

Pakistan Army Chief's Visit to United States November 2015 Analysed

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Pakistan Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif's visit to United States from November 16-20, 2015 has raised more questions than meets the eye. This is because of the contradictory reports in Pakistani media that the Pakistan Army Chief was not on a "US-invited visit" but instigated a "self-invited" visit, hardly a few weeks after the Pakistani Prime Minister had visited Washington to meet President Obama.

This would be the Pakistan Army Chief's second visit to the United States within a year and which is unusual. Also, contextually, it is not the United States which is presently hard-pressed for any dialogues with the Pakistan Army Chief. Evidently, it is the Pakistan Army Chief seemingly perturbed by growing voices in the United States against Pakistan's lack-lustre deliverability on crucial issues and the outcry against Pakistan Army's increasing production of tactical nuclear weapons and the US President's recent strong utterances on this count, which has impelled the Pakistan Army Chief to proceed to USA on a self-invited visit.

Analytically, the three major points on which the US President did some plain-speaking to the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif were Pakistan's inability to bring the Taliban on the table for peace-talks with Afghanistan; Pakistani inability to rein-in Pakistani terrorist outfits like the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Haqqani brothers; and Pakistan's production of tactical nuclear weapons. All these three crucial issues stand usurped by the Pakistan Army and the Army Chief as his own domain. Contextually, all three issues have acquired a pressing salience on the US national security agenda.

The United States is well aware of the above realities in Pakistan and the fact that is noticeable is that the United States chose to first have a Pakistani Prime Ministerial visit to sound Pakistan before a Pakistan Army Chief visit raises interesting US perspectives on Pakistan civil-military relations. In one sense it depicts that the United States would like that the first point of contact on crucial issues should be the civilian

government of Pakistan and its elected Prime Minister. If that be so then it is a welcome US step in reinforcing the primacy of Pakistan's elected Government.

This line of analysis gets further reinforced by the Pak media reports and even a US official report later down played that the United States had not invited the Pakistani Army Chief but it was a Pakistani Army Chief instigated 'self-invited' visit to United States and thereafter the United States had to go along to fix his meetings with US Administration, military brass and the CIA Director.

Pursuing this line further, what appears on analysis is that the Pakistan Army Chief feared that with the United States exercising immense pressures on Pakistan on the three crucial issues stated above, the Pakistani Prime Minister may have conceded more in his talks with the US President than what he may have been briefed by the Pakistani Army Chief. Therefore, an urgent visit by the Pakistan Army Chief was crucial so that the Pakistan Army could draw the lines on these issues beyond which the United States should not push the Pakistan Army further.

Notably, the Pakistan Army Chief visited Saudi Arabia before his visit to the United States fearing that with Prime Minister Sharif being close to the Saudi Arabian royalty and the United States co-opting the Saudis to pressurise Pakistan Army, it was well worth a visit before he proceeds to his self-invited US visit. Media reports suggest that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has frowned on this Saudi visit by the Army Chief.

More noticeable are also Pakistani media reports reflecting that for the first time all important discussions of the Pakistan Army Chief in the United States will be attended by a Pakistani Federal Government official besides the Pak Ambassador in USA. This itself raises many eyebrows.

Reverting back to the three crucial issues on which the US President is exerting strong pressures on Pakistan, let us analyse them briefly, one by one.

The US President is unhappy that Pakistan, read the Pakistan Army, has not been able to bring the Taliban on the table for peace talks or is holding back on it. The Taliban is very much the protégé of the Pakistan Army and is in a position to press it to be amenable, but then the Pakistan Army wants to keep the Taliban up its sleeve for future uses. The United States because of these reasons has been forced to extend not only to delay its final drawdown of US Forces till 2017 but also keep higher levels of US Forces in Afghanistan.

Similarly, the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Haqqani Group are Pakistan Army assets for proxy use against India and Afghanistan and the Pakistan Army would not be ready to dispense with them, even though the United States is pressing them hard to do so.

The United States has been in talks with Pakistan to cap its nuclear weapons holdings and production of tactical nuclear weapons in

exchange for other concessions like a civilian nuclear deal akin to India. But the Pakistan Army is vehemently opposed to any such proposals and on this can count support from the Pakistani public.

With the United States likely to press hard and lean heavily on the Pakistan Army on all the three issues discussed, the Pakistan Army Chief seems to have calculated that even if no invitation is forthcoming from the United States, a self-invited visit to United States would not only enable a direct dialogue at the highest levels in the United States but also possibly could enable him to “reinvent Pakistan Army’s strategic utility to the United States” citing the ISIS creep towards Pakistan.

The present Pakistan Army Chief is no poster-boy of the United States like his predecessor General Kayani who was much fawned on in Washington. In fact, he seems to have grown too big for his shoes as was his claim during a recent RUSI event in London that in the governance vacuum in Pakistan, he as the Pakistan Army Chief has to function as a “soldier statesman”. That should ring bells in Washington.

The United States and Pakistan seem to be headed for interesting times and with international abhorrence of Islamist terrorism of which Pakistan has been the epicentre and so also on nuclear weapons proliferation, it remains to be seen as to how hard the United States can clamp down on the Pakistan Army to fall inline.

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