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The Sorcerer’s Apprentice: Islamist Militancy in South Asia

Many high-profile terrorist incidents—ranging from the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington to the July 7, 2005 subway bombings in London to the November 2008 assault on Mumbai—have had direct connections to individuals and groups operating in Pakistan. Islamist militants based there also regularly launch attacks on government and coalition targets in Afghanistan. Such violence inflicts significant human and economic costs on the international community, threatens to incite a regional conflagration with India, and undermines international efforts to stabilize Southwest Asia.

Debates on the source of such violence revolve around two theories. One is that terrorism is a central element of Pakistan’s strategy to combat India’s presence in Kashmir and to facilitate the re-Talibanization of Afghanistan. Proponents of this view believe that Islamabad has not prevented terrorism emanating from its soil largely because it does not wish to; Pakistan finds terrorist violence far too useful a tool to combat it seriously. Regional expert Frederic Grare, a supporter of this theory, argues that Pakistan continues “to nurture terrorist groups as a means of securing its geopolitical goals” because

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organizations such as “the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Toiba are essential tools of regional policy.”

The second theory is based on the idea that most terrorism results from local conditions in the terrorists’ own countries. International terrorists do sometimes use Pakistani territory or maintain ties to people or organizations within Pakistan, but they do so despite official efforts to prevent it, not as tools of the government of Pakistan. For example, in the wake of the London subway bombings, then-President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan denied that Pakistan was responsible for terrorism in other countries, and said that he “got annoyed” when Pakistan was blamed for terrorist violence overseas. He maintained that the indoctrination of the London bombers did not occur in Pakistan. Instead, their “mindset changed in the UK.”

Although both theories contain some elements of truth, they are actually misleading. Throughout its history, Pakistan has deliberately used non-state actors as a strategy of asymmetric warfare against stronger adversaries such as India and the Soviet Union. Islamist militants were armed and trained by elements of the Pakistani military and intelligence services, and funded by a sophisticated international financial network. This enabled Pakistan to attrite Indian and Soviet resources via proxy, without having to face either country in a direct conflict.

Now, however, Pakistan’s strategy has given rise to what we call a “sorcerer’s apprentice” problem. The jihadi organizations, like the magic brooms in Goethe’s tale, have taken on a life of their own. Along with the government, the army, and the intelligence services, such groups now comprise one of the main centers of gravity within Pakistan. As a result, the militants are in a position to pursue their own policy. Similar to Goethe’s brooms, they often act against the interests of their creators, attacking security personnel, assassinating government officials, seizing large swaths of territory within Pakistan, and launching attacks on India that could permanently scuttle the Indo–Pak peace process and trigger a large-scale war. Although Pakistan is largely to blame for creating and nurturing the jihadi, it is no longer wholly in control of them, and they should not be seen simply as tools of Pakistan’s policy.

Neither India nor Pakistan has reacted to these developments constructively. Pakistan has largely remained in a state of denial, refusing to take responsibility for its role in causing the jihadi problem. It has occasionally moved against the militants, but has never truly attempted to shut them down. Nor has it made
serious efforts to deliver services and create social conditions that could make militancy less attractive, preferring instead to invest resources in pursuing its ongoing conflict with India. India, for its part, is working to coerce Pakistan into preventing further anti-Indian terrorism, despite limits on Islamabad’s control over jihadi organizations. Furthermore, many of the coercive tools that it is acquiring, such as enhanced conventional military capabilities, are inappropriate to the task. Indeed, they may encourage further support from Pakistan for militancy by making the country less secure. Thus, neither India nor Pakistan has been able to play the role of regional sorcerer and rein in the jihadis.

Pakistan’s use of non-state actors has been an effective strategy in the past to a significant degree, inflicting considerable costs on stronger adversaries without subjecting Pakistan to the risk of catastrophic defeat. But Pakistan’s use of militants has increasingly spun out of control, creating serious internal and external security challenges. Can India and Pakistan transcend their traditional strategic comfort zones and deal more effectively with South Asia’s sorcerer’s apprentice problem?

Pakistan’s Long Dalliance with Militancy

Many discussions of Pakistan’s use of jihadi organizations begin with the 1980s. During this period, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq utilized mujahideen forces to undermine the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.\(^3\) Pakistan, however, has been using proxy forces since attaining independence from the United Kingdom. In October 1947, Pakistan employed Pathan tribesmen to attack the princely state of Kashmir as its monarch vacillated on the question of whether to accede to India or to Pakistan. The rebels quickly advanced on the Kashmiri capital of Srinagar, raping and pillaging along the way.\(^4\)

As attacking forces approached Srinagar, a panicked Maharaja Hari Singh appealed to New Delhi for military assistance. The government of India agreed to defend Kashmir if Singh would commit to join the territory to India. He complied, signing an Instrument of Accession on October 28, 1947. Shortly thereafter, a full-scale war erupted, pitting Pakistan-supported and Pakistani regular forces against the Indian military. The conflict ended in stalemate on December 31, 1948, with India controlling approximately two-thirds of Kashmir and Pakistan the remaining third. This division of territory largely set the foundation for decades of Indo–Pak conflict.

Pakistan resorted to irregular forces again in August 1965 by employing militants in an effort to seize the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir.\(^5\) The militants infiltrated Indian Kashmir to precipitate an uprising, which was to be followed by a Pakistani conventional military operation to seize the territory. The plan presumed widespread Kashmiri support for Pakistan and disaffection
with India. This assumption proved to be wrong; locals promptly alerted the authorities to the presence of the infiltrators, enabling Indian forces to move against them. Despite this failure, Pakistani leaders launched the follow-on, conventional military phase, thereby provoking the second Indo–Pak war. Like the first war, this conflict ended essentially in stalemate. The two parties subsequently agreed to return to the status quo as per the Soviet-brokered Tashkent Agreement of 1966.

In spite of these setbacks in 1947–1948 and 1965, Pakistan’s leaders did not lose interest in using militants to help seize control of Indian-administered Kashmir. Indeed, almost immediately after the 1965 war, elements within the Pakistani military started to recruit religious zealots in the Kashmir Valley in hopes of sowing discord and promoting political upheaval within the state. To that end, the Pakistanis started to work with a newly created organization called the Plebiscite Front. While some elements of the Front were willing to limit themselves to the realm of political struggle, others wanted to resort to violence to achieve their goal of merging Kashmir with Pakistan.

These efforts suffered an important setback in the early 1970s, as India cracked down against various jihadi groups. Following Zia-ul-Haq’s coup in Pakistan and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Islamabad renewed its use of the jihadi option. Zia-ul-Haq presided over the mujahideen campaign in Afghanistan, which played an indispensable role in defeating the Soviet Union. His death during the summer of 1988 in a plane crash prevented him from applying this strategy to Kashmir. When an indigenous uprising erupted in Indian Kashmir in December 1989, however, his successors lost little time in doing so. The Pakistanis initially backed the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), a homegrown, notionally secular separatist organization, but such support proved to be short-lived. The JKLF did not wish to join Kashmir to Pakistan. Instead, it sought the creation of an independent Kashmir encompassing both Indian and Pakistani-controlled portions of the state.

Consequently, the Pakistani military and Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) marginalized the JKLF, redirecting their resources toward more Islamist-oriented organizations dedicated to establishing Pakistani control over Indian-administered Kashmir. These organizations ranged from the predominantly Kashmiri Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), to the mostly externally recruited, battle-hardened Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), whose main goal is to establish an Islamic state in South Asia, and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), whose main focus is to

The Pakistani state and the jihadis are, to a significant extent, now working at cross purposes.
separate Kashmir from India and join it with Pakistan. Pakistani support for these groups fundamentally transformed the character of the Kashmir insurgency, metamorphosizing it from an indigenous independence struggle, triggered by the malfeasances of Indian rule, to an externally orchestrated effort to attrite Indian resources and seize Jammu and Kashmir for Pakistan.9

Over time, Pakistan-backed militants launched increasingly provocative terror operations.10 On December 13, 2001, for example, LeT and JeM attacked the Indian Parliament while it was in session. Although the terrorists were defeated and no members were harmed, the assault could have resulted in a massacre of India’s national legislators. In the wake of this attack, under considerable U.S. pressure, Pakistan undertook cosmetic efforts against organizations such as the LeT and the JeM, briefly incarcerating members of their rank and file. Also, on January 12, 2002, in a nationally televised speech, Musharraf stated that he would not allow Pakistani soil to be used as a launching pad for terror against India or any other country, though he did not rule out the possibility that militant groups might operate from Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which enjoys nominal independence. Despite Musharraf’s apparent interest in preventing further terrorism, little changed in practice. Soon thereafter, in May 2002, the LeT were implicated in an attack on the families of soldiers stationed at an Indian military base at Kaluchak in Jammu and Kashmir.

The December 2001 parliament assault had led India to undertake a massive military mobilization to coerce Pakistan into ending its support for terrorism. The May 2002 Kaluchak attack brought the two states to the brink of war. For reasons that are the subject of a vigorous debate, they managed to avoid outright conflict during these 2001–2002 crises.11 Nonetheless, Indo–Pak relations remained fraught as Pakistan failed to completely rein in the jihadi organizations operating on its soil.

In the wake of the 2001–2002 crises, a series of bombings rocked major urban centers across India from Bangalore to New Delhi. Indian authorities attributed several of the attacks to the LeT. Pakistani authorities in some cases ignored the charges, and in others denied any connection with the bombings. Doubts about continued links between Pakistan and anti-Indian terrorism, however, were effectively dispelled with the November 2008 assault on Mumbai. A group of 10 terrorists launched a series of carefully planned attacks against the Taj Mahal and Oberoi hotels, the Bhikaji Cama Children’s Hospital, the Chattrapati Shivaji Railway Terminus, the Leopold Café, and the Chabad House, a Jewish cultural...
center. Well over one hundred civilians, several security personnel and all but one terrorist were killed in the three-day shooting spree.

Pakistani authorities initially denied any link between the Mumbai attackers and Pakistan. Overwhelming evidence that the terrorists were members of LeT and that their operation had been planned in, launched from, and directed in real time by operatives in Pakistan, however, pointed toward the contrary. No longer able to deny the Pakistan–Mumbai connection, Pakistani officials placed Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, the head of the LeT’s charitable front organization, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, under house arrest in Lahore. Before long though, Saeed was free once again after a Pakistani court released the LeT chief in June 2009, citing a paucity of evidence against him. The provincial government of the Punjab subsequently withdrew terror charges against Saeed for a similar want of evidence.

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice

Analysts have often cited Pakistan’s support for Islamist militancy as strategically shortsighted. Islamabad has adhered to essentially the same strategy in pursuit of the same ends for most of its history, using non-state actors in an effort to alter territorial boundaries in South Asia without triggering a full-scale conventional conflict in the region. Despite its repeated efforts, Pakistan has rarely succeeded in attaining its goals. The 1947 and 1965 Kashmir wars ended in stalemate. The Pakistan-backed insurgency in Kashmir, despite its violence, has not convinced the Indians to leave the territory. To the contrary, the Indians have become more intransigent as the carnage has increased. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s provocative behavior has created serious regional tensions that could trigger a major conflict, and diverted resources away from other urgent domestic priorities such as economic development, educational reforms, and infrastructure renewal. Thus, critics argue, Pakistan’s asymmetric warfare strategy has largely failed.12

This criticism, however, is not wholly warranted. Pakistan’s asymmetric warfare strategy has in fact achieved notable successes. Its support of mujahideen forces in Afghanistan played a crucial role in the Soviets’ defeat. In Kashmir, the Pakistanis have inflicted serious economic, military, and diplomatic costs on India. They have also led New Delhi to adopt draconian antiterrorism policies that have badly tarnished its international image. In neither case was Pakistan forced to engage in direct combat against a stronger adversary. Rather, the use of non-state actors enabled the Pakistanis to damage the Soviets and the Indians while avoiding direct conflict and the concomitant risk of catastrophic defeat. Whatever its shortcomings, Pakistan’s strategy has achieved important goals, and should not be dismissed as an abject failure.

Despite its past successes, however, Pakistan’s asymmetric warfare strategy now faces the serious problem that those militant organizations, which the Pakistanis
created and nurtured to execute their policy, no longer wholly share their aims or serve their interests. The militants’ goals have become increasingly maximalist. Many seek not just to liberate Kashmir or to join it to Pakistan but see eventual control of territory within India proper as the true prize in their struggle. And they will not allow the Pakistani state to prevent them from attaining it. Nasr Javed, a LeT official, delivering a speech at the Quba Mosque in Islamabad on February 5, 2008, declared: “India is also afraid of jihad. India fears that if the Mujahideen liberated Kashmir through jihad, then it will be very difficult to keep rest of the India under control. Jihad will spread from Kashmir to other parts of India. The Muslims will be ruling India again.” He went on to say, “The government of Pakistan might have abandoned jihad but we have not. Our agenda is clear. We will continue to wage jihad and propagate it till eternity. No government can intimidate us. Nobody can stop it—be it the U.S. or Musharraf.”

The jihadi organizations also oppose Pakistani efforts to cooperate with U.S. antiterrorism efforts. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government realized that Islamist terrorism was not an issue isolated to the Middle East or South Asia. Rather, it was a global problem that directly impacted the United States’ own security. U.S. leaders also decided that they needed Pakistan to serve as a leading partner in their new “global war on terror.” Thus, Washington dramatically shifted its policy. It would no longer ignore Pakistani support for militancy in South Asia, and it would offer Pakistan substantial military and economic benefits for cooperating in its antiterror efforts. In order to reap these rewards, Pakistan agreed to serve as an ally in the U.S. antiterrorism campaign. As a result, the Pakistanis were forced to limit support for Islamist insurgents in Kashmir, occasionally even outlawing militant groups. This Pakistani cooperation with the United States alienated the militant organizations. These groups, which owed their existence to Islamabad, branded Musharraf a traitor and turned against the Pakistani government.

Meanwhile, the Taliban, whose control of Afghanistan had been strongly supported by the Pakistani government, now seeks not just to retake Afghanistan, but to seize Pakistani territory as well. Factions such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban, the main Taliban group in Pakistan, have asserted control over swaths of territory to resist the central government, enforce a strict interpretation of Sharia law, and unite with the Afghan Taliban against NATO forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan would benefit from Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan: it would mean a friendly government in Kabul, afford Pakistan badly needed strategic depth, allow it more...
direct access to the energy-rich states of Central Asia, and reduce Indian regional influence. Islamabad, however, does not wish to cede control of its own territory to Taliban elements.

These differences between the goals of the Pakistani state and the Islamist groups it helped to create and nurture have severely undermined Pakistani security in a number of ways. First, they have led to outright violence between the militants and Pakistani forces (for example, the Pakistan army has been battling Taliban elements in South Waziristan). Such conflict is costly, both in military terms and in terms of harm to Pakistan’s civilian population. Second, differences with the militants have put Pakistani leaders at risk. Musharraf survived multiple assassination attempts after siding with the United States in the war on terror. And militants associated with the Pakistani Taliban succeeded in killing former prime minister Benazir Bhutto as she sought to return to office. Third, jihadi attacks on Indian targets, such as Mumbai, do not merely threaten to undo the Indo—Pak peace process but risk plunging the subcontinent into a large-scale war. In the event of another major terrorist incident in India, Pakistan could be held responsible even if Islamabad was not involved in planning or executing the attack—as it evidently was not in the Mumbai case. Even an Indian government that did not wish to respond militarily could find domestic political pressure to do so overwhelming.

Significantly, this is occurring at a time when the Pakistanis can ill afford it. Islamabad would like to deescalate tensions with New Delhi and reduce the likelihood of an Indo–Pakistani confrontation so that it can concentrate on stabilizing its internal security situation in the northwest. Instead, the danger of conflict with India forces Pakistan to divide its attention between the northwest and the East, making its task of internal stabilization significantly more difficult. Thus, the Pakistani state and the jihadis whom it no longer fully controls are, to a significant extent, working at cross purposes.

**Who’s Your Sorcerer Now?**

Following the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai, a single question echoed from New Delhi to Washington: were the Mumbai attacks simply the work of Pakistan-based militants or were they actually orchestrated by the government of Pakistan? Given the militants’ increasing autonomy, however, and Pakistan’s inability to reassert control over them, this was the wrong question to ask. The relevant question is: who will now play the role of South Asian sorcerer and rein in the jihadis?

The natural candidates for the sorcerer’s role would be the governments of either Pakistan or India. Recent events, such as the Mumbai attacks, have shown that neither is presently up to the challenge. The government of Pakistan has publicly promised to prevent its soil from being used to launch anti-Indian
terrorism, but the Mumbai attacks demonstrate that Islamabad is unable to honor this pledge. India, for its part, cannot defend itself against such attacks. Despite the fact that the Indian authorities had received credible warnings of a seaborne terrorist operation, a mere handful of terrorists were able to keep Indian security personnel at bay for nearly three days, showing that the Indian authorities were caught completely off guard.

India does enjoy conventional military superiority over Pakistan. This advantage does not, however, afford the Indians many good options for dealing with the jihadis. The Indians could strike across the Line of Control against terrorist camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which is the most plausible option. But even if such attacks were successful, they would yield only limited benefits because Kashmiri militant camps are transitory and lack high-value human targets or physical infrastructure.

Because strikes on militant camps are not likely to be profitable, the Indians could threaten to launch large-scale attacks deep into Pakistan proper in the event of further terrorism. Although India would eventually prevail in such a conflict, victory would be costly. Nonetheless, such a large-scale confrontation might make continued tolerance for anti-Indian militancy prohibitively expensive for Pakistan, thus finally convincing Pakistan to fully renounce the jihadi option. But even if Indian leaders decided that the possible benefits of such a policy were worth its likely costs, Pakistan's nuclear capacity makes it infeasible. Given the danger of triggering a nuclear response, it would be too risky for the Indians to launch large-scale attacks deep into Pakistan’s territory. In the past, India has been willing to contemplate limited conflict with Pakistan, despite Pakistani nuclear weapons (for example, the 1999 Kargil conflict). Pakistan’s nuclear capacity, however, has led the Indians to explicitly rule out the possibility of launching a full-scale conventional attack on the Pakistanis.\(^\text{15}\) India is unlikely to change its position in the near future.

A series of rapid, more limited attacks into Pakistani territory could inflict significant costs on Pakistan without triggering a nuclear exchange. The possibility of such action might stand a better chance of convincing Pakistan to abandon its support for anti-Indian militancy than the threat of all-out conventional war. India is acquiring increasingly sophisticated conventional assets and formulating a “Cold Start” military doctrine that may afford it such a capacity.\(^\text{16}\) Given the jihadis' growing autonomy, however, greater Indian coercive capabilities could prove irrelevant. Pakistan may be unable to control

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the militants’ behavior even if it wants to. Thus, Indian military threats could convince Pakistan that it must rein in the jihadis, and still fail to prevent further terrorism. The jihadi networks in Pakistan are so pervasive and their strength so significant that only a firm, unequivocal decision on the part of the country’s military and intelligence services to sever all links, albeit not without costs, could bring about their eventual demise. Short of such a drastic volte-face on the part of the Pakistani security and intelligence services, the hydra-headed monster cannot be slain. In addition, a more coercive Indian approach runs a serious risk of backfiring. Pakistan’s asymmetric warfare strategy has been largely motivated by its insecurity vis-à-vis India. Thus, by augmenting its punitive capabilities, India could render Pakistan even less secure and increase its incentives to promote militancy even further.

Neither India’s nor Pakistan’s domestic security nor their conventional military capabilities, therefore, are currently able to solve South Asia’s sorcerer’s apprentice problem. Unfortunately, their nuclear arsenals are largely useless as well. Nuclear weapons facilitated Pakistan’s initial adoption of a low-intensity conflict strategy against India during the 1980s and 1990s, preventing large-scale Indian conventional retaliation while militants launched attacks in Indian Kashmir. Nuclear weapons cannot now be used to eradicate the terrorists who flourished under this strategy and today wreak havoc in both India and Pakistan. And nuclear weapons limit India’s future military options in dealing with terrorism— they prevent New Delhi from taking action that, though costly, could potentially convince Pakistan to revisit their tolerance for anti-Indian militancy.

Finally, nuclear weapons pose a danger because of Pakistan’s unstable political and security environment. The army, Pakistan’s most powerful institution, tightly controls the nuclear arsenal. The army has enormous incentives to ensure the weapons’ security, and they do not appear to be under any immediate threat. Still, Pakistan could face situations in which its arsenal might be vulnerable. For example, if Pakistan attempted to move weapons during a crisis with India, militants could capture them as they are being transported, particularly if the jihadis had access to inside information, such as the weapons’ transport schedule. Of course, even if they managed to steal a weapon, the militants would still face a number of difficult tasks, such as determining how to use it. Nonetheless, the security of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal is a genuine concern. Nuclear weapons, therefore, are not only unable to help India or Pakistan play the role of a South Asian sorcerer, they could even potentially pose dangers of their own.

**Taming the Apprentice**

What is the solution to South Asia’s sorcerer’s apprentice problem? The situation will require a radical rethinking of the region’s security framework, with both
India and Pakistan adopting policies that transcend their traditional comfort zones. Pakistan must truly forswear militancy, ending support for the jihadis and accepting international military and financial assistance in crushing them. The Pakistanis need to recognize that, despite past successes, the costs of supporting militancy now outweigh its benefits. Recent events, such as the Mumbai attacks, may present Islamabad with a final opportunity to get control of the situation. If the government of Pakistan does not take decisive action against the militants soon, it may lose control of the state or find itself drawn into a catastrophic conflict with India in the wake of another terrorist attack.

Pakistan has moved against terrorist organizations in the past. These measures, however, have been mostly cosmetic and of short duration. Following government crackdowns, terrorist groups have traditionally changed their names and quickly resumed their activities. Even in the wake of Mumbai, Pakistan’s action against the militants was half-hearted. As noted above, Pakistani officials initially denied any connection between the Mumbai terrorists and Pakistan, arresting Saeed only when faced with overwhelming evidence of LeT’s role in the attacks and releasing him soon thereafter. Given this track record, it is doubtful that Pakistan will move seriously against Islamist militancy in the near future. Only time will tell for certain.

The Indians, for their part, must take their own security far more seriously. In 1991, following a major financial crisis, the Indian government acknowledged its socialist development model’s failures and adopted a new, free-market strategy for economic growth. Similarly, India must use the Mumbai attacks to wholly revamp its security infrastructure. They appear to have begun to do so. In the wake of the attacks, the government announced that it was enhancing its maritime security capabilities, creating a U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation-like National Investigative Agency, increasing intelligence sharing, improving the training and equipment of police and domestic security forces, and strengthening antiterrorism laws. The Indians must follow through on these initiatives.

In addition, they must address their own Muslim community’s legitimate concerns, both in Kashmir and in India proper. This will reduce the incentives for continued Kashmiri insurgency, and lower the likelihood that overseas terrorists will find willing accomplices within India. If they fail to implement these measures, India’s impressive economic and military gains of recent years will be for naught. Skyrocketing gross domestic product, sophisticated conventional military capabilities, and even nuclear weapons mean little.
when ordinary citizens are not safe in railway stations, streets, hospitals, and hotels of their own cities. And if India remains vulnerable to Mumbai-like attacks, international corporations will lose interest in the country, refusing to do business in what they view as an excessively dangerous environment.

None of the steps outlined above will provide an overnight solution to the problems of Islamist militancy within South Asia. These can, however, help South Asia create its own modern-day sorcerer, dealing with the forces that Pakistan’s asymmetric warfare strategy have unleashed over recent decades without triggering a large-scale conflict or nuclear conflagration. If the region fails to meet this challenge, its most pressing security problem will go unaddressed and the implications will reverberate far beyond South Asia.

Notes

