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The Strategic Implications of India's Internal Security: Looking Back at Mumbai

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Between November 26th and November 29, 2008, 10 gunmen murdered 173 people and brought India's financial capital to its knees. This ushered in a period of high tension between India and Pakistan, sparked the beginnings of an effort to reform India's internal security response, and may have opened a door to expanded cooperation between the United States and India against terrorism. More importantly, the attacks underscored how vulnerable India-Pakistan relations are to incidents of this sort, especially when governments are weak or elections loom.

India's Internal Security Problems—Regional Insurgencies: India's security managers describe internal security as their biggest challenge. Kashmir is the best known focus for internal insurgency, and violence in Kashmir has historically involved both homegrown militants as well as those supported from Pakistan. However, for India's security managers, three other problems top their list of worries: insurgencies in India's ethnically diverse and relatively remote northeastern states; the so-called Naxalite efforts in central India; and incidents of urban terrorism or sabotage carried out by Islamic extremists around the country.

The small states of India's northeast are ethnically distinct from the rest of the country. They have been fighting to expand their social and political autonomy and to protect their land against encroachment from India's expanding population. The Indian government has responded with both military counterinsurgency efforts and, in some cases, political negotiations. These efforts have been somewhat successful in one state (Mizoram) but less so in the rest of the northeast. India's security managers have long argued that the insurgents in the northeast are receiving support from across India's borders. They are especially suspicious of Pakistani support funneled through Bangladesh.

The Naxalites arose from a Maoist insurgency that started in West Bengal but has since spread to the less-developed rural areas of central and eastern India. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has referred to this group as the most serious threat to India's national security. Estimates of the strength of the Naxalites vary widely; some run as high as 40,000. The Naxalites have a loose connection with the Maoist insurgents in Nepal, who are now the leading party in the post-royal government there.

Terrorism with Islamic Extremist Connections: The third critical threat is from attacks around the country evidently carried out by Islamic extremists or by actors linked to them. A partial list of the most prominent incidents would include the massive attacks in Mumbai in 1993 and a string of widespread attacks on markets and other public targets in Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Varanasi. The most politically shocking attack took place on December 13, 2001, when a group of gunmen opened fire on the Indian Parliament building in New Delhi. Twelve people were killed, including five militants, and a dozen more were injured. The groups responsible for the attack were Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Nearly four years later, on October 29, 2005, bomb blasts in Delhi killed 62 and injured more than 200 others. Again, Indian officials believed that the Pakistani-based, Islamic terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba was responsible for the attacks. On July 11, 2006, the extremists again chose Mumbai as their target. In a span of 11 minutes, seven bomb blasts targeted the city's suburban railway and killed 209. More than 700 others were injured.

In November 2008, the target was once again Mumbai, the country's financial capital. The attackers, associated with the same group apparently responsible for the attacks in 2001 and 2005, Lakshar-e-Taiba, entered Mumbai on small speedboats. The gunmen attacked a crowded Mumbai train station, a restaurant popular with tourists, and several luxury hotels. A total of 173 people were killed and more than 300 were injured. Although the Mumbai attacks did not involve the highest number of deaths, they continued for three days, during which they virtually monopolized the news. This made them the highest-profile attack at least since 2001. The response of the security forces was courageous and persistent but very slow—it took the National Security Guard commandos nine hours to deploy to the site—and plagued by coordination problems with the state police.

In all these cases, the Indian government cited evidence that the attacks were perpetrated by groups who have been supported in the past by the Pakistani government and continue to operate in Pakistan despite being declared illegal. In the past two years, senior security officials have become increasingly concerned about the involvement of a small number of India's 160 million Muslims in activities of this sort. This issue is not widely discussed in public because its implications are frightening for a country whose national identity is based on its multireligious nature.

The Postmortem—Security Reforms: The Mumbai attacks sparked a dialogue within India about the need to reform the country's security apparatus. Not only were the Indian authorities fighting the terrorists with outdated weapons (i.e., rifles and helmets from the World War II era), but there were also concerns that the militants' use of satellite phones and global positioning systems had surpassed the Indian police's ability to track them. After the 2008 Mumbai attacks, it appeared as if the Indian police and other security personnel were only equipped to deal with routine law-and-order situations, not terrorist attacks.

In the aftermath of the attacks, India's interior minister resigned and was replaced by the savvy and competent finance minister, P. Chidambaram. The new minister promptly announced a security overhaul in which a national investigation agency would be set up; vacancies in the country's intelligence agencies would be filled; a coastal command would be set up to secure India's 7,500 kilometer-long coastline; a total of 20 "counter-insurgency, anti-terrorism" schools would be set up in various parts of India to train police and security personnel; intelligence agencies would be equipped with advanced equipment; commando forces would be set up in individual states; laws relating to terrorist acts would be toughened; and money-laundering laws would be strengthened. While these plans for reform are encouraging, it is too early to say how effective the efforts have been. One area the reform efforts have not focused on is the problem of coordination between national and state security forces. Our experience in the United States would suggest that, in a federal system, linking central and state authorities is an enormous challenge that will require practical solutions and exercises that go beyond headline-grabbing new initiatives.

The External Link: A theme running through this entire narrative is Pakistan-based support for subversion and terrorism in India. For many years, U.S. analysts downplayed India's accusations. Following the attack on India's embassy in Afghanistan in July 2008, however, U.S. intelligence sources were publicly quoted as acknowledging some kind of link between the attack and Pakistan's intelligence services. Although the Pakistani government has dissociated itself from this kind of attack, both Indian officials and the general populous are deeply skeptical. They believe that elements of the Pakistani state are complicit in the recent Mumbai attacks because of the apparent involvement of former or retired intelligence operatives and the fact that extremist organizations have continued to operate in Pakistan despite being declared illegal.

Despite India's conviction that its problems in the northeast and in central India have a Pakistani connection, incidents in these areas have generally had no major repercussions for India-Pakistan relations. The India-Pakistan cease-fire and peace dialogue that started in late 2003 survived several brutal attacks linked to Islamic terrorists (such as the attack on a Pakistan-bound train and the earlier attacks on Delhi and Mumbai cited above). India's political leaders and security officials had evidently concluded that the dialogue with Pakistan was important enough to continue despite these incidents.

The attacks in Mumbai stopped the peace process in its tracks, and with it the dialogue on more routine issues such as trade and travel. In addition, the Mumbai attacks reignited a familiar debate within the Indian government and in Indian policy circles: should India continue to avoid destabilizing Pakistan,

recognizing that the viability of the Pakistan government has security benefits for India; or should it provide maximum pressure, regardless of the potential impact on Pakistan's stability, based on the theory that only overwhelming Indian force can protect India's security? In this case, the moderates won the debate, as they have in recent years. While they recognized that India's military options were either too risky or too ineffective to work, they did approve of more modest actions along the borders that Pakistan read as menacing.

India-Pakistan diplomacy following the Mumbai attacks centered on the exchange of information about the attackers in Mumbai and on the Pakistani response to India's demand for extradition of both the planners of the attack as well as those accused in several earlier incidents in India. After the 2008 Mumbai attack, Delhi provided Islamabad with a file of information indicating that the attackers came from Pakistan. After several conflicting signals and false starts, Pakistan gave a substantive response to the dossier and acknowledged that the attacker captured alive, Mr. Ajmal Kasab, was Pakistani. Pakistan's official acknowledgment that its territory had been used to prepare the attack decreased tensions, and the India-Pakistan story was eventually overshadowed by the political crisis within Pakistan between President Asif Ali Zardari's government and the opposition.

After the Mumbai attacks, caution prevailed during India's internal deliberations. However, analysts were convinced that another attack of this sort might push India's political leaders to a more forceful—and potentially more dangerous—response. This possibility reflects the need for a democratic government, especially one facing elections, to show that it can defend its country. The argument that a stable Pakistan serves India's interest has little political resonance within the country. A former Indian intelligence official articulated this hawkish view: "A divided Pakistan, a bleeding Pakistan, a Pakistan ever on the verge of collapse without actually collapsing—that should be our objective till it stops using terrorism against India." The assumption behind this argument is that India can perfectly calibrate the line between applying pressure to Pakistan and causing a political implosion. Thus far, India's decisionmakers have not chosen to bet the region's future on this fine calculation.

New Opportunities with Washington? After the Mumbai attacks, an FBI team visited India while Delhi and Islamabad were working toward an exchange of information. The U.S. interest was driven by the fact that at least five American citizens had been killed in the attacks. While details of the forensic cooperation between India and the United States have not been released, it is clear that U.S. officials were impressed and sobered by what they found, and that the United States conveyed this clearly to Pakistan. This appears to have been a factor in facilitating a relatively constructive Pakistani response. The 2008 Mumbai episode contrasts with several previous terrorist incidents in which U.S.-India cooperation was clearly hamstrung by U.S. inability to deal straightforwardly with the problem of actual or potential Pakistani involvement. This may open the door to stronger antiterrorism cooperation between Delhi and Washington, an important potential addition to the relationship the two countries have been developing.

The Region is Vulnerable: The November 2008 attacks in Mumbai are a reminder of the potential consequences of incidents that neither the Pakistani nor the Indian government can completely control. Specifically, the Mumbai episode demonstrated how quickly a seemingly stable India-Pakistan environment can deteriorate. Besides the familiar arguments for political leadership and persistent diplomacy between India and Pakistan, one factor in reducing this vulnerability is strengthening both governments' means of detecting, preventing, and responding to such incidents.

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