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## Pak PM Nawaz Sharif under Multitasking

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Pakistan made history on May 05 when PML (N) leader Nawaz Sharif was sworn in as the new Prime Minister of Pakistan. Sharif's government took over from another democratic government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which also created a record for being the first civilian government to have completed its full five year tenure.

It is not that the PPP did not have its anxious moments. Although army chief Gen. Kayani did not attempt a coup for various reasons, he kept a firm grip on the country's foreign and strategic policy. India, Afghanistan and the US remained the army's preserve.

The army has also had its fair share of trouble. Its establishments suffered attacks from terrorists, especially the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), it was indicted for extra-judicial killings in Balochistan and its worst moment of shame came when American seals killed Al Qaida Chief Osama Bin Laden in a high walled house in the army town of Abbottabad. Within the country it lost face for failing to prevent the American attack. Internationally, it suffered the ignominy of secretly protecting the world's most wanted terrorist in its safe house while professing to the world it was committed to fight terrorism. Kayani's face was saved by the United States who needed the army for their own counter-terrorism efforts. Has the army been chastised?

Over the last five years, Pakistan's Chief Justice Iftikhar Ahmed Choudhry led judicial activism specifically targeting President Zardari. To settle old scores, Justice Choudhry pursued Zardari on corruption and money laundering cases, seeking to prosecute him for money stashed away in Swiss banks. Zardari escaped for the time being under an immunity clause as the president, but two prime ministers were ousted by the Supreme Court for contempt of court. (For not acting on court orders to take up the Zardari case with the Swiss government).

Iftikhar Choudhry, who is slated to retire later this year, may not sit by idly especially with his main adversary, former President Parvez Musharraf in Pakistan facing several charges including treason.

These are issues that Nawaz Sharif will have to take care of, including selecting a successor for Gen. Kayani who will retire this year after a three-year extension brokered by the Americans.

This is Nawaz Sharif's third term as prime minister. He was removed in a coup in 1999 by his chosen army chief Parvez Musharraf and was in exile, protected by Saudi Arabia, finally returning to Pakistan in 2008 through the good offices of the Saudis and the USA.

After 14 years in political wilderness and unpredictable future, Nawaz Sharif may have emerged much wiser as a politician. He does not belong to a family of rich land lords that most Pakistani politicians, especially from Punjab do. He is from an industrialist family, mainly involved in steel and the sugar industry. He, therefore, has links to the agricultural sector also.

Sharif is no intellectual but he is wily and street smart. And he must have honed his skills further; otherwise he would not have made a comeback. Where corruption is concerned, the Sharif brothers, especially his younger brother and Punjab Chief Minister Shabaz Sharif, are no angels. An acolyte of Nawaz Sharif, who had to flee Pakistan with his family when Sharif fled, told this writer that the problem with him was that he did not want to share the loot with any body.

But Sharif has demonstrated that he is like a rubber ball in a pool of water, eventually he will bounce back. He became the first Pakistani prime minister to be elected three times – another record. This time he takes over the country when some aspects of politics in the country may have changed to make a military coup more unlikely. Yet a recent opinion poll suggested that over sixty percent still have a positive opinion of the army. Unbridled corruption among civilian political leaders which is responsible for the nation's current economic woes, would have caused this mind set. The Sharifs would do well to wear this public view as a talisman.

In his acceptance speech on the floor of the Parliament, Nawaz Sharif emphasized that the US drone attacks must end, and other countries must respect their sovereignty. He had to make this populist statement as Pakistanis are both frustrated and infuriated by the drone strikes which, while taking out top terrorist leaders are inflicting collateral damage, killing innocent civilians.

How he will handle this issue with the Americans is another question. Washington insists some of these drone attacks will continue as they target terrorists who plan to harm the US. Under the current economic conditions Pakistan cannot do without US aid which comes in billions both for civilian and military support. It may have to ask for a new International Monetary Fund (IMF) tranche, to which the US holds the key. This a key challenge for Nawaz – how to balance between the US which is crucial for financial aid, the Pakistani people who hate the US as the worst enemy of Pakistan, and the terrorists of Waziristan with whom he wants to broker peace instead of going into confrontation.

Taking on the issue that has most impacted industry and society, namely the huge power shortage, Nawaz Sharif promised improvement soon. This is easier said than done. A recent USAID funded survey carried out by the National Planning Commission, showed corruption in this sector led to the energy – industry debt of \$9.1 billion at the end of 2012, Even for reducing corruption, international assistance will be required. International Power Producers (IIPs) burnt their fingers when Nawaz Sharif was in power last time.

The army received a signal when Nawaz said “dictatorships weakening the federation and giving rise to terrorism and sectarianism”, and the abrogation of the constitution will not be tolerated”. In fact, terrorism and sectarianism were fathered primarily by Gen. Zia-ul-Haq and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. But it is also true that the Sharifs have their soft spot for Islamists.

Very astutely, Nawaz went out of the way to try and carry all political parties together to reconstruct the nation. He did not apportion blame to any individual or party. He instituted a good working relationship with Imran Khan’s Tehrik-e-Insaf Pakistan (TIP) whose promise of a tsunami in the election did not materialise.

In a circular telegram (May 06) to all Pakistani diplomatic missions, he put “economic development” and “peaceful neighbourhood” as the two priorities, as well as realising the vision of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. He would have kept in mind that Jinnah was Shia and not a Sunni, he was married to a non-Muslim, and in his personal choices was anything but what the Pakistani leaders have been pushing since his death.

The foreign policy contours laid out by Sharif said Pakistan and the US have much commonality, a message that he will not get into confrontation with the US and an appeal to understand his situation. Washington is expected to make conciliatory statements, but a quiet understanding will be reached – one for Pakistani public consumption, and one unstated agreement that will allow the US to pursue its national security interests. That should take care of the bilateral relations.

Strategic ties with China will remain high as ever between the two “all weather” and “time tested” friends. New Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s recent visit to Pakistan last month when Sharif was Prime Minister-in-waiting saw “China’s endorsement of Sharif. Li took a business delegation with him looking for avenues to invest in Pakistan, laid out concrete plans for a connectivity corridor between Pakistan and Kashgar in Western China through road, rail and fibre optical communication, and reactivating the Chinese built Gwadar port which has

come back under Chinese management. All these will bring investments from China, facilitate trade, but most importantly create an all weather Chinese connectivity to the Gulf and West Asia. Oil and gas pipe lines for China's imports from the region are on the cards.

For all their friendship, China has given very little financial aid to Pakistan. Instead, it has empowered Pakistan with conventional and nuclear arms to counter India; this will continue.

Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia are made in heaven. Riyadh has helped out Pakistan in more ways than one, especially in maintaining political party balance, energy and finance. Pakistan, too, has reciprocated handsomely including in assisting the nascent Saudi nuclear capability.

Relations with India may have to be taken together to an extent by Nawaz Sharif because of the army. According to him, relations with India need to be pursued progressively for normalcy, while actively seeking solutions to all outstanding issues, including Jammu and Kashmir. There is an eye out for the army which is chary on relations with India, though it has downgraded the threat from India below that of internal terrorism. A state of confrontation with India is the army's bread and butter and substantiates its position and eminence among the common Pakistani. To disturb this will be at Nawaz's own peril.

But Nawaz is a businessman and understands the keen interest of Pakistani business to work with India. Good business with India will help Pakistan immensely, and his own family business will benefit. He is also aware that India will welcome this move, and activate the SAARC economic agreement.

Afghanistan will be tied with India one way or the other. Prime Minister Sharif could not or decided not to, come up with any new idea on Afghanistan. He reiterated the cliché of Afghan-led and Afghan owned peace process – a concept which has no meaning, but was created by America to find a template to keep Afghans happy. The Pakistani hardliners and the army see India's influence in Afghanistan as a threat to Pakistan's control of the country through its surrogate, the Afghan Taliban. As the Afghan military Chief Gen.

Shir Mohammed Karimi told the Afghan Senate recently, "Pakistan was concerned over Afghanistan's relationship with India". At the same time the Afghan Taliban has begun to detest the Pak army and its intelligence wing, the ISI for trying to control them including through the confinement of some of their leaders.

As the draw down of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan approaches in 2014, countries around Afghanistan including China are disturbed. The Central Asian states including Russia are making joint military preparations for an Afghan meltdown post-2014. US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, however, asserted recently that the US will not abandon Afghanistan and they have a security agreement with Kabul. The huge amount needed for Afghanistan's reconstruction and upgrading of the Afghan national army is being spearheaded by the US.

There are too many foreign interests to make Afghanistan stable. Of course, the Taliban will have to be given a say and position in a new government. The Taliban and the old Northern Alliance are ideologically so different, that continuous clash is initially inevitable.

India will be a significant player and its role will have to rise above civilian assistance. If Nawaz Sharif accommodates India, the Pak army will surely oppose. Gen. Kayani had once said at a NATO conference in Brussels that Pakistan had nothing in common with India – either historically, culturally or in terms of religion. An intellectually uneducated statement, but viscerally anti-India. Whatever good intentions that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif may have towards India, he will have to work within the bounds created in Pakistan over decades. How can he deal with the Pak army and ISI created and controlled anti-India terrorist organisations like the Laskar-e-Toiba (LET), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JEM), the Hizbul Mujahidin (HM) and others whom Kayani called assets of the Pak army? The Sharif family's own connections with radical Islamic groups is another question.

Certainly, India should welcome Nawaz Sharif's initial good intentions towards India. But India should not go overboard for two reasons. One, sudden over friendliness towards Sharif may go against him in Pakistan as selling out to India. Next, Sharif will have to work within the confines he has inherited and must be seen at home to have stood up to India. Sharif is now Pakistan's leader, and India is still seen as the main external enemy. India should work considering these realities.

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