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**Barking Up the Wrong
Tree: Rethinking
India's Real Enemy**

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Barking Up the Wrong Tree: Rethinking India's Real Enemy

Abstract

This article examines India's security challenges through the prism of historical conflicts, ideological adversaries, and evolving forms of warfare. It critiques the long-standing debate over China versus Pakistan as India's primary enemy, arguing that while China presents a conventional strategic challenge, Pakistan constitutes a persistent ideological and proxy-war threat. Rooted in the Two-Nation Theory, Pakistan's military-clerical establishment has sustained conflict through terrorism, insurgency, and deniable non-state actors. The article traces India's restrained post-independence policies, the shift after 2014, and the emergence of "white-collar" terrorism. It concludes that countering Pakistan-sponsored proxy war requires a nationwide, intelligence-driven internal security strategy rather than escalatory kinetic conflict.

Keywords: Proxy war, Terrorism, White collar terror, Homegrown terror, Two-nation theory, Sleeper cells

Introduction

The country was partitioned, which cost 2 million killed and 12-20 million displaced. While this was going on, the Pakistan Army, in the disguise of irregulars, attacked J&K while its Maharaja was in the state of indecisiveness. However, this offensive was checked by the Indian Army in 1948, but still a sizeable portion of J&K were occupied by Pakistan (PoJK). Pakistan, however, did not rest here and embroiled India in an unprovoked 1965, 1971 and 1999 (Kargil conflict) {all of which they were defeated}.

On the other hand, China made inroads in the Ladakh and Arunachal sectors, resulting in full-fledged armed conflict with her in 1962 Nation yet not forgotten its after effects.

These events encircled India from the West, East, North and Northeast. However, still one question is yet to be resolved: Which country is India's No 1 Enemy? China or Pakistan?

Genesis of Two Nation Theory

Events and beliefs that Hindus and Muslims are separate identities commenced with the Khilafat movement in 1920. This movement was triggered when the Ottoman Sultan (the Caliph), who was also the religious head of Sunni Muslims, was reduced to a figurehead by the Britishers post the First World War. Indian Muslims believed that they were the true followers of the Prophet and champions of the cause of Islam, though within 5 yrs Muslims of Turkey usurped the rights of the Caliph more than what the British ever did. Ironically, this movement was supported by Gandhi and unsupported by Jinnah.

More than Muslims of any other country of the world, Indian Muslims appeared to be more pan-Islamic and exclusive. In 1921, the British government had intercepted a telegram sent to the Amir of Afghanistan, inviting him to invade India, allegedly written by a Muslim leader of the day—Muhammad Ali.

Prior to this, Sir Syed Ahmad founder of Anglo -oriental college (Aligarh), in 1877, was of the view that Hindus and Muslims with conflicting interests and outlook were separate Nationalities. In fact, he was the father of the 'Two-Nation Theory'.

It was with this kind of thinking and ideology that Pakistan was created. Field Marshal Munir of Pakistan Army had expressed similar views in one of his speech prior to Terrorist attack in Pahalgam (J&K).

There was another thought process among the Muslim leaders prior to the partition — that Muslims were the rulers of the country and can enjoy all the advantages of the ruling class. This Psyche is still evident in Pakistan, especially among its clergy and ruling class. This superiority complex has given birth to the theory

of Gazwa-e-Hind, which the Pakistan Army has been promising its subjects. Bangladesh calls it Ghazwatul Hind (Battle Against India).

To achieve this aim, Pakistan joined western block who made it a military power in the region, which encouraged her to launch attacks on India, without any provocation or reason from our side, in 1965, 1971 and Kargil.

Advent of China: Another Enemy

China commenced its invasion of Tibet (which was a buffer zone between India and China) in 1950 and carried on with the invasion unopposed. It resulted in the flight of 80,000 Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama to India in 1959. India's response to the initial invasion was subdued. Subsequent events led to the Sino-Indian War of 1962, which resulted in China nibbling Indian territory in East Ladakh and laying false claims on various sectors of Arunachal Pradesh along the Indo-Tibet boundary. The claims continue to manifest in border clashes, though short of war in Areas such as Doklam, Galwan, and East Ladakh.

Desire to be Good to Our Neighbours

With Pakistan

- Abruptly ending the Kashmir conflict from a position of strength and going to the UN, ceding sizeable territory to Pakistan named PoJK.
- Entered the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) favouring Pakistan.
- Gave back strategically important Haji Pir Pass and other high-value territories won by us during 1965 war.
- Returned 93,000 POW of 1971 war to Pakistan, with nothing in return.
- Giving the status of Most Favoured Nation (MFN), with nothing of such favour in return.
- Did not open another front in response to the Kargil conflict and restricted our actions in that sector only.
- No military response to terrorist attacks prior to the attack on Uri.

With China

- India supplied rice to the invading Chinese Army in Tibet via Nathu La in 1950, as transporting rice to the PLA from mainland China was impractical due to the high altitude and poor infrastructure in Tibet prevailing at that time. This arrangement continued till 1954 till the Sichuan-Tibet highway was completed in 1955, allowing China to transport its own supplies.
- Signing of the Panchsheel Agreement with China in 1954.
- Helped China overcome its international isolation after the Korean War by establishment of diplomatic relations with her— India was the first country outside the socialist block to establish diplomatic relations with China after the War.
- Abstained from voting on UN Resolution 498 in February 1951 which condemned PRC for aggression in Korea.
- Despite the US feelers in 1950 to India, suggesting that she could get a UN Security Council permanent seat, India favoured China to get this Honour.

Evaluation of Number 1 and Number 2 Enemy Positions

There has been ongoing debate as to who is the number 1 enemy —among both civil and military thinkers. The consensus is being built up in favour of China as the number 1 enemy due to the following reasons.

- Past border clashes in Nathu La and Galwan, and ongoing unresolved border issues;
- Significant strategic threat due to its modernisation of military power and threatening posture along our borders;
- China and India competing for influence in the Indian Ocean;
- China's effort to encircle India; and

- Support for Pakistan and insurgents in the Northeast of our region.

However, the relations are not entirely hostile—China and India also have economic, trade and ancient cultural ties. Moreover Countries who trade with each other seldom go to war. Therefore some of the conflicts may be strategic rather than existential. Besides this, several challenges would face China in launching a military offensive against India. These are:-

- Demographically, Tibet is not a safe launch pad for a Chinese offensive against India;
- Hostile terrain and climate in the launch pad can cause more casualties than combat, as it happened in 1962 to China;
- Limited campaigning season due to extreme climate and rain for major part of the year;
- Vulnerable long supply lines from the mainland to Tibet and up to the border;
- India's improved border infrastructure;
- The Indian Army is more experienced in mountain warfare than the PLA;
- The Chinese Air Force in Tibet faces challenges of fuel and reduced payload on take-off;
- China is most vulnerable in the Indian Ocean because of its trade routes passing through the Strait of Malacca, which can be choked by India; and
- Near Nuclear parity.

A war with India cannot be short and swift to produce any favourable results to enhance the international status of China. Rather, it will have adverse fallout in Chinese status as a superpower, both military and economic, if it fails to make any rapid strategic gains. Therefore, it does not qualify to be our Enemy number "ONE".

Status of Pakistan as Enemy

- Pakistan even after independence, continued working on the views expressed by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan;
- Pakistan Army and her intelligentsia fed their public that the Britishers should have handed over governance of India to Muslims as they had taken away the kingdom of the Indian subcontinent from Muslim rulers. It is against the historical fact that, by 1759, Marathas had conquered the entire territory of India, and the writ of the Mughal emperor ran from the Red Fort to the village Palam of Delhi only;
- The Army and the government inculcated a sense of superiority over Hindus in their public psyche; and
- Through their education syllabus, to prove themselves as a superior race and rulers of India, they named their missiles as Babar, Gauri and Gazni and indoctrinated their public as their descendants.
- With the decisive defeat in 1971, Pakistan realised that it could not match the military and economic might of India, hence commenced a proxy war through state terrorism against India, having the following objectives:
- To achieve strategic objectives to destabilise India and challenge its sovereignty.
- Forcing the resolution of Kashmir by fuelling insurgency and separatist movements.
- Attempting to cause disaffection and radicalisation among locals of the Border states (Punjab insurgency and radicalisation of West Bengal and Assam falls under this category).
- Increase India's security cost and 'Bleed India Through a Thousand Cuts strategy'.
- Perennial conflicts with India will justify among its public, the size of Pakistan Army and to claim a major share of the National Budget and maintain significant power within the state politics
- Prevent India to have regional dominance-emerging as a dominant power in South Asian Region. This objective suits both USA and China also who are seen perennial supporters of Pakistan with economic and military aid as they are equally interested in 'Balkanization of India'.

To carry out this policy, Pakistan has non-state actors /organisations. Prominent being Lakshar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad headed by Hafiz Saeed and Maulana Masood Azhar respectively. These groups have been commented by Pervez Musharraf as his reserve core against India.

Former ambassador of Pakistan to USA— Mr Husain Haqqani, until 2011, has stated that, according

to LeT literature, its aim is to liberate all territories that used to be under Muslim Rule. These includes Spain, Kashmir, Hyderabad, Assam and Bihar. Though, practically impossible, still it motivates Jihadi groups within and outside Pakistan to pursue broadly global jihad aimed at revival of Islam's global ascendancy and eventual domination.

Signs of Proxy War

- J&K yet not stabilised. Besides genocide of Hindus and their forced exodus, terrorist attacks are going on unabated. Pahalgam and white collar terrorism is the latest. According to government data, around 41,000 people—consisting of 14,000 civilians, 5,000 security personnel and 22,000 militants have died in J&K as of March 2017. Since 89 till today this fig has risen to 70000 plus.
- Punjab was also embroiled in this Proxy war from 1982-93 and had a toll of 21,469 including 11,690 civilians, 7,946 militants and remaining to include army and security forces casualties.
- Hijacking of Airlines Flight IC -814 in December 1999 which ended with India releasing three high profile militants in exchange of passengers and crew held in Kandahar. It was considered a massive intelligence and security failure.
- Massive Attacks on Bombay in 26/11, Uri, Pathankot, Pulwama, Pahalgam and numerous other attacks are part of this warfare.

India's Response to Proxy War

Pre-2014 our response was:

- Dialogues and talks, which were often stalled due to Pakistan's engagement with the separatists.
- Diplomatic isolation. Repeatedly raised the issue at UN, seeking international pressure on Pakistan to stop sponsoring terror.
- Counter insurgency operations limited to own territory.
- Seeking dismantling of LeT and JeM through international pressure.

Our Response Post 2014:

- The overall approach marks departure from earlier policies that were often perceived as lacking a clear strategy to counter the proxy war.
- Launching cross border aerial attacks on terrorist and their assets such as Surgical Strike, Balakot and Op Sindoor.
- Withdrawing Most Favoured Nation trade status.
- Suspending Indus Water Treaty.
- Declaring any future terrorist attack as an 'Act Of War'.

Pakistan is not a Country, But an Ideology

Ideology of Pakistan was created when Muslims of Indian subcontinent developed a specific attitude and mindset, that they are different from Hindus. It has adopted Islamic ideology influencing its political system and has continuously indoctrinated its children that they are, superior to other races and has ruled over vast territories of the world.

Each citizen is motivated to consider India as its only adversary. Its establishment has succeeded in selling a narrative to its public that Pakistan had won 1965, 1971 and 1999 wars and also during Op Sindoor,

through their state controlled media. Since it possesses Nuclear arsenal, it also has a desire to be leader of the Muslim world

Conflict with India gives relevance to its military and clergy. Hence, Pakistan's policy of continuing

Proxy War against India has not diluted a bit even after surgical strike, Balakot and Op Sindoor. Even if Pakistan breaks into four regions and is reduced to holding Punjab Territory only, it will continue to carry on selling dreams to its subjects by continuing proxy war with India. There will be enough support from USA and China whose long-term aim will remain in sync with Pakistan.

With this in mind is it advisable to carry out cross border aerial strikes against terrorist camps / military targets? Such a conflict can go out of hand and can result in a prolonged war which the foreign powers would like us to indulge in to attain their aim to retard our rise on the world stage. Such a war, like Ukraine and in

Middle East, will cause civil casualties which, for a densely populated country like India will be beyond management. Without boots on the ground such wars are, prolonged, destructive and indecisive.

White Collar Terrorism Extension of Proxy War

White Collar Terrorism refers to terrorism that has been planned, financed and executed by highly educated, viz. doctors engineers and professors. They use their status and institution as camouflage to avoid detection.

This phenomenon came in to prominence in November 2025 during the Red Fort bombing in New Delhi causing immense loss to life, carried out by a Doctor and his accomplices working in Al-Falah Hospital in Faridabad (Haryana). Subsequent investigations revealed that they had collected approx. 2900 kg of explosive in the form of ammonium nitrate over the past two years, out of which only 360 kg was used for making a car bomb used in Red Fort Bombing. One of their accomplice— a lady doctor was arrested from Lucknow (UP).

Another incident refers to the arrest of a Doctor from Hyderabad, having studied MBBS in China, in Gujarat by the anti-terrorist squad. The doctor was found in possession of Racin— highly toxic poison which he had manufactured in his home laboratory. He was planning for mass poisoning of public water sources and temples in Delhi, Ahmedabad and Lucknow. These are just few examples of many sleeping cells having terrorist modules existing in our country which can be activated on will by Pakistan based terrorist organisations and ISIS.

Prior to this, a poster had appeared in October 2025 in Srinagar, that was seen as a propaganda for Pakistan based Jaish-e-Mohammad, for threatening spectacular attacks on security forces and outsiders. It led J&K police to uncover a “white collar terror module” involving the radicalised doctors and clerics linked to JeM. In another incident, Rajasthan police, on 24 January 2026, seized approximately 10,000 Kgs of ammonium nitrate in Nagaur district, with substantial amount of explosives accessories.

These incidents took place after Op Sindoor where India had raised the deterrence to Pakistan to the next level by declaring— ‘any future act of terrorism as an Act of war’. It appears Pakistan has not learnt any lesson and will carry on with the Proxy War. Only deviation will be shifting its proxy war actors from its Nationals to Indian and BD born actors while retaining planning and timings with her state owned terrorist outfits. This policy will give no reason to India to launch any kind of kinetic action against her. From the above pattern it appears that future acts of terrorism a tool of proxy war- will be more lethal, conducted by home grown radicalised individuals having Pan- India foot prints. Possibility of use of drones to deliver explosives over densely populated areas cannot be ruled out making terrorism High Tech and without any footprints.

Body Organs of Homegrown Proxy War

Homegrown terrorism, although is an extension of Proxy War by Pakistan, has the following body organs within India:

- **Social Media.** There are many YouTubers who are part of international conspiracy to destabilise India.

Few YouTubers are operating from foreign soil. Mostly they are leftist leaning converging with the interests of Pakistan. They are mostly heard saying that “Terrorism has no religion and terrorists also have human rights”. They are always vocal and supportive of granting bail to those who are in custody for fomenting communal riots which is also a part of Proxy war. They also play victim cards on smallest of pretext. Foreign print and electronic media is also party to it—they feel that they are protected by the guarantee of ‘freedom of speech’ given in the constitution.

- **Religious and Educational Institutions.** Indian constitution grants ‘right to establish and administer educational institutions to conserve distinct cultural identity’. Generally, the state is oblivious of the kind of religious and educational activities going on in these institutions. There is a very thin line between promoting radicalisation and conserving cultural/ religious identity.
- **Intelligentsia.** Outwardly they will condemn the acts of terrorism but with caveat such as “*Yeh Bhatke hue Noujwan Hain*” [They are misguided youths]. Hence, we should address their grievances and many such statements to soften public outrage whenever any act of terrorism takes place. They also write articles justifying unfounded grievances and play victim card. These kind of people in fact provide covering fire to the whole process of proxy war.
- **Sleeper Cells.** These comprise of those who are the foot soldiers to execute the plans on receiving orders from across the border. Till then, they are engaged in recruiting, training, collecting and stocking lethal material and generating financial resources needed to execute the task. To avoid detection these parts of a single sleeping cell are generally spread over different states of the country but having demographic advantage to have guaranteed protection.

All the above organs of Proxy war are likely to be dispersed all over India rather than concentrated in one state/Zone, where it can be dealt effectively by coordinated operations of both centre and state forces with protection of AFSPA, like in any officially designated insurgency areas/ states. It also cannot be considered as a law and order problem too as currently being viewed and dealt by the states.

State: The First Contact Point

To begin with initial task of Seek and Search will have to be of the state This task should be made responsibility and accountability of the local police station(s) of suspected area districts/ tehsils of each state. To be effective for this task, the local police stations of the suspected area should be provided with additional resources in terms of electronic surveillance equipment to intercept mobile phone conversations and professional manpower to gather human intelligence (HUMINT). Once the target is fixed, central agencies like IB, NIA and NSG can take over the case.

Chances of sleeper cells is more in those areas of the states where there is local advantage of having laboratories to assemble IEDs, recruit man power and have continued logistics support without any hindrance. It is not difficult to map such suspected tehsils /districts in the country.

Other elements of proxy war such as media, educational institutions, intelligentsia and legal activists can best be neutralized by the centre as these are located both within and outside the country. Country has enough potent laws to deal with them provided there is political will. If need be, they should be dealt by unobtrusive means.

Conclusion

Cross Border sponsored Proxy War will take some time to completely wipe out from India. Recent white collar terror attacks is the immediate consequence of India—declaring any involvement of Pakistan in a terrorist attack on her soil as an “Act of War”. No sane country, facing economic and social meltdown, would

like to undertake this kind of misadventure overtly. At the same time, Pakistan Army would not like to abandon its policy of 'Bleeding India With Thousand Cuts'— essential to retain its relevance and to keep morale of its country at a satisfactory level.

This white collar or homegrown soldiers of Proxy War, in the form of sleeper cells, can be activated by Pakistan as per its convenience without showing her footprints, thus giving no justification to India to launch any kind of kinetic action against her.

Actions like Op Sindoor can go out of control and take a shape of Ukraine and middle east war which both China and USA and her allies would like to see to retard our economic progress. Whenever India has taken any kinetic action against Pakistan, it has united her public against us. Hence, it is in the best interest of our country to let instability in Pakistan prevail and wait for its economic and military collapse leading to its disintegration or civil war.

White collar terrorism— tool of proxy war is not area/ state specific. Its tentacles could be spread in more than one state to avoid suspicion and has elements of lethality, mass destruction, biological warfare and use of drones to release explosives over densely populated areas.

To fight this war successfully, all states and union territories must be given the task to fight it as a war, rather than considering it as a 'routine law and order problem'.

Local police stations in the suspected/ advantageous areas for sleeper cells, be provided additional well trained manpower to gather HUMINT and state-of-the-art electronic intelligence gathering equipment. Thereafter, these police stations must be held accountable for any intelligence failure or dereliction of duty.

Central government must keep a watch on all other body organs of this proxy war and deal with them through rigid legal system in vogue or through unobtrusive means, if need be, to protect national security. Terrorism unleashed by Pakistan is a Proxy War. It should be fought like a 'War 'that has no rules of morality and concern for human rights'. Internal security is hence 'call of the day'.

About the Author

Major General CM Seth (Retd) was commissioned in 1963 and took part both in 1965 and 1971 Wars. An alumnus of Staff College, he held instructional appointments in infantry School, College of Combat and IMTRAT. Been Deputy Force Commander NSG, BGS and Chief of Staff of a Corps. He also commanded a division in mountains and retired from the post of ADG Territorial Army.



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