
Pakistan's in a Mess, But It's Survival Likely

Syed Ata Hasnain

Abstract

The article carries out a recapitulation of key past events and a realistic assessment of the situation in Pakistan and its implications, especially in the region. The economy, internal stability and security, political leadership and foreign affairs, all seem to drive Pakistan towards an abyss. Will it fall into it or will it recover? Political elements in Pakistan will always play the politics which exploit the negatives of Indo-Pak relations to create opportunities for themselves. Only a stable government can give peace a chance, but in Pakistan, the only government which can be stable is the one which has the backing of the army. The current political crisis and its implications indicate a number of scenarios playing out which going by past precedent and the imperative of the army remaining the king makers are predicted by the author with precision.

Introduction

Pakistan has long been heading towards a situation where it could be perceived as a failed state, or at least a state under immense strain. Everything that goes into the efficient functioning of a nation appears

Lieutenant General **Syed Ata Hasnain** PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM & Bar (Retd) is a former GOC 15 Corps and Military Secretary. He is currently member NDMA and an acclaimed Speaker and Author on security issues.

under stress. The economy, internal stability and security, political leadership and foreign affairs, all seem to drive the nation towards an abyss. On the other side of the border is its nemesis, India—which had many problems during its early years after independence but now seems to steadily progress towards a much higher economic and geopolitical status. It is aspiring to be a US\$ 5 trillion economy in the next few years and US\$ 10 trillion economy by 2035 or perhaps earlier. Its leadership now bears the self-confidence to virtually declare the next 25 years as the *Amritkaal* or the period of runaway success which could be labelled a golden period. Neighbours have a way of either joining each other's success or becoming a mutual bane. Considering Pakistan's current status and that of the interim future, its acrimony towards India and the cussedness with which it views its relations, it's very unlikely that India is going to find a cooperative partner on its west flank, even if that cooperation would actually mean something positive for Pakistan. The progressive study of Pakistan is therefore a compulsive imperative for India and especially India's strategic community because linked to the latter's aspirations is the state of affairs in Pakistan which today appears heading only southwards. This paper sets out to examine Pakistan and the challenges it appears to face, but has no way of overcoming those.

It's very unlikely that India is going to find a cooperative partner on its west flank, even if that cooperation would actually mean something positive for Pakistan.

The Challenges for Pakistan

Although the current political shenanigans between Imran Khan and the Pakistan army may appear to take the focus, these issues are not even half as important as the internal security situation in Pakistan which from 2007 has been on a steady decline along with its economy. Hence this article looks first at these two issues.

Internal Security of Pakistan. Pakistan's tryst with internal threats from terrorism commenced after the Lal Masjid intervention by the Pakistan Army in 2007—an attempt by Pervez Musharraf to curb the rise of internal radical churning. That is when the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) came into being. TTP is an alliance of militant networks formed to unify opposition against the Pakistan Army.

From 1977, Zia-ul-Haq as President and Chief martial law administrator had initiated the process of greater Islamisation (read radicalisation) to bring Pakistan closer to the Islamic world and use the ideology to Pakistan's advantage by attempting the isolation of India and targeting it with proxies. This was the first coming of terrorists into Pakistan; the second was in 1980 when transnational extremist elements were sponsored by Pakistan, in conjunction with the US and Saudi Arabia, against the Soviet army in Afghanistan. In the first two instances, the target of the terrorists was external. However, the third coming in 2007 mentioned above, unleashed terrorism internally. The most prominent consequence of this action, the TTP, has ever since remained a thorn in the side of the Pakistan security forces.

As is well known, the internal war against the TTP continued till 2018 when the Pakistan army ostensibly declared victory; it was premature. The usual mistake armies the world over make is to treat the end of physical resistance by a terrorist group as the end of its existence. The TTP was aware that in the existing circumstances of Pakistan's politics and ideological way of things, its opportunities would come sooner than later; the networks were intact even as the Pakistan army claimed victory. The TTP laid low while other radical parties, such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, made political headway through the strategy of attempting to strangulate the government by frequently blockading the national capital. It had the tacit sympathy of Imran Khan's party, the Tehreek-e-Insaf (TEI) and his government. The outreach of radicals into Punjab also multiplied many times over.

The TTP is now fast re-emerging; the geopolitical circumstances have changed just as it rightly assessed, but much faster than it could have predicted. Within a year of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban is correctly assessing that it will need Armageddon for the US forces to return to a region where its forces fought over 20 years with little strategic outcome. The Afghan Taliban is therefore shaking off the mantle of Pakistan's control over it. It was a creation of Pakistan's ISI and probably envisages a far greater role for itself in the ensuing intra and inter-civilisational confrontation against forces that do not profess its extremist radical ideology, in the regional context.

It appears that the Afghan Taliban's initial aspiration is to ideologically dominate the Af-Pak region thereby dictating the internal discourse in Pakistan. That discourse of the early 1980s is what led to the creation of the Taliban movement. Whether today it has changed or not is a debatable point but Pakistan is struggling and realising the folly of following a policy of promoting extremist radical ideology. The same is deeply embedded in its civil society and is strangulating it within. The Afghan Taliban is also placing greater pressure on the boundary issue with Pakistan, questioning the finality of the Durand line and its fencing. Its strategy appears to dwell on pressurising Pakistan by forcing the commitment of its security forces to both border security and internal security-related issues. It is fully aware of Pakistan's limitation in being unable to balance its security needs between the three areas of its compulsive focus. These are:

- Afghanistan (including the border issue).
- The internal security of Pakistan (to include sectarian, ethnic and ideological threats).
- The eastern border with India with special attention towards the Kashmir issue.

Baloch separatism has taken the internal threats several notches higher than ever existed. It is making it extremely difficult for the

The Pashtun sentiments are being re-energised due to the developments in Afghanistan. As it is the Pashtuns see themselves as a separate entity/nationality.

Chinese-assisted projects in Baluchistan to function or be completed due to the threats from the Baloch separatists. This has had a serious impact on Sino-Pak relations too and is partially responsible for the Chinese reluctance to pursue infrastructure development in Baluchistan and other affected areas.

The Pashtun sentiments are being re-energised due to the developments in Afghanistan. As it is the Pashtuns see themselves as a separate entity/nationality. Now with the Afghan Taliban not wishing to acquiesce to Pakistan's strategic needs there are dangerous developments taking place at the Durand Line. The fencing of the border is objected to since there is nothing permanent about the Durand line as per Afghan understanding. In all these years after 2001 the Afghan Taliban—protégés of the ISI no doubt—have maintained an independent line of thinking on the border issue with Pakistan. At Pakistan's mercy for the last two decades, earlier they were in no position to protest. The border issue is one domain where now the Afghan Taliban can express its resentment against the strangulating hold of Pakistan's ISI and regenerate Afghan nationalism too. The latter is necessary because as is well understood, the Taliban is no monolith.

The Economic Scene. Pakistan has never been able to replicate the initial promise it displayed in the 1960s when its citizens while visiting India were the cynosure of all eyes. The fantasy items they brought for their friends and relatives made Indians feel as if Pakistan was El Dorado. After 1971 Pakistan could never replicate that and has had to go to the IMF 23 times for economic bailouts.¹ The country has been in a perpetual balance of payments crisis for many years and the state of its current economy is sufficiently worrisome. Shamshad Ahmed, Pakistan's former foreign secretary stated—"anyone who takes charge

of the government immediately comes to us and asks us to arrange a trip to the US or Saudi Arabia to go looking for loans right away”.² Plans of debt servicing and regeneration of the economy do not ever seem to be the priority. Living from loan to loan and building up a cascading debt without any plans of expanding exports is the catastrophic policy Pakistan has pursued for many years. India suffered the ignominy of its forex reserves touching rock bottom at US\$ 1 billion in 1991, but the active consensus-based political approach to changing its economic policies led to a turnaround without which India would have been in serious trouble. Pakistan unfortunately does not have the good fortune of national interest being the uppermost consideration of its political and military leadership, for whom self-gratification is the focus. According to Moeed Yusuf, the former NSA under the Imran Khan government, the Pakistan economy for much too long was built upon the security model. The Pakistani leadership was satisfied with resources coming in on the basis of the geopolitical and geostrategic importance that Pakistan posed at any given time. He failed to say how shallow the thinking of the leadership was, that a national economy could be built on the basis of a nation remaining strategically significant forever. He was, however, courageous enough to say that Pakistan first needs to admit its past mistakes. However, anyone who does this would face political opprobrium. Which politician would change this? Yet Pakistan will need to find someone with political gravitas and high leadership qualities to admit past mistakes, throw the electoral hustings to the winds and take some courageous actions to restore even a semblance of the economy and in fact that of basic governance. If Pakistan is going to get driven

Yet Pakistan will need to find someone with political gravitas and high leadership qualities to admit past mistakes, throw the electoral hustings to the winds and take some courageous actions to restore even a semblance of the economy.

by considerations such as those which effectively removed one of its best economic brains from the scene, then no one can come to its assistance. Atif Mian, the well-known Pakistani economist and Economic Advisor to Imran Khan was removed from the appointment very early in his tenure in 2018, Pakistan's suicidal radical extremists demanded his removal because he followed the Ahmadiyya faith which is banned in Pakistan since Ahmadiyya do not endorse the finality of the Holy Prophet of Islam.

The creaking Pakistan infrastructure is collapsing with the recent nationwide power outage extending almost 24 hours in some areas. Recovery without infrastructure that supports growth, will remain a major challenge for Pakistan. Loans have been promised from many donors but will be insufficient to see a long-term recovery rather than just a temporary tactical patchwork to get over the bad times.

The Current Political Crisis and its Implications

The PDM took the form and shape of opposition unity with Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as leading lights; an 11-party alliance with Maulana Fazlur Rehman of Jamaat Ulema-e-Islam (F), as the president. It was founded in September 2020 as a movement against then PM Imran Khan, accusing his regime of poor governance, political victimisation of opponents, and mismanaging the economy and foreign policy.

Opposition alliances have a long history in Pakistan. They have come together against military dictators but with varying success. Field Marshal Ayub Khan was removed from the presidency in the late 1960s by such an alliance, but these were less successful against Zia-ul-Haq's presidency in the 1980s. What is noticed is that progressively the influence of the classic civil society like the one that could rally for the removal of Ayub Khan in 1968, has waned. This influence today has been replaced by the radical voice in society; power seems to flow from the ability to muster street strength for violent blockades of cities and establishments. In yester

years the Pakistan Army's voice carried. A word from the local Corps Commander would clear the streets. That is no longer true. The Army likes to retain influence but avoids direct confrontation with mobs and street demonstrations; its a house divided although on the surface this does not appear so.

Imran Khan was stable until he fell out with the Pakistan Army. That facilitated Shahbaz Sharif's election as the PM on 11 April 2022 after a vote of no confidence against Imran Khan carried in the Pakistan National Assembly. However, it is increasingly clear that Imran Khan is the most popular political leader in Pakistan today. His power emanates from the street and the Army is unsure of how to handle him. He can easily pander to the radicals and has a following within the Pakistan Army too. With the backdrop of the failed economy, the general elections are unlikely to be held. The PDM would be glad to get a reprieve from the current crisis and work towards building its effectiveness towards winning the election. Currently, it enjoys the confidence of the Pakistan Army and none else. The latter would want to see the back of Imran Khan or ensure that he does not return to power. The Pakistan Army may have weakened its hold on polity but it still carries the capability to select a PM just like it did in the case of Imran Khan.

A crisis emerged on 9 May 2023 when the Government/Army sent a posse of Rangers to arrest Imran Khan. All hell broke loose as a PTI mob entered even the residence of GOC 4 Corps at Lahore. The Army probably wanted to keep itself away from the public eye but as it turned out it is now completely in the eye of the storm. The events were all over electronic and social media. This unending drama over Imran Khan is going to continue for some time. After all the shenanigans we have seen thus far it seems doubtful that the Pakistan Army or the constituents of the PDM would like to see Imran Khan back to power after a future election. The retribution then will be worse than anything before. Things in Pakistan do not progress as per rules and that is why Imran Khan

Things in Pakistan do not progress as per rules and that is why Imran Khan has to watch his back. The Supreme Court may have supported him so far; how long more will that continue is anybody's guess.

has to watch his back. The Supreme Court may have supported him so far; how long more will that continue is anybody's guess. Once the Army has decided to flex its muscles it will have no qualms about abrogating the constitution or democracy. It will be a virtual 'coup'. Both the PDM and the Pakistan Army need each other at the moment. How their fight against the Supreme Court will pan out, while retaining democratic credentials, is going to be a major challenge.

A plausible scenario could be the Army weeding out Imran supporters within the senior ranks (they are known to exist) as a first step. The postponement of the election to allow the PDM the space to project itself in better light from a governance angle seems inevitable. To remove Imran Khan from potential candidacy for PM he could either be assassinated (as in so many previous cases) or judicially defanged with the Army staying in the background. The Army will have to work overtime to convert an election result to its choosing. That is because Imran Khan's elimination or arrest would spark some high-energy protests in the streets. Thus far it appears the Army under General Munir is getting the upper hand because it is effectively eroding the power base of the PTI through threats against many of the high-profile members of Imran Khan's PTI. We are likely to see a substantial rise in General Munir's power once he ensures that a majority of Corps Commanders of his choice are appointed by October 2023. Lt Gen Faiz Hameed the former DG ISI who is hugely favoured by Imran Khan appears to have been marginalised. Gen Munir is slowly ensuring that he has full control over the Army but there is yet no certainty of the situation.

What could be debated in this situation is whether the above crisis is an existential threat to Pakistan. This does not seem to be, as Pakistan has

seen much of the same before; only this time the economy too being in a poor state the unpredictability factor is much higher. However, it appears Pakistan, will pull through and will be bailed out by the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

With the Pakistan Army in the grip of factionalism and attempting to maintain national stability, its campaign against the TTP has lacked lustre this time and the concept of employing soft power at the outset that Gen Asim Munir has declared, is flawed. It requires a strong kinetic response followed up by doses of soft power. Besides this, much has to be done to neutralise the negatives arising out of the extremist ideology which promotes chaos through issues such as blasphemy laws and the pursuit of minorities.

Radicalisation and its Dangers

The majority of Pakistani society was slow in ferment towards radicalisation. The political community did not get immediately affected as was evident from the results in elections where the radicals made only a marginal impact till 2012. However, over time the writ of the radicals has increased dramatically. The symbolic juncture for drastic change was the assassination of Salman Taseer in 2011, the governor of Punjab, at the hands of Mumtaz Qadri a policeman in service with Pakistan's Punjab police. Qadri was promoted to a household name with no resistance from the state. It was around this time that the Pakistan Army commenced getting the first indicators that it had overplayed its ideology card. In fact, right after the 2007 incident involving the entry of the Pakistan Army into Lal Masjid, internal militancy gathered weight. It came to a head post the next major set of events—the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) attack on Karachi airport in June 2014 and the Army Public School Peshawar on 16 December 2014, which saw the launch of Pakistan Army's Operation Zarb-e-Azb in full intensity from 2014 to 2018. One-third

The international community has reasons to feel concerned, especially because of Pakistan's nuclear weapons which are in a state of tenuous command and control.

of the Pakistan army's active brigades were deployed for the operation. The tactics followed by the Pakistan Army was bewildering. Entire villages in Swat and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had been forcibly vacated to allow Pakistan's gunships to rake the built-up areas.³ Such tactics obviously increase radicalisation.

The international community has reasons to feel concerned, especially because of Pakistan's nuclear weapons which are in a state of tenuous command and control. The US probably got wind of the deteriorating state of things early enough and changed tack to some extent by backing Pakistan to control the internal situation in Afghanistan and the region in general. The refurbishment package for the F-16s was also linked to this. However, the reality is that the hard money that is required for recovery is not coming Pakistan's way. Without a disciplined approach and strict international oversight, a recovery is yet too far; the first question is that of survival and the manner in which the inevitable violence will manifest. However, the possibility remains far from Pakistan's weak political leadership and the Pakistan army attempting to execute anything that will draw India into the already complex situation.

Time is running out. Any bailout that the international community considers will take time to manifest; it's the interim period which is really challenging. There is much talk of implosion and the potential move of masses of population towards the international borders. The latter will bring with it another element of chaos which will add to the already existing turmoil. In all this, can the Pakistan army meet all the demands that are placed upon it?

Conclusion

The PDM government could have endeared itself to those pushing the peace narrative with India but it has remained halfway. To its credit, the ceasefire at the LoC has been held since 25 February 2021. However, recent utterances by Shahbaz Sharif inspired no confidence as he harped on the same issues, ostensibly to retain some hard-line support and the Army's backing. Logic dictates that Pakistan's economic situation will not allow it to provoke India

lest the spiral of escalation becomes uncontrolled. Yet, there will be a segment within Pakistan's hard-liners that would rue the loss of all that was invested in the turbulence created in J&K. Thus, Pakistan is unlikely to pull back altogether from the sponsoring of proxy war and will work towards the retention of influence in J&K. The new-found opportunities in Punjab would also need to be exploited and the feasibility of bringing these together with the J&K opportunities would always remain a priority. Political elements in Pakistan will always play the politics which exploit the negatives of Indo-Pak relations to create opportunities for themselves. Not until a stable government comes to power and has the backing of the Pakistan Army, will these elements relent and allow peace a chance. The connection with China and its dependence on it for economic bailouts will always constrain Pakistan from changing its stance towards India. We can expect a dynamic situation to prevail with threats changing, contingent upon the changes in Pakistan's economic situation. For those who imagine the implosion of Pakistan and its inability to remain a coherent state it should be remembered that the effects of that scenario could be much more unpredictable and much less under our control;

Those who imagine the implosion of Pakistan and its inability to remain a coherent state it should be remembered that the effects of that scenario could be much more unpredictable and much less under our control.

hence much more difficult to respond to. As a final word Pakistan is likely to survive the chaos and continue to be an irritant for India.

Notes

1. IANS, “Tough love: Pak has gone to IMF for bailouts 23 times in 75 years”, *The Economic Times*, 26 February 2023, at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/tough-love-pak-has-gone-to-imf-for-bailouts-23-times-in-75-years/articleshow/98247038.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.
2. Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, “Pakistan’s Vicious IMF Cycle”, *The Diplomat*, 28 September 2022, at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/pakistans-vicious-imf-cycle/>.
3. Author’s informal conversation on a trip to UAE with a Pakistani taxi driver hailing from Swat and working in the UAE.