Pakistan's Overbearing Army

Civilian Institutions are in Danger—Are There Solutions?

reviewed by
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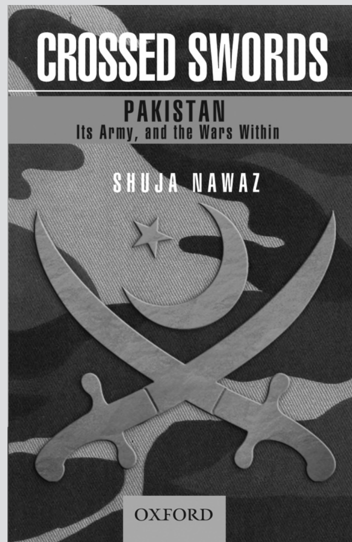

Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within is by Shuja Nawaz (Oxford University Press, 2008).

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Fifty years ago this October 24, Pakistan's first Army Commander in Chief overthrew the prime minister, imposed martial law, and abrogated the constitution. That jarring rotation from civilian rule to martial law spawned five decades of overhauled constitutions, three protracted periods of martial law, and the overthrow of four civilian governments. In *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within*, renowned Pakistan expert and former *New York Times* journalist Shuja Nawaz examines the tumultuous history of Pakistan's overbearing army. Nawaz gives an insider's analysis of Pakistan's civil-military relationship, explaining how the country's most powerful and well-organized institution shapes, reflects, and suffocates this nuclear-armed, Muslim-majority nation.

Crossed Swords begins with a detailed narration of the subcontinent's pre-modern history, proceeding to its modern history, where the military has ruled Pakistan for 38 of its 61 years. Historically, most Pakistani army officers believed that coups were needed to rescue Pakistan from its incompetent civilian political class. Nawaz notes that prior to the 1958 coup, its leader, "'[General Ayub Khan] stated that the Pakistan Army will not allow the politicians to get out of hand, and the same is true regarding the people of Pakistan.' Ayub's view was that it was 'the army's duty to protect the country."

Over time, Nawaz argues, the army "has penetrated the civilian sector and now controls large segments of civil administration," exhibiting the ability to act autonomously in foreign affairs, control domestic political activity, and operate independently of elected civilian leaders.

Nawaz writes that the military's unfettered access to state resources has let it overpower private sector industries. The military's intrusion into the government has allowed it to allocate more government revenue for its own institutional expansion, including the purchase of sophisticated military equipment, facilities, and training schools. The author argues that over the decades, this bloated bureaucracy diminished government spending on health, education, and basic infrastructure—sectors of civil society essential for internal development.

Crossed Swords candidly appraises the failures of the army leadership. According to Nawaz, despite the professionalism of its lower ranks, the army's upper echelons are prone to blunder. He cites the genesis of the military's ineptitude as Ayub Khan's coup half a century ago and his "role in institutionalizing the appointment of sycophantic and sometimes incompetent officers to the highest ranks who would not buck the trend or question any of his actions." Nawaz adds that the army's emphasis on careerism, centralization, and lack of proper delegation of authority has bled into the daily operations of civilian and political institutions.

He shows that during the 1947 First Kashmir War with India, Pakistan's aim was to internationalize the Kashmir dispute. Pakistani leaders thought that invading Kashmir would precipitate a UN-mandated ceasefire and bring about a plebiscite in Pakistan's favor. But as Nawaz notes, "In retrospect, Pakistan's higher planning and leadership failed

to clearly see the advantage of intervening in Kashmir and to gauge the Indian reactions in a manner that they could counter effectively. A guerilla operation was launched without trained manpower to direct and control the tribals, and certainly without laying the ground for local support in the valley of Kashmir."

Army leadership again proved unprepared during Pakistan's 1965 war with India. Following the clashes and a formal ceasefire, Ayub Khan proceeded to implement Operation Gibraltar, another gamble to seize Kashmir. Like the 1947-48 war, Gibraltar was based on the idea of infiltrating trained guerrillas into Indian-held Kashmir to foment local unrest. But once again, the reaction of the local people was not adequately considered. Though the operation was supposed to be executed in coordination with the army high command, Nawaz argues, "Even senior officers at the army headquarters were kept in the dark, as were the formation commanders. No prior ground work had been done with Kashmiri leaders in Indian-held Kashmir."

Although Pakistan killed a great number of Indian troops and displayed a valiant defense of Punjab, military planners left their country's entire frontier of East Pakistan exposed and "yet again, there appeared to be no attempt to draw their air force or the navy into the strategic planning for the impending war."

Nawaz also offers a variety of insights about contemporary Pakistani politics. For instance, while policymakers in Washington have recently been accusing the largest Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), of acting independently of Islamabad, Nawaz argues that this is a result of misdirection. Pakistan's leadership blames its illegal or unpopular policies on "independent" agents of the ISI, he says.

He also notes that beginning this autumn, a conservative element within the army, known as "Zia Bharti," or "Zia's Recruits," is due to take over many senior leadership positions as promotions occur. Encouraged by jihadist General Mohammad Zia ul Haq during the 1980s, many young Islamists are today reaching the pinnacle of their careers. This group may be disinclined to aid Americans: its members were deprived of advanced overseas military training at elite US institutions after Washington instituted sanctions following the discovery of Pakistan's covert nuclear program.

Crossed Swords also offers recommendations on ways to scale-back the army's creeping "Bonapartism." One way presented is forcing military and ISI officials to testify before parliament. Nawaz also recommends that Pakistan's regional commanders all be four-star generals and appointed by the same authority that currently appoints the Chief of Army Staff and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This would distribute power among regional commanders and reduce the power of Chief of Army Staff. In addition, Nawaz insists that the army reexamine its expansive benefits such as its lifelong system of healthcare, especially in a country that "does not reward its civil servants well nor its educationists." He also recommends that ISI personnel begin respecting legal norms and begin reprimanding cases of misconduct, such as random cases of vigilantism and incidents of autonomous handling of foreign relations.

While his recommendations are unique and tightly-focused, it remains to be seen why the military—taken strictly as a bureaucratic entity—would forfeit its institutional power to civilian leaders for which they have "an underlying disdain." For instance, Pakistan scholar Ahmed Rashid accounts that ISI's investigative arm, the National Accountability Bureau, allegedly compiled dossiers on the finances of the country's politicians to pressure them into supporting technocrats sponsored by military-backed parties. Given the military and ISI's pervasive grip, it remains unclear why they would willfully diminish their institutional power or whether Pakistan's civilian rulers could force them to do so.

Nawaz sees the army's next challenge in dealing with the low-intensity guerilla insurgency in its western tribal region, which the army is presently ill-equipped and untrained to fight. The author insists that in order to combat internal insurgencies and to deter conventional threats from India, Afghanistan, and Iran, the army must re-orient its force structure. "[T]o be truly effective, the army needs to be radically transformed into a leaner and highly mobile force, not the lumbering giant that it is today."

His concern is well-placed. As often happens with conventional militaries, Pakistan's army has suffered severe losses at the hands of elusive and adaptive militants. Since joining the so-called "war on terror," their army has lost nearly 1,400 soldiers in clashes with insurgents. One soldier told the BBC, "This is a country where soldiers are slaughtered…Their bodies may be found, but not their heads." In August 2007, Baitullah Mehsud, commander of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and the alleged mastermind behind the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, captured over 200 Pakistani troops who offered little to no resistance. Some officers admit morale has not been this low since the army failed to stop East Pakistan's secession in 1971.

Reshaping the Pakistani army's cumbersome conventional force structure for more adaptive military campaigns may be a step in the right direction. But there exists concern that nimbler forces might be inadequate for conventional warfighting. A similar a debate is brewing over the US Army's organizing principle: whether to focus future operations toward Iraq-style counterinsurgencies or on force-on-force conventional warfare maneuver. Military analysts caution that the US Army's present infatuation with stability operations and nation building will erode its capacity for conventional warfighting. For Pakistan, a greater emphasis on a lighter force could leave it vulnerable to invasions by India, large-scale internal subversions, or political destabilization caused by economic problems.

In the end, Nawaz argues that Pakistan's best defense against political and military implosion "lies in creating a powerful, pluralistic polity residing in a strong economy, built on a society that values education and the welfare of its population." According to Nawaz, that requires a restoration of the balance between the army and civilians. H

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