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Pakistan Appoints a New Army Chief

There are good reasons why the appointment of a new Chief of the Army Staff in Pakistan has received so much media attention outside Pakistan. The country's location has given it a role that needs careful handling. This paper makes the case that the conduct of foreign affairs should be left to the elected representatives of the people.

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Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced on 26 November 2016 that he had appointed Lt Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa as the country's new Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). Assuming office on 29 November, Gen Bajwa became the 16th man in Pakistan's 70-year history to hold this position. He has succeeded General Raheel Sharif, the first person to relinquish this office at the appointed time. Four of their predecessors had gone on to remove the established governments and assume total political power. Together, they

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governed the country for 32 years, almost half the time in Pakistan's history. Field Marshal Ayub Khan ruled for 11 years, from 1958 to 1969 when he was replaced by General Yahya Khan who was eventually forced to resign in December 1971. The third military rule was under General Zia ul Haq who governed for 11 years, from 1977 to 1988. He died in office, killed in a plane crash. The fourth military ruler was General Pervez Musharraf who was in office from 1999 to 2008.

Three days after the prime minister's announcement, the fourth star was conferred on the appointee, as General Raheel Sharif (not a relation of the prime minister) passed on his bamboo swagger stick to his successor in an impressive military ceremony. The transfer of military authority was seen by some foreign observers as a sign of Pakistan's political maturation and the confidence the prime minister now has in his hold on power. "This time, Prime Minister Sharif seemed so confident that, after a dinner Thursday at which he praised Gen. Sharif as 'one of the finest military leader[s] of his generation,' he left Pakistan Friday for meeting in Turkmenistan, and named Bajwa as soon as he returned Saturday," wrote Pamela Constable in an extensive coverage for *The Washington Post* of what she called "changing the guard without a battle."²

This appointment of a new chief of the army staff is big news. It was carried on the front pages of all Pakistani newspapers. But even more important, the news got prominent play in the Western press. Long stories were written by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and most of the British press covered the story in detail. It was big news since the military in Pakistan, in spite of the return of democracy almost a decade ago, continues to wield power that goes beyond its legitimate domain. The men in uniform take important decisions in the areas that matter for the world. Pakistan's Afghan- and India-policies and its approach towards Islamic extremism remain under the control of the military. As the newspaper *Dawn's* Cyril Almeida wrote in a column, "from Kayani to Raheel, we've seen the new scheme: rule without ruling. It means keep the civilian pinned

² Pamela Constable, "Changing the guard without a battle," *The Washington Post*, November, 27, 2016, p. A20.

back generally and pinioned to the mat occasionally. It's worked well and the list of contrivances and convulsions is long and notorious."³

General's Raheel's Performance

Although there were some reservations, there was general agreement in the country that General Raheel had done well in his position as COAS. His focus was on moving against extremism in the country while leaving the delicate task of political development to politicians. In a conversation the author had with the General in November 2014 during his visit to Washington, he said he had three priorities. The first was to move against all terrorist organizations no matter their ideologies and location. "Non-state sectors had no role in the country. The law of the land must be obeyed." When we talked about the Zarb-e-Azb operation he had launched in North Waziristan, a tribal area on the border with Afghanistan that had been turned into a "terrorist resort," he said that the military's operations would not be easy and smooth. The terrorist organizations would resist and mount their own operations. He had predicted correctly; three weeks after the author's interview with Gen Sharif, the Taliban launched an attack on the Army School in Peshawar and killed more than 150 students and teachers.⁴

His second priority was to give space to the political forces in the country to develop the nation's political structure. This had not happened earlier because of interference by the military in the process. He was determined to let politicians move at the pace and in the direction of their choosing. The third priority was economic recovery. "We in the military know very little about this. We can only hope that our economic managers understand what needs to be done."

The fact that in several public opinion surveys including those conducted by Pew Research Center, Gen Raheel Sharif was reported to be the most popular figure in Pakistan with approval rating far higher than those of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and opposition

³ Cyril Almeida, "Number 16," *Dawn*, November 27, 2016, p. 6.

⁴ Shahid Javed Burki, *Terrorism's most devastating blow in Pakistan*, ISAS Brief No. 355 – 23 December 2014, <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg>

leaders such as Imran Khan was attributed by some to the public relations program mounted by the Inter-Services Public Relations office, ISPR. “This was accompanied by deliberate myth-making around General Raheel as the ‘greatest general’ to have ever walked the face of this country,” wrote Talat Hussain for the newspaper, *The News*. “Every step he took to go to his office was made to sound like a favor to the nation.”⁵

Challenges ahead

There may be some difference in emphasis but the policy priorities pursued by his predecessor will likely be those the new COAS will follow. In addition to fighting terrorism,⁶ keeping the military out of politics, and giving a helping hand in developing the economy, the new army chief would do well to give more space to political leaders to conduct the country’s foreign affairs. At this time, relations with India have deteriorated to the point where New Delhi was able to prevent the summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) from being held in Islamabad early this fall. Both countries are violating almost on a daily basis the cease-fire agreement concluded in 2003 to manage the “line of control,” the effective border between the Indian and Pakistani-held parts of Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan also has an important role to play in bringing peace to Afghanistan as America continues to disengage from that country. And finally, Pakistan’s relations with the United States will require some deft handling with the coming to power of president-elect Donald Trump in Washington in January 2017. All these matters need to be left in the hands of civilian authorities.

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⁵ Talat Hussain, “Chief don’ts,” *The News*, November 27, 2016, p. 6.

⁶ (Editor’s Note: Pakistan’s Inter-Services Public Relations Office (ISPR) has, on 30 November 2016, quoted Gen Bajwa as saying, during his first visit to field formations, that the “war against terrorism will continue with focused approach and it will be taken to its logical conclusion till total elimination of terrorism from our soil.”)