Geopolitical Assessment: Pakistan-China-Saudi Axis

by Kemal Alam
Geopolitical Assessment: Pakistan-China-Saudi Axis
by Kemel Alam

Geo-Political Update: General Raheel Sharif gives confidence to China

Saudi Air Force delegation on joint Chinese-Pak JF-17 roll out (courtesy of PAF Shaheen)

Security Situation and Assessment

General Raheel Sharif taking command as COAS (courtesy of ISPR)
“Enough of this pussyfooting, there are two Victoria Crosses in my family. We are going into North Waziristan & Karachi”

General Raheel Sharif at the Corps Commander Conference.

Raheel Sharif is now half way through his term as Chief of Army Staff (COAS), and under his watch the Pakistan Army has taken control of almost all aspects of foreign policy for the first time since 2008. Since General Pervez Musharraf handed over command to Ashfaq Kayani, the Army had retreated into its barracks in almost every way. Even operationally, Kayani’s six years were seen as those of great indecisiveness. Barring the operations in South Waziristan and Swat Valley, the other border movements were piece-meal. There was a quiet revolt brewing amongst his top Generals most notably former IGFC (Inspector General Frontier Corps) and commander of Pakistan’s main strike corps (1 Corp Mangla), General Tariq Khan.

For the first time in Pakistan’s history, local media openly criticized a former four star General on his retirement; his family’s corruption, land deals, and an all-time low morale was reported amongst the men in Khaki uniforms. The greatest concern was from Pakistan’s ‘all-weather’ friend, China who was not convinced in Pakistan’s effort to seriously combat those who pose a threat to Chinese national security.

As of 4th April, Pakistan’s Army Chief, Raheel Sharif has now signed Pakistan’s biggest military deals with China and Russia, undertaken an unprecedented two week official tour of the United States, and visited 10 Downing Street for the first time without the elected Prime Minister of the day, Nawaz Sharif.

It is important to state that Raheel Sharif was not expected to make COAS; he was fourth in the list of men short listed to be new Army Chief after Kayani. The first visit he undertook was to China, and put to bed the six years of uncertainty on the issue of Pakistani support to Chinese maneuvers in Xinjiang, Wakhan and
Gilgit. Despite of protests from India, that Chinese forces were now operating in Pakistani territory alongside Pakistani SSG China and Pakistan have solidified their friendship, which China’s President described as the best of its kind in the world. Pakistan is also poised to make its first sale of co-produced JF-17 jets to Saudi Arabia and possibly Argentina. Pakistan has been the arbiter of Saudi-Chinese relations since 1970s when the Kingdom first established meaningful ties with China. Similar to the Kissinger and Nixon trips that Pakistan facilitated to China, the same was done with the Saudis. Now in 2015, this axis seems to be establishing itself in the Persian Gulf and Levant. Joint air exercises and land forces workshops have been established along with a framework agreement to support each other in Yemen, Afghanistan, Western China, Baluchistan and Central Asia.

General Raheel Sharif has also slowly but surely ushered out all the two and three star appointees of Kayani so he can control all the Generals as he pans out the new military strategy underpinned by regional diplomacy. First move was to install a new Director General of Strategic Plans Division (SPD), in the shape of General Zubair Mahmood Hayat, a suave former Military Attaché to the United Kingdom. The SPD position is the third most powerful and sensitive slot in the Army after the Chief himself, and DG ISI. So this move has sent a lot of shockwaves especially in India and Iran. The former DG SPD, General Kidwai had been at the helm for well over a decade. General Hayat after serving a short stint has been moved into another key position, that of Chief of General Staff (CGS).

The Indians and Iranians had come to trust Kidwai and work with him in terms of sharing information of missile tests, new developments and keeping the regional missile balance and in India’s case a nuclear balance. The SPD have also taken a shared relationship with PAF Kamra, where the Air Force have signed new agreements with the Chinese and the Turkish Aerospace Industries. The SPD are developing tanks, air munition and other projects with the Turks. When the Americans stopped the Turkish-Pakistan T-129 attack helicopter deal from going through, Pakistan then got China’s latest attack helicopter the Z-10s to replace its Pakistan’s aging fleet of Cobras. China sees the deployment of Z-10s as essential to test them out in an actual conflict which Pakistan is now waging in Tirah Valley and North Waziristan. Similarly Pakistani and Chinese pilots are jointly testing out ammunition dropping capabilities in the aerial campaign against the TTP.
Under Raheel Sharif’s watch China has arguably also made its first move into international diplomacy. It has been an open secret that China had for the best part of a decade only relied on business and energy security as framework to show its international interests. In Afghanistan, for three decades all routes to Kabul went through Rawalpindi however now China has for the first time stepped up its effort of diplomacy in Afghanistan, actively engaging with the Taliban and spelling out a clear path ahead for Afghanistan’s security and economic well-being. This has been a carefully planned effort in the 15 months or so into Raheel Sharif’s generalship. For the first time since NATO ISAF’s presence in Afghanistan, Raheel Sharif has dispatched his DGMO (Director General Military Operations) Major-General Amir Riaz regularly to Afghanistan to meet with Afghan and NATO officials to coordinate battlefield coordination. This has also been supplemented by trips by both XI (Peshawar) and XII (Quetta) Corps commanders for more regional planning with their Afghan counterparts. Previously under Musharraf and Kayani this had just been with NATO officials and photo opportunity with Afghans. Now it has a meaningful on-the-ground tactical result orientated focus.

The new head of the ISI, Lt-General Rizwan Akhtar was picked for his deft handling of the situation in Karachi when he was DG Rangers Sindh. Akhtar had been credited with a hardline approach in Karachi which meant the Rangers taking a more pro-active role in going after armed gangs in Karachi. Previously this was the domain of the Police or Frontier Constabulary brought in from Baluchistan and KP Provinces. But under Akhtar’s watch the Rangers with its regular Army officers took charge to take the battle to groups in North Karachi with links to the Baluch insurgents, TTP and the Afghan Taliban.

**US-Pak relations**

General Sharif’s visit to American certainly was not a normal affair. A nearly two-week-long state visit reminded Pakistan of the ‘good old Zia’ days when the Pakistan Army was America’s best friend in every aspect of defense and intelligence sharing. Sharif apart from his military to military talks held extensive talks with John Kerry, met President Obama although there were no photo opportunities as to not upset the Indians. All the major Senate and Congress Committees met with the COAS. The most significant outcome of
this trip was that DGISPR, DGMO, DGISI and DG-A all had follow up week long meetings with various agencies in the US. One of the most significant results was counter intelligence coordination which had virtually come to a stop under Kayani’s watch and here it is important to point out, that Kayani had been DGMO and DGISI before he became COAS. Some would say that Kayani was too close to the Americans since his two-star days, at least his detractors in Pakistan would say this. In the West his best friend has been Chief of Defense Staff, General Lord Richards. Admiral Mullen had also forged a love-hate relationship with Kayani but it was Kerry who was closest to Kayani for quite a few years even as Senator. Kerry has taken the same mantle with Raheel Sharif. DG-A, is a bright rising star who the Americans have homed in on, Major-General Ahmad Mahmood Hayat, is the younger brother of DGSPD, and is in charge of relations with America and has been for the last three years, he is seen as a future COAS and comes from one of the country’s most blue blooded Army families with six Generals within the last twenty years. He was previously GOC in DI Khan which was a key staging area for the Haqqani network and cross border violations. The Americans and British have found it increasingly hard to talk to the Saudi military and intelligence and are trying to use the Pakistanis for at least finding out what might be happening in the more regional conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Prince Bandar bin Sultan is no longer carrying the intelligence portfolio which means the Americans find it more difficult to understand the Pak-Saudi-Levant triangle.

Pakistan-US relations have always fostered when there is a Republican government in charge which is something a lot of observers have not taken into account. Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, both the Bush presidencies have seen the most amounts of FMS and defense engagement along with full intelligence cooperation. There are a lot of Pakistani military officials already keeping an eye on Jeb Bush and his campaign. There is a Texas and Florida business and chamber of commerce connection which has also been central to a key NATO contract given to Musharraf’s cousin for more than a decade that is dual-national of both US and Pakistan. USAF observers are still based in PAF Jacobabad and the USAF-PAF relationship is seen as fundamental to the military trust. The PAF which does not do politics maintains excellent trust levels with the USAF and DoD. This goes back to the Kargil War in 1999, when PAF refused to fly F-16
sorties for Musharraf knowing full well half the Army did not even know of the misadventures of Musharraf.

Security Situation and Assessment

Contrary to some media accounts sensationalizing insurgent attacks, the security situation in Pakistan remains challenging but manageable. The sheer presence of Raheel Sharif at all battle fronts ala Qassem Suleimani has lifted the morale of the Army and also forced some groups in Punjab to renounce their affiliation to the TTP and Kashmiri groups and instead focus on just ‘social healthcare’ work. Most notable of these groups have been the Jamat ud Dawah (JUD) party and Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), the two biggest Sunni movements funded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both have renounced violence and promised to cooperate with the Army on all accounts.

The 16th December school attack in Peshawar Army Public School (APS) attack that left more than 100 students dead seemed to be the final nail in the coffin of almost a decade long confusion in the Pakistan Army doctrine on good and bad Taliban. Post APS attack, the Pakistan Army have deployed an almost 9/11 like retaliation and bringing together of the nation. Although still in its early days, for the first time the Pakistan Army Chief said, that Afghan’s enemies were Pakistan’s enemies. This was very different to the Kayani and Musharraf mantra, which focused on, ‘why should we attack those who do not attack Pakistan.’ This surge in border activity in terms of force projection (178,000 troops on the border) and real operations in North Waziristan, Bajaur, Khyber have also resulted in Dr. Abdullah Abdullah of Afghanistan praising Pakistan and saying he is willing to trust Pakistan for now. Pakistan Army also carried out air drops in Panjsher Valley following the avalanche; this was followed up by very public display of rare Tajik-Pakistan Army unity.

Major attacks in urban centers are down in the last twelve months. Most of the major attacks are now sectarian in nature such as the twin bombing in Lahore on March 15th against two Churches, or the Shia bombing of the mosque in Sindh and Peshawar. Similarly the targeted killing of Hazara Shia in Baluchistan has
also spiked. It has been mooted that as a first priority the need to stabilize the Afghan theatre of conflict and FATA means that for now the Christians and Shia attacks might be given a second preference. This also means that JUD and AWSJ have for now been given a free hand to operate against the Shia groups. This has also coincided with events in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The Iranians for the last two years have been alleging that planes have been taking off from Southern Punjab full of fighters enroute to fight in Iraq and Syria. This Saudi backed initiative has also seen a dizzying amount of visits by Saudi Royals almost on a weekly basis to Islamabad and Rawalpindi. General Raheel Sharif was the chief guest at an all GCC military exercise in 2014 along with Saudi Arabia’s first ever long range ballistic missile test. The more Saudi leans on Pakistan it seems, the more Saudi gets involved in the domestic structure of Pakistani politics. The Saudis have for long insisted that they are not just ‘influential but active participants’ in Pakistani affairs. The current Crown Prince Muqrin, himself a former fighter pilot has been schooled with the Pakistan Air Force and has carried the Pakistan file for almost a decade now along with the new King Salman. The much talked about new ‘Salman doctrine’ relies wholly on the Pakistan and Egyptian armies according to Saudi Arabia’s top journalist Jamal Kashoggi.

Most analysts in Pakistan are in agreement that for the first time in its history the Pakistan Army has learnt to do a coup without doing a coup. This means that without removing the elected government it has taken over control of some organs of state. There is still a free hand of the Nawaz Sharif government to run its economy and infrastructure projects but as far as foreign policy and domestic security go, Nawaz has lost all control. This can be seen as being manifest most notably in the Rangers operation in Karachi. The major parties PML-N, PPP and PTI were against an all-out attack on 9-Zero, the headquarters of the MQM. However Raheel Sharif ordered the attack and simultaneously dispatched ISI chief to London which resulted in the arrest of a major MQM leader in London. The MQM have been based in London for more than twenty years much to the ire of the ISI and Pakistan military. Their leaders carry British passports and are not extradited. However since Raheel Sharif’s coming both Altaf Hussein and his deputy were arrested (and bailed). This has jolted the previously untouchable MQM in North London.
In summary, the greatest move that Raheel Sharif has conducted has been conducting diplomacy with the Americans, the British, the Chinese and the Saudis. He has held Nawaz Sharif back from sending a covert presence to Yemen despite public announcements both by the Saudis and Nawaz Sharif. The Chinese file has already resulted in the biggest defense deal in China’s history with the submarine deal and attack helicopter deal\(^2\). The Afghans are at least cosmetically happier with the Pakistanis than they have ever been since the 1970s, and that is a serious feat. The British government for the first time conducted face to face meetings with the Army Chief without the presence of the Pakistani Prime Minister. Historically the Army Chief of Pakistan only meets his British counterpart and not the PM in 10 Downing Street. The two-star and three-star shuffles in Pakistan have been accompanied by frantic defense diplomacy with Qatar, Bahrain and the Saudis. The Qataris have for the first time signed a major defense pact with Pakistan as well as loaning 32 F-16 pilots\(^3\). This was something the Saudis would never have allowed previously. Under Raheel Sharif though, the Saudis know they have to tread carefully as they need him more than he needs them\(^4\).

References: