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SADF COMMENT

Change of Guards, Change of politics? A look at Pakistan's latest reshuffle of its top brass

A couple of weeks after Pakistan's new Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Omar Bajwa took over the reins from General Raheel Sharif, Lieutenant General Naveed Mukhtar was appointed Director General (DG) of the country's powerful spy agency Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) on December 12th. According to some analysts, these two new appointments could be [part of a major reshuffle](#) in the military's top brass, which might initiate political changes, especially in its foreign policy or in the country's [unhealthy civil-military relations](#). However one can't help thinking that such predictions sound like a déjà vu recurring each time when posts for the most powerful positions in Pakistan are vacant. Analysing the careers, former deployments and personal characteristics of the respective individual soldiers, some observers tend to construct a peculiar rationale why the situation should turn for the better regarding the enhancement of civilian decision-making power in crucial policy fields and subsequently the promotion of democratization. In this context, especially the statements regarding identified potential aloofness towards politics due to professional behaviour (in other words, maintaining a [low political profile](#)' is perceived a priori as a [pro-democracy credential](#)'), and/or 'constructive exchange' with Indian or Afghan counterparts of the top officers are serving as indications for the likelihood of new political and institutional changes.

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But such forecasts are doomed to fail for several reasons: Firstly, the significance and capacities of an individual person, even for a member of the top brass (namely COAS or DG ISI), to enforce an institutional change is limited and as such it is [generally overrated](#). Moreover, both the army and the intelligence have their own internal power structures and decision-making mechanisms, keeping the influence of its top representative in check. For example Pakistan's COAS finds its limitation through the powerful [Corps Commander Conference](#) and the realm of the DG ISI is limited through internal interests groups, also often described as '[Circles within Circles](#)' (especially by those elements who have a soft corner for jihadism and militancy). Furthermore, COAS and DG ISI usually serve only for a few years, [hardly enough time to get to grips with sprawling](#) institutions.

Secondly, the Pakistan's security agents are not only extraordinary vast entities but also their institutional patterns and their role are deeply entrenched in the country's political administrative structures. Subsequently they possess an extraordinary high degree of resilience towards any substantial reform.

In this context, the very same optimistic observers celebrated the [first 'regular' transition of power](#) between two civilian governments in the country in the 2013 national elections as an indicator for democratic consolidation. However, the appreciation of this allegedly 'new democratic wave' faded out the hardness of the decade-old authoritarian and anti-democratic trajectories of Pakistan's conservative establishment. The latter one consist of '[a nebulous web of generals, bureaucrats and hand-picked politicians](#)' that define the core of the country's national defence and internal security policies. The central government in Islamabad never experienced a situation that could be described as civilian supremacy over the military. Nevertheless, one could emphasize that the armed forces did not influence the last general polls outside the benchmarks as the civilian government defined them. But civilian control means also that the elected civilians have control over all the decision-making processes. But this is not the case in Pakistan today. Civilians never had any say on crucial policy fields, especially not in foreign policy, national defence and security, nuclearization, or military organization. One should also note that the appointment of General Oamar Bajwa as COAS by Prime Minister Sharif was mainly possible because the predecessor General Raheel Sharif [decided to retire](#) and was not interested in an extension of his tenure. As such it is true that the process of the latest COAS appointment followed [constitutional requirements](#). But it would be misleading to interpret this as a power shift towards civilians in a way that Prime Minister Sharif Nawaz is 'asserting his authority' in the area of military organisation.

However, until recently, civilians possessed decision-making power in some areas of public policy (as long as the economic interests of the military were not negatively affected) and

before 9/11 also had some leverage in internal security. But this changed with the start of the [China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#) project, a Chinese supported multi-million-dollar development project. Being overwhelmed by the challenge of eradicating domestic security threats to ensure a smooth and safe CPEC implementation, the central government granted the soldiers an increasing formal, institutionalised role in the country's political system. As a matter of fact, the National Action Plan (NAP) was formulated emphasizing the fight against terrorism as the country's top priority, which of course will be ensured by the security sector agents. Also, the Constitution was amended in favour of the establishment of military courts. More concretely, the [21st Amendment Act](#) provides for the creation of 'military speed trial courts' for offenses relating to terrorism, waging war against Pakistan and prevention of acts threatening the security of the country. The latter ones determine a significant transfer of power to armed forces' authorities, especially since with the new legal regulations civilians can be [subjected to military jurisdiction](#). In addition, the army enforced the establishment of the so-called [Apex Committees](#), constituting a quasi-parallel administrative structure sidelining the executive and legislative powers on the national and provincial level in all matters regarding the CPEC development. However, the Apex Committees, where the military top brass is the main decision-maker, quickly emerged as the most important institution in the current structure of governance, also because mega-projects like CPEC affect all spheres of people's life.

In result, the new COAS Bajwa inherits from his predecessor General Raheel Sharif, a military, which not only [dominates almost all spheres of government](#) but also acts as '[state within the state](#)'.

One can [identify a very similar phenomenon](#) in the context of the ISI. Besides the lack of civilian control over the army, the government has almost no oversight over the ISI. This is gaining significance, since Pakistan's prime intelligence organisation has been long accused of supporting Jihadists. They have been accused of [targeting neighbouring countries](#), foremost India and Afghanistan, as well as turning a blind eye towards radicalised Islamists preaching violence and hate against the country's minorities and arch rival India. Furthermore, despite being constitutionally responsible for dealing with external security threats, the ISI is facing allegations of [meddling in the country's politics](#), like conducting numerous attempts [undermining civilian governments](#). Serving primarily as the covert arm of the army, the DG ISI reports only in theory to the prime minister as set by the rules, but in practice he reports directly to the COAS. As such, it does not come by surprise that the announcement of General Akhtar's promotion to DG ISIS didn't come from the Ministry of Defence or the Prime Minister Secretariat but through the military's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) department.

In sum, the latest reshuffle is far from being an indication of the end of the unfortunate past political paths and [‘that democracy is flourishing in the country’](#), as stated by some optimistic observers. In contrast, Pakistan’s ‘new’ army and intelligence leadership will continue the same policies of its predecessors. As such, one should not expect any remarkable changes in the country’s repressive domestic policy approaches or the abandonment of state-sponsorship of terrorism as a foreign policy instrument. Even if the new top brass decided to make a symbolic gesture, they will not be trusted abroad, especially in Kabul, New Delhi, and Washington that lost their patience with Pakistan. They most likely ‘won’t believe’ whatever Pakistani military and civilian authorities say and won’t trust the policies they might initiate towards a rapprochement with the country’s neighbourhood. Subsequently, the region will continue to witness incidents of cross-border militancy, keeping Pakistan’s bilateral relations at an abysmal state.