



## The Change of Guard in the Pakistan Army: An Assessment

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Pakistan has been under military regimes from 1956 till 1971, 1977 till 1988 and again from 1999 till 2008. A praetorian state, the army is seen to be the major backbone of political decision making, where the civilian political structure is relegated as a symbol of instability, corruption and indecision. However, Pakistan polity for the first time saw a democratic leadership completing two tenures consecutively, the army remaining in the backdrop of political decision making. The Pakistan Army still remain the major decision-making apparatus for foreign policy making, which works along with the various intelligence apparatus that supports the system.

Though the Army was meant to be a disciplined and neutral body, the Pakistani Army has been radicalized on Islam and politically motivated while having its own economy generating mechanisms within their administrative and bureaucratic structure, maintaining a check on the powers over the democratic decision makers, as well as coordinating their moves in accordance with their policies and actions. This makes the role of the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) an extremely important and influential position in the decision making apparatus for making domestic along with the foreign policies.

In the history of Pakistan's Army, very few Army Generals have received the grand exit that General Raheel Sharif received while retiring from the post of Chief of Army Staff on November 30, 2016. Setting all speculation to rest, he took the decision to retire, neither opting to usurp the existing civilian government, or opting to head regional security alliances, which was offered to him. Such an action has re-invigorated a sense of respect amongst the common masses for the Pakistan Army, which has been in a steady decline in the last decade.

This led to the appointment of the tenth Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS). The post was created during the tenure of Gen Tikka Khan in 1972 under the Prime Ministership of ZA Bhutto. Previously the post was known as Commander in Chief of Pakistan Army. From 1947-1951

the position was led by two British Generals which later, having four Pakistani military generals adorned the post. Pakistan being a praetorian state, the role of the Pakistani Army remains decisive in the country's domestic and external policy making. Most of the former Commander in Chiefs or COAS either joined mainstream politics, became governors of various provinces, and some served as National Security Advisors and diplomats. Whilst some were dishonourably discharged due to the then prevailing situations, some were tried for corruption, exiled or assassinated. Only Gen Abdul Waheed Kakkar and Gen Kayani opted for the alternative to stay away from public life after their retirements.

To look back, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, who had assumed the post of Chief of Army Staff (COAS) on October 6, 2007, taking over from General Pervez Musharraf, the then President and head of state remained in position for two tenures, for a period of six years, the only four star general to have a full term renewed. There was an initial speculation that Gen. Kayani would be offered to stay head of the military with a new title after stepping down as army chief, in a newly formed post to head a revamped and more powerful Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (JCSC). It was opined by Pakistani security analysts that PM Sharif would overhaul the JCSC, a largely ceremonial office, into a "central defence body" by restoring its command over the entire military establishment and giving it additional powers, including the charge of the nuclear arsenal.

Selection of Gen. Raheel Sharif as his successor was a challenging move for the civilian leadership, as Gen. Rashad Mahmood, who was closer to the Kayani faction, was thought to be his likely successor, along with Gen Tariq Khan, who was closer to the Pakistani lobbies in US and Gen Haroon Aslam, the then most senior official after Kayani. But Gen. Kayani, breaking the usual tradition retired without assuming any specially designated posts honourably and even criticized the then existing rumours that was going around of him staying back in power in some re-defined form. It was reported that choosing Gen Sharif, in the place of the names that were being speculated was a challenging task for the civilian leadership, as Gen Sharif was considered to be 'a rank outsider in the race for the army chief', a 'career infantry officer'. Gen Sharif was known for his lack of political ambition then, considered being a moderate, which remained to be one of the major factors that encouraged the civilian leadership to appoint him in the most sought after position, as per analysts. During his appointment, Gen Sharif already held the Hilal-i-Imtiaz military award, and was the younger brother of late Major Shabbir Sharif, who received the Nishan-i-Haider for his services in the 1971 war, who is respected in all Pakistani army ranks. PM Sharif though tacitly appointed Gen. Rashad Mahmood as the JCSC, without altering or revamping the existing body, which pacified the Kayani faction, which did not alter the then status quo that existed between the civilian and military leadership. Gen Sharif was serving as Inspector General Training and Evaluation before being appointed as COAS whereas Lt Gen Mahmood was serving as the Chief of General Staff before being appointed as the JCSC.

Gen Sharif remained as the COAS of Pakistan during one of the most difficult times, when the policy of terrorism that they nurtured brought significant collateral damage in the last few years. Terrorism has boomeranged on Pakistan through the killings of school children and university students, rising violence against sectarian and religious minorities in all the provinces,

killing of women and children, attacking lawyers and journalists, violence in army training schools and institutions and in the innumerable blasts that saw the loss of life and property. Carrying out Operation Zarb-e-Azb and trying to strengthen the National Action Plan (NAP) has been instrumental in bringing large tracts of Waziristan back to normalcy. It also assisted in providing confidence to regional and international investors to choose Pakistan, especially with the laying of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Project for which the Army allotted a separate security apparatus along with the existing Frontier Corps, Pakistani Rangers along with the various branches of the Pakistani Army.

The Pakistani Army also made rampant seizures and arrests in Karachi, which, as per their reports, has significantly brought down the rate of crime and violence, including target killings, extortions and drop in kidnapping activities. With the accompanied assistance of the intelligence agencies there were significant efforts to de-weaponise Karachi.

Under the guidance of Gen Sharif, there were attempts to curb corruption within the provinces, as well as making attempts to facilitate and strengthen mechanisms being created to enquire against corruption cases against the federal government. The arrest of Dr. Asim Hussain, Chairman of Higher Commission of Sindh on charges of corruption and nepotism in 2015 is one such example. Gen Sharif also remained instrumental along with the Ministry of Interior Affairs for speedy trials and convictions in terrorism related cases. He has also been instrumental in trying to prevent the isolation of Pakistan in front of the international audience due to the continued support that is provided to select terrorist groups and individuals in Pakistan and had reportedly suggested swift action against them to prevent such further sequestration of the nation.

Gen Sharif has played a considerable and strategic role in strengthening the position of Pakistan in the immediate neighbourhood as well as internationally, as during his tenure he has made multiple visits to strengthen military and strategic ties, coordinated joint military exercise with defence personnel of countries, procured as well as made attempts to re-invigorate the waning defence arms and equipments and accordingly been instrumental in forming strategic and defence alliances.

However, Gen Sharif though having played a dynamic role in trying to bring back vigour to an institution which was being blamed for all the maladies of the nation - failed on multiple fronts as well. The latter was perhaps instrumental in him having to step down, rather than opting for an extension.

- Nawaz Sharif, a Prime Minister with ailing health and rising challenges to the civilian government's stability on issues of corruption, would have been wary of offering Raheel Sharif another extension when he was gaining support within the masses of various provinces, as a better administrator. As precedence shows, the Prime Minister, in the past, has not favoured the renewal of tenures of those who seemed to have threatened his position.

- The friction within the army brass, which became visible in the All Parties' Conference that took place on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016, regarding using terrorism as a state policy, which is being supported and used especially by members from the military and the intelligence, which got exposed to the media, in a meeting between the civilian and military administration. The information created ripples between the civilian and military administrators and still remains a point of friction.
- After the plan of the CPEC being launched, a year has passed by, and though the first batch of goods were traded from Gwadar under a blanket of security cover, projects under the project still remain far from completion, facing serious bottlenecks of security, corruption and legislative hurdles. The responsibility of providing security was on the Pakistani Army, along with looking after the overall operations, which has been difficult for them with the increasing protests against the CPEC project, militancy in the provinces, and the constant conflict of power and credit sharing in between the civilian and military administration in regard to CPEC.
- Gen Sharif though was instrumental in carrying out Operation Zarb-e-Azb, but the entire operation remained biased and failed to curb terrorism. It failed to counter or stop any terrorist or extremist organisations functioning in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir or in Gilgit and Baltistan. Various terrorist groups still carry out attacks within Pakistan in Punjab, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, targeting and killing members from the religious minorities and other weaker sections of the Pakistani community. There have been attacks on army cadets college as well, along with numerous blasts in Shia mosques and churches. The 2014 Peshawar school attack that led to the brutal death of 132 children and the Bacha Khan University incident, created ripples within the Pakistani society, as the collateral damage went higher. So though violence, as per government reports, is on the decline, but terrorist actions continue unabated in Pakistan, moving into urban spaces, presenting new threats and challenges, targeting civilian and military targets, which was shown to be one of the biggest achievements of General Sharif.
- By the reason of his lack of political ambition; even though strengthened the democratic roots of Pakistan, it in the contrary weakened the Pakistani Army's position within the Pakistani civilian political leadership. He being summoned to the National Parliament now and then to state the security situation of the country, or the defence policies, was not seen by many of the higher echelons in the army establishment positively. His position during the 2014 stalemate in resolving the situation and his stand during the ongoing Panamagate scandal shows the resolve of keeping himself from taking direct political actions and steps which brings instability to the civilian political set-up and looks like his direct intervention in the then crisis.
- Gen Sharif also failed to curb increasing disappearances, extra-judicial killings and suppression of common civilians, lawyers, journalists as well as social activists in Balochistan and FATA in the name of curbing terrorism. As per the reports of the National Human Rights Commission in Pakistan, the incidence of such disappearances and killings has been on the rise. In the name of curbing corruption, Gen Sharif also was at a fix to maintain a neutral stand, as most of the actions taken were against parties, which were

opposed to the federal government, and not much action was taken against cases that involved politicians belonging to the ruling party.

- Gen Sharif also failed to initiate the creation of and nurture a cordial environment with its immediate neighbours, Afghanistan and India, to create an atmosphere of trust and understanding, and practically failed to strengthen any peace in the region.

### **Selection of the New COAS**

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in consultation with his core advisors, named the new military command, appointing Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa and Gen Zubair Mahmood Hayat as the chief of army staff and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC), respectively, in the hope of stabilising the fragile civil-military balance, on November 26<sup>th</sup> 2016. As per the comments of Gen Bajwa's former commanding officers, he is a strong proponent of the army not intruding into civilian space. As per reports, he had taken a positive stand during the 2014 anti-government sit-in, which may have weighed on his candidature. Gen Bajwa is an infantry officer, while Gen Hayat hails from the artillery. The latter has the honour of being the first gunner to become a four-star general since Gen Musharraf retired in 2007. Both officers are from the 62nd Pakistan Military Academy Long Course and were commissioned in the army in October 1980.<sup>i</sup> However, there have been some protests from religious hardliners regarding the General Bajwa having Ahmadi relatives.

Graduate of Canadian Forces Command and Staff College in Canada, Naval Post Graduate University, Monterey in the United States and National Defense University at Islamabad and an officer for 35 years, Gen Bajwa was previously posted as the Inspector General for Training and Evaluation at the General Headquarters, the same post held by Gen Raheel Sharif before he took over as army chief. He has also commanded 16 Baloch Regiment, an Infantry Brigade and has commanded Infantry Division in Northern Areas. Like Gen. Sharif, Gen Bajwa was not a front runner to the post and has now superseded Lt Gen Syed Wajid Hussain (chairman of Heavy Industries Taxila), Lt Gen Najibullah Khan (DG Joint Staff Headquarters), Lt Gen Ishfaq Nadeem Ahmed (Corps Commander Multan) and Lt Gen Javed Iqbal Ramday (Corps Commander Bahawalpur). The seniority list has almost never been strictly followed in appointing army chiefs. The list was followed most closely in 2007, when Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani — the senior-most officer — was appointed army chief. Both Gen Bajwa and Gen Hayat lack the experience of active combat because neither has been posted in a conflict zone. The newly appointed Army Chief however, is credited with having spent a considerable part of his military service in the Rawalpindi-based 10 Corps, which is responsible for guarding the Line of Control (LoC). Gen Bajwa's relatively more moderate view of the relationship with the civilian government, may have been the decisive factor in PM Sharif's decision.<sup>ii</sup>

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said, that there will be no immediate shift in Pakistan's military policy under the new army chief. The United States on November 27<sup>th</sup> issued a statement, welcoming Gen Bajwa's appointment and said it wanted to assist Pakistan with its domestic and regional counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts. The US embassy in Islamabad stated

that it wanted to help “Pakistani authorities to honour their pledge to prevent the use of Pakistan’s soil for terrorist attacks against its neighbours”.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Assessment**

This was PM Sharif’s fifth selection of the COAS, his former picks being Gen Asif Nawaz Janjua (1991), Gen Waheed Kakar (1993), Gen Pervez Musharraf (1998) and Gen Raheel Sharif (2013). Seniority, was not the main criterion. The factors that remained central in the selection process seems to be the neutrality of the candidate regarding his political ambitions in Pakistan, the candidate’s understanding of the Baloch problem, his closeness with the leaderships in Pentagon as well as with Beijing, his military record and the relationship he maintains with the civilian administration, Gen Bajwa appears to fulfill their conditions. This appointment remains important as the incumbent will not only be responsible for the promotion of Pakistan’s interests regionally and internationally, but also integral for the stability and longevity of the democratic interlude that has again made reappearance from 2008.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, “PM picks Gen Qamar Bajwa to head army”, *Dawn*, November 27, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1298904/pm-picks-gen-qamar-bajwa-to-head-army>

<sup>ii</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, “PM picks Gen Qamar Bajwa to head army”, *Dawn*, November 27, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1298904/pm-picks-gen-qamar-bajwa-to-head-army>

<sup>iii</sup> “New army chief brings no change in policy: Asif”, *Dawn*, November 28, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1299133/new-army-chief-brings-no-change-in-policy-asif>