



Proliferation of SALW in South Asia: A Case Study of Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper assesses and explores the institutionalisation of non-state actors in Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine. Following the formation of its dual strategy during the Cold War era, by analysing historical, geopolitical and contemporary case studies that have provided an opportunity to the Pakistan army to assert dominance in the country's political affairs. It delves into Pakistan's domestic SALW proliferation as well as the porous border region, enabling illicit arms trafficking and diversion of military-grade weapons to non-state actors by assessing the linkage between SALW proliferation, terrorism and Pakistan's intelligence role in organising terror activities in the Kashmir and Afghanistan, thereby supporting Pakistan's asymmetric warfare capabilities. This paper focuses on the importance of studying SALW and Pakistan's political affairs, the deep connection with militant organisations as covert proxies, through case studies of Pakistan.

Keywords: *Proliferation, SALW, Pakistan, Non State Actors, Terrorism*

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Introduction

Proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in South Asia and specifically in Pakistan during recent years has made it a focal point in global politics, concerning the unmonitored production of illegal which is not only domestically produced but also imported from other countries. The proliferation of SALW in Pakistan is the world's largest concentration market of illegal weapons, with civilian firearms estimated at around 43 million. (Mahajan, 2025b)

Pakistan's and Afghanistan's porous (mostly tribal) and unchecked borders have become the hotspot areas for arms smuggling. This arms proliferation not only bolsters Pakistan's illegal arms trading due to its proximity to conflict zones and supports militant groups, but also allows them to sell these weapons among the militant groups across South Asia and even North East Africa. This issue is exacerbated by weak governance, corruption, and the presence of militant groups. Before analysing the importance and case studies of SALW, it is crucial to first understand how non-militant organisations became a strategic calculus of Pakistan's dual strategy.

Historical context:

The Pakistani government sponsors militant groups as a tool for asymmetric warfare. Asymmetric warfare is not something new, but it has been used for ages by guerrillas, non-state actors, etc., by attacking the adversary's weakness while avoiding military confrontation through the tactic of using surprise attack and SALW. Pakistan's consecutive losses during the wars of 1965, 1971 and then later 1999 made Pakistani secret agencies realise the use of non-state actors as a tool of asymmetric warfare. Despite Pakistan being armed with advanced American and Chinese-made weapons, the Pakistani army has failed severely during the wars. Knowing its strength and capabilities, Pakistan understood the need to resort to unconventional means to leverage power against its neighbouring countries, especially India, by using non-state actors as a tool of asymmetric warfare.

Asymmetric war is a form of warfare in which "non-state actor uses unconventional tools and tactics against a state's vulnerabilities to achieve disproportionate effect, undermining the state's will to achieve its strategic objectives." (*Vista De Asymmetric Warfare: A State Vs Non-State*

Conflict, n.d.)

The Pakistani state relies on non-state actors to pursue covert strategic objectives while maintaining plausible deniability. These objectives are accomplished by providing sanctuary, funding, training and logistic support by the government to militant groups and encouraging terror acts to destroy public confidence in the rival government. Thus, such situations are used to exploit the rivals' governance, deter political opposition and coerce people to stand against their own government.

During the post-partition and the Cold War era, Pakistan's critical position in world politics, where its core ideology of making Pakistan a great Islamic nation among the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and finding its alliance between the bipolar Cold War bloc was undecided. Looking at the Indian way of Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), Pakistan decided not to align with the bipolar world and rather silently take an interest in the Chinese government after the 1962 war between China and Pakistan to balance power against India. The Cold War era of globalisation and rapid advances in technology warfare allowed Pakistan to formulate a dual strategy where Pakistan would balance both China and the USA diplomatically while supporting militant groups.

Pakistan's „dual strategy“ and „strategic depth doctrine“ have allowed the government to coexist with the covert militancy while the government publicly engages in the political and diplomatic process. This simultaneous support from the Pakistan government helps militant proxies to achieve strategic goals. Thus, it allows the Pakistani state institution to maintain deniability internationally while leveraging militant groups to exert terror in regional politics. Whereas Pakistan's strategic geography, where these militant groups are trained, provided with the logistics and intelligence, all without getting caught by international counter terrorism committees like FATF, serves its strategic depth doctrine. (Bhasin, 2025; Tharoor, 2025).

These terror groups fostered by the Pakistani state consolidate legitimacy among the hardline ideology segments and assert terror over neighbouring countries, especially India. These groups act as a tool to spread terror in the Kashmir and influence Afghan affairs, enhancing Pakistan's strategic position in South Asia. These groups often bolster the military's role as defender of Islam, leading to domestic support from radical Islamists and innocent civilians. Such dynamics have resulted in “unholy alliances”, in which the government intelligence and military work with

Islamist militant groups to reinforce radical Islamic influence within the country and across the border. (*Pakistan Army and Terrorism; an Unholy Alliance*, n.d.)

Since its independence (the formation of a new country), Pakistan has constantly faced turbulent political challenges. The unorganised governance structure between the Pakistan military and its government has deteriorated the political structure of Pakistan, where accountability and security have resulted in zero consequences. After Zia-ul-Haq became the commander, the military gained power over the political establishment, making Pakistan a military-run country with the political institution serving as a façade for them. (Muneer, 2024) This has resulted in a power imbalance in the institution, with the military establishing itself as a principal political and security actor in the country. As observed, this political power in the hands of the Pakistani army, where the percentage of officers is from the Punjab region, led to a violent cause, as they not only made themselves superior to other races but also exploited their own citizens of basic rights. The brutality of the Pakistan army in Balochistan is an example of how the army has exploited its own citizens. This power in the hands of the Pakistan military and intelligence, with no repercussions for their actions and no jurisdiction from the political government and civilians, allowed Pakistan intelligence to fund and establish terror groups serving the motive of their dual strategy, where these terror groups, known as mujahedin, carried out covert missions for them. (Zrumbesh English, 2025)

Pakistan's ISI played a pivotal role in planning and strategising the Afghan jihad by supporting Sunni Muslim mujahedin groups against soviet forces, becoming the primary conduit for covert USA and Saudi funding (Waldman et al., 2010). The ISI have not only been funding these groups, but also orchestrating, sustaining and influencing the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, making Pakistan a haven for them. This support of ISI in Pakistan's regional security focuses on countering India's influence in the Kashmir region and influencing Afghanistan as a form of its "strategic depth" doctrine. Pakistan's geography and strategic location promised safe manoeuvres for arms and terror transactions across borders. Despite Pakistan's alliance with the USA and its counterterrorism policy, Pakistan established its independent policies, using American aid to strengthen itself. (Admin & Admin, 2017)

The importance of studying SALW

With the proliferation of SALW, the number of terror activities and homicides across South Asia

has increased. The debate on SALW trade has highlighted the role it plays in conflict areas. The unmonitored number of SALW trade has led to large-scale conflicts between the state actors (military) and non-state actors (militants), causing thousands of casualties among innocent civilians. Due to their small size and light weight, it's very easy to use and smuggle them across nations. Non-state actors prefer these weapons as they are cheap and easy to use. Small weapons often leave behind more casualties than weapons of mass destruction do, and leave long-lasting terror across the region. Pakistan, being the largest exporter and producer of illicit arms in South Asia between 2001-2020, has recorded on average 91,776 cases registered by police for possessing illicit arms, with a minimum of 68,661 and a maximum of 115,174 cases per year. This has resulted in an increase in intentional homicides within Pakistan. Not only have these weapons been smuggled across borders, especially the Kashmir, has also witnessed many terror activities taking the lives of innocent civilians. (Cgr, 2024)

The silent arsenal:

The United Nations broadly define Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) as weapons designed for use by individual soldiers or small crews. Small arms include revolvers, pistols, rifles, submachine guns, assault rifles, and light machine guns. Light weapons encompass heavier but still portable arms such as heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, as well as mortars under 100mm calibre. The classification also includes ammunition, explosives, and light explosive devices (e.g., grenades, landmines). This UN framework guides the international discourse on arms control and illicit trade interventions. SALW have been described as weapons of choice in contemporary conflict; though less salient than nuclear weapons, SALW have been called weapons of mass destruction, as these leave a devastating impact on populations. During conflicts, these weapons serve as primary weapons of violence, as they are easily available and easy to operate, making them conventional yet catastrophic means of war. These weapons tend to leave long-term psychological, social and demographic scars. (Wezeman & Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2003)

Pakistan hosts significant domestic arms production centres, notably the informal arms market of Darra Adam Khel and the state-run Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF) in Wah. Darra Adam Khel is known for artisanal weapons manufacturing within a shadow economy, producing a

variety of firearms that often bypass official regulation, contributing heavily to the illicit arms supply (Lajong et al., 2025). POF in Wah officially produces a range of military-grade small arms and ammunition, which serve both Pakistan's military needs and, allegedly, feed into informal channels for militant groups.

During the Cold War, Pakistan's strategic depth strategy became a conduit for the US and its Western military to channel aid to the Afghan mujahideen in their fight against the Soviets. These arms support the Pakistani intelligence services in funding regional militant networks across borders. Following the withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan in 2021, it is estimated that about seven billion dollars' worth of arms and ammunition were left behind. Many of these weapons, including assault rifles, night vision, and tactical gear, are being sold on the black market. Evidence of this is seen in Operation Sindoor, in which the terrorists have used US-made M4 carbines smuggled from Afghanistan, concerning the continuation of the regional threat posed by uncontrolled arms proliferation in South Asia. (Staff, 2024)

Pakistan's extensive porous borders with Afghanistan and India facilitate easy smuggling of SALW. Illicit arms markets, driven by high regional demand from insurgents, militants, and criminal networks, thrive in these border regions. Weak law enforcement and corruption exacerbate uncontrolled arms trafficking.

The porous border dynamics allow SALW to flow seamlessly into conflict zones, sustaining long-term insurgencies. Pakistan's strategic location and the porous Afghan-Pakistan frontier have long made the region a conduit for illicit small arms and light weapons (SALW). Three broad trafficking corridors are commonly described in the literature: a northern route into Central Asia (via Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan), a southern route through the Khyber-Pashtun areas toward the Arabian Sea (the classic "Golden Crescent"/drug-smuggling corridor), and longer European/Balkan channels that have historically linked South and Central Asia to Western markets. Following the 2021 U.S.-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, an estimated large quantity of Western military equipment and SALW left in Afghanistan has leaked onto black markets; several investigations and expert assessments report these arms appearing in

Afghan and Pakistan-based militant arsenals. Field reports and Small Arms Survey/ICCT investigations document continued smuggling across the Torkham, Spin Boldak and other border points, and link these flows to enhanced militant capabilities in Pakistan and along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. (*Taliban Smuggling Weapons to Pakistan to Be Used in Cross-border Skirmishes Against India: Report, 2022*)

Military-grade weapons, procured through Pakistan’s official channels and produced domestically, are often sold to non-state actors, including jihadist militant groups like the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and others. These weapons are often procured through theft, corruption, and covert facilitation by individuals within state institutions. Thus, resulting in raising the fighting capacity of proxy militant outfits, complicating counterterrorism measures and regional security.

SLAW constitutes the fundamental arsenal for insurgents in Kashmir and Afghanistan, facilitating guerrilla warfare in rugged terrain where heavy weaponry is impractical. Their portability and ease of use make SALW vital for mobility and sustained asymmetric warfare.

The widespread availability and proliferation of SALW have been central in extending the duration and intensity of insurgencies in these regions specifically in Pakistan which is intricately linked to terrorism and organised crime. Illicit arms trafficking routes often overlap with smuggling and criminal networks. Weapons finance and enable terrorist acts, while organised crime uses the arms trade for profit and territorial control. This nexus creates a destabilising cycle where arms proliferation fuels violence, terrorism, and criminality, undermining regional peace and law enforcement efforts. It can be also broadly understand by studying the case studies related to SALW and non-militant groups of Pakistan.

Case study

26/11 Mumbai attack: a gruesome attack on the innocent civilians on 26 November 2008, shook the whole world with terror. These terrorists were armed with AK-56 rifles (Chinese versions of the Russian AK-47), hand grenades, and other weaponry supplied by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) from Pakistan. These attackers were trained in LeT camps in Pakistan, specifically recruited and equipped there, and came via a small boat from Karachi. The attackers maintained communication with their handlers in Pakistan, who provided tactical guidance during the

attacks. The primary operation leader was identified as LeT senior official Zaki Rehman Lakhvi. The attackers' homes were traced to various towns in Pakistani Punjab and North-West Frontier Province. (Burns, n.d.)

Uri (2016) and Pathankot (2016) – Infiltration Routes and Arms Smuggling Networks. Militant infiltration from Pakistan via the international boundary remained a challenge, with infiltration attempts linked to terrorist camps located just across the border in Pakistan. Arms smuggling along these routes has been persistent, with arms and explosives being brought into India, especially in Punjab and the Kashmir region. Historical data shows thousands apprehended crossing borders with arms between the 1980s and 1990s, and ongoing efforts to smuggle weapons through these infiltration routes continue to be a security concern. (*Uri 2016 to pahalgam 2025: India's strong reply to 3 major terror attacks 2025*)

Pulwama Attack (2019) – Explosives and Small Arms in Hybrid Attacks. The 2019 Pulwama attack was a suicide bombing carried out with a vehicle packed with explosives, killing 40 Indian paramilitary personnel. The attack was claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistan-based terrorist group. This attack used explosives rather than firearms but also involved militant small arms in related hostile engagements. India attributed the attack's planning and support to Pakistan, which denied involvement. This attack escalated India-Pakistan tensions significantly. (Chauhan, 2020)

Pahalgam 2025- the terrorists used M4 carbine rifles, American-based, left behind in Afghanistan in 2021 by the American military. (TOI News Desk, 2025)

These reports indicate persistent trafficking and possession of varied SALWs in the region, signalling ongoing militant activity and arms smuggling networks in South Asia.

Conclusion

Pakistan's strategic engagement with non-state actors and arms proliferation as a tool of asymmetric warfare highlights the complex nexus of Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine, maintaining its deniability in cross-border militant activities. The deep connection between Pakistan's military and its service intelligence, institutionalising and orchestrating the militants' operations by leveraging SALW production, to avoid confrontation with regional adversaries any confrontation. The study of SALW and its connection with terrorism leads to violence and

instability across South Asia. The porous border of Pakistan serves as a black market for smuggling illicit weapons and a suitable area to produce these weapons without being detected. Pakistan's dual approach of integrating its political affairs with covert militancy continues to threaten regional peace and security.

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