RESEARCH PAPERS

Pakistan’s Proxy Obsession: Internal Drivers and External Manifestations

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Pakistan’s reliance on proxy warfare against India is often explained as a diversionary response to domestic instability, but the historical record reveals a deeper and more enduring pattern. Across military coups, economic crises, political upheaval and rising internal militancy, Islamabad’s support for anti-India groups has remained remarkably consistent. This paper examines whether internal crises actually trigger surges in cross-border terrorism, or whether proxy warfare has become a permanent institutional instrument of Pakistan’s security policy, sustained by strategic utility, military dominance and decades of investment in militant networks.

Introduction

As the Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC)-led political unrests in Pakistan occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) persist, Pakistan continues to face threats of violent attacks from the Teherik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch rebels. Furthermore, it also faces a major geopolitical dilemma, as Pakistan is bound by a defence pact with Saudi Arabia which could potentially compel it to act against its long-standing, Shia-majority ally, Iran. As internal instabilities once again rock their Western neighbour, the Indian Armed Forces stand operationally alert to secure Amarnath *yatris*

and foil infiltration bids across the Line-of-Control (LoC), as the melting snow in the Himalayas opens up militant routes. In the midst of all this, the discourse over proxy terrorist groups has resurfaced and particularly, Pakistan's proxy groups, that exist for the sole purpose of annihilating India. Pakistan has time and again used proxy warfare as a panacea against India even while it was facing domestic crises and struggling to maintain peace within its own borders. Although extensive research has individually examined Pakistan's internal crises, its anti-India proxies and their use against India, this article integrates these areas of research. Doing so, it attempts to determine whether periods of internal crisis in Pakistan coincide with, or are followed by, surges in Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attacks in India; or if, internal instability is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism. It also aims to examine why these proxy groups, nurtured for decades by the Pakistani deep state, have proven to be such a vital strategic aspect of its India policy.

Proxy Strategies and Pakistan's Internal Issues

While the use of organised proxy groups by Pakistan began in the late 1980s, the first documented use of proxy forces against India occurred during Operation Gulmarg in August 1947, when newly-born Pakistan sent thousands of Pashtun tribesmen to invade the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Over time, the ISI-backed proxies evolved their operational strategies to carry out large-scale attacks on Indian soil. Beginning with religiously-motivated targeted killings in the late 1980s and, urban terrorism and *fidayeen* attacks from the early 2000s onwards, they gradually moved to the use of local Kashmiri guides and porters, and international bases in the mid-2000s[i]. This was followed by attacks on military installations and the revival of Pro-Khalistan elements in the mid-2010s. Starting from the early 2020s and continuing till today, proxies have been engaging in strategies such as narcotics and small arms smuggling using drones, hybrid militancy and white-collar terrorism. Emerging reports also suggest that terrorists may possibly be expanding into amphibious and information warfare domains. This includes training in water-based infiltration and AI and cyber techniques, with the latter being imparted particularly to female recruits[ii].

On the other hand, since its inception, Pakistan has grappled with political instabilities, military coups, ethnic and political violence, financial crises, environmental disasters and public unrests. Even during these turbulent times, it has kept intact its strategy of 'bleeding India with a thousand cuts,' with its proxies serving as the perfect weapons. In order to establish a connection between periods of acute domestic instability in Pakistan and increased terrorist attacks in India, it is important to examine the chronology of events over the last four decades, i.e., since Pakistan's organised anti-India proxy warfare era began.

The late 1970s and early 1980s – A Precursor to Proxy Warfare

Scholars have credited former Pakistani military General and dictator Zia-ul-Haq for being the principal architect of Pakistan's anti-India proxy warfare. The US, on the other hand, can be attributed for influencing Pakistan's proxy war strategy, owing to its role in organising the Afghan *mujahideen* and enabling it to play a covert role in South Asia's Cold War chapter. During the Soviet-Afghan War era, thousands of Afghan and foreign fighters gained extensive combat experience and it is estimated that between 1977-87, approximately 30 to 60 per cent of American weapons meant for these Afghan *mujahedeens*, were diverted by Pakistani intelligence agencies into the Pakistani black markets as well as into their own security apparatus[iii]. The end of the 1980s were marked by two important events – the end of the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, and the onset of indigenous insurgency in Kashmir. This formed a market equilibrium, as the demand for insurgents in Kashmir was met by the supply of thousands of trained *mujahideen* fighters available in a post-Soviet Afghanistan.

As this laid the foundation for Pakistan's proxy warfare, Zia devised what would become one of the most defining legacies of Pakistan's deep state: a fillip to the emergence of a network of Kashmiri separatist groups, anti-India jihadist originations, and pro-Khalistan insurgent groups. In addition to highly-trained fighters being remobilised from Pakistan's Western Front to the Eastern front, the ISI under Zia, nurtured proxy groups by securing foreign financial support, establishing training infrastructure and *madrassas*, and imparting extensive combat training to *jihadi* militants[iv]. He continued to cultivate proxy groups until his death in 1988, following which his strategy was put into practice through Operation Tupac – which, is also said to be an Indian intelligence assessment of Pakistan's proxy capabilities of instigating militancy in Kashmir and destabilising India[v].

Timeline and Events

The mid-1980s to mid-1990s – "If Kashmir Burns, India Burns"

- **Security Situation for India:** Increased support for pro-Khalistan movement post Operation Bluestar; insurgency begins in J&K; targeted killings, rapes and abductions in J&K; Kashmiri Pandit exodus; formation of Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), 1987; formation of Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF militant wing), 1988; formation of Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), 1989; IAF personnel attack in Srinagar, 1990; Kishtwar massacre, 1993; formation of Harkat-ul-Ansar (HuA), 1993; first high-profile attack – Bombay Blasts, 1993; Al-Faran kidnappings, 1995.
- **Domestic Situation in Pakistan:** 8th Constitution Amendment, 1985, legitimizes martial-law measures and gives President power to dismiss elected governments; end of Afghan *jihad* and availability of trained fighters; transition to civilian government post Zia's death in 1988; activation of the Pressler Amendment in 1990 leading to the US suspending military transfers and economic aid to Pakistan, causing weakened Pakistani conventional capabilities and increased reliance on China; significant period of political instability as leadership changes multiple times involving Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif between 1988-1993; recurring Balance of Payment (BoP) pressure and fiscal deficits between 1993-1997; high levels of Shia-Sunni secretariat and ethnic violence; rise of criminal gangs in Sindh; Islamist radicalisation within Pakistani military leading to attempted coup in 1995. There were, however, positives such as - high inward foreign remittances and GDP growth in the 1980s; billions in aid packages and military equipment received from the US and Saudi Arabia between 1980-1988; reforms for economic liberalisation, 1991.

The mid-1990s to mid-2000s – The Onset of Pan-India Attacks

- **Security Situation for India:** Lajpat Nagar bombings, 1996; Sangrampora massacre, 1997; Prankote massacre, 1998; Thub village massacre, 1998; Chapnari massacre, 1998; Wandhama massacre, 1998; Chamba massacre, 1998; Kargil War, 1999; IC-814 Hijacking, 1999; formation of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), 2000; Chittisinghpura massacre, 2000; Nunwan Amarnath pilgrim attack, 2000; Red Fort blasts, 2000; J&K Legislative Assembly blast, 2001; Indian Parliament attack, 2001; Raghunath Temple attacks, 2002; Kaluchak massacre, 2002; Akshardham Temple attack, 2002; Nadimarg massacre, 2003; Mumbai twin bombings, 2003; Ayodhya attack, 2005; Delhi serial blasts, 2005; IISc Bangalore attack, 2005.
- **Domestic Situation in Pakistan:** Corruption allegations against Benazir Bhutto leading to her dismissal and husband Asif Ali Zardari's arrest; ethnic and political violence persists; Judicial Crisis leading to reduced judicial independence and high concentration of executive power under Nawaz Sharif in 1997; international sanctions after nuclear tests causes forex reserves to decline by almost 70% within seven

months in 1998[vi]; Kargil War, 1999; military coup by Pervez Musharraf, 1999; increased militancy in tribal areas; Pakistan comes under global scanner post 9/11 attacks and for close ties with the Taliban and Al Qaeda; downfall of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations; attacks by militants on Pakistani security forces (SFs) and infrastructure due to its support to the US for the Global War on Terrorism (GWoT); 17th Constitution Amendment, 2003, restores several presidential powers and temporarily legitimizes Musharraf's dual role as President and Army Chief. Positives, however, included - 13th Constitution Amendment, 1997, removes President's power to dismiss elected governments, strengthening the Prime Minister; Global standing as a major non-NATO ally, receiving major funds, intel and logistical support; billions in military aid and developmental assistance received from the US and coalition forces during GWoT; Paris Club Debt Restructuring, 2001; high GDP growth between 2003-2007.

The mid-2000s to mid-2010s – Pakistan's Most Turbulent Times and India's Deadliest Terrorist Attacks

- **Security Situation for India:** Varanasi bombings, 2006; Mumbai train bombings, 2006; Hyderabad twin blasts, 2007; Uttar Pradesh court blasts, 2007; Rampur CRPF camp attack, 2008; Jaipur serial blasts, 2008; Bangalore blast, 2008; Ahmedabad blasts, 2008; Delhi serial blast, 2008; 26/11 Mumbai attacks, 2008; Pune German Bakery blast, 2010; Varanasi Ghat bombing, 2010; Mumbai triple blasts, 2011; Delhi High Court bombing, 2011; Hyderabad Dilsukhnagar blasts, 2013; cross-border infiltration and small-scale attacks on SFs in J&K continue between 2013-2015, including one in Gurdaspur, Punjab in 2015.
- **Domestic Situation in Pakistan:** Deadly earthquake of magnitude 7.6 in 2005 causes large-scale destruction; Sui Crisis, 2005; assassination of Baloch leader Nawab Akbar Bugti, 2006; Baloch insurgency intensifies between 2004-2006 as insurgents repeatedly attack Pakistani SFs, public infrastructure and target Chinese projects in Balochistan; widespread energy crises between 2005-2015; Lawyer's Movement, 2007-2009; Lal Masjid siege, 2007; formation of TTP in 2007; state of emergency under a Provisional Constitutional Order declared by Pervez Musharraf in 2007; assassination attempt and assassination of Benazir Bhutto, 2007; likely impeachment causes Pervez Musharraf to resign as President in 2008; one of Pakistan's worst economic crises hits amidst the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) causing forex reserves to collapse and inflation to rise to 20%, 2008; grey-listed by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), 2008-2010; attack on Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore, 2009; destructive floods in 2010 highlight weak disaster management and governance failures; deterioration of ties with the US after Osama bin Laden raid, 2011; ties further deteriorate due to Salala incident of 2011; attack on Malala Yousufzai for advocating girls' education in 2012 by TTP militants draws global condemnation; grey-listed by FATF, 2012-2015; Army Public school attack by TTP, 2014; 126-day sit-in by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in 2014 politically challenges Nawaz Sharif government; assassination of Punjab Home Minister Shuja Khanzada, 2015; political instabilities persist throughout the decade with continuous changes in leadership; terrorist/insurgent and political violence peaks as recorded fatalities (civilian, SFs, militants combined) cross 57,800 in 10 years[vii]. Several positive developments also take place, such as - IMF bailout of $11.3 billion post GFC; successful democratic transition with an elected civilian government completing a full term between 2008–2013; Operation Rah-e-Rast undertaken regaining control of Swat Valley from militants, 2009; Operation Rah-e-Nijat undertaken weakening TTP strongholds in South Waziritan, 2009; 18th Constitutional Amendment, 2010, strengthens Parliament and reduces presidential powers; first successful democratic transfer of power between two democratically-elected civilian governments, 2013; energy improvements through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) between 2013-2018; Operation

Zarb-e-Azb undertaken dismantling major militant sanctuaries in North Waziristan, 2014; implementation of National Action Plan for countering terrorism, 2015.

The mid-2010s to mid-2020s – Onset of Political Upheaval in Pakistan

- **Security Situation for India:** Pathankot Air Force station attack, 2016; Uri attack, 2016; Nagrota Army base attack, 2016; Anantnag Amarnath Yatra attack, 2017; Sunjuwan military station attack, 2018; Pulwama attack, 2019; Jammu Air Force station drone attack, 2021; Rajouri attack, 2023; Poonch ambush, 2023; Reasi pilgrim bus attack, 2024; several small-scale attacks on SFs in J&K in 2024; Pahalgam attack, 2025; Red Fort blast, 2025; open firing by lone terrorist at Lal Chowk in Anantnag, 2026.
- **Domestic Situation in Pakistan:** Quetta Civil Hospital Bombing, 2016; revelations following the leak of Panama Papers in 2016 politically weakens Nawaz Sharif government; domestic political polarisation intensifies; Pakistan's Supreme Court launches investigation against Nawaz Sharif leading to his disqualification in 2017; major BoP crisis between 2018-2022; grey-listed by FATF, 2018-2022; India retaliates with Balakot strikes in 2019; India abrogates Article 370 in 2019 potentially triggering changes in Pakistan's Kashmir strategy; COVID-19 pandemic hits; one of the worst locust infestations hits the region in 2020; American troops withdraw and cross-border militancy expands as Taliban returns to power in 2021; catastrophic floods hit Pakistan in 2022; Taliban-negotiated peace talks with TTP fail and latter ends ceasefire in 2022; militancy in Kyber Pakhtunkhwa and insurgency in Balochistan intensify, with Baloch groups increasingly targeting Chinese projects from 2022; one of the worst cyclical economic crises with weeks of imports left between 2022-2024; disputes and fallout of PM Imran Khan with the military after three years of military-backed governance in 2022; PTI coalition weakens and vote of no-confidence leads to Khan's removal, 2022; PTI supporters stage massive rallies, 2022; assassination attempt on Khan, 2022; PTI supporters arrested and Khan imprisoned in Toshkhana case, 2023; widespread riots follow Khan's arrest in 2023; CPI inflation hits 38% and rural food inflation 52% in 2023[viii]; Khan's wife Bushra Bibi imprisoned in Iddat and Al-Qadir Trust cases, 2024; international organisations express concern over the harsh treatment of both imprisoned; JAAC-backed cost of living protests in PoJK, 2024; Jaffar train hijacking by BLA, 2025; India suspends Indus Water Treaty and undertakes Operation Sindoor destroying state-backed terrorist infrastructure, 2025; JAAC-backed large-scale unrests begin in PoJK revealing local dissatisfaction in governance, 2026. The positives during this period included - $60 billion received in Chinese investment for CPEC amidst rising Chinese debt, 2015; aid packages received from UAE, Saudi Arabia, IMF and China following BoP crisis; Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad undertaken for intelligence-led operations against residual militant networks, 2017; removed from FATF grey list in 2022; inflation moderation occurs post 2023; Operation Azm-e-Istehkam undertaken to intensify counterterrorism efforts, 2024; World Bank adopts a 10-year Country Partnership Framework, 2025, with Potential support of up to $20 billion for developmental projects.

Analysis

The Diversionary War Theory has always been an intriguing concept in international relations, and Pakistan, an interesting case study. Experts note how it has often blamed external forces like India for its internal instabilities, at times leading to Pakistan initiating low-intensity proxy conflicts against India in order to divert domestic, global and media attention from its internal failures[ix]. Recurring challenges such as corruption scandals, political instabilities, military overreach as well as inefficient efforts in curbing extremism and militancy, diminishing leadership popularities,

economic distress, and mounting international pressure (sometimes from its own allies) to take action against terrorist groups, have often been swept aside. For this, a spark is ignited in Kashmir, drawing attention away from internal unrests and towards cross-border confrontations with India. Throughout the last four decades, amidst different crises and under different leaderships, the one aspect of Pakistan's foreign policy that has remained consistent is the use of proxy groups against India. This is because an attack in India or a perceived threat to Indian sovereignty can increase the likelihood of potential military provocation from India. Such attacks, coinciding with widening domestic faultlines in Pakistan, may enable the Pakistani leadership to reinforce its domestic legitimacy by redirecting attention to a bigger threat – 'the India threat.' Moreover, it also creates a strategic justification for redeploying troops from the western to eastern front[x].

While changes in India's counterterrorism policies and reforms within its security apparatus have substantially curtailed the impact and lethality of these terrorist attacks, it does not necessarily imply a change in Pakistan's policies to utilise proxies. The above timeline provides a broad overview of Pakistan's domestic landscape alongside the corresponding terrorist attacks in India. In the first phase, Pakistan's domestic situation was comparatively better and the anti-India proxy network was still in its developing stage. The Kashmir insurgency in India had just begun and the resulting violence was majorly religiously-targeted. In the second phase, pan-India attacks increased immensely, an outcome that became increasingly likely, as Pakistan had become a key US ally in the GWoT and was receiving substantial military and economic aid. Moreover, its proxies by then, had become a developed network capable of sustaining operations against India. The domestic situation in Pakistan during both these phases was comparatively stable, reducing the perceived need to employ diversionary tactics through proxy groups. In the third stage, when the Pakistani public was grappling with the alleged military-backed assassination of Benazir Bhutto, increasing TTP militancy, and an intensifying GFC-induced economic crisis between 2007-2008, India, at the same time, witnessed some of the deadliest and most wide-spread attacks, majorly orchestrated by the Pakistan-backed Indian Mujahideen. This may indicate that the phase between 2007-2008 is the strongest example of Pakistan's employment of diversionary tactics. In the last stage, particularly between 2022-2024, Pakistan faced one of the most severe economic crises, coupled with nation-wide public unrests and political upheaval, as a result of the Imran Khan's ouster by the military. This period, should have led the Pakistani military to apply diversionary tactics, however, Pakistan-sponsored proxy attacks in India were limited regionally to Jammu and demographically to Indian SFs; suggesting that the application of proxy war is a standard security strategy rather than a deflective instrument.

If Pakistan's reliance on proxy warfare was primarily driven by diversionary incentives only, then periods of heightened internal instability should theoretically have coincided with increased efforts to destabilise India. However, the trajectory over the last four decades does not give strong, consistent evidence to suggest this. Defence experts and senior journalists have often mentioned that with a surge in domestic issues in Pakistan, the threat of attacks in India also increases. While this is true, it does not mean that every internal crisis in Pakistan will correlate to a deliberate increase in terrorist or militant attacks in India. Historical trends indicate that the use of proxy groups against India has not always necessarily been invoked as a response to an internal crisis, but their strategic utility has indeed increased at times of internal instability. The above analysis demonstrates that Pakistan's use of proxies does not apply solely as a tool of diversionary tactic but rather as a persistent policy during prolonged periods of internal unrests as well as during periods without any major systemic crises. Various reasons discussed below examine why proxies are so deeply embedded in Pakistan's operational milieu, and how they have become an adaptive, institutional feature of Pakistan's security policy rather than merely a strategic asset that can be used as a crisis response.

Why Pakistan may Never Let Go of its Anti-India Proxies

- **Cheaper, Safer and More Attractive than Conventional Warfare:** Despite its own weaknesses, Pakistan has long pursued to maintain leverage over India by keeping the Kashmir issue alive. Its 'bleed India with a thousand cuts' strategy is the foundational basis of using proxies to maintain pressure on India while trying to stay below the threshold of provoking a major inter-state conflict. A costly and self-destructive conventional war, would only burden Pakistan financially, militarily, logistically and diplomatically. Moreover, these proxy groups operate under a veil of ambiguity while carrying out the ISI's covert agenda. They are publicly portrayed as independent non-state actors, thereby providing Pakistan with ample scope for plausible deniability, and enabling it to immediately disassociate itself from any terrorist attack in India, which was conceived and orchestrated by its own deep state. A new strategy of recursive proxies is also being adopted, wherein smaller offshoots of established terrorist organisations are created under refined, secular-sounding names, thereby enhancing deniability and avoiding scrutiny, as it diverts the attention away from the parent organisation to the splinter group[xi].
- **The "*Kashmir Hamara Hain*" Narrative:** Keeping Kashmir as a persistent flashpoint not only serves Pakistan domestically and internationally, but also strategically, given its historical and symbolical significance to Pakistan's national identity. Being repeatedly invoked in domestic discourse as well as in international forums, it serves as a unifying national narrative for the Pakistani public and as a source of institutional cohesion for the military. Kashmir's continued prominence and the portrayal of India as a hegemonic threat reinforces nationalistic sentiment, further strengthening the radical anti-India sentiment. To amplify these narratives, well-known Pakistani media outlets often allow misinformation to persist on their platforms, while individual Pakistan-based social media users routinely engage in coordinated anti-India propaganda and disinformation campaigns.
- **A Strain on India's Resources:** By consistently keeping the Kashmir issue at the forefront of bilateral and international discourse, Pakistan ensures that the threat to India's sovereignty remains its topmost priority. This compels India to devote substantial military, financial, administrative, intelligence, and policy resources to counterterrorism and internal security operations, thereby imposing a sustained burden on the Indian security apparatus. Moreover, frequent incidents of militancy compel the Indian government and SFs to undertake defensive or retaliatory action, which may result in unavoidable collateral damage. Pakistan has capitalised on these incidents by portraying them on global platforms as evidence of systemic human rights abuses. These attempts have been made to amplify narratives of India's weak governance in J&K, consequential public discontent amongst locals, and an eroding international image and diplomatic standing.
- **Enables Military Dominance in Shaping India Policy:** By projecting India as Pakistan's biggest threat, the Pakistani Army and ISI have historically exercised greater influence than the civilian leadership in directing the country's strategic policies in matters concerning India. This was particularly evident in two instances where rapprochement efforts initiated by Islamabad were overridden by Rawalpindi, which chose to adopt a rather aggressive stand[xii]. The first occurred in 1999, when PMs Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif signed the Lahore Declaration, only for the Kargil conflict to erupt months later after Pakistani Army regulars disguised as Kashmiri locals, infiltrated across the LoC. The second followed PM Modi's surprise visit to Lahore in December 2015, after which the 2016 Pathankot Air Force Station and Uri attacks brought the renewed peace process to an abrupt halt. Furthermore, the military's dominance over Pakistan's security and foreign policy has made it the primary interlocutor with the US. This has enabled Pakistan to

leverage its geostrategic position to access billions in dollars' worth military and economic assistance, in return for advancing American regional security objectives[xiii].

- **Investment High, Return on Investment Higher and Disinvestment Almost Impossible:** Over the last four decades, Pakistan has invested immensely in the development of militant proxy groups through sustained financial support, training, infrastructure and ideological indoctrination. As a result, these organisations have evolved into a deeply interconnected proxy ecosystem, making the complete dismantling of any single group or its factions increasingly difficult. Moreover, many of these groups have now gained a level of operational independence, such that, their central leadership and ideological support is so strong, that they have turned out to become more stable and powerful than most democratically elected civilian governments in the country. Over two decades ago, it was noted that Pakistan's influence over some of the proxies was eroding as the latter were becoming more powerful. They were starting to act autonomously on the pretext that their *jihad* was primarily in the interest of Kashmir's liberation and therefore, they were not necessarily required to follow Pakistan's strategic objectives[xiv]. Even at present, experts note that groups like JeM often bypass hierarchical adherence and act in autonomy, irrespective of whether they receive operational approvals from their ISI bosses or not[xv].
- **Cherry-picking between Good and Bad Terrorists:** Anti-India proxy groups not only facilitate in furthering Pakistan's external agenda, but also assist domestically in - ironically, keeping a check on terrorism itself. Pakistan administers a policy of differentiating between terrorist groups, conveniently categorising the anti-India groups such as LeT, JeM, HM and their factions, as 'good terrorists,' while those like TTP and Baloch/Sind insurgent groups - which threaten its own sovereignty - as 'bad terrorists.' It is also reported that while conducting counterterrorism operation Zarb-e-Azaab in 2014, Pakistan permitted TTP cadres to realign themselves and join anti-India outfits instead. They were given the choice to either join the Afghan Taliban or Kashmir-centric groups like LeT and JeM, with most preferring the latter[xvi]. This results in a favourable outcome for Pakistan as 'bad terrorists' contribute to higher militant fatalities, while 'good terrorists' become new recruits in anti-India groups.
- **Distress amongst Diaspora:** Proxy groups also aid Pakistan immensely in carrying out its K2 strategy, by rattling India internally through militancy, and externally, by mobilising pro-Khalistan diaspora in foreign countries. This obliges Indian agencies to remain vigilant within the country, along borders and across continents, while exposing them to campaigns that portray the country negatively, through fabricated allegations of human rights violations, infringements of territorial sovereignty, and perceived persecution of religious minorities.

Conclusion

Pakistan's proxy groups did not emerge overnight but were cultivated through decades of sustained support, gradually evolving into an entrenched system that has now become integral to Pakistan's security and foreign policy. Periods of internal instability in Pakistan have frequently coincided with waves of terrorism in India, suggesting that proxy groups have served both as diversionary tools during domestic crises, as well as enduring instruments of deterrence during periods of relative stability. Having invested heavily in this network, Pakistan faces significant constraints in dismantling it. Nevertheless, the strategic utility of these groups as – instruments for domestic cohesion, plausible deniability, and asymmetric warfare – makes their abandonment highly unlikely. The relationship between Pakistan's internal crises and terrorist violence in India is further reinforced by the fact that while religion may provide solace to the poor, it is social and economic inequalities that enable religious extremists to exploit faith, frustration and ignorance, for political

mobilisation[xvii]. Internal instabilities therefore create conditions that are conducive to militant recruitment, thereby aiding the proxy networks that Pakistan has long relied upon.

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