



WEBINAR

**CIVIL–MILITARY
RELATIONS IN TRANSITION:
CONTINUITY, CHANGE, AND
STRATEGIC STABILITY
IN PAKISTAN**



Saturday 10 January 2025

⌚ 7:30 -8:30 pm

BRIEF REPORT

Conceptual Framework

Civil-military relations have remained a defining feature of Pakistan's political evolution, governance structure, and national security framework. From the early years of state formation, Pakistan's institutional development has been shaped by security imperatives, regional conflicts, and geopolitical alignments. While cooperation between civilian leadership and the military played a stabilizing role in the formative period, repeated political crises, constitutional disruptions, and leadership instability gradually produced institutional imbalance and mistrust.

In recent years, particularly following internal political upheavals and post-2025 regional security developments, renewed efforts toward reconciliation, coordination, and institutional balance have become increasingly visible. Rather than viewing civil-military relations as a binary struggle for supremacy, contemporary discourse reflects a shift toward understanding them as an evolving framework shaped by continuity, adaptation, and strategic necessity.

The webinar sought to move beyond polarized narratives by examining how historical legacies continue to influence present arrangements, what has meaningfully changed, and how Pakistan can strengthen democratic stability while safeguarding strategic interests. The session emphasized that sustainable governance depends not on rigid models but on constitutional respect, institutional harmony, and public welfare.

Discussion Points



**Dilawaiz
Tabessum**

Co-Hosts, South Asia Times

Kaiwan Rad

- The webinar was co-hosted and moderated by Dilawaiz Tabessum, Lead Research Coordinator at South Asia Times, alongside Kaiwan Rad, Researcher at SAT. The moderators framed civil-military relations as a structural issue rooted in Pakistan's political development rather than an outcome of individual personalities or isolated events.
- They highlighted that the objective of the session was not to revisit historical blame or revive adversarial debates, but to assess continuity and change through an academic and policy-oriented lens. Emphasis was placed on understanding how institutional learning, coordination mechanisms, and strategic realities have reshaped interactions between civilian and military institutions in recent years.
- The moderators underscored the importance of constructive dialogue, constitutional boundaries, and mutual respect as essential components for long-term political stability and democratic resilience.



Dr. Amna Mahmood

Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University

- “Civil–military relations become central in security-centric, post-colonial states,” and Pakistan is not an exception. Pakistan inherited “truncated borders, volatile frontiers, and immediate security threats” after 1947. The 1948 Kashmir conflict forced Pakistan to “prioritize survival over economic development”. Early Pakistan had a “severely under-resourced military,” compelling disproportionate defense spending
- Pakistan became a “security state immediately after independence”. National survival and economy are twin objectives, but security dominated policymaking. The 1954 Western alignment (SEATO, CENTO) made foreign policy synonymous with defense policy. Economic, trade, and industrial relations were subordinated to military strengthening. Minimum deterrence against India became the core strategic objective.
- The 1971 crisis revealed the failure of military rulers to understand political and federal dynamics of East Pakistan. Indian intervention succeeded due to internal political mismanagement. Post-1971 civilian leadership lacked grassroots political training and crisis-management capacity. Repeated civilian failures enabled further military interventions.
- The Zia-ul-Haq era institutionalized military dominance, including custodianship of ideological borders. Article 58(2)(b) allowed military influence even after formal disengagement. Extra-constitutional coordination between the President and the Army Chief marginalized the Prime Minister.
- Post-1988 hung parliaments weakened civilian authority. Civilian governments lacked experience, unity, and constitutional leverage. The Kargil conflict reflected absence of civilian inclusion in security decision-making. Musharraf’s rule further subordinated judiciary and civilian institutions.
- Pakistan today functions as a “hybrid regime,” not a full parliamentary democracy. Parliamentary sovereignty remains compromised. Military dominance is accepted in security matters, but problematic in governance. Civil–military relations are “very good” in terms of coordination, not supremacy. Major policy decisions require military concurrence.
- National unity emerges during conflict with India, yet civilian supremacy remains weak. The current arrangement is ideological and structural, not personality-driven. Human security threats—climate change, food insecurity, water scarcity—now define national security.
- Programs like the National Action Plan reflect institutionalized civil–military cooperation. A full return to civilian supremacy is unlikely in the short term. Hybrid systems must be transparent, accountable, and constitutionally grounded. The 1973 Constitution remains the legitimate foundation for sovereignty of the people

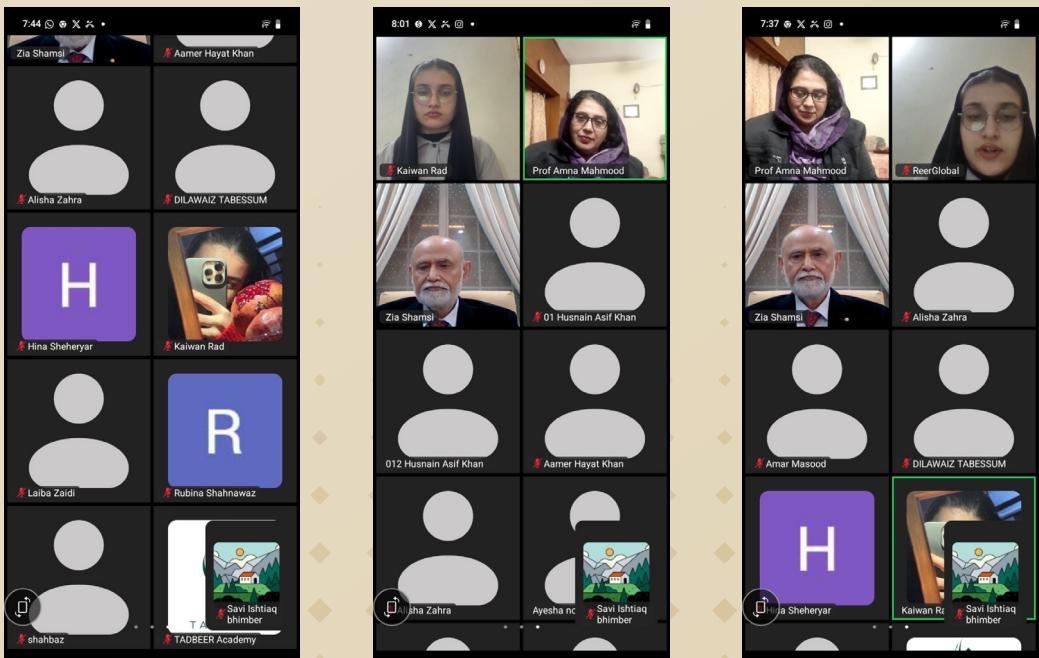
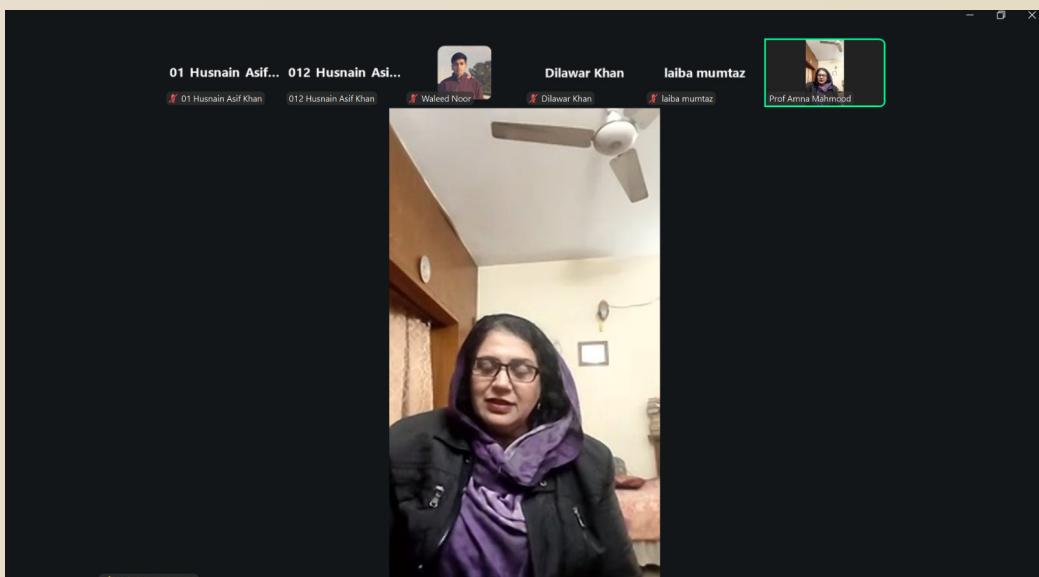
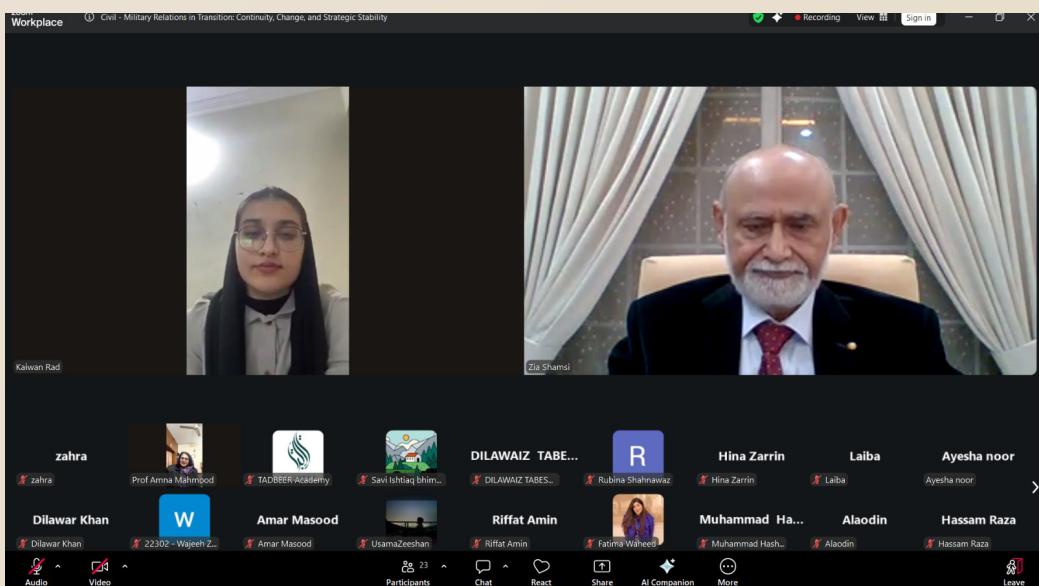


Dr. Zia-ul-Haque Shamsi

Head, Department of Strategic Studies, National Defence University

- Civil-military relations must be understood through “theoretical and operational lenses”. Referencing Sun Tzu’s model: civilians set policy, give resources and objectives; the military executes without interference.
- Pakistan “lacked resources at independence” and had to build its security architecture from scratch. Western alignment during the Cold War was a strategic necessity, not a choice. The post-2025 conflict demonstrated effective civil-military unity and coordination. Pakistanis “become a nation during crises” despite societal diversity. The military led the response, while civilian leadership publicly supported and recognized the armed forces. Pakistan showed strategic restraint despite military success. India launched extensive disinformation campaigns, which Pakistan countered calmly and soberly.
- Information warfare is now a core dimension of national security. There is no justification for martial law or military governance in principle. People’s well-being is central to national security. National security cannot be sustained without public satisfaction. Examples from Venezuela and Turkey show that regimes survive or fail based on popular support.
- Governance models must suit local societal dynamics, not ideal or imported models. Hybrid systems can function if they serve the public interest. No objection to civilian or hybrid rule as long as people’s needs are prioritized. Public support is essential for territorial defense and sovereignty.
- Pakistan has experimented with all governance models—military, civilian, and hybrid. Pakistanis are capable, industrious, and globally valued workers. State failure is not due to the people, but governance structures. Democratic space should not be limited; the Constitution must be respected.
- If a hybrid system exists, it should be constitutionally accommodated. Elections must remain free and fair. Ultimate authority should reflect the consent of the people.
- Security today includes both traditional and non-traditional threats. Satisfied citizens strengthen both democracy and defense

Webinar Highlights



Policy Recommendations

- Pakistan's existing civil-military arrangement should be recognized as a functional hybrid model born out of security imperatives, not democratic failure. As both speakers noted, this structure is "ideological and structural, not personality-driven." Rather than debating supremacy, policy should focus on predictability, continuity, and institutional harmony, particularly during crises.
- Consistent with Dr. Zia ul Haque Shamsi's reference to classical civil-military theory, civilian leadership should retain policy authority while the military maintains operational and strategic primacy in security affairs. The armed forces' role in defense, foreign policy signaling, counter-terrorism, and information warfare should be formally embedded in state decision-making frameworks to avoid informal or ad hoc coordination.
- Given Pakistan's security-centric environment, the NSC should function as the principal platform for civil-military alignment, particularly on strategic, economic, and hybrid threats. This reflects Prof. Dr. Amna Mehmood's assessment that major policy decisions already require military concurrence and should therefore be streamlined rather than obscured.
- In line with both speakers, national security policy must explicitly integrate human security, climate stress, food insecurity, water scarcity, and economic stability. The military's logistical capacity, planning discipline, and crisis-management experience should be systematically leveraged in non-traditional security domains, reinforcing its role as a national stabilizer beyond warfare.
- The post-2025 conflict demonstrated that civil-military unity delivers deterrence, credibility, and strategic restraint. Policy must preserve the principle that during external threats, command unity and information discipline remain non-negotiable. Political contestation should not undermine operational coherence in times of national danger.
- As highlighted by Dr. Shamsi, information warfare is now a core battlefield. Pakistan should adopt a military-led, civilian-supported strategic communication doctrine to counter disinformation, manage escalation, and project restraint. This safeguards national credibility without politicizing security narratives.
- Echoing both speakers, elections, constitutional processes, and parliamentary functions must continue, but without destabilizing the security architecture. Democratic continuity should be viewed as complementary to, not competitive with, military effectiveness—especially in a region marked by persistent external threats.
- Rather than framing governance as a binary choice between civilian or military dominance, policy discourse should emphasize outcomes: public satisfaction, economic resilience, and territorial integrity. As Dr. Shamsi argued, "people's well-being is central to national security," and any system delivering stability and welfare retains legitimacy.
- Civilian institutions should be strengthened gradually in policy expertise and governance capacity, but not through abrupt power rebalancing that risks instability. Incremental civilian learning alongside a strong military guardian role reflects Pakistan's historical realities, as outlined by Prof. Dr. Amna Mehmood.
- Finally, while hybrid governance is a practical reality, its long-term sustainability depends on constitutional accommodation and transparency. This aligns with both speakers' insistence on respecting the Constitution while acknowledging ground realities ensuring that stability is institutional, not personalized.

Executive Summary

The webinar “Civil–Military Relations in Transition: Continuity, Change, and Strategic Stability in Pakistan” examined the historical evolution, present configuration, and future trajectory of Pakistan’s civil–military relations. Speakers argued that Pakistan’s civil–military imbalance is not accidental or personality-driven but the product of post-colonial security imperatives, repeated wars with India, Cold War alliances, constitutional distortions, and prolonged military rule.

The discussion emphasized that Pakistan has effectively transitioned into a hybrid political system, where civilian institutions operate in coordination with, and often under the guidance of, the military—particularly in matters of national security, foreign policy, and increasingly governance and economic decision-making. While this arrangement has delivered short-term stability and effective crisis response (as seen during the post-2025 conflict), it continues to constrain parliamentary sovereignty and democratic consolidation.

Speakers converged on the view that national security in contemporary Pakistan is inseparable from human security, public trust, and citizen well-being. Sustainable stability, they argued, depends not on institutional dominance but on constitutional clarity, transparency, and public consent

Conclusion

From a South Asia Times perspective, Pakistan's civil-military relations should be understood as a security-driven partnership, refined through experience rather than ideology. The armed forces remain the central stabilizing institution, particularly in an era of hybrid warfare and regional volatility, while civilian continuity provides legitimacy and public linkage. The objective is not supremacy, but cohesion, resilience, and national survival. This webinar reflect a deep crisis of legitimacy in Pakistan's civil-military equation, where neither popular sovereignty nor elite decision-making is seen as genuinely representative. Participants oscillate between skepticism toward mass democracy and fear of elite or ideological capture, revealing a loop between establishment dominance, weak parliamentary representation, and disengaged citizens. The debate also shows an unresolved tension between liberal democratic models and Islamic political frameworks, with concern that both can devolve into minority rule if improperly applied. Overall, the discourse underscores that Pakistan's civil-military imbalance is not just institutional but ideological and societal, rooted in who is trusted to define the "national will.

Thanking Remarks



Mr. Salman Javed

Director General,
South Asia Times

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Amna Mahmood and Dr. Zia-ul-Haque Shamsi for sharing their valuable time, experience, and scholarly insights with us today. Your perspectives have helped us better understand the complex balance between continuity and change in Pakistan's civil-military relations



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