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RAW: India's External Intelligence Agency

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Introduction

India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), has long faced allegations of meddling in its neighbors' affairs. Founded in 1968, primarily to counter China's influence, over time it has shifted its focus to India's other traditional rival, Pakistan. RAW and Pakistan's spy agency, the [Inter-Services Intelligence \(ISI\)](#), have been engaged in covert operations against one other for over three decades. The ongoing dispute in Kashmir continues to fuel these clashes, but experts say Afghanistan may be emerging as the new battleground. Islamabad sees India's growing [diplomatic initiatives](#) in Afghanistan as a cover for RAW agents working to destabilize Pakistan. It accuses RAW of training and arming separatists in Pakistan's Balochistan Province along the Afghan border. RAW denies these charges, and in turn, accuses the ISI of the July 2008 bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul.

The History of RAW

Until 1968, the Intelligence Bureau (IB), which is responsible for India's internal intelligence, also handled external intelligence. But after India's miserable performance in a 1962 border war with China, the need for a separate external intelligence agency was clear. During that conflict, "our intelligence failed to detect Chinese build up for the attack," writes Maj. Gen. VK Singh, a retired army officer who did a stint in RAW, in his 2007 [book](#), India's External Intelligence: Secrets of Research and Analysis Wing.

As a result, India established a dedicated external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Founded mainly to focus on China and Pakistan, over the last forty years the organization has expanded its mandate and is credited with greatly increasing India's influence abroad. Experts say RAW's powers and its role in India's foreign policy have varied under different prime ministers. Successes that RAW claims it contributed to include:

- the creation of Bangladesh in 1971;
- India's growing influence in Afghanistan;
- Sikkim's accession to India in the northeast in 1975;
- the security of India's nuclear program;
- the success of African liberation movements during the Cold War.

The first head of RAW, Rameshwar Nath Kao, who headed the IB's external intelligence division, led the agency until he retired in 1977. Many experts, including officers who worked with him, credit him with RAW's initial successes: India's triumph in the 1971 war with Pakistan, and India's covert assistance to the African National Congress's anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. "To a large extent, it was Kao who raised RAW to the level of India's premier intelligence agency, with agents in virtually every major embassy and high commission," writes Singh. But the organization has been criticized for its lack of coordination with domestic intelligence and security agencies, weak analytical capabilities, and complete lack of transparency.

The Structure and Function of RAW

Not much is known regarding the structure of RAW, say experts. The organization started with 250 people and about \$400,000. It has since expanded to several thousand personnel, but there is no clear estimate of its staffing or budget, as both remain secret. However, an estimate by the U.S.-based Federation of American Scientists suggests that in 2000, RAW had about eight to ten thousand agents and a budget that experts place at [\\$145 million](#). Unlike the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or Britain's MI6, RAW reports directly to the prime minister instead of the Ministry of Defense. The chief of RAW is designated secretary (research) in the Cabinet Secretariat, which is part of the prime minister's office. Some officers of RAW are members of a specialized service, the Research and Analysis Service, but several officers also serve on deputation from other services such as the Indian Police Service.

RAW had two priorities after its formation, writes B. Raman, a former RAW official, in the 2007 [book](#), *The Kaoboy of R&AW: Down Memory Lane*. The organization worked to strengthen its capability for intelligence gathering on Pakistan and China and for covert action in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Some experts say that RAW's efforts in East Pakistan, which was created from the partition of the Indian state of Bengal and completely separated from the rest of Pakistan, was aimed at fomenting independence sentiment. Over time, RAW's [objectives](#) have broadened to include:

- Monitoring the political and military developments in adjoining countries, which have direct bearing on India's national security and in the formulation of its foreign policy.
- Seeking the control and limitation of the supply of military hardware to Pakistan, mostly from European countries, the United States, and China.

Experts disagree on the amount of influence RAW asserts on India's foreign policy. [Sumit Ganguly](#), a professor of political science at Indiana University, says the agency has no influence on foreign policy. However, [Dipankar Banerjee](#), a retired army official and current director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, a New Delhi-based think tank, says the head of RAW has direct access to the head of state, to whom he provides input and analysis.

From the early days, RAW had a secret liaison relationship with the Mossad, Israel's external intelligence agency. The main purpose was to benefit from Israel's knowledge of West Asia and North Africa, and to learn from its counterterrorism techniques, say experts.

RAW's Role in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka

RAW played a significant role in the formation of Bangladesh along with the Indian army and other Indian security and intelligence agencies. Besides providing intelligence to policymakers and the army, RAW trained and armed Mukti Bahini, a group of East Pakistanis fighting for the separate state of Bangladesh. Analysts say that RAW also facilitated the northeastern state of Sikkim's accession to India in 1975, and provided military assistance to groups hostile to the pro-China regime in Myanmar, such as the Kachin Independence Army.

But it was the support for the Tamil separatist group, [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam \(LTTE\)](#) in Sri Lanka, that brought RAW much criticism from human rights organizations. RAW helped to train and arm the LTTE in the 1970s, but after the group's terrorist activities grew in the 1980s—including its alliances with separatist groups in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu—RAW withdrew this support. In 1987, New Delhi made a pact with the Sri Lankan government to send peacekeeping troops to the island and Indian forces ended up fighting the group RAW had armed. In 1991, Rajiv Gandhi, prime minister of India at the time of the peacekeeping force deployment, was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber.

Covert Action in Afghanistan, Pakistan

Since its inception in 1968, RAW has had a close liaison relationship with KHAD, the Afghan intelligence agency, due to the intelligence it has provided RAW on Pakistan. This relationship was further strengthened in the early 1980s when the foundation was laid for a trilateral cooperation involving the RAW, KHAD, and the Soviet KGB. Raman says RAW valued KHAD's cooperation for monitoring the activities of Sikh militants in [Pakistan's tribal areas](#). Sikhs in the Indian state of Punjab were demanding an independent state of Khalistan. According to Raman, Pakistan's ISI set up clandestine camps for training and arming Khalistani recruits in Pakistan's Punjab Province and North West Frontier Province. During this time, the ISI received large sums from Saudi Arabia and the CIA for arming the Afghan mujahadeen against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. "The ISI diverted part of these funds and arms and ammunition to the Khalistani terrorists," alleges Raman.

In retaliation, in the mid-1980s, RAW set up two covert groups of its own, Counter Intelligence Team-X (CIT-X) and Counter Intelligence Team-J (CIT-J), the first targeting Pakistan in general and the second directed at Khalistani groups. The two groups were responsible for carrying out [terrorist operations inside Pakistan \(Newsline\)](#), writes Pakistani military expert Ayesha Siddiq. Indian journalist and associate editor of Frontline magazine, [Praveen Swami](#), writes that a "low-grade but steady campaign of bombings in major Pakistani cities, notably Karachi and Lahore" was carried out. This forced the head of ISI to meet his counterpart in RAW and agree on the rules of engagement as far as Punjab was concerned, writes Siddiq. The negotiation was brokered by then-Jordanian Crown Prince Hassan bin-Talal, whose wife, Princess Sarvath, is of Pakistani origin. "It was agreed that Pakistan would not carry out activities in the Punjab as long as RAW refrained from creating mayhem and violence inside Pakistan," Siddiq writes.

In the past, Pakistan also accused RAW of supporting Sindhi nationalists demanding a separate state, as well as Seraikis calling for a partition of Pakistan's Punjab to create a separate Seraiki state. India denies these charges. However, experts point out that India has supported insurgents in Pakistan's Balochistan, as well as anti-Pakistan forces in Afghanistan. But some experts say

India no longer does this. As this [Backgrounder](#) explains, Pakistan is suspicious of India's influence in Afghanistan, which it views as a threat to its own interests in the region. Experts say although it is very likely that India has active intelligence gathering in Afghanistan, it is difficult to say whether it is also involved in covert operations.

Relations with the CIA

The CIA assisted in the creation of RAW, says South Asia expert [Stephen P. Cohen](#) of the Brookings Institution. However, India's intelligence relations with the CIA started even before the existence of RAW, note experts. After India's war with China in 1962, CIA instructors trained Establishment 22, a "covert organisation raised from among Tibetan refugees in India, to execute deep-penetration [terror operations](#) in China," writes Swami.

But the CIA's operations with the ISI to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s made RAW very wary. However, it did not stop RAW from seeking the CIA's assistance in counterterrorism training. Raman writes: "One had one more bizarre example of how international intelligence cooperation works." The CIA trained the officers of the ISI in the use of terrorism against an adversary, and at the same time, he writes, it trained RAW and IB officers "in some of the techniques of countering that terrorism." India's intelligence agencies also feel the lack of an equal relationship with the CIA, say experts. Swami says RAW's grievance is that there is little information they get on Pakistan from the United States; however, Washington expects New Delhi to provide it with intelligence on Afghanistan.

In 1997, Prime Minister I.K. Gujral shut down both the CITs aimed at Pakistan on moral grounds. Before Gujral, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao had ended RAW's eastern operations in the early 1990s, as part of his efforts to build bridges with China and Myanmar, say analysts.

Successive RAW leaders attempted to gain fresh authorization for deterrent covert operations, but without success, says Swami. Siddiqua writes: "The Indian government probably realized that encouraging covert warfare would not only destabilize bilateral relations but was also dangerous for the peace and stability of the entire region."

Weaknesses in RAW

The intrusion of Pakistan-backed armed forces into the Indian state of [Jammu and Kashmir \(GlobalSecurity\)](#) in 1999 prompted questions about RAW's efficacy. Some analysts saw the conflict as an intelligence failure. However, RAW officials argued they had provided the intelligence but political leadership had failed to act upon it. The Indian government constituted a committee to look into the reasons for the failure and recommend remedial measures. The report of the [Kargil review committee](#) was then examined by a group of ministers, established in 2000. The group recommended a formal written charter and pointed out lack of coordination and communication within various intelligence agencies.

Following the review, a new organization was set up-the National Technical Research Organization (NTRO)-modeled on the U.S. National Security Agency-which would be the repository of the nation's technical intelligence-spy satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and spy planes. The government also decided to create a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), whose head would be the adviser to the Chief of Staffs Committee and the defense minister. The DIA was empowered to conduct transborder operations.

However, the shakeup of the intelligence apparatus has not removed the problems that persisted, especially relating to the overlap of agency activities, say experts. Earlier, RAW was the only

organization permitted to conduct espionage operations abroad. Now both the IB and DIA have also been given the authority to conduct such operations, writes Singh.

There have also been occasional media reports of penetration inside RAW by other agencies, in particular the CIA. Swami writes that RAW is exceptional amongst major spy agencies in maintaining [no permanent distinction \(Hindu\)](#) between covert operatives who execute secret tasks, and personnel who must liaise with services such as the CIA or public bodies, such as analysts and area specialists. "As a result, personnel with sensitive operational information are exposed to potentially compromising contacts," he writes.