

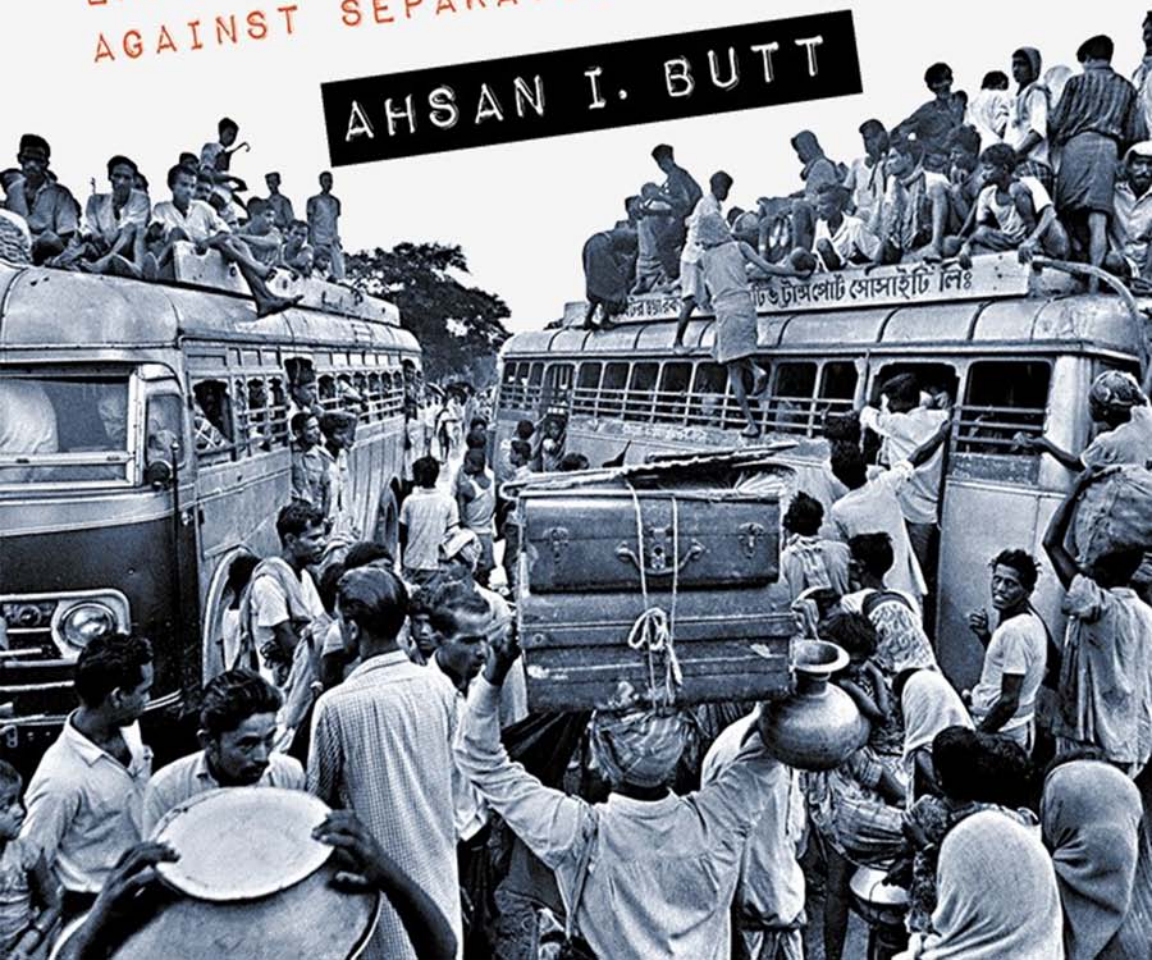
SECESSION

AND

SECURITY

EXPLAINING STATE STRATEGY
AGAINST SEPARATISTS

AHSAN I. BUTT



India's Strategies against Separatism in Assam, Punjab, and Kashmir, 1984–1994

India is hardly a stranger to separatist conflict—no state has experienced as many secessionist movements.¹ I explore three movements that took place within half a decade of each other—Assam (1985–92), Punjab (1984–93), and Jammu and Kashmir (henceforth Kashmir, 1989–94). These movements represent the three “hotbed” regions of ethno-national separatism in India. Muslim and Sikh nationalism in Kashmir and Punjab dominated regional, national, and even international headlines for years. The Northeast, meanwhile, has proved problematic for India to placate for decades, featuring both ideological (primarily leftist or Marxist) and ethnic-based conflicts, and Assam is the central state in the region. I focus on these cases because of the two basic clusters of secessionist movements in India—immediately after independence, and in the late 1970s through the 1980s—we have better data and simply know more about the latter period. Moreover, by maintaining consistency from the previous chapter in both the region and period covered, South Asia in the 1970s and 1980s, I can control for larger, structural changes in international politics, such as regional dynamics or the Cold War. Finally, because the cases display variation on both the independent and dependent variables, and in Punjab’s case, variation over time, there is a theoretical, as well as empirical payoff to juxtaposing these conflicts.

Separatist conflict in India, broadly speaking, is a function of the country’s extreme size and ethnic diversity, on the one hand, and the state’s long-running stand that it would not acquiesce to the loss of territory based on ethno-national claims on the other (see map in chapter 2). This strict insistence against secessionism is often thought of as the product of the precedent-setting logic, whereby India fights separatists because it fears that concessions would only encourage other groups to stake similar claims. The thinking goes that, in a state as heterogeneous as India, such a policy would lead to a domino-effect, and the internal destruction of the state. There is certainly something to this idea, and Indian leaders often invoke

the danger to the state's secular constitution that territorial concessions to ethnic or religious groups would entail. However, the emphasis on the precedent-setting effect of fighting separatists has probably been overstated. India has other reasons to foreclose the possibility of secession when faced with such movements. Its urgency to keep territory within the Indian Union is also a function of external factors: the interplay of its rough neighborhood, its ambitious regional and global agenda, and its collective view of the causes of its colonial subjugation.

India perceives itself as a major global power, competing for hegemony in the region with China. The major narrative sustaining Indian foreign and security policy in the latter half of the twentieth century, according to Garver, was that "India is a great nation whose radiant influence molded a wide swath of the world beyond its boundaries," and that it deserves a "place of eminence in the world."² Jawaharlal Nehru's deep belief in India's destiny to be a major player in world politics shaped his rhetoric and actions as India's long-running first prime minister and foreign minister.³ Even before independence, Nehru argued for a Security Council seat for India on the basis that "it is absurd for India to be treated like any small power in this connection . . . India is the center of security in Asia."⁴ Notwithstanding its lack of a formal strategic doctrine and its claims that it is not hegemonic, scholars argue that India's behavior is in keeping with its own version of the United States' famous Monroe doctrine, whereby it seeks to bar foreign powers from exercising influence and sees itself as the guarantor of stability in the region.⁵

The Indian state has been sensitive to the issue of territory since birth, when it consolidated itself by bringing under its ambit, in a matter of weeks, more than five hundred "princely states" crisscrossing it, bequeathed by a clumsy British retreat from the subcontinent.⁶ Nehru and the Indian leadership were more than aware that India was only a potential major power, not an actual one, and that the realization of its promise depended on its size, both geographically and demographically.⁷ In 1949, Nehru told the Constituent Assembly that there was an "inevitability of India playing an important part by virtue of her tremendous potential, by virtue of the fact that she is the biggest political unit in terms of population today and is likely to be in terms of resources also. She is going to play that part." Nehru believed that alongside the Soviet Union, the United States, and China, "the obvious fourth country in the world is India." This belief that its size and population are central to its claims and potential for great power status are generally widespread among Indian leaders.⁸

The main threat to these ambitions to become a major power and exercise influence in the region and beyond were internal and external subversion from its neighbors.⁹ India's grand view of its place in the world is complicated by its strategic environment, where it is the third node in the Sino-Indo-Pak triangle.¹⁰ It has had numerous confrontations and wars

with both China and Pakistan, including a devastating defeat in a border war in 1962 against China that shook not just the security and foreign policy establishments, but the entire body politic.¹¹ China and Pakistan enjoy deep strategic ties, and each actor in the Sino-Indo-Pak triangle has been a nuclear power since at least the 1980s.¹² Historically, China and Pakistan have forced Indian planners to confront the possibility of a two-front war,¹³ though the introduction of substantial nuclear arsenals in the region complicates such plans. Pakistan has launched conflict over Kashmir several times, and continues its revisionism over the territory today.

That internal and external security are an "overriding consideration" for India's political elites stems from the widely shared view of its colonial history, where its two-hundred-year servitude to the British crown was attributed to its longstanding lack of internal cohesion.¹⁴ For Nehru and the newly independent Indian state, therefore, the greatest threats to its security came from within, not without.¹⁵ This view has survived decades. Analysts argue that strategic thought in India sees a "close relationship between internal security and outside aggression," most obviously encapsulated in the issue of Kashmir and Punjab,¹⁶ as I discuss below, but also historically in places such as Nagaland and Mizoram. India conflates internal and external security with good reason: its internal vulnerabilities mark an opportunity to upturn the balance of power against it, one that each of its main rivals has taken repeatedly in its Northeast and Northwest over decades. India's neighbors would gain considerably by cartographically cutting it down to size, forcing the loss of territory and population, and its geopolitical ambitions demand that it must be consistently on guard against such behavior. For India, secessionism is therefore as much an external threat as internal, and it consequently denies the possibility of its various ethnic or nationalist groups becoming independent. As Indira Gandhi pointedly noted, "If there is friendship, well, all the borders can be soft, not just Kashmir!"¹⁷ The absence of "friendship" with both China and Pakistan has meant that India cannot afford compromise against separatists and must ensure their defeat, lest its security and ambitions be threatened.

While a combination of concerns about the balance of power and precedent setting may explain why India refuses to acquiesce to secessionism in general, we are still left with the puzzle of why the extent of coercion India used against separatists in the 1980s varied widely. In Assam, the Indian government practiced a mix of policing and militarization: it delegated strategy to the state government led by the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), itself a product of a concessionary accord with the center, for dealing with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an avowedly secessionist organization. Its delay, short duration, and limited intensity of military operations against ULFA were backed up by repeated offers of talks with "moderates." In Punjab, the government's initial strategy was policing, encapsulated by an accord with "moderate" Sikhs in the Akali Dal (L) Party in 1985, before it

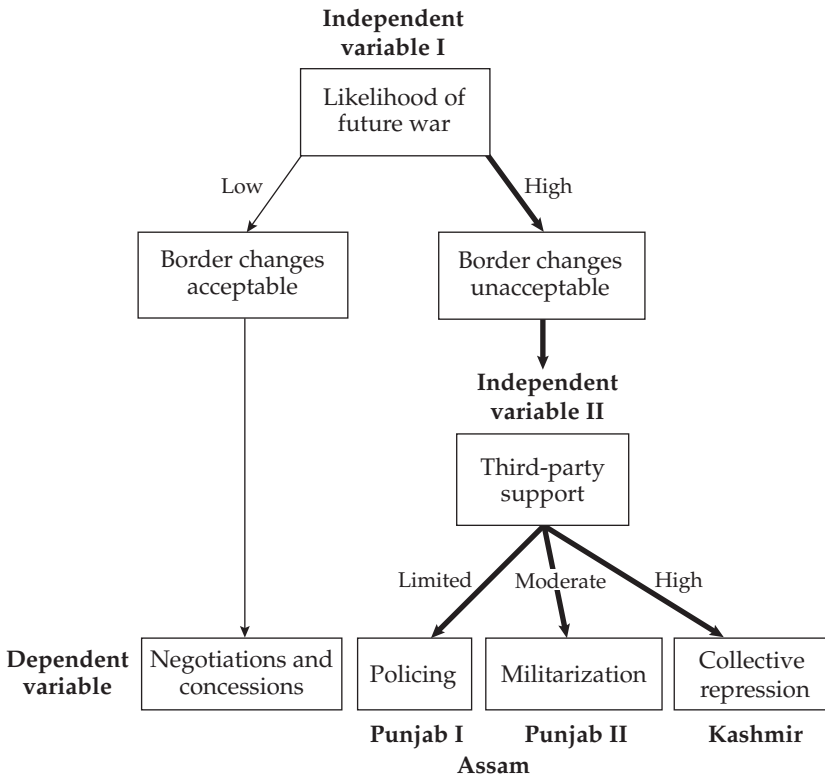


Figure 3. Variation in India's responses to secessionism in the 1980s

escalated to militarization in 1987, when the Punjab police assumed center stage in the conflict. In Kashmir, in contrast to both cases, the state used collective repression at the outset of the crisis, in the winter of 1989–90.

This variation can be explained by these movements representing external threats to varying degrees, since there were dissimilar levels of third-party support. Kashmir was the main prize in a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan—two wars had been fought over it previously—and religious, political, and military ties between the Pakistani state and the Kashmiri secessionists meant that perceived third-party support was “high.” Conversely, Indian strategy in Assam was less repressive because the movement, owing to third-party support that was “limited” from a significantly weaker power, Myanmar, did not represent a significant external threat, freeing various central governments to alternatively ignore the problem, or treat it with low levels of coercion. Indian strategy in Punjab, meanwhile, followed shifts in Pakistani support. In 1985, when there was “limited” support for Sikh nationalists, and the government saw the problem through a domestic prism, it adopted policing, a mixture of low-level

coercion and concessions to moderates. However, the passage of time saw Pakistani involvement in support of Punjabi secessionists rise to “moderate” levels, and in 1987, India responded with militarization. Figure 3 graphically represents the argument proffered in this chapter.

The main alternative theories outlined earlier in this book cannot explain the variation in India’s strategies against separatists in the 1980s. Internal deterrence arguments that privilege the reputation-building effects of using violence would predict that the earlier movements—those in Assam and Punjab—would see more repression than Kashmir. Arguments for political institutions, meanwhile, cannot explain the observed variation simply because India’s status as a constitutional democracy and the number of “veto factions” within the polity did not change in the period examined, but state policy assuredly did. Additionally, arguments specific to the Indian context, such as those based on natural resources or the extremism of the movement’s demands, also offer unsatisfactory answers. A focus on external security allows us significantly greater analytical traction on secessionist conflicts in India than we had previously.

Assam, 1985–92

We first turn our attention to the Northeast of India, encompassing the states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim, home to decades of insurgency and instability. In total, there are about one hundred rebel groups active in the region. Much of the violence in the Northeast is autonomist or secessionist in nature, but there is also violence among the states themselves, among different tribes within states, between tribal and nontribal groups, and between native sons of the soil and “outsiders.”¹⁸ Indeed, the conflict-ridden nature of politics in the region is reflected in the title of a book on it: *Durable Disorder*.¹⁹

Given the wide-ranging panoply of groups and ethnicities in the region,²⁰ I focus my attention on Assam, one of the states in question. Why Assam? For one, it is the most populous state in the region.²¹ For another, the fact that it borders every other Northeast state renders it, at least geographically, the region’s core.²² Finally, of the seven major urban centers of the region, Assam is home to four—Guwahati, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, and Silchar.²³ It is thus fair to characterize Assam as the “heart of this region”²⁴ and consider it an apposite window to understand secessionist conflict in the restive Northeast.

The Indian state was fairly restrained in its use of force in Assam relative to ethno-national movements in other parts of the country. In the period under study, the center faced two different types of actors: a student-led sons-of-soil agitation in the mid-1980s and a full-blown separatist insurgency at the turn of the decade. Neither saw sustained aggressive Indian military action. Instead, the former was treated with a negotiations and

concessions strategy by the Rajiv Gandhi government, which signed an accord with the All Assam Students Union (AASU) in 1985. However, because AASU fell well short of a true autonomist or secessionist organization, the center's conduct toward it is not a true test of my argument. On the other hand, ULFA was a more typical secessionist organization, and while it was assuredly the target of military campaigns unlike AASU, coercion in Assam, compared to Kashmir or Punjab, was delayed in implementation, restrained in intensity, short in duration, and targeted in scope. For years, the center delegated its dealing with ULFA to the AGP-led state government that enjoyed close ties with the organization. When force finally came in the early 1990s, talks with moderate elements of the movement were continually emphasized, and in one case, elected state governments were in charge when the campaign was ordered, in contrast to Punjab and Kashmir. As such, I consider Indian behavior in Assam between 1987 and 1992 as falling between policing and militarization.

This "soft" coercion had its roots in the fact that unlike in Punjab and Kashmir, ethno-national movements in Assam did not pose a significant external threat to the Indian state. Third-party support for both the students of AASU as well as the separatists of ULFA was negligible from the usual suspects, Pakistan and China. Bangladesh provided sanctuary and support to ULFA, but this support began in the 1990s, after, not before, the Indian military campaigns to flush militants out of Upper Assam that I focus on. ULFA's third-party support in the time period in question was restricted to a handful of bases in Myanmar, a significantly weaker power than India, and as such can be categorized as "limited." The lack of support from threats to Indian security meant that, first, the center's attention was distracted from the ULFA problem to more urgent matters elsewhere in the country, where external involvement was higher. Second, when the center did decide on coercion, such as in operations Bajrang and Rhino in 1990–92, it calibrated it to the relatively low levels needed to neutralize an organization lacking significant third-party backing.

RELATIVE DEPRIVATION AND DISAFFECTION AGAINST OUTSIDERS AND MIGRANTS

The major structural cause of Assamese dissatisfaction with the Indian state revolved around socioeconomic concerns.²⁵ Literacy and per capita income were lower in Assam than national averages, and roads, communications, access to piped water, and industrial development lagged well behind the rest of the country.²⁶ From the perspective of native Assamese, what was especially galling about the state's relative poverty was that the state possessed plentiful natural resources, without substantially benefiting the local population. Instead, royalties from oil, plywood, and tea were siphoned off to the center.²⁷ Exacerbating this sense of exploitation

was that central and state administrations were dominated by outsiders—those that were not “sons of the soil.”

More immediately, what led to Assamese agitation in the late 1970s and 1980s was the pace and extent of migration into the state by nonlocals, upturning the demographic balance and allegedly “turning the indigenous people of Assam into a minority.”²⁸ The roots of migration into Assam go back 150 years. The British colonial administration encouraged migration from places such as Sylhet and Mymensingh in present-day Bangladesh, as well as Bihar, Orissa (present-day Odisha), the Central Provinces (present-day Madhya Pradesh), the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh), and Tamil Nadu because it needed a cheap and effective labor force for its interests in tea, oil, communications, and economic modernization. In turn, these demographic changes led to a desire for more direct administration in Assam, leading to greater demand for educated labor to occupy clerical and administrative positions in government. The English-speaking population of Bengal fit the bill, resulting in even greater immigration of non-Assamese to the state.²⁹ Around this time, formal opposition to immigration began to develop, such as with the formation of the Assam Protection Association in 1926.³⁰ Partition brought another mass influx of nonlocals, to the chagrin of Congress’s chief minister in Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, whose opposition to the settlement of Bengalis in the state relented only when Prime Minister Nehru threatened withholding federal development funds.³¹ A similar story played out when a civil war in Pakistan between its east and west wings spilled over into India, leading to significant migration from Bengal to Assam and the rest of Northeast India (chapter 2). This episode of migration into Assam set the stage for the crisis of the late 1970s.

Reliable figures on the exact rate of migration into Assam are difficult to find precisely because immigration was such a politicized issue, and illegal immigrants are hardly likely to leave a paper trail on official forms and the census. However, some broad inferences have been made, given that population growth in Assam consistently outpaced growth in India overall. Between 1971 and 1981, Assam’s population grew by 36 percent while India’s grew by 25 percent. In the previous decade, the respective figures were 35 percent and 25 percent. Between 1951 and 1961, Assam experienced population growth of 35 percent and India of 22 percent. In the decade before that, it was 20 percent and 13 percent respectively. One estimate notes that had Assam’s population grown at the same rate as India’s throughout the twentieth century, Assam’s population in 1971 would have been half of its 15 million.³² While hardly conclusive, this disparity suggests that Assam attracted migrants at a much higher rate than the rest of India. Organizations directly involved in the anti-immigrant movement claimed that there were between 4.5 and 5 million illegal aliens in Assam, about a third of the total population, in the 1970s. This was probably an exaggeration. A lower-end estimate put the number of illegal foreign

nationals in Assam at about 1.6 million, or 11 percent of the state's population.³³ Regardless of its precise extent, native Assamese found immigration troubling for both cultural and socioeconomic reasons: Bengali Hindus and even Muslims tended to dominate the public sector as well as professional jobs, and there was a fear amongst Assamese property owners that the generally impoverished peasants could radicalize their native counterparts.³⁴ Most important was the electoral impact of migration, which disproportionately benefitted the Congress Party and its "vote bank" among Bengalis.

THE AASU AGITATION AND RAJIV GANDHI'S ACCORD

In April 1979 Hiralal Patowari, a parliamentarian from the Mangaldai constituency, one with a significant Bengali Muslim population, died.³⁵ The voter rolls for the resulting by-election included large numbers of foreigners; a court found forty-five thousand voters to be illegal aliens, or about one-sixth of the overall list.³⁶ The Mangaldai election put into sharp relief an issue that had been simmering for years and had even gained national prominence, and led to organized opposition to illegal aliens led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU), which kicked off a statewide strike to protest the infiltration issue in June 1979.³⁷ Two months later, it joined the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), an umbrella organization counting in its midst several regional parties and organizations. Their leaders had one specific demand: use the 1951 National Register of Citizens as the baseline to ascertain which Assam residents were legally living there and which were not, and deport all identified noncitizens.³⁸

The center and student leaders held a series of negotiations in the early 1980s on this question of detection, disenfranchisement, and deportation of foreigners, but the devil was in the details: who, exactly, was to be considered a foreigner? In discussions with the prime minister and the Home Ministry, the AASU-AAGSP pressed that all immigrants who entered the country after 1961 be classified as illegal. The center countered with 1971 as the cutoff date, mainly because of a cooperative agreement signed between Indira Gandhi and Mujib-ur-Rahman which impelled India to settle all refugees who entered the country before 1971.³⁹ From the center's point of view, readily giving in to the nationalists would exact a significant political cost: it would imperil its Bengali immigrant vote bank,⁴⁰ and treating Hindu immigrants from what had been East Pakistan as illegal aliens would have courted disaster in mainstream Hindu circles in the rest of the country. The "obvious" solution to this problem—of making an exemption for Bengali Hindus while declaring Bengali Muslim immigrants illegal—would open a unique can of worms, drawing into question the secular nature of the Indian republic as well as alienating Muslims at large, an important

constituency for Congress. Finally, expelling Bengali immigrants would spell trouble for India's relations with Bangladesh.⁴¹

Consequently, neither side conceded much for years, as Assam became home to strikes, disturbances, and instability. State governments, devoid of legitimacy due to election boycotts and contested electoral rolls, repeatedly collapsed after a few months in charge.⁴² Even Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia, an ethnic Assamese and a "most dynamic and astute" politician who knew local Assamese politics well, could not stem the agitation after coming to power in the 1983 State Assembly elections. The polls were marred by an AASU boycott—adhered to in Assamese areas and ignored in Bengali constituencies—and significant communal violence, especially in Nellie, where some fourteen hundred Bengali men, women, and children were killed by a mob of about twelve thousand people.⁴³ A year after the Nellie massacre, a young tribesman told the *New York Times* that "our people are itching for another confrontation. They tell us that peaceful methods haven't worked for these four years."⁴⁴

This juncture fell short of a true secessionist moment, given AASU's demands did not involve greater autonomy or statehood, but the escalatory rhetoric and disturbances forced the center to confront this ethnic movement. The strategy of Rajiv Gandhi's government was negotiations and concessions, promising a "new initiative" and talks with agitation leaders in January 1985 that began the next month.⁴⁵ By June, the two sides had agreed on all but one issue.⁴⁶ By August, optimism was pervasive and Rajiv appeared jubilant.⁴⁷ Despite a last-minute hitch, an accord was signed, and its fortuitous timing allowed the prime minister to announce it in his Independence Day speech at the Red Fort in Delhi on August 15, 1985.⁴⁸

On the big question of voter rolls, the center conceded and decreed that January 1, 1966, would serve as the base year for ascertaining residents' citizenship status. Anyone who entered the state after January 1, 1966, but before March 25, 1971, would be removed from electoral rolls for a period of ten years. Anyone who entered Assam after March 25, 1971, would be deported. The government also pledged to ramp up border security. Acknowledging the long-running sociocultural undercurrents in the Assamese movement, the government promised that "constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people." Finally, the government agreed to "review with sympathy and withdraw cases of disciplinary action" against those who had transgressed in the agitation and to pay compensation money to survivors of those who had been killed. In return, the AASU and the AAGSP agreed to halt its agitation.⁴⁹ The accord was signed by R. D. Pradhan, the home secretary, and AASU president Prafulla Mahanta and general secretary Bhrigu K. Phukan.

As was the case in Punjab (see below), Rajiv Gandhi's "decisiveness" garnered a great deal of credit. Unlike his mother, who "disliked making decisions," Rajiv "hears his people and decides quickly—often immediately in the cabinet meeting."⁵⁰ The "fundamental difference" between the two was that while Indira was more interested in protecting Congress' majority, Rajiv cared less about the party's interests and wanted to be seen as a problem-solver.⁵¹ Western headlines and editorials cooed in admiration for Rajiv's "willingness to rethink seemingly intractable problems, open dialogue, and after hard bargaining, reach agreements that give promise of providing solutions," which was a "fresh approach that leaders in other troubled areas of the world would do well to emulate."⁵² Rajiv himself struck a triumphant tone: "Ten months ago, the world was watching whether India would disintegrate into pieces. Today, that question does not arise."⁵³ Notwithstanding opposition from Assamese Muslims who felt "betrayed," and politicians in West Bengal, who played up the fear of a mass migration of Bengali Hindus into their province, overall sentiment toward the accord and Rajiv was almost entirely positive, with some going as far as calling it "a magna carta for peace."⁵⁴ For their part, the leaders of the agitation were also recognized, marking their return from New Delhi at a euphoric rally at Judge's Field.⁵⁵ They formed a new party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), bringing into their fold two regional parties, the Assam Jatiata Badi Dal and Purbanchalia Loka Parishad, and delivered a dominant performance in the elections of December 1985, winning 64 out of 126 seats.⁵⁶ Mahanta became the youngest chief minister in Indian history and promised that illegal immigrants would be "deported immediately after their detection."⁵⁷ "The accord will definitely be implemented," he warned Bengali immigrants. "If that antagonizes them, we cannot help it. There will definitely be no compromise on that aspect."⁵⁸

From the center's point of view, the accord defanged the student agitation, bringing it into mainstream politics. However, the center's accommodationist stance, and the resulting tenure of the AGP government, created the space for the development of a significantly stiffer test for the Indian state in Assam. Interestingly for our purposes, even the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an avowedly secessionist organization, was treated with relative restraint.

THE RISE OF ULFA

The AGP record in power was, to put it mildly, disappointing.⁵⁹ Less than two years into the AGP's tenure, the *Times of India* commented that "the ruling Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) seems to have lost much of its initial enthusiasm for change . . . the AGP is slipping into the familiar role of a traditional political party in power which is affected by internal rivalry and

faced by disillusionment among its earlier support base."⁶⁰ The AGP failed for many reasons. First, their leaders were inexperienced, unprepared, internally divided, and corrupt.⁶¹ Second, despite claiming that they would "reach out to other Indian citizens who have doubts about our intentions" their strict insistence on antiforeigner drives and assertion of Assamese identity created the conditions for rebellions by tribals, such as the Bodos, led primarily by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU).⁶² Third, the task of detecting and deporting illegal immigrants proved challenging, both due to the difficulty of separating illegal immigrants from their ethnic brethren who were present legally, and because the Congress government in the center could not be accused of expending all its energies in aiding the AGP in fulfilling the conditions of the accord, leading to considerable rancor from Mahanta.⁶³

The upshot of these developments was that by 1988, observers were referring to the accord as a "crumbling document," propelling support toward ULFA.⁶⁴ ULFA was a secessionist organization that fought on behalf of "the people of Assam," unlike AASU, which fought on behalf of the "Assamese people."⁶⁵ This distinction was born of an idea to expand ULFA's potential support base and to include not just those drawn from the Ahom ethnic stock, but all ethnicities and religions contained on Assam's land; "they realized you can't take on the Indian state without 30–35% of the population."⁶⁶ In the words of an organizational spokesperson, "The ULFA is not a chauvinist organization and [we] treat all sections of people staying in Assam as equal."⁶⁷ ULFA drew cadres and support both from nationalist groups such as the AASU and AAGSP as well as leftist groups such as the Assam Jatiyotabadi Yuba Chatro Parishad (AJYCP). Largely dormant during the agitation from 1979 to 1985, its activities restricted to bank robberies and isolated assassination attempts, ULFA stepped up its violence in response to the failures of the AGP government. Though it is difficult to pinpoint one secessionist "moment" for this movement, contemporary reports record it having a significant presence in Upper Assam, where it originated, and throughout the Brahmaputra Valley by 1987.⁶⁸

In the five years of AGP rule, ULFA killed about a hundred high-value targets, such as Assamese businessman Surrendra Paul, politicians belonging to Congress or UMF such as UMF leader Kalipada Sen, and police officials such as Dibrugarh superintendent Daulat Sing Negi.⁶⁹ Its activities, including violence, extortion—especially of tea producers, who closed factories and tea gardens and evacuated scores of executives—and bank robberies were considered serious enough to postpone general elections in the state in November 1989.⁷⁰ By December 1989, it was said to "run a flourishing parallel government in many rural areas of Assam," focused especially on the districts of Nalbari, Barpeta, Lakshmipur, and Dhemaji.⁷¹ In November 1990, the *Times of India* argued that "the depredations of this

secessionist and terrorist outfit have reached such a stage that the ruling Asom Gana Parishad has ceased to govern in all but name."⁷²

THE CENTER'S STRATEGY AGAINST ULFA

For years, in part compelled by greater external threats elsewhere covered later in this chapter, the center adopted a hands-off policy and outsourced the task of dealing with ULFA to the AGP state government. When it did escalate to militarization, it chose a relatively mild form. Crucially for our purposes, the Indian state made splitting the separatists into moderate and extremist camps a central part of its strategy, a hallmark of policing. As such, it would be fair to characterize India's strategy against ULFA from 1987 to 1992 as a mixed one, between the poles of policing and militarization, but tending to the former.

Despite demands from toughness from the Hindu right, the center explicitly left matters up to the AGP state government on dealing with ULFA between 1987 and 1990.⁷³ This was a curious strategy given that the close relations between the AGP and ULFA were widely acknowledged.⁷⁴ At the same time as Prime Minister V. P. Singh was unleashing Governor Jagmohan and Indian security forces in Kashmir, he adopted conciliatory rhetoric and offered the carrot of oil refineries and financial munificence to placate Assamese dissatisfaction—and was applauded by observers both in Delhi and in Assam for doing so.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the AGP "strategy" to deal with the situation was comically undercooked: police were "asked to take prompt and effective steps" to improve law and order, alongside a "publicity blitz" to counter ULFA propaganda.⁷⁶

It was a change of government, to Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, combined with the threat to international tea producers and sellers, that brought about closer center attention to ULFA and Assam, starting around August 1990.⁷⁷ Another possible factor, unconfirmed, was an alleged video shown to the prime minister in which a senior AGP minister was caught having discussions with an ULFA leader, the last straw for the government.⁷⁸ Increased central attention to the problem resulted in two military operations in close succession: Bajrang in late 1990, and Rhino in late 1991, which killed or captured a great proportion of ULFA's senior leadership.⁷⁹ Bajrang began in November 1990, when Shekhar instituted president's rule and outlawed ULFA.⁸⁰ He said that "any country cannot afford that secessionist elements go on scot free."⁸¹ A senior government official was blunter, warning that "these fellows are really going to get it in the neck. They've been getting away all these months with murder, extortion, and worse."⁸²

Though there was some alarmist rhetoric upon the announcement, fear and uncertainty amongst the general public, and reports of human rights abuses,⁸³ the Indian security footprint in Assam was relatively light, especially when contrasted to events in Punjab and Kashmir. Security forces

mostly focused on capturing ULFA cadres alive and dismantling camps.⁸⁴ One indicator of the moderate nature of Indian coercion in Assam was the short duration of military operations. Bajrang was phased out after less than three months, mainly because of ULFA's ceasefire declaration.⁸⁵ Foreign tea companies such as Unilever, often a litmus test of stability and order in the state, had returned even earlier, by February.⁸⁶ Bajrang brought substantial numbers of ULFA cadres to the negotiating table after the organization had previously claimed it would not settle for anything less than full independence.⁸⁷ Five months after Bajrang had begun, the center considered Assam's situation "normal" enough to announce that it would hold general elections in the state.⁸⁸ By April, the army had completely suspended Bajrang; by June, elections had been held, with Congress and its chief minister designate, Saikia, emerging as the big winners.⁸⁹

The Indian state was compelled to act once again when, a few months later, ULFA kidnapped several important personalities, including state government employees and a Soviet mining expert.⁹⁰ Eventually it decided on more military action in the form of Operation Rhino in September 1991, again focusing on Upper Assam.⁹¹ One important distinction from Bajrang, as well as many other Indian military operations including those in Kashmir and Punjab, was that Rhino was conducted with an elected state government in power, symbolizing delegation from the center. Indeed, Chief Minister Saikia was an important player, mediating between various levels of government and the secessionists throughout the crisis.⁹² As with Bajrang, it did not take long for ULFA to cry uncle. By December 1991, its "backbone was broken," a "virtually decimated" organization.⁹³ It announced a unilateral and indefinite ceasefire in anticipation of talks with the Narasimha Rao government in Delhi, and released six major hostages in its custody.⁹⁴ In turn, this quick retreat by ULFA allowed the center to halt military operations in January 1992 and pursue a soft strategy of talking, which began in February.

A crucial part of the government's strategy was to induce fissures in ULFA, and it took less than two weeks of Rhino for these splits to occur.⁹⁵ In fact, there were so many reports of factionalization within the organization that its leaders felt compelled to clarify that no such thing was happening.⁹⁶ By March 1992, a formal split was all but complete, with one side favoring talks and the other fighting.⁹⁷ The breakaway moderate faction, called S-ULFA (S for surrendered), began negotiations while the more extremist camp, led by Arabinda Rajkhowa and Paresh Barua, continuing to face military action.⁹⁸ This factor, of both national and state leaders continually emphasizing that talks with extremist organizations were acceptable, is another that distinguishes the center's strategy from other parts of the country, such as Kashmir in the early 1990s or Punjab in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, India's softer side was shown in the center's promises for establishing an Indian Institute of Technology in North

Guwahati, infrastructural development, support for a fourth oil refinery at Numaligarh, and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh's assurances that "that the center would do everything possible to put the state's economy on a sound footing."¹⁰⁰

A policing strategy entails selective coercion against hard-line elements alongside tactical concessions to moderates, while a militarization strategy includes targeted counterinsurgent operations. India's strategy against ULFA from 1987 to 1992 included elements from both. Its delegation to the AGP government between 1987 and 1990, its delay of military operations, and its consistent emphasis on talks with moderates all fell under a policing strategy.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, the very fact that it had to launch counterinsurgent campaigns, albeit limited in scope, duration, and intensity, means that it escalated to militarization, at least temporarily.

THE LIMITED ROLE OF EXTERNAL SECURITY IN ASSAM

The Indian state faced two types of nationalist movements in Assam, and neither saw significantly harsh repression. The state's response to the first movement, against the student agitators, was a negotiations and concessions strategy involving an accord between Rajiv Gandhi and AASU in 1985. There were few external implications attached to the student movement; the Indian state's concerns in the run-up to the Assam accord were almost entirely domestic in nature. Congress leadership in the mid-1980s believed that "a negotiated peace in Assam was important for gaining better political control over the Northeastern cluster of states as a whole." The "national leadership was confident that the post-accord election would strengthen Congress rule in Assam. Even if Congress were to lose the election, its replacement could be expected to lend support to the national system."¹⁰² Indeed, this is precisely what occurred. The Assam crisis was also an opportunity for Rajiv Gandhi to reaffirm his "problem-solving" reputation, which at least temporarily was a boon to Congress.¹⁰³

However, the state's response to the AASU movement is not a true test of my theory, given that, while based on a conceptualization of ethnic difference, it was not aimed at a separate homeland, or anything close. AASU's demands are consistently described as existing within the confines of the Indian constitution.¹⁰⁴ As one analyst put it, "The student leaders of the Assamese movement were fighting not so much to assert their separate identity as to return to the bosom of Mother India."¹⁰⁵ Indeed, AASU explicitly needed the Indian state to accept its point of view on Bangladeshi migrants for it to succeed in its political goals.¹⁰⁶ As such, it is not surprising that the Indian state did not use even low-level force against the movement.

More relevant for my argument is the state's treatment of ULFA. India faced a far tougher challenge against this avowedly secessionist organization,

but partly because of a lack of external support, even this was treated with relatively soft hands. Contemporary reports declared that, "unlike in Punjab and some other states, there is, according to military and civilian intelligence sources, no evidence of state-level foreign involvement in Assam."¹⁰⁷ Local journalists confirmed in interviews that ULFA did not get direct support from outside India.¹⁰⁸ Instead, ULFA received training from other insurgent groups in the Northeast, mainly the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), and relied on illicit private Chinese networks to procure arms.¹⁰⁹ While China had earlier supported assorted rebel groups in the Northeast, especially in Nagaland, it had ceased to do so by the early 1980s. Indeed, "repeated efforts by the ULFA and the NSCN in the late 1980s to secure Chinese help did not lead to any direct assistance from Beijing," mainly because by then China, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, was seeking to mend relations with India, and saw the "export of revolution" as undesired "baggage of a Maoist past." Pakistan too had supported groups such as the Naga National Council and the Mizo National Front in the 1960s but overtly leftist groups were not generally supported by the Pakistani state.¹¹⁰ Most important, Pakistan's ability to offer support to secessionists in India's Northeast was severely hampered when it lost East Pakistan in 1971, denying it a border connection to the region.¹¹¹ Simple geographic proximity meant that Pakistan could support movements in Kashmir and Punjab much more robustly than those in the Northeast; the distance made it challenging for insurgents to go to Pakistan.¹¹²

While ULFA would go on to receive significant external support, it would be after operations Bajrang and Rhino, not before. Those cadres who did not see fit to surrender escaped to Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, where they enjoyed sanctuary and eventually financial and military aid.¹¹³ The connections with Bangladesh were especially important after the formation of the Khaleda Zia government, one more friendly to Pakistan and the ISI than Awami League regimes led by Sheikh Hasina, which were closer to India.¹¹⁴ Indeed, Khaleda Zia's tenure saw a two-pronged effort, both by Bangladesh's DGFI as well as Pakistan's ISI, to support ULFA.¹¹⁵ But until the early 1990s, the period covered in this chapter, the external implications of nationalist movements in Assam were muted, with the only possible concern rumors of ULFA's sanctuaries in Myanmar, a much weaker power than India. Even the extent of these bases is disputed, and interviewees noted that ULFA's sanctuary presence in Myanmar was minimal relative to what it achieved in Bangladesh after the early Rhino. As such, I code third-party support for the movement in Assam as "limited."

A lack of significant external support had several implications for softening India's strategy against ULFA. First, it ensured that Indian action in Assam was delayed, because of more pressing external concerns elsewhere in the country.¹¹⁶ In the words of a national editorial, "the total collapse of law and order in Kashmir and the continuing violence in Punjab" meant

that the “grave situation in Assam is largely going unnoticed.”¹¹⁷ According to a local journalist, “national symbolism” and the “Pakistan obsession” had a great deal to do with India’s lack of attention to the Northeast: “Kashmir is a high issue, while Northeast India is a low issue.” Because there are important electoral constituencies in the Hindi belt, including Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, there is an element of playing to the galleries insofar as insurgencies on the western border were concerned. As he told me, “These [Kashmir and Punjab] were the important insurgencies, but Northeast is a fringe insurgency.”¹¹⁸

Second, the lack of external support for ULFA meant that when military action did come, it was relatively brief. ULFA’s material base suffered from a lack of foreign sponsorship, dampening the level of force required to defeat it.¹¹⁹ It was “not very advanced” when it came to military capabilities, and “no match” for the Indian army.¹²⁰ And unlike Kashmir or Punjab, Assam is surrounded by other Indian states, providing a buffer from China, thus making it easier to deal with.¹²¹

Third, the lack of “emotional” connections to India’s main security rivals mitigated the possibility of pathological violence by security forces. As one journalist remarked, “In Kashmir, it’s perceived as a war against Pakistan. In Punjab also, it was supported from across the border. If ULFA was let’s say a Muslim group, my impression is it [Indian use of force] would have got more amplification.”¹²² While the Kashmiri Muslim is looked at as a “closet Pakistani,” Assam’s heavily Hindu population makes it less likely that security forces would see locals as being in bed with an enemy state.

In Assam, then, India faced movements which enjoyed no support from major threats such as China and Pakistan, and even minor powers, such as Myanmar, only provided sanctuary. As such, the threat the movements posed was relatively muted, which meant that the Indian state adopted relatively soft methods to deal with them. It adopted negotiations and concessions against AASU, encapsulated by an accord in 1985. Against ULFA, the center adopted a mix of policing and militarization, as seen in its delegation of strategy to the ULFA-friendly AGP state government; its delay of military operations because of distraction with other more pressing threats; the short duration and limited intensity of its military operations when they finally did kick off; and its emphasis on talks with moderate elements of the movement.

Punjab, 1984–93

The interaction between the Indian state and Sikh nationalists in the 1980s is perhaps the most complex of the cases in this chapter, simply because it saw the largest degree of internal variation in strategy. While Assam saw a mostly hands-off center and only sporadic military action, and Kashmir

witnessed consistent brutality, Punjab was the target of different policies by the Indian state. When opposition to the state among Sikhs became widespread after the attack on the Golden Temple in June 1984, marking the secessionist moment, Rajiv Gandhi treated the problem with a policing strategy, stressing the difference between “moderates” and “extremists.” This strategy resulted in a generous, negotiated accord with the Akali Dal (L) in the summer of 1985. However, violence continued to fester in the state, and in the spring of 1987, India escalated to militarization, when it imposed president’s rule and loosened the leash to the Punjab police led by K. P. S. Gill.

Overall, this case, more than others, highlights the limits of monocausal explanations and the need for analytical humility. My theory can shed light on important aspects of the variation in state strategy in Punjab. Rajiv’s concessions to Sikh nationalists in 1985 were based largely on a domestic political logic, staged within a context in which Pakistani support for the movement was muted (“limited”). By 1987, when Pakistani support was more robust (“moderate”), the Indian state instituted a harsher strategy. While at least some of this covariation is causal, in that Pakistani support made for a tougher militant movement and consequently a more coercive policy, external security considerations were only part of the story. There were at least two equally important contributors to the tough fight the Indian state faced: the long-term institutionalization of British and Indian essentialist beliefs in Punjabi Sikhs’ martial capabilities, which imbued them with the very same, and the splintering and factionalization of the militant movement in the late 1980s. These factors, along with Pakistani arming, training, and sanctuary of Sikh militants in the late 1980s, combined to produce an insurgency whose lethality required significant coercion in response.

THE ORIGINS OF SIKH NATIONALISM

A number of factors, structural and more immediate, were responsible for the outbreak of Sikh mobilization in the 1980s. First, Punjab had a relatively even demographic split between its Sikh and Hindu populations,¹²³ concentrated in the countryside and cities respectively. The rural Sikh community was itself divided between more prosperous, landowning Jats on the one hand, and the traders, former refugees from Pakistan, scheduled castes, and landless laborers on the other. The Akali Dal Party, an ethno-religious party purporting to represent Sikh interests, generally attracted the vote of the landowning Jat Sikhs, while Congress’s main supporters were Hindus and poorer, urban Sikhs. Congress, as a result, had a larger vote-bank than the Akalis; the latter would benefit if it were able to unite the Sikh population, both rural and urban, poor and rich, to form one voting bloc.¹²⁴

Then there was the matter of provincial boundaries. Since independence, Akali leaders had demanded a Punjabi province. But because India's governing ideology was marked by a Nehruvian distaste for "communalism" or any hint of religious demands, Congress at both the national and state level succeeded in delegitimizing Akali demands by casting them as based on a Sikh, rather than Punjabi, identity. In their dismissal of Punjabi-centric demands as a Sikh Trojan horse, the center was calculatedly aided by Punjabi Hindus, who in the 1951 and 1961 censuses, declared their personal language to be Hindi, rather than Punjabi. However, with the deaths of Nehru and his successor Lal Bahadur Shastri, along with Sikh sacrifices in India's wars against Pakistan and China in the 1960s, the mood within Congress—led by Indira Gandhi—shifted. On November 1, 1966, the province was carved out, featuring 41 percent of the land and 55 percent of the population of the old one, but the absence of many Punjabi-speaking areas, such as Abohar-Fazilka, and the fact that Chandigarh, the state capital, was administratively a Union territory, to be shared with Haryana, rankled.¹²⁵

Agriculture was a third structural factor. The Green Revolution disproportionately benefited richer Jat farmers at the expense of lower castes and landless laborers, polarizing society on socioeconomic lines.¹²⁶ More narrowly, the center allocated 75 percent of Punjab's water for nonriparian states despite Punjab providing, in 1980, 73 percent of the central government's food grain reserves and contributing handsomely to the country's rice, cotton, and sugarcane production. Canal irrigation did little to soften the blow,¹²⁷ and as a consequence, Sikhs demanded greater allocation of water from the Ravi-Beas, at the expense of states like Haryana and Rajasthan.¹²⁸

Finally, as Delhi became the scene of "fawners and flatterers," Prime Minister Indira Gandhi centralized power to ward off threats from within and outside her party and declared Emergency, suspending constitutional provisions and rights. As a result of these actions by Indira, the Akalis, as one of the only groups to directly take on her authoritarianism, saw their leaders imprisoned.¹²⁹ These factors contributed to large-scale mobilization in the state, but it took some myopic and foolish decisions from Congress leaders for Punjab to reach its secessionist moment.

OPERATION BLUESTAR AND THE SIKH SECESSIONIST MOMENT

Upon winning control of the central government in 1980, Indira Gandhi dismissed a number of state governments controlled by the opposition, including Punjab, and sought fresh elections in each of them.¹³⁰ The Akalis, turned out of government, won a paltry 27 percent of the vote, which in turn allowed Indira to paint them as unpopular. Armed with the Anandpur Sahib resolution, which explicitly laid out their grievances on water,

Chandigarh, and territory, the Akalis turned to more agitational politics. They were, in essence, forced to do so. On the one side, they had to make their presence and demands felt to the center. On the other, they were being squeezed by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

Bhindranwale was a relatively unknown figure until the late 1970s; his main claim to fame came from being elected the head of the Damdami Taksal, a religious educational institution, in 1977. His role was essentially that of a traveling evangelist, encouraging a more ascetic tradition among Sikh youth, proscribing clipping beards, smoking, alcohol, or drugs, and baptizing hundreds of men and women.¹³¹ His rise to prominence—"from a village preacher to national figure"—was a result of violence between orthodox Sikhs and a breakaway sect known as Nirankaris in the late 1970s.¹³² Bhindranwale recruited gangsters, criminals, and unemployed young men execute hits on regular Nirankaris at first, and then expanded their target list to include Nirankari sympathizers, dissident Akalis, Congress members, police officers, and Hindu journalists.¹³³

Bhindranwale created an extreme flank of Sikh agitational politics, even if he did not enjoy widespread popularity or legitimacy.¹³⁴ Bhindranwale's behavior generated "a game of one-upmanship," compelling moderates to adopt extremist rhetoric, if not methods.¹³⁵ Interestingly, Bhindranwale's role as an extremist that would pressure the Akali Dal was envisioned and cynically deployed by Congress itself, mainly for electoral reasons. To attract Jat Sikh peasant voters and discredit the Akali Dal Party, Congress leaders—including those at the very top, such as Giani Zail Singh and Sanjay Gandhi—encouraged Bhindranwale's violence.¹³⁶ Such behavior is typical of mainstream Indian political parties, which often seek the "production" of communal violence in advance of elections, usually in the form of riots, so that voters may be polarized into secure voting blocs on religious lines.¹³⁷

In the midst of Hindu-Sikh communal violence pushed by the likes of Bhindranwale, there was a series of negotiations between Indira and Akali leaders such as Sant Harchand Singh Longowal over the status of Chandigarh, water rights, territory, and a recognition of Sikh grievances more generally.¹³⁸ At times, a deal appeared imminent, but Indira would back off, generally acting on the political advice of her close confidantes who wanted her to appear tough minded. Meanwhile, communal and terrorist violence increased at a slow rate. Between 1981 and 1983, 101 civilians were killed, with 75 of those deaths occurring in 1983.¹³⁹ Particularly concerning was that Bhindranwale and his men started smuggling arms and hiding out in the Golden Temple, one of Sikhism's holiest sites. From there, they acted with de facto impunity.¹⁴⁰ Bhindranwale, in characteristic bluster, warned that "if the authorities enter this temple, we will teach them such a lesson that the throne of Indira will crumble. We will slice them into small pieces . . . *lohe ke chane chabayenge* (they'll be forced to chew

iron lentils, i.e. bullets).¹⁴¹ Indira and Congress faced pressure to do something about the worsening law-and-order.

The result was Operation Bluestar. On June 2, 1984, the Indian government officially ordered the army to “check and control extremists and communal violence in the state of Punjab and the Union Territory of Chandigarh, provide security to the people and restore normalcy.”¹⁴² Punjab was sealed off from the rest of the country, and troops using tanks and heavy artillery surrounded the Golden Temple complex.¹⁴³ It took about four days for the entire area to be neutralized. At least hundreds of people, including Bhindranwale, died. The operation was deemed a bad idea across the political spectrum, with the typical comment referring to it as a “major mistake.”¹⁴⁴ K. P. S. Gill, the man given credit for eventually eradicating violence in the state as director general of police in Punjab, and who generally espouses a fairly no-compromise attitude with regard to terrorists in his writings on the conflict, termed the operation “ill-planned, hasty, and knee-jerk . . . the damage Bluestar did was incalculable.”¹⁴⁵ Lieutenant General J. S. Aurora, a decorated veteran of the military, said in an interview that “the government showed no sense, no sensibility in handling the crisis.”¹⁴⁶

Bluestar was the point at which Sikh dissatisfaction with the center became congealed, becoming widespread from a relatively tiny group of militants and extremists to a more general feeling in Sikh society.¹⁴⁷ That is, Bluestar’s aftermath represented Sikh nationalism’s secessionist moment. For Julio Ribeiro, a former senior police official, Bluestar was “the trigger for the Khalistan movement, it affected all ordinary Sikhs.”¹⁴⁸ According to a journalist, “Bluestar was a watershed in the history of Sikhs, Punjab, and possibly India” because of the role it played in uniting Sikhs who were otherwise more divided into pro-Congress, pro-Akali, and pro-militant camps; “almost every Sikh felt alienated and hurt.”¹⁴⁹ Khushwant Singh pointedly noted that “only a miniscule proportion of Sikhs subscribed to Khalistan before the temple was stormed.” The *New York Times* reported that “before the raid on the Golden Temple, neither the Government nor anyone else appeared to put much credence in the Khalistan movement.”¹⁵⁰ A measure of Sikh dissatisfaction was the desertion of four thousand soldiers in the aftermath of the twin operations.¹⁵¹ Sharper still was the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October 1984 by two of her Sikh bodyguards. Anti-Sikh riots kicked off in all areas of the country but were especially acute in Delhi, where the Sikh community became the target of mob violence. In an echo of its pre-Bluestar activities, Congress officials connived with local authorities to fuel the riots.¹⁵² More than two thousand Sikhs were killed and ten thousand left homeless in Delhi alone.¹⁵³

Facing Punjab’s secessionist moment was Rajiv Gandhi, who took over the prime minister’s office the day his mother was assassinated before riding the backlash and ethnic mobilization conjured up by that event to win a sweeping election victory in the winter of 1984–85. His initial strategy

of policing failed to quell the violence, partly due to Pakistan's increased meddling, which caused the Indian state to escalate to militarization in 1987.

POLICING IN PUNJAB: ACCORD WITH THE AKALI DAL (L)

Punjab was atop incoming Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's to-do list. Though he veered into a hawkish stance early in his tenure, saying in December that the Anandpur Sahib resolution was unacceptable and that separatists would be "crushed," Rajiv essentially adopted a conciliatory stance.¹⁵⁴ "My government will give top priority to the problem of Punjab," he said. "The Sikhs are as much a part of India as any other community."¹⁵⁵ He stressed that "we must go beyond the prevention and suppression of violence. We must cure the minds where hatred and prejudice arise."¹⁵⁶

Rajiv adopted what Wallace calls "a process of political accommodation" by opening dialogue with Akali representatives and making "significant concessions in all major areas of concern."¹⁵⁷ In fact, Rajiv not only conceded essentially everything his mother had rejected between 1982 and 1984, but went further still.¹⁵⁸ The central government agreed to turn the city of Chandigarh over to Punjab. It appointed a commission to determine which Hindi-speaking areas would be transferred to Haryana, further cementing the status of Punjab as a Punjabi province. The dispute over the river waters was referred to a judicial tribunal. The Anandpur Sahib resolution, for so long the bane of the center, was referred to the Sarkaria Commission on Center-State Relations.¹⁵⁹ That was not all. Earlier in 1985, starting around March, the Rajiv government released senior Akali leaders from prison. An inquiry into the killings of Sikhs in Delhi was ordered and a ban on the AISSF was lifted. Economic assistance to the state was also promised.¹⁶⁰ Finally, the Rajiv government also planned to hold state elections in Punjab which, presumably, the Akalis would win, and thus would constitute a transfer of power.¹⁶¹

The accord was signed with hopeful language, with the signatories—Rajiv Gandhi and Longowal—declaring that "this settlement brings to an end a period of confrontation and ushers in an era of amity, goodwill and co-operation, which will promote and strengthen the unity of India."¹⁶² Both Rajiv and Longowal earned considerable goodwill within and outside Punjab, and optimism was pervasive. The *Times of India's* report on the accord began, "The Punjab problem has been solved."¹⁶³ The *Chandigarh Tribune* glowingly commented that "statesmanship, courage, a judicious blend of diplomatic finesse and administrative firmness and purposeful mediation" all contributed to Rajiv's agreement with Longowal, one that "represents the collective triumph of sanity and good sense over sectarian sentiments and mutual hatred."¹⁶⁴ A week after the accord the governor, Arjun Singh, claimed that "normalcy was returning to Punjab at a fast pace."¹⁶⁵

With respect to my argument, India adopted a policing strategy, where state violence is restrained, and instead tactical concessions—especially to those nationalists deemed “moderate”—are employed to deal with the movement. Indeed, the distinction between the “moderate” Akali Dal (L) faction and those actors deemed more extreme, both in the AD (L) and broader Sikh movement more generally (e.g. AD [United], AISSF), was one Rajiv consistently played up. In public appearances, he credited Longowal for isolating terrorists, expressed gratitude for his reciprocation of his good faith, and emphasized that “the other group was the extremists and we will deal with them as such.”¹⁶⁶

As my theory would predict, these concessions could be made only within a context of depressed external vulnerability. Most explanations for Rajiv’s accommodationist stance explicitly credit a domestic-political logic. For example, scholars such as Kohli and Brass cite the heavy electoral victory Rajiv and Congress won in 1984–85 as the primary cause of the concessions to the Akalis, since Rajiv could concede from a position of strength and be unconcerned with a backlash in the Hindi belt, having swept into power on the back of a massive and convincing electoral victory.¹⁶⁷ A biography of Rajiv Gandhi’s also notes that the accord brought the prime minister a “great deal of kudos and the respect of friend and foe alike,” reaffirming his early reputation as a problem-solver.¹⁶⁸

It is true that allegations of Pakistani support to Sikh militants were common in 1984–85, but contemporary media reports suggest that rather than reflecting “true” perception, such accusations were propagandistic, deployed for political gain and discrediting adversaries. Indira Gandhi’s warnings about “foreign forces” at work in Punjab after Bluestar were politely dismissed as carrying “the odour of election propaganda in them.”¹⁶⁹ Similarly, a *New York Times* report soon after Bluestar summed up the prevailing wisdom on the authenticity of accusations of external involvement, which pointed to not just Pakistan but also the CIA. It wrote that “the Government has yet to provide proof of foreign complicity to overcome doubters among Indians and Western diplomats,” noted that “in the past, attacks on Pakistan have been politically popular among the Hindi-speaking tier of northern India, which has become a crucial arena for elections expected to be called around December,” and quoted both opposition politicians, such as the BJP’s Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and anonymous diplomats, as dismissing the Pakistani connection.¹⁷⁰ The *Washington Post* reported that “the only indirect evidence of a Pakistani link that has surfaced so far has been the confiscation of weapons smuggled across the border into Amritsar with markings indicating they came from the arms pipeline that normally services Afghan guerillas operating on Pakistan’s western border,”¹⁷¹ while another Western paper informed its readers that “specialists say there is little evidence thus far that Pakistan is supplying armaments to extremist Sikhs in the Punjab.”¹⁷² Indian security officials

claimed to the media, based on the testimony of one arrested truck driver, that Pakistan was training "15,000 Sikh youths" in "subversive activities,"¹⁷³ an outlandish figure. One item of proof ostensibly demonstrating Pakistani complicity was the discovery of two circumcised men at the Golden Temple.¹⁷⁴ A media report quoted an army officer admiring the cleverness of Pakistani support to Sikh militants, noting that they "have covered their tracks so well that it is difficult to pinpoint them,"¹⁷⁵ eliding the possibility that their tracks were nonexistent because they had not yet walked the soil. Indeed, the weapons that were coming from across the border into Punjab around the time of Bluestar were the product of smuggling networks rather than full-throated official support.¹⁷⁶ Given that the Pakistani angle appears to have been publicized more as a product of cynical electoral and political objectives rather than apparent wholehearted belief, it seems reasonable to code Indian perceptions of Pakistani support in 1985 as "limited."

For the Indian government, then, the combination of Rajiv's domestic incentives and muted external support allowed for a relatively restrained policy, where the center made significant concessions to "moderate" elements of the nationalist movement. Elections held soon after the accord featured a high turnout and were dominated by the Longowal wing of the Akalis, suggesting that mainstream Sikhs were satisfied with the accord.¹⁷⁷

Unfortunately, the extremist fringe of the Sikh movement did not accept the deal. An ominous sign was a police subinspector's killing in Amritsar the day after the accord.¹⁷⁸ The "United" Akali Dal assailed the pact as a "sellout" and claimed that the leaders of the Akali Dal (Longowal) did not represent Sikhs.¹⁷⁹ Less than a week after the accord, there were gunfights between Akali Dal factions at the Golden Temple, where AISSF cadres were distributing pamphlets describing Longowal and other Akali Dal (L) leaders as traitors to the Panth.¹⁸⁰ AISSF cadres disrupted Akali Dal meetings with anti-Longowal and anti-accord slogans.¹⁸¹ Meanwhile, Longowal pleaded with less moderate party allies to not air their differences with him and the accord in public.¹⁸² Eventually, those party allies would come around, but tragically only on the day Longowal was shot dead.¹⁸³ Longowal's assassination took place less than a month after the accord; it was "hard to imagine a more lethal blow to the cause of peace and harmony in Punjab."¹⁸⁴ A drumbeat of murder and violence ensued. The accord became controversial, with Hindu hard-liners, such as the BJP's L. K. Advani, criticizing it for hurting the interests of Haryana and Rajasthan, and its implementation, or lack thereof, becoming a cause of recrimination between the state government and the center.¹⁸⁵

Following its election victory in September, the AD (L)-led state government proved unable or unwilling to arrest the violence.¹⁸⁶ The Akali Dal's administrative control of the state was always tenuous, caught as they were between religious militants accusing them of being stooges and a center

impatient with their inefficacy in quelling violence.¹⁸⁷ There were several illustrations of this predicament, one not dissimilar from what the AGP faced in Assam. In February 1986 for instance, Chief Minister S. S. Barnala claimed that it was up to the executive committees of the Akali Dal and the SGPC (a religious institution) to decide on how best to clear the Golden Temple of militants, rather than the elected state government which he headed.¹⁸⁸ Twice in the next year, Barnala was hauled up by the Akal Takht (Sikh religious authority) on account of his religious misconduct,¹⁸⁹ blurring the lines of authority in the state. Militants were widely perceived to have considerable sympathy and outright support of many within the police and the Akali Dal (L) Party itself, compromising Barnala's ability to mobilize political support to take Sikh terrorism head on.¹⁹⁰ As such, the center's next major step was to institute president's rule in May 1987.

ESCALATION TO MILITARIZATION

President's rule had been on the cards months earlier. In December 1986, the *Times of India* editorialized that, given the law and order situation, "the case for President's rule in Punjab has become pretty strong."¹⁹¹ The Hindu right was regular in its demands that it be imposed, warning of "unprecedented bloodshed" absent "drastic steps."¹⁹² By May, disappointed in the state government's efforts in bringing order, the center was ready to pull the trigger. It dismissed Barnala and the Akali government, marking the coda to the Punjab accord's political arrangement.¹⁹³ Alongside president's rule, the center instituted the draconian Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act.¹⁹⁴ Rajiv promised that under the new regime there would be "no compromise with terrorism" and "no leniency" would be shown until "this terrorism ends and this issue is solved."¹⁹⁵ His firmness was supported by brokers in Delhi.¹⁹⁶ Almost immediately after the imposition of president's rule, security forces launched a major offensive against militant hideouts in Tarn Taran.¹⁹⁷ In response, the militants too stepped up their attacks, marked by an especially horrific attack on dozens of Hindu commuters riding a bus in July.¹⁹⁸

These measures represented an escalation from policing to militarization, the Indian state's admission that it was fighting a war. As Julio Ribeiro said at the time, "We are in the thick of a battle."¹⁹⁹ For him, the Indian state had to react to the militants' increasing violence.²⁰⁰ Similarly, K. P. S. Gill wrote that by 1987, "the conflict had certainly escalated to the level of warfare."²⁰¹ Under his much-discussed leadership, the Punjab police instituted a harsher, tougher strategy, a "ruthless but effective police campaign," marked by operations such as Black Thunder in May 1988 (aimed at clearing the Golden Temple), massive search and cordon operations, and Operation Rakshak in November 1991, which called for a "catch and kill" policy for alleged militants.²⁰² The so-called Gill doctrine, "grounded in hard-headed

Clausewitzian principles," emphasized "kinetic counter-terrorist measures," or in plain English, aggressive force.²⁰³ As one analysis states, Gill "did not waste time trying to engage them in theological debates. Instead he appealed directly to their natural instinct for survival. Gill offered the terrorists a stark choice: they could either die for their idea of God, or live for themselves. There was no third option."²⁰⁴ The early 1990s, especially, saw Gill and the Punjab police given "*carte blanche* power to confront militancy without interference from legislators or state administration" following the election of Prime Minister Rao.²⁰⁵ Predictably, human rights violations piled up: Indian security forces, "and the Punjab police in particular, summarily executed civilians and suspected militants in custody, engaged in widespread disappearances and brutally tortured detainees" during the conflict's worst years. Gill dismissed concerns about such methods, noting that "if an officer has done something wrong, it is between him and his maker."²⁰⁶

There were two main trends that were responsible for rising militancy in the state, and in turn Indian escalation to militarization: increasing Pakistani support, and the Sikh insurgents' lack of unity. When Sikh militants first crossed into Pakistan after Blue Star, they were disappointed at their cool reception: "The Pakistani state initially denied them military aid and imprisoned them so as to control their movements better. It was not until the Sikh insurgency truly began to organize in 1986 that the Pakistani secret services considered supporting the insurrection in earnest."²⁰⁷ Pakistan's initial hesitation sprung from the militants' lack of discipline and the fact that Punjab "was not Kashmir" and simply not as important. As such, hundreds of Sikh militants were held in a Faisalabad jail, while some potential leaders were given villas in Lahore. Indeed, not only did Pakistan not support these militants initially, but it did not even allow them to go back to India, leading to a failed prison-escape in Faisalabad. "It was not until the first Sikh political-military structures were formed in 1986 that ISI really began to back these insurgents' war effort," achieving real momentum only after 1988.²⁰⁸

Similarly, a journalist with close ties to the Indian security establishment argues that Pakistani "support seems to have been generally low-grade prior to 1984," and it took until the early 1990s for Pakistan to "become a significant player."²⁰⁹ Elsewhere he notes that while "we do not know precisely when and how Pakistan arrived at the decision to back terrorists" in Punjab, it is only in 1987 when the Kalashnikov rifle and "hundreds of terrorists" crossed the Indo-Pak border.²¹⁰ One former security official corroborated that Pakistan's supply of the dreaded Kalashnikov rifle did not reach appreciable levels until 1988.²¹¹ It was in response to the 1989 Brassstacks crisis that Pakistan further opened the "terror tap" when "small arms flows, in particular, increased dramatically."²¹² This support included the supply of assault rifles, including the AK-47 and AK-56, RPG-7 rockets,

Chinese-origin machine guns, night vision equipment, communications equipment, training, and leadership of Khalistani groups by Pakistani intelligence personnel, thus qualifying Pakistani support in 1987 as “moderate” by my framework.²¹³

The importance of Pakistani support in the late 1980s for Indian counter-insurgency can be gleaned from a variety of sources. K. P. S. Gill told me that “the impact of [Pakistan-supplied] AK-47s was very grave,” that absent Pakistani backing, the insurgency would have ended “much earlier” and been “treated on par with aggravated dacoities, on par with criminal issues” rather than the war that it was fought as.²¹⁴ As he wrote, the militants’ collective ability to kill was “directly connected with the gun-power available” to them through Pakistan.²¹⁵ Another former security official told me that Pakistani support, including “finances, weapons, training, explosives” gave the Sikh militant movement greater “lethality and punch,” and was like “oxygen” for the Sikh militants. “We tried to choke that supply of oxygen.”²¹⁶ Specifically, he discussed a two-pronged strategy, whereby K. P. S. Gill went “hammer and tong” in the heartland, while on the border the erection of a fence beginning in 1988 drastically cut “hard-core terrorist numbers.” Pakistani external support meant that even relatively low numbers of militants—Julio Ribeiro claimed there were between three hundred and five hundred terrorists operating in 1986—could paralyze India’s most prosperous state because the large number of arms and ammunition that flooded Punjab were far superior to what the Indian police then possessed.²¹⁷

Alongside this increasing Pakistani support, the splintering of the Sikh movement—“there was no common leadership, no common manifesto”—meant that there were innumerable militant groups, whose violence took on as much a criminal as ideological color.²¹⁸ Each area would see a different, local organization come up, with no central command coordinating between the many leaders and groups.²¹⁹ One estimate was that there were 162 militant groups active at some point during the insurgency.²²⁰ Recent scholarship on civil conflict has emphasized how fractionalization of national movements generates higher levels of violence; fragmentation results in actors using violence to outflank rivals within the movement, and it precludes attempts by movement leaders to end hostilities when peace agreements are signed.²²¹ Both processes, outbidding as well as spoiling, were in evidence in Punjab after the accord.

These two trends—splits from within, and support from without—took on greater potency in the wider context of Sikh martial capabilities. Both the colonial British state, as well as the Indian Republic (less explicitly), subscribed to a belief in a theory of “martial races,” whereby some ethnicities are considered better fighters than others. Punjabis—and especially Punjabi Sikhs—have long been overrepresented in the Indian armed forces (at partition, Punjabis were 6.5 percent of the population and 54 percent of

the army).²²² This belief has become a self-fulfilling prophecy because it helped endow Sikhs with greater-than-average levels of military training and combat experience. These longstanding policies caught up to, and deeply compromised, the Indian state in the 1980s, since it afforded militant organizations a steady stream of possible recruits who could provide organizational, tactical, and weapons skills. Indeed, the heaviest violence in Punjab took place in precisely those districts where the army is most heavily recruited (Amritsar, Gurdaspur, and Tarn Taran).²²³ As one journalist told me, militants in Punjab were “very tough” and “would not bend in interrogation,” and that gun battles were “very long” between security forces and militants.²²⁴ The fighting in Punjab often took place “between Jat Sikh and Jat Sikh” often drawn from the same village, one fighting for the police and one for the militants.²²⁵

India’s escalation from policing in 1985 to militarization in 1987 can be clearly seen in the annual death tolls from the conflict. In the years preceding the accord, “terrorist” fatalities were relatively low: 14 in 1981, followed by 7, 13, 77 (a gross underestimate), and 2 in 1985. These low numbers were consistent with a strategy of policing. In 1986, there was a rise to 78, before a massive increase to 328 in 1987, then 373, 703, 1,320, 2,177, 2,113, and 798 in 1993.²²⁶ Put differently, when Pakistani support for the militants was essentially nonexistent, between 1981 and 1985, the average number of annual deaths (including civilians, militants, and law enforcement) in the conflict was 138. The corresponding figure for the period between 1986 and 1992, when Pakistan support was more robust, was 2,841.²²⁷ Though correlation does not imply causation, the difference in casualty rates in the two eras is massive, and testimony from analysts, journalists, and former security officials all point to the centrality of Pakistani support in generating a stiff insurgency.

Generally, the Punjab case observes the theoretical predictions of this book. When the Punjabi movement was viewed through a domestic lens—that is, when external support for the separatists was relatively low—the state’s response was policing. Despite the best intentions of the Rajiv-Longowal accord, the extensive raw material for, and splits within, Sikh militancy, alongside Pakistan’s increasingly active role in the late 1980s in Punjab, led Indian strategy to become more heavy handed over time.

Kashmir, 1989–94

The third crisis under study in this chapter is the one that took place in Kashmir, beginning in the winter of 1989–90. This crisis was set off by a fraudulent election in 1987, which pushed Kashmiri nationalists to launch a secessionist struggle. Unlike the Assam and Punjab cases, however, the center employed collective repression at the outset of the crisis. The

principal driver of the overwhelmingly violent response by the state was that Kashmir was center stage for the Indo-Pak rivalry. In particular, Pakistan had twice before tried to take over Kashmir in the decades prior to the secessionist struggle and was widely perceived to be behind the rebellion in the early 1990s, especially by Indian security forces on the ground. For the Indian state, Kashmir's separatist movement posed a greater external threat, and as a consequence, it acted as the theory proffered in this book would predict—with heavy-handed repression, with both emotional and materialist effects of “high” third-party support operative.

A BUFFER STATE SINCE BIRTH

Contestation over Kashmir and its future began during the drive for, and in the immediate aftermath of, independence from the British. Under the terms of the British withdrawal, Muslim-majority provinces such as those in Northwest India and the northeastern province of Bengal were to become part of Pakistan; the rest would become the independent nation state of India. The grey area in between was occupied by the so-called princely states, which were governed by monarchs nominally independent of the British crown but who still paid allegiance to it. The leaders of these princely states were given three choices: join India, join Pakistan, or become independent.

The unique factor about Kashmir was that it was a Muslim-majority province with a Hindu leader, Maharaja Hari Singh. From a strictly demographic perspective, it probably should have acceded to Pakistan, but Hari Singh opted for independence, not wishing to subject himself to larger powers. As a result, a tribal rebellion broke out in Kashmir in July 1947. Sensing an opportunity, Pakistan sent bands of its own forces to support the rebellion later that year,²²⁸ leading to Hari Singh asking for Indian help to quell the disturbances. India promised aid only on the condition that he formally accede, a condition he agreed to. India's forces faced off against Pakistan's, in what became the first war over Kashmir. The war ended in an essential stalemate, and the ceasefire line drawn by international mediators in the fall of 1948 left Pakistan with about one-third of Kashmir and India the rest.²²⁹

Over the next few decades, the Indian center's interventionist practices caused Kashmiri disaffection.²³⁰ For instance, state elections in the rest of India began in 1952, but Kashmir had to wait until 1962 for legislative assembly elections and 1967 for national assembly elections to be held. Moreover, the elections that were held were typified by irregularities, rigging, and fraud, aimed at ensuring that the center's chosen affiliates maintained power.²³¹ It took until 1963 for the formal offices of the governor and the chief minister to be introduced, and for the Indian Election Commission and Supreme Court to exercise jurisdiction in Kashmir.²³² Additionally, India failed to hold a plebiscite Prime Minister Nehru had promised

Kashmir in November, 1947.²³³ By the mid-1970s, Shaikh Abdullah, the most popular leader in the province, had ceased his demand for a plebiscite, having been in jail for close to two decades, and signed an accord with Indira Gandhi.²³⁴ Ominously, these developments were not taken in stride by Kashmiris, who began to question whether personalities such as Shaikh Abdullah truly spoke for them. Shaikh Abdullah's administration was highly corrupt and authoritarian, all the while doing little for the socioeconomic development of the state, which was marked by increasing unemployment among educated youth.²³⁵

The 1983 elections represented a crucial turning point. Shaikh Abdullah had passed away, replaced as party head by his son, Farooq Abdullah, who was not blessed with his father's charisma and political acumen.²³⁶ Though there were some irregularities and violence during the election, most broadly accepted the National Conference's comfortable victory—resting mainly on Muslim support in the valley—with one important exception: Indira Gandhi.²³⁷ When in May 1983, Farooq Abdullah joined a national alliance of anti-Congress parties, the die was cast. Up to this point, Kashmiri politicians, even relatively nationalist ones, concerned themselves mainly with developments within the state. The approach onto the national stage was uncharted territory, and it was one that was not appreciated by the prime minister.²³⁸ She dismissed the Abdullah government, with incoming governor Jagmohan informing Abdullah that he had “lost confidence” of the state assembly. In his place, Congress installed a puppet regime led by Abdullah's personal rival, and brother-in-law, G. M. Shah.²³⁹ However, G. M. Shah himself soon outgrew his usefulness and was dismissed. Farooq Abdullah, desperate to return to power, reached an agreement with the center to contest the forthcoming elections in an alliance with Congress.²⁴⁰

Predictably, Kashmiris did not react amiably to this alliance, which they perceived as a sellout to the center, similar to Farooq's father's act in the mid-1970s. A conglomerate of parties under the banner of the Muslim United Front (MUF), led by the Jamaat-e-Islami, called a strike after the alliance was announced, and on March 23, 1987, hundreds of activists were arrested.²⁴¹ The MUF would be the primary opposition party contesting the now-infamous 1987 elections, widely deemed to be rigged and fraudulent.²⁴² More generally, Kashmiris began to shed their previously docile acquiescence to the maneuvering by the center and the National Conference Party, their mobilization driven by a more literate citizenry and greater access to media. Kashmiris could no longer be bought off with the ease with which they once were.²⁴³

1987 ELECTIONS

The Congress–National Conference alliance swept to an overwhelming victory in 1987, in an election widely acknowledged to be rigged. An anonymous

source in the Indian Intelligence Bureau told one scholar that thirteen seats were stolen. Two weeks before the election, six hundred opposition party workers were arrested in stronghold areas. Despite the pervasive allegations of fraud, watchdog institutions such as the Election Commission and the High Court of Jammu and Kashmir were silent.²⁴⁴ The importance of the 1987 election rigging can be inferred from the fact that the leaders of the Kashmir insurgency, when it finally came in early 1990, were all polling agents for the MUF in the 1987 elections. These included Shabir Shah, Yasin Malik, and Javed Mir.²⁴⁵ Abdul Ghani Lone summed the 1987 rigging this way: "It was this that motivated the young generation to say 'to hell with the democratic process and all that this is about' and they said 'let's go for the armed struggle.' It was the flash point."²⁴⁶

Under pressure from the opposition and with increasing agitation in the state by 1989, Farooq Abdullah began to lose control. The unrest was fueled by global developments, such as those in Eastern Europe, where the Soviet empire was collapsing and giving rise to free and independent states.²⁴⁷ Becoming increasingly assertive, the main insurgent organization in the state—the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF)—kidnapped the daughter of the Indian home minister in December 1989 and successfully used her as a bargaining chip for the release of five members of their group.²⁴⁸ The following month, Farooq Abdullah's government was dismissed and Kashmir was brought under direct rule by New Delhi.

This was Kashmir's secessionist moment. Kashmiris were expectant of a new era; "they thought it was the beginning of what they've been asking for."²⁴⁹ The Indian state would follow with a highly repressive response, beginning with the installation of the hard-line Jagmohan as governor and the banning of foreign journalists from the valley.²⁵⁰

COLLECTIVE REPRESSION IN KASHMIR

The extent of the repressive response to separatism in Kashmir can, at a first glance, be discerned from the language deployed to describe Indian behavior from 1990 to 1994. Scholars and journalists have variously described Indian actions as "stringent repressive measures," "undirected repression," "nonsurgical," "unleash[ing] its iron fist," "ferocious," "tenacious," "often unruly," and "bare-knuckled."²⁵¹ State officials directly involved in the violence have also guardedly betrayed the high levels of state violence in the early 1990s: secessionists "required a credible display of the might of the State to put things in proper perspective," and it was crucial to "give sharp teeth to the machinery against terrorists."²⁵²

What, precisely, are these descriptions of? First, there was a high level of military and paramilitary participation in the state. By January 1990, just as the Kashmir issue was becoming a national concern, there were already over 80,000 troops in the state, and the Kashmir "valley had been virtually handed

over to paramilitary forces.”²⁵³ By the middle of 1993, these figures had increased to an estimated 175,000 soldiers and 30,000 paramilitary personnel in the province.²⁵⁴ By the mid-1990s, the number had increased further still, to 400,000, a number which represents more troops than all but sixteen countries’ entire active-duty personnel in 1995.²⁵⁵ These forces were overwhelmingly non-Kashmiri and non-Muslim,²⁵⁶ meaning that not only did the Indian government blanket the state with security forces from an early juncture, but also that these soldiers were generally deemed to be outsiders.

Second, Indian forces were afforded a great deal of latitude, and absolved of any accountability, when it came to the security operations.²⁵⁷ “The Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Ordinance, introduced in July 1990, provided the security forces with extraordinary powers to shoot and kill, and search and arrest without a warrant, all under immunity from prosecution ‘in respect of anything done or purported to be done in exercise of power conferred by this Act.’”²⁵⁸ It also introduced the Disturbed Areas Act to supplement existing emergency laws in the state, as well as the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act. However, as Bose notes, “most Indian counterinsurgency operations in the Valley made no reference to *any* framework of law.”²⁵⁹

Alongside the liberal use of curfews, often accompanied by shoot-on-sight orders, crackdowns were the main ingredient in the stew of Indian counterinsurgency.²⁶⁰ Crackdowns involved large groups of heavily armed security forces arriving in jeeps and trucks and cordoning off a village or neighborhood. All men would then be asked to step outside their homes and congregate in an open space, where local informers—often tortured into flipping to the government’s side—would identify militants and those who helped and harbored them. Meanwhile, soldiers would carry out house-to-house searches for weapons and explosives; allegations of theft, vandalism, and sexual assault of women and girls were commonplace during these searches. These crackdowns “would last a whole day or longer, even in harsh winter conditions.”²⁶¹ Those that were identified as militants or supporters of militants would be driven to “interrogation centers” which grew rapidly in Srinagar and the Valley in general. “Torture, often in gruesome forms, became routine and widespread . . . numerous people returned from interrogation either physically crippled or mentally disturbed, or both; others never returned at all.” Journalists and rights organizations estimate that a few thousand persons disappeared after being taken into custody throughout the duration of the conflict.²⁶²

More serious was the series of massacres of unarmed civilians in Kashmir, especially during the early months of the crisis. In January 1990, a large group of unarmed civilians gathered at Gawakdal Bridge to protest searches conducted at Chota Bazar and Guru Bazar that morning. The protestors were shot at with live ammunition from either side of the bridge, and more than a hundred died in what is considered one of the worst massacres in

Kashmiri history.²⁶³ In fact, in just three days in late January, Indian security forces killed more than three hundred unarmed protestors.²⁶⁴ In March 1990, similar demonstrations were shot at by police forces, and more than forty people died.²⁶⁵ When Maulvi Mirwaiz Farooq, chief preacher at Jama Masjid in Srinagar, was assassinated in May 1990, his funeral procession passed through Islamia College, where the Sixty-Ninth Battalion of the CPRF was stationed. The security forces fired at the crowd and killed between sixty and one hundred people. Mirwaiz's coffin was also struck with bullets. As a close aide of Governor Jagmohan said, "They just went berserk and emptied all the bullets they had."²⁶⁶

Neutral observers assiduously recorded Indian repression, including summary executions, reprisal killings, torture, rape, the destruction and looting of civilian property, arson of residential neighborhoods, and lethal force against protestors.²⁶⁷ They described Indian behavior in places such as Handwara, where the BSF burned down three dozen houses and two hundred shops and fired into a crowded market in October 1990; or in Phazipora in August 1990, when Indian army soldiers killed twenty-five civilians in a village in retaliation for a militant attack two kilometers away; or in Pattan, also in August, where soldiers fired from their convoy into a crowded market, despite no provocation.²⁶⁸ International media also highlighted the importance of collective punishment for Indian counterinsurgency, noting its reliance after July 1990 on arson—witnesses described seeing "men in khaki sprinkle gunpowder, light it, then keep firefighters away at gunpoint"—and gang rape as a response to militant attacks.²⁶⁹

It is important to reiterate that these policies were carried out at the beginning of the crisis, representing the state's primary response to Kashmiri nationalists. Furthermore, notwithstanding Governor Jagmohan's hard-line reputation, this response was "supported by virtually the entire spectrum of Indian political opinion."²⁷⁰ According to a news report, "'Action first, political initiative later.' This is the line of thinking that is emerging among various political groups in the State," while another relayed Rajya Sabha parliamentarians' demands for a "ruthless crackdown on the militants."²⁷¹ Even when Jagmohan resigned in the spring of 1990, there was no letup, with Saxena, his replacement, clarifying that "there is no change of policy" and that he would be "very firm" in Kashmir.²⁷² The Indian response of collective repression, which targeted both insurgent groups as well as civilians, took a heavy toll, with estimates of tens of thousands dead in the first few years of the conflict.

INDIAN STRATEGY IN KASHMIR: THE PAKISTAN CONNECTION

As soon as the crisis hit the Valley, the Indian state blamed Pakistan for its "direct incitement to subversion, violence and terrorism" in Kashmir.²⁷³

Indeed, it would be difficult to make sense of the Indian response in Kashmir without accounting for how the region figured into the interstate tension between India and Pakistan.

Kashmir was valued highly by both India and Pakistan at independence, with neither state prepared to relinquish its claim.²⁷⁴ For India, the state mattered a great deal for its self-perception as a secular republic, as opposed to its bitter rival, Pakistan, which is often thought of as the product of communal and religious agitation. As the only Muslim-majority state in India, Kashmir is often regarded as the emblem of India's secularism. In a 1951 address, Nehru summed up this feeling when he said that "Kashmir has become the living symbol of that non-communal and secular state which will have no truck with the two-nation theory on which Pakistan has based itself." On another occasion, he commented that "Kashmir is symbolic as it illustrates that we are a secular state; Kashmir with a . . . large majority of Muslims nevertheless of its own free will wished to be associated with India." Pakistan too felt the acquisition and control of Kashmir was a *sine qua non* of its existence as a state because the idea of Pakistan as a home for South Asian Muslims simply did not make sense without holding all Muslim-majority states in the Indian subcontinent. As M. A. Gurmani, Pakistani minister for Kashmir affairs noted in 1951, "We are fighting for Kashmir on the same principle as that on which we fought for Pakistan."²⁷⁵

Pakistan's first salvo for Kashmir took place in the winter of 1947–48, when it supported a tribal rebellion in an effort to win control of the state. Less than two decades later, it tried, and failed, again, launching Operation Gibraltar, which called for Pakistani troops bearing the sharp teeth of a domestic uprising and seizing the entirety of Kashmir.²⁷⁶ These wars rendered Jammu and Kashmir the most sensitive border state in India and made Congress and other mainstream parties in India regard any opposition emanating from Kashmir as inherently suspicious.²⁷⁷ This suspicion was exacerbated by citizens of Indian Kashmir playing up Pakistan relations; for instance, it was common to see the Pakistan flag hoisted on 14 August (Pakistan Independence Day) and a black flag on 15 August (Indian Independence Day), and locals tended to back Pakistan in hockey or cricket matches against India.²⁷⁸

Pakistan did not cause Kashmir's secessionist moment, but certainly took advantage of it, as it became "deeply involved in the uprising and provided training, arms, and sanctuary," along with fighters themselves. As one analyst put it, the "situation in Srinagar appeared like a dream come true" for India's neighbor.²⁷⁹ Initially surprised by the scale of Kashmiri unrest and dissatisfaction, Pakistan moved quickly. What was different about its intervention in 1990 from what came earlier was that this time, Pakistan waited for Kashmiris to act first. As one local journalist put it, "the insurgency in Kashmir was imported, not exported."²⁸⁰ What aided Pakistan was a decade of practice in the anti-Soviet conflict in Afghanistan—the so-called

Afghan model—which entailed training, arming, and funneling money to antistate guerrillas from across the border. The Pakistan Army and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) set up training camps and used much of the same personnel it had used in Afghanistan, who, conveniently, were available for action given the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s.²⁸¹ Joshi provides details on Pakistani training:

When insurgency began, training tended to be elementary, spanning just about a week to ten days and involved learning the use of AK-47 rifles, pistols, throwing grenades and laying explosives. Trainees were shown how to take apart a rifle or a pistol, clean it and put it together again. Later, the course was increased to two and a half weeks and the syllabus was upgraded to include the use of RPG-7, light machine-guns as well as techniques of concealment, camouflage, reconnaissance and intelligence gathering.²⁸²

Pakistan did not uniformly back every insurgent group operating in Kashmir. While at the outset, Pakistan supported groups demanding independence, such as JKLF, as well as those demanding accession to Pakistan, such as Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM), it quickly grew to favor the latter. Eventually, by cutting off financial and logistical support for JKLF and overwhelmingly siding with its insurgent rivals, Pakistan ironically aided India in decimating the most viable organization for winning independence.²⁸³ This unevenness in support emanated from the ISI and Pakistan military's natural partiality to those groups that shared their goals—unity with Pakistan, rather than independence, which would conceivably cut into Pakistani-controlled Gilgit-Baltistan. Moreover, the JKLF was more of a secular, nationalist organization, while HM and its allies were more Islamist in nature, fitting better with the ISI worldview and ideology.²⁸⁴

Relative to Punjab and other secessionist “hot-spots,” the Kashmiri nationalist movement saw more Pakistani support. One Kashmiri journalist told me that “Kashmir is an altogether different ballgame,” compared to other separatist conflict in India, and another stated simply: “No country backed Punjab like Pakistan backed Kashmir.”²⁸⁵ One defense analyst informed me that there was a “huge difference” in scale between the Khashistan and Kashmiri insurgencies, marked especially by the large numbers of young men going across the Line of Control in January 1990 and the equally large number of weapons coming back. Additionally, the Kashmiri insurgency was almost entirely funded by the ISI while the Punjab insurgency was largely financed autochthonously.²⁸⁶ A newspaper analysis in May 1990 commented that the Kashmir insurgency was “totally different” from others India had faced because there had never before “been such a massive involvement of a neighboring country.”²⁸⁷

All this is to say that Pakistan exercised a great deal of control over the direction and strength of the insurgency in Kashmir. However, even before

reliable intelligence had been collected, Indian officials were convinced that Pakistan was behind the insurgency. The first indication that India interpreted Kashmir as an external conflict was that it moved thousands of troops from its border with China to Kashmir and the Pakistani border.²⁸⁸

Less than two months after Rubaya Sayeed's kidnapping, intelligence sources claimed that there were five hundred Pakistan-trained militants in the valley, supplied with "sophisticated arms and explosives."²⁸⁹ Jagmohan repeatedly mentions the importance of Pakistan in his memoirs. He writes that when he assumed his role, he faced "an intensified onslaught of the terrorist campaign which Pakistan intended to fan vigorously," that "powerful forces, both internal and external, were operating, at various levels, to frustrate whatever I was doing, or intended to do," and that of the forty-four distinct militant organizations operating in Kashmir, "almost all" of them came from across the Line of Control; "it came to be known that there were at least 39 training centers in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Pakistan."²⁹⁰ According to him, "Pakistan provided not only moral, political and propaganda support to the subversionists in the Valley, as it itself admitted, but also actively helped them in training in guerilla warfare and techniques of contemporary terrorism . . . sophisticated weapons and finances were made available."²⁹¹

Other state officials were on a similar page. Sudhir Bloeria, who served in various roles in the Kashmir bureaucracy, wrote that when he arrived in the area in April 1990, he had to "launch an immediate and vigorous exercise to . . . assess the impact of the sustained and strenuous efforts of the Pakistani ISI and its cohorts."²⁹² He discovered that "an unspecified number of sympathizers and motivators had been activated by the ISI operators along the border and in the interiors."²⁹³ The "fire and smoke" in Kashmir, he claimed, was caused by the "machinations of Pakistan and its notorious ISI," and there "were unmistakable signs as well as confirmed intelligence reports that ISI was making strenuous efforts to foment trouble" in Kashmir.²⁹⁴

In October 1990, Governor Girish Chandra Saxena summarized the status quo by noting that "the number of militants is very large. Weapons available to them are also sizable. And the situation on the ground is not frozen. Pakistan is trying to push more and more people."²⁹⁵ A similar snapshot of the Indian security establishment's bleak view during the first months of the insurgency is captured by A. S. Dulat, a former senior intelligence official, in his recent memoirs:

Things were going badly in the Valley: Kashmiris began to sniff azaadi, for they were taken in by the ISI's bluff that if they started something big enough, the Pakistan army would come and liberate them from India, much in the way India had helped Bangladesh's liberation from Pakistan. Insurgency in Kashmir was masterminded by Gen. Zia-ul-Haq and his henchmen

as revenge for Bangladesh. Kashmiris were crossing the border in droves . . . we were in a mess. The Pakistanis were enjoying watching Kashmir burn.²⁹⁶

The Indian state, then, believed Pakistan was behind developments in Kashmir;²⁹⁷ third-party support was perceived as “high.” As my theory would predict, there were two aspects of this support that led to a more vicious Indian reaction. First, violence from security forces on the ground was more indiscriminate because of their seeing the entire local population as disloyal and traitorous, in bed with an enemy state. Second, Pakistani support led to a more challenging fight, since it meant a stronger Kashmiri nationalist movement alongside the potential for a Pakistani invasion. This tougher fight generated a more vicious counterinsurgency.

According to Bose, “In the eyes of the several hundred thousand soldiers and paramilitary troops flooding the Valley, the whole population was suspect—not just disloyal to India, but, much worse, in league with the enemy state across the LOC [Line of Control] . . . for the average Indian soldier fighting insurrection in the Valley, ‘the face of the Kashmiri has dissolved into a blurred, featureless mask. He has become a secessionist-terrorist-fundamentalist traitor.’”²⁹⁸ Representatives of the Indian state themselves make the case for violence being intensified due to suspicions of divided loyalties amongst the local population. As Bloeria wrote, “Those who had been swayed by the propaganda and sustained efforts of the ISI and had embarked on the path of militancy, anti-national activities and challenging the integrity of the country, required a credible display of the might of the State to put things in proper perspective . . . the aim was to send a clear message to the militants and their supporters that they would not be in a position to carry out their nefarious activities unchallenged and the retribution would be swift and severe.”²⁹⁹ Saxena, who succeeded Governor Jagmohan as the lead administrator in Kashmir, noted that “because of a proxy war being conducted from across the border and sponsoring of terrorist violence on a large scale, it was at times difficult to ensure targeted responses by the security forces. There were occasions when there was overreaction or even wrongdoing.”³⁰⁰ The distinction between ordinary Kashmiris and Pakistanis had all but vanished for those in charge.³⁰¹ BSF personnel argued that, given the presence of Pakistani agents in Kashmir, “judicious suspicion” was an “essential” part of their duty.³⁰²

Yasin Malik, one of the top commanders of JKLF, alleged that when held in captivity, “They called me a Pakistani bastard. I told them I want my rights, even my vote was stolen.”³⁰³ This treatment was not restricted merely to those who took up arms. A moderate Kashmiri politician said that “we are branded Pakistanis. We have always been objects of suspicion. Even if we pick up the Indian flag, and start shouting *Jai Bharat ma*, the suspicion will remain. They do not trust us. Our elders fought against the

Pakistanis in 1947, we fought against them in 1965 and 1971, but I do not know why we are still not trusted.”³⁰⁴ When a labor leader was tortured and attempted to tell soldiers about his Indian friends, they replied that “Humme sab kuch pata hai. Tum sab Pakistani ho” (We know everything. You are all Pakistanis).³⁰⁵ A four-member fact-finding team visited the state in March 1990 and concluded that security officials “suffer from the paranoid feeling that the entire population of the valley are pro-Pakistani ‘terrorists.’ Dictated by such suspicions, operations to maintain law and order have invariably led” to Indian counterinsurgency “wreaking vengeance on the innocent masses of the valley.”³⁰⁶

Veteran Kashmiri journalists pointed out how due to their perceived pro-Pakistani leanings, Kashmiris were seen as an “enemy” by security forces; “for India, every Kashmiri is a Pakistani agent, or at least anti-India. Their loyalty is in doubt.”³⁰⁷ Younger Kashmiri journalists, explaining the intensity of Indian counterinsurgency in Kashmir, agreed that it was an emotional reaction, rooted in “the baggage of partition” and the fact that Kashmir is an overwhelmingly Muslim state.³⁰⁸ Journalists and analysts based in Delhi backed these assessments, arguing that there was “no question” that Pakistani support led to a tougher, more emotional, and more vicious Indian response, as it hardened Indian resolve.³⁰⁹ Another suggested that the Indian state had a “panicked” reaction to the insurgency because Kashmir was an issue “attached to Pakistan,” with its Muslim-majority population.³¹⁰

One aspect of the Kashmiri-Pakistani threat conflation that bears mentioning, commented on by several interviewees, was the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism in India during this period. One former security official who served in Kashmir emphasized this angle at length. According to him, what explained the Indian reaction in Kashmir was the national context within which it took place, including the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and religious polarization in mainstream politics, with the rise of the BJP, the Ayodha mosque incident, and communal riots in Bombay.³¹¹ As a result, violence in Kashmir from both insurgents and the state became colored with a religious tinge, especially since a substantial proportion of Kashmiris were demanding or fighting for accession to Muslim Pakistan. Notably, during the midst of the crisis, the Hindu right, led by the BJP, insisted on tough measures against the Kashmiri movement—in part as a signal to Pakistan. The BJP claimed that only the “strongest possible measures” including a “bullet for bullet approach” could salvage India’s unity and integrity, arguing against any “political moves” given that the “the first priority should be to check and curb Pakistan’s interference in the affairs of Jammu and Kashmir.”³¹²

Other sources shed light on the second important implication of Pakistani support: that it resulted in a more challenging fight for the Indian state. Similar to Indian support for Bengali separatists, Pakistani support

for the Kashmiri national movement set up a two-front problem for the Indian state, whereby it had to practice counterinsurgency internally while guarding an international (de facto) border from which it regularly received fire.³¹³ This meant that the security forces were as concerned with infiltration of insurgents into Kashmir as it was with their activities once crossed.³¹⁴

At the outset of the crisis, it was deemed that the Indian state's solidarity was under threat from a "Pakistan-backed insurgency [that] has assumed alarming proportions."³¹⁵ As far as Indian decision makers and soldiers were concerned, they needed to fight very hard to keep Kashmir within the union. A former Congress Party official told me that the period between 1989 and 1992 saw "extreme brutality" because Kashmir was "a bone of contention between India and Pakistan, India will defend it no matter the cost. Suspicion of Pakistan support from the beginning gave legitimization for extreme violence."³¹⁶ Another former official said that the Indian state's response to the Kashmir rebellion "was that a portion of Indian territory is under attack and needs to be defended."³¹⁷ A Kashmiri Pandit who fled the valley claimed that matters escalated faster in Kashmir than in Punjab or Assam because unlike those territories, in Kashmir the combination of a history of border war with Pakistan, and the fact that it was "a Muslim country providing [help to] Muslim citizens" of India, meant that the state was on high alert.³¹⁸ As one contemporary analysis argued, "most Indians, for security reasons, would tolerate a level of repression in Kashmir that they would protest if it occurred elsewhere in the country."³¹⁹

The seriousness of the external threat in Kashmir necessitated strong resolve. Referring to Pakistan, Prime Minister V. P. Singh noted in April 1990 that "they want to achieve their territorial goals without paying the price of war. You can't get away with that. You will have to pay a heavy cost. We have the capability to inflict that cost."³²⁰ He made clear that there would be no compromise with "anti-national elements" who were "getting assistance from external forces," and that "no force, either external or internal, will ever be permitted to alter" Kashmir's status in the Indian union.³²¹ Dispelling the impression that security forces' actions in Kashmir were excessive, the prime minister pled for a proper understanding of the threat that necessitated such a response: "Let us not underestimate the very deep conspiracy across the border."³²² Similarly, his successor, Chandra Shekhar, argued for "strong measures" in Punjab and Kashmir to ensure that the militants not receive Pakistani help.³²³ A diplomat summarized the Indian position succinctly: "We have pulled no punches in our messages to the Pakistani leadership . . . we have told them clearly to stop interfering in Kashmir and that we will not allow the secession of any part of India."³²⁴

Jagmohan himself justified his repression as a response to the territorial threat India faced, noting that "now I am saving the union. How many people did Abraham Lincoln kill? If I have to use force, there's a moral legitimacy to it."³²⁵ Home Minister Mutfi Mohammad Sayeed, one of the

principal architects of India's Kashmir policy, similarly argued that "no slackness" would be shown to the "terrorists" of Kashmir.³²⁶ He warned Pakistan that "any attempt to destabilize the nation will be fought back with full determination and fortitude," that "we have the capacity and determination to fight out this undeclared war," so that it may "defend every inch of Kashmir."³²⁷ Even ousted chief minister Farooq Abdullah claimed that an "iron hand" was needed in Kashmir to adequately deal with the "evil designs of our neighbor."³²⁸

Former security officials also focused on the material implications of Pakistani support. Some emphasized that insurgent organizations need military leadership for purposes of planning and analysis of military operations, and pointed to the importance of training across the LOC in the early years of the insurgency, which gave insurgents the ability to take on, and in certain cases, be militarily superior to, state security forces. Put together, the cocktail of training, command and control support, and sanctuary meant that security forces' "hands were full."³²⁹ Others argued that a movement as large-scale as the Kashmiri insurgency could not be sustained without the level of support the Pakistani state proffered.³³⁰ The sophistication of the arms Pakistan was supplying, for instance, necessitated an upgrade in Indian security forces equipment in both Kashmir and Punjab.³³¹

This position was shared by the press. An editorial in a national newspaper urged the Indian nation "to gear itself for the very long haul in Kashmir" given that Pakistan was now imparting "control and direction of the movement in the Valley."³³² It cheered "the tough line being taken by the home ministry against militants and secessionists," which dealt significant blows to "the ideologues of the Pakistan-sponsored movement."³³³ Pro-union Kashmiri newspapers urged their readers to consider this "a time when every patriotic Indian should have supported the efforts of Governor Jagmohan in dealing with the terrorist menace [and] restoring peace and tranquility in the valley."³³⁴ Security forces' "excesses" may be troubling, "but in a kind of situation that we face in the valley today and in view of the increase in the militants' attacks on the security forces, it will be difficult to altogether avoid" them; the deaths of innocents' was "inevitable" when security forces came under attack from "groups of militants numbering 50 to 100."³³⁵ The *Kashmir Times* argued several times that Pakistani support for the insurgency necessitated toughness from the Indian state, and latitude for Jagmohan's repression. In February 1990, it solemnly noted that "in view of [the] serious threat of militants in the valley and threatening posture of Pakistan the country is facing a serious situation in the border state . . . any letup in the efforts being made to combat terrorism and face the challenge to the country's integrity is unthinkable."³³⁶ Similarly, in March, it argued that "what we face today is a war-like situation with the neighboring country planning infiltrations, arming the militants and providing them every kind of assistance including finances and

sophisticated arms in addition to crude propaganda to boost the morale of the subversives . . . in such a situation the security forces in the State cannot take things lying down . . . what is important at this juncture is a clear-cut Kashmir policy by New Delhi and free hand to the Governor to fight the terrorist menace in Kashmir.”³³⁷ President’s rule in the summer of 1990 was “inevitable because of the continued attempts by Pakistan to push more and more militants and arms into the valley.”³³⁸

High levels of perceived support from Pakistan to the Kashmiri nationalist movement, then, helped generate collective repression by the Indian state in response. Pakistani aid to, and affinity with, the local population meant that they were seen as a disloyal fifth column, leading to more indiscriminate violence on the ground. Pakistani support also meant that Indian security forces faced a tougher fight than they would have otherwise, both within the valley and across the LOC, which resulted in more violence.

Alternative Explanations

The two main theoretical alternatives to the view given in this chapter do not fare well in the Indian case. The argument for institutional veto points fails to explain the observed variation because India’s governing structure did not change in the period in question while its strategy assuredly did. To the extent that political arrangements with varying degrees of centralization were imposed, such as president’s rule, these were consequences, not causes, of India’s decision-making. The precedent-setting argument, meanwhile, has been often employed by Indian leaders when justifying their stance against secessionism. Typically, leaders will refer to the noncommunal and secular nature of the Indian state when denying the possibility of independence to ethnic or religious groups, arguing essentially that if the Muslims go, what will stop the Christians or Sikhs? An argument for cascading secessionism being the state’s overriding concern would expect the most violence and repression in the crisis which chronologically appeared before the others. However, the Indian state employed concessions and policing to deal with the first two crises in Assam and Punjab, which took place in the early and mid-1980s, and employed the more brutal response in the conflict that arose last.

More context-specific arguments also offer unsatisfactory answers. For instance, one could argue for a natural resource-based explanation, where a state fights harder for richer lands, but this would also fail to explain the variation examined here, since it was Assam that was the most resource-rich province of the three, not Kashmir. Assam contains large oil reserves and is also a massive producer of tea. One could make the case that even Punjab is more resource-rich than Kashmir, given the reliance of the Indian state on Punjab for agricultural production.

It could also be reasoned that the movement in Kashmir had the most extreme goals (full independence, rather than autonomy) and thus saw more violence. This view ignores that the ULFA, treated with relative restraint, was an explicitly secessionist organization. More generally, this argument ignores “strategic bluffing” by separatist movements, an exceedingly common tactic:³³⁹ movements demanding independence sometimes do so only to set a high initial price, while movements demanding autonomy could do so as the first of a series of “salami slice” claims. *Prima facie*, it is difficult for states to distinguish between the two types. Past a certain baseline of organizational and political strength, which all three movements displayed in spades, the state must treat the movement’s demands with seriousness. In turn, the seriousness with which the state takes each individual movement is dependent on how much it can threaten the state, which rests on how much third-party support it enjoys.

One could also point to varied levels of democratic political institutions in each of the states examined here, with Kashmir featuring a much higher degree of centralization of power, as a more powerful explanation for variation in violence. There is no doubt that a decaying institutional framework gave fuel to dissatisfaction on the ground to rebels and their supporters, especially in Kashmir. However, from the perspective of the state’s decision-making—the object of inquiry here—differences in institutionalization was as much a consequence as a cause of its calculus. It was precisely *because* Kashmir was viewed through an external lens that the center could ill afford to take chances with allowing greater democratic representation to its citizens. In Assam, by contrast, rebel parties such as the AGP could be brought into the political fold because of the lower level of threat the movement posed, and state governments in both Assam (1987–90) and Punjab (1985–87) could be trusted to tackle militancy when the external threat was relatively low.

A final counterargument to mine could reason that I overstate the variation in Indian strategy across space and time. One specific version of this claim would point to Operation Bluestar, and question why the death of hundreds at the hands of state security forces would not be considered harsh coercion. I consider Bluestar the very event that led to the Sikh secessionist moment, and as such, do not include it as part of the Indian state’s strategy against separatists. To the contrary, until 1985, Sikh agitation was restricted mainly to Bhindranwale and a relatively tiny group of militants, in part encouraged by the Congress government itself. As such, the Indian government’s actions at the Golden Temple in 1984 should be seen as an overcompensatory corrective to its cynical deployment of religious criminals for electoral gain, rather than as part of a strategy against a full-blown separatist movement. A more general version of this counterargument, meanwhile, would make the claim that “India has always been very brutal” in its counterinsurgency, pointing to, for instance, Indian strategy in the

Northeast in the 1960s, and dispute whether there is a significant difference between its conduct in places such as Assam and Kashmir and Punjab.³⁴⁰ A more general assessment of Indian counterinsurgency lies outside the scope of this book. However, it bears noting that during the much-discussed period of Indian brutality in the Northeast, the 1960s, insurgents enjoyed significantly more Pakistani and Chinese support than in the period examined here. For example, groups in Nagaland began receiving weapons and training from East Pakistan in 1958.³⁴¹ This support was intensified after China's victory against India in the 1962 war, after which it began its wholehearted support of Naga insurgents, making Indian counterinsurgency considerably more challenging from the mid-1960s onward.³⁴² It was Pakistan's loss of its eastern wing in 1971 that severely compromised its ability, and China's, to support groups in the Northeast,³⁴³ explaining why, during the 1980s, the scale and intensity of Indian counterinsurgency in the Northeast did not approach its behavior on the western border.

The comparison of Kashmir with Punjab and Assam is instructive. In Assam, the Indian government was willing to escalate to only mild coercion, while signing accords with both political and militant representatives of the ethnic group. In Punjab, similar to Assam, the government was willing to be accommodationist when it viewed the conflict through primarily a domestic lens; it was only when Pakistani support for the Sikh separatists increased that the Indian state went to a more aggressive strategy. In the Kashmir case, however, at the first signs of trouble, the center imposed president's rule, sent in the hard-line Jagmohan, and when he proved to be a disastrous choice, replaced him with the equally hard-line Saxena. High levels of violence were evident from the very beginning of the crisis. The Indian state simply could not afford to do anything other than smash the insurgency, given that it believed Pakistan was behind it, and that a serious and significant threat to the territorial status quo between the two states had developed.³⁴⁴

As my theory would expect, the movement that represented the greatest external security threat, Kashmir, received the most repressive strategy—collective repression. Conversely Punjab was a more mixed case: a strategy centering on policing at the initial secessionist moment, and then an escalation to militarization when Pakistani support increased to moderate levels. The movement deemed the least threatening externally due to limited levels of third-party support, Assam, was dealt with the softest hands, with a mixture of policing and militarization.