

# Conflict Areas in India: Lessons Learnt

Jayanto N Choudhury, IPS (Retd)<sup>®</sup>

## Abstract

*78 years after Independence, armed movements continue across the country to address perceived grievances. Lessons learnt over the past 40 years could help frame a strategic approach to reduce the cost to national resources and human suffering. Key measures include improving governance, enhancing police capabilities to strengthen counter-insurgency capacity, emphasising intelligence, ensuring seamless coordination, deploying forces strategically, engaging with communities, minimising collateral damage, and working at multiple levels to deny the use of safe havens in neighbouring countries.*

## Introduction

The resurgence of terror attacks in the Jammu region in Jul 2024, followed by massive Counter-Insurgency/Counter-Terrorism (CI/CT) operations, underscores the complex internal conflict landscape across India. 78 years after Independence, armed movements persist across the country to advance diverse political, economic, and social agendas. Apart from obstructing the socio-economic progress of these conflict areas, a strategic concern is that adversaries could exploit these potential fault lines.

Different internal conflict scenarios have called for varied responses, most of which have been contained over time. While a 'One-size-fits-all' approach is unrealistic, lessons learnt from past experiences can help frame a strategic and operational approach that reduces the cost to national resources and human suffering. Internal conflicts over the past 40 years and effective responses are reviewed below, followed by a few lessons learnt.

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<sup>®</sup>Jayanto N Choudhury, IPS (Retd) was Director General, National Security Guard and Director General of Police, Assam. He is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the United Service Institution of India and Special Monitor, National Human Rights Commission.

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## Past Experience

Since the 1980s, 45,000 people have died in terror incidents, including 15,000 civilians and 6,000 security personnel. Operation Blue Star, the 1993 serial bomb blasts in Mumbai, the hijacking of IC-814, the attack on Parliament in 2001, and the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai are merely the tip of the iceberg of repeated terror assaults, not just in conflict-prone states but also against iconic landmarks across the country.

The pro-Khalistan militant movement took 14 years to contain, with nearly 12,000 lives lost. This was the first militant movement equipped with weapons more sophisticated than those available in the police arsenal, cadres trained in military-style tactics, and the capability to attack targets globally, as demonstrated by the Kanishka Air India bombing. Serial bombings and the assassinations of even high-level leaders in the heart of the nation's capital highlighted the vulnerability of ordinary citizens and the inadequacy of the response capability. This marked the first salvo in the 'Proxy War', directly guided by controllers in Pakistan, who provided direction, training, military-grade weapons, and explosives.

The threat was met with a national consensus, improved police capabilities, better coordination, and a strengthened criminal justice system. The imperative to win public support was learned the hard way. Khalistani terrorists have been unable to carry out acts of violence for decades, but the embers of the movement persist, primarily in parts of Europe, Australia, and North America.

Armed movements have been integral to asserting political demands in the North-East Region (NER) since Independence, beginning with the Naga Hills in the 1950s, followed by the Lushai Hills; the Meitei outfits in the Imphal Valley of Manipur; the tribal areas of Tripura in the 1960s and 1970s; Assam from the late 1980s; and finally, in Meghalaya, both the Hynniewtrep (Khasi Hills) and Achik (Garo Hills) ethnic militant movements. Common features have included:

- Assertion of a separate socio-political identity reflected either in demands for secession or for a separate state.
- Older groups like the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), and People's Liberation Army of Manipur provided training, sanctuary, and arms to emerging outfits.

- Sanctuaries in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, with transit routes through Nepal. ULFA, and earlier the Naga, Mizo, and Manipur insurgencies, received some support from Pakistan's agencies and, indirectly, from China.

The governments of the Centre and the northeastern states deserve much of the credit for the improved situation. After initial setbacks, Security Forces (SF) built the necessary capacity, while the government kept its doors open for talks. In Mizoram, the UnderGround (UG) outfit Mizo National Front joined the political mainstream. In Assam, the Unified Headquarters evolved as an enabling platform for effective coordination. The ceasefire in Nagaland has brought unprecedented peace for almost three decades. The denial of sanctuaries in Bhutan, Bangladesh, and, to an extent, Myanmar exerted significant pressure on the UG outfits. The erosion of public support for militants, reinforced by a focus on development, also played a key role. Today, valley-based groups in Manipur account for most of the violence in the region, though the ongoing Kuki-Meitei conflict requires a different perspective. Militant groups in Manipur are now embedded within their ethnic communities. Unfortunately, the state police are on the back foot, with thousands of arms looted and the force deeply divided along ethnic lines. In both Nagaland and Manipur, armed militias enforce a parallel administrations in some areas.

Maoist militancy has resulted in nearly 7,500 fatalities over the past decade, including 3,000 civilians and approximately 2,000 police personnel. States like undivided Andhra Pradesh have effectively neutralised the threat. However, 35 districts across central Indian states are still classified by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) as 'Affected', with 25 districts accounting for 90 per cent of Maoist violence.

The response of the Centre and Maoist-affected states has been multi-sectoral. The MHA's National Action Plan provided an overall strategy that has improved coordination, streamlined deployment, incorporated technological multipliers such as unmanned aerial vehicles, and prioritised infrastructure development. Other initiatives include enhanced surrender policies, creation of specially trained state police units, and recruitment of local tribal youth.

The Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs), heavily deployed in Maoist-affected states, are well-organised and equipped. However, limited tenures exacerbate the unfamiliarity of their personnel with the local population and terrain. Their effectiveness is further hindered by the inability to operate seamlessly across state borders. Adopting a more localised operational doctrine and raising specialised units such as the Commando Battalion for Resolute Action have yielded positive outcomes. These efforts, along with special anti-Maoist units of state police, have achieved tactical successes against the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army.

National economic priorities necessitate large-scale mining in the forest reserves of Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Jharkhand, and Odisha, resulting in the displacement of Adivasi tribal communities. Rehabilitation schemes are often inadequate, leaving youth vulnerable to recruitment as Maoist foot soldiers. The challenge is to build confidence among these communities, ensuring they also benefit from the intended economic transformation.

There have been ups and downs over the past three decades in the counter-militancy campaign in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). This remains the main battleground of Pakistan's proxy war, driven primarily by its 'Deep State'. Support for militancy has persisted regardless of regime changes, with every possible method employed to sustain violence. While militancy in the Kashmir Valley has been contained, a conflict theatre has reopened in the Jammu region. Pakistan's 'State-within-a-state' continues its efforts to stoke violence and deepen communal divides. While both central SF and the J&K Police have developed effective CI/CT capabilities, the prime need now is to craft a counter-narrative that resonates with the public.

Efforts to recruit local youth from other parts of India for Islamist movements, even if limited in scale, cannot be ignored. Terrorism in the hinterland remains a potential threat, particularly from Pakistan-sponsored groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. So far, Islamist terror incidents in India have borne a Pakistan footprint. Even in the case of the Indian Mujahideen, its apex leadership operated out of Pakistan. However, the effort was to conceal this 'Smoking Gun' by projecting an 'Indian' identity.

India has a challenging neighbourhood. Festering internal conflicts could escalate into the threat of 'Two-and-a-half Fronts' in the event of war with its main adversaries. Pakistan's deep state continues to use terror as an instrument of statecraft and a low-cost weapon of 'Grey-zone Warfare'. The denial of sanctuaries in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and contiguous locations in Myanmar was critical in containing violence in the NER. Similarly, the bold actions by the Royal Government of Bhutan played a significant role. Nepal and the porous terrain along the Indo-Bangladesh frontier have been exploited for infiltration by terrorists. The regime changes in Bangladesh and the disturbed conditions in Myanmar require close monitoring to prevent efforts to re-establish camps by outfits like the ULFA (Independent), which have remained outside negotiations. Border management must be enhanced by adding depth to systemic measures to thwart crossings along these porous frontiers. This includes leveraging the support of border communities, deploying technological multipliers, ensuring seamless coordination with state police, and strengthening infrastructure through careful deployment of Border Guarding Forces (BGFs). China's intentions also warrant monitoring, though there is currently little evidence of direct support to separatist groups in the NER, as was the case earlier.

Beyond India's immediate neighbourhood, Pakistan-based terror groups have attempted to raise funds and mobilise support in the Middle East. Moreover, global Islamic groups are perceived to be at the forefront of contemporary global terrorism. Most global terrorism-related fatalities each year occur in six or seven countries, where these groups operate. With terror networks exploiting global information and communication technology, as well as social media platforms, India continues to collaborate with friendly governments to monitor these groups.

### **Lessons Learnt**

**Strengthening Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism Response Capacity.** Police stations are the foundation of India's internal security architecture. However, state police forces are often the weakest link in the initial phase of a CI response—being understaffed, poorly trained, and lacking motivation. Police organisations and training, designed primarily for public order, conventional crime, and traffic management, are often outmatched

by motivated, well-trained, and better-armed militants. Furthermore, the poor public image of the police undermines their ability to enlist public support. Under India's Constitution, policing is a state subject. As a result, the Centre funds schemes such as raising India Reserve Battalions, but rarely focuses on strengthening the capacity of the civil police. Even today, the Centre's Modernisation of Police Forces scheme is primarily allocated to weapons, fortified buildings, and similar infrastructure, rather than expanding the network of police stations, establishing civil police specialist units, or developing the skills and attitudes essential for modern policing.

**Strengthening Legal and Forensic Frameworks.** Special laws, such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) are necessary to augment the regular legal framework, but their application requires rigorous oversight to minimise abuse. The capacity of state and central forensic facilities must be upgraded, with simplified evidence requirements for admissibility in terror cases, particularly those involving firearms, explosives, or financing. Special courts and trained prosecutors are essential to ensure speedy trials. A robust Witness Protection Scheme is crucial to safeguard individuals who agree to testify as prosecution witnesses. Additionally, streamlined procedures for securing digital evidence from servers located abroad and strengthening Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties and Memorandums of Understanding with selected countries will enhance the capability to investigate cross-border terrorist offences. Prisons often become recruitment grounds, where hardened terrorists influence petty criminals. A comprehensive prison policy is required to segregate inmates effectively, with staff trained to manage and rehabilitate terrorist prisoners.

**Optimising Central Armed Police Forces and Border Guarding Forces.** The CAPFs, now a million-strong, support state police but require reorganisation, specialised training, and equipment for effective CI/CT roles. BGFs serve as the first line of defence along India's 15,000 km of land frontiers and 7,500 km of coastline. In addition to physical barriers and infrastructure, such as lighting and roads, better utilisation of technology, enhanced coordination with state police, and investment in border communities can significantly strengthen border surveillance.

**Balancing Army and Police Roles in Internal Security.** Similarly, the Indian Army, in an Internal Security (IS) role, has provided significant support in internal conflicts, whether in Punjab or the NER, and remains on the front lines in J&K. The decision to keep the Army away from the counter-Maoist campaign demonstrates that, with a clear mandate, strong leadership, and appropriate training, state police forces, supported by CAPFs, can shoulder much of the CI role. Moreover, the prolonged diversion of the Army for IS threats could adversely affect its warfighting capabilities—something India cannot afford, with two potentially hostile fronts.

**Specialised Units for Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Insurgency.** State armed police often lack CT/CI capabilities in the initial stages, but several states have since raised specialised units. Force One (Maharashtra), Garuda (Karnataka), and Octopus (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) are trained and equipped for urban interventions. Other specialised units are trained to address jungle and rural insurgencies, such as the Greyhounds (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), the Special Operations Group of J&K, Assam Police Rangers, C-60 in Maharashtra, and the Special Task Unit (Odisha). The National Security Guard (NSG) has occasionally conducted annual exercises for these Special Weapons and Tactics units to review preparedness and has undertaken field visits to a few states. However, this process needs to be systematised to ensure that state special units have the required capacity in terms of personnel, weapons and equipment, individual and team skills, and training facilities.

**Intelligence as the Cornerstone of Counter-Insurgency.** Intelligence should be the first line of defence in any CI operation, but it is often lacking in the initial stages. Anonymity acts as a shield for insurgents and terrorists, who appear capable of striking anyone, anywhere. Clarity about the insurgent organisation, identifying and tracking individuals of interest and their overground networks, and locating arms caches and hideouts—all contribute to building the capability for precise, intelligence-led operations. Additionally, insights into internal differences within insurgent or terrorist outfits, whether related to their use of violence or the end goals of their movement—are critical. Generating strategic intelligence becomes particularly challenging when multiple outfits are involved, some with headquarters located beyond India's

borders. A combination of techniques—technical intelligence, human intelligence, systematic interrogation of arrested individuals, motivating surrendered cadres, and leveraging local information through the state police—plays a vital role in addressing this challenge.

**Cutting Off Terror Financing.** Funds are the lifeblood of insurgent and terrorist outfits, often raised through trafficking in narcotics, arms, and fake Indian currency notes, as well as extortion, looting, and kidnapping for ransom. Countering this requires measures to reduce access to *hawala* (an informal money transfer system) and money laundering channels, as well as tightening banking procedures. Sections 3 and 4 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act specifically address terrorist financing, with offences under the UAPA included.

**Evolving Central Counter-Terrorism Capabilities.** Central CT capabilities have continuously evolved. The NSG was raised after Operation Blue Star in 1984, as a purely military response was seen as leading to unacceptable social costs. The National Investigation Agency was established following the 26/11 attacks, recognising that offences like terrorism transcend the territorial jurisdictions of individual states. Intelligence coordination mechanisms, such as the Multi-Agency Centre and its subsidiary State Multi-Agency Centres, were also introduced to break down the silos in which different agencies operate.

**Engaging with Communities.** Time and again, not just in India but globally, public support has been recognised as the ‘Centre of gravity’ of any effective CI strategy. Consistently engaging communities in rural and jungle areas has proven to be a force multiplier, but such engagement needs to go beyond mere ‘Civic Action’ and become an integral part of CI capacity-building. The heroic role of the staff at the hotel Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai, during the 26/11 attacks demonstrates the potential of engaging the public in creating a CT *kavach* (shield), even in urban areas. Often, a lack of trust in government institutions must be overcome, as well as the inability to meet even the basic needs of the people. Yet, with efforts to motivate and instil a sense of security, rural communities have shown tremendous support in conflict areas, even at great personal risk. Most of the population in such areas is usually fence-sitters, simply wishing to avoid trouble for

themselves and their families, whether from SF or militants. By engaging and winning over this majority, the small minority committed to the insurgent cause can be effectively isolated.

**Engaging Vulnerable Youth.** A comprehensive approach to engage with vulnerable youth is essential. This includes liberal surrender and amnesty policies, as well as livelihood opportunities for those who have joined insurgent or terrorist groups due to misguided emotions, threats, or peer pressure. Community involvement and the active engagement of social power centres are critical to making such initiatives more effective. Furthermore, an imaginative yet credible narrative that effectively counters insurgent or terrorist propaganda is indispensable.

**Human Rights/Collateral Damage.** It is often said that “You can not make an omelette without breaking eggs”, and collateral damage was viewed as unavoidable in counter-militant operations. Sometimes, uninvolved civilians do get killed. However, what is unacceptable is a disregard for civilian lives, the use of disproportionate force, or treating the entire population as hostile with the aim of intimidating locals against supporting militants. In such situations, collateral damage is counterproductive to achieving CI and CT objectives. It has been learned the hard way that respecting human rights is not just a moral imperative but also an indispensable component of an effective CI strategy. Too often, aggrieved youth have joined militant or terrorist ranks seeking revenge for family members killed or allegedly tortured during interrogation, or even for personal humiliation at the hands of the SF. Similarly, entire communities have been driven to support militants out of anger. As the United States discovered in Vietnam, it is possible to ‘Win most battles yet lose the war’.

**Coordination.** Effective coordination mechanisms are essential when multiple forces are inducted. Platforms that have proven effective include the Unified Headquarters at the apex level and District-level Coordination Committees. However, there is a risk of these becoming mere bureaucratic exercises. Individual egos, differing assessments of the situation, conflicting priorities, unhealthy competition, and variations in organisational culture can render these mechanisms dysfunctional. The military culture emphasises defining clear objectives, following an unambiguous chain of command, and implementing a systematic campaign plan.

In contrast, the socio-political environment of a state is more ambiguous. Political leadership operates with a broader agenda that can impact CI priorities, while multiple centres of influence exist. State police, being part of the state's governance ecosystem, tend to look to political leadership for direction. Side-lining civil governance is counterproductive, as the political apparatus often has the closest ground-level connections, even if perceived as flawed. Coordination forums are most effective when the apex level focuses on the macro perspective, works toward consensus on an overall assessment of the situation, sets broad objectives with clearly identified outcomes, builds the necessary capacity, and develops an effective counter-narrative alongside other non-kinetic measures. Within this strategic framework, detailed operational planning is better achieved by smaller operational sub-groups, with tactical implementation carried out at the unit or district level.

**Deployment.** When conditions in conflict areas deteriorate to 'Ground Zero' and governance collapses, central forces are often rushed in, usually without adequate orientation or training specific to the situation. To outside personnel, all 'Locals' may appear sympathetic to insurgents—a perception worsened by incomplete intelligence. At this stage, organising CI grids on a geographical basis becomes unavoidable, along with general area operations. Measures such as checkpoints, armed pickets for area domination, constant patrolling, and cordon-and-search operations aim to deny freedom of movement to militants and insurgents but are often perceived as harassment by the public. Additionally, the saturation deployment of external armed forces projects an image of 'Occupation', characterised by heavily fortified bunkers and personnel unfamiliar with the local culture and terrain. This not only alienates the population but also provides militants with more targets to attack, bolstering their image as being capable of challenging the government.

**Transitioning Counter-Insurgency from Defence to Consolidation.** This defensive phase should transition forward as soon as intelligence provides a clearer picture of 'Hotspots' and the militant order of battle. The grid should then differentiate between more secure and less secure areas, with emphasis on intelligence-led operations. Moreover, measuring success solely by the 'Body Counts' of killed militants or weapons recovered is

inadequate. The deployment of armed pickets should be carefully calibrated to avoid projecting an overbearing presence and instead focus on reassuring the population, with personnel trained to engage constructively with local communities. The bulk of the available forces can be kept in strategically located reserves, where personnel can continue their familiarisation and training. In more secure areas, local communities can be organised for sustained self-defence. The objectives of a CI campaign in its later stages must be to consolidate and expand secure areas, while isolating the hotspots and regions where militants have a stronger support base. Building the capacity of the local police and securing the support of local communities is indispensable to achieving a long-term security solution. Otherwise, militants are likely to return as soon as central forces withdraw.

### **Conclusion**

Internal conflicts are likely to persist in India in the foreseeable future, but effective containment can significantly reduce their negative impact on national aspirations. Achieving this requires better governance in affected states, including strengthening policing capacity by raising specialised CT and CI units, while avoiding the over-militarisation of the civil police. A CI strategy must adopt not only a 'Whole-of-government' approach but also an 'All-of-society' approach, finding innovative ways to engage the community. Simultaneously, denying support to militants and terrorists from neighbouring countries may require efforts beyond engaging governments. It is equally important to influence public opinion in these countries through systematic people-to-people engagement, as well as strategic investments and trade, especially when formal power centres act against India's interests.

### **References**

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