

The British and Pakistani Armies: Sharing Both a Personal and Institutional Future

Kamal Alam

The long relationship between the British and Pakistani armies is transforming, from one based mostly on pomp, ceremony and personal friendships, to one based on shared strategic interests.

The Pakistan Army can sometimes be more British than the British Army, at least when it comes to pomp and ceremony. Its cavalry officers have the best horses, and they play in the top polo competitions in Argentina and England; many of their sons go to Britain's top boarding schools; and they even fashion their moustaches in the same manner as Field Marshal Herbert Kitchener.

According to Carey Schofield in her book *Inside the Pakistan Army*, after independence in 1947 the Pakistan Army inherited the majority of the British Indian Army regiments that were facing the threat on the Afghanistan 'frontier'. As a result, it initially had British officers mentoring in the military academies and staff colleges. Now the relationship has come full circle with a Pakistan Army major, Uqbah Malik, becoming the first instructor from a Muslim country to teach British cadets at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He has also trained the Jordanian crown prince, Emirati princes and Afghan cadets.

Malik's role reflects a British bid to learn from the Pakistan Army's operational and doctrinal training of military forces in the Middle East. Under Malik, British cadets have trained with their Pakistani counterparts in Pakistan, a historical first observed first-hand by the author, and now British NCOs are on their way to becoming part of Pakistan's military academy at Kakul. There is also talk of a British Major heading to become an instructor in Pakistan, and at present there is a Pakistani colonel at the Defence Academy at Shrivenham, where he is a member of the Directing Staff and has his own syndicate group.

Since the US-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan it has been no secret that the West – and, in particular, the Americans – have seen the Pakistan Army, and especially its intelligence services, as the biggest external obstacle to the destruction of the Taliban. Whenever the relationship with the US has soured, particularly after a US military helicopter strike killed at least 24 Pakistani troops in 2011, British senior officers have been brought in to keep the Pakistani military on-side.

It has even been argued by the Americans and Afghans that the British military has been too soft on the Pakistanis and cared more about Pakistani concerns than those of the Afghans. The former British envoy to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, wrote in his book, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign*, that two British defence chiefs, Field Marshal Charles Guthrie and General Lord Richards formed close friendships with the Pakistani top brass. Ahmed Rashid, in his book, *Descent into Chaos: The World's Most Unstable Region and the Threat to Global Security*, also said that Richards was too close to the Pakistani military's viewpoint. According to former US Vice President Dick Cheney, Guthrie's friendship with General Pervez Musharraf, the former military ruler of Pakistan, helped the Americans to forge a close relationship with the Pakistanis in their efforts to hunt down and capture the majority of Al-Qa'ida's leadership.

More recently, Chief of the General Staff Sir Nicholas Carter has described Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif, as 'a great adviser and mentor'. This month, Carter

became the first British Army chief to be the main guest to attend a Pakistan Army cadets' passing out parade, an honour reserved normally only for Saudi and other Arab royal families. In the past year alone, Carter has been to Pakistan three times, more times than he has been to any other non-NATO member.

It was these personal British friendships that have kept Pakistan from completely falling out with the US and NATO. Now the British army wants to capitalise on this relationship as it bids to evolve into a smaller, but smarter, force. History and pomp and ceremony aside, the UK–Pakistan relationship is becoming more strategic, to the extent that the two armies could even fight together against a common enemy.

Carter, along with Commander Field Army Lieutenant General Patrick Sanders, have put Pakistan at the forefront of their defence engagement policy. They are keen to learn from the Pakistan Army's reported success in Operation *Zarb-e-Azq*, which Sanders praised, going so far as to say that what the Pakistan Army had achieved in Waziristan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas 'has not been achieved for 150 years'. One of the cornerstones of this success was how the army leadership used the militants' own narrative against them: enforcing regulations on hate speech; scrutinizing more closely the curriculums in religious schools; prohibiting media coverage of terrorist organisations; and, crucially, declaring that only the Pakistani state – as a Muslim state – could declare jihad – non-state actors such as the Taliban or Daesh did not have the authority to do so. The British army, which has been operating in Muslim countries such as

Major Uqbah Malik (far right) with British cadets in Pakistan. The British army wants to capitalise on the UK–Pakistan relationship as it bids to evolve into a smaller, but smarter, force. *Courtesy of Ahmed Sajjad Kayani/Pakistan Military Academy Kakul.*



Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, is engaging the Pakistanis on 'lessons learned'. So the question for the British is how they can use the religion card to fight militants who justify their war against the UK based on theology.

The UK is also keen to leverage Pakistan's historically close ties to the Gulf. In his book, *Churchill's Empire*, Richard Toye claims that Winston Churchill wanted the new state of Pakistan to replace the old British Indian Army as the guardian of the Gulf, and in 1956 Pakistan were close to taking part in the Suez Crisis on behalf of the British. At the time, the Egyptians under President Gamal Abdel Nasser saw Pakistan as a Western and British lackey. This year, Pakistan's continuing close ties to the Gulf were made clear when General Raheel Sharif became the head of a newly formed military alliance of mostly Sunni Islamic states led by Saudi Arabia, known as the 'Muslim NATO'. Indeed, Pakistan continues to be a key provider of security to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, both of which are vital for the UK's own security: intelligence sharing with Saudi Arabia is key to stopping terror plots in the UK, while Bahrain now serves as a permanent base for British forces in the Persian Gulf. Pakistan and the UK have already worked together in the Gulf, particularly on counter-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa and Persian Gulf.

Britain, under its own new East of Suez policy, can in the long-term benefit from cooperation with the Pakistani

Army. The trust between the two armies built during the Afghan war is set to pay dividends both in the Middle East and at the prestigious academies in the UK.

The author knows that the 32 Engineer Regiment of the British Army is partnering in counter-IED capability with the Pakistan Army Engineers, and the British Army's 77th Brigade are conducting intellectual-level engagements on perception management of the enemy, the cultural side of the war and media strategy. The two armies hold an annual counter-insurgency conference, focusing not just on combat, but also diplomacy and refugee management. The author is aware that the British Army is also sending officers to the Centre for International Peace and Security – which prepares officers to deploy in conflict zones – at the National University of Sciences and Technology in Islamabad to learn from Pakistan's experiences in peacekeeping.

Britain is also using the Pakistan Army to help with the recruitment of more British Muslims – the majority of whom are of Pakistani origin – into the UK armed forces. British Muslims have reportedly been reluctant to join the armed forces partly because they believe that the UK is waging a war against Islam. By saying that the British and Pakistani armies are fighting against terrorists and not Islam, the army is attempting a new approach, and the author has seen first-hand that Pakistani military officers are regular guests at recruitment events

to help to explain this. The British Army has invited Pakistan Army officers to address key community leaders in cities such as Manchester and Birmingham to help not just with recruitment but also to explain what it is doing in regional conflicts.

The British and Pakistani armed forces appear now to be on the same page, from training each other's officers and soldiers, to countering violent extremism in their communities and showing a united front, whether on the Afghan border or in the Gulf. The message being given is that the two militaries are fighting the same enemy, whether it be on the Pakistani–Afghan border or in the Middle East.

With geopolitical alliances shifting rapidly, and with instability and conflict raging from North Africa to Southeast Asia, the UK–Pakistan military alliance that was born in 1947 on polo fields and golf courses is now playing a key role in both Pakistan's and Britain's defence engagement with the wider world. Both armies stand to benefit from this in the decades to come.

Kamal Alam

Kamal has been a Visiting Fellow at RUSI since July 2015 and specialises in the Pakistan Army's relationship with the British Army. Previously he has advised the British Army on Syrian affairs.