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The Mumbai attacks and Indo-U.S. relations



NOVEMBER, 26, 2008: A scene at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminal railway station in Mumbai. The audacious attack has catalysed a convergence of thought about the threat posed by all groups operating in and from Pakistan.

C. Christine Fair

The Lashkar and other so-called "Kashmiri" groups are not just India's problem; rather, they are the problem of the entire international community.

India and the United States have more or less agreed on a desired end-state for Pakistan: a stable, democratic, civilian-controlled state at peace with itself and with its neighbours and with a commitment to preventing further nuclear proliferation.

However, Washington and New Delhi have seldom agreed on the best means of encouraging this end-state. Since the 1950s, Indian leadership has been discomfited by Washington's practice of cajoling Pakistani cooperation for a variety of initiatives with pecuniary appeasements and conventional military assistance, training and sales.

For many years after 9/11, New Delhi rightly chided Washington for its singular focus upon Pakistan's cooperation in fighting the Al-Qaeda and, after 2007, the Afghan Taliban while doing very little to persuade Pakistan to cease and desist from employing militants to prosecute Pakistan's foreign policies throughout India. India (likely correctly) believed that Washington tended to view the so-called "Kashmiri groups" as India's problem. At times those groups also threatened key U.S. security interests. The Jaish attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 precipitated a year-long Indo-Pakistan military crisis, which adversely affected U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan and engagement of Pakistan during Operation Enduring Freedom. Throughout the standoff, U.S. officials worried about the outbreak of war and the possibility of inadvertent or deliberate nuclear use. In other words, Washington cared about the so-called "Kashmiri groups" only if they directly threatened U.S. interests whereas India's primary security threat centred upon those groups.

Both countries, it seemed, were fighting their own wars on terror, even if in parallel. Arguably, the Lashkar-e-Taiba's audacious 11/26 attack in Mumbai catalysed a convergence of thought about the threat posed by all groups operating in and from Pakistan and has fostered important cooperation and coordination on how best to deal with the menace in Delhi and Washington among other global capitals.

Lashkar-e-Taiba is a peculiar — and intractable — case for all parties concerned. Of all of the Pakistan-based groups, it is widely believed to be the most closely leashed to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). Unlike the hordes of Deobandi militants — such as the Pakistan and Afghan Taliban, the Jaish-e-Mohammad, the Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan among others — the Lashkar-e-Taiba had never targeted the Pakistani state or international targets within Pakistan.

The Lashkar had even publicly declared war on the "Brahmanic-Talmudic-Crusader" alliance from the late 1980s. Indeed, it was widely agreed that it could operate against international targets. However, its efforts to prosecute this agenda had been limited. For example, Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives were found in Iraq, Australia, Bangladesh, among other venues and they had been targeting U.S. and allied troops in Afghanistan perhaps as early as 2007. However, compared with the scale of the resources it devoted to India, the Lashkar's inaction against the West was notable. This author presumed that its restraint was due, in part, to its ties to the ISI. Presumably, as long as Rawalpindi valued in some measure its relationship with Washington, such operational restrictions would remain in place notwithstanding the Lashkar's well-known vitriolic stated aims.

During the Presidential campaign, Democratic candidate Barack Obama promised to continue bombing targets in Pakistan's tribal areas using drones and insisted that Pakistan — not Iraq — was the epicentre for global terrorism. After years of providing billions in military assistance and operational reimbursements to the Pakistan army with no accountability, Mr. Obama promised a different relationship with Pakistan. A Lashkar attack deliberately targeting American and western civilians within a few weeks of Mr. Obama's presidential victory seemed so unthinkable within these changed political contexts that this author initially incorrectly presumed that the attack was executed by the Jaish-e-Mohammad or an indigenised Indian cell cultivated by the Lashkar. By the first day of the siege, though, it was apparent that the attack was indeed directly authored by the Lashkar. The only question that remained was whether it had been sanctioned by the ISI and if so, from what level. Those questions persist.

Retrospectively, it is clear the Mumbai assault served — successfully — several possible strategic goals for Rawalpindi if not Islamabad as well. First, it exacerbated tensions between India and Pakistan and disrupted the ongoing peace process. Notwithstanding the views of prominent American journalists, this author remains dubious that the Pakistan army would ever want a rapprochement with India given that the security competition with India legitimises its sweeping role in running the state. The ensuing rupture in India-Pakistan relations may have re-energised an enervated Pakistan army that loathed Musharraf's various policies.

Second, the anticipated military response from India afforded Pakistan a convenient opportunity to move forces to the east from the west, where it was engaging the Pakistani Taliban in what was, at that time, a deeply unpopular war. In April 2008, one Pakistani officer had remarked to this author that it was a bad time to be in the Pakistan army because he had joined to kill Indians not Pakistanis. The tensions that followed the attack on Mumbai resuscitated the relevance of Pakistan's conventional conflict amidst international insistence that the army invest in equipment and training, as well as doctrinal reorientation, for counterinsurgency operations. The attack demonstrated — to the military and intelligence organisations — that attacking India remains a central ambition of their organisations and gave a fillip to those militants who were impatient with Pakistan's post-9/11 "moderated jihad" strategy.

Changed dynamics

However, this attack — like other Pakistani misadventures — has changed regional and international dynamics ultimately to Pakistan's disadvantage. First, Pakistan's inaction towards the Lashkar and its front organisation Jamaat-ul-Dawa rent asunder any doubts about Pakistan's commitment to retaining the organisation as a strategic reserve to do the state's bidding in the region.

Second, whereas the Lashkar was previously a "niche specialty" within the U.S. government, it is now a major concern across nearly every policy, law enforcement, intelligence and military agency. The attack — like 9/11 — lent increased urgency to deepening U.S.-India cooperation centred upon joint law enforcement and counterterrorism concerns. While less "sexy" than military-to-military engagements, this kind of coordination is vital to securing both nations against terrorists threats.

Third, the proximity of the Lashkar to the ISI, along with continued revelations about ISI assistance to the Afghan Taliban, remind the United States and others that the Pakistan government continues to fight a selective war on terror, while preserving those militant groups that service the state's foreign policy goals.

This has catalysed widespread cynicism about Pakistan's role and the logic of continued U.S. military and financial support to Pakistan in the name of counter-terror cooperation. Cynics, with evermore ammunition, ask how Pakistan can be a partner in fighting terrorism when it continues to rely upon terrorism outside of its borders? Moreover, the Mumbai attack, coming upon the heels of dozens of others in India, has motivated the Indian government to once again commit to fortifying India's internal security.

The savage four-day assault — streamed in real time into living rooms around the world — forged a consensus that did not previously exist about the kind of threat that all Pakistan-based militant groups posed to the international community. Whether India and her partners will be able to develop the necessary collective tools to temper the threat posed by the Lashkar and its fellow travellers remain to be seen. However, India is no longer alone in this sanguinary struggle. The Lashkar and other so-called "Kashmiri" groups are not just India's problem; rather, they are the problem of the entire international community which in the wake of Mumbai has embraced this challenge.

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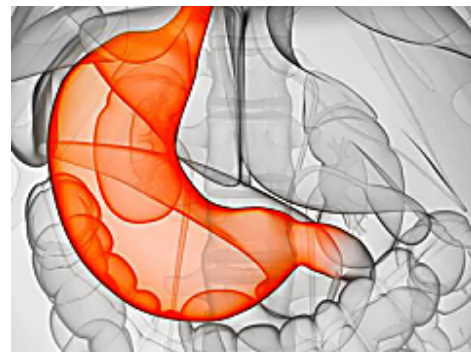
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