

What is Pakistan army's game plan?

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When Pakistan's army chief General Raheel Sharif visits Washington for talks in a few days' time, top US officials are likely to be listening more attentively than they did to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during his visit there last month. The Americans know the military is once more in the driving seat in Pakistan and the civilians have yet again proved hopeless at governance, and given little leadership on Washington's main concern: counter terrorism.

Gen Sharif's picture is almost daily splashed across every newspaper in the country, as he bounds from visiting troops on the front line to handing out sympathy and cheques to widows and orphans after a particularly deadly Taliban assault. [By contrast](#), Mr Sharif appears rarely, and when he does he is slow and overweight and never deviates from his written text. He does not act like a third-time prime minister, or an inspiring leader for a country in a deep political and economic morass facing the challenge of Islamic militancy.

For years, the army refused to clean up the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. Gen Sharif's excellent reputation rests on a highly effective military operation in the area that has either killed or driven into Afghanistan most Pakistani Taliban and militants of other groups. Terrorism across the country is much reduced since the army action began 18 months ago. The army has also tackled the mafias, protection rackets and corrupt politicians in Karachi, bringing peace to the war-torn city. Huge adulatory posters of the general have appeared on street corners in gratitude, many calling for him to stay in his post rather than retire next November.

But few people want a military regime back and the risk of this is causing the most concern among Pakistanis. What is the army's game plan? Speculation is rife. Gen Sharif gives no briefings, meets few outsiders and his only means of communication are tweets sent out by the army's media cell – headed by the respected Lt Gen Asim Bajwa – which now oversees the country's entire media. Foreign policy is now virtually run on tweets – which become newspaper headlines. Rarely is any other information available.

One thing is clear, however: Gen Sharif has no intention of taking over. When he was appointed chief in November 2013 he promised to wipe out terrorism at home, urged fellow Pakistanis to stop blaming outsiders for the country's woes and deal with them internally and, crucially, vowed to support democracy.

The army has always dominated national security and foreign policy, even when civilians were in power, and it is no different now. When Mr Sharif refused army appeals to appoint a national security adviser, the military last month appointed its own – a retired general – to brief the prime minister. Just days before leaving for Washington Gen Sharif, addressing fellow generals in Rawalpindi, issued a [harsh critique of the government's](#) performance, saying the army's counter-terrorism campaign was being undermined by poor governance and inadequate help from civilian agencies.

The military is now extending its reach. It has its own courts, which hold trials in secret; it obsessively watches the media (and as a result there is a great deal of self-censorship by journalists); it help makes bureaucratic appointments; and it has strengthened anti-corruption bodies looking into politicians' fortunes. It is deeply suspicious of civil society and non-governmental organisations and consequently itself takes care of 1.2m refugees from the fighting in the tribal regions. Nothing and nobody moves without a nod from the military.

Politicians are the most worried about the future. At least two parties in Karachi and one in the north are no longer major players; their leaders are in exile fearing the wrath of the anti-corruption broom. As the recent local elections showed, no party – including Mr Sharif's ruling Muslim League – has a national following. They have all been [relegated to provincial parties](#).

Without leaders it is likely that these parties will fragment. If there is a vacuum, who will fill it – the army and its civilian supporters under a new hybrid form of government? Or – most likely – chronically weakened political parties, which will allow the military to intensify its grip on the country.

When Gen Sharif steps down, it is likely that his replacement will follow the same policy. Retired officers say there is a firm institutional belief in the army that it must continue to dominate policymaking well into the future. However, they say that the army will not interfere in the political process.

The key to easing the tension between military authority and sustaining democracy is building a civilian state capacity to enforce good governance and allow a modern country to emerge that provides goods and services. The civilians will need the army to help them in this, but must take ownership of policymaking in areas such as the pursuit of terrorists and improving governance – rather than just making money.

For now, it seems the military prefers to control governance itself rather than show the patience needed to help build civilian capacity. But Pakistan cannot afford to have the army forever at the wheel in all its institutions while pretending the civilians are in power.