity in the society received a fillip from the regime of General Zia ul Haq who thought-up the concept of 'Nizam-e-Mustafa' (a community run on the values of the Prophet of Islam), the Army overplayed its hands and helped create the Frankenstein of fundamentalist views which is so much a target of its current endeavour to suppress! It backed the 'Taliban' in Afghanistan to further its goals, and ended up fighting it when the 'Taliban' spilled into Pakistan and confronted that State. The incumbent Chief of Staff General Raheel Sharif took on the extremists in North Waziristan through his *Operation Zarb-e Azb* and involved the Army in the National Action Plan (NAP) to root out terrorism (this also enabled him to be

critical of civilian (read politicians') corruption which he alleged impeded implementation of the NAP).

Finally, and this is an important sociological point, in a feudal Pakistan, where politics is dominated by the landed gentry, the Army is representative in many ways, of the professional middle class, or even the common man. Time was when the feudal gentry were held in check by the senior bureaucracy, the Civil Service of Pakistan (the CSP). The CSP was a successor of the old Indian Civil Service (ICS), the steel frame that kept the British Empire in India afloat. The early CSP largely comprised *Muhajirs* or Muslim refugees from India. With the passage of time the baton was passed on to more indigenous recruits, but their power was phased out by assaults from both the landed gentry and the Army. Thus the Army alone now carried the common man's flag, and because it ran its own schools and training centres, produced a meritocracy in the form of better officers, doctors and engineers. To keep the Army mollified, it was offered the cream of business establishments, including in real estate and public corporations, which created for it a huge civilian segment of beneficiary *clientele*. Resources available to the Army enabled it to participate in the offer of relief and succour to the affected in a country prone to natural disasters which spiked its popularity.

The Army props up its image by pomp and pageantry, and places great store by the tradition of discipline associated by much spit and polish. The sports of polo and golf lend to the culture of producing the perfect 'officer and gentleman' (though now women are also being recruited, if in small numbers, and confined to 'other arms', such as the Army Services or Medical branches). The system of Officers Messes and old boy networks draw heavily upon partly the Old British public school system and largely upon the legacy of the British Indian Army. The Army regiments that are genuinely old, such as the Punjab Regiment raised as early as in 1751, the Baloch Regiment raised in 1798, and the Frontier Force raised in 1843 cling on to their respective military legends replete with flags and colours won and awarded in battles around the world. The newer ones, such as the Azad Kashmir Regiment, Sind Regiment and the Northern Light Infantry, all raised during the post-Pakistan (1947) era, have begun to create their own traditions. All in all, the Pakistan Army is a huge entity of myriad interconnections, a plutocracy of power that gives the outward appearance of being unaware of its privileges.

Headquartered in Rawalpindi (close to the capital, Islamabad), from where the Chief of Staff Raheel Sharif exercises supreme control over this leviathan, the Army operates three commands: the Northern Command, the Central Command and the Southern Command. These

cover the entire territory of the country. Next in hierarchy come the nine existing Corps. Each Corp is a field formation, responsible for a zone within the Command Theatre, headed by a three-star General (Lieutenant General). Under the Corps come the Divisions, the largest striking force, comprising around 15000 combatants and 8000 support elements, led by a two-star General (Major General), also known as the General Officer Commanding (GOC). Other fighting formations are brigades (led by a Brigadier or one-star General), battalions (headed by a Lieutenant-Colonel), Companies (led by a Major), and Platoons (led by a Captain/Lieutenant). The regiments referred to earlier are administrative military organisations, not fighting formations, whose component battalions or units are spread across different fighting formations. The head of the Regiment is usually a full-Colonel, an officer seen as past his fighting prime, but held in great esteem and dignity. Prior to 1971, there was also the Bengal Regiment, a famed component of the then Pakistan Army, but whose eight battalions shifted loyalty to Bangladesh during its Liberation Movement and formed the backbone of the current Bangladesh Army, and provided its first Commander-in-Chief, General MAG Osmany.

The head of the Pakistan Army is a four-star General, designated as the Chief of Army Staff (COAS). Unlike in many contemporary democracies where operational command rests with the Ministry of Defence, the COAS, currently General Raheel Sharif (no kin of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif), has complete operational, logistics and training command vested in him. This fact, combined with the factors analysed at the beginning of this paper, render the COAS in Pakistan, one of world's most powerful military commanders (though technically there is another four-star General in the form of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, which is largely considered a ceremonial position). Politically the COAS, given the informal but disproportionately important role of the military in the country, also has a significant governance role. This comes to the fore, in foreign affairs, particularly in terms of dealing with the neighbours such as Afghanistan (due to Taliban-related issues) and India (due to the omnipresent nature of the Kashmir problem in all dealings with India), and the United States, China and the United Nations (because of the relevance of the Army to each of these States or institutions). Consequently the Army retains a major say in all matters pertaining to foreign relations. Indeed it was instrumental in providing the National Security Adviser, and, as some analysts contend, in the prevention of the naming of anyone formally as the Foreign Minister.

Such is the backdrop against which the succession to Raheel Sharif is being considered. There were times when the General had been seen as even more powerful than the Prime Minister

Nawaz Sharif. But there is one occasion where the power of the Prime Minister vis-à-vis the COAS is near-unassailable. That usually comes every three years when it is time to appoint one. Nawaz Sharif has by now acquired a modicum of expertise in the area, having appointed Generals Asif Janjua (1991), Waheed Kakar (1993), Pervez Musharraf (1998) and Raheel Sharif (2013). The only slip-up occurred when he tried to appoint General Ziauddin Butt replacing Musharraf in 1999, for which he paid a heavy price of losing his own job, and allowing for the situation for Musharraf to run the country for a decade. In November Raheel Sharif is due to retire, and will need to be replaced.

Actually, Nawaz Sharif will have two key appointments to make at the same time: the ceremonial one of the Chair of Joint Chief and that of the COAS. Initially there was some talk of a possible extension for the popular incumbent. But Raheel Sharif himself laid those expectations to rest when he announced in January this year that he would not wish to continue. Indeed any desire on his part to continue would not only give the Prime Minister some considerable disquiet, but could also rile potential successors, and could drive a wedge between the senior Generals, which could damage the Army's unity, and thereby, reputation. While Nawaz Sharif might have personal predilections in favour of one or another candidate, he is also aware that, once installed in office, the chair profoundly dictates the behaviour-pattern of the occupant.

The safer bet for him could thus be to follow the protocol. It is that the names of the first six most-senior Lieutenant Generals are presented to the Prime Minister by the Army headquarters via the Defence Ministry, whose current Minister is Khwaja Asif, who has a reputation of non-interference in such matters. The Prime Minister would thereafter consult with the incumbent, who would not normally proffer any views that might rock the boat. The order in terms of pure seniority, most likely to be the criterion for the choice, is as follows: Lieutenant General Zubair Hayat, currently Chief of General Staff; Lieutenant General Isfaq Nadeem Ahmed, Corps Commander, Multan; Lieutenant General Javed Iqbal Ramday, Corps Commander Bahawalpur; and Lieutenant General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Inspector General Training and Evaluation. A couple of other officers match the seniority but would be passed over as they have not commanded a Corps. Zubair Hayat, the current front-runner who has headed the Strategic Plans Division, which controls the nuclear armoury, is said to be an avid reader, and comes of an intensely military family of general officers.

The Pakistan Army is reputed to be a coherent force, but obedience to the political master by its Chief has not always been its hallmark. It dates back to when the British officers commanded it. The first two Commanders-in-Chief (as the post was called till 1971), Sir Frank Messervy and General Douglas Gracey, were said to have disobeyed Governor General Mohammed Ali Jinnah's orders to deploy in Kashmir. There is an anecdote about Mohammed Ayub Khan, the C-in-C, after the proclamation of the first Martial Law in October 1958. At an event when Ayub was blinking at press photographers, President Iskander Mirza teasingly remarked to him that he would have never made a 'good actor'. Later that evening Ayub demonstrated what a fine actor he was by despatching three generals to President Mirza, who sent him packing. Then there have been the forceful take-overs by Zia ul Haq and Musharraf. But it is possible that such instances now would be relegated to the pages of history. Should this passage of command be effected smoothly, and there is every reason to believe such would be the case, then it would buttress Pakistan's fledgling democracy. That would be good for all concerned, and all who care.

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