

Pakistan's foreign and security policies after the 2013 general election: the judge, the politician and the military

FRÉDÉRIC GRARE

Thirteen years after he was deposed and sent into exile by a military coup, Nawaz Sharif has returned to power in Pakistan. On 11 May 2013, contrary to opinion poll predictions of a hung parliament, the former Prime Minister's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) fell just short of the 137 seats required to secure a simple majority. Despite the unprecedented level of violence during the campaign, voter turnout was over 60 per cent, a marked improvement on the 44 per cent of the 2008 elections. The PML-N formed the new central government and also the provincial government of Punjab. Control of Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan went respectively to the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Baloch and Pashtun nationalists.

The election inevitably raises questions about the capacity of the new government to address the most pressing issues the country is facing. Reforming the economy will undoubtedly be Sharif's priority, especially since he enjoys the backing of a substantial part of the business community. But curbing—and eventually eradicating—political violence will also be among the chief concerns of the Prime Minister and his team. Moreover, the foreign policy orientations of the PML-N government will be closely scrutinized by foreign analysts and policy-makers alike. The new government takes office in an atmosphere of deep-seated anti-Americanism within Pakistan in which the imperatives arising from the western withdrawal from Afghanistan may clash with the new government's willingness to redefine its contribution to the US fight against terrorism, especially with regard to the use of drones and reconciliation with the Pakistani Taliban (TTP).

All these issues will play out against the background of civil–military relations. Although Sharif has benefited from the army's patronage in the past, his relationship with the military has always been difficult. He is the only prime minister to have sacked two chiefs of army staff, Jehangir Karamat and Pervez Musharraf; the latter subsequently toppled him in a coup after Sharif drew the generals' ire for reaching out to India.

Sharif himself has played down the possibility of conflict with the military. During the election campaign the PML-N's expressed views on security and foreign policy dovetailed with those of the military, suggesting that open disagreement is unlikely, at least in the short term. Relations with India, though, could

prove the greatest challenge to the government's relations with the military. Sharif has expressed his willingness to normalize relations with New Delhi, and his past record leaves no doubt about his sincerity.¹ But it remains to be seen just how much *rapprochement* the generals will allow.

Sharif is not without assets in his relationship with the military. The election results guarantee him a stable and legitimate central government, making him much less vulnerable to political pressures than his predecessor. His close relationship with Saudi Arabia, where he lived in exile until 2007, is also likely to provide him with an alternative source of economic assistance and a powerful ally that the military cannot ignore. But the relationship will also suffer from a profound ambivalence. The army will need the new Prime Minister to restore the economy and Pakistan's standing in the world, but if he is successful in this one result may be the marginalization of the military as a political actor, an outcome the generals would clearly prefer to avoid. On a structural level, therefore, the relationship will remain unstable.

This article examines some of the structural constraints the new government will have to face in the months and years to come. Based on a careful examination of the real divergences and convergences of civilian and military actors on security and foreign policy, it analyses how civil–military relations are likely to influence the new government and the potential impact of the resulting policies on the military's overall power. It does so by looking at three critical factors: the military's diminishing capacity to influence politics as the political class comes to show greater unity and responsibility; the assertiveness of the judiciary; and the relationship between policy-making and public opinion in foreign affairs and security matters. It concludes that the establishment of civilian dominance over the military will be at best an incremental process, and that the security and foreign policies of the new government are likely to reflect that reality. Nevertheless, a strong popular mandate and the prevailing strategic circumstances also give Nawaz Sharif a unique and historic chance to consolidate democracy in Pakistan.

The 2013 elections and the evolution of civil–military relations

Sharif has a long and complex relationship with Pakistan's military institutions. He owed his start in political life in the mid-1980s to the former military dictator Zia-ul-Haq, and in the 1990 election, which brought him to power for the first time, he received money from the military intelligence agencies.² During his second term in office, however, as noted above, Sharif sacked two chiefs of army staff, precipitating his downfall. In 1999, a military coup toppled Sharif, who was jailed and sentenced to death for the attempted murder of Musharraf,³ but

¹ Nawaz Sharif signed the Lahore Declaration with his Indian counterpart, Atal Behari Vajpayee, in 1999.

² Two decades later, on 19 October 2012, the Supreme Court condemned the army, the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) and the Military Intelligence directorate (MI) for rigging the 1990 elections and announced an inquiry into the civilian beneficiaries of military largess. The case is known as the Ashgar Khan case, from the name of the retired air force officer who filed the complaint. For the full text of the Pakistan Supreme Court verdict, see *Express Tribune*, 19 Oct. 2012.

³ While Musharraf was on his way back from Sri Lanka, Sharif prohibited the plane bearing him from landing

was finally sent into exile in Saudi Arabia under strong pressure from the Saudi government. The new Prime Minister will therefore have to become reconciled with the military, and indeed began to set about this task in the last months of his electoral campaign, toning down his usual anti-military rhetoric and putting the blame for the 1999 coup and his exile on Pervez Musharraf specifically, rather than on the military as a whole.⁴

However, questions regarding the future role of the military go beyond Sharif's own relationship with the generals. Most analysts see the Pakistani army as the authoritative decision-maker in matters of foreign policy and defence, and therefore question the relevance of the election outcome as an indicator of Pakistan's future direction. Since 2008, the military and its chief, Pervez Kayani, have professed their loyalty to the democratic system and renounced their historical habit of political interference; but examination of events over the past five years calls into question such claims of detachment from politics. As C. Christine Fair asserts: 'Kayani has been very much a part of Pakistan's political machinery even while cultivating meticulously the impression at home and abroad that he is a professional officer waiting for the civilian leaders to lead.'⁵ He has never ceased to manipulate the system, shrewdly using the judiciary as a 'sword of Damocles' against the Asif Ali Zardari government to render it more vulnerable to army pressures. Although he was unable to coerce the President into stepping down, Kayani nevertheless succeeded in pressuring Zardari to forgo the use of considerable parts of his powers. In the process, he paved the way to Sharif's victory over Zardari and facilitated the rise of new political forces such as Imran Khan's PTI.

The so-called 'Qadri episode' is seen by many, in Pakistan and beyond, as a good illustration of the way the military exerts pressure on political actors. In December 2012 Tahirul Qadri, a Canadian religious cleric of Pakistani origin, returned to Pakistan and initiated a political campaign calling for a democratic revolution through electoral reforms aimed at preventing corrupt candidates from participating in the forthcoming elections. Interestingly, Qadri also asked for the election date to be advanced and for the participation of both the military and the judiciary in the interim caretaker government.⁶ With apparently unlimited access to resources of unknown origin, the cleric sustained his campaign with numerous television advertisements and extensive organized rallies.⁷ He then launched a 'Long March' from Lahore to Islamabad and staged a sit-in in front of Parliament House, calling for the immediate dissolution of the parliament, the provincial assemblies and the Election Commission of Pakistan.⁸

on Pakistani territory, although the aircraft supposedly had insufficient fuel to reach a foreign airport. The military then seized the Karachi airport's control tower to allow the plane to land. This was the beginning of the coup. "Plot to kill" coup leader', BBC News, 14 Oct. 1999.

⁴ Declan Walsh, 'Sharif vs. army, round 3', *New York Times*, 14 May 2013.

⁵ C. Christine Fair, 'Why the Pakistan army is here to stay: prospects for civilian governance', *International Affairs* 87: 3, May 2011, pp. 571–88 at p. 580.

⁶ The interim government was set up to ensure the impartiality of the state during the elections.

⁷ For his 23 December rally in Lahore alone, Qadri's organization hired around 50,000 buses. See 'The mystery of Tahirul Qadri', *The Economist*, 12 Jan. 2013.

⁸ See Anita Joshua, 'Qadri's picketing ends with "Long March Declaration"', *The Hindu*, 18 Jan. 2013.

Supreme Court lawyers declared Qadri's demands unconstitutional, and none of his goals were realized. However, some observers interpreted Qadri's campaign as an attempt by the security establishment to create the conditions for the indefinite postponement of the elections. If one accepts the idea that Qadri's anti-corruption operation was supported by the military, his failure is also the failure of the military and an indicator that something is changing in Pakistan's troubled politics. The mainstream parties all understood that they could not confront Qadri's anti-corruption argument openly and allowed him to save face through a 'Long March declaration' signed by the Prime Minister, but made no concessions. Imran Khan, who is known to have strong connections with the security establishment, and who initially asked for Zardari's resignation, backed off. This seems to indicate that although it still has considerable leverage, the military can no longer manipulate the political system as easily as it used to.

The Qadri episode may have been an attempt at a bloodless coup. The Pakistani military has always shown a strong preference for technocratic governments that master the state machinery without interfering in the army's political designs. Some commentators have also seen in the cleric's campaign a more ambitious project to carry out 'a socio-political re-engineering and bring about a forced ascendancy of what the GHQ [General Headquarters] and its partners consider as [the] middle-class',⁹ a tendency already observed under Musharraf, who consistently supported the Muttahida Quami Movement, a middle-class political party, in its effort to become a national organization. As the army's top brass see themselves as middle class, the promotion of new actors belonging to that category would help the military in its confrontation with the traditional power structures.

Ayesha Siddiqi also posits a parallel with the mid-1980s, when the government led by Muhammad Khan Junejo disagreed with the military's approach to negotiations on Afghanistan, and suggests that the Qadri affair could have been the military's attempt to prevent a similar loss of control over negotiations leading up to the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹⁰

Whatever the reasons behind the Qadri campaign, it demonstrates that the military is not voluntarily disengaging from politics. The security establishment may no longer take a direct role in partisan games, but it is still playing politics by proxy. This is in no way a new tactic. Unlike many authoritarian regimes, the Pakistani military has never sought the complete elimination of its political opposition, but rather the creation of a situation in which it can be the ultimate arbiter of all political disputes. It has constantly sought to reinforce its own political power through a deliberate and effective effort to weaken civilian governments by creating or reinforcing new actors and dividing existing political forces, thereby keeping control over key forces to enable itself to continue orchestrating policy.

Under the Zardari government, the military found its power reduced when, for the first time, the main political forces respected the rules of the system. The

⁹ Ayesha Siddiqi, 'Civil-military relations and the Qadri drama', *Express Tribune*, 16 Jan. 2013.

¹⁰ Siddiqi, 'Civil-military relations and the Qadri drama'.

PML-N played its role as an opposition party but did not go along with the military when the latter tried to evict Zardari from the presidency. This relative unity allowed for the adoption of the 18th amendment to the constitution, which removed the president's power to dissolve parliament unilaterally. Although the move resulted from a strange convergence of interests between Zardari's need to survive politically and Sharif's need to see the Legal Framework Order repealed to allow him a third term as prime minister, the amendment in practice limited the capacity of the military to manipulate the political system, forcing the generals to seek new tools for political engineering. The Qadri anti-corruption campaign was one such instrument; but, spectacular as it may have been, it ended in failure.

Sharif inherits, therefore, a much stronger political situation than his predecessor did. His political restraint over the past five years allowed the democratic system to consolidate, while the latter benefits in turn from the large majority the PML-N achieved in the elections. This majority, and the power-sharing in the provinces that the elections delivered, should now facilitate the respect of the constitution by all political forces. The military keeps some powerful leverage, but it will have to adjust to the new reality.

Enter the judiciary

This new situation undoubtedly gives new salience to the increasingly assertive judiciary. Unlike the Qadri episode, which was consistent with the military's technique of creating or bolstering third parties to undermine mainstream actors, the emergence of the judiciary as a seemingly independent actor represents a new phenomenon with uncertain potential consequences for the new government. Given the record of the past five years, there are reasons to suspect that the Supreme Court may side with the military should the latter find itself in conflict with the new government.

Pakistani researcher Haris Gazdar observes that, over the past five years, 'acts of judiciary activism have not been randomly distributed. There is a pattern: media-fuelled populism, encroachment upon the authority of the parliament and executive, helping political allies, and keeping mum where core interests of the military might be involved.'¹¹ Indeed, the judiciary has been ambivalent at best in its relationship with the generals, often extending its role beyond purely legal concerns, and never implementing unfavourable decisions relating to the military. On the contrary, the judiciary often demonstrated a deliberate bias against the Zardari government, and in so doing it bolstered the military's relative power, whether intentionally or otherwise.

The tensions came into particularly sharp focus on 19 June 2012, when Yousaf Reza Gilani, Pakistan's prime minister, was convicted of contempt of court and disqualified from office. Gilani's deposition was merely collateral damage, the result of his having refused to write a letter to the Swiss authorities to reopen

¹¹ Haris Gazdar, 'Judicial activism vs democratic consolidation in Pakistan', *Economic and Political Weekly* 44: 32, 8–14 Aug. 2009.

money-laundering allegations against Zardari, the court's real target. The court then ordered the arrest of the PPP's proposed replacement for Gilani, Makhdoom Shahabuddin, for importing chemicals used in the production of narcotics when he was health minister.

Surprisingly, though, the court accepted the nomination of Raja Pervez Ashraf, despite his suspected involvement in corrupt electricity deals when he was energy minister.¹² Ashraf agreed to write to the Swiss authorities, who refused to reopen the case, citing Zardari's presidential immunity. The court should have—and probably had—anticipated this outcome. Even so, the pressure on the government was not over; while accepting Ashraf's nomination, the Supreme Court ordered his arrest on the alleged corruption charges,¹³ though he was released within hours.

Despite the predictions of many observers, the government ultimately completed its term in office, but the new judicial activism has generated strong criticism in Pakistan. Not surprisingly, political elites (and especially the PPP) have expressed outrage at what they see as the court's interference in politics, but members of Pakistan's civil society have complained as well.¹⁴ For example, the leaders of the Lawyers' Movement that protested at Musharraf's marginalization of the courts in 2007 are dissatisfied with the current judiciary, and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has accused the judiciary of 'exercising its power rather than its jurisdiction and encroaching on political space'.¹⁵

The judiciary's fight against corruption in Pakistani politics was in line with general public opinion and long overdue, but its conduct of it appeared biased. In pursuing its campaign the judiciary favoured its own institutional interests and the interests of the Chief Justice, never hesitating to compromise or look the other way whenever it felt those interests so dictated.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the judiciary has been exclusively an instrument of the military, or even a consistent ally of the generals. On at least three notable occasions it acted against the military. First, in October 2012 the Supreme Court condemned the intelligence agencies for their interference in the 1990 elections, when they diverted public money to support selected parties and politicians.¹⁶ Second, the Supreme Court has also investigated the 'enforced disappearances' of Baloch activists detained secretly, sometimes for years, without trial.¹⁷ (But it is worth noting that none of the court's orders on this issue were ever implemented: when the a UN Commission visited Pakistan to enquire about the enforced disappearances, Chief Justice Muhammad Chaudhry joined the MI, ISI and army chiefs in refusing to meet the delegation.) Third, the court has brought charges against Pervez Musharraf, who returned from self-imposed exile in London in early 2013 in the hope of contesting the elections. Musharraf is charged with having violated the constitution in 2007 when he imposed martial

¹² See 'Pakistan politics: Gilani goes', *The Economist*, 22 June 2012.

¹³ Declan Walsh, 'Internal forces besiege Pakistan ahead of voting', *New York Times*, 15 Jan. 2013.

¹⁴ Aftab Ahmed Abro, 'Is our judiciary independent?', *News International*, 15 Aug. 2012.

¹⁵ Jamal Shahid, 'Judiciary accused of encroachment on political space', *Dawn*, 5 April 2013.

¹⁶ See 'Asghar Khan case short order: full text', *Express Tribune*, 19 Oct. 2012.

¹⁷ Anas Malik, 'Pakistan 2012: an assertive judiciary in a pre-election year', *Asian Survey* 53: 1, Feb. 2013, pp. 34–46.

law and suspended not only Chief Justice Muhammad Chaudhry but also 110 other judges, and with the murders of Benazir Bhutto and the Baloch leader Akbar Bugti.¹⁸ Whether or not Musharraf comes to trial will constitute a test of the judiciary's resolve in fighting the military's constitutional overreaches.

So far, Sharif's PML-N has largely benefited from the new judicial activism, but that could change; many of the party's most prominent members are not beyond suspicion in matters of corruption. Sharif himself could face heightened scrutiny now that he has returned to power. The court might choose to revisit cases related to bank loans on which his family defaulted in the 1990s, or it could reopen the investigation into the funds he received from the military in the 1990 election.¹⁹

Chief Justice Chaudhry is due to retire in December 2013, and nobody knows what will become of the Supreme Court's activism after his departure. Moreover, the 19th amendment to the constitution, promulgated at the end of 2010, introduced a parliamentary role in top judicial appointments, in effect limiting the potential sources of conflict between the judiciary and the executive.²⁰ But the new Prime Minister remains vulnerable and the judiciary could once more function as a political weapon for opponents of the civilian government.

Is public opinion a constraint for Pakistan's foreign policy decision-makers?

The real extent of the military's control over foreign policy and, by contrast, the degree of freedom of elected governments in conducting foreign policy cannot be determined without assessing the impact of public opinion on foreign policy matters. Foreign policy is rarely a decisive electoral factor anywhere in the world, and Pakistan is no exception, but some authors argue that 'the effect of public opinion on the country's politics, including its foreign policy, may be critical'.²¹ It is worth examining the potential impact of public opinion on both civilian and military decision-makers.

Political parties and public opinion on foreign policy

On the basis of the 2013 general election campaign rhetoric, US–Pakistani relations can be seen as a case in point for those who consider that public opinion is decisive in foreign policy matters. According to an opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Center shortly before the elections, 72 per cent of the Pakistani population has a unfavourable opinion of the United States, with only 11 per cent holding a favourable opinion. Negative sentiment towards the United States

¹⁸ Interestingly, Pervez Musharraf has not been charged for the 1999 coup, a blatant violation of the constitution, after which the current Chief Justice took an oath and declared the 2002 constitution legitimate under the 'rule of necessity'.

¹⁹ Walsh, 'Sharif vs army, round 3'.

²⁰ See 'Text of 19th amendment bill', *News International*, 21 Dec. 2010.

²¹ William B. Milam and Matthew J. Nelson, 'Pakistan's populist foreign policy', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 55: 1, 2013, pp. 121–34.

has been on the rise since the US intervention in Afghanistan began, peaking at around 80 per cent in 2012. Moreover, a 64 per cent majority of Pakistanis consider the United States an enemy of Pakistan.²² Pakistani political parties from across the ideological spectrum did not hesitate to surf this wave of anti-Americanism during the campaign, but in practice their policies could prove more nuanced. All but the most radical organizations have expressed a desire for improved relations with the United States. Even though Pakistani public opinion about America has always been a strange combination of fascination and rejection and is therefore more complex than it looks, the attitude of the political parties indicates a significant distance from it.

Extremist organizations have little support among Pakistanis. Pakistanis generally agree that militant groups, especially those that target the Pakistani state instead of foreign powers, are a danger to their country.²³ However, despite broad agreement on the dangers posed by most militant groups, Pakistanis are divided over how best to fight extremism. In the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 35 per cent are in favour of combating militancy by force of arms, while 29 per cent oppose this policy.²⁴ Campaign rhetoric does not coincide entirely with public opinion on this issue. The PML-N and the PTI support the creation of a dialogue with some extremist groups, a stance that does not have clear popular support.

Finally, public opinion and the political parties' positions are obviously out of sync on India. Over half of Pakistanis (52 per cent) consider India a serious threat to their country, with 38 per cent citing it as the greatest threat.²⁵ But India as a theme was largely absent from the campaign, and only radical religious organizations took an antagonistic stance towards New Delhi. When asked about relations with India, most political leaders, including Sharif and Khan, expressed their desire for improvement. All seek an expanded dialogue with New Delhi, further indicating that the correlation between public opinion and policy is in no way exact.

The military and public opinion on foreign policy issues

Convergence between public opinion and military policy is more difficult to demonstrate and usually evident only in hindsight.

Some analysts present the army position on foreign policy as essentially reactive to Pakistani public opinion. Former US ambassador to Pakistan William Milam and Matthew J. Nelson argue, for example, that 'there have been attempts by the army, mainly through the ISI, to influence public opinion, but for the most part,

²² Pew Research Center, 'On eve of elections, a dismal public mood in Pakistan', Pew Global Attitudes Project Pakistan Report, 7 May 2013, p. 12.

²³ Half (49 per cent) of Pakistanis consider the Taliban a serious threat to their country; only 11 per cent express a favourable opinion of the Taliban and 13 per cent of Al-Qaeda. Opinions are more mixed regarding the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which 24 per cent of Pakistanis support. The Haqqani network receives a low 8 per cent. Pew Research Center, 'On eve of elections', p. 9.

²⁴ Pew Research Center, 'On eve of elections', p. 10.

²⁵ Pew Research Center, 'On eve of elections', p. 10.

the ISI can only shore up existing public beliefs by suppressing countervailing beliefs'.²⁶ The argument is debatable. For instance, the 'Pakistan studies' portion of Pakistani school curricula entertains only a casual relationship with historical reality, and is clearly an attempt to frame in negative terms the way in which young Pakistanis think about India. Similarly, the military has shown considerable skill in using the media to influence the way people think about current affairs.

Milam and Nelson's argument contains both an element of truth and an inherent contradiction. No Pakistani leader, civilian or military, can afford to fall foul of popular nationalism. But popular nationalism can evolve, and has done so. 'Suppressing countervailing beliefs' cannot be viewed in purely negative terms—it can also give rise to new sentiments, deliberately or otherwise. Such suppression has been historically a powerful means of influencing public opinion at home and abroad, with deep and lasting influence. It may not have created public beliefs independently, but it undoubtedly created the conditions which are at the origin of current domestic and foreign perceptions of Pakistan, including its own identity crisis. The roots of this crisis, and the military actions that helped foment it, date back at least to the mid-1970s.

A diverse and complex society, Pakistan has hosted a myriad political opinions and attitudes. Like every society, it generates its own extremism; and, like other Muslim countries with important Shi'i minorities, it had to confront the tensions generated by the Islamic revolution in Iran. The Zia-ul-Haq regime (1978–1988) marked a qualitative change in the evolution of Pakistan in which a policy of systematic Islamization brought about enduring change in the nature of civil–military relations. The dictator began to support proxy militant groups in Afghanistan and against India, establishing a trend that the military establishment continued under successive regimes. Domestically, this helped the military cast itself as a guarantor of political stability. Among westerners, it allowed the military to portray itself as a last rampart against Islamic extremism. Radical organizations thus not only helped to suppress countervailing beliefs: they became, at times, the only voice to be heard in the public space. Other voices were allowed only to the extent that they followed the line of the military.

In recent years, after the Taliban's defeat in Afghanistan, the military has used this same strategy to play a dual game, offering Taliban fighters sanctuary in Pakistan and supporting their operations in Afghanistan. Domestically, civil–military relations came to be increasingly mediated by religious extremist groups, which over the years distanced themselves from their military sponsors. The military more or less controlled the situation until the Red Mosque incident in July 2007, when the army had to intervene against Taliban extremists who had gone to ground in an Islamabad mosque. After the confrontation, which left scores of extremists killed or captured, Islamist groups turned against the military, precipitating the crisis the country is currently experiencing. These groups are trying to limit freedom of expression in Pakistan by targeting their opponents, especially the secular parties that bore the brunt of political violence

²⁶ Milam and Nelson, 'Pakistan's populist foreign policy', p. 128.

during the election campaign, while the army and a substantial part of the political class remain ambivalent. This, in turn, continues to generate an image of Pakistan abroad as an Islamist country and influences subsequent policies.

Given these conditions, it is difficult to believe that the military and its intelligence agencies have not, at the very least, helped frame the political debate and contributed to the current political reality in Pakistan.²⁷ Islamization policies and the use of Islamist proxies, both internally and externally, may have shored up existing beliefs, but they have also changed popular perceptions of the world within Pakistan. According to a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) after the terrorist attacks of 26 November 2008, for instance, 62 per cent of Pakistanis believed that either India or the United States was responsible.²⁸

It was the military's idea all along to substitute a broad Islamic nationalism for any sort of subnationalism, ethnic or tribal, but the generals were never able to give their preferred form a defined and positive content. This content emerged by default, with opposition to India and radical ideologies playing a larger role than the limited constituencies of radical Islamist organizations should have permitted. As a matter of fact, public opinion can be influenced and changed. In 2004, for example, part of the public became much more open to improving relations with India when Musharraf decided to begin a process of normalization. In 2013 the Kashmir issue, a perennial theme in Pakistan's foreign policy and, according to Musharraf, one of Pakistan's two core national interests, was totally absent from the campaign.

But even where fundamental elements of Pakistani national interest are concerned, public opinion never dictates the instruments of policy implementation. Political actors retain the ability to implement policies—be they confrontational or cooperative—as they see fit. It is here, more than in perceptions of threat, that the potential for conflict between the new government and the military lies. But whatever the evolution of the relationship between the new government and the military on foreign policy matters, Pakistan's public opinion will have very little to do with it.

²⁷ The new Prime Minister, who has repeatedly (and rightly) been accused of having been soft on militancy during the campaign, was once at the forefront of the fight against sectarianism in Punjab and survived an attack on his life for that reason.

²⁸ IRI Index, *Pakistan public opinion survey*, 7–30 March 2009, Washington DC, p. 27. Even educated Pakistanis suggested that the attacks were 'a Hindu–Zionist conspiracy backed by the United States', a conspiracy theory heard by the author on several occasions. The Islamization policy has also contributed largely to perceptions of Pakistan abroad. For a long time it legitimized foreign support to the military before the latter's duplicity in the war in Afghanistan was finally recognized. The notion that the Pakistani army may be a bulwark against extremism has not totally disappeared but has lost much of its strength, and the army is now regarded with much greater suspicion. Thus the argument which in the past generated support for Pakistan now contributes to its isolation.

Whither Pakistan's foreign policy?

The PML-N's approach to radical Islam and political violence

Reducing political violence will be one of the major concerns of the new government. When it took power in 2008, the PPP promised to rid Pakistan of violence, bigotry and terror. Five years later, extremist organizations are stronger than ever, targeting both religious minorities and the state apparatus, though this resurgence of activity can be blamed in part on the siege and killing of militants at the Red Mosque under Musharraf. Although the figures vary slightly among sources, almost 48,000 people have been killed in Pakistan since 2003.²⁹ Interestingly, despite General Kayani's pledge to eradicate extremism in a speech in August 2012, the military has proved unable to deliver on the issue either.

The electoral campaign of 2013 itself suggests the kinds of constraint that the new government will face in crafting its foreign policy. Few campaigns in Pakistan's history have been as violent as the most recent one. According to the Islamabad-based Center for Research and Security Studies, some 2,674 people were killed in 1,108 incidents between January and April 2013, with an unusual escalation of attacks against political parties and their candidates in April.³⁰ In this wave of violence many Hazara Shi'is were killed, but secular parties, especially those allied with the Zardari government and the PPP, were the targets of choice of the Pakistani Taliban, which sought to prevent them from running an effective campaign and to create a more favourable electoral landscape for the conservative parties. Neither Sharif's PML-N nor Imran Khan's PTI was threatened.³¹

But the complexity of the fight against radical extremist groups goes beyond the relations of some mainstream parties with the TTP. While the military and their intelligence agencies have come under scrutiny, there have also been reports of the PML-N working out deals with the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), the new name of the Sepah e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a banned sectarian grouping with a particularly lethal armed wing, the Lashkar e Jangvi (LeJ).³² This approach, the logic goes, would allow the ASWJ a few seats in Saraiki Punjab in exchange for its support for the PML-N in other constituencies of Saraiki and Central Punjab.³³ Militant groups have indeed become kingmakers in Punjab. Even if their candidates are not in a position to win seats for themselves in the national and provincial assemblies, their popular support is sufficiently strong to swing the vote where contests are close. The overwhelming victory of the PML-N diminishes their practical power in the short term. But entering mainstream politics also gives

²⁹ At the time of writing, 12 May 2013.

³⁰ In Sindh alone, 701 people were killed; 418 died in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 403 in Balochistan, though the violence subsided somewhat in the FATA during the same period. See 'Pakistan Conflict Tracker report (January–April 2013)', Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), Islamabad, 3 May 2013.

³¹ The election authorities themselves have been ambiguous about the role of radical organizations in the elections, allowing candidates of sectarian groups to contest seats while disqualifying candidates with forged university degrees or having a supposedly anti-Pakistan 'ideology'. See Declan Walsh, 'Extremists pursue mainstream in Pakistan election', *New York Times*, 5 May 2013.

³² Ayesha Siddiqi, 'Contextualizing militancy in Punjab', *Express Tribune*, 27 Feb. 2013.

³³ Ayesha Siddiqi, *The new frontiers: militancy and radicalism in Punjab*, Centre for International Strategic Analysis (SISA) Report no. 2, 4 Feb. 2013, p. 31.

them enhanced legitimacy and new means of action which will help them extend their influence over time.

According to Ayesha Siddiq, this situation is the result of a process over the past decade during which a relatively large number of militant organizations gradually coalesced into a few larger ones. Although officially banned, these organizations were allowed by the security establishment to go underground and spread into society. According to Siddiq, the intelligence agencies are now trying to mainstream these groups to draw them away from violence. Civilian officials have objected to this course of action, but nonetheless must account for it in their own political calculations.³⁴ The deals made by the PML-N are likely only to facilitate this mainstreaming process.

This would not necessarily have been a negative phenomenon, had the timing been different. Mainstreaming extremist movements has sometimes proved to be an effective way of diverting them from violence. This can be successful, however, only when the movements concerned are already in decline. This is not the case in today's Pakistan, where extremist violence—and especially sectarian violence—is on the rise all over the country.

Moreover, Sharif has refused to condemn the Pakistani Taliban and, although he is more careful than Imran Khan, has suggested that options other than military action must be explored to deal with them.³⁵ By avoiding criticism of the TTP, the PML-N has largely escaped the violence that afflicted its mainstream political opponents, but the bloodshed inflicted by the TTP has in no way diminished. The combined impact of violence and political activism has been to strengthen the political standing of the extremists, who now occupy a much larger area of public space.

Irrespective of the actual intentions of the government in foreign policy matters, the PML-N's relations with some extremist groups are likely to constrain it on two levels. On some key issues, it will be difficult to completely ignore the militants' demands, at least when they resonate with general public opinion. Sharif had to take such opinions into account even during the campaign, when he said that Pakistan 'should reconsider its support for the US war on Islamist militancy and suggested he was in favour of negotiations with the Taliban', a comment likely to anger Washington,³⁶ though Sharif has never condemned drone strikes in terms as harsh as those used by other politicians, such as Imran Khan. Moreover, according to Ayesha Siddiq, these groups were and are still supported by Pakistan's intelligence agencies, giving the military an additional source of leverage over the new government. The question therefore remains open how heavily the relative proximity of the new Pakistani Prime Minister to radical organizations, even if purely instrumental, is likely to weigh on his foreign policy.

The relationship between the government and the TTP could in fact moderate, if not minimize, the possibility of a dialogue with the extremist organization

³⁴ Siddiq, 'Contextualizing militancy in Punjab'.

³⁵ *Jerusalem Post*, 5 May 2013.

³⁶ *Jerusalem Post*, 5 May 2013.

damaging US–Pakistani relations. On the domestic level, it may prove difficult to translate electoral tactics into a peace deal with the TTP. Gone is the time when Pakistan's security establishment controlled most Islamist groups within its borders. According to the French researcher Mariam Abou Zahab, the TTP has no intention of negotiating with the regime.³⁷ In this context, appeasing the TTP could be an extremely risky strategy that would weaken state control over substantial parts of Pakistan's territory in the volatile provinces adjacent to Afghanistan. The new government may be faced with no option other than fighting the TTP or trying to accommodate it. The latter choice would be equivalent to condoning it—and with it, all radical anti-state organizations, with potentially disastrous long-term consequences.

The change of government is therefore unlikely to produce a sudden, dramatic improvement in the security situation of the country. As if to underline the previous government's lack of a coherent anti-terror strategy, the PML-N announced shortly after the elections that a national policy on terrorism would be made and implemented by the government after consultations with all political parties.³⁸ On the same day, Sharif reiterated his determination not to let Pakistani soil be used for terrorist attacks against any country in the world,³⁹ a message clearly directed to India. Like its predecessor, however, the new government will be confronted with the inherent contradiction of Pakistan's relations with the jihadists: the tolerance, if not active promotion, of pro-state terrorist actors in the face of the difficult fight against anti-state extremist organizations at a time when the lines between the two categories are increasingly blurred.

What foreign policy for the new government?

Given the military's remaining influence, the wild card of judicial assertiveness and the complexities of extremist violence in Pakistan, the diplomatic freedom of the civilian government will inevitably be limited. The civilian role in foreign policy is not absent, but its scope should be carefully defined.

A number of high-ranking civil servants and party officials, as well as a substantial part of the population, share the military's threat perceptions and broad foreign policy objectives. School curricula and manipulation of the media, as discussed above, help to create this minimal consensus on security and foreign policy issues.

Real differences exist, however, in views on the conduct of foreign policy. Mainstream parties have in the past demonstrated a greater tendency than military government to try to resolve issues peacefully, and it is reasonable to expect that the new government will try to act accordingly. Sharif, who signed the Lahore Declaration on peaceful coexistence and nuclear disarmament with his Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee in 1999, has already stated that he intends to resume relations with India where he left off in 1999. In this endeavour he is

³⁷ *Le Monde*, 13 May 2013.

³⁸ *Deccan Herald*, 14 May 2013.

³⁹ Wang Zhaokun, 'Pakistan to fine tune anti-terror strategy', *Global Times*, 14 May 2013.

likely to have the support of part of the business community which, especially in Punjab, has been pushing for closer trade relations with India. But making peace with India remains a dividing line between civilians and the military. Facing threats from internal sources and along the border with Afghanistan, the military needs to improve relations with India; it remains to be seen, however, how far the generals will allow political overtures to be pursued.

The new government also inherits a diplomatic situation that limits its own margin for manoeuvre but also protects it. Consistent with his anti-American rhetoric during the campaign, Sharif has promised to recalibrate Pakistan's counterterrorism cooperation with the United States,⁴⁰ and may be tempted to reopen the drone question, although he has been less vocal on the issue than his PTI counterpart. It remains to be seen how the victory of the PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa will play out in relations between Pakistan's central government and the TPP and in the overall trajectory of the Afghan conflict.

But the issues which poisoned US–Pakistani relations in 2011 (in particular the Salala incident, in which US troops inadvertently killed 24 Pakistani soldiers, resulting in the closure of Pakistan's overland supply routes to US troops in Afghanistan for several months) have now been addressed and are unlikely to be reopened. The US–Pakistani agenda over the next two years will be dictated by the constraints generated by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and, unless forced by some unforeseen crisis, neither the Pakistani military, the Sharif government nor the United States will allow the process to be derailed.

Relations with Afghanistan itself may prove more difficult, as demonstrated by the various border incidents, including exchanges of artillery fire, during the past few months. Moreover, the Pakistani military, whose policy in Afghanistan is still driven essentially by concerns about Indian ties with Kabul, is unlikely to let any civilian government interfere in its own operations, overt or covert, in the country. It is also unclear whether the new government fundamentally disagrees with the military on the type of policy that should be pursued in Afghanistan.

But Afghanistan also creates an indirect opportunity for the new government to assert itself in international affairs. Constant interference in its neighbours' affairs over the past three and a half decades through the use of Islamist proxies has generated suspicion of Pakistan among all of Afghanistan's neighbours, as well as among the wider international community. Islamabad officially maintains relatively good relations with most of the countries concerned, but its diplomatic room for manoeuvre is limited. Pakistan is in effect isolated (although this isolation is not absolute), while its economy is deteriorating. This situation is likely to persist, and Pakistan will not be able to reverse the trend unless it rebuilds meaningful relations with its neighbours. This necessity creates a diplomatic space for the new government.

Sharif's predecessor benefited from a similar situation in 2011, when the prospect of a 'divorce' from the United States and a growing economic crisis allowed President Zardari to distance himself from the military and initiate a process of

⁴⁰ Richard Leiby, 'Has Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif changed his stripes?', *Washington Post*, 9 May 2013.

rapprochement with India.⁴¹ The policy shift would have probably been impossible without at least tacit military acceptance, but it was nevertheless a civilian initiative. A similar situation prevails today and, although it remains the dominant power in foreign policy, the military will need the civilian power to break the vicious circle of economic regression and international isolation in which they have locked up the country.

Sharif seems to have understood the opportunity and sent the right message to India. On 6 May 2013, five days before the elections, in an interview with Indian journalist Karan Thapar, he professed his goodwill towards India. He indicated his willingness to resolve all pending issues, including Kashmir, peacefully; not to let Pakistani soil be used by extremist organizations to attack India; to forbid all anti-India speeches, 'including by Hafez Saeed'; and to launch investigations into responsibility for the Kargil war and for the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. In making these assertions, Sharif was undoubtedly trying to reassure India and international public opinion at large; it remains to be seen, however, whether he will have the capacity to carve out sufficient political space to implement this agenda. President Zardari started his term with similarly good intentions, but was soon prevented from translating them into concrete action by the balance of power within the country.

The 1999 military coup against Nawaz Sharif was prompted by differences over policies *vis-à-vis* India. The military was already preparing for the Kargil incursion when the Prime Minister was signing the Lahore Declaration. The situation might be different this time, because the military needs some degree of *rapprochement* with India and because every move Pakistan makes is now watched internationally with suspicion. Nawaz Sharif will probably also be more careful.

Relations with the ASWJ will be an additional constraint and will force the new Prime Minister to tread a fine line on terrorism-related questions with clear implications for relations with India and Pakistan's other neighbours. The two factors—*rapprochement* with India and the relationship with extremist groups—are not of equal importance, but do in part condition each other. Better relations with India are an economic imperative, but it would not take much to rekindle the suspicion between the two countries should the military decide that *rapprochement* has gone too far. Religious parties and extremist organizations could again be an effective tool in exerting pressure on the government.

Even a limited success in controlling terrorism would go a long way towards redefining regional relations. It would help Pakistan break out of its current isolation and consolidate the new government, as well as, by extension, the democratic Pakistani political system.

⁴¹ He actually initiated the policy in 2008 but was prevented from implementing it by the consequences of the 26 November 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai.

