

## Pakistan army is in the mood for a change of tack.

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Ahmed Rashid

For the first time the Pakistan army has admitted to the dangers of growing Islamic militancy and warned that if the entire nation does not unite against it “we’ll be divided and taken towards civil war”.

General Ashfaq Parvez Kiyani, the army’s chief, made the forthright comments in a speech on August 14 in front of officers celebrating Pakistan’s Independence Day. “We realise the most difficult task for any army is to fight against its own people but...no state can afford a parallel system or a militant force,” he said.

After years of denial that militancy posed a [threat to Pakistan](#) and blaming outsiders such as India, the US and Israel for backing terrorist groups in the country, Gen Kiyani finally admitted that “the fight against extremism and terrorism is our own war and we are right in fighting it”.

His comments are a departure from what the army, the government and the political elite have offered as explanations for rising militancy and sectarian killings in the past that have almost brought the nation to its knees. Every day, 10-30 people are killed in multiple acts of violence - most of it by Islamic extremists - but there is no accountability for the perpetrators and few are ever caught or punished.

Gen Kiyani also made it clear that the army will not tolerate a dual system of governance by the militants and he asked for the civilian government’s support for army operations, which has been sorely lacking in the past. “It is imperative that the entire nation is united in this context because the army can only be successful with the co-operation of the people,” he said.

His statement comes as US pressure on Pakistan continues. Leon Panetta, US defence secretary, said that the Pakistan army was ready to go into North Waziristan, a key militant base area, to root out terrorists. Some US Congressmen are also trying to fix Pakistan with the label of state sponsor of terrorism, which could result in the country being seen as another North Korea.

Gen Kiyani’s positive words will now require more actions. The army has pursued a dual policy [allowing the Afghan Taliban](#), in particular the Jalaluddin Haqqani network, to operate freely out of Pakistan and attack US forces in Afghanistan. Similarly, the army and its Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) have allowed those Pakistani Taliban who do not turn their guns inwards but kill Americans to operate freely. This has infuriated the US military.

The ISI has also helped mobilise dozens of religious parties and militant groups who have launched an anti-American crusade on the streets in recent months. As a result, the ISI has been accused of harassing, intimidating and even killing journalists, human rights workers and others - something that it strongly denies.

Critics have argued that the ISI needs to be brought under civilian jurisdiction and that Pakistan needs a holistic counter-terrorism strategy that treats all extremists as a potential threat, but tries to reconcile with as many as are willing to do so.

The army has never had a strategy. Instead, it has approached the issue tactically, such as the recent whipping up of anti-American feeling by Islamic groups to put pressure on Washington during the seven month stand-off when Pakistan closed the US and Nato supply route for Afghanistan.

There are other questions that the military has never answered, such as what was Osama bin Laden doing in Pakistan before he was killed last year and who was supporting him. A host of militants from China, Turkey, the Central Asian republics, Arabian Gulf states, western Europe and other places are active with the Pakistani

Taliban and more foreigners continue to come for training. All the countries affected now openly criticise Pakistan's inability or refusal to deal with these threats, placing the country into deep isolation.

Nevertheless, Gen Kayani has certainly set the ball rolling and it is hoped that his comments will be followed by a genuine military counter-terrorism strategy as well as encourage the government and civilian politicians to come out more openly against the extremist threat.