
Pakistan's Strategy of Covert War

Shalini Chawla

For the Pakistan army, the insurgency (in Kashmir) was a successful strategic ploy to tie down hundreds of thousands of Indian troops who would otherwise have been deployed on the border and possibly threatened Pakistan. The army carefully calibrated the kinds of weapons and level of funds it provided the Kashmiri militants, and at times reined in the ISI so as not to provoke Indian military retaliation against Pakistan. The level of support was kept just below what India might use to justify an attack on Pakistan.

— Ahmed Rashid

The Pakistan military has pursued a covert war strategy with remarkable persistence over the past 61 years, changing only the tactics. Covert warfare or covert operation in this context is defined as “an operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor”. Covert war is also a low cost alternative to conventional war and a tactic to keep the enemy permanently occupied by creating disturbances in the enemy territory and could be aimed at leading the state towards political, civil or even economic instability.

Covert warfare as an art of statecraft is not new and goes back to the 4th century BC, when Kautilya wrote the *Arthashastra*, interestingly, not far from today's Islamabad. Kautilya defines war against the enemy very vividly and states that war is not limited to only physical warfare but includes diplomacy and other techniques suitable for the time and place. Covert and/or concealed war occupies an important part of the overall war strategy. The nature of covert

Ms **Shalini Chawla** is Research Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

operations can be different depending on the territory, people, and most importantly, the nature of the conflict.

The need to control Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) state and incorporate it into Pakistan was felt very strongly in Pakistan initially for secular-strategic reasons and later in pursuit of ideological goals. The Maharaja of J & K sought a Standstill Agreement with India and Pakistan to maintain the status-quo. Pakistan agreed but promptly violated it in September 1947 to impose an economic blockade in order to pressurise a decision on Srinagar. This led to Pakistan's first aggression on Kashmir.

The Pakistani leadership seriously considered launching a quick military attack to cut the Jammu-Kathua road (which provided the sole road link from India to the Kashmir Valley). But the British threat of withdrawal of officers discouraged an overt strategy and, hence, the covert strategy was born. Akbar Khan, who actually wrote out the plan for the 1947 attack under the title of "Armed Revolt inside Kashmir", lists out the involvement of Mian Iftikaruddin, then a leader in the Muslim League, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, Sardar Shaukat Hayat Khan, minister in the Punjab government, senior ex-army officer of the Indian National Army, Brig Sher Khan, Director of Intelligence, Air Commodore Janjua of the Royal Pakistan Air Force, Lt. Masud of the cavalry and Khwaja Abdul Rahim, commissioner of Rawalpindi and members of the Muslim League National Guard. These were some of the prominent names apart from several others who assisted in the conspiracy and invasion. Akbar Khan, who was director of weapons and equipment at GHQ (the Pakistan Army's General Headquarters) arranged for the weapons. He claims in his book:

Fortunately, I discovered that a previous government sanction existed in GHQ for the issue of 4,000 rifles from the Punjab Police. The police did not appear to be in urgent need of them since they were not pressing for them. I, therefore, decided to base my proposal on a minimum of 4,000 rifles, assuming that the police could be ordered to receive these rifles from the army and make them available for Kashmir.

In addition, stocks of weapons and old ammunition declared unfit for military use was also made available by Col Azam Khanzada from the Ordnance Corps. The Pakistan Army, with the approval of the political leadership decided to exploit a local uprising which had broken out in Poonch, thus, taking the initial step of covert warfare. Pakistan accelerated its infiltration activities and in order to carry out guerrilla warfare operations, sent a large number of Pathan

tribesmen, Punjabis and other Pakistani nationals to defeat the state forces.

The aggression of 1947-48, formed the basic guidelines for Pakistan's future military strategy against India. The war established the pattern of Pakistan's covert war strategy as an important component of its grand strategy. The salient aspects of this strategy in the 1947-48 War may be summed up as follows:

1. Employment of irregular armed fighters composed of army personnel on leave, demobilised/retired soldiers/local and tribal individuals/groups.
2. Weapons and logistics support provided by the Pakistan government under the overall guidance of the Pakistan Army.
3. The irregular fighters were reinforced with regular Pakistan Army units and formations to avoid their defeat by Indian military forces defending their territory.
4. Pursuit of a covert war, including with regular military forces, with plausible deniability of direct involvement.
5. Political ideological formulations to provide justification for the war as indigenous uprising, freedom struggle, etc. to which Pakistan provided "political and moral support".

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The Pakistan Army leadership learnt many lessons to improve its strategy. The ceasefire agreement of 1949 failed to stop Pakistan in its covert actions in the Valley. Akbar Khan was of the opinion that a ceasefire in Kashmir was a mistake and the armed struggle with India should have continued. He was the key person who single-mindedly engaged in planning and seeking implementation of the covert war for the future. He wrote in *Raiders of Kashmir*:

At one time, as in 1947-48, armed help and military intervention by Pakistan, on behalf of Kashmir, were essential. Later, when the door for such assistance was closed by the ceasefire line and the promised plebiscite was evaded by India, the need arose for political arousing of the people in support of their accepted demand. At this stage, moral and material aid from Pakistan was needed.

Akbar Khan briefed President Iskander Mirza about his plan for covert war. His perception was that the terrain inside Kashmir was ideally suited for guerrilla warfare and given the conditions of roads and other facilities, infiltration would not be noticeable. Akbar's plan also suggested that the guerrilla fighters "have to be preferably locals" and "their target would be unguarded bridges, isolated wires and unprotected transport" in order to create unrest and spread terror in the region. The operation planned by Akbar Khan was for a duration of 12 to 18 months during which batches of guerrilla fighters would be replaced by the fresh lot of 500 men. Gen Ayub Khan, the army chief, who was entrusted with the task of implementing the 'scheme', managed the weapons and logistics. Akbar was told by the new Prime Minister, Malik Feroze Khan Noon, "Akbar you will be pleased to know that we have started it." While Pakistani covert operations in the 1950s and then early 1960s became far more organised, they actually yielded less results because the people did not support them. The Indian leadership, in fact, was now more determined to settle the issues in the Valley and possibly have a dialogue with Pakistan. Covert operations and even Sheikh Abdullah's absence did not disturb the situation in J & K to the degree aimed for by the Pakistani political leaders and the army.

The 1965 War: Operation Gibraltar

Covert operations in the Kashmir Valley without success were adding to frustration and impatience in Pakistan. In 1964, Pakistan developed a strategy around Operation Gibraltar as the covert component and Grand Slam as the overt armoured and artillery thrust into J & K. Five factors for this approach can be identified.

Firstly, India's defeat in the 1962 War against China and the improving relationship between Pakistan and China gave Pakistan the confidence of winning against India. Pakistan had started to believe after the 1962 Sino-Indian War that India would be unable to defend its borders in case of sudden infiltration. Secondly, the riots that followed after the disappearance of the Prophet's hair from Hazratbal led Pakistan to believe that the people in Kashmir were dissatisfied with India and it could rely on their support in its attempt to occupy the territory. Thirdly, Pakistan's alliance with the United States and, hence, the modernisation of the military with acquisition of the latest defence equipment provided the belief that superior technology and offensive strategy would out-balance the larger Indian military. Fourthly, India at that point of time was just recovering from its defeat in 1962 and, thus, Pakistan felt it was easier to defeat an Indian military which was in a state of disorganisation, with

weak political leadership at the Centre. Fifthly, Pakistan realised that the ongoing Indian military expansion would make India much stronger later on and it would then be difficult to take Kashmir by force at a future date, hence, the opportunity was now.

The tactical aims of Operation Gibraltar differed from the war in 1947. Although both operations had a similar basic motive of occupying Kashmir, the insecurity factor which was highlighted and presented by Akbar Khan in 1947 did not exist in 1965. The Indian Army

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responded robustly and was soon able to cut off the militants' infiltration routes and supply lines. The irregular fighters had to face the Indian troops and those who survived were tracked down by the help of the local political activists.

Operation Gibraltar was followed by Operation Grand Slam, as planned, in which the Pakistan Army launched a major armour-cum-artillery offensive in Chhamb sector to capture Akhnur. The initial battle between the Indian and Pakistani troops had remained confined to Kashmir, till the Pakistani forces attacked Chhamb on September 1. India obviously had no reason not to retaliate with a similar attack and the Pakistan Army was actually surprised when India launched a counter attack in Lahore-Sialkot sector on September 6. On September 23, the fighting stopped, with both India and Pakistan claiming victory. India actually had reason to celebrate as it managed to achieve the objective of defending Kashmir against the Pakistani invasion, both covert and overt.

In the 1970s, Pakistan moved towards increasing Islamisation and the religious ideology, initially promoted by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was followed by the aggressive fundamentalist policies of Gen Zia-ul-Haq. As a consequence, Pakistan's military strategy has been shaped and supported by the Islamic ideology emerging from the (mis)interpretation of the Holy Quran. The loss of East Pakistan and rise of insurgency in Baluchistan led the military and political leadership in Pakistan to intensify the religious ideology to counter any further division of Pakistan and also to motivate the nation for an aggressive posture against India.

Terror and the Concept of War

The Pakistan Army changed its motto in 1976 to include *jihad* as one of the three guiding principles. The study on war doctrine and strategy in the context of the Holy Quran has been done by Brig SK Malik in his book, *The Quranic*

Concept of War. Terror, according to the author, and, majority of the Pakistani military officers is central to the war strategy. Zia-ul Haq as the martial law administrator endorsed the conclusion. Use of terror as an instrument to impose your will and decisions on the enemy has been legitimised, citing examples from the Holy Quran and arriving at the conclusion that “when God wishes to impose His will upon his enemies, He chooses to do so by casting terror in their hearts”.

The Islamic concept as interpreted by Brig Malik relies on the use of terror in the preparation stages of war itself in order to assure victory and achieve direct results. Thus, terror has been legitimised in the Islamic ideology which has till today shaped the military strategy of Pakistan. Brig Malik asserts “Terror struck into the hearts of the enemies is not only a means; it is the end in itself.” War strategy, according to the Holy Quran, might have different forms depending on various factors but it must be effective and capable of striking terror into the hearts of the enemies. It is emphasised that fear has to be an important part of the preparation of war and it determines that “the test of utmost preparation lies in our capability to instill terror into the hearts of the enemies”

One of the most effective modes of generating terror is through covert warfare, thus, creating physical and mental unrest and fear in the enemy territory. Covert warfare, as practised by Pakistan, which includes different tactics like guerrilla warfare, inciting insurgencies, destruction of buildings, etc. now included use of terror in the name of religion.

Following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979, Lt Gen Akhtar Abdul Rahman, the director general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in his presentation to Gen Zia convinced him of Pakistan’s capacity to defeat the Soviets in a large-scale guerrilla war. He (Gen Akhtar) believed that Afghanistan could be another Vietnam, with the Soviets in the position of the Americans. He insisted on the military option which implied Pakistan covertly supporting and managing the guerrilla warfare with arms, ammunition, money, intelligence, training and operational advice. He also suggested that Pakistan should use the border areas of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan as a sanctuary for both the refugees and guerrillas. The base was essential for covert forces as without a secure, cross-border base, no such campaign could succeed. Zia was convinced with Gen Akhtar’s thought process and he proceeded with the same strategy.

Afghanistan had all the right ingredients for covert guerrilla warfare: firstly, loyal and dedicated people, who would give their life for the cause and directly and indirectly support the struggle. Secondly, the guerrillas completely believed

in, and were willing to sacrifice their lives for, the cause interpreted in terms of fighting for Islam. Thirdly, favourable terrain made the tracking of the guerrillas difficult. Also, the locals were well versed with the terrain and Pakistan could rely on them. Fourthly, a secure base, which provided the covert fighters a place for training, rest and refit. Fifthly, outside support for the resistance, which would bring the revolt funding; weapons and equipment were provided by the United States, and Saudi Arabia.

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Since the US assistance to the Mujahideen started as a covert affair, the ISI Directorate became the channel for not only ensuring the secrecy of the operation, but also providing expert advice and training the Mujahideen. The ISI Directorate received the weapons from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), stored and distributed them to the Mujahideen on the basis of their performance in Afghanistan. The Director of the CIA, William Casey and Lt Gen Akhtar discussed and approved the plans for psychological warfare and shared common intelligence data for Afghanistan. The policy guidelines were set by Gen Zia and were loyally implemented by the ISI.

The Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and Pakistan's role as a frontline state in the fight against Communism was a significant strategic gain for Pakistan as far as its position on Kashmir was concerned. The military leadership in Pakistan gained professional experience in carrying out covert warfare as Pakistan was now the official base for the Mujahideen. The Pakistan military acquired the expertise in motivating, training and sheltering the guerrilla fighters and utilised the experience and tactics later in Jammu and Kashmir.

Terrorism in Punjab in the 1980s

Pakistan's covert war strategy was not limited to Islamic ideology and its religion. It exploited fundamentalist extremists among the Sikhs—the Khalistanis—as the fighters for its covert war in Punjab starting in the mid-1980s.

The Khalistan movement started in the 1970s in a subdued form outside India in the United Kingdom and acquired Pakistan's assistance to gather momentum in the Indian state of Punjab in the 1980s. The ISI exploited the motivation and determination in the aggressive Sikh separatist group and decided to use them for its purposes to create instability in Punjab. It set up

clandestine camps for training and arming the Khalistani recruits in Punjabi Pakistan and in the NWFP. The Sikh terrorists in Canada, the UK and Punjab visited these camps in order to motivate the Khalistani recruits. Looking at the sequence of events and developments in Punjab, it can be concluded that the ISI had clear intentions of expanding these activities into other neighbouring states. The general belief amongst the military leadership was that by targeting Punjab, they would be in a position to destabilise India's internal peace and security which, in turn, would facilitate their objective of annexing J&K.

Pakistan's clear objectives in supporting terrorism in Punjab were:

1. Pakistan's claim for Kashmir tempted the ISI to encourage militancy in Punjab (especially west of the River Beas) as this would make the Indian defence in Kashmir difficult, both by threatening the logistics lines of communication to J&K and also creating insecurity in the core area from where the Indian Army could launch a counter-attack to relieve any Pakistani military pressure in the Chhamb sector (as indeed was the case in the 1965 and 1971 Wars).
2. To create political unrest in India as this, in turn, would create instability and, thus, place Pakistan in a better position to conduct a war in Kashmir.
3. Punjab has been an economically sound state and, thus, disturbances in Punjab would impact the overall Indian national economy.
4. Given the size and diversity of India, the probability of the separatist movement in the heart of India could have a spiralling effect and create the opportunity for the birth of the demand for a separate state from other regions.

Covert War in Kashmir in the 1980s and 1990s

In the 1980s, religious resurgence, coupled with increasing alienation of the youth for diverse reasons, started to grow in Kashmir and Pakistan's strategy began to concretise. What was happening in Afghanistan and also simultaneously in the Khalistani movement obviously had a direct impact in the Valley. Thus, in the mid-1980s, disturbances in Kashmir were growing with an unusual amount of Jamaat activity, processions and resentment against the Hindus and the communal divide had started to be a major disturbing factor. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Pakistan became much more active in sponsoring terrorism in J&K. The ISI initially trained the secular groups in Kashmir and eventually shifted to training of the groups linked to Pakistan's own Islamic parties. These Kashmiris drew their inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood and regarded the struggle in Kashmir as an Islamic War on national liberation

and were extreme in their hatred for India. The period after 1988 witnessed shifts in the nature of covert war in terms of weapons and strategy followed by the Pakistani policy-makers.

B Raman, in his study states that “between January 1, 1988, and October 31, 1998, there was a total of 38,753 Pakistani-sponsored terrorist incidents in Jammu and Kashmir, compared to 4,411 terrorist incidents in the rest of the world”. The categorisation of the incidents is as follows:

- Targeted attacks on the security forces – 18,064
- Targeted attacks on civilians – 9,793
- Indiscriminate killings with explosives and arson attacks – 10,896.

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In the late 1980s and the 1990s in Kashmir, the targets were the security forces, specifically the army and the Border Security Force (BSF), with RPG-7 rockets. The terrorists in Kashmir seem to be imitating the Mujahideen tactics in attacking the security forces. The policy of targeting the Indian security personnel was adopted to create a general perception that if the security forces could not protect themselves, how could they protect the people.

The weapons used by the terrorists had undergone a change as Pakistan had acquired modern arms in the 1980s to equip the covert fighters in Afghanistan. Although the CIA supplied arms for the Afghan fighters, around 60 per cent were retained by the Pakistan Army. But the most important factor for the escalation of the covert war in Punjab and J&K was the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Pakistan which it perceived as the security guarantee against a robust Indian military response. In the 1990s, the terrorists were much better equipped owing to the following factors:

1. There was significant expansion in the smuggling of high technology weapons from Pakistan into Kashmir and a corresponding change in the tactics used by the terrorists, including the use of hit and run strikes by highly trained and well equipped detachments. The new weapons used by the terrorists included 107 mm rockets, 60 mm mortars and 40 mm automatic grenade launchers.
2. The terrorists in the 1990s were using sophisticated communications systems, including small radios and collapsible solar-panels for reload

systems, as well as frequency scanning devices to track the communications systems used by the Indian security forces in the Valley. The modern communication systems used by the terrorists were of US/North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) origin, initially used by the Mujahideen in Afghanistan.

3. Massive expansion of small arms was experienced, including all types of specialised equipment which was used for the assassination projects.

Thus, the weapons and technology transferred by the United States during the Afghan War in the 1980s became a major asset for the Islamic militants in Kashmir who were also trained in the use of these weapons.

Taking into account the arms seized by the terrorists in Kashmir between 1988 and 1999, B Raman states, "If one presumes that for every arm and ammunition recovered, there must be at least one more lying unrecovered, the weapons pumped into J&K by Pakistan would have been sufficient to equip at least two conventional divisions of an army." Most of the weapons acquired by the Kashmiri militants entered from the western side of the state. *Times of India* reported in 1991 that Indian authorities claimed to have identified 72 routes used by the militant forces crossing the Line of Control from Pakistan.

The insurgency in Kashmir became much more organised after 1988. The militants gained experience in Afghanistan and were more professional in carrying out covert warfare. Highly trained Mujahideen, many of them professional special forces, and terrorists joined the fighting in Kashmir. Acts of sabotage increased not only in number but also intensity. The militant acts were being responded to violently by the Indian security forces and consequently innocent civilians in the Valley suffered. "Whether any or most of these fighters acquired their combat skills in Afghanistan is a matter of detail. What is important is that their spiritual outlook has been shaped by the Afghan experience which they, and a goodly part of the religious and military establishment in Pakistan, consider to have been a true *jihad*. It was the spirit of *jihad* which drove the Soviet Army from Afghanistan. It is the spirit of *jihad* which can drive the Indian Army from Kashmir. The various schools who subscribe to this thinking consider it an article of faith that the seeds of the break-up of the Soviet Union were sown in Afghanistan. Might not the same happen in Kashmir with similar consequences for India?"

Covert War under Nuclear Umbrella

It is believed that Pakistan had acquired a credible nuclear deterrent capability by 1987 after which it started the expansion and intensification of its covert war in India. The acquisition of nuclear capability enhanced Pakistan's capability to wage and escalate the covert war in Kashmir as nuclear weapons were believed to deter India from responding with conventional military retaliation. Policy-makers in Pakistan seem to be convinced that they will be able to carry on their activities in Kashmir with the threat of using nuclear weapons if required and this would restrain India's military moves.

Pakistan became more vocal about the possession of nuclear weapons in the late 1980s and then in the 1990s, in order to create an impression of the fact that any military move from the Indian side might be retaliated with the Islamic bomb.

Pakistan became more vocal about the possession of nuclear weapons in the late 1980s and then in the 1990s, in order to create an impression of the fact that any military move from the Indian side might be retaliated with the Islamic bomb. The Pakistan military now had the nuclear umbrella to shield them from the Indian military response. In 1989, the then Army Chief, Gen Aslam Beg asserted that Pakistan lost the previous wars with India due to "lack of clear strategic vision." He announced that Pakistan had a coherent strategy now. "One aspect of the strategy was launching of the militant proxy war in J&K from July 31, 1988; and the other was the achievement of nuclear deterrence (to provide "defence" in the offensive-defence strategic doctrine, while irregular war was used for the "offensive" component)."

Soon after the Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998, Nawaz Sharif made a statement in the media, "The explosions restored the strategic balance in the region. The five permanent members of the Security Council have pledged they would encourage India and Pakistan to find mutually acceptable solutions through direct talks that address the root causes of tensions, including Kashmir". Kashmir became much more important on the agenda of the Pakistan Army after the nuclearisation of Pakistan as compared to its stand on Kashmir in the earlier decades. Air Commodore Jasjit Singh has stated that Pakistan's "very rationale of going nuclear was to neutralise India's vastly superior conventional military potential. Under the nuclear umbrella, Pakistan has felt confident of prosecuting its low-cost proxy war against India." Pakistan's

activities were not only confined to the Valley but also other parts of India were disturbed by the terrorist acts. However, Pakistan was worried about a robust Indian military response with its superior capabilities. The covert war could rapidly escalate to overt war. Thus, the covert war strategy seems to have been constrained below a level that could provoke the Indian military response. Therefore:

- The numbers of guerrilla fighters /Mujahideen terrorists never exceeded 2,500-3,000 (with around 800 'hard core') in 20 years in Kashmir.
- The attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, was an exception in this regard. India mobilised its armed forces, but did not launch a punitive war.
- India's threat of war led to scaling down of covert war intensity, without abandoning it.

Following the terrorists attacks on 9/11 in the United States, President Bush announced the US global war against terrorism. Gen Musharraf, under tremendous pressure, agreed with the Americans and promised to eradicate terrorism from the territory of Pakistan. Does that mean that terrorism as a means to covert war is ending? The answer is obviously in the negative due to the following factors:

1. The nuclear arsenal has been expanded so that Pakistan is more capable of "offensive-defence".
2. The conventional military capability is being built up enormously to provide Pakistan additional options against any "limited war" by India for punitive retaliation.

Over the past two decades, covert war has been calibrated by the bleeding through a thousand cuts philosophy, so as not to excite a major military response and punitive action. Pakistan has received support from the big powers (the US and China), projecting its insecurities and threat perception from India. Pakistan has in the past unsuccessfully attempted and acted on the strategy of covert war escalating into an overt one, against India. In 1999, during the Kargil War, the strategy backfired and failed badly.

Six decades of Pakistan's reliance on the centrality of the covert war strategy is unlikely to change in the coming years, although tactics, intensity and areas of operations may undergo changes. The support to the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and continuing terrorist violence in J&K and selected places in India, along with support to Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh

which impacts the northeast states of India, are obvious examples of Pakistan's continuance of the covert war strategy. In conclusion, we need to ask the question: have we worked out a viable effect-based strategy to defeat Pakistan's covert war strategy?

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Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)
RPSO Complex,
Parade Road
New Delhi 110010
T +91-11-25691308 F +91-11-25692347
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