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*Shuja Nawaz, the author of **Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within**, talks about the ramifications of Lt Gen Asim Munir's appointment as the new army chief*

Shuja Nawaz, a well-known commentator and strategist on Pakistan and its army, is also the author of *The Battle for Pakistan: The Bitter US Friendship and a Tough Neighbourhood* and *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within*. He was also the first director of the South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council in Washington DC from January 2009 through October 2014 and is currently a distinguished fellow at the Center. He spoke to TOI+ about the appointment of the new army chief and what it means for Pakistan.

Q: Pakistan has a new army chief, Lt Gen Asim Munir. How should India be looking at him?

Until such time that the new chief indicates a change of direction vis-à-vis India, the status quo will remain in effect. On the plus side, this means a relatively quiet LoC [Line of Control] in Kashmir.

Q: How do you view Munir's appointment? In your book, you refer to him as a 'straight arrow' but he takes over at a rather turbulent

time in Pakistani politics when the establishment is being challenged by Imran Khan?

This appears to be an appointment by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif as a tactical move to neutralise the rampant campaign of Imran Khan to upend the coalition government and get new elections sooner rather than later. The Sharif brothers may have seen the differences that led to Imran asking for the removal of then DG ISI [director general of Inter-Services Intelligence] Asim Munir as being a big plus in their favour. If the stated reasons for those differences are correct and he does not countenance corruption and speaks his mind, then this might be a double-edged sword.



Shuja Nawaz is a distinguished fellow at the South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council in Washington DC

Q: Munir was removed as ISI chief by Imran when he was the PM and he does not seem to be in a mood to back off. How do you see the civil-military alliance playing out in the near future? Munir was the one who apparently spoke to Imran about alleged practices by his wife and friends.

It is early to say how Imran will handle the new appointment. Since he did not raise any legal challenges or try to persuade the president to delay the appointment, it seems he has accepted the change and will do his best to avoid a direct conflict with the new chief. This may be a wise move so he can concentrate on his political targets in the coalition rather than fight the military now that his nemesis Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa is set to leave. No civil-military alliance can succeed for too long because of its intrinsic imbalance of power.

Q: A volatile scenario is likely to play out: Imran's long march could turn violent or he could decide to convert the march into a long-term sit-in. How might the army handle the situation for it will not want to fire at its own people?

Imran has so far managed to avoid violence during his processions at its early stages. There is no reason to think that he will turn a show of public support into a show of force and provoke the government to call in the military in aid of civil power. He will not want to go toe to toe with the army.



Lt Gen Asim Munir will take charge as the army chief at a time when Pakistan is going through political and economic turmoil (Photo: PTI)

Q: Gen Bajwa has repeatedly said that the army will stay neutral but given Pakistan's history, do you see the army taking a back seat?

Neutrality is in the eyes of the beholder. The army and its intelligence agencies have been far from neutral in the post-[Pervez] Musharraf period. By providing security for elections, they have in effect worked against entrenched governments that wanted to steal elections.

Q: What is the way out of the political impasse?

There may well be an incentive for backchannel discussions between the government and Imran now to arrive at a schedule for new elections that will give each side a face-saving formula.

Q: Do you foresee snap elections being called, which is Imran's immediate demand, even though it has been rejected by PM Shehbaz Sharif?

No snap elections, given Imran's current momentum. Talks about the schedule may be a wise way of slowing down his movement. Meanwhile, the key will be restoration of economic stability and avoiding default. Pakistan is running out of begging bowl options. It must generate growth and wealth on its own and restore the confidence of domestic and external investors. This will also restore the confidence of the military in its civilian titular masters.



Munir will be judged by how he handles the culture of entitlement that has infected civil and military elites. UNDP estimates some \$7bn annual elite capture of wealth in Pakistan. Plus, a sizeable 40% of the black economy

Q: The Pakistani media believes Imran is best placed to win the elections given his appeal among the youth and the middle-class? Where does this leave the Sharif brothers and the Bhutto-led Pakistan People's Party?

Imran believes he can win the elections, based on his showings in recent by-elections. However, he cannot run on every seat in a general election. He will need strong local candidates and will have to retain the so-called independents whom the military may have persuaded to side with him the last time around. In the meantime, the government will need to vigorously return to the IMF [International Monetary Fund] programme and reinvigorate its tax administration, while removing costly subsidies. It will also need to rapidly privatise loss-making state-owned enterprises.

Q: Is an army intervention a possibility, even if remote?

The possibility always exists if things get out of hand in terms of internal security, magnified by economic chaos and uncertainty. But the military seems to have learned its own lessons about not taking on more than it can handle.



Former PM Imran Khan is likely to cool down tensions with the army so that he can concentrate on his targets in the government (Photo: PTI)

Q: Reports indicate that Imran has sizeable support, especially among the army's mid-level hierarchy? How conscious would Munir be of this?

Any chief would be aware that the army of today represents Pakistani society with all its likes and dislikes. The urban middle-class especially is enamoured by Imran and younger officers belong to that social class. So, the senior officers will pay special attention. The visible wealth gap between the middle-ranking officers and senior officers as a result of enhanced perks and benefits may have added to these concerns. Munir will be judged by how he handles the culture of entitlement that has infected civil and military elites. UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] estimates some \$7bn annual elite capture of wealth in Pakistan. A staggering figure. Plus, a sizeable approximately 40% of black economy. Many eyes will be on the "straight shooter".

Q: What are the chances of backchannel talks between Imran and the establishment succeeding and how might they pan out?

The army must avoid getting into such talks directly. It must encourage the political parties to talk and resolve matters directly. Both the ISI and the ISPR [Inter-Services Public Relations] need to adopt a much lower profile than before. They need to encourage greater responsibility for the politicians and greater transparency and accountability that the people are demanding from all politicians, including Imran. How the military deals with the latest expose on the alleged accumulation of assets of the outgoing army chief will be a good example of what is to come.

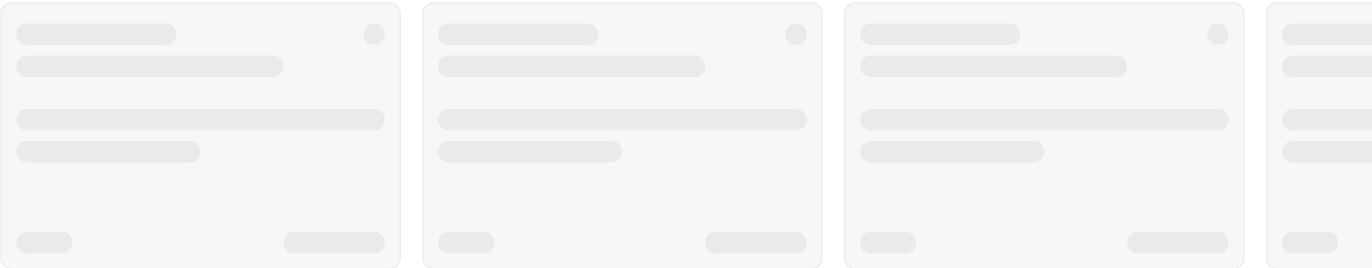
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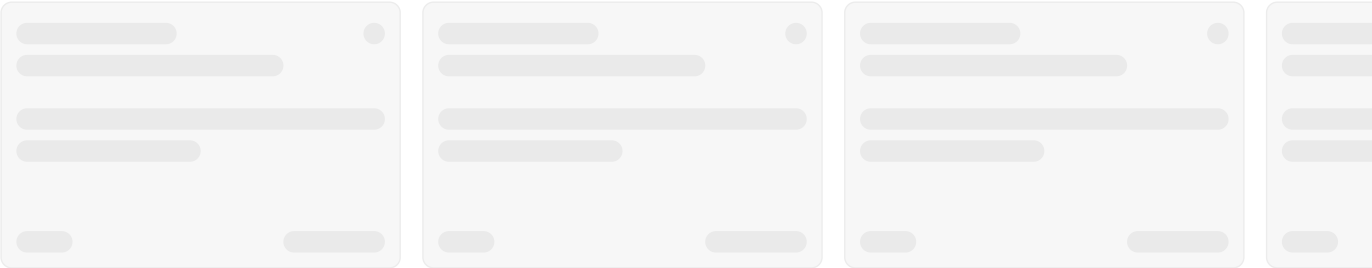
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