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Priyanka Singh

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Review Essay

Army: The Be-All or End-All of Pakistan Politics?

Priyanka Singh

Aqil Shah, **The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2014, 399 pp., Rs 995 (hardback), ISBN 9780674728936

C. Christine Fair, **Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War**, Oxford University Press, South Asia Edition, 2014, 347 pp., Rs 750 (hardback), ISBN 9780199454686

T.V. Paul, **The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World**, Random House India, 2014, 257 pp., Rs 499 (hardback), ISBN 9788184005516

Witness to three fully fledged coups, Pakistan's beleaguered political history has been consistently punctured with prolonged stints of military rule. Although a democratic state in principle, it is the episodic rule by the military that has inflicted Pakistan's political destiny and shaped its political culture and practices. In May 2013, there was a rather peaceful transition—the first of its kind—from one popularly elected incumbent government to another. Notwithstanding the frequent upheavals, the constant pulls and pressures that bear upon the civilian set-up underscore the prominence and inevitability of the army in Pakistan's political discourse.

Against this backdrop, this review essay deliberates on the role of the military in Pakistan's strategic and political landscape, juxtaposes democracy against military dictatorship and in the process encapsulates the struggle for power in Pakistan between the two diametrically opposed realms—the civil and the military. The essay is a collation of emergent ideas and assertions on the intrinsic role of the army in Pakistan as depicted in three books published in 2014: *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan*, by Aqil Shah, prescribes civilian supremacy against the ills of military authoritarianism; *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, by C. Christine Fair, is a lash-out at the army's unwarranted predominance in controlling the state of affairs; and *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World*, by T.V. Paul, ascribes the constant war mode as a drain on resources stunting all prospects of growth and stability.

Guardian or predator

The travails of partition continue to dominate the discourse in Pakistan and public perceptions at large. The searing pain of having lost a substantial chunk of territory as

Dr. Priyanka Singh is Associate Fellow, at IDSA, New Delhi.

a result of the Bangladesh war and the continuing claims on Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which the majority in Pakistan believe belonged to them, have all been exploited to create a conviction that India is an eternal enemy. Parallel to this, the army has deftly cultivated a sense of belief that, come what may, it will lead and salvage the country and its people. The threat perception emanates from Pakistan's disparity with India in size and might, and a Hindu majority population is the lever on which the Pakistan army hinges. In a state that was born insecure, the army is pivotal, as Fair says: 'countries have armies, in Pakistan, the army has a country' at its disposal (p. 27).

Shah has spun his central thesis around a pertinent question: 'who will guard the guardians?' (p. 2). The question arises from a sense of wariness concerning military interference and aggression in Pakistan politics. It also stems from the fact that democracy in Pakistan has not matured to a level where it can rein in the military's persistent advances.

Shah's work attempts to understand the precarious civil military equations in Pakistan. Censuring the army for an inherent sense of superiority as being the final resort to secure Pakistan's larger interests, domestic or external, Shah's account is a clear propagation of civil supremacy over military rule. To support his assertions, Shah has culled information from material available from the National Defence University (NDU) in Islamabad and based his conclusions mainly on interviews held with military officers, serving and retired.

Among several key questions that Paul raises is why does Pakistan 'remain a garrison or a heavily militarized warrior state?' (p. 2). Paul argues that decades of military-centric security have made it more vulnerable as a political entity. At the outset, Paul presents the war versus development narrative and examines Pakistan as a case to explain how nation building is stymied by war. Paul dwells on the problem the elite have created for their country by constantly ignoring reforms much needed in the political and economic spheres.

Strategic culture and behavioural patterns

The army in Pakistan is essential to the strategic priorities and foreign policy directives. It controls the nuclear assets and holds strings of domestic and external policy issues with regard to the close and extended neighbourhood. The genesis of the military's role at the core of decision making began as early as 1951 after the Rawalpindi conspiracy. After this, General Ayub Khan began rendering direct advice to the civilian government on a range of issues concerning the nation. The army's influence increased thereafter and followed by the coup in 1958, Shah writes, the process of civilisation of military rule or legitimisation through popular vote began under General Ayub Khan.

Pakistan's history is replete with instances that show that the army has on several occasions discredited democracy. At any point, if the civilian dispensation endeavoured to contain or undermine the army, it has either been dislodged or shoved to the edge by applying diverse tactics. As a principle, the army clips civilian authority the moment it shows signs of consolidation. As a result, democracy could never take solid root in Pakistan. The army has ensured that democracy only exists up to a level where it can be easily eroded. While safeguarding its pivotal position, the army has, after bouts of military rule, allowed democracy to return to the country. This could be partly due to domestic compulsions or certain international obligations. For instance,

the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was instrumental in reinstating democracy in Pakistan during the late 1980s. Similarly, in 2007–2008, the US decision to link aid to democracy was crucial in the calling of national elections.

While it is correct to assume that the army has frequently transgressed the civilian domain, politicians and society have to take equal responsibility for the army's ascendance to power. The army's space and position of strength has been ceded by relentless divisions within the political class and the tendency to fraternise with the military for selfish, short-term political gains. It is common knowledge that the military leaders responsible for staging coups have been, in all cases, in the good books of the civilian leaders they subsequently dislodge. Similarly, the army has used one set of civilian leadership to oust another. In 1977, the opposition against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was promised power by Zia ul Haq once the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government was removed. During the 2014 political crisis, the dissident leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Javed Hashmi, made a similar accusation that the army, which was behind the crisis, had promised power to the PTI chief Imran Khan.

Secondly, the army in Pakistan is ideology driven, unlike armies that usually practise political and religious atheism. It espoused radical and fundamentalist elements to serve ulterior purposes, both to meet its own needs against India and Afghanistan and partly to oblige the US objectives against the former Soviet Union. Its affinity to fundamentalism and extremism has enhanced its belief that as a security-centric institution meant to guard territory, it is also entitled to secure the 'ideological frontiers' of the country against external forces (Fair, pp. 66–102). The pervasion of religion in the Pakistan army is rooted in the two nation theory, which classifies Hindus and Muslims as belonging to separate homelands—India and Pakistan. Upholding this divisiveness and obtaining a 'military balance' with India is, hence, of paramount significance to the army (Paul, p. 12). Perpetual association has strengthened the army's alliance with militant groups. As a fallout, radical Islamic forces have increasingly permeated the ranks of the Pakistan army.

Last but not the least, the strategicness of Pakistan's geographical location, described by Paul as the 'fulcrum of Asia' (p. 5) and its significance in the struggle among the great powers, has been aptly pronounced by the annotation 'geostrategic curse' (p. 18). Since geostrategic interests are driven mainly by security institutions, the army in Pakistan has been the inevitable actor in every geostrategic and geopolitical venture.

Riding the anti-India bandwagon

Broadly speaking, India has been at the core of Pakistan's relations with the US, China and Afghanistan. During the Cold War years, the military in Pakistan was able to procure US arms and material aid to put up a strong front against its arch rival. Taking advantage of the India–China tensions during the 1960s, Pakistan was quick to strike an agreement with the latter. Lately, its intrusive policy/role towards Afghanistan appears to be steered by the overarching India factor.

Coming to specifics, as Fair argues, the Kashmir issue is the lifeline of the Pakistan army; it will neither allow it to die nor enable its settlement. For the army in Pakistan, Kashmir and the perceived threat from India is an existential issue. It therefore benefits from the status quo frequently challenging India's territorial advantage. According to the military narrative, to accept the current territorial position is

somewhat acquiescing to India. This could also be equivalent to rejecting the two nation theory disaggregating the Hindus and Muslims under separate states, as enunciated by the founding leaders of Pakistan.

Fair pegs her account on the ‘revisionist goals’ harboured by the Pakistan army vis-à-vis India, which implies changing borders and political systems (p. 1). As Paul puts it, an overt obsession with Kashmir, the determination of ‘redeeming perceived lost territories’ (p. 4), has intensified over the years. Fair sums it up by calling it Pakistan’s ‘maximalist agenda’, which includes getting hold of Kashmir, inhibiting India’s growing stature and influencing affairs in Afghanistan (p. 2).

Fair’s work explores the deep rooted convictions within the Pakistan army that it is bound to frustrate India by keeping it engaged in a perennial conflict-like situation, one that is likely to apply the brakes to its otherwise unprecedented rise. Having lost its eastern arm in 1971 to alleged Indian designs and not being able to seize Kashmir from India fuels the army’s revisionist agenda through which it projects itself as determined to alter the status quo. However, it is unrealistic to believe that India and Pakistan will be at peace if the Kashmir issue is resolved. As Fair cautiously admits, problems with India are far reaching, complex and go well beyond the territorial claims over Kashmir.

The armies of India and Pakistan inherited their culture and ethos from the British, as posited by Aqil Shah. Subsequently, however, both militaries evolved, charting divergent courses. Unlike Pakistan, the army in India has always been under the civilian umbrella. Soon after partition, the Pakistan army colluded with tribal raiders to wage a war in Kashmir in an effort to annex the state by force. This war, like other conflicts with India, has coloured the Pakistan army’s character as belligerent, one that invades others’ territory, while its counterpart in India has been perceived as an army up against an invading force. Contrary to this, the army in Pakistan has always been ‘portraying India as the aggressor’ (Fair, p. 157).

The dominant perception across the subcontinent is that the army and the intelligence in Pakistan scotch any attempt made by the civilian apparatus to improve ties with India (Paul, p. 193). The Kargil war is an appropriate example, where the civilian government, by admission, was largely unaware of the developments at the Line of Control (LoC).

Pakistan: misled, disarrayed

Based on superfluous ambitions, the Pakistan army has deepened its niche within Pakistan society and the system. It is territorial, arrogant, infused with excess power and hence has made an indelible mark on every foreign policy and national security measure. It is unapologetic about trivialising democracy in the name of rectifying political currents. Over a period of time, it has amassed absolute authority as an institution—the dependable body to solve crisis situations. The handling of the 2014 political crisis, which the Nawaz Sharif government narrowly survived, saw the army as an arbiter. With profound influence, the Pakistan army took the moral high ground, aided by smart pronouncement of its political neutrality, thus appearing as the ultimate saviour of peace and stability. As well as this, as Shah notes, the army has furthered its non-military economic interests. It continues to enjoy leverage disproportionate to actual contributions towards nation building, growth and stability. It has manipulated the country’s misgivings at all times and catapulted minor disputes and issues to dangerously serious levels. In the process, the army has added unprecedented strength

and might to its manoeuvring of the course of the country's political and economic fortunes. The focus has never really drifted from core national security objectives and as long as this remains the, the army will be a relevant, rather inevitable institution.

The military commands a huge share in the federal budget and also enjoys the unique privileges it receives from the US. Post 9/11, the influx of US aid has been a boon for the military in Pakistan. In this context, Shah argues that those external factors have contributed to the unwarranted growth of the army's power and might in Pakistan. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and American retorts post 9/11 have all bestowed on Pakistan a crucial role in managing the state of the American strategic crisis. Fair attributes the US with having a negative 'corrosive impact' (p. 281) on the promotion of democracy in Pakistan. Fair believes that before the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act 2009, the US failed to make any explicit commitment towards promotion of democratic practices. The goal of the US has been rather to stabilise the nuclear-armed Pakistan than to restore democracy.

The army's collision with Islamists to forge its goals vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan has been detrimental. Years of involvement with extremist forces to fulfil the strategic goals of the west and otherwise to ensnare India, housing militant sanctuaries under its tutelage, has not only boosted further radicalisation but projected Pakistan as a country of militants and violence. In the present context, the army is seemingly put up against forces and elements that it once fostered. Commenting on this paradox, Paul disagrees with the contention that it is the army that has kept the country united. He notes that the forces that threaten to tear the country apart were its own creation (p. 92).

The army has used its control over nuclear assets as an instrument to deter India from retaliating and the rest of the world from dictating tough lines for the Pakistan army. Control over the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has aided the military's diligence in all its endeavours and misadventures, covert or confrontational. The way the Pakistan army has managed dissemination of information to accord itself an image of credence and trust is incredible. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) has managed the media portrayal of the army as per the right-wing orientations and the grandiose 'preferred narratives' (Fair, p. 198).

Way out

Pakistan's political history reflects the vicious cycle created through respective stints by the military and civilian governments. To a large extent, each of these dispensations has laid the conditions for the other's revival. The situation became dire due to the tide of fundamentalists and a clique of incompetent and unmotivated civilian leadership. Pakistan at the moment is under 'very stable instability' (Fair, p. 277). With a high level of receptivity for the army's culture in Pakistani society, the prospects for reformation appear quite bleak. Nevertheless, the three books put forward a set of extensive suggestions for possible solutions—whether it would take some kind of external shock or a total defeat to discredit the Pakistan army.

Both Aqil Shah and Christine Fair make classifications involving internal and external drivers that could perhaps induce change in the army's strategic culture and practices or effectively 'guard the guardians' (Shah, p. 254). Shah debates whether a complete democratic transition could help, as democracies are less prone to wage wars against each other in view of the accountability to the electorate. He cites the case of the Kargil war of 1999 (where the two democracies did go to war) to support

his argument that greater civilian control in the state apparatus is likely to put an early end to armed conflicts.

Shah advises ‘democratic resocialization’ of the army, a process that should ideally begin at school (p. 276). Children should be instilled with thoughts on the ideas and principles of democracy. At the officer level, proper training should be imparted at the NDU, defining the role and domain of an army in a parliamentary democracy. Lessons should be drawn from parallel cases to demonstrate that in most cases where the military has overstepped or transgressed, its organisational strength and discipline has declined. Similarly, developing ‘alternative centers’ of power could balance out power dynamics in the Pakistani state and society (p. 278). Shah adopts a comparative approach to establish that countries have transformed into democracies from militaristic rule with gradual dissipation of military influence.

Dwelling heavily on the regional and global implications of an errant Pakistan army, Fair discounts appeasement as a possible way out. She believes it will only add substance to its irrational pursuits and embolden its belief that it is the superior force. Her conclusions on the future course and prospects for change from ‘within and without’ are clearly pessimistic (p. 276). At the end of her book, Fair reiterates her principle notion that Pakistan’s security policy is not driven by security requirements, but the ideological commitment that existed before its birth as a nation. Pakistan in the foreseeable future will carry on subverting US interests in the region and similar trends will be a constant irritant for India in times to come.

T.V. Paul notes that dispelling the army’s rigid influence is a huge challenge that only democracy can quell. It takes prolonged stable democracy to underwrite the decline of the military’s hold. He delineates the role of the civil society and politicians in reining in the military and the intelligence that has thrust the country into economic and political crises. Calling it a choice from within, Paul puts the onus on society to fully embrace democratic ideals and principles that allow space for plurality, debate, discourse and dissent.

Assessment

The three books present an unvarnished analysis of the Pakistan military, dealing expansively with its evolution as the apex institution. Pakistan was formed out of a political settlement but the state fabric has been deeply tinged with military politicking for the better part of its existence. While Aqil Shah and C. Christine Fair’s works focus chiefly on military politics in Pakistan, *The Warrior State* by T.V. Paul takes a broader view of the country. However, even in his case, the underpinnings and content are purely indicative of the evolution of Pakistan as a garrison or military state.

The books are valued additions to the existing discourse on the Pakistan military, led by Ayesha Siddiqa’s *Military Inc.*,¹ which calls the military a corporation with significant economic stakes, Carey Schofield’s *Inside the Pakistan Army*,² Shuja Nawaz’s *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within*³ and Husain Haqqani’s *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*.⁴ For certain startling revelations, Siddiqa’s book was banned in Pakistan. Therefore, to see a series of literature on such a contentious subject as Pakistan’s military and how it has inflected democracy is a welcome sign. All three books impart historical awareness regarding the military’s rise, and make straightforward assertions on the disadvantages of army interference and what it augurs for the country’s future. Hence, the authors make a vital

contribution in diagnosing the ills the military culture has injected in Pakistan's social and political system.

While it will be nearly impossible to decimate the army's influence and power in the near future, what is even more important is the realisation that democracy or *jamhuriat* is essential to nurture Pakistan. Contentions within the political class have undermined democracy and hindered political consolidation. The army during successive stints has been able to infuse the system with a mindset that perpetuates their institutional interests and privileges. The civilian leadership gets boxed in by constraints imposed by the army and rules without much initiative to alter the system. Once democracy takes root, it will be a big leap towards attaining parity with India, the quest against whom dominates the thinking, perceptions, narratives and actions of the Pakistan military.

Notes

1. Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, Pluto Press, London, 2007.
2. Carey Schofield, *Inside the Pakistan Army: A Woman's Experience on the Frontline of the War on Terror*, Biteback Publishing, London, 2011.
3. Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within*, Oxford University Press, New York, USA, 2008.
4. Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Natraj Publication, New Delhi, 2005.