



Centre For A New South Asia

Peace and Conflict Studies

The Centre For A New South Asia (CNSA) is a Research Centre at the Jindal School of International Affairs within the esteemed O.P. Jindal Global University in Sonipat, India. Our primary objective is to examine the geopolitical dynamics within South Asia and on a global scale, intending to address and mitigate challenges prevalent across the Asian region and beyond.

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The Effectiveness of India's Counterinsurgency Operations in Kashmir

Abstract :

The Insurgency in Kashmir has been a consistent and complex threat to the national security of India and its people ever since the mid to late 1980s (Patankar, 2009). With the 40-years-and- counting long counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign, the Indian Army has faced its fair share of difficulties in the effective management/execution of such a complex and multifaceted campaign amidst evolving political and ground realities in both Jammu and Kashmir as well as the centre.

Introduction: Understanding the Kashmir Conflict

The roots of the Kashmir insurgency are complex in nature and consist of a mixture of historical grievances, territorial disputes between India and Pakistan and demands for Kashmiri self-determination that ended up erupting in the mid to late 1980s.

Thus, what started as a COIN operation against domestic terror groups such as the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, has now resulted in a low-intensity conflict and proxy war against terror groups such as Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Toiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed; manned by foreign nationals and funded by external forces ranging from our hostile neighbour in the west to international terror groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda (Patankar, 2009).

India's COIN strategy has had to evolve to respond to these complexities. Thus, the Indian Army's COIN campaign is divided into two phases, Phase I from 1989-2000 and Phase II from 2001 to the present day.

➤ Phase I: 1989-2000

The first phase of the Indian Army's COIN campaign in Kashmir was decisively military-focused. Nearly 3,00,000 troops were deployed to combat the growing insurgent threat in the state. The Indian Army was initially successful and limited the insurgency's large-scale operational capability, however, on the micro level significant issues persisted. (Dhakal, 2014)

The Indian Army's heavy reliance on force, alongside the abuse of human rights and restraining the political rights of the Kashmiris alienated them from the rest of the country. In the eyes of the Kashmiris, the army and the state lost all credibility due to accusations of torture, mass arrests, and the indiscriminate use of force by the army. The situation was further exacerbated by the Pakistani government's growing backing of the militants in Kashmir through ISI.

Politically, while the Indian government attempted to commence the democratic machinery of the Kashmiri State via elections in 1996, this was quickly put to a stop by insurgent threats and boycotts of the elections by the local population. This was mainly due to the disillusionment of the people in the government due to its failure to deliver on promises made, lack of political autonomy combined with widespread unemployment and corruption in the state machinery (Patankar, 2009). The first phase ultimately failed to resolve the insurgency as a result of excessive usage of military force and a severe lack of political & socio-economic reform.

➤ Phase II: 2001-Present

India's COIN strategy shifted to a more comprehensive approach in 2001 which integrated military precision with economic investment, political engagement and a more complex diplomatic initiative, acknowledging the need to address the underlying grievances of the populace.

The main spearhead of this new approach was "Operation Sadbhavna". This operation was aimed at improving the image and public relations of the army and the Indian government. To this extent, the Indian Army helped the local communities by establishing schools, vocational centres as well as health clinics. This was aimed at winning the "hearts and minds" of the local populace. In addition to this gesture of goodwill, the Army also reorganized its forces via the establishment of a unified headquarters for both the army and paramilitary forces.

Politically, a significant step was taken in rebuilding the trust between the Kashmiri populace and the Indian government as local and state elections resumed in 2002. Voter turnout as a result increased substantially, with 63% voter turnout in the 2008 elections and 79% in the 2011 Panchayat elections (Dhakal, 2014). However, the underlying demand for self-determination remained unresolved. There has been little to no dialogue between the government and the insurgents, and terror attacks continue to undermine stability in the region.

Meanwhile, India has made substantial investments in the Kashmir region since 2001 in the economic sector. Infrastructure projects have revitalized the region's economy, but only partly. Tourism, which suffered greatly during the height of the insurgency, has rebounded, with 2,11,80,011 tourists (The Department of Tourism, J&K, n.d.) visiting the region in 2022. However, unemployment and economic instability remain high, particularly in the rural areas.

Key Challenges:

The mixed approach to COIN, while effective in curbing insurgent activity, is not without its fair share of challenges.

The issue of the numerous human rights violations, allegations of torture, and arbitrary mass arrests conducted by the Indian security forces has remained a mainstay since the 1980s (India: Repression Persists in Jammu and Kashmir, 2024). Indian Security forces have also been accused of using sexual violence as a tool of repression in Kashmir.

Pakistan's support for the various insurgent groups in Kashmir has been a constant thorn in the side of the Indian Army despite the employment of surgical strikes by India. Another compounding challenge is the plague of cross-border infiltrations in the area despite the BSF's best efforts, which continues to disrupt the region's stability due to the increasing presence of foreign insurgents. (Dhakal, 2014)

Conclusion:

The COIN campaign in Kashmir has evolved significantly since the 1980s, being built on the lessons learned by the Indian government and army. Changing from the military-focused approach of the first phase to the more holistic approach of the second has proven to be effective. However, this holistic second phase has been unable to resolve the underlying issues surrounding human rights abuses, the ever-present spectre of the ISI, the lack of economic growth in rural areas as well as the absence of a coherent and grounded political strategy for the region. It is only by addressing these pertinent challenges can India build on its successes and move closer to achieving lasting peace in the Kashmir region.

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