

# The War of Ideas between India and Pakistan

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## Introduction

This article argues that India and Pakistan are locked in an ideological impasse, which stems from their respective identities as nation-states. Such a dynamic does not permit the emergence of lasting amicable relations. At best, it can only allow for armed coexistence, much like the relationship between the United States of America and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Terrorism and Kashmir are side-issues; the real contest is between two different interpretations of how politics in the Indian subcontinent ought to be handled.

The article is divided into two sections. Section-I advances the proposition that the Pakistani state is an ideological contradiction. It points out that the Two Nation theory, usually cited as the basis for Pakistan's creation as well as its claim on Kashmir, is at odds with official support for Pan-Islamism. In section-II, the article examines how Pakistan is exploiting this duality to its advantage, through perception management directed at international audience. It concludes by suggesting that India should concentrate on negating the Two Nation theory by promoting secularism domestically.

## An Ideological Contradiction

Pakistan was created on the basis of a presumption that Muslims and Hindus could not coexist within a democratic framework. Its founders, members of the anglicised Indian Muslim elite, maintained that both communities represented distinct 'nations', and needed separate spheres of influence.<sup>1</sup> Their demand for a separate Muslim homeland acquired popular support through religious mobilisation. Any Muslim who did not support the call for a separate state was threatened and branded an infidel.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, when the Indian subcontinent was eventually partitioned, the Two Nation theory was only partially vindicated. Although a million people were killed in religious riots, more Muslims still chose to remain in 'Hindu' India than join Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Three years after partition, only 7 per cent of Pakistanis spoke Urdu, their national language, as opposed to 38 per cent of Indian Muslims.<sup>4</sup> Even more worrisome for the Pakistani leadership, all major centres of subcontinental Islamic thought remained within the borders of independent India.

Upon its creation, therefore, 'Pakistan' represented only a landmass. Unlike Israel (created shortly thereafter), it lacked a spiritual connection with the territory it occupied. This detracted from the credibility of the new state as a Muslim homeland. The Muslim-majority kingdom of Jammu & Kashmir (hereafter abbreviated to 'Kashmir') became crucial to Pakistani self-sanctification. Its accession to an Islamic state would have reiterated the principle that religion defined nationality – a principle that the leadership of post-colonial India had already rejected.

As is well-known, Kashmir acceded to India instead. The Pakistan elite chose to refer to the kingdom's subsequent status as reflecting the 'unfinished agenda of partition'. It thus generated an impression, both domestically and internationally, that Kashmir would have acceded to it, but for Indian perfidy. The Two Nation theory was elevated in Pakistani discourse to the status of an absolute truth, instead of remaining a contested abstraction between armchair intellectuals.

In effect, the territorial dispute over Kashmir masked a bigger ideological dispute over whether Pakistan had sufficient grounds to call itself a 'nation', distinct from the rest of India. Once the latter had declared itself secular, it had also implied that the creation of Pakistan was unnecessary, since all religions would be treated equally by post-colonial Indian governments. Perhaps the first analyst to recognise that Kashmir was just a symptom, and not the root cause, of India-Pakistan rivalry was Bhola Nath Mullik.

Writing in 1948, Mullik (then an Assistant Director in the Indian Intelligence Bureau) warned that Pakistani irredentism was not confined to Kashmir. The incomplete nature of partition in the Indian heartland, where Hindus and Muslims still coexisted amicably, was the real source of tension between the two states. As long as Pakistan symbolised the idea that both communities could not share the same political space, it would threaten Indian internal stability and in turn, be threatened by it. Reducing the threat of Pakistani subversion would require discrediting the Two Nation theory.<sup>5</sup>

Almost simultaneously, the Pakistani Intelligence Bureau developed a similar conception of the bilateral relationship. Its top officials believed that the preservation of Pakistan required balkanising the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious Indian state into its constituent parts, with each identity group representing a separate 'nation'. From this vision arose the Qurban Ali Doctrine – a paradigm for continuous but covert Pakistani subversion within Indian territory.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, right from their creation, secular India and Islamic Pakistan were locked in a zero-sum game. India scored an important advantage in 1971, when civil war broke out in Pakistan. Over the course of eight months, the Pakistan army massacred between 300,000 and three million Bengali Muslims. It justified such brutalisation by indoctrinating its personnel to view Bengalis as 'Hindus in disguise'.<sup>7</sup> Killing them was, therefore, not contrary to the Two Nation theory.

Such terminological gymnastics aside, the fact remained that with the secession of its Bengali province in December 1971, Pakistan lost much of its rationale. Its territory now had even less significance from an ideological perspective. To reconcile with its new borders, the Pakistani state began rewriting its history. The so-called 'Arabist shift' in its domestic narrative created a 'tendency to view the present in terms of an imagined Arab past with the Arab as the only "real/pure" Muslim'.<sup>8</sup>

Basically, after 1971, Pakistan domestically replaced the Two Nation theory with a Pan-Islamic or 'One Nation' theory. Its education system propagated the notion that Pakistani nationhood dated back to 711 AD, when Arab conquerors introduced Islam to the Sind region of India.<sup>9</sup> This narrative overlooked the fact that Islam had appeared in southern India 82 years earlier.<sup>10</sup> It also strengthened Pakistan's claim to Kashmir domestically, by portraying the region as having once been part of a Pan-Islamic realm. Lastly, the Arabist shift depicted modern-day India as representing 'Hindu' usurpation of Pakistani territory, having once been ruled by Muslims.

The new discourse, however, came with some drawbacks. It portrayed British colonialists, who ruled India between 1757 and 1947, as invaders of 'Pakistan' and enemies of Islam.<sup>11</sup> Although such sentiments could be fostered within the confines of Pakistani classrooms, they risked alienating the West if propagated internationally. (By the 'West', this article refers specifically to the Anglo-American world, not all European or developed countries). Furthermore, they implied that Pakistani irredentism was not limited to Kashmir, but potentially extended to the whole of India. Since Islamabad was keen to acquire Western support on the Kashmir issue, it needed to compartmentalise what it told domestic and international audiences. The Two Nation theory was therefore officially retained, even as the One Nation theory was unofficially popularised.

Pakistan became a schizophrenic state. On the one hand, it possessed a distinct identity within the international community of nation-states, with sovereignty over a finite piece of territory. On the other, it perceived itself as a protector of Muslims worldwide, with an obligation to make their struggles its own.<sup>12</sup> Extra-territorial intervention was ingrained in the narrative of Pan-Islamism. The result was a country that formally insisted on others respecting its sovereignty, while informally not recognising theirs. The next section shall describe how Islamabad rationalised this duality to international audiences.

### **Leveraging Ideological Duality**

Writers on civil-military relations often compare Pakistan with 19th century Prussia, arguing that instead of being a state with an army, it is 'an army with a state'.<sup>13</sup> There is another basis for comparison however: the leadership of both states learnt to use diplomatic double-speak while pursuing expansionist policies.

Under Otto von Bismarck, Prussia followed three principles to convince established powers not to intervene while it militarily redrew the map of Europe. First, it insisted that its wars against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and France (1870-71) were each motivated by limited aims. Second, it cited common values among European states to create an impression that it shared the same objectives as established powers, and only had a different way of achieving them. Lastly, it set 'rhetorical traps' for opposing governments (i.e. all those suspicious of its long-term motives) by pointing to their past statements and arguing that their current policies contradicted these.<sup>14</sup>

Pakistan has adopted an identical approach to concealing tensions between the Two Nation theory and Pan-Islamism, regarding matters of state sovereignty. Firstly, it has portrayed itself to international audiences as a weak power with no geopolitical agenda beyond self-preservation. The key to this image is a discourse linking the status of Kashmir to ongoing instability in Afghanistan. Pakistani support for Afghan Islamists is depicted as a quest for 'strategic depth' against India. Even Pakistani writers admit, however, that this usage differs from traditional concepts of strategic depth, which involve creating a buffer zone between two opposing armies, not to the rear of one.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, Islamabad has emphasised the Two Nation theory in its discourse on Kashmir to foreign audiences, thereby appealing to shared norms of nation-building. Since religiously-defined statehood is a European construct, Pakistani irredentism finds sympathy amongst some Western governments. The present-day state system is itself derived from the 1648 Treaties of Westphalia, which established a credo of 'whose region, his religion'.<sup>16</sup> It aimed to contain sectarian rivalry between Catholics and Protestants, by allocating sovereignty to each within well-defined territories. The nation-state concept has, therefore, come to signify the homogeneity of a people and mutual respect for political boundaries.<sup>17</sup>

India faces an uphill task in explaining to neutral governments why it rejected the Two Nation theory - a subcontinental version of the exclusivist Westphalian ideal. Its claim to being secular is considered suspect, given the violence that accompanied partition in 1947, and occasional riots between Hindus and Muslims. Like Pakistani nationalism, Indian secularism is an unproven idea - an 'essentially contested concept'.<sup>18</sup> Its applicability to the real world is open to interpretation, and its respectability varies with circumstances as well as the biases of those doing the interpreting.

Internationally, the Indian case has also been muddled by the fact that New Delhi's claim to Kashmir is based on a legal argument. Although this argument itself is almost flawless, it takes some understanding from those unfamiliar with its intricacies. Pakistan in contrast, has adopted a reductionist approach whose simplicity is appealing: Kashmir was meant to join it on religious grounds, but India engaged in a land-grab. The logic of partition favours this interpretation over the complicated Indian one.

By fashioning an irredentist narrative bereft of nuances, Pakistan has conveyed its case to the broadest possible audience. This propaganda technique was used to good effect in May-June 1999, when Islamabad insisted that its military intrusion into Kargil was not an intrusion at all. Rather, it portrayed the Indian army as attacking local insurgents fighting for self-determination. Pakistani officials calculated that foreign commentators would not know the demography of Kargil - a Shia-dominated locality that did not support the Sunni-led Kashmiri insurgency.

Post 1999, New Delhi has attempted to gain moral superiority by highlighting Pakistani sponsorship of jihadist terrorism, while abstaining from overt or covert retaliation to specific terrorist attacks. This tactic stalled on two counts: first, the international community did not regard violence in Kashmir as 'terrorism'. Instead, it perceived Kashmir as a disputed region whose status was open to negotiation. Second, following 9/11 Pakistan grew increasingly important to Western counterterrorist efforts, due to the sheer number of international jihadist plots originating from its territory.

Pakistan also managed to project terrorist ‘spectaculars’ within India as the work of non-state actors outside the control of its intelligence establishment. Most Western analysts have been prepared to buy into this argument, after making allowances for the possible involvement of ‘rogue’ state officials. Basically, these analysts do not subscribe to Indian assessments that events such as Mumbai 2008 amount to covert warfare, conducted as part of Pakistani state policy.<sup>19</sup>

Thirdly, Islamabad has been helped in the battle for international opinion by the tendency of Indian political leaders to fall into rhetorical traps. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated in September 2006 that India and Pakistan were both victims of terrorism. While this observation was statistically true, it did not reflect the whole truth. As a Pakistani columnist has pointed out, there was no basis for comparison since Indian terrorists never rampaged through Pakistani streets.<sup>20</sup> To suggest that the two countries are equal victims of terrorism was misleading and amounted to an own goal by the Indian government. Pakistani official spokesmen have capitalised on this mistake.

By constructing a narrative that depicts itself as restrained and acting in conformity with international norms, Pakistan has legitimised its intervention in Afghanistan and Kashmir. It has blunted the Indian diplomatic response by projecting New Delhi as being inconsistent. Most importantly, however, it has managed to engineer a mutually reinforcing dynamic between the Two Nation theory and Pan-Islamism. Pakistani spokesmen argue that if international jihadism is to be curbed and Afghanistan stabilised, the Kashmir issue needs to be resolved. Few Western analysts doubt that by ‘resolution’, what Islamabad really wants is an international ruling in its favour.<sup>21</sup> However, they do not question the internal logic of this narrative: how can settlement of a territorial conflict reduce the potency of a borderless concept? Focusing on this issue would require acknowledging the extent to which Pakistani society has been radicalised – an unpleasant thought for any policy adviser.

### **Religious Tolerance is Itself a Weapon**

This article argues that Pakistan has struck an intelligent balance between preaching the Two Nation theory and practicing Pan-Islamism. Western governments depending on Pakistani counterterrorist cooperation have gone along with the dichotomy. These governments are not ill-disposed towards India, but their perceptual filters are more compatible with the Pakistani discourse than the Indian one. New Delhi can do little to change this, and perhaps should not waste time attempting to.

Instead of lobbying the West to dissuade Pakistan from supporting terrorists, India should strengthen its own secular credentials and thereby undermine the long-term basis for Pakistani statehood. Centrifugal forces are already tearing away at Pakistani society, in the form of ethnonationalism and sectarian violence. These forces would be strengthened over the next decade if India builds itself into a prosperous and inclusive state. In the interim, it needs to resist Anglo-American pressure to make concessions on Kashmir.

The difficulty of enforcing secularism cannot be underestimated. As the 2006 Sachar Committee report noted, widespread bias against Muslims pervades Indian society.<sup>22</sup> Muslims are wrongly believed to be complicit in atrocities carried out by Pakistani terrorists, and are victims of retaliation by Hindu vigilantes. Such trends, if not aggressively countered through policing and inter-faith dialogue, risk strengthening the argument for Pakistan and for religious segregation. Their elimination is necessary if India is to win the war of ideas with its troublesome western neighbour.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXL, No. 581, July-September 2010.