

Gen. Raheel Sharif: Chief Has Changed, Army Remains the Same

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A very good measure of the Pakistan Army's enduring influence in national security and foreign policy matters and potential for interference in domestic politics is perhaps the anticipation and interest within Pakistan on the appointment of the new chief. What this suggests is that while the army chief is new, the army he belongs to represents the same old army which looms like a dark shadow over the political landscape. Chances, therefore, are that the change of face in the GHQ in Rawalpindi is not going to materially change the army, much less dilute its control over issues like security, defence and foreign policy.

While it is entirely possible that the army desists from imposing itself on the civilian government in an overt or direct manner, it will in all likelihood continue to pull the strings and manipulate things from behind the scenes by intervening in a more nuanced and oblique manner on a range of issues from terrorism and extremism to relations with Afghanistan, US and of course India. This is not so much because the army has lost the ability to intervene directly – according to a former Prime Minister, all it takes is one jeep and two trucks for the army to overthrow a civilian government – as it is because the army wouldn't want to directly take responsibility for handling the growing mess inside the country.

A lot has been made of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif taking his time to select the next army chief and signalling civilian supremacy by picking the number three in the seniority list. The fact, however, is that superseding is the norm in the selection of the army's top rank. Out of 15 army chiefs, only two were selected on basis of seniority; all others broke the line of succession. The norm, therefore, is to either supercede and/or 'kick upstairs' i.e. appoint the senior-most general to the largely ceremonial position of the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee. This time there has been both. The senior-most Haroon Aslam was superceded and the next in line Rashad Mehmood was 'kicked upstairs', paving the way for Raheel Sharif to be the next Chief. Nawaz Sharif has done this in the past as well when he appointed Waheed Kakar and Pervez Musharraf, both of whom later forced him out of office in his first two terms as Prime Minister. In other words, the appointee can become the nemesis. That is the immutable law of Pakistani politics. Whether Raheel Sharif will remain subservient to civilian authority because 'Pakistan has changed' and 'democracy is here to stay' remains to be seen.

The Pakistanis are suddenly attributing qualities and skills to Raheel Sharif that no one, not even the General himself, knew he possessed. For instance, it is being lauded that as the

Inspector General Training and Evaluation (his last post before the appointment) he was responsible for not only bringing in new doctrines and training modules to reorient and refocus the Pakistan Army to the internal threat of terrorism and insurgency, but also for forging a new military doctrine to counter India's so-called 'Cold Start' doctrine.

For one, as IGT&E Gen Sharif was effectively sidelined and his involvement in the new doctrines was incidental. By no stretch of imagination a Clausewitz or a Rommel or Sun Tzu! For another, the talk of the internal threat as the biggest challenge did not start with either Gen Kayani or after Gen Raheel Sharif's appointment as IGT&E. Back in 2003, Gen Pervez Musharraf had first spoken about the internal threat of terrorism and extremism becoming existential challenge. From around 2005-06 the Pakistan Army recognised that it wasn't trained or equipped to handle the internal threat. Since then, there has been a steady introduction of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism training modules in the military academies. To credit Gen Raheel Sharif with introducing new concepts in COIN/CT is nothing more than apple-polishing. As far as countering India's 'Cold Start' doctrine is concerned, the fact is that the Pakistan army first carried out the Azm-e-Nau series of exercise manoeuvres in 2009-10 when Gen Raheel Sharif was given charge of the Bahawalpur Corps. Since then the Pakistan army has consistently fine-tuned its operational plans against India and Gen Sharif was at best involved in these plans tangentially.

Clearly, while Gen Sharif had all the qualifications for being elevated to the position of the chief, his career record indicates that he wasn't quite the bright spark that he is being made out. He never really got charge of any of the operationally and/or politically important positions (except perhaps for GOC Lahore). There is a pecking order in both command and staff postings and generally the army chief wouldn't want to waste his best officers in relatively insignificant positions like IGT&E. Although general officers are required to serve in both command and staff positions – something that Gen Sharif has done – there are some postings that within the institution are regarded as more powerful and prestigious than others. For instance, in command postings, it is one thing to command a strike corps (Mangla and Multan) or a politically important corps (Rawalpindi, Lahore or Karachi) or even an operationally crucial corps (Quetta and Peshawar) and quite another to command the Gujranwala or Bahawalpur Corps. Similarly, in staff postings, it is one thing to be Chief of General Staff or Adjutant General or even Military Secretary and quite another to be handling logistics or training. That Gen Sharif wasn't quite the go-getter general might well have worked in his favour. A high-profile officer highly regarded in the military circles would almost definitely spook the civilian leadership. There is of course no guarantee that an apparently meek and relatively modest officer will not shake the political applecourt. After all, Ziaul Haq was obsequiousness personified in front of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto!

Insofar as bringing a paradigm change of the Pakistan army is concerned, the personality and world view of the chief plays only a small part. The chief can at best tinker with things but sweeping changes are partly collegial (involving all the top formation commanders) and partly by a coterie. As yet there is no clinching evidence that would suggest that the Pakistan army is ready to either accept civilian supremacy or change its inimical policy towards India or Afghanistan or even on the use of terrorists as instruments of state policy. If anything, it is sheer disinformation that Pakistan Army's focus is no longer India-centric.

Given that Gen Raheel Sharif's elder brother died in the 1971 war could be a chip on his shoulder when it comes to India. What is more, almost all of Gen Sharif's command postings at the battalion, brigade, division and corps levels have been on the Indian border. This could well mean that he will remain India-centric. There are of course two possibilities. The more likely one is that his command postings have made him inveterately hostile to India, in which case there will be no change in the Army's policy of hostility and export of terrorism. But there is also a sliver of a chance that he has realised the futility of the current paradigm and therefore could try to make some changes in the Army's India policy. This will however be contingent on how much he is able to remould the thinking among his generals, which in turn will depend on whether or not he has the personality, charisma and the ability and desire to change the military's mindset on India.

The other great challenge will be on civil military relations. There is disquiet in the army over the seeming drift in affairs of state. If this continues and the chief doesn't intervene then it could affect the morale of the troops. But if he intervenes then it will create tensions in civil-military relations. Arresting the drift is not going to be easy as it will require paying a big political cost, something that politicians are generally reluctant to do. Finally, there is the all important issue of terrorism and insurgency as well as relations with Afghanistan and US. Will the Pakistan Army under Gen Sharif try to make a Faustian bargain on these issues or will the Army now try to clean up the terrorist nests that it has been tolerating and supporting for so long. If it is the latter then things are likely to get worse in the short run, but hold out the hope for a better future. But if it is the former then there could be some short term relief but in the long term Pakistan will face unmitigated disaster.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.