Insurgent Crossfire

North-East India

Subir Bhaumik

Since the British withdrew from the subcontinent, nations in the region have been at war with each other. But instead of fighting long-drawnout wars like that between Iran and Iraq, nations of South Asia have sponsored guerrilla armies and armed, trained and equipped them to harass, bleed or embarrass their rivals. The four wars in the region's post-colonial era were also born out of sponsored guerrilla wars. In 1948 and 1965, Pakistan first tried to have its way in Kashmir by sponsoring irregulars on a large scale and then followed it up with unsuccessful military campaigns aimed at ensuring the state's secession from India. In 1962, China attacked India not so much over a disputed border or India's much publicized Forward Policy but essentially in response to what it felt was a joint Indo-US covert effort in Tibet. In 1971 India rounded off its successful sponsorship of the Bengali guerrilla struggle in erstwhile East Pakistan by a speedy military campaign that resulted in the break up of Pakistan.

Insurgent Crossfire examines the origins of sponsored insurgencies and how they have shaped South Asia's tense diplomatic environment. Having done that, it studies the major sponsored guerrilla campaigns in South Asia and then seeks a detailed case study of the. phenomenon by focusing on the far eastern slice of the subcontinent. The author argues that this region, with its multitude of tribes and battling ethnicities, has been the most durable theatre of insurgent crossfire - in which nations like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China (a major actor in South Asian politics) have backed insurgencies against each other.

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The origins

The Second World War marked the beginning of the end of the Eurocentric international system that had dominated the world for over two centuries. In the process of colonial disengagement, the former colonies were exposed to violent conflicts stemming from inherent divisions of language, religion and ethnicity, that had either remained dormant or had been subtly manipulated by the colonial power. These latent sources of conflict surfaced as the prospect of colonial withdrawal drew near. The boundaries inherited by the new states were, in most cases, synthetic legacies of colonialism, often "incongruent with the natural distributions of social, economic, linguistic and cultural traits of human populations".[1]

This created a two-tier struggle in what came to be loosely characterized as the Third World—conflict between the new nation-states within a region and between dominant ruling groups and disenchanted, apprehensive minorities within the nation-states. The manifestation and contents of these conflicts vigorously interacted with the emerging world system, ideologically bipolar in the initial stages, and produced a world order more fluid than the one it had succeeded. The resultant instability in the global system was as much a consequence of the absolutist ideological pretensions of the major powers as of the inherent weaknesses of the post-colonial Third World nation-states. The emergence of nuclear deterrence, however did not dampen the levels of

superpower competition; it merely restructured and reshaped it. The unending conflicts within the Third World continued to provide the erstwhile Soviet Union and the United States ever-new opportunities for intervention. So, although the world has been spared another global war, it has witnessed a plethora of smaller wars fought mostly by Third World nation-states with rival superpower support. These "little wars"[2] have transformed countries into international or multinational battlefields, as lengthy insurgent campaigns fought between guerrilla outfits and national armies, or foreign troops, have been orchestrated by an irredentist neighbour or a hostile superpower. Each of these conflicts have been characterized as originating as a local insurrection, fuelled by varying degrees of external support, sharpened by the military and political response of the concerned nation-state or the interventionist power and complicated by varied patterns of international response.

In the Vietnam War, the thin dividing line between conventional warfare and a raging insurgency patronized by foreign sources became blurred. The anti-colonial struggle against the French turned into an undeclared war fought between guerrilla proxies of the Communist North Vietnam and the US-backed Southern regime; it erupted into conventional warfare (e.g. the North Vietnamese Army's direct assaults on the South in 1968 and 1972-73 and a near-continuous American air offensive against North Vietnam), slowly spreading to Cambodia and Laos – partly because the Vietnamese Communists were trying to widen the theatre of conflict for tactical reasons. The escalation of American response and the growing Sino-Soviet assistance to North Vietnam resulted in a complete polarization of the international community and turned this "little war" into the most unremitting international conflict since 1945 – both in military terms and in the levels of the global concerns witnessed.

Angola and Afghanistan present less complex examples of "global wars on national territories". In both these conflicts, the Americans avenged the humiliation of Vietnam by forcing Soviet armies to withdraw and/or Soviet-backed regimes to give way to those supported by the US and their allies. The two World Wars in the first half of this century led Raymond Aron to describe this century as the "Century of Total War". The numerous local conflicts in the second half of this century could prompt others to characterize the period as the "half century

of little wars". Labels are simplistic, but the growing predominance of patronized insurgencies as a foreign policy option – given the determination of the superpowers to avoid a global war at all costs – signifies a major shift in the conduct of international relations in the second half of this century.

Insurgency is the obvious military option of the weak against the strong, adopted by aspirant political groups, oppressed tribes and classes, invaded peoples and by ethnic minorities against foreign conquerors or oppressive domestic regimes. Perhaps its first recorded instance (1500 BC) is a letter from the Hittite king Mursilis in which he talks of "irregulars who, not daring to attack me by daylight, preferred to fall on me by night".[3] In form, scope and content, insurgencies begin as "little wars" as defensive campaigns, as wars of resistance, often, according to E. J. Hobsbawn, in his book *Bandit and Rebels* (London, 1969) without "any explicit ideology, organization or programme". The insurgent may begin as a "social bandit", as a "pre-political peasant rebel" or as the focus of spontaneous popular resistance, but his ultimate success depends on his mastery of social agitation, political protest, covert, and finally overt military action and his capability to weave all this into one single, though not always unilinear, revolutionary struggle. In their final form, insurgencies culminate in wars of national liberation, radical socialism, ethnic self-determination or a combination of some or all of these. They may, however, degenerate into banditry or organized crime or just end as reckless terrorist movements or surrogates of foreign powers incapable of achieving the original goals of the movement.

In the last century the political and military potential of insurgency was demonstrated in the Napoleonic Wars. Of particular note was the part played by Spanish guerrillas, sponsored by the British, in their struggle against the French forces during the peninsular campaign. Though the British subsequently belittled the part played by guerrilla leaders such as Mina and Sanchez, later studies proved otherwise: "The French had a four-to-one superiority in regular soldiers [against the English] and it was the guerrillas' diversions that prevented its concentration against Wellington, with what might have been fatal results."[4] Similarly, the Russian Army later underrated the contributions of partisan commanders such as Davydov in the defeat of Napoleon, while

proposals for raising a "popular Army" were viewed with considerable suspicion by the Prussian military leadership, even after the disastrous defeat at Jena in 1806.

Even Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were unwilling to recommend insurgency as a revolutionary tactic in advanced, industrialized societies. Engels believed guerrilla war could succeed only in conjunction with regular armies – as in the Spanish resistance. Like the British, he was inclined to see the "little war: only as part of the 'bigger war' " though outside Europe he regarded conditions for guerrilla insurgency as being more propitious. Lenin and Trotsky had serious reservations about insurgency as a long-term tactic: "The guerrilla line was useful in the initial phases, but when discipline and need for organization became paramount, it turned its negative pole on the revolution."[5]

It was left to Mao Tse-tung to recognize the value of guerrilla insurgency as a viable revolutionary tactic in the Chinese countryside. His theoretical formulations, reflected in *On Protracted War*, inspired a whole generation of Communist revolutionaries in the Third World and are still adopted as the model of revolutionary war by guerrilla groups such as the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) of Peru. But the successful Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949, Tito's partisan war against the German occupation forces and Castro's victorious guerrilla campaign in Cuba were perhaps the last of the "autonomous insurgencies".

For all its historic significance, the guerrilla war in Vietnam re-emphasized the crucial role played by foreign support in the success of insurgency in an age of large standing armies, sophisticated weaponry and specialized counterinsurgency forces. However brave or ingenious the exploits of the guerrilla forces that fought in Vietnam or Afghanistan, their ultimate victory depended upon continuous access to modern weaponry supplied by foreign patrons. The reliance of the modern insurgent on foreign patronage entails certain limitations. A growing dependence on external allies may lead guerrillas to neglect their mass support base among the people on whose behalf they claim to be fighting, a problem exacerbated by the need to relocate their headquarters to neighbouring countries (e.g. the Afghan Mujahideen's bases in Pakistan). Over-reliance on foreign support may also harm insurgent forces as the diplomatic compulsions of the patron state change in response to its own international priorities. Iran supported the insurgency

of the Iraqi Kurds and the Soviets were sympathetically disposed to them, during the initial stages of the movement. After the establishment of a pro-Soviet Baathist regime in Iraq in 1963, however, the Soviets lost interest in the Kurds, while the Shah, fearing Iraqi retaliation, closed Iran's borders to the Kurdish resistance in 1964. The "Pesh Merga" collapsed in the mid-1970s, not because the Kurds were fighting any less bravely but because, to quote a Kurdish proverb, "the Kurds have no friends".[6] The withdrawal of Chinese support to the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) from the mid-1980s is seen as the major factor behind its declining effectiveness and marginalization vis-a-vis the other ethnic guerrilla movements in Burma (Myanmar). Because it is thought of as being under undue Chinese influence it was excluded from the loose-knit umbrella organization called the "Democratic Alliance of Burma", formed in November 1988. A DAB leader told the author: "They [BCP] can sell our revolution under Chinese pressure."[7]

The best example of the fragility of patron-client relationships is the extreme swing in the ties between India and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). From 1983 onwards the LTTE was trained, armed and inspired to fight against the Sri Lankan security forces by the Indian intelligence services. Four years later, when India tried to persuade the LTTE to accept the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of 1987, signed by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President Jayawardene of Sri Lanka, the Tamil guerrillas refused to do so. India tried to convince the Tamil groups that the autonomy provisions of the accord were good enough to fulfill their aspirations of self-rule, but the LTTE was not prepared to settle for anything less than an independent Eelam (Tamil homeland). When the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) arrived in Northern Sri Lanka, they were welcomed enthusiastically by the Tamil population. However, as they began disarming the Tamil groups, in accordance with the terms of the agreement, the LTTE began to resist, provoking a massive punitive response by the Indian Army. This ushered in a bloody confrontation in the Jaffna peninsula, which eventually culminated in the phased withdrawal of the IPKF. There followed a brief "honeymoon" between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government before fighting erupted again between the Tigers and the Sri Lankan Army.

However, despite its limitations as a policy option, patronage of insurgency against rivals has continued to grow. Though suspicious of the "partisan spirit" since the revolution, the Soviets did encourage export of "small war technologies" to both Communist and national liberation movements after the Second World War on an increasing scale. Mao's China and Castro's Cuba, in the early days of the regimes, viewed themselves as the fountainhead of anti-imperialist guerrilla struggles in the world. The Western nations, the United States in particular, have fought or helped friendly regimes fight insurgencies – but whenever it has suited their interests, they have enthusiastically aided guerrilla campaigns against rival regimes, as in Afghanistan and Tibet. The "era of the little war" appears far from over.

Of the twenty-nine conventional wars fought in the Third World since 1947, only four have been in South Asia; of these one was between India and China (1962), the other three involving India and Pakistan. All three of the latter grew out of "little wars"; moreover the short border war between India and China owed as much to disputed frontiers as to Peking's considerable irritation at Indian manipulation – in collusion with the United States – of the Tibetan insurrection. Two of the Indo-Pakistani conflicts escalated into full-fledged wars as the Pakistani armed forces sought to ensure a successful outcome to their covert efforts in Kashmir. The last Indo-Pakistani war, by far the most decisive, stemmed from India's not-so-secret patronage of Bengali insurgents, and culminated in the splitting of Pakistan.

None of these wars were very lengthy, even by contemporary Third World standards. The first Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir lasted the longest – from 22 October 1947, when Pakistani-aided tribal irregulars swept into the Kashmir Valley, to January 1949, when a United Nations cease-fire took effect. Unlike later Indo-Pakistani wars, this one was confined to the state of Kashmir. The invasion of Kashmir by the "Azad Kashmir"[8] forces, a loosely organized collection of raider parties supported by the Pakistani Army, forced its ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, to announce the accession of the princely state to the Indian Union. That paved the way for a prompt Indian military response and in turn brought the Pakistani Army to join the issue in support of the irregulars. The 161 Indian Army brigade held up the advance of the tribal forces and, in early November, counter-attacked, breaking through

the tribal defences with ease. In December, owing to logistical problems, the Indian Army suffered several setbacks and retreated from certain stretches of the border. The following spring (1948) the Indians mounted a fresh offensive and reoccupied some of the territory they had lost. Apprehensive that the war might spill over into its own territory the Pakistani Army became more actively involved, deploying a parachute brigade, two field artillery regiments and a medium artillery battery West of the Indian town of Jammu. The Indian Government realized the war could not be brought to a close unless Pakistan discontinued its support for the "Azad Kashmir" forces, and therefore sought UN mediation, which finally brought an end to the war.

"Although it was the longest of the three conflicts, the first Kashmir war was also the least costly in terms of human and material losses, because of the limited firepower used by both sides."[9] Total casualties were estimated at around 1,500 – though, from the Indian point of view, New Delhi had to reconcile itself to the loss of about 5,000 square meters of territory that was subsequently incorporated into Pakistan.

The second Indo-Pakistani war in 1965 also started with a covert Pakistani effort to foment insurrection in Kashmir by infiltrating "Kashmiri freedom fighters" across the border. As the capture of some of these guerrillas revealed a Pakistan-inspired plan to bring about the secession of Kashmir, Indian forces went on the offensive. The first engagements between the two armies occurred on 15 August. A number of strategic mountain passes fell to the Indian forces, including the heavily defended Haji Pir Pass. Realizing it was the only way to contain an Indian advance into "Azad Kashmir", the Pakistani Army launched a massive attack in the Chhamb-Jaurian sector with the aim of capturing the strategic Akhnur stretch, connecting Kashmir to the rest of India.

The Indian Army, as a deterrent, expanded the theatre of the war by means of an offensive against Pakistan's heavily populated Punjab province. In order to draw the Indian armour away from Lahore, the Pakistanis drew up a boldly planned but poorly executed armored assault on Khemkaran in Indian Punjab. By mid-September the war had reached a stalemate after some initial gains on both sides, and on 20 September the UN Security Council passed a unanimous resolution urging the two

belligerents to stop the fighting. Within two days both India and Pakistan agreed to a cease-fire and the war came to an end. Airpower and armored units were widely used in this war and losses on both sides were much higher than in the first Kashmir war. India lost between 65 to 70 aircraft, 175 to 190 tanks and suffered about 3,000 casualties, not to mention almost 300 square meters of territory it calls its own; Pakistan lost about 20 aircraft, 200 tanks, 3,800 men and 720 square meters of territory. The lost territories were later restored after the cease-fire.[10]

A Pakistani air offensive against Indian bases in the Western sector followed by ground attacks in Kashmir and Punjab launched the third Indo-Pakistani war in December 1971. Yet the origins of this conflict lie in the Pakistani military crackdown on the Bengali population of East Pakistan in March 1971 and the unstinted support provided to the Bengali guerrillas by India ever since. The hostilities did not last long, though it is now known that the Indian Army had penetrated into East Pakistan over a month before the official declaration of war; in fact Indian special units had been involved in planning and even in executing surprise attacks on targets inside East Pakistan since May 1971 and the Bengali Mukti Fauj (Liberation Army) was armed entirely by the Indians. The idea was to bleed the Pakistani military machine in the Eastern theatre and so pave the way for a decisive Indian strike.

While the fighting in the Western sector proved inconclusive, Indian forces, alongside Bengali freedom fighters of the "Mukti Bahini" (Liberation Force), swept into East Pakistan. In the West, the Indian Air Force maintained a high operational profile, carrying out over 4,000 sorties, and, for the first time, there were naval engagements. In the East, the Combined Indian Mukti Bahini force reached the outskirts of Dhaka on 16 December. Later that day the Pakistani commander in the Eastern theatre, Lieutenant General Niazi, surrendered to his Indian counterpart, Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora. The next day India declared a unilateral cease-fire, which the Pakistani leadership was relieved to accept. Some 9,000 Pakistani troops were killed and over 90,000 surrendered in the Eastern theatre. India lost about 2,500 soldiers killed, but ensured the break-up of Pakistan and emerged decisively as the major power in South Asia.

The short border war between India and China began with a Chinese offensive against Indian positions in the North-East Frontier Agency – the area now known as Arunachal Pradesh – on 20 October 1962. The attack took the form of a punitive expedition following repeated Chinese warnings against India's "forward policy" in the Himalayas. A border dispute had dragged on since 1955, one which high-level discussions had failed to solve. Though the border was a contributory factor in the run-up to war, the intensity of the Chinese response was, in a large measure, conditioned by the sustained Indian patronage of the covert war in Tibet.[11]

India accepted Tibet as an "integral part of China", but it continued to aid and abet Tibetan guerrillas in close coordination with the CIA, to keep the Chinese grip on Tibet as weak as possible. The actual fighting lasted only a few weeks and ended with the unilateral cease-fire declaration by China on 20 November. Indian losses were three times as heavy as the Chinese, the defeat was absolute. The fundamental differences of political structure, conflicting ideology, divergent world view and demographic composition of the states of South Asia have, with the passing of the colonial era and the partition of the subcontinent, provided many latent sources of conflict. But how have these manifested themselves? Obviously not through frequent conventional wars. Though the major South Asian nations (China included, because it has become a major actor in the South Asian sub-system since its takeover of Tibet) possess large standing armies and have been prone to spend an increasing percentage of their GNP on defense, they have avoided lengthy wars like the nine-year Iran-Iraq conflict, in which over a million people died. Moreover, because of limitations imposed by their economies, and the relative independence of their foreign policy – which has allowed them to seek and accept aid without the direct intervention of foreign powers in the region – the states of South Asia have kept their spending on arms down to a lower level than their neighbours in West and South-East Asia. (In the period 1950-55, 75 percent of the arms trade with the developing countries flowed into Asia, of which South Asia accounted for only 15 percent; this figure fell to 8.8 percent between 1980 and 1984.[12] Though the relative level of arms expenditure has increased in both India and Pakistan since the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan

in 1979 and the closer superpower involvement in South Asia that followed, a fourth war between the two traditional rivals has been avoided. Instead the hostility between India and Pakistan has manifested itself in offensive diplomacy characterized by the patronage of low-intensity insurgencies on each other's territories, e.g. in Kashmir and Sind. This sponsoring of continuous guerrilla warfare, easily regulated by the control exercised over the insurgents by the host countries in which they are based, trained and supplied from, has created a pattern of what I term "insurgent crossfire" that is firmly rooted in the ancient diplomatic traditions of the region.

Twenty-three centuries after Kautilya advised Chandragupta Maurya against making a dash for Magadha, capital of the powerful Nanda kingdom, suggesting instead that he wage a war of attrition,[13] his South Asian descendants have adopted the "promotion of disaffection", which Kautilya described as the "most effective means of fighting an enemy", and turned it into an essential element of their offensive diplomacy. It is now part and parcel of the unique "low-cost offensive posture" adopted by South Asian nations towards each other since decolonization. Rarely has sponsorship of an insurgent movement in one country generated an identical response from the affected nation: the Vietnamese have not encouraged an insurgency in Thailand or China as a riposte to their aid to the Cambodian resistance; Israel responded to Arab patronage of the PLO with a combination of assassination, bombing attacks and straightforward military offensives such as the Operation Gallilee, launched against PLO-dominated South Lebanon in 1982; the Soviet Union and the United States have boosted insurgencies in each other's sphere of influence, though not within their respective national borders. The reasons for this are not hard to find: insurgencies can be fostered, not created, so the possibility of backing an insurgency in response to that of a rival power arises only if both protagonists have simmering ethnic, religious or political problems which a sponsored insurgency might exploit.

South Asia possesses ideal conditions for sponsored insurgencies – its constituent parts are incomplete and artificially formed nation-states consisting of ethno-religious groups in uneasy cohabitation and has also witnessed a certain institutionalization of the phenomenon. If Pakistan has patronized insurgencies in Kashmir and Indian

Punjab, then India has done likewise, albeit more successfully, in erstwhile East Pakistan. Pakistani intelligence agencies allege that India plays a major role in boosting ethnic separatism in Sind and Baluchistan. The Chinese, in close cooperation with Pakistan, responded to India's support for the insurgency in Tibet by assisting guerrilla forces in North-East India. Although it is only natural to expect an identical response from nations in a condition of conventional war, the uniformity of stimulus and response in pursuit of conflict by non-conventional means gives the diplomatic processes of South Asia a distinct identity of their own. Leaving aside the major actors – India, Pakistan and China – even Bangladesh has sheltered Mizo and Tripura rebels from North-East India in response to India's encouragement of tribal insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Only when the strategic disparity is as great as that between India and Nepal or India and Sri Lanka, has covert support for insurgents not been met with a similar response.

A chronology of South Asia's "little wars" would span the entire duration of the post-colonial regional sub-system in South Asia.[14] Not one year has been without its quota of patronized insurgency. Pakistan's attempts to manipulate events in Kashmir to its advantage have been almost continuous; Indian involvement in fomenting the Tibetan insurrection continued for a decade after 1955; and Chinese support for insurgents in North-East India lasted for over twenty years from the early 1960s. Indian involvement in East Pakistan was not as precipitous as it may at the time have seemed to be, though active help to Bengali political organizations did not pre-date the Pakistani crackdown of 1971. And by the late 1970s India was backing Tamil guerrillas in Sri Lanka and tribal insurgents in Bangladesh. Thus although South Asia has suffered only four short conventional wars, it has witnessed an unusual continuity of conflict by other means. Academic studies of South Asian regional diplomacy and inter-state relations have concentrated on the four wars and their origins and have overlooked the emergent pattern of foreign-patronized insurgencies as the predominant form of conflict. Moreover the insurgencies themselves have usually been studied in isolation.

With every indication at the time of writing, that an insurrection in the Indian state of Kashmir, apparently supported by Pakistan, is set to continue, South Asia's "Era of Insurgent Crossfire"

seems here to stay, a point borne out by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, when she bitterly criticized the late President Zia-ul-Haq for encouraging Sikh terrorists in Indian Punjab: "If he plays the Punjab card, India will play the Sind card, and we have more to lose."[15]

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