Mumbai Terrorist Attacks – A Question of Governance

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The slaughter of civilians in Mumbai by terrorists in November 2008 has once again vitiated the relationship between India and Pakistan in what is the fourth major crisis between them since the two countries became nuclear powers in the late 1980s. At one level, the crisis may be viewed as typical of the confrontations between nuclear-armed states that have occurred since the Cold War years. The United States and the Soviet Union faced off over Berlin in 1961 and Cuba in 1962, while China and the Soviet Union fought a series of skirmishes over a disputed border in 1969. The current standoff in South Asia bears a strong resemblance to the crisis of 2001-02, when terrorists attacked the Indian Parliament and came close to inflicting a crippling blow on the Indian leadership. At the time, India blamed Pakistan and the latter denied responsibility; India demanded a list of criminals and terrorists be handed over and Pakistan refused; the United States applied limited pressure on Pakistan while trying not to dilute its primary objective in Southwest Asia, which was to eliminate Al Qaeda and the Taliban; and Pakistan made a show of compliance through arrests and proscription of specific groups to put a stop to what it was denying even existed. The one difference is that the prospect of war on the subcontinent is less close, though both sides have made the necessary noises to appease their publics and goad the United States into intensifying its hectic efforts to pour oil on troubled nuclear waters.

But why this particular crisis? India and Pakistan had apparently learned from the crises of 1990, 1999, and 2001-02 that the 'stability/instability paradox,' which allows lower-level confrontations even as nuclear war is avoided, yields plenty of risk and limited gain.[i] To be sure, Pakistan did accomplish its objective of placing its case regarding the disputed territory of Kashmir firmly on the international agenda, while India was able to draw global attention to Pakistani complicity in acts of cross-border terrorism. But neither side gained substantially and the situation on the ground remained essentially the same after repeated crises. There seemed to be no alternative but to turn to the negotiating table. The Composite Dialogue, under way since February 2004, has covered a range of issues, ranging from nuclear confidence building and disputes over specific areas such as the Siachen Glacier and Sir Creek, to Kashmir.[ii] While none of the issues covered has been resolved, there has been significant progress. Nuclear risk reduction measures have been implemented, notably the 2005 agreement to inform each other of impending ballistic missile tests and the 2007 agreement to notify each other in the event of a nuclear accident. Trade has grown rapidly from $521 million in 2004-05 to $2 billion in 2007-08. On Kashmir, both sides have moved away from rigid positions to try to soften the Line of Control (LoC), the military line that divides their respective portions of Kashmir, by opening up travel and trade. The wellsprings of the present crisis, which has brought the process to a grinding halt, lie in domestic politics, with Pakistan providing the active ingredient and India the passive.

Pakistan's drift into civil war on its western front and economic and political crisis all round has shifted the balance of domestic power in its hybrid political system from the military to the civilian, but only in a limited way. While keeping his options open and continuing to back 'freedom fighters' active in Kashmir, General Pervez Musharraf weakened the basis of the military's dominance over the state by making concessions on Kashmir. This might have been tolerable had he been able to lead the country effectively, but he could not. Instead, under him, the Pakistani army failed to invigorate the economy, allowed jihadism to gain rapid ground both along the western border and in the Punjabi heartland, and became increasingly parasitical and corrupt as it extended its tentacles in government and economic life.

Musharraf's confrontation with the judiciary led to a public storm that finally brought about his political eclipse and

catapulted the mainstream political parties back to centre stage. The army, fighting a reluctant war with the Taliban, is led by General Kayani, a former head of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which nurtured the Taliban in the first place, and is now trying to engineer its revival by underlining the Indian threat. The role of the ISI in the bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul (highlighted by US intelligence) and the repeated incidences of firing across the LoC over the last several months indicate a strategy to accomplish three things: shift the focus of conflict from the west to the east, unify Pakistani politics against the external 'other', and revive the army's eroding position in Pakistani politics.

Across the border, the Indian state must take responsibility for its sins of omission. Despite unflagging terrorist and insurgent violence, no Indian government in the last two decades has mobilized the considerable resources available to it to meet the fundamental obligation of the social contract and ensure the security of the citizen. Mumbai alone has been subjected to repeated attacks, including major serial bombings in March 1993 (257 deaths), August 2003 (50 deaths) and July 2006 (181 deaths). Yet there has been no serious institutionalized effort to protect ordinary citizens (as opposed to heavy protection given to political leaders). While much attention has been paid to the toll taken by terrorism in Kashmir, the reality is that, according to the Indian government's own figures, between 2004 and August 2008, Maoist violence in the central portion of the country caused 3,102 deaths whereas the figure for the state of Jammu and Kashmir was 2,672, followed by that for the northeastern states, where terrorism is endemic, which was 2,270. The irony of the Indian government's demand that Pakistanh and over the criminal mastermind Dawood Ibrahim, said to be resident in Karachi, was not lost on many Indians since Ibrahim's entire network in Indiais alive and flourishing. The current focus on maritime security has merely brought a shift in the immensely profitable narcotics trade (from Central Asia and Afghanistan via Pakistan) from smuggling by sea to an overland route – the supposedly well-guarded land border with Pakistan. The larger problem of the softness of the Indian state is that of deeply embedded corruption, reflected in India's low ranking at 85 in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. Above all, while much is made of the world's largest democracy, optimists rarely distinguish between formal process and the delivery of collective goods, not least of which is security.

Clearly, the subcontinental imbroglio boils down to governance. What can be done? On the Pakistani side, the problem has to be dealt with primarily by Pakistanis themselves. Their country, which has see-sawed between military aggrandizement and civilian ineptitude, stands again at a crossroads and the big question is whether Pakistan will go with the region's democratic tide or be weighed down again by its praetorian chains. The United States and other countries would do well to recognize their failure in putting all their eggs into the military's basket and instead press hard for the taming of the generals. Indians can fulminate and threaten, but there is nothing they can do without risking a nuclear war or at best further undermining Pakistan, which hardly bodes well for India's own future. India would do far better to put its own house in order and ensure the leadership's apologies to its people are followed up with kept promises.

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[i]The concept of the stability/instability paradox was originally formulated to argue that, precisely because nuclear war is not desired, hostile states are relatively free to engage in conventional war. See Glen Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in *The Balance of Power,* ed. Paul Seabury (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), pp. 194-201. In practice, this has worked at still lower levels of marginal and subconventional conflict.

[ii] The on-going India-Pakistan Composite Dialogue encompasses peace and security (including confidence building measures), Jammu and Kashmir, the Siachen Glacier, Sir Creek, the Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project, terrorism and drug trafficking, economic and cultural cooperation, and promotion of friendly exchanges in various fields. Negotiation on each component is undertaken by a designated committee.