

## Pakistan – Crystal Gazing Beyond Elections

**Lieutenant General PC Katoch,  
PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd)®**

**T**he recent elections in Pakistan, with Imran Khan installed as

Prime Minister, is in the backdrop of increased internal strife, a looming economic crisis that may force Pakistan seek bailout package from the IMF for the 13<sup>th</sup> time, continuing insurgency in Balochistan, public realisation of China's looming debt trap and discontent over lack of governance. With the Pakistani military directly and indirectly ruling for 30 and 40 years respectively of Pakistan history, questions arise whether Imran Khan really wants peace given his own radical background, what freedom of action will he be permitted by the military and will détente be temporary till Pakistan tides over the immediate economic crisis?

### **2018 Elections**

Pakistan's military-ISI orchestrating elections in Imran's favour was a foregone conclusion; effort over months by way of intimidation, coercion and buying support, not necessarily rigging of elections that observers would notice. Imran's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) not getting *ab initio* clear majority didn't matter since the military knew that the required shortfall could be made up through 'others' and defections, to enable Imran to form the government. The Military didn't favour PML-N and PPP since Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari were considered difficult to manipulate.<sup>1</sup> Zardari as President had ordered the ISI to be brought under the Ministry of Interior, albeit military made him withdraw those orders. Nawaz Sharif came in the military's crosshairs when he began asserting himself and indicated he wanted better relations with India. Therefore, ISI favoured Imran Khan despite Imran having never held a government post.

The most disturbing part of this election was extremists including those designated "terrorists" being permitted to contest

elections and campaign. The military ensured Nawaz Sharif and his daughter remain in jail during elections. Islamabad High Court was given the diktat, “We do not want to let Nawaz Sharif and his daughter come out [of the prison] until elections”.<sup>2</sup> Aside from the aforesaid, military favouring Imran possibly had other reasons, like:

- (a) The economic mess in Pakistan, could be blamed on Nawaz Sharif government even as Pakistan is falling into China’s debt trap because of military’s ‘yes Beijing attitude’ even at the expense of bartering Pakistan’s sovereignty.
- (b) In April 2018, Imran endorsed the demands of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) but Imran’s support is more from the radical segment of Pashtuns, unlike Manzoor Pashteen, PTM Chief who draws large crowds but is against violence. Imran’s elevation would help the military manipulate the Pashtun uprising.<sup>3</sup>
- (c) Imran Khan and his political party Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) were opposed to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which had alarmed China. Installing him as Prime Minister automatically negates that resistance with the military holding all the aces, and concurrent added security of the CPEC.<sup>4</sup>
- (d) In the event, that the military wants to curb terrorist groups operating from Chinese soil (that being a big ‘if’), Imran was the preferred choice because of his radical background.

### **Imran Khan’s Radical Links**

Imran’s links with Taliban and his funding of the Haqqani seminary known as the ‘Oxford of Global Jihad’ is well documented. It has earned him the sobriquet of “Taliban Khan”.<sup>5</sup> Even Fazlur Rehman Khalil, who was put on US-designated global terrorist list along with both his terrorist organisations – Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and Ansar-ul-Ummah, is openly supporting Imran. Khalil is linked with Al Qaeda and terrorists have been active in both Kashmir and Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Pakistan-based terror outfit Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) is secretly building a 15-acre complex on outskirts of Bahawalpur (Pakistan) to train thousands of young children for Jihad.<sup>7</sup> JeM supported Imran, calling Nawaz Sharif traitor to Pakistan and Islam. Indian efforts to get Masood Azhar, JeM chief designated terrorist because of multiple terrorist acts in India, including the December 2001 attack on Indian Parliament, and January 2016 attack on Pathankot airbase were blocked at the UN by China. Masood Azhar and JeM operate freely despite Pakistan having been placed on FATF 'grey' list and agreeing to 26-point action plan to check financing terrorist groups.<sup>8</sup> Former PM Nawaz Sharif tried to curb JeM and ordered arrest of Azhar, but now with Imran Khan in the hot seat, JeM operations will likely go in overdrive. Jaish leaders have fanned in rural Punjab, addressing mosque congregations to raise funds. During a sermon in Farooq-e-Azam mosque in Pattoki, Maulana Ammar, a Jaish leader urged hundreds to make cash donations, asserting that "jihad was a mandate of the Shari'a".

### **Pakistan – Crucible of Terror**

In 2007, Pakistani military's private-business-corporate enterprise was over £10 billion. Terror became an essential tool of Pakistan's foreign policy; for the military to retain its stranglehold; proxy wars with India and Afghanistan became essential. While Pervez Hoodbhoy wrote in 2008 that militant jihad had become part of culture in educational institutions with armed groups inviting students for jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan, Najam Sethi had written in 2012, "The ISI has walked into GHQ and seized command and control of the Armed Forces".<sup>10</sup>

The Bible of Pakistani military is the book 'The Quranic Concept of War' published in 1979, authored by Brigadier SK Malik of Pakistan Army.<sup>11</sup> The preface of the book is written by Allah Bukhsh K Brohi, the former Pakistani Ambassador to India, and Zia-Ul-Haq, former President of Pakistan. The book focuses on the concept of jihad within Islam and explains that it is not simply the domain of the military. Most significantly, it justifies terrorism, which amounts to distorting the teachings of Quran.<sup>12</sup> The teachings of Quran have been debated in multiple

international forums discussing countering transnational forums including in Iraq and Afghanistan between Muslim scholars and clerics, with the latter stating that it is the distorted interpretation of Quran which is causing the violence. Using its own interpretation of Quran, Zia-ul-Haq institutionalised radicalisation of Pakistan, assiduously preparing the whole population, particularly youth, for holy jihad. Quran is presumed to reveal words of God as spoken through his chosen prophet, Mohammed.

As per SK Malik, “As a complete Code of Life, the Holy Quran gives us a philosophy of war as well. . . . This divine philosophy is an integral part of the total Quranic ideology”.<sup>13</sup> Malik’s book ‘The Quranic Concept of War’ is a treatise with historical, political, legalistic, and moralistic ramifications on Islamic warfare. It seemingly is without parallel in the western sense of warfare since the “Quran is a source of eternal guidance for mankind”. All Muslims play a role in jihad, a mainstream concept of the Quran, that jihad in terms of warfare is a collective responsibility of the Muslim *ummah*, and is not restricted to soldiers. This is the “only pattern of war,” or approach to war that an Islamic state may wage.

### **Recent Indications by Military-ISI**

With the type of radicalisation, philosophy of jihad and proxy wars that Pakistan has been waging against India and Afghanistan for the military to retain its power over Pakistan, there were hopes that the economic quagmire and a new Prime Minister would bring change of course by the military and the ISI. Three recent indications, however, point otherwise, which are described as under:

- (a) **ISI’s Operation ‘Express’**. In a clandestine operation code-named ‘Express’, ISI is funding and promoting the “Sikh Referendum 2020” campaign. This has been intercepted digitally and conclusively confirmed thorough social media chatter.<sup>14</sup> Referendum posters were displayed at Pakistani Gurdwaras during pilgrimage of Sikh *jathas*. A Sikh radical leader based in Germany, known to be an ISI operative, is linked to these 2020 campaigners. Another strong ally of the 2020 organisers involved in murder of a Rashtriya Sikh

Sangat chief and other terror incidents is believed to be funded by the ISI.<sup>15</sup> ISI is also reportedly trying to revive Sikh Separatist movement in Punjab.<sup>16</sup>

(b) **Taliban Attack on Ghazni.** The Taliban attack on Ghazni during August 2018, replay of Taliban attack on Kunduz in 2015, killed more than 200 Afghan security forces personnel in the heavy fighting, with some 1000 Taliban attacking the city on four fronts.<sup>17</sup> The Afghan Defence Minister confirmed that the Taliban were supported by foreign militants, including Pakistanis, Chechens, and Arabs; 194 militants killed, 167 injured, and dead bodies of Pakistanis being shifted to Pakistan, although number of Pakistanis killed was not specified.<sup>18</sup>

(c) **Rocket Attack on Presidential Palace in Kabul.** The Ghazni attack was on eve of Imran Khan's oath taking as Prime Minister. Then Taliban fired rockets close to the Presidential Palace in Kabul as the city was preparing to celebrate the festival of Eid and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was delivering his holiday message for the celebrations of Eid al-Adha. It prompted a ferocious aerial response with helicopter gunships bombing the house from where the rockets were reportedly launched.<sup>19</sup> The first rocket landed near the Presidency building while the second hit the US Embassy but no one was hurt. The area where the rockets hit is one of the most secure in the Afghan capital.

### **The Military and Imran**

There is no doubt that the foreign and defence policies of Pakistan are being defined and dictated by the military and not by the political authority – and that is unlikely to change. On the contrary, the radical character of Imran could actually be used by the military to progress its agenda against India and Afghanistan, while outwardly Imran calls for peace. Pakistan military's aim is to ensure control of bulk of territory of Afghanistan through the Taliban, and exploit Imran's Taliban links to achieve this.<sup>20</sup> According to one report, Imran could be expected to persuade Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to include Taliban into the core of the governance mechanism in Kabul. Once ensconced, Taliban

would push out other elements and expand their reach, to topple Ghani and replace him with a Taliban commander. Sources close to Imran say that US policy makers are on board in this plan, and that Imran has promised the US side that Taliban would not target US soldiers in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> All this may not be wholly true but if Pakistan succeeds in this game, it would mean return to Taliban rule in Afghanistan, possibly enabling exit of 'majority' US forces in the process – akin to Iraq. Move of additional 60,000 Pakistani troops to the Afghan border could be a part of the above overall strategy for boosting support to the Taliban.<sup>22</sup>

The next objective of Pakistan is obviously J&K, which can be kept on the boil till the time Kabul can be wrested indirectly and the US-NATO can be kept pacified.<sup>23</sup> US estrangement with Russia and Iran and the trade war with China has cumulatively made these three countries support the Taliban, while Pakistan is boosting the muscle support, as can be witnessed from the Ghazni attack and increased attacks in Kabul and rest of Afghanistan. China too has stepped up support.<sup>24</sup> If US pilots are facing laser attacks in Afghanistan in addition to Middle East, the obvious source is China or Russia. The US will likely find it more and more difficult to operate in Afghanistan, even after the alleged promise by Imran to minimise American casualties.

### **The China Factor**

Aims of the China-Pakistan nexus coalesce in respect of both Afghanistan and India. India is to be kept constrained within South Asia; shrinking its strategic space and grabbing as much of its territory as possible. In Afghanistan, US-NATO forces must exit and a regime installed in Kabul totally subservient to China-Pakistan. The trade war, global awareness of China's 'debt trap' policy, countries like Malaysia cancelling Chinese projects, and hiccups in China's BRI project have imposed caution on President Xi Jinping. China's major concern is success and security of the CPEC. That is why Luo Zhaohui, Chinese Ambassador at New Delhi, who 'threatened' India during the Doklam standoff, wore a turban recently, paid obeisance at Golden Temple, witnessed flag-lowering ceremony at the Attari-Wagah border and tweeted hope for "peace, friendship and cooperation" between India and

Pakistan. But despite the visit, the Modi-Xi Wuhan Summit, visit of China's Defence Minister to India and resumption of India-China hand-in-hand exercises, the China-Pakistan aims vis-à-vis India will remain unchanged.<sup>25</sup>

### **Challenges Facing Imran**

Pakistan has spent 22 of the past 30 years under multiple IMF bailout programmes, which in turn have undercut Pakistan's productivity and growth potential, by eroding governance and state capacity, and creating conditions for ever more rent-seeking and corruption.<sup>26</sup> Economic growth and development require sound governance and ample state capacity. Those criteria can be met only through extensive, well-considered reforms over the long term. The question is whether the IMF will encourage that, or have Pakistan keep doing the same thing while expecting different results. The country has had three currency devaluations since December 2017, and its external debt and liabilities of 31 per cent of GDP is the highest in last six years. Pakistan took USD1.2 billion from China before March 2018, another USD3.7 billion in commercial loans from Chinese banks and another USD 2 billion loan was announced in July 2018.<sup>27</sup> Overall, Chinese loans to Pakistan amount to USD7 billion. Pakistan seeks USD12 billion bailout from IMF but US has warned such bailout means aiding China. Besides addressing the economic mess, Imran faces the uphill task of improving governance, fighting corruption and tackling religious militancy.<sup>28</sup> Imran's celebrity status may not prove enough to deal with Pakistan's myriad challenges.<sup>29</sup>

### **Crystal Gazing - Future**

As PTI Chief, Imran's foreign policy advisors Shireen Mazari and Shah Mehmood Qureshi are staunchly anti-India. Several members of Imran's cabinet are individuals who served in the military dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf – old wine in new bottle.<sup>30</sup> In his victory speech, Imran had said he wants good relations with India and if India took one step, Pakistan would take two.<sup>31</sup> But this is plain gibberish because the first step must be Pakistan turning off the terror tap. Imran has talked of 'Naya Pakistan' but with no indication that he would curb terrorist groups that are tearing Pakistan apart. With infiltration and terror attacks

in J&K continuing, the only change may be more foreign terrorists inducted for jihad, given the boost that the JeM is getting under Imran's dispensation.

Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan's Foreign Minister says Pakistan wants "uninterrupted" dialogue with India.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, Qureshi was also Pakistan's Foreign Minister during multiple terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 by Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).<sup>33</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sent a congratulatory letter to Imran Khan, expressing commitment towards "constructive engagement", but for Pakistan to interpret this even as an "indication" to initiate talks was at best presumptive on Pakistan's part.<sup>34</sup> It is entirely possible that prophecy by Bruce Riedel, former CIA Director, that Pakistan is set to become even more dangerous with Army-Imran at helm, may come true.<sup>35</sup>

Notwithstanding the above, India has always believed in giving peace a chance. This is not the first time that Pakistan seeks financial bailout. But with the severity of financial constraints this time, can Pakistan go for course correction? The experiment of 'mainstreaming' global terrorists like Hafiz Saeed and his Milli Muslim League having failed, can the ISI clamp down on their terrorist activities, curb financing and fuelling terrorism in J&K and bring peace astride the border? It appears quite unlikely with Imran having been happy with these elements supporting him during elections. Besides, will the military permit this at all with its aim to consistently internationalize the Kashmir issue and harp on human rights? Without such course correction, any talks including on trade-commerce are unlikely to change the *status quo*.

## Endnotes

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®Lieutenant General PC Katoch, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd) is a veteran Special Forces officer, a leading defence analyst, a visiting fellow in foreign think tanks who contributes regularly for Indian and foreign publications. He was an elected member of the USI Council from 2011 to 2016.

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