Pakistan’s New Army Chief:
The Sharif Balance Sheet & the Bajwa Forecast

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For the first time in the last two decades, Pakistan’s Army Chief retired as per scheduled without any extension. Early 2016, Gen Raheel Sharif, Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff (COAS) stated in public: *I do not believe in extension and will retire on the due date*. And he retired in late November, with the government announcing Gen Qamar Bajwa as the next Army Chief.

What are the major challenges for Gen Bajwa? Of course, it is not a clean slate for him; the legacy of his predecessor Gen Raheel Sharif will play an important role in shaping his options. Will he continue where Gen Sharif left, or will he chart his own roadmap? What is the Sharif legacy? And what is the Bajwa forecast?

**Gen Sharif to Gen Bajwa**
The transition was smooth and without much of politicking and controversies. Gen Bajwa will have to thank both the Sharifs for this. Gen Sharif resisted the temptations and even pressure from a section to get an extension. There were posters in public demanding that Gen Sharif should continue and the opposition parties would not have any major objections, if Gen Sharif demanded an extension. While an extension of the COAS in a democracy is Parliamentary prerogative, Pakistan is no ordinary democracy and its military chief is no ordinary General. During the recent decades, it was the other way around; the COAS would decide whether he would retire or need an extension!

Gen Sharif’s balance sheet on domestic and external fronts is complex. Though his contribution to internal security are eulogised
Gen Sharif walked a tight rope and kept civil-military balance, despite provocation by political leaders, especially Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri. Both in 2014 and recently in 2016, the opposition parties, especially Imran Khan played dirty expecting the military to intervene. There were rumours in 2014, on the role played by some of ISI officials in engineering/supporting the PTI-PAT agitational politics. However, Gen Sharif kept the military away from interference with the political process on both occasions. In 2014, Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri dispersed after getting fatigued and in 2016, the judiciary intervened (and the issue is still being discussed in the Supreme Court).

Of course, the other Sharif – Nawaz, was extra careful, thanks to his own history in the last two decades vis-a-vis the military. In terms of dealing with India and Afghanistan, Sharif seemed to have outsourced the foreign policy to the GHQ. Domestically, after the decline of “political dialogue with the TTP” and a national con-
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Gen Bajwa’s options are limited in continuing Zarb-e-Azb. Given the popular expectations and the resolve of militants, the new Chief will have no option than to continue the military operations.

What will Gen Bajwa do? Most likely he will continue Gen Sharif’s strategy. Though Gen Sharif did not publicly oppose Nawz Sharif, silently he took away important portfolios from the Prime Minister. Dealing with India and Afghanistan, and going after the TTP and MQM – were strategies planned and executed in the GHQ in Rawalpindi and not in the Parliament in Islamabad. Gen Bajwa is most likely to continue this strategy.

Continuing with the Zarb-e-Azb

Gen Bajwa’s options are limited in continuing Zarb-e-Azb. Given the popular expectations and the resolve of militants, the new Chief will have no option than to continue the military operations. Gen Sharif’s success in fighting the Pakistani Taliban was mixed. To be fair to him, he inherited a complicated counter insurgency strategy vis-a-vis the TTP from his predecessor Gen Kayani. His predecessor believed in “Talking to the TTP” - a widely accepted strategy then; it was a myopia and naturally it failed.

Gen Sharif changed the above strategy and did not look back. He converted the cyclic strategy of talks and military operations vis-a-vis the Pakistani Taliban into unilinear. Gen Kayani’s counter terrorism strategy had multiple shades. The TTP’s ingress outside the Federally Administered Tribal Agency (FATA) was fought hard, but Kayani did go slow in opening a bold front within Taliban stronghold (Swat being the only exception). Perhaps, the military establishment as a whole was apprehensive of a blow back then.

Gen Sharif took on the TTP – both within and outside the FATA. Despite the high profile TTP attacks in Peshawar (December 2014), Charsadda (January 2016) and Quetta (October 2016), Gen Sharif did not waver.

Will Gen Bajwa pursue a similar strategy? Has Gen Sharif set in motion a path that is irreversible? Given the predominant public support for action against the Pakistani Taliban and TTP’s mounting attacks, it will be difficult for the next COAS to alter the course. Besides his own personal resolve, Gen Sharif also seems to have succeeded in creating a contingent within the Establishment by boosting the sagging morale of his officers. He may not have rooted out terrorism by the end of 2016 as he had predicted ear-
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lier, but his resolve will be his legacy. And Gen Bajwa has a bigger opportunity to take this forward, given the public support.

Cleansing Karachi

Karachi will pose a tough challenge domestically for Gen Bajwa. Gen Sharif’s decision to call the MQM (especially Altaf Hussain) bluff and start a cleansing operation in Karachi should be as important as the fight against the Pakistani Taliban. It was not an easy decision for Gen Sharif, where his predecessors dithered on Altaf Hussain. When the other Generals kept away from interfering in Karachi’s self regulated chaos, Gen Sharif decided to establish order in Pakistan’s biggest city, economic capital and an ethnic cauldron.

One would question the means employed in going after Altaf Hussain and the MQM leadership; however, the End seems to justify it. Today Altaf Hussain stands thoroughly dis-credited and is unlikely to bounce back and hold Karachi for ransom from London. The MQM is bracing for a new era without Hussain; there have been reports recently that Musharraf may take over!

Though the actions against the MQM have discredited Altaf Hussain, Karachi is far from becoming stable. Given the multiplicity of actors (religious parties, sectarian organizations, al Qaeda and Taliban remnants and criminal groups), the decline of MQM’s hold does not automatically lead to Karachi’s peace. The new COAS will have to face the consequences, but hopefully continue to keep MQM on leash.

The Indo-Afghan Challenge

The biggest challenge for Gen Bajwa will be on both borders – Pak-Indian and Pak-Afghan. Gen Sharif is leaving violent borders for Bajwa to handle. Though many within Pakistan may appreciate Gen Sharif’s initiatives and “strong” responses, his tenure witnessed violent borders on both sides - Indian and Afghan. Both are not easy borders for any COAS, but Gen Sharif’s strategies did not secure them any better.

While Gen Sharif did take stern action against the TTP and in Karachi, conspicuous by absence is any concrete action towards those Pakistani jihadi groups with an anti-India posture – especially the Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Toiba. Perhaps, Gen Sharif did not want to open another front within Pakistan. Still, it would not
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Will Gen Bajwa rework Pakistan’s Kashmir approach? Gen Sharif misjudged the violence within Kashmir valley in 2016; his actions and response along the LoC, has in fact, diverted the attention from whatever has been happening within the Valley.

Will Gen Bajwa rework Pakistan’s Kashmir approach? Gen Sharif misjudged the violence within Kashmir valley in 2016; his actions and response along the LoC, has in fact, diverted the attention from whatever has been happening within the Valley. Though Pakistan has been accusing India for using disproportionate force, it was a response and retaliation. The new COAS would face a tough India, acting tougher along the LoC.

Besides Indo-Pak border and Kashmir, another challenge for Gen Bajwa would be the situation along the Afghan border. Though Gen Sharif inherited an unstable Durand Line, he neither secured it nor improved it. Today Pak-Afghan border – politically, demographically and militarily is as volatile as when he took over. Gen Sharif was unwilling to change Pakistan’s strategy towards the Afghan Taliban and the Huqqani network.

With the deaths of Mullah Omar and his successor later, Gen Sharif had a golden opportunity to rework Pakistan’s strategy towards the Afghan Taliban, and thereby towards Kabul. Unfortunately, he could not take a bolder decision on Afghan Taliban, as he did with the Pakistani one. As a result, Kabul, especially Ashraf Ghani took a U-turn in rapprochement strategy towards Islamabad and Rawalpindi. While Karzai was inherently anti-Pakistan, Ghani was wavering initially towards Pakistan. Gen Sharif should have sensed the opportunity and seized it. The failure of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) on Afghanistan and thereby Pakistan’s leverage as well, is likely to come back and haunt the new COAS more.

While Pakistan is basking on their new found Eldorado – the China
Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), recent initiatives by India, especially Chabahar and its larger implications along with Iran and Central Asia is likely to reduce the Afghan dependence on Pakistan in the long term. The Indo-Iranian convergence along with Central Asian countries on Afghanistan (which will play out further during the forthcoming Heart of Asia conference in New Delhi) effectively will further reduce Pakistan's leverages in Kabul. Gen Bajwa will face the consequences of Sharif’s inability to work with Kabul.

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To conclude, domestically Gen Sharif took bolder decisions in dealing with the Pakistani Taliban and MQM, and kept the military away from interfering in political equations between the government and opposition. Not seeking an extension and retiring as scheduled, whether will be followed later or not, but sets a precedent. The Chief of Army Staff as an institution is popular within Pakistan than it has been ever during the last decades. And the Prime Minister is willing to work with, even cede his decision making powers on crucial issues to the Army Chief Gen Bajwa should be able to reap the benefits.

Externally, having taken control of Pakistan’s Afghan and India policy, Gen Sharif could not stabilize the borders and has left Pakistan borders in an unstable situation than it was, when he took over. Gen Bajwa will be reaping the whirlwind on both sides of Pakistan.

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Views expressed are author’s own.