

COMMENT 206 - Pakistan's new civilian-military cordiality in perspective

By Siegfried O. Wolf

01 March 2021– DOI: [10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C206](https://doi.org/10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C206)



Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf, Director of Research at SADF (Coordinator: Democracy Research Programme); he was educated at the Institute of Political Science (IPW) and South Asia Institute (SAI), both Heidelberg University. Additionally he is member (affiliated researcher) of the SAI as well as a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines (New Delhi, India).

Since Imran Khan took office as Pakistan's Prime Minister (PM) in August 2018, there has been an obvious [improvement](#) in the ties between the civilian government and the country's armed forces. It is argued here that this new civil-military cordiality led to a constructive, less tensed working relationship between the army's top brass and the civilian administration; however, it did not translate into any reduction in the military's political influence, particularly over foreign affairs.

If one is to believe the official rhetoric, civil-military relations (CMR) are currently experiencing an unprecedented collaborative and cordial unity. When describing the actual state of the country's CMR, PM Khan described them as '[excellent](#)' and '[most harmonious](#)'. Civilians and military 'work together' and '[have complete coordination](#)'. Moreover, 'the military completely stands with all the government's democratic policies.'¹ Observers see the [increased interaction \(meetings\)](#) within "Pakistan's political decision-making troika" – comprised of Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (DG ISI) Faiz Hameed, and PM Khan – as revealing this improvement in the relationship between the army's top brass and the civilian leadership. However, current Pakistani CMR has nothing to do with formally established

¹ Similar statements were made by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Director General [Asif Ghafoor](#); for instance: The 'Army is supporting a democratically elected government as per constitution and there will be no let-up in this as it is a must for the progress and prosperity of Pakistan.'

civilian control or emerging civilian supremacy over the country's armed forces. Rather one witnesses a return to the traditional "[consultation mechanism](#)" based on informal (not institutionalised), [personal relations](#) between the COAS (including DG ISI) and the PM. However, this does not necessarily indicate a shift in the "CMR power equation".² Instead, unlike during the tenures of PM Khan's predecessors Nawaz Sharif, Yousaf Raza Gillani, or Benazir Bhutto, now relations between the PMO and Army GHQ are characterised by both forces '[being on the same page on all issues of national interest](#)'. Moreover, the PM accepts, even supports, an increasing role by the army in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor/CPEC initiative, the country's most significant development project (Wolf, 2019). Here, it is interesting to note that Khan clearly changed its position regarding China, concretely from [being critical](#) of the CPEC and demanding the reassessment of several individual projects (as he did during his last general election campaign) towards a straightforward supporter of Chinese projects since he took office as PM.³ He also does not attempt to normalize relations with arch enemy India (as Nawaz Sharif did). Instead, Khan launched a multi-faceted anti-India campaign in collaboration with the country's military and ISI, using all opportunities on the international stage to rise accusations against New Delhi (regarding claimed human rights violations in Kashmir, state-sponsorship of terrorism - especially in Afghanistan -, planning of a surgical strike against Pakistan so as to distract the citizenry from international problems, [lobbying against a permanent seat](#) for India in the United Nations Security Council/UNSC, among others). The latest move to reduce tensions, especially the frequent occurrence of

² In this context, it is interesting to point out that the DG ISI and COAS called on the PM to meet and that the meetings took place in the PMO, not at the Army GHQ in Rawalpindi. This can be interpreted as a measure by the military to enhance the impression its obedience to the civilian government. The fact that the [COAS is visiting](#) the ISI headquarter to get briefed is noteworthy – it could be seen as an indicator that some basic dynamics are in flux (in the past, DG ISI was expected to brief the COAS at the GHQ). There is also a new frequency and intensity in the appraising of ISI activities by the COAS – which constitutes a new development. Some experts state that there is some "grumbling" among the army's top brass as a result of the extension of the COAS tenure. More concretely, numerous senior officers hoped to be promoted to the position of army chief, or to consecutive appointments. Obviously, these did not materialize; as many officers are [retiring before](#) the end of COAS Bajwa term on November 30th, 2022, additional discontent is surging. However, one should not construe these huffs as a severe challenge to the Pakistani army's internal coherence. The Pakistani military offers so many social and economic benefits for its personnel, especially for those retired, that no one would risk great losses by creating fissions among the top echelon over the issue of appointments and/or extensions of tenures.

³ An example of how [PM Khan](#) changed its stand on China/CPEC: 'When asked whether Islamabad with renegotiating its terms of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with Beijing, PM Imran rejected the notion, adding that Pakistan's relationship with its ally was better than ever.'

[cease-fire violations](#) at the Line of Control (LoC),⁴ is seen in a very recent [joint statement](#) dated February 25th, 2021, upheld by Islamabad and New Delhi. Both ‘agreed for strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors with effect from midnight 24/25 Feb 2021.’⁵ This agreement was worked out on a bilateral military-to-military level by the two Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) and the initiative was apparently supported through back channel diplomacy by the each country’s civilian National Security Advisors. This indicates an underlying rationale: Pakistan’s military cooperates with civilians but is still in full charge of the country’s foreign policy.

Also, in the context of [Pakistan’s approach towards Afghanistan](#) in general and the Afghan Peace Process (APN) in particular, Khan apparently shares the views held by the military and ISI: providing diplomatic-political support to the Taliban by downplaying, even side-lining, the Taliban’s violations of the [February 2020 deal](#) with the U.S., as well as promoting the establishment of an [interim government](#).

Pakistan’s political opposition sees the development within the country’s civil-military relations as rather critical and highlights that under PM Khan, [soldiers are](#) ‘increasingly encroaching on the civilian sphere, with many generals now heading administrative and executive institutions’. In other words, Pakistan’s opposition expresses its concerns over the army’s increasing leverage within the country’s political-administrative institutions. Here, it is interesting to mention that on January 27, 2021, the Pakistani National Assembly (NA) and the Chinese National Peoples Congress (NPC) agreed on the formation of a joint parliamentary committee ‘[for effective oversight and monitoring](#)’ of the CPEC. The creation of this new parliamentary body can be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, as an expression of the ‘[frustration by Beijing with the slow pace of CPEC projects](#)’. Secondly, as a Chinese attempt ‘[to become more closely involved](#)’ and gain more influence over the implementation of CPEC projects. Thirdly, given the fact that

⁴ The Line of Control’ (LoC), the de facto border between the two countries in the disputed region of Kashmir.

⁵ If effective, this joint statement could mark a milestone in the IND-PAK relations, since both countries agreed on a ceasefire along the LOC in 2003, working together towards the reduction of violence in the Kashmir region. Moreover, it is the first common agreement of both countries since many years.

the proposal for this initiative comes from NA speaker Asad Qaiser, the move can be seen as an effort by lawmakers to back PM Khan by diffusing criticisms that he is [‘shifting the control of CPEC projects from the civilian government to the military establishment’](#). This is important since the government had to face the emergence of a growing joint oppositional alliance - called Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) - demanding the PM’s resignation⁶. Therefore, the new body can be also interpreted as a Chinese effort to support the apparent public image campaign by the civilian and military leadership and create the semblance of civilian control and democratic consolidation of the political-institutional set-up in the country. This obviously aims to support [Pakistan’s vision](#) of a fundamental [reset](#) in its relations with the U.S. Last but not least, Beijing’s willingness to create a joint parliamentary oversight entity could be also seen as a part of a ‘dual-track strategy’ to extend and maintain its influence in Pakistan. More concretely, beyond supporting the process of an extending institutional role by the military within the CPEC initiative, Beijing also spends efforts to (re-)strengthen the role of civilian institutions regarding the CPEC, particularly the role of those side-lined so far (namely lawmakers). The strengthening of the National Assembly’s role within the CPEC most likely constitutes an expression of Beijing’s ongoing unease with PM Khan – as well as the strategy not to put all eggs into one basket, the military one.⁷ In sum, Beijing is supporting Islamabad’s efforts to maintain the façade of a semblance of civilian control in Pakistan.

⁶ [‘The Pakistan Democratic Movement \(PDM\) -- a collection of conservative, liberal, ethnonationalist, and Islamic political parties -- claimed they were seeking to “restore true democracy” by forcing the county’s praetorian army out of politics.’](#) This is based on claims that PM Khan and his political party PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf) were only able to win the last general/parliamentary elections because they were rigged by the army – which is allegedly currently involved in the suppression of the political opposition as well as [‘manhandling’](#) and manipulating civilian institutions for their partisan interests. Currently, the [PDM lost its momentum](#) since it was not able to achieve its political goals. However, the [military establishment will most likely become “alerted”](#) since the country has a record of political movements able to successfully shake the military’s position, at least temporarily .

⁷ In this context, the Chinese financial aid (bailout) for PAK to repay the Saudi loan also strengthened Imran Khan’s position not only vis-à-vis the political opposition but also towards the military (besides the fact that army top brass took a more active role in PAP-KSA relations).

References:

Aamir, A. (2021, February 11). China moves for more control over Belt and Road in Pakistan. Nikkei Asia.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/China-moves-for-more-control-over-Belt-and-Road-in-Pakistan>

Al Jazeera (2018, October 29). Imran Khan CPEC Diplomacy: Remodelling Trade Politics between Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and China. Al Jazeera. Centre for Studies.

<https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/10/imran-khan-cpec-diplomacy-remodelling-trade-politics-pakistan-iran-saudi-arabia-chin-181029102924737.html>

Ashfaque, A. (2020, September 4). Military fully backs govt policies, says Imran. Dawn.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1577820>

Bezhan, F. (2020, October 23). Pakistan's Powerful Military Faces Biggest Challenge In Years. Gandhara.

<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-s-powerful-military-faces-biggest-challenge-in-years/30909240.html>

Daily Times (2019, November 19). Govt, army on the same page: ISPR.

<https://dailytimes.com.pk/502803/govt-army-on-the-same-page-ispr/>

Daily Times (2020, September 4). Pakistan's military stands with PTI government: PM Imran.

<https://dailytimes.com.pk/662804/pakistans-military-stands-with-pti-government-pm-imran/>

Dawn (2021, January 28). Pakistan-China joint parliamentary panel soon to oversee CPEC.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1604032/pakistan-china-joint-parliamentary-panel-soon-to-oversee-cpec>

Hashim, A. (2020, October 21). Pakistan army to probe opposition allegation of pressuring police. Al Jazeera.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/21/pakistan-army-to-probe-opposition-claims-of-pressuring-police>

Hashim, A., Fareed, R. (2021, February 25). India, Pakistan agree to stop cross-border firing in Kashmir. Al Jazeera.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/25/india-pakistan-agree-to-stop-cross-border-firing-in-kashmir>

Hussain, Z. (2021, January 27). The PDM's predicament. Dawn.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1603835>

Iqbal, A. (2020, September 27). Pakistan opposes India's demand for UNSC seat

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1581834>

Khan, S. (2021, February 5). Pakistan: Why is the military taking over civilian posts? Deutsche Welle.

<https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-why-is-the-military-taking-over-civilian-posts/a-56473442>

MoD India (2021, February 25). Joint statement. Press Release (ID: 1700682). New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Defence.

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1700682>

Naqvi, H. (2019, August 21). 20 serving generals of Pak Army will retire till Nov 2022. The News International.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/515008-20-serving-generals-of-pak-army-will-retire-till-nov-2022>

South Asia Monitor (2021, January 28). Joint China-Pakistan parliamentary panel to oversee CPEC.

<https://southasiamonitor.org/index.php/china-watch/joint-china-pakistan-parliamentary-panel-oversee-cpec>

Siddique, A. (2021, February 1). Pakistan's Opposition At A Crossroads After PM Refuses To Step Down. Gandhara.

<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-democratic-movement-protest-khan-deadline/31080737.html>

Sidiqi (2021, January 13). Pakistan always preferred Afghan politicians over govt: Experts. Pajhwok Afghan News.

<https://pajhwok.com/2021/01/13/pakistan-always-preferred-afghan-politicians-over-govt-experts/>

The Nation (2021, January 26). Pakistan looks forward to build relations with US on fresh conversations: Moeed.

<https://nation.com.pk/26-Jan-2021/pakistan-looks-forward-to-build-relations-with-us-on-fresh-conversations-moeed>

The Nation (2020, September 3). PM Khan terms civil-military relationship 'excellent'.

<https://nation.com.pk/03-Sep-2020/pm-khan-terms-civil-military-relationship-excellent>

The News International (2021, February 1). Gen Bajwa, ISI chief meet PM Imran Khan for the fourth time in 40 days.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/783402-gen-bajwa-dg-isi-meet-pm-imran-khan-fourth-time-in-40-days>

The News International (2021, January 21). Army chief briefed on security situation in ISI headquarter visit.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/777602-army-chief-briefed-on-security-situation-in-isi-headquarter-visit>

The News International (2020, September 3). PM Imran says civilian, military leadership on same page in latest interview.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/709499-pm-imran-says-civilian-military-leadership-on-same-page-in-latest-interview>

The Week (2019, December 3). Pakistan army generals revolted against Bajwa's extension: Report.

<https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2019/12/03/pakistan-army-generals-revolted-against-bajwas-extension-report.html>

Wolf, S.O. (2021, February 19). Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations in flux: Is Islamabad realigning its foreign policy? SADF Working Paper, No. 26. Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/pakistan-saudi-arabia-relations-in-flux-is-islamabad-realigning-its-foreign-policy/>

Wolf, S.O. (2021, February 1). Intra-Afghan-Peace Talks (III): Pakistan's push for an interim government in Afghanistan. SADF Comment, No. 202. Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/comment-202-intra-afghan-peace-talks-iii-pakistans-push-for-an-interim-government-in-afghanistan/>

Wolf, S.O. (2021, January 26). Intra-Afghan-Peace Talks (II): Pakistan and the puzzle over the future of foreign military presence in Afghanistan. SADF Comment, No. 201. Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/pakistan-and-the-puzzle-over-the-future-of-foreign-military-presence-in-afghanistan/>

Wolf, S.O. (2021, January 22). Intra-Afghan-Peace Talks (I): Pakistan's growing influence in Afghanistan. . SADF Comment, No. 199. Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/intra-afghan-peace-talks-i-pakistans-growing-influence-in-afghanistan/>

Wolf, S.O. (2019). The China Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment. Chams: Springer.

Wolf, S.O. (2013, April 1). PSRU Research Report 2, Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU), Durham University.

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/psru/PSRUreport2withPGNnos.pdf>

Yasin, A. (2021, January 23). 'Improved' civil-military relations have positive effect on economy: Fawad. Dawn.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1603067>

Zaidi, M. (2021, February 17). Resetting Pakistan-US relations. The News International.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/790992-resetting-pakistan-us-relations>

19 Avenue des Arts 2nd floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles
Email: info@sadf.eu Web: www.sadf.eu