

Challenges for new military leadership

By Faisal Ahmed

The military transition in Pakistan is taking place at a turbulent time for Pakistan, as the country grapples with host of political, internal, external and economic challenges. Military, over the decades, has come to wield extraordinary influence in shaping the course of country's politics, influencing its political economy and directing its foreign relations.

Domestic Politics

The foremost challenge for the new military brass is to inject degree of certainty and stability in a deeply polarized political environment. Next general elections are slated for October 2023, when current assemblies are scheduled to complete their terms. Imran Khan, the main opposition leader who was ousted from power in April this year, is calling for early elections and demonstrating his street power. In the process, he has attacked the outgoing army chief Gen Bajwa and clashed with military brass over their professed 'neutrality' and 'apolitical' role in recent months. The current government wants to complete its remaining tenure to reclaim lost political space. In the process, political system is experiencing unprecedented dysfunction. The new military brass would, thus, first have to improve army's public image that has been sullied by controversies, besides injecting stability in the political environment by ensuring that the policy decision taken under Gen Bajwa to remain away from politics continues to be adhered to.

Economy

At present, Pakistan's most pressing challenge is economy. Even outgoing army chief Gen Bajwa acknowledged that during his last week in office. Pakistan is under an International Monetary Fund Programme (IMF) to avert default and stabilize a balance of payment crisis. The measures to stabilize the economy have unleashed a wave of high inflation, now touching nearly 30 percent, while foreign exchange reserves continue to remain under stress. In turn, economy has experienced contraction as State Bank has increased interest rates to 16 percent now. Economic situation is now compounded by global economic downturn, and an increase in price of oil and diversion of LNG cargoes to Europe in the wake of Russia-Ukraine conflict. As government focuses on stabilizing economy and managing the worsening energy crisis in winters, Pakistan would require extensive financial support from friendly countries to stay afloat. Here Gen Munir would have to engage with key capitals such as Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, Doha, Beijing and Washington to indicate that Pakistan is committed towards ensuring implementation of IMF program without any impact from political situation on the economic policy-making.

Internal Security

The internal security situation in Pakistan is rapidly aggravating. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, a conglomerate of militant organizations, has formally announced an end to ceasefire with the Army and vowed attacks throughout the country. Just two days after the announcement, TTP claimed

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its first attack on security personnel in the suburbs of Quetta. The attack marked the start of a new cycle of violence in the country.

Gen Munir will have to contend with a key question as to how to deal with TTP now that Afghan Taliban are in power? Last year, Pakistan engaged in talks with TTP, that were facilitated by the Afghan Taliban. These talks have not yielded a breakthrough. Meanwhile, attacks on army patrols and frontier corps troops by TTP increased over the past three months during which 132 terrorist were reported, including 50 alone in November.

Linked with it is the tense border security situation along the Afghan border. This challenge warrants review of current strategy towards TTP and including relations with Afghan Taliban. Beyond TTP, conflict in Baluchistan continues to simmer. Baloch militant have undertaken attacks against Chinese nationals. A new policy on engaging and handling Baloch militancy is also warranted.

Foreign Relations

In engagement with the international community, Pakistan confronts a familiar set of choices and challenges. In the neighborhood, Pakistan needs to maintain steady engagement with China for both economic security and defence needs. This relationship has gained an added regional and international significance due to China's proactive international role now. Here, Pakistan-India relationship becomes important. Islamabad-New Delhi ties are frozen and any forward movement is not expected at least till mid 2024, till completion of electoral cycles in both countries. However, focus of new army command will be to see that both sides continue to manage the tense relationship and keep implementing ceasefire understanding renewed in February 2021. A key indicator of Gen Munir's approach towards India will be, if the back-channel talks are resumed.

With Iran and Gulf, Pakistan continues to maintain engagement with both sides. The increasing economic and security ties with key Gulf nations mean that Pakistan has to increasingly engage with Gulf capitals. Islamabad is now significantly dependent on oil facilities from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and financial support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE. Meanwhile, border security, trade and ties with Iran are crucial in the broader regional context. Here, Gen Munir will have a tough challenge navigating Iran-Gulf tension while advancing Pakistan's interests. This situation becomes even more complicated when the perception of Gen Munir having a hardline stance on Iran is taken into consideration.

Similarly, at the global level, the sharpening strategic competition between China and the US places Pakistan in a delicate position with regards to deepening its strategic relations with China and simultaneously maintaining functional ties with the US. Pakistan has to engage with the US on range of interests including economic, security and international diplomatic support. Islamabad cannot pick sides between the two great powers and thus, have to deftly navigate the international strategic landscape. Here, engagement with European countries is crucial to expanding Pakistan's political, economic and security space in the US-China tensions.

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