War by Proxy:
Terrorists, Militias, and the India-Pakistan Rivalry

Harrison Akins
Graduate Research Fellow
Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy
University of Tennessee

April 2019
**Baker Center Board**

**Cynthia Baker**  
Media Consultant, Washington, DC

**Patrick Butler**  
CEO, Assoc. Public Television Stations  
Washington, DC

**Sarah Keeton Campbell**  
Attorney, Special Assistant to the Solicitor General and the Attorney General, Nashville, TN

**Jimmy G. Cheek**  
Chancellor, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

**AB Culvahouse Jr.**  
Attorney, O’Melveny & Myers, LLP  
Washington, DC

**The Honorable Albert Gore Jr.**  
Former Vice President of The United States  
Former United States Senator  
Nashville, TN

**Thomas Griscom**  
Communications Consultant  
Former Editor, *Chattanooga Times Free Press*  
Chattanooga, TN

**James Haslam II**  
Chairman and Founder, Pilot Corporation  
The University of Tennessee Board of Trustees

**Joseph E. Johnson**  
Former President, University of Tennessee

**Fred Marcum**  
Former Senior Advisor to Senator Baker  
Huntsville, TN

**Amb. George Cranwell Montgomery**  
Former Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman

**Regina Murray**, Knoxville, TN

**Lee Riedinger**  
Vice Chancellor, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

**Don C. Stansberry Jr.**  
The University of Tennessee Board of Trustees  
Huntsville, TN

**The Honorable Don Sundquist**  
Former Governor of Tennessee  
Townsend, TN

**Baker Center Staff**

**Matt Murray, PhD**  
Director

**Katie Cahill, PhD**  
Associate Director

**Charles Sims, PhD**  
Faculty Fellow

**Krista Wiegand, PhD**  
Faculty Fellow

**Jilleah Welch, PhD**  
Research Associate

**Brandon Buffington**  
Business Manager

**Elizabeth Woody**  
Events Manager

**William Park, PhD**  
Director of Undergraduate Programs  
Professor, Agricultural and Resource Economics

**About the Baker Center**

The Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy is an education and research center that serves the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and the public. The Baker Center is a nonpartisan institute devoted to education and public policy scholarship focused on energy and the environment, global security, and leadership and governance.

Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy  
1640 Cumberland Avenue  
Knoxville, TN 37996-3340

Additional publications available at [http://bakercenter.utk.edu/publications/](http://bakercenter.utk.edu/publications/)

**Disclaimer**

Findings and opinions conveyed herein are those of the authors only and do not necessarily represent an official position of the Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy or the University of Tennessee.
War by Proxy: Terrorists, Militias, and the India-Pakistan Rivalry

Harrison Akins
Graduate Research Fellow
Howard H. Baker, Jr. Center for Public Policy
University of Tennessee

On February 14, 2019, a 78-vehicle convoy was transporting more than 2,500 members of India’s Central Reserve Police Force through the Pulwama district of the volatile state of Jammu and Kashmir, plagued by an anti-state insurgency since the 1980s. As the convoy snaked its way through the Kashmir Valley towards Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir’s capital, a vehicle plowed into one of the convoy’s buses as the vehicle’s driver detonated the explosives he carried, killing 46 members of India’s security forces. The suicide bombing, the deadliest of its kind in the region since 1989, was claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammed, a U.S.-designated terrorist group long suspected of receiving illicit support from the Pakistani government for its campaign of violence against India. This bombing served as a flashpoint for worsening relations between India and Pakistan as Indian officials accused its rival of complicity in the attack.

The Pulwama attack puts a spotlight on the long-standing role of non-state actors as proxies for war in South Asia. Jaish-e-Mohammed is but one of a veritable mosaic of terrorist groups, militias, and paramilitary forces comprising the conflict landscape of the India-Pakistan rivalry, one of the world’s most enduring interstate rivalries.1 After providing a brief overview of the India-Pakistan rivalry, this Policy Brief explains how the political dynamics of this interstate rivalry has led the two governments to rely upon a cast of non-state actors to increase their capacity to commit violence against both external and internal threats.

The India-Pakistan Rivalry

The rivalry between these two South Asian nations, one that has led to four interstate wars (1949, 1965, 1971, 1999), was born in the bloody conditions of Partition in 1947—the unnatural division of British India into its religious constituencies. The mass exodus of humans across the newly established border lines on India’s eastern and western flanks led to unprecedented communal violence and human suffering. As the South Asian historian Yasmin Khan observes,

Partition played a central role in the making of new Indian and Pakistani national identities and the apparently irreconcilable differences which continue to exist today. We could even go as far as saying that Indian and Pakistani ideas of nationhood were carved out diametrically, in definition against each other. Partition, then, is more than the sum of its considerable parts—the hundreds of thousands of dead, the twelve million displaced. It signifies the division of territory, independence and the birth of new states, alongside distressing personal memories, and potent collective imaginings of the ‘other’…The two

---

states necessarily saw each other through the prism of violence that had taken place and eyed each other warily across the expanses of the ruptured Punjab.²

This became the defining frame for the new nations’ perception of one another and the basis for their security policies, both foreign and domestic. Within Pakistan, India was perceived as an existential threat and, if given the opportunity, it would undo its Muslim neighbor. General Mohammed Ayub Khan, the president of Pakistan from 1958-1969, wrote, “From the day of Independence, Pakistan was involved in a bitter and prolonged struggle for her very existence and survival.”³ Coming from a position of greater military strength, India’s focus has been to maintain the regional status quo and keep the revisionist Pakistan from militarily upsetting it. However, Pakistan loomed large in Indian security policy as their smaller rival allied with stronger states such as the United States and China and the conflict over Kashmir intensified.⁴

At the heart of this rivalry lies the disputed territory of Kashmir, a princely state under British colonial rule. While the Indian Independence Act of 1947 apportioned Muslim majority areas to Pakistan and the remainder to India, the 562 autonomous princely states were formally granted the right of choice between India or Pakistan, with the British Prime Minister Clement Atlee also allowing for the possibility of independence. Kashmir, however, possessed a Muslim majority population and was expected to join Pakistan, with leaders of the Muslim League visiting the region in the 1940s to court its political leaders.⁵ Maharaja Hari Singh, Kashmir’s Rajput Hindu ruler, eventually signed the Instrument of Accession to India following an uprising against his rule in August 1947 and under pressure from the Indian government. This move provoked the outbreak of the first India-Pakistan war, which led to a ceasefire agreement on January 1, 1949. This agreement led to a heavily militarized UN-mediated ceasefire line (later renamed the Line of Control in 1972) dividing the territory between Indian-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, a status quo that persists to this day.

The India-Pakistan rivalry was made more worrying as both countries became nuclear powers. India’s development of its nuclear weapons program was galvanized in the early 1960s by a quick succession of events—the 1962 Sino-Indian War, China’s first successful nuclear test in 1964, and the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War. While long-time Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who died in May 1964, was a long-time opponent of India’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, his successors saw it as necessary to protecting non-aligned India’s security interests, especially with the absence of any security guarantees from existing nuclear powers against Chinese aggression.⁶ This culminated in India’s first nuclear test in May 1974.

Pakistan, on the other hand, saw the development of nuclear weapons as a key balance against a militarily stronger India, stemming from the conditions of India and Pakistan’s asymmetric inheritance of the British Indian Army’s assets following Partition based as it was on relative size. By the 1980s, Indian still maintained a 2:1 military advantage over its rival. A Pakistani bomb was also seen as a source of security independence, particularly after the United

States’ arms embargo during the 1965 war with India. The pursuit of the bomb was pushed to the forefront of Pakistani security efforts following the disastrous 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, which led to the Indian-supported independence of East Pakistan (Bangladesh), and India’s 1974 nuclear test. South Asian scholar Stephen Cohen observed that, for Pakistanis, the bomb came to be perceived as “a magic bullet that could resolve any problem.”\(^7\) Aided by centrifuge designs stolen by Pakistani engineer A.Q. Khan and support from China, Pakistan continued to develop its nuclear program throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.\(^8\) Despite being under sanction from the United States, Pakistan successfully detonated its first nuclear bomb in May 1998.

**The External Threat**

With a nuclear-armed India and a nuclear-armed Pakistan facing off across the Line of Control (LOC), officials in both governments were aware of the potentially high costs of any large-scale military engagement. Political leaders around the world similarly were wary of the potential for a nuclear exchange between the two countries, applying pressure on both states to maintain the political status quo and avoid escalating disputes into militarized confrontations. Therefore, the reliance on non-state actors to target the external threat from their interstate rival has been a strategy pursued in order to circumvent the high costs of direct military confrontation, avoid international sanctions for military action, and increase the capacity to commit violence given these political and strategic constraints.\(^9\)

The militarily-weaker Pakistan in particular has long-relied on such a strategy by supporting militant and terrorist groups active within Indian territory. While India’s nuclear arsenal made large-scale Pakistani military operations untenable, the Pakistani government after 1998 also concluded that as it now possessed a nuclear deterrent it could support anti-Indian terrorist and insurgent groups and foster low-level conflict (including military exchanges across the Line of Control) without fear of an Indian military escalation.\(^10\) Further, after 9/11 and the critical role Pakistan played in supporting the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the United States’ leverage and influence over Pakistani action was diminished, giving them a freer hand to support covert militant behavior against India.\(^11\)

The Pakistani government, often through its military intelligence organization, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), relied on a variety of militant groups as proxies to degrade and weaken their rival, most famously the U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. These groups operate from Pakistani territory, often without interference from the government. Yet, a debate surrounds the true extent of their linkages with Pakistani officialdom. These groups’ goals, however, are in line with Pakistan’s, committed as they are to targeting India as part of their *jihad* to “liberate” Muslims from domination within Hindu-ruled India, especially Kashmir.\(^12\) In addition to the 2019 Pulwama bombing, their deadly actions have included the 2001

---

8 See Feroz H. Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*.
attack against the Indian Parliament in New Delhi; a 2005 bombing of a Delhi market during Diwali; a series of bombings in 2006 in the city of Varanasi lying along the sacred Ganges River; and the 2008 Mumbai Hotel attack, along with a number of attacks within Kashmir. While any major attack by these groups quickly escalates tensions between India and Pakistan, as happened following the Pulwama attack, Pakistan still asserts that it does not control or direct these actions, alluding to the principal-agent problem identified by scholars as plaguing governments’ relationships with non-state actors.13

Pakistan has also supported insurgent groups focusing their fight within Kashmir. This was a strategy initially pursued by the Pakistani army in 1947 to support the Poonch Rebellion against the Maharajah of Kashmir, who had recently decided to accede to India. Given the presence of senior British army officers still serving in the military of the newly independent Pakistan, Pakistani officers were aware of their hesitancy to engage in military conflict with India. Therefore, they unofficially mobilized and supported the deployment of Pashtun lashkars (tribal militias) from the North-West Frontier Province to Kashmir. This provoked a response by the Indian military allowing Pakistan to officially intervene, leading to the first Indo-Pakistani war.

Pakistan would again rely on this strategy beginning in the late 1980s when an anti-government insurgency in Kashmir, cloaked in the language of jihad, erupted in response to the Indian government’s manipulation of local elections.14 The insurgency was at first led by the pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). The JKLF was soon to be superseded by pro-Pakistan militant groups, most notably the Hizbul Mujahideen. Seeing this as an opportunity to “bleed India” from within, the insurgency received support from Pakistan through the ISI. By 1993, the ISI was providing $3.3 million per month to the various insurgent groups, facilitated their movements into Kashmir, and operated training camps on the Pakistani side of the LOC.15

There are similarly concerns within Islamabad that the Indian government has provided support to the latest wave of anti-state insurgency raging in Pakistan’s Balochistan Province.16 While there has not been definitive proof presented of Indian involvement in Pakistan’s southwestern periphery, Pakistani officials point to Indian officials’ rhetoric and the presence of exiled Baloch activists within India as evidence enough.17 Outside of Pakistani and Indian territory, both governments have also engaged with and supported sub-state actors in Afghanistan in order to protect their political interests and stymie the other’s influence. This is most famously represented by Pakistani support for various Taliban groups operating within Afghanistan in order to promote strategic depth against Indian machinations.18

Internal Challenges

While Pakistan’s support for militant groups within India has garnered much regional and

---

17 Prateek Joshi, “Where is India’s Baloch Policy Heading?,” The Diplomat, November 11, 2016.
international attention, the political dynamics of the India-Pakistan rivalry also has influenced both governments’ reliance on non-state actors within their own borders, especially in reserving their regular military forces for confrontations with their rival.19

Within Indian-administered Kashmir, as a result of the lingering threat from Pakistani military action across the LOC, the regular Indian military forces deployed to the region possessed two intertwined responsibilities: to counter the Kashmir insurgency and maintain a defensive line against potential military incursions by Pakistan.20 The use of pro-government militias and paramilitary forces in counterinsurgency operations, such as the Ikhwan-e-Muslimi recruited from former Kashmiri insurgents, allowed the Indian military to reserve its regular forces for manning the border and guarding other strategic areas. As Indian army officers acknowledged in a 1999 interview, the purpose of these militia forces was “to relieve regular army units from counter insurgency operations, leaving the army to man the Line of Control and the Chinese border to the north.”21 Under direction from the Indian military, the Ikhwan-e-Muslimi, heavily criticized for human rights abuses, became “the centerpiece of the counterinsurgency operations” focused on offensively targeting insurgent groups.22

Given the conditions of its rivalry with India, Pakistan has likewise relied on pro-government lashkars in counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (the now re-designated Tribal Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province). After 2001 and under pressure from the United States, Pakistan deployed its army to the Tribal Areas in order to target al Qaeda operatives and secure the region from becoming a safe haven for groups targeting NATO forces across the Durand Line in Afghanistan. The Pakistan army, however, was ill-equipped and ill-trained to challenge guerilla tactics within the difficult and mountainous terrain of the Tribal Areas and quickly became bogged down. The army’s unsuitability for counterinsurgency stemmed from the Pakistani government building it up to confront the threat from India as its primary purpose.23 Its training and armaments were adapted for land warfare in the broad and flat plains of the Punjab against India’s regular military forces. The mobilization of local lashkars among the Pashtun tribes, with increased local knowledge of the conflict environment, was meant to supplement the inherent disadvantages of a military designed to confront the threat from India.24 Moreover, senior Pakistani officials were often reluctant to re-deploy troops from the eastern border, cognizant of the need to maintain a defensive line against potential Indian military encroachment. The use of pro-government tribal militias in the Tribal Areas allowed the government to bolster its counterinsurgency efforts without needing to re-position military units and freeing troops to return to defensive positions in the east.25

20 General Shankar Roychowdhury, Officially at Peace: Reflections on the Army and its Role in Trouble Times (New Delhi: Viking, 2002), 44.
Conclusion

The political dynamics of the India-Pakistan rivalry has resulted in both governments relying on varying types of non-state actors for varying reasons. Given restrictions stemming from both states’ nuclear deterrence and international pressure, support for militant groups as proxies operating within a rival’s borders increases a state’s opportunity to commit violence without bearing the high costs of a large-scale military engagement. The India-Pakistan rivalry also has influenced the domestic reliance on pro-government militias. Both states used militias in counterinsurgency operations to reserve regular military units to act as a defensive deterrence along the international border. Moreover, the outsized role of this rivalry in India and Pakistan’s security policies led their militaries to be developed and trained to operate in the plains of the Punjab in pitched battles against regular military forces. Both militaries, therefore, were ill-suited to counterinsurgency efforts within the difficult terrain of India’s Kashmir region and Pakistan’s Tribal Areas.

So long as this rivalry persists, driven by the intractability of the Kashmir dispute and the ideological division pushing both sides to see the other as an existential threat, it is expected that India and Pakistan will continue to foster links with an ensemble of terrorists, militias, and other non-state actors inside and outside of their territory as proxies for war.