

ISAS Insights

No. 161 – 16 March 2012

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Change of Guard at Pakistan's ISI: Some Implications

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Abstract

In Pakistan, appointments to senior staff positions in the military often tend to acquire disproportionate political importance. This is also the case with the incoming head of the awe-inspiring Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's principal spy agency, Lieutenant General Zaheerul Islam. He assumes office in March 2012. In direct contradiction of Clemenceau's famous dictum, Pakistan is milieu where war is considered too important to be left to the civilians! The matrix that Islam will operate on is in constant flux, nationally and regionally. It will not be his responsibility to formulate state policies but given the prevalent culture of governance in Pakistan, he will certainly be in a position to influence, and even at times to shape, them. His contribution to strategy can be positive and constructive, depending on how dexterously he is able to play his cards in a challenging and scenario.

Introduction

In most countries, military appointments, even to senior posts, are generally considered routine. They rarely generate discussions. They may merit media attention but ordinarily not academic analyses. Not so in Pakistan. In that country these are scrutinised with great care. Not just by its citizens, but also by foreigners who have interest in that volatile land. Their

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numbers are legion. For, Pakistan is high in the pecking order of interest of most analysts of contemporary global politics. It is one of the world's largest Muslim countries. It is strategically located in one of the most troubled parts of the planet. Violence, even of extreme nature, is of regular occurrence in that turbulent democracy. Its institutions of governance are woefully fragile. Yet, it is militarily one of the strongest powers that exist, with a rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal, and an army that is both large and proud. Sometimes though, it is hard-pressed to find feathers for its caps (or berets). Its combat credentials have not always been remarkable. Yet politically and traditionally, the proverbial 'man on horseback', the soldier, remains powerful. And the most powerful component among them is the awe-inspiring Inter-Services Intelligence, the ISI, the principal spy agency. That is why the recent placement at its head of Lt General Zaheerul Islam attracts such attention and provokes examination. He is due to assume office on 18 March 2012.

The Appointee's Background

Lt General Zaheerul Islam's background is impeccably military. He has been the immediate past Corps Commander of Karachi. This position is usually reserved for the army chief's confidant. Also, for someone with a commendable professional record. One would expect, therefore, a degree of closeness between him and the Chief of Staff Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. While the appointment of the Director General of the ISI is made by the Prime Minister, one would have to be naïve to believe that this can be done without the active consent or even without nomination by the Chief of Staff. Moreover, while Gen Islam will formally report to Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, it is a safe bet that Gen Kayani will always be kept informed of all such communications. So the departure of Lt General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, and his replacement by Islam is not to be construed as an erosion of power of the Chief, or as the accretion of strength to the Prime Minister. Most things will remain the same.

Islam comes of an intensely military family. His father was a Brigadier General in the Pakistan Army. One of his uncles was the near-legendary Shah Nawaz Khan of India, a general in Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Azad Hind Fauj, aka the Indian National Army. As is well known, Bose wanted to liberate India from the British during the Second World War by force with aid and comfort from the Japanese. He assumed that the end would justify the means. But Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru preferred the British to the Japanese. Indeed, Nehru did not allow Shah Nawaz Khan and others of his ilk to rejoin the Indian Army when he was Prime Minister of the Dominion of India, and, as some have argued, still somewhat chary of cutting loose the British connection in its entirety. But the Indian people reacted differently, and returned Shah Nawaz Khan to the Parliament no less than four times. But the two, Khan and Islam, had never met. Also reported in the media now was a possible familial link between Islam and the King of Bollywood, Shah Rukh Khan. The Pakistan Army denied it in decent haste. Some believe though, were it a fact, political bilateral relations would have been better served.

On a Sticky Wicket

In cricketing parlance, the wicket Islam is being sent in to bat on could not be stickier. In the best of times, the ISI chief confronts a stupendous task. At present, the difficulties are immense. At home, the civilian masters have grown deeply suspicious of the military in general and of the ISI in particular. And Pakistan's American friends, if they can at all be described as such these days, are getting increasingly wary. These make for huge complexities. However, from some key quarters there are more pleasant signals. The Indians have wisely kept themselves aloof from any of the many intramural feuding in the Pakistan government, and the Chinese as a rule are non-interfering, offering 'all-weather friendship' to all and sundry in Pakistani politics.

Pasha, named by the Time magazine recently as one of the world's 100 most powerful figures, should have heaved a sigh of relief at being reassigned, though the pang of parting from this office may have been palpable to his own person. In Pakistan, old soldiers never die, as the saying goes: but nor do they simply fade away, by the same token. They are usually transferred to another post, uniformed or otherwise. Luckier among them land themselves plum ambassadorial posts (Lt General Asad Durrani, for instance). Some others choose to be political activists or strategic commentators (one such, of somewhat fiery reputation, is Lt General Hamid Gul). Of the 17 Generals who have headed the ISI since its founding in 1959, only one has made it to the top in the Army; he is none other than Kayani himself. No one has been a head of State. So, from lessons of the past, undue ambitions, if any, on the part of the incumbent would not be warranted. Only for a job done well there may be a cushy reward at the end, but nothing overly attractive.

The Task Ahead

Any chief of ISI is likely to have the Sword of Damocles hanging above his head. Pasha, for instance, was sharply criticised for failing to detect the American raid on Abbottabad that killed Osama bin Laden last year. Or for failing to discover in the first place that Osama was living in Abbottabad under the Army's very nose (or had he known it and kept it secret?) For these the Parliament had put him on the carpet, and he had reportedly offered to resign. The Prime Minister might not have acted then, but would have taken note. Pasha was also suspected of having travelled to the Gulf countries to seek their support for a coup, an unlikely accusation. Then, though it could not have been his responsibility, 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed in a US-led operation during which the Pakistani side was bewilderingly passive. The Army was taking a lot of flak, and a major change was apparently called for. Pasha's retirement date fell due, and not to renew his services would have seemed an advisable course of action without ruffling too many feathers. Islam was ready and much like Barkis in David Copperfield willing, with the right connections. There were other aspirants, as is wont to happen in such cases. One such was Major General Sahibzada Isfandiyar Ali

Khan Pataudi (of blue blooded feudal lineage, a scion of that Indian Princely family). But Islam had a higher military rank and greater experience, and became the chosen one.

Islam has his work cut out for him. He will endeavour to gain back for the ISI the confidence of the country's civilian, though some will say nominal, rulers. He is likely to remain in office till October 2014 when he is due to retire. This means he will see through the next elections, and almost certainly changes in political governance. The Americans have always proved a challenge for the ISI chiefs. While Pasha was at least generally acceptable to Washington, and often liked, his predecessor Lt General Nadeem Taj had very testy relations with the US. It saw him as being in cahoots with extremists (though it is not easy for any ISI head to evade this perception, as indeed it was not so for Pasha, and nor will it be so for Islam). Right now the Americans are in the throes of a deep crisis in Afghanistan, the latest being the burning of copies of the Holy Quran and the mindless shooting spree of a rogue soldier. By such actions they have well and truly shot themselves in the foot. Consequently, they are likely to leave that country sooner than later. So how does Pakistan position itself in that unruly land? Since much of the Pakistani public see the West as a bigger threat, is it, somewhat ironically, a good time to mend fences with India? Recently in Singapore the Indian Foreign Minister S M Krishna has stated that India-Pakistan wars are facts of the last century; the present has brought with it promises of change of mindset. He spoke glowingly and warmly of his past and anticipated interactions with the new Pakistani Foreign Minister, Ms Hina Rabbani Khar. These are heartening sentiments. How can one take positive advantage of such changing moods?

Conclusion

This is the matrix on which the new Director General of ISI will operate. He will himself not formulate policies with regard to any of these issues. But he will doubtless be in a position to influence them. His contribution is likely to come, drip by drip, on a daily basis, in a tactical fashion, but eventually feeding into the stream of strategy. It is not always easy to drink the intoxicating draught of authority and yet keep a steady head. The French statesman Georges Clemenceau had said that war was too important to be left to the generals. In Pakistan, the exact opposite is felt to be true: war is seen to be too important to be left to the civilians and is expected to be conducted by generals. Yet even here, things may be in a state of flux, changing, albeit ever so slowly. Gilani of late has shown courage and commitment in facing up to the courts and critics. In any State every citizen has the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of the nation's destiny. For Gen Islam it will be much more than that of an average citizen. One hopes that his contribution will be constructive and positive and point towards calm, and stability.

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