Pakistan: the Army's Role in the Country's Life

Due to the historical development of Pakistan, over the years the Pakistan's army has become a powerful government force and one of the actors in political life. But unlike political parties whose purpose is to become the head of the executive and legislativ branches of government, generals of today's Pakistan are not creating such prospects. Maintaining stability and the rule of law is their primary task except for, of course, when the country is threatened by a collapse from internal or external threats.

Over the course of nearly seventy years of the country's history, the federal army has acted in support of the political processes occurring in Pakistan: Islamisation in the 1980s, in the 1990s - protection of the interests of the democratically elected civilian government; in 1999, once again, as in the 50s-70s it supported the military coup and further, in the first decade of the 21st century, the military-civilian administration. From 2008 to the present, the army has been the guardian of society's democratic gains. Soldiers have always "played a role in shaping the course of history" of the state. This is the position of the Army Chief of Staff General R. Sharif. In other words, the army has stood for retaining the existing order in the country, supported and maintained the status quo existing at the time.

For many decades, the army has been the main stabilising force of the state. This concept in Pakistan's recipe, as stressed by the generals, consists of several components: repulsing external aggression, maintaining the internal security regime, setting and implementing national objectives and/or mitigating natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, the army always lives by the aspirations or expectations of the nation.

The constitution is one of several tools that are used by the army to build and strengthen democratic institutions and protect national interests. In 2008, Pakistan held parliamentary elections with the participation of leaders of all political parties in the country. And deputies elected by popular vote represented the transition from the civilian-military form of government of previous years to a democratically elected parliament. At that time, the army supported holding elections in accordance with the Constitution and refused to participate in the electoral process. In this way the generals stressed their commitment to Article 243 of Pakistan's Constitution.

In 2013 the general parliamentary elections witnessed the transfer of power from one civilian administration to another with the simultaneous change of political elites.

In addition to the constitutional challenges set before the federal army to repel aggression or threats of war and protect territorial integrity, this state institution is also intended to effectively resolve the country's domestic political challenges.

First of all, this means countering centrifugal forces: religious conflicts, attempts to split the country along ethnic lines, the localisation of separatist movements, the struggle against local insurgents and foreign fighters in inland areas, etc.

Secondly, maintaining a balance of power/responsibility between the army and the civil administration at the present stage.
Thirdly, the army is a powerful business corporation in Pakistan.

This raises the natural question of subjective and objective reasons for such colossal responsibility and national tasks assigned to Pakistan's federal army. To date, this has been substantiated by a number of factors: weak institutions, fighting among ruling civilian elites, an amorphous multi-party system, the weakness of the opposition party in the legislature, peculiarities of the foreign policy situation in the region, etc.

The thirteen-year war in neighbouring Afghanistan, the strengthening of Islamic extremism and terrorism, "...the geopolitical situation, and non-state actors recognised in the world, have put Pakistan in the spotlight," according to Army Chief of Staff General R. Sharif, "... they have brought with them many challenges... This imposes a great burden of responsibility on the Pakistani army."

Thus, in modern reality the army is the main state institution in Pakistan, which for a number of objective and subjective reasons is promptly and adequately responding to the challenges of our time. In our view, reversing the growing domestic dangers and maintaining the stability of the political situation in the country is the only way of saving the Pakistani state. And this task is performed by the army.

In 2014, the army faced yet another domestic political challenge: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appealed to the generals for help in resolving the political crisis in the summer of this year. In other words, he called on the army to intervene openly in the political life of the country. It was an extremely attractive offer, given that a major period of Pakistan's modern history has been spent under the reign of a military or military-civilian administrations. According to Article 245 of Pakistan's Constitution, the Army "is intended to assist the civilian government". However, the generals remained neutral, seeing no threat to either the territorial integrity or sovereignty of the country in the current crisis caused by the struggle among political parties.

However, during a protest march in July - August 2014 in Islamabad, organised by the political party Tehreek-e-Insaf (led by Imran Khan) even the police were powerless to stop the raging crowd from storming the television company. 1000 soldiers were urgently summoned to Islamabad. Later on their protection of the protest camp in the Red zone of the capital (where the government agencies and the diplomatic corps are located) facilitated a peaceful sit-in over the course of three months.

Remaining de jure neutral, the generals, of course, pursued their own corporate interests. They thus strengthened (once again!) their political position at the expense of weakening the executive power of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Natalia Zamarayeva, PhD in History, Senior Research Fellow in the Pakistan Department at the Institute of Oriental Studies, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".