

General Ehsan Ul Haq: Chairman of the joint chiefs of staff committee of Pakistan

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General Ehsan Ul Haq, Chairman of Pakistan's Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, is the most senior Pakistani official to visit NATO.

In November, Gen Haq met NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and senior alliance military officials in the Military Committee and at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).

"NATO has become our neighbour and we thought it would be [fitting] to exchange some views and understand each others' perspective of the situation in Afghanistan," Gen Haq said.

In addition to US Marine General James Jones, who served as Supreme Allied Commander Europe until December 2006, Gen Haq said Pakistan had "many distinguished visitors from NATO over the last couple of years".

"We have a fairly good rapport and we only want to consolidate and deepen this relationship so that we can work together in the best interests of peace and stability in our part of the world," he added.

Gen Haq does not rule out reports that Taliban are crossing from Pakistan into Afghanistan but denies Pakistani complicity. "I think as far as the presence of the Taliban in Pakistan is concerned, one can't vouch for it that they're not there. We have a very large Afghan refugee presence in Pakistan, more than two million of them still, so the possibility of many of them being Taliban or being in contact with the Taliban in Afghanistan cannot be ruled out," Gen Haq said.

"There are movements across the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders that we are trying to control to the best of our abilities, but to say that there is support for these elements from the government of Pakistan or any entity related to the government of Pakistan is absolutely incorrect and reflects a lack of understanding of the situation in our part of the world.

"Frankly speaking, we have been the target of a lot of extremism and terrorism and we in Pakistan are engaged in a struggle to eliminate terrorism and to control extremism, so for us to be in any way sponsoring such elements is out of the question." Gen Haq believes there is a solution to the problem, however. First he said the problem should be considered without unnecessarily indulging in a blame game and should be addressed by all parties as a team in partnership. Second, in order to work in the extremely harsh terrain, Pakistani forces need better surveillance, night-vision, mobility and logistics capabilities

in addition to better fire power, providing the ability to acquire targets and the capacity to respond and react. Third, he supports building a fence in more critical elements of the border: "Fencing the areas which are more difficult is do-able, and we should consider that."

Afghan, NATO, Pakistani and US military and civilian officials meet regularly in the Tripartite Commission (not renamed after NATO became the fourth member) and have established a joint intelligence centre. Gen Haq said the centre's modalities and structure "are being worked out" but that "it will be like an intelligence headquarters with representatives from all the four parties [who] can bring together whatever information is available in their own systems, put it together, see that it is adequate to take appropriate action on it". He said Pakistan had "come a long way" in achieving jointness since the creation of the Joint Staff Headquarters 30 years ago, "but that is not to say that we have really achieved the ultimate objectives.

"The political and military leadership in Pakistan is convinced that we have to keep moving on this track to be ultimately able to achieve a status like the British armed forces, a chief of defence staff system, or the American armed forces, where they have the Joint Chiefs of Staff in hands-on direct control of all the segments of the armed forces. So we have some way to go but we are on the path, gradually we are moving forward. Obviously, the pace picked up after we carried out the nuclear tests and we became an overt nuclear power. The need to harmonise our nuclear strategy and our conventional strategy was a big impetus to integration of the armed forces and strengthening of jointness." Pakistan has a nuclear strategy of "minimal, credible deterrence", according to Gen Haq. "We don't want to be in an arms race - this is not a numbers game - but we want to have enough capability that it can deter war or aggression against us," he said.

Pakistan does not have a nuclear 'no first use' policy but Gen Haq said: "We will not use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon power." He admits that Pakistan has nuclear weapons to make up for weaknesses in conventional forces: "That's to an extent correct."

However, he adds that India became nuclear first and Pakistan was left with no option. "It was they who initiated nuclear weapons in south Asia. When you put their nuclear capability on top of their conventional superiority, for us it became an existential threat."

Gen Haq said Pakistan has a major programme to modernise the three armed services spread over almost 15 years. He identified the army's focus as improving its capabilities in night fighting, armour, defence against terrorism and mobility. "As far as the navy is concerned, we are trying to strengthen our surface capabilities and we are inducting Chinese F22P frigates. We have the Agosta 90B and we may be examining the replacement of some of our oldest

submarines. We are also strengthening our fleet air arm by the acquisition of P-3 Orions from the US. "As far as the air force is concerned, we are getting the F-16s, he said. "We are also looking at the Chinese F-10, also called FC-20, aircraft, which is their high-tech aircraft. We have our own fighter aircraft, the FC-17, coming up, and of course we are also getting the Swedish AWACS [AEW] aircraft."