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Who will succeed Raheel Sharif as the next chief of Pak Army?

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2/13/2016

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For an exceptional nation known for “most countries have armies, but the Pakistan Army has a country,” the jockeying for the position of the next Army chief has been going on behind-the-scenes for some time now. As seniority and ability is not the fixed criteria, we can never be sure of how the dice will roll until the final orders are signed. Nevertheless the new chief will take charge at a time the most powerful body in Pakistan faces two challenges: a no-nonsense Prime minister and religious extremism.

The Pakistan Army has overarching influence on politics, economy, foreign and defence policy of the country. This has resulted in the coinage of the often-repeated aphorism, “most countries have armies, but the Pakistan Army has a country.” The chief of the Pakistan Army is the most powerful person in the country. Thus, the question of who will succeed General Raheel Sharif as the sixteenth chief of the Pakistan Army is a weighty one with repercussions for the region’s future.

Till recently, it was expected that General Raheel Sharif, like his predecessors General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani and General Pervez Musharraf, would receive an extension. This sentiment had been strengthened by General Musharraf’s statement in September 2015 calling for extension of General Sharif’s tenure. On January 25, 2016 General Sharif put the speculation regarding his

tenure to rest and revealed his plan to retire when his three-year term ends in November 2016. With the possibility of an extension out of the way, it is opportune to look at who could become the next chief of the Pakistan Army.

There are 29 three-star officers in the rank of Lieutenant-General in the Pakistan Army. Though all of them would no doubt aspire to become the next chief, the choice will zero in on to three or four officers. At the time of picking a successor to General Kayani, it was widely assumed that the race was among then Lt General Raheel Sharif, Lt General Tariq Khan, Lt General Rashad Mehmood (who was appointed as Chairman of Joint Chief of Staff Committee), Lt General Haroon Aslam and Lt General Zaheerul Islam.

The jockeying for the position of the next Pakistan Army chief has been going on behind-the-scenes for some time now. Two reshuffles and promotions carried out under General Raheel Sharif's watch in December 2013 and April 2015 have provided some initial indications. The December 2013 reshuffle took place barely a month after General Sharif assumed office. This marked an important transition in Pakistan's nuclear complex with the end of the 15-year long tenure of Lt General Khalid Kidwai as chief of the Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division (SPD). The SPD is the custodian of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and missiles. The December 2013 reshuffle had seen Lt General Zubair Mahmood Hayat taking charge as the new Director General, SPD.

The second major round of promotions and resultant reshuffle in the Pakistan Army's top echelons happened in April 2015. Five officers in the rank of Major General were promoted to Lieutenant General. Lt General Zubair Mahmood Hayat, who was holding charge of the SPD since December 2013, was promoted as Chief of General Staff (CGS). In 2013, Hayat had commanded the XXXI Corps located at Bahawalpur which forms an important part of the Southern Command of the Pakistan Army. The promotion as CGS makes him the senior most among the current three-star generals in the Pakistan Army.

An Artillery officer, Lt General Zubair Hayat hails from a military family. His father, Major General Aslam Hayat, served in the Army. Interestingly, his other siblings too serve in the Army. Lt General Omar Mahmood Hayat heads the Ordnance Factories at Wah. His younger brother Major General Ahmed Mahmood Hayat is Director General (Analysis) in the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). In the past, five Chiefs of General Staff have gone on to become the Army chief. Given the fact that Lt General Zubair Hayat has been in charge of the SPD and commanded a Corps and is currently the Chief of General Staff sets him up at the top of the list of candidates who are vying for post of the chief of the Pakistan Army.

Though seniority matters, it is not the only consideration in the selection of the Pakistan Army chief. The incumbent, General Raheel Sharif, superseded two seniors to become the Army chief. Going further into the past, then Prime Minister Bhutto had appointed Zia-ul Haq as the Army chief superseding seven senior Lieutenant Generals.

Lt General Ishfaq Nadeem Ahmed, commanding the Multan-based 2 Corps, is another important challenger for the top post. From November 2013 till Lt General Zubair Hayat took charge in April 2015, Lt General Ishfaq was Chief of General Staff (CGS). He has also served as the Director General Military Operations (DGMO) for over two years and has also commanded a

strike infantry division. As compared to the other possible contenders, Lt General Ishfaq has a much more varied experience ranging from heading the Pakistan Army's Federal Relief Commission, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF).

The third individual in the race is Lt General Mazhar Jamil. An Artillery officer, he currently oversees Pakistan's nuclear complex as DG, Strategic Plans Division having taken charge from Lt General Zubair Hayat in April 2015. He is known to be close to former Pakistan Army chief General Kayani and was promoted to the rank of Lt General superseding four officers during Kayani's tenure. Between September 2013 and December 2013, he was Military Secretary and Vice Chief of General Staff from 2012 to 2013. It is also interesting to note that Lt General Jamil was garrison commander at Abbottabad and Commandant, Pakistan Military Academy (PMA), Kakul when the US Navy SEALs attacked a compound near PMA to kill Osama Bin Laden in May 2011. This fact might raise hackles with the international community and in particular the United States.

The chief of the Pakistan Army has more often than not been selected among officers hailing from the fighting arms of the service like the infantry, artillery and armoured corps. Though the final appointment is notionally made by the Pakistani Prime Minister, it is believed that choice is limited to a shortlist of three to four officers recommended by the incumbent Army chief. As seen in Raheel Sharif's appointment, it is not binding on the civilian leadership to go along with the chief's recommendation. General Kayani is believed to have recommended Lt General Rashad Mahmood for the top post with Lt General Haroon Aslam slated to take charge as Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC).

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif decided to appoint Lt General Raheel Sharif as the Army chief with Lt General Rashad Mahmood kicked upstairs to occupy a largely ceremonial position. In case of Raheel Sharif, his proximity to Lt General Abdul Qadir Baloch, a key confidant of PM Sharif's family seems to have played a role in the final decision. The final choice would boil down to many factors. These include the officer's "perceived loyalty" to the civilian Government, the incumbent Army chief's recommendation, past commands held, and the influence their familial and other informal support networks are able to exercise over the selection process. Though we can never be sure of how the dice will roll until the final orders are signed, the new Pakistan Army chief will take charge at an important juncture given the increasing trend of violent extremism in Pakistan and the region as a whole.