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Pakistan's Battered Tribal Regions Set the Stage for New Prime Minister

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's new Prime Minister, Imran Khan, faces formidable challenges. For now, the most difficult one may yet be mollifying his restive fellow Pashtuns who have suffered grievously in the Army's anti-terror operations in the country's tribal regions.

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INTRODUCTION

Three months before Imran Khan was sworn in on 18 August as Pakistan's new prime minister, Islamabad had the appearance of serenity; the anxieties of a country on the threshold of electing a new leader were not visible in the mainstream mass media, where content is heavily censored. Television news channels and English-language print media faced both an aggressive establishment, and nationalist trolls, who accused them of committing what they called "anti-national" acts such as questioning the armed forces for pandering to the likes of Islamist militant Hafiz Sayeed or giving space to the views of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who had been convicted for corruption.

In an interview in May,¹ Sharif attacked the Pakistani Army for doing little to control the terrorists that crossed over to Mumbai in 2008. His comments may have caused consternation in the Army's top leadership and stirred India; yet, they made little impact in Pakistan domestically as the newspaper's circulation is controlled. For most of the journalists who cover Pakistan, they would only learn of the contents of that interview from the strong denial that was subsequently issued by the Director General of Inter Services Public Relation (DGISPR), Gen. Asif Ghafoor, during his interaction with journalists, including this author. Some Pakistani editors also joined the press conference with Gen. Ghafoor, where he was asked about a wide range of issues including those that are not traditionally in the purview of an Army spokesperson. For example, Gen. Ghafoor admitted that the Pakistan Army had become deeply involved in the question of attaining peace between India and Pakistan.² Further, he said that he did not find it anomalous for the Army to get involved in foreign policy, claiming that New Delhi also consults the Indian Army before negotiating peace with Islamabad.

Ghafoor was merely echoing the views that have been earlier expressed by Pakistan's Army chief, Qamar Javad Bajwa, who has been asking the civilian government to mend ties with India. That the chief of the DGISPR would make such remarks on the eve of the general polls, indicated that the Army indeed plays a key role in managing Pakistan's foreign policy.

REVIVING THE 2003 CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT

Perhaps it was due to this growing understanding in Delhi about who India will have to deal with after the elections, that both countries decided to return to the 2003 ceasefire agreement after a telephone conversation between their respective Director Generals for Military Operations (DGMO). However, the terms of the ceasefire of 2003 could only be achieved after intervention from the leaders of the two countries.

To begin with, Pakistan wanted to convey to India that it will have to deal with its Army if the goal is a permanent truce with Pakistan. What was also visible then

was that the Army establishment would not countenance a situation where it has to deal with a civilian leadership that is hostile towards them; therefore, what followed was the methodical political and social destruction of Nawaz Sharif. This was accompanied by the strengthening of Imran Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and other right-wing organisations that subsequently cornered the vote share of both the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

The Pakistan Army, besides openly inserting itself in future talks with India, also wanted to disprove the impression that it was abetting terror by taking Indian journalists including this author—for the first time—to the regions under FATA (or Federally Administered Tribal Areas).³ FATA has been the scene of intense fighting between the armed forces and Pakistan Taliban since the launch of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in June 2014. The Pakistan Army not only wanted to show media practitioners how difficult the battle has been, but also that the terrorists have the support of a foreign power—i.e., India. FATA, which has now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), has seen sustained violence due to the face-off between the Army and the Pakistan Taliban. Millions of Pashtuns have been internally displaced in Pakistan, feeding anti-army and anti-state sentiments among the people.

Earlier this year, a young Pashtun leader, Manzoor Pashteen, launched the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) that accuses the Army of supporting terrorist groups. The PTM claims that some 32,000 Pashtuns have disappeared since Zarb-e-Azb began, and through subsequent military operations as well. These allegations have never found space in the mainstream media due to censorship.⁴ As the movement has been non-violent, it has been spared a brutal crackdown—though the narrative around it has been set by the state: the PTM is supported by foreign powers including India. Challenging such perceptions is a big task ahead for the new Prime Minister, Imran Khan, who is of Pashtun descent.

JOURNALISTS' VISIT TO FATA

From the Pakistan army helicopter (MI17) flying at an altitude of some 5,000 feet over a depopulated, barren landscape of North Waziristan, it was possible to see Pakistani flags lazily fluttering at mud forts and hilltops in parts of North Waziristan. The cheerless, uninhabited scene was suggestive of a mediaeval battleground where the guns have fallen silent and the army has retired to its barracks.

The brief aerial tour was enough to understand the ferocity of the battle that took place in 2014 in this parched and inhospitable terrain: most of the houses have been stripped of their roof upon orders of the Army to allow helicopters to keep a watch on what was happening inside them. More importantly, there were no people in sight. Even when the helicopter landed at the Kila Ghulam Khan Fort

after taking a full round of the town, there was literally no one on the ground to even witness its landing. There were only Pakistan Army soldiers who greeted the visitors with shouts of “Pakistan Zindabad. Nara-i-Takbeer.”

The Kila Ghulam Khan fort—where the Army officials took this author and the other journalists for a briefing—was stunning in many ways. One had to simply sit down amidst the massive fort, observe the geography, and imagine the history of Pakistan—the invasions, the wars, and great ambitions that have taken their roots there. From the fort, Afghanistan was a few kilometers away, and beyond the hills were the long, winding roads that lead to Central Asia. These are the same land routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia that have been denied India following Partition.



The Kila Ghulam Khan fort / Photo by Sanjay Kapoor

Kila Ghulam Khan, considered to be the third most important border crossing point between Afghanistan and Pakistan, is now a trade terminal. Former prime minister of Pakistan, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, inaugurated the terminal in April. The briefing given by Brigadier Jawad of Pakistan army was short, but it underlined the importance of the Kila Ghulam Khan pass. The brigadier also told the visiting journalists of how the Pakistan government proposes to improve trade with Afghanistan, as well as control the movement of militants from across the border. Islamabad is also fencing the border in the area, much to the annoyance of the government in Kabul, which never recognised the Durand line that separates the two countries. Therefore, a visit to Kila Ghulam Khan was important to plot North Waziristan’s strategic importance on the map of Pakistan and how it serves as a reminder of the contestation with Afghanistan on the issue of Durand line.

A short helicopter ride from Kila Ghulam Shah is Miranshah, the frontier town which the Pakistan Army wanted to showcase to the visiting group of South Asian journalists, especially the ones from India. Pakistan's DGISPR Gen. Asif Ghafoor, in his briefing to the delegation, remarked how Pakistan "had faced a bigger challenge from terrorism" compared to India. A visit to Miranshah, in the general's reckoning, would show how the Pakistan Army has succeeded in fighting terror.

Just before Partition, when the India National Congress (INC) and the Muslim League were scrambling for support from different regions of British India, Jawaharlal Nehru was invited to visit North Waziristan by Baccha Khan (the popular name of the Awami league leader, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan). The purpose of the invitation was to convince the restive Pashtus to stay with Congress, and in India. However, Nehru's trip to Miranshah—and other areas of what was then known as North West Frontier Province (NWFP)—turned out differently than what was planned. When Nehru, in his speeches, promised to free the Pashtus from "slavery", describing them as having been "debauched by the British", the community elders were incensed. It was with difficulty that Nehru got out safely from the region.⁵

There is more than anecdotal evidence to the "wild" side of Miranshah, as heard in stories from Pakistanis and Indians alike. Its people's irreverence to authority is also visible on the walls of the Army headquarters. Along the cavernous passage leading to the briefing room, hang yellowed framed photographs of wives of British officers, most of them caught by the camera laughing—juxtaposed with shots of Pashtuns, looking hardy in their long flowing shirts and turbans and sporting their rifles. Myths about the hardy Pashtuns and the tough terrains that they lived in were further served by the mysterious posting of the Lawrence of Arabia or TE Lawrence to Miranshah as a "clerk" in the Royal Air Force in 1926.⁶

There was bewilderment in the barracks of Miranshah as to why a man whose exploits in Arabia redefined a region would settle for such a lowly job. No one believed the reasons why he was in this frontier post, which was, in Lawrence's words, just a fort and an airstrip. Later, historians believed he was an imperialist spy planted to overthrow the anti-British Afghan government. Lawrence's "somnolent" stay in Miranshah or stormier happenings in this region before 1947 are now confined to entries in Wikipedia or blogs of those obsessed with the Raj era. Over the years, many myths have fed the numerous stories from the bygone era.

RECREATING THE TALIBAN'S TUNNEL NETWORK: A SHOW OF ARMY GRIT

This author, during a visit to Miranshah in May, saw evidence of the latest hard fought battle and the reconstruction that has consequently been required. Memories are being put together of how Pakistan's army smoked out the enemy from their hideouts in the hills, to the tunnels that the Taliban had built to escape

the eyes of the US army drones and army surveillance helicopters. The Pakistan Army has recreated the Talibani tunnel network – many of the kind that they destroyed during the operation. YouTube videos of 2014⁷ show the Army spokesperson taking TV journalists through the tunnels—pitch-dark, yet with enough clues of the difficult battle fought by the Army.⁸

The showpiece that the Army has created begins from the *Markaz* or the centre, where the local Taliban chief was based. Some creative imagination has gone into piecing together not just the underground network and how it was concealed, but also the role of external agencies, which in the Pakistan Army's view, were supporting the Taliban. Every exhibit strung together in the hideout suggests an assembly-line that sustained and protected the Talibani terror. Even though brigadier Jawad, who escorted the media delegation, did not mention an Indian hand in the violence that unfolded in Miranshah, the DG ISPR, Asif Ghafoor, made suggestions to that effect. In an earlier briefing to the same media delegation, Ghafoor also mentioned what the alleged R&AW agent Kulbhushan Jadhav had revealed during interrogation.

Later, in media interviews, Gen. Ghafoor also said that the Taliban had managed to entrench itself in Waziristan as India began to amass its Army against Pakistan on its border. Now that the Pakistani Army has cleared the Taliban and is trying to fence its border with Afghanistan, the belief is that it would position more troops along the India border. What could that mean?

The tunnel network was presented by the Pakistan Army as a way of life for the Pashtun belligerents. In the tunnels, they hid from the drones as well as the security personnel. The complex has two sides: At the back is the courtyard and on the other side is the shop that faces the main street. The street view gives no sense of the labyrinthine tunnels below a seemingly innocuous teashop, which is meant as a watch-point. Behind the shop in the courtyard of the *Markaz* is a large drum in which water slowly fills from a tap. If the spotter outside felt that there is a threat to the *Markaz*, he would warn the fighters inside the courtyard who would promptly shift the water drum, which conceals a passage to the underground tunnel. After sliding inside the tunnel, the drum is brought back under the water tap from below, which is turned on to show that there is no one around.

In the underground are numerous rooms. One of them is an armoury filled with AKs of different sizes and other weapons. Then there is a room of the Amir, which appeared to have been inspired by images of Osama bin Laden's home in Abbottabad. A room full of currency notes seized from the Talibanis excited the curiosity of the visiting journalists about the identity of the fighters as well as their patrons. Many of the notes were demonetised Indian notes of INR 500. The reporters were left intrigued about why these notes were inside this tunnel complex in FATA. Some clues were given by the control room, where there were TV monitors showing Indian news channels like Sahara, Zee and Aaj Tak. The

journalists were similarly puzzled as to why no Pakistani news TV channels were switched on in this recreated underground hideout.

The most important room in the underground network is the Fidai room where young fighters, according to the Brigadier, are indoctrinated to become suicide bombers to “sacrifice themselves for Allah.” The room has been colourfully decorated with plastic flowers and cheap-looking carpets with framed photographs of Indian film actresses like Rani Mukherjee and Katrina Kaif.

CONCLUSION

The reality that was presented to visiting journalists to burnish its credentials as an Army committed to fighting terror has been rejected by US Department of Defense. They have canceled US\$300 million aid to Pakistan for not doing enough to fight terror. Till now, Prime Minister Imran Khan has not shown his fondness towards the West, and to rile Washington more, has announced that one of the first countries that he would be visiting after taking office would be Iran, which is facing US sanctions. This is an act of defiance on the part of Imran Khan, who has to deal with the shift in the balance of power in the region. The influence of China on Islamabad's policy-making after it invested US\$ 53 billion in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an undeniable facet of this new reality. These new realignments are posing a challenge not only to Pakistan, but also to India, which finds some of its Iran-centered policy moves to side-step Islamabad threatened again.

The coming months will show how the forces of history manifest themselves in a region that has seen little peace after the British left the subcontinent. ©RF

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sanjay Kapoor is the Editor of Delhi-based *Hardnews Magazine*. He was in Pakistan recently upon the invitation of the Pakistan Media Development Foundation (PMDF).

ENDNOTES

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2. Amit Baruah, "Pakistan Army ready to join dialogue process with India", *The Hindu*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ready-to-join-dialogue-with-india-pak-army/article23905872.ece>.
3. FATA is a strategically located tribal region in the Northwest of Pakistan. It covers seven tribal agencies — Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, and North & South Waziristan – stretching from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in the east to Balochistan in the south. It shares borders with a few provinces of Afghanistan, from Kunar in the north through Nangarhar, Paktia and Khost to Paktia in the south. Recently, FATA was merged with its neighbouring province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
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