

India versus Pakistan: Why terrorism and cricket cannot go hand in hand

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Opinion

As another India-Pakistan cricket match is being played in the Asia Cup, we must consider that in this very year, we have lost countless soldiers to Pakistani terror

Zeba Zoariah Last Updated: September 10, 2023 17:37:36 IST



India skipper Rohit Sharma (L) and his Pakistan counterpart Babar Azam (R) at the toss during the Asia Cup Super Four meeting in Colombo. AFP

In a world filled with entertainment and distractions, it's easy to overlook the sacrifices made by our security personnel who risk their lives day and night to protect us. When you have the luxury of an endless supply of nameless and faceless young men willing to lay down their lives for your safety, perhaps it becomes all too easy to take their sacrifices for granted. But what is the true price of one single security personnel?

Consider the grim reality: By 30 July 2023, there had already been 30 terrorist-initiated incidents, resulting in the tragic loss of 11 security personnel's lives. In August 2023, three Army personnel were killed in a dangerous encounter with militants in South Kashmir's Kulgam district. Earlier, on 5 May 2023, five elite para commandos from the Army's Special Forces were killed, and a Major was injured in the Kesari Hills of

Thanamandi. Official data from the past three years paints an even bleaker picture, revealing that out of 284 terrorist-initiated incidents in Jammu and Kashmir between 2019 and 30 July 2023, a staggering 228 security personnel paid the ultimate price for our safety.

Sangiote village in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district mourned instead of celebrating Eid in April 2023. The village was the tragic destination of the Army truck ambushed, resulting in the loss of five brave soldiers. The truck was *en route* to deliver fruits and supplies for an iftar gathering scheduled in Sagiote that evening.

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In the rugged terrain of Rajouri-Poonch, history has woven a tapestry of challenges and unyielding struggle, often overlooked by those who live under the shield of protection. This land, nestled between the LoC in the west/south and the formidable Pir Panjal range in the north/east, conceals its secrets amidst low mountains that swiftly ascend to unforgiving heights, adorned with cliffs, rocky crags, and dense forests – the ideal hiding grounds.

Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain (Retd) said that once plagued by terror, this region found respite around 2010, thanks to Rashtriya Rifles, regular army units, and reinforcements from the East. However, from 2013 onwards, it became a target for resurgence. Infiltration here can swiftly birth terror, unlike the foreboding presence in the Kashmir Valley.

In 2003, Operation Sarp Vinash showcased the Army's determination, eliminating 54 terrorists. As the proxy war's proponents intensified their efforts, smaller groups, and a surrogate of Jaish-e-Mohammad emerged, striking in November 2021, claiming seven brave soldiers and minority community members in 2023. There are whispers of Lashkar-e-Taiba's involvement in recent attacks, blurring the line between heroism and peril for Para SF soldiers.

In the heart of these treacherous jungles, every search and destroy operation is a slow, agonising endeavor. Our brave troops navigate this relentless labyrinth, ever vigilant, while most are oblivious, engrossed in matches that pit us against a nation that has caused immeasurable pain. What is the price we pay for this indifference, for not recognising those who protect our very existence?

The Pulwama terror attack stands as a chilling testament to the audacity of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, the deadliest in over a decade. On that fateful day, a heart-wrenching 44 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) lost their lives, with countless others suffering severe injuries, when a car, loaded with explosives, mercilessly plowed into a CRPF bus. In the wake of this tragedy, the late cabinet minister, Arun Jaitley, passionately declared, 'India will take every possible diplomatic measure to ensure the absolute isolation of Pakistan!' And yet, it pains us to admit that we still keep them closer than an arm's length, even if it's on the cricket field.

Despite the loss of precious lives and the continued threat of terrorism, people choose to watch or attend cricket matches with a country that stands as an arch-rival. Pakistan, a nation with a long history of hostility, has consistently exploited these sporting events as platforms for its sinister propaganda. The question we must ask ourselves is whether we should play cricket with Pakistan in any international matches until the situation between our two nations truly improves.

Pakistan, it seems, has caused more harm than any divine force ever could. They have persistently employed terrorism and covert actions as instruments of state policy against India. Pakistan has actively recruited, trained, financed, armed, and infiltrated terrorists within our borders while providing sanctuary to those who seek to harm us. Despite global outcry against terrorism and the façade of cooperation Pakistan displays, they have yet to dismantle the infrastructure that fuels terrorism in territories under their control. This infrastructure, sponsored and utilized by the notorious Pak-ISI, continues to recruit, train, finance, and infiltrate terrorists into India, perpetuating the cycle of violence and suffering.

In the face of such relentless aggression, it's time we re-evaluate our priorities, demanding justice for those who have paid the ultimate price and considering the profound consequences of our choices on the field and in the realm of geopolitics.

Shahid Afridi, known for his inflammatory remarks on Hinduism and support for armed conflict in Kashmir, should never have a platform on Indian television. On the other hand, Shoaib Akhtar declared, "Ghazwa e Hind is mentioned in our sacred books. We will first capture Kashmir and then invade India for Ghazwa e Hind." Despite cricket and art transcending borders, his words threaten India's very boundaries. Coming back to Shahid Afridi, he advocates for Yasin Malik, who is convicted of terrorism in Kashmir. Meanwhile, Waqar Younis celebrates Rizwan's Namaz 'in front of Hindus' after a cricket win against India.

In Pakistan, the tragic tale of killings and mob violence over blasphemy allegations is a grim, recurring nightmare. Over the years, countless individuals have faced false accusations, with many meeting a cruel fate in targeted sectarian attacks from Christians to Sikhs to Shias to Ahmadiyyas. The roots of this horror trace back to the 1980s, when General Zia harnessed religion to justify his military rule, sparking a pervasive Islamization of society and its core institutions. Religious fundamentalism, like a relentless tide, now inundates every facet of Pakistani life — politics, education, and the media. The religious script, shrouded in misunderstanding, casts a long, ominous shadow over the nation.

Amidst the turmoil in Pakistan, the economy teeters on the edge of catastrophe. The once-mighty rupee now cowers at a pitiful 300 PKR to a dollar, a stark testament to the nation's financial woes. International aid and loans from the likes of the IMF have become lifelines, desperately needed to prop up a sinking ship. Food inflation runs rampant, gnawing at the already frayed threads of survival for ordinary citizens. Electricity prices

surge, casting long shadows of uncertainty over households. Yet, amidst this economic turmoil, the most perplexing fact remains: The number of terror groups continues to thrive, refusing to yield to the nation's cries for stability and peace.

As the global war on terrorism persists, India has played a commendable role, exemplified by its hosting of the G20 summit, showcasing its commitment to international cooperation and stability. However, it's crucial to dispel the false equivalence propagated by some Western nations, notably Britain, suggesting that violence plagues both India and Pakistan equally. India stands apart by unequivocally rejecting terrorism as a means to its ends, emphasising a steadfast commitment to peace and security. The PCB, an extension of Pakistan's state, operates within the shadow of a nation with a disturbing history of religious apartheid and a deeply troubling penchant for employing terrorism as foreign policy. In stark contrast, India stands resolute, dissociating itself entirely from such nefarious tactics.

While we promote and engage with a nation like Pakistan in the Asia Cup, a state marred by terrorism and hostility, we betray our own values. With 80 per cent of ICC's revenue under your command, use this clout to take a stand for justice. Remember when we boycotted South Africa for their racist apartheid regime? What holds us back now? Does the immense revenue generated by India versus Pakistan cricket clash outweigh the sacrifices of our courageous jawans?

As another India-Pakistan cricket match is being played in the Asia Cup, we must consider that in this very year, we have lost countless soldiers to Pakistani terror. Is this how an aspiring superpower and a self-respecting nation should comport itself in the face of its martyrs?

The author is a final year LL.B student at O.P Jindal Global University and is a Bachelors in Global Affairs from the same university. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely that of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views..

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