

Pakistan's New Chief of Army Staff: Challenges for General Asim Munir

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Summary

General Asim Munir has succeeded General Qamar Javed Bajwa as the Chief of Army Staff of the Pakistan Army. Bajwa's tenure as the Army chief remained controversial. Under his leadership, the military establishment actively interfered in Pakistan's political process. Munir's appointment came after months of speculation, controversy and lobbying as Pakistan's overall political situation has become more complex and confusing due to former Prime Minister Imran Khan's persistent anti-establishment rhetoric and pressure tactics. The paper highlights several challenges for Munir while arguing that the most pressing challenge would be to reestablish the Army's tenable legitimacy to build an acceptable system of neutrality as well as to help the fragile Shehbaz Sharif government maintain a broadly non-confrontational system of governance based on constitutional accountability and electoral fairness.

Introduction

The Chief of Army Staff of the Pakistan Army (COAS) has often wielded real power in a broader 'battlespace' that extends beyond the military domain into the heart of Pakistan's polity, society and economy. One former Pakistani diplomat has expressed her frustration over the hype surrounding the appointment of the Army chief, arguing that the "impression this created was as if the entire destiny of the country depended on who made it to the army's top slot."¹ However, she did not downplay its significance and remarked:

"This is not to say such appointments are inconsequential in a country that has seen repeated military interventions in politics and where the Army continues to wield much influence and power. But the obsessive concern with the change of guard at GHQ [General Headquarters] made it appear as if this is the defining factor that will decide the country's direction in the years ahead."²

Nonetheless, there should be no doubt that the Army chief has the real power to make Pakistan's destiny. Even though the constitution provides no space for the Pakistan Army in the political domain, soon after his appointment, the Army chief often becomes almost equal to the prime minister in key decisions that affect Pakistan's destiny.

¹ Maleeha Lodhi, "Hype and reality", *Dawn*, 28 November 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1723585/hype-and-reality>.

² Ibid.

General Qamar Javed Bajwa remained the COAS for six years as a result of an extension given to him in 2019 by then Prime Minister Imran Khan. However, his tenure was marked by controversies as he was accused of first installing the Khan-led 'hybrid' regime and then removing him from power to pave the way for another pliant regime. During his final speech as the Army chief, Bajwa did not offer any original insights into the long-standing role of the military in Pakistan's polity.³ Though he acknowledged the unconstitutionality of the Army's interventions in politics, his implication was the Army has had to step out to safeguard Pakistan's national interest due to gross mismanagement by civilian politicians. However, Bajwa reserved most of his criticism for Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), accusing it of crafting "a fake and false" narrative.⁴

The onslaught of criticism faced by the Army is due to the perception that the military did not help the erstwhile PTI government against the opposition's onslaught. Soon after his ouster through a no-confidence vote, Khan accused "some individuals" in the military establishment of orchestrating his removal in collusion with "foreign conspirators".⁵

Failure of the Army's 'Project Imran'

The PTI government was widely perceived as the preferred party of the military establishment, which supported the PTI in the 2018 election. Bajwa's plan was for Khan to be the civilian face of the 'hybrid regime', while the Army would call the shots from behind. Bajwa would have an extended tenure and Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed would replace him.⁶ The military establishment might have believed that a handpicked prime minister would not only remain deferential to its dictates but would also manage economic and governance challenges. Because of the deferential media, the so-called "Bajwa doctrine" was also a matter of much public discussion. While his supporters hailed it a great vision, his detractors argued that it merely reflected the status quo and provided a veneer for indirect military rule by giving intellectual respectability to the Pakistani military's "entrenched notion of institutional supremacy".⁷

The military establishment's 'Project Khan', proved to be a political and diplomatic disaster, forcing the Army to take a back seat. Last year, Khan decided to assert his prime ministerial authority and insisted on retaining Hameed – these raised questions about his motives. However, Bajwa reacted by notifying the appointment of the new chief – apparently without Khan's consent – leading to a political standoff. There were some other issues that made things more complicated.

³ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Army has resolved to shun politics, assures Bajwa", *Dawn*, 24 November 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1722761>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Pakistan: Army scurries for damage control after Khan Khan's 'foreign conspiracy' Yorker", *The Print*, 19 April 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/pakistan-army-scurries-for-damage-control-after-Khan-khans-foreign-conspiracy-yorker/921681/>.

⁶ Mohammad Taqi, "Pakistan: Bajwa's Exit Will Not Herald Dramatic Shift in the Civil-Military Power Imbalance," *The Wire*, 27 November 2022, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/pakistan-qamar-bajwa-asim-munir-hybrid-regime>.

⁷ Husain Haqqani, "The Pakistani Army is trying to convince the world it's on the verge of a great transformation," *The Print*, 20 March 2018, <https://theprint.in/opinion/general-bajwa-cannot-avoid-politics-even-if-he-wishes-to/43137/>.

Finally, Khan had to face a no-confidence vote against his government. Perhaps he failed to realise that an unstable coalition government with a very thin majority was not in a position to challenge the military establishment, and it was particularly difficult for a government with feeble democratic credentials to do so. Over the last three years, his policy of confrontation had already weakened Pakistan's fragile democratic institutions.

There were several reasons, but the immediate factor behind Khan's exit was to prevent the possibility of Khan announcing Bajwa's successor. There were apprehensions that Khan would appoint Hameed as the next army chief, who would help him to eliminate all political opponents. Had Hameed been in charge of the Army, Khan would be able to win the next general election without much difficulty. Though the successful no-confidence vote frustrated Khan's political ambitions, his ouster has also created fresh difficulties for the new government and the military.

As Khan found himself unable to prevent his constitutional ouster, he went on a warpath and came up 'conspiracy theories' of regime change. He projected himself as a victim of political vendetta by the Americans with local collaborators. By questioning the military's 'neutral' stance, Khan also accused his political adversaries of playing a role similar to that of 'Mir Jafar' and 'Mir Sadiq', the two Muslim figures in British India who came to represent the ultimate act of treachery.⁸ Though Khan and his supporters ran a vigorous social media campaign against Bajwa and the new government, the Army preferred not to retaliate.

The manner in which Khan had acted against the Army's top brass and the Sharif brothers, it was obvious that anyone but Hameed would be selected as the COAS. Bajwa may have attempted to persuade the prime minister to appoint one of the generals close to him but that was not entirely undesirable to Khan. As an Indian analyst of Pakistani politics observed:

"The grapevine in Islamabad was that the military leadership – read General Qamar Bajwa – was pushing for a less controversial successor. Out of the top six generals from whom the next chief would be picked, one (Munir) was not acceptable to Imran and another (Faiz Hameed) was not acceptable to anyone else except Imran."⁹

However, it was Nawaz Sharif's choice that mattered.

The Nawaz Sharif Factor

The government made General Asim Munir's appointment as the Army chief following informal consultations involving Nawaz, the brother of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who has been living in exile in London. However, Nawaz has a record of choosing the wrong

⁸ Kingshuk Chatterjee, "Of traitors & Mir Jafars — and some uneasy truths", *Indian Express*, 24 April 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/of-traitors-mir-jafars-and-some-uneasy-truths-7884248/>.

⁹ Sushant Sareen, "Pakistan: The Sharifs pick a new sheriff and nemesis", Observer Research Foundation, 25 November 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/pakistan-the-sharifs-pick-a-new-sheriff-and-nemesis/>.

officer to lead the Army. General Abdul Wahid Kakar, whom Nawaz chose in 1993, had forced him and then President Ghulam Ishaq Khan to resign, paving the way for a general election. Nawaz's next pick was General Pervez Musharraf. However, the Sharif-Vajpayee summit in Lahore in February 1999 did not have Musharraf's backing. While Musharraf was angry over Nawaz's decision to withdraw troops from Kargil, the latter transferred the responsibility of Pakistan's botched-up military operation in Kargil onto the Army. Musharraf's dramatic dismissal by Nawaz soon after giving him an extension proved to be the last straw. However, Musharraf conducted a coup and imprisoned Nawaz. The next Army chief appointed by Nawaz was General Raheel Sharif, but relations between them became extremely tense within months of his appointment. Thereafter, Nawaz appointed Bajwa, who soon projected himself as a democrat willing to respect civilian authority but he began to undercut Nawaz. Bajwa was indirectly responsible for Nawaz's judicial ouster and his subsequent imprisonment on corruption charges. Nawaz had publicly accused Bajwa of plotting, together with Hameed, to bring down his government.¹⁰

Though the current government has picked Munir as the COAS, the latter was also part of the political engineering that had brought Khan into power. As head of the Military Intelligence and later the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Munir's positions helped the military install Khan as prime minister. However, Munir fell out with Khan, due to a number of reasons, including differences in corruption emanating from the residence of the prime minister. Soon, Khan had Munir removed as ISI chief and replaced him with Hameed. So, when the government had to make a choice, it was Munir's perceived hostility to Khan that led Nawaz to make a decision in his favour.

The Sharif brothers believed that Munir's appointment will strengthen the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which is facing a resurgent Khan.¹¹ It remains to be seen the extent to which Munir will prove to be politically useful for PML-N in the next election; Munir is likely to be dragged into the quagmire of Pakistan's political machinations sooner or later. Moreover, the Pakistan Army cannot avoid being involved in political issues. Tensions between civil and military authorities are unavoidable in Pakistan because the entire political system in the country has evolved in such a way that the Army is a key player rather than an impartial observer.

Military Dominance

For a country that has seen many instances of military rule, distinguishing between military and civilian can become very difficult because the end of a formal military rule does not always usher in effective civilian control of key aspects of national policy. Some militaries are able to rule without governing, as we have seen in Pakistan, Egypt, Myanmar and

¹⁰ "Nawaz Sharif accuses Pakistan's army chief of toppling his government", *Hindustan Times*, 17 October 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/nawaz-sharif-accuses-pakistan-s-army-chief-of-toppling-his-government/story-iyB1I9dA5Z47ta2pg8XhvM.html>.

¹¹ "PM Shehbaz Sharif visits elder brother Nawaz in London to consult on appointing new Pak army chief", *Times of India*, 10 November 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pm-shehbaz-sharif-visits-elder-brother-nawaz-in-london-to-consult-on-appointing-new-pak-army-chief/article-show/95425211.cms>.

Thailand. The Pakistan Army continues to exert power even when it has technically withdrawn to the barracks since the end of the Musharraf regime in 2008.

The dominance of the military was relentlessly challenged by the PTI. One of the reasons was internal division within the Army, as many military families backed Khan. However, Khan seems to have realised that he cannot survive politically by completely alienating the military establishment, as reflected in his reported directions to PTI leaders to refrain from criticising Munir.¹² Nonetheless, there is no possibility of a political rapprochement as the Pakistan Army's powerful position hampers the likelihood of genuine dialogue and collaboration with civilian leaders.

Munir's Challenges

Munir's list of challenges in his new role is significant and complicated. Besides internal political difficulties, Munir will need to manage growing security challenges on the Afghanistan border as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been steadily gaining ground after the Afghan Taliban captured power last year. Bajwa's work through intelligence-based military operations against terrorism has come undone with the resurgence of the TTP. On 28 November 2022, the TTP ended its five-month-long ceasefire with the Pakistan government and, on 30 November 2022, a suicide bomber from the TTP blew himself up near a patrolling police truck in the restive Balochistan province.¹³ Now that the TTP has officially ended the ceasefire, the group is expected to carry out more attacks in areas where it has maintained networks. It remains to be seen what Munir's policy regarding peace talks with the TTP would be. The demands for military intervention in the Swat Valley and tribal areas to suppress growing terrorism will only rise. Pakistan's relations with the Afghan Taliban have already taken a tumble due to differing perceptions on the TTP and the Durand Line dispute.

Considering the outsized role the Pakistan Army plays in foreign policy, Munir will have to deal with multiple challenges in improving Pakistan's tense relationship with the United States (US). Although Islamabad has made vigorous diplomatic efforts to minimise the dissonance in its relationship with Washington, the task is not an easy one. The US' historical difficulty in deciding whether Pakistan is a partner or an obstacle in the search for lasting solutions to Western dilemmas in Afghanistan has only compounded the problem for Munir. The US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, recently ruled out any possibility of Pakistan playing a role in facilitating talks between Washington and Kabul.¹⁴

During Khan's tumultuous tenure, Pakistan's ties with the US steadily deteriorated and US President Joe Biden showed his displeasure by not making the customary telephone call to

¹² "Khan directs PTI leaders to refrain from criticizing Pak's new army chief Asim Munir", *The Print*, 2 December 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/Khan-khan-directs-pti-leaders-to-refrain-from-criticizing-paks-new-army-chief-asim-munir/1246350/>.

¹³ "Pakistan Taliban claim suicide blast killing 3, injuring 28", *The Hindu*, 30 November 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-taliban-claim-suicide-blast-killing-3-injuring-23/article66203980.ece/amp/>.

¹⁴ Anwar Iqbal, "US doesn't need mediators for Taliban talks", *Dawn*, 23 October 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1716452>.

Khan. Following Khan's exit, Pakistan's military establishment has undertaken the arduous task of repairing ties with the US, as illustrated by Bajwa's visit to Washington in early October 2022,¹⁵ and his phone call to a senior US State Department official to secure the disbursement of funds from the International Monetary Fund. In light of these efforts, Munir would prefer to reorient Pakistan's military-diplomatic posture toward the US.

Conclusion

Munir's immediate challenge is to manage the Khan-led PTI which will keep the security establishment occupied in domestic politics. Since his ouster, Khan has been on the offensive, launching a campaign against the federal government and the military leadership. Following Bajwa's retirement, Khan has urged the new chief to disassociate the Army from "Bajwa's fascist actions", and remarked that the international perception of the Pakistani military is "increasingly negative" because the federal government was "seen as a mere puppet government".¹⁶ Therefore, the immediate challenge for Munir is to discard Bajwa's baggage at the earliest. To sum up, at a time when Khan's persistent anti-establishment politics has found much traction with the people, Munir's every move will be closely monitored at home and abroad.

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¹⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "United States hosts Pak Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa for a week", *Economic Times*, 3 October 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/united-states-hosts-pak-army-chief-qamar-javed-bajwa-for-a-week/articleshow/94628151.cms>.

¹⁶ "Khan says he expected new military leadership to have 'dissociated from past policies'", *The Nation*, 4 December 2022, <https://www.nation.com.pk/03-Dec-2022/Khan-says-he-expected-new-military-leadership-to-have-dissociated-from-past-policies?version=amp>.