

Faith, Unity, Discipline: The ISI of Pakistan by Hein G. Kiessling, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2016, pp. 309, INR 599

*Vishal Kumar Verma**

The work of intelligence agencies is a grey area and any attempt to 'lift the veil' is an uphill task, shrouded in uncertainty and doubt, and suspect as to the authenticity of the information brought out into the open. Notwithstanding this, it has been established beyond doubt that intelligence agencies have a major say in strategic events both at the international and national levels. Given a free hand, they might end up 'controlling the controllers'. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan has established itself as an effective agency, whose work has a definitive impact on a range of issues spanning regional politics/ international relations, guerilla warfare as well as sub-conventional mechanisms, including the fuelling of uprisings and armed rebellions. The ISI is also involved in trying to counter terrorism within and outside Pakistan. Controlled and headed by the Pakistan Army, it has an important say in most matters pertaining to the country, be they domestic or international.

Faith, Unity, Discipline: The ISI of Pakistan, by Hein G. Kiessling, is a timely and well-researched book. It has 21 chapters and includes an introduction, postscript, five appendices and comprehensive notes and bibliography. It covers the life of the ISI from its formative years till 2015, and therefore is quite up-to-date. Initially, the chapters are organised in a

* The reviewer is a serving officer in the Indian Navy and presently commanding the Naval Flight Test Squadron, INAS 552, at Goa. The views expressed here are his own.



chronological order and cover large periods of time—1948–58, 1958–71, 1971–77, 1977–88 and so on. Subsequently, they tend to become event-specific and detailed, and often covering two to three years, indicating, perhaps, data gaps in the initial periods which could possibly be attributed to a time lapse and/or lack of data sources. Adding further to the USP of the book—it would be a good introduction to anyone interested in the ISI—is the fact that Kiessling’s primary sources of data include his own observations as well as the multitude of interviews/interactions with retired and serving ISI/military personnel, some of whom could perhaps not be quoted, made during his long stay in Pakistan. There is obviously a vacuum with regard to official sources as they still remain in the classified domain. When one deals with an intricate subject like ‘intelligence’, there is always a fear of ‘what fact is real fact’ and whether or not interviews/news/available literature are a simple case of perception management.

The book’s Introduction covers the birth of Pakistan up till the present time. It generally scans the politico-strategic environment in Asia, and in India and Pakistan specifically, during this period. Various aspects such as the Indo-Pakistan conflicts, the tug of war between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union during the Cold War that, in effect, caused a churning in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan relations, conflicting river interests impacting Kashmir; and, ultimately, the cementing of Pakistan–China relations, have been highlighted. In a broad overview, Kiessling points towards the birth of Al-Qaeda, the initial footprints of ISI, its relationship with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its role in insurgencies in Kashmir and the North-East. He emphasises the general belief in Pakistan that the ISI has been wrongly the first suspect behind any attacks/killings or missing persons.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe the birth and structure of the ISI, and the early political and military events that shaped it, including the role of varied intelligence agencies such as the CIA (the US), MI6 (the United Kingdom [UK]), SAVAK (Iran) and SDECE (French) influencing its growth. The initial form of the ISI—a military structure and always headed by an army officer—ensured that the Pakistan Army remained intertwined with the country’s politics and was always responsible (the term ‘controlled’ would be inappropriate here) for the ‘state of the State’, either directly or through the periphery.

Though founded in 1948, the ISI came into its own in the 1970s, specially so with the 1971 East Pakistan debacle. Thereafter, it picked

up pace and fuelled the Khalistan movement against India, supported by the West and the US (the CIA) in particular, ultimately leading to the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi post Operation Blue Star. This era could be termed as the transition phase from the 'ISI of Pakistan' to 'Pakistan of the ISI'. From then on, the ISI has either dominated or had a say in the majority of the important politico-military developments in and around Pakistan.

The book clearly establishes that the ISI has played a decisive role in Pakistan's internal politics and foreign policy (for example, the appointment of Generals as ambassadors); supported the General Headquarters (GHQ) whenever there was a dilemma or issue between it and the established government of the day; or acted on its own wherever opportunities arose. While the ISI has a dual reporting system, it has leaned more towards the GHQ and the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) for obvious reasons. However, the ISI and GHQ are also victims of the ambitions of their own top brass, who keep trying to topple each other, sometimes by supporting opposing political figures/parties. It has been very effective (whether by chance or by design) in uncovering multiple plots by junior officers in the armed forces to assassinate people occupying high offices such as that of the Prime Minister or the COAS.

Kiessling's research comprehensively brings out Pakistan's meddling in the internal affairs of India (in Jammu and Kashmir [J&K], Punjab and the North-East as well as possibly plotting the assassination of Indira Gandhi), and also in Afghanistan (the handiwork of Afghanistan Bureau of the ISI) on a large scale, with support from the ISI and GHQ (Pakistan Army). In order to secure its own interests as well as those of the US in Afghanistan, Pakistan has also attempted to intervene in bordering areas of the erstwhile Soviet Union, an arrangement that suited the Americans well during the Cold War. Aiding the Pakistanis were the CIA, the US, Saudi Arabia and, in a small way, other countries like China and Turkey, all of which have provided them a variety of material, financial and human support, which enabled them to flood the region with small to medium calibre weapons and radicalise local populations, a strategy that has come back to haunt the creators *and* the rest of the world. Some real gaps on the ISI's role in the 1993 Mumbai (then Bombay) blasts, the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, the 1999 Kargil conflict and other similar events cast a doubt as to the author's intentions in highlighting the wrongdoings orchestrated by GHQ/ISI. There is also no mention of ISI's involvement with China.

Kiessling leaves the reader at a crossroads of events. Who was responsible for the Ojhri Camp catastrophe? Why were various ISI chiefs shunted out, including Akhtar Abdur Rahman (after a seven-year term)? What or who caused Zia-ul-Haq's plane to crash? Who perpetrated the Midnight Jackal affair? Who supplied the list of ISI contacts of Sikh insurgents to India? What were the reasons for the death of COAS Asif Nawaj? These are just a few from a large list.

In the book, the author also brings out that stashing of money, by politicians, bureaucrats and military personnel, has been an integral part of Pakistan's existence, be it Mehrangate, Afghanistan war or the lucrative drug trade. In Pakistan, it has become second nature to route funds from foreign countries into the economy/personal accounts in the name of supporting strategic ventures—only the donors keep changing (the US, Saudi Arabia and now China [pp. 54, 55]).

Reading the book, one realises that Chapter 15 is the only chapter that is dedicated entirely to ISI and makes a fair attempt to bring out the structure, personnel and budget of the organisation. The author shows an affinity towards Pakistan as he over-emphasises that the original state of Kashmir was 32 per cent with Pakistan, 48 per cent with India and 20 per cent with China (pp. 3, 13). He also feels that 1948 was a victory for Pakistan. He brings out a number of misgivings on the ISI's part, especially its participation in numerous rebellions, guerilla warfare, and multiple domestic and international plots, but refrains from deeply interrogating and comparing them from the standpoint of breach of sovereignty, or international law, or United Nations conventions. To the contrary, in Appendices 1 and 2 on Balochistan and the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), Kiessling tends to criticise India regarding its efforts to preserve democracy. The use of bold fonts, in a way, look like accusations from a Pakistani stand point. It is possible that his long years of stay in Pakistan and his deep association with top Pakistani generals has tended to colour the author's vision. There is nothing wrong with the statistics or conjectures; rather, it is the manner of presentation where he portrays a veneer indicating self-preservation on Pakistan's behalf and an aggressive outlook by India. It is quite possibly the reverse. In the same breath, he refrains from acknowledging the role of the US, the United Kingdom (UK), Russia/Soviet Union, China and Saudi Arabia, and how, perhaps, their special and regular operatives have breached the sovereignty of multiple states and meddled in their internal affairs. The author's approach tends to remain centred on India–Pakistan–Afghanistan. In

so far as ISI's co-operation with other intelligence agencies is concerned, Kiessling tends to underscore the CIA–ISI connect on a number of occasions. His liberal and deep description of the CIA and ISI's long relationship stems from the recent distancing of the US from Pakistan and, perhaps, portrays his unhappiness over recent developments

In this reviewer's opinion, the book could have been alternately titled 'The Politico-military History of Pakistan and the Role of ISI'. Unlike other works that cover in depth the operations, internal politics and shaping of the intelligence agencies, an in-depth analysis of the design/operations/internal workings of the ISI and the games within the organisation is missing here. The book does help one put things in a chronological order with regard to major developments in the ISI, the change of guard there and, in some cases, short biographical details of select Director-Generals of the organisation. Although a good politico-military account of Pakistan that presents all important events and the role of the ISI, *Faith, Unity, Discipline* fails in shedding light on the workings of the ISI. A good read if one wants a general overview of important developments in Pakistan's history, but not satisfying if one is looking for a deep, analytical scrutiny of the organisation. All in all, it is a different angle to look at the same prism!

