

---

# Pakistan Army: A State Within a State

Gurmeet Kanwal

## Under the Military Jackboot

Like Pakistan itself, its army has been passing through turbulent times. The army's counter-insurgency operations in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (erstwhile North-West Frontier Province—NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have not been going well; its establishments have been attacked with at least some attackers coming from within; its relations with its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies have plummeted to an all-time low after the spectacular US raid to kill Osama bin Laden at Abbottabad in May 2011; morale is low; and, its senior leadership is at loggerheads with the political leaders of Pakistan.

Despairing at the role played by the Pakistan Army in meddling in the country's politics and governance in the context of the 'Memogate' scandal, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani called the army a "state within a state". Though this phrase has been in use for long, the prime minister got it wrong: in Pakistan, the army is the state. The military jackboot has ridden roughshod over Pakistan's polity for most of the country's history since its independence. While Gens Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq and Musharraf ruled directly as presidents or chief martial law administrators, the other army chiefs achieved perfection in the fine art of backseat driving. The army repeatedly took over the reins of administration under the guise of the "doctrine of necessity" and, in complete disregard of international norms of jurisprudence, Pakistan's Supreme Court merrily played along.

Since the birth of Pakistan, the army has effectively ensured that Pakistan's fledgling democracy is not allowed to flourish. The roots of authoritarianism in

---

Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd) is former Director, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

**Since the birth of Pakistan, the army has effectively ensured that Pakistan's fledgling democracy is not allowed to flourish.**

---

Pakistan can be traced back to Gen (later Field Mshl) Ayub Khan who promoted the idea of “guided” or “controlled” democracy. The concept of the ‘troika’ emerged later as a power sharing arrangement between the president, the prime minister and the chief of the Army Staff (COAS). The ‘political militarism’ of the Pakistan Army imposed structural constraints on the institutionalisation of democratic norms in the civil society.

Some key national policies have always been dictated by the army. Only the army can determine Pakistan's national security threats and challenges and decide how to deal with them. Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is guided by the army and the rapprochement process with India cannot proceed without its concurrence. The army controls Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme and research and development. The civilian government has no role to play in deciding the doctrine, force structures, targeting policies and command and control. The army chief controls the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate and decides the annual defence expenditure and all defence procurements. It also controls all senior-level promotions and appointments; the government merely rubber stamps the decisions. Lt Gen Shuja Pasha, director general (DG) ISI, was recently given another two-year extension and Gen Kayani himself is on a three-year extension.

In keeping with its visceral hatred of India, as also to further China's objectives of cutting India to size and confining it to the backwaters of the Indian Ocean as a subaltern state, the Pakistan Army has adopted a carefully calculated strategy of ‘bleeding India through a thousand cuts’. This has been given effect overtly through irregular warfare – the Razakar and Mujahid invasion of Kashmir in 1947-48, Operation Gibraltar in 1965 and the Kargil intrusions of 1999 – and covertly through ISI-sponsored militancy and terrorism in J&K and state-sponsored terrorism in other parts of India. In the 1980s, Pakistan had encouraged and supported Sikh terrorist organisations in their misplaced venture to seek the creation of an independent state of Khalistan.

The ISI provides operational, intelligence, communication, training, financial and material support to Islamist terrorist organisations like the Lashkar-e-Tayebba and the Jaish-e-Mohammad to wage war against India. Similarly, it provides moral and material support to various Taliban factions like the Haqqani network to operate in Afghanistan against the Karzai regime and NATO-ISAF (International

Security Assistance Force) forces despite the fact that Pakistan is a major non-NATO ally in the so-called 'global war against terrorism'. The Mumbai terror strikes in November 2008 and the killing of Osama bin Laden in the army cantonment of Abbottabad, where he had been housed by the ISI for almost five years, provided direct proof of the ISI's complicity in anti-NATO activities.

This duplicitous working ethos of running with the hares and hunting with the hounds comes naturally to the Pakistan Army and the ISI. In fact, during the Kargil conflict, the Pakistan

Army had earned the infamous sobriquet of "rogue army" for asking its soldiers to fight in civvies, returning badly mutilated bodies of captured Indian soldiers and refusing to take back the bodies of soldiers of the Northern Light Infantry killed in action on the specious grounds that they were Mujahideen.

Some of the powers usurped by the army over the years can be attributed to the political parties' self-inflicted injuries. The shenanigans of the two main political parties – the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) – and widespread corruption led several times to the people's complete disenchantment with the rule of PPP's Benazir Bhutto and her father before her, and PML's Nawaz Sharif. In addition to poor political leadership, the failure of democratic institutions can also be ascribed to constitutional and judicial weaknesses and the unsatisfactory levels of socio-economic development. The people are once again disenchanted with the poor quality of governance provided by the Gilani-led PPP government.

External factors have also led to the army playing a larger role than is warranted in a democracy. By arming the military to the teeth, the US has made Pakistan a praetorian state in which the army plays a dominant role. It is only recently, in the face of the Pakistan Army's perfidious role in Afghanistan that the US government has begun to come to terms with its ill-considered long-drawn policy. The US Congress has blocked military aid to Pakistan. Since the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers by NATO-ISAF forces in a border outpost in November 2011, US-Pakistan relations have hit a new low. The incident led to the Pakistan government's decision to stop the flow of logistics convoys through Quetta and Peshawar, deny base facilities at Shamsi air base and demand renegotiation of the rules of engagement.

**The politico-military standoff within Pakistan following the 'memogate' scandal threatens the continuation in office of the weak civilian government.**

---

The worst fallout has been the politico-military stand-off within Pakistan following the 'memogate' scandal that threatens the continuation in office of the weak civilian government. To cap it all, the economy is in a serious mess – the funds are low, the debts are high, exports have dwindled to a trickle and the rupee has fallen to all time low of 90 rupees to a dollar. Pakistan has become a rentier state that is dependent on US largesse to meet its obligations for the repayment of its burgeoning debt.

### **Coping with Insurgency**

Over the last decade, the deteriorating internal security environment has become Pakistan's greatest national security threat. The Pakistan Army and its intelligence arm, the ISI Directorate gained considerable experience in aiding, abetting and fuelling insurgencies and terrorism in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and in J&K and other parts of India since 1988-89. Having concentrated solely on preparing for a conventional war with India, the army had no worthwhile experience in fighting insurgencies successfully and has expectedly failed to deliver, particularly in ground operations in the picturesque Swat Valley.

As the Pakistan Army's previous operational expertise lay in creating and fuelling insurgencies and not in fighting them, it failed to sense that it was creating a Frankenstein monster at home by encouraging fundamentalist terrorism abroad and failed to fight the scourge effectively for almost 10 years. Large parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and FATA have been under Taliban control for many years. The challenge to Pakistan's sovereignty in Swat and Buner was addressed with brute force only after the Taliban were on a triumphant march to Islamabad. The insurgency in South Waziristan was tackled on a war-footing after years of procrastination, but the writ of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) still runs in North Waziristan. The army continues to place its trust in the false hope that it can sign durable peace deals with the Taliban – a tactic that has failed in the past.

Clearly, the army is both unable and unwilling to conduct effective counter-insurgency operations even though it has deployed more than 150,000 soldiers in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, and has suffered 13,000 casualties, including over 3,000 dead. Casualties in Operation Al Mizan were particularly high. Special forces units of the Pakistan Army, the elite Special Services Group (SSG), are also directly engaged in fighting the militants. Many soldiers, including officers, are known to have refused to fight fellow Muslims. Many others have deserted. Several cases of fratricide have been reported. Questions are now being raised

about the army's lack of professionalism in counter-insurgency operations and its withering internal cohesion. Gen Pervez Ashfaq Kayani, the COAS, was asked some hard questions by junior officers when he went around the country to pacify agitated officers after the US Navy SEALs had taken out Osama bin Laden in a spectacular operation.

The army's convoys have been repeatedly ambushed; it has faced numerous terrorist strikes in the shape of suicide attacks and bombings; many of its personnel (especially Pashtun soldiers) have deserted as they do not wish to fight fellow tribesmen; and, many soldiers have been captured in humiliating circumstances. While some of these soldiers were later released by the militants for a large ransom, some others were killed. Soldiers are routinely overstaying leave or going AWOL (absent without leave) and even regular army battalions have seen their morale dip to worryingly low levels. There have been some reports of soldiers disobeying the orders issued by their superior officers. Complicating the issue further is the fact that the army has been gradually Islamised since Gen Zia-ul-Haq's days and the early converts to the *jihadi* way of life are now coming into positions of command. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that a once proud professional army is headed inexorably downhill.

The Pakistan Army has been forced by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), headed for many years by the late Baitullah Mehsud, to wage a three-front "war": against the TTP and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in South Waziristan; against the anti-Shia Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) in the sensitive Darra Adam Khel-Kohat area of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the Shia-dominated Kurram Agency of FATA; and, against the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), headed by Maulana Fazlullah, and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) in the Swat Valley of the NWFP. The TTP's cadre base comprises over 20,000 tribesmen and Mehsud commands about 5,000 fighters. "Radio Mullah" Mangal Bagh Afridi leads the Lashkar-e-Islam (LI), a militant group that has refrained from joining the TTP and is independently active up to the outskirts of Peshawar. Meanwhile, radical extremism is gaining ground in Pakistan and the scourge of creeping Talibanisation has reached southern Punjab.

Though it has flirted with peace deals with the militants, the army finds it impossible to meet the demands of the TTP and the TNSM. According to B Raman, a noted counter-terrorism expert, these include the suspension of all military operations in the tribal areas; the withdrawal of army posts from the FATA; the release of all tribals arrested under the Anti-Terrorism Act; the release of Maulana Abdul Aziz Ghazi and tribal students arrested during the commando

**Stung to the quick by a series of Taliban successes in “liberating” tribal areas and under pressure from the Americans to deliver in the “war on terror”, in the initial stages, the Pakistan Army employed massive firepower to stem the rot.**

action in the Lal Masjid of Islamabad in July 2007; and, enforcement of the Shariat in the tribal areas.

Stung to the quick by a series of Taliban successes in “liberating” tribal areas and under pressure from the Americans to deliver in the “war on terror”, in the initial stages, the Pakistan Army employed massive firepower to stem the rot. Helicopter gunships and heavy artillery were freely used to destroy suspected terrorist hideouts. This heavy-handed firepower-based approach without simultaneous infantry operations failed to dislodge the militants but caused large-scale collateral damage and served to alienate the tribal population even further. Major reverses led to panic reactions including the hurried negotiation of “peace accords” that

were invariably observed more in the breach by the militants.

On September 5, 2006, the Government of Pakistan had signed a “peace accord” with the tribal leaders of Waziristan (and probably the Taliban as well, though the government denies this) in the North Waziristan town of Miranshah. The salient points of this rather surprising agreement included the following:

- The government agrees to stop air and ground attacks against militants in Waziristan.
- Militants are to cease cross-border movement into and out of Afghanistan.
- Foreigners (understood to mean foreign *jihadist*) in North Waziristan will have to leave Pakistan but “those who cannot leave will be allowed to live peacefully, respecting the law of the land and the agreement” (quoted from an article in the *Dawn* newspaper).
- Area check-points and border patrols will be manned by a tribal force. Pakistan Army forces will withdraw from control points.
- No parallel administration will be established in the area. The law of the government shall remain in force.
- The government agrees to follow local customs and traditions in resolving issues.
- Tribal leaders will ensure that no one attacks law enforcement personnel or damages state property.

- Tribesmen will not carry heavy weapons. Small arms are allowed.
- Militants will not enter agencies adjacent to this agency (the agency of North Waziristan).
- Both sides will return any captured weapons, vehicles, and communication devices.
- The government will release captured militants and will not arrest them again.
- The government will pay compensation for property damaged and deaths of innocent civilians in the area.

The terms of the Miranshah peace accord were humiliating for a proud professional force to swallow. The accord is reported to have led to the payment of large amounts of money for “damaged property” – sums that went indirectly to the militants. The US and its NATO allies were taken completely by surprise by the accord that allowed the militants to make peace with the Pakistan Army and gave them the freedom to use the NWFP and FATA areas close to the Afghan border as safe havens to attack the US and NATO forces. The militants soon broke the ceasefire as well as the peace accord. Other similar peace agreements were also signed. In October 2007, the Pakistan government entered into a peace agreement with the terrorists in the Swat Valley that was spinning out of control. This accord too did not last long. All these accords clearly showed that the Pakistan Army and the Musharraf-led government of the day had no clear strategy to counter the growing menace of the Taliban-Al Qaeda insurgency in the NWFP and FATA. The government and the army were groping in the dark and hoping that something would work out.

The far less capable and less well trained and equipped Interior Ministry paramilitary force, the Frontier Corps, is being employed in direct fighting in the Waziristan agencies. However, it has failed to cope with the better armed and better motivated Taliban militants. Perhaps the use of the Frontier Corps instead of the Pakistan Army made political as well military sense to the Pakistan General Headquarters (GHQ). The Frontier Corps, which numbers about 60,000 men, is manned almost completely by Pashtuns who are naturally trained for mountain warfare, have far better knowledge of the terrain in FATA than the army and have cultural affiliations with the people residing there. The officers of the Frontier Corps are usually taken from the Pashtun cadre of the Pakistani armed forces, which is also an advantage.

Raised by the government of the British Raj in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Frontier Corps maintains control over the tribes in the FATA. It has always been

**While the Pakistan Army has conducted a number of successful operations in the NWFP and FATA areas, it has not been consistent in its efforts and has failed to gain the upper hand.**

responsible for manning the Pak-Afghan border along the Durand Line. The Pakistan Army has put in considerable effort to train the Frontier Corps for counter-insurgency warfare with technical and material support from the United States. As the terrain is mostly mountainous, it is felt that lightly-armed Frontier Corps infantrymen can conduct operations effectively. In the long run, better trained and more suitably equipped Frontier Corps troops, combined with administrative and economic reforms, might well provide the answer to the problem of militancy in FATA.

As far as the regular army is concerned, it has moved several combat formations from the corps facing India across the Line of Control (LoC) and the international border in Jammu and Kashmir to the northwest, besides troops from the two western corps at Peshawar and Quetta. Three brigades of 11 Corps based at Peshawar and two brigades of the Quetta-based 12 Corps are reported to have been moved to Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan. One brigade each has been deployed in the northwest from 30 Corps at Gujranwala and 31 Corps at Bahawalpur. The internal crisis is considered so grave that even the strike corps have not been spared and a total of about nine brigades have been relocated to the west, though not all of these have been rushed headlong into counter-insurgency operations. These include two brigades from the Kharian-based 17 Infantry Division of 1 Corps, Pakistan's Army Reserve North. However, this massive redeployment at the risk of depleting combat strength on the eastern border with India has not really fetched the desired dividends. When fighting formations are pulled out from their operational roles and their primary areas of responsibility, to be employed for secondary tasks, the expectation is always that their absence will be for a limited duration and that they will be employed only to launch surgical strikes that will be followed by quick extrication. On the contrary, these formations are getting sucked deeper into a worsening quagmire on the western border.

While the Pakistan Army has conducted a number of successful operations in the NWFP and FATA areas, it has not been consistent in its efforts and has failed to gain the upper hand. For example, the success at Bajaur in end-September 2008 came after several months of poor results in lackadaisical operations.

The tactics, techniques and procedures adopted by the Pakistan Army have not yielded results that are commensurate with the effort put in. The army's intelligence network is virtually non-existent as human intelligence (HUMINT) sources are proving difficult to cultivate. Its ability to undertake operations at night and in conditions of poor visibility is rather limited as it lacks suitable night vision devices, hand-held battlefield surveillance radars and other sensors. Its movements are ponderous and easy for the militants to spot as its columns follow the beaten track while the militants know every nook and cranny of the terrain over which they operate.

Many of the army's God fearing soldiers are not convinced that going after their fellow Muslims, even if they are anti-national militants, is a justifiable approach. Deep down in their hearts, many of them would much rather fight the US and NATO troops whom they see as occupiers and violators of their land, their faith and their culture. The army leadership has failed to address this emotive issue with any degree of success. Clearly, at present, the army lacks both the will and the capacity to fight the insurgents effectively in the NWFP and FATA. It is also completely out of sync with the aspirations of the tribal people inhabiting these areas and is unable to win the battle of hearts and minds that is crucial to gaining popular support. While a few of the tribal chieftains are neutral in the fight between the army and the militants, most of them encourage their people to provide shelter and succour to the militants.

The senior leadership of the Pakistan Army has so far been employing a heavy-handed approach to put down rumblings of discontent in Balochistan and the Northern Areas in the past. It has failed to understand that artillery barrages and helicopter and air force bombings of civilian villages and towns are inherently counter-productive. The field commanders must be taught to discriminate between innocent civilians and armed combatants and must demonstrate concern for senior citizens, women and children instead of treating them with disdain. Success will come only when the army begins to close in with the militants and clears them from key areas systematically while ensuring that sufficient combat units are left behind to prevent the militants from taking over the cleared territory again. One method that can be adopted is to establish an interlinked grid of company-sized 'posts' to dominate given areas, conduct patrolling and strike operations based on hard intelligence and, simultaneously, enable the civil administration to execute development projects and run schools, hospitals, a postal service and banks. And, army or paramilitary columns must be physically deployed to ensure rear area security and keep the arteries open

**There can never be a purely military or a purely political solution to an insurgency. A successful counter-insurgency strategy is a dynamic but balanced mixture of aggressive offensive operations conducted with a humane touch and socio-economic development.**

---

for supplies and reinforcements. All this is, of course, infinitely more difficult than lobbing 500 kg bombs from the air combined with artillery barrages.

There can never be a purely military or a purely political solution to an insurgency. A successful counter-insurgency strategy is a dynamic but balanced mixture of aggressive offensive operations conducted with a humane touch and socio-economic development. Political negotiations to address the core issues of alienation of the population and other political demands must also be conducted with the local leadership simultaneously. The tribal culture prevailing in the NWFP and FATA, with its fierce ethnic

loyalties and diffused leadership, makes the task of the army and the government more difficult. At present, the Pakistan Army is a long way from becoming truly combat worthy for the nature of sub-conventional warfare that circumstances have forced it to wage in the NWFP and FATA. It would do well to understand, analyse and learn from the counter-insurgency doctrine that the Indian Army has so successfully followed for 20 years in Jammu and Kashmir and over half a century in India's northeastern region. On its part, the Indian Army must also study the counter-insurgency campaign of the Pakistan Army so as to carefully avoid the hazards and pitfalls that the Pakistan Army has encountered in its high-handed approach.

### **Impact on India-Pakistan Relations**

Gen Ashfaq Pervez Kayani's statement after the avalanche at the Gayari battalion HQ that peace with India is in Pakistan's interest and that the Siachen conflict zone should be demilitarised is, undoubtedly, encouraging as it is the first such statement made by a serving Pakistani COAS. However, the real question is whether the Pakistan Army has had a genuine change of heart about the futility of prolonged hostility towards India or if recent approaches are a tactical ploy to tide over current difficulties. This is a complex question that requires in-depth analysis.

Since the independence of both the countries in August 1947, the Pakistan

Army has been waging irregular warfare against India in one form or the other. The story of the army-led Razakar invasion in 1947-48, Operation Gibraltar in 1965, the proxy war in J&K and elsewhere in India through mercenary terrorists since 1989-90 and the Kargil intrusions of 1999, is too well known to bear recounting. Through vigorous tactical-level operations, the Pakistan Army pursued a low-intensity limited conflict along the LoC in J&K for over 50 years up to November 25, 2003, when a mutually observed ceasefire came into effect.

The Pakistan Army's clearly stated objective is to wrest Kashmir from India at all costs. It calls this endeavour the "unfinished agenda of partition". The army tried to take Kashmir by military means but failed to do so in 1947-48 and 1965. Given its present vulnerability due to extensive internal security commitments, the army appears to have temporarily shelved the military option and is relying on a political-diplomatic offensive and its proxy war to achieve its aim. As there is a very deep nexus between Pakistan and China for the development of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and military hardware, and Pakistan is heavily dependent on China, it can be deduced that the proxy war against India is China's proxy war too – the Pakistan Army would not be able to pursue it without Chinese support and sustenance.

In view of the challenges posed by growing internal instability, the employment of 150,000 troops on the western borders – with Uncle Sam breathing heavily down their necks – and the fear of major Indian strikes if another Mumbai-type terrorist strike is launched by ISI-sponsored *jihadi* organisations like the LeT and the JeM, the Pakistan Army has decided to substantially reduce its proxy war operations against India for the time being. However, it is keeping the pot simmering so that it retains the ability to ratchet up violence levels again whenever it needs to. Hence, Pakistan's recent overtures towards India are a tactical ploy to tide over the army's current difficulties, rather than a paradigm shift in grand strategy and should not be seen as a major change of heart.

## **Conclusion**

The precarious situation in Pakistan is headed towards a dangerous denouement. The likelihood of a military coup is being openly discussed again despite Gen Kayani's unequivocal denial of any such plans. Pakistan cannot survive as a coherent nation-state unless the army gives up its agenda of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan, attempting to destabilise India through its proxy war, and stops its meddling in politics. The army must pull itself up by the bootstraps and substantively enhance its capacity to conduct effective counter-insurgency

operations. The Pakistan Army has let down Pakistan and must make amends. In the national interest, the army must give up being a state within a state and accept civilian control, even if it does so with bad grace.

However, all hope is not lost. While the Pakistan Army is passing through a rough patch, it is still a good professional army that is well led. Its senior leadership has carefully identified the shortfalls in its performance in counter-insurgency operations and has initiated remedial training measures. Gen Kayani had designated the year 2009 as the year of training. The acid test of the army's present state of training and preparedness for counter-insurgency operations will come when it finally launches the long-delayed offensive against the TTP in North Waziristan – an area that it has so far shied away from addressing.

Though denied by the Indian prime minister's office, perhaps in keeping with the requirements of statecraft, it has been reported that the government has begun a back-channel dialogue with the Pakistan Army. As the army is the real power centre in Pakistan and has been so for most of its history, it is a step in the right direction. Even during war, it is always advisable to keep a channel of communication open with the adversary. In the case of India and Pakistan, this is even more important as the two nuclear-armed nations have a long history of conflict and have come close to war at least twice in the last decade.