

77

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26/11: A Decade After

Harsh V. Pant and Maya Mirchandani (Eds.)

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Introduction

Harsh V. Pant

A decade has passed since Pakistan-based militants struck the Indian financial capital of Mumbai, killing 165 people (not counting the nine terrorists that were killed by Indian security personnel) and creating panic among the city's populace. The attacks drew comparisons with the September 11, 2001 tragedy in the United States. Yet, the Mumbai attacks (or "26/11", for the day that they happened, 26 November 2008) not only provoked public outrage but also gave birth to expectations that the government would finally begin to address the deep-seated, systemic shortcomings in the country's security apparatus. A decade seems like long enough, and while there have been some changes, a lot remains unachieved. ORF examines the causes and consequences of the 26/11 attacks in this volume of articles that focus on the multiple dimensions of this crisis and its aftermath: strategic, operational and tactical.

We begin with Kriti M. Shah's piece underlining key policy objectives behind the Pakistani state's sanctioning of the 26/11 attacks and analysing whether or not Pakistan succeeded in those aims. Deepak Sinha's essay then looks at the reasons why Mumbai was an attractive target for the attacks and how equipped the city is today in meeting similar challenges. This is followed by a piece by Abhijit Singh that places the attacks as a failure of coastal security, outlining the challenges and the current state-of-play in this arena. Khalid Shah, in his contribution, takes up the issue of Kashmir and its linkages to the wider terror attacks on the Indian mainland, and explores the question of whether the Kashmir issue still drives Pakistani thinking behind such attacks. In the subsequent piece, Pushan Das analyses the counter-terror response of India to 26/11 and underlines the changes in the country's counter-terror response mechanism since. In the penultimate piece, Maya Mirchandani examines the debate on the role of media in national security crises. She underscores the challenges media faces in covering crises like 26/11, given the need for balancing national security imperatives with the task of disseminating relevant information to the public. Sushant Sareen closes the series by gazing at the future: will 26/11-like crises continue to shape the trajectory of India-Pakistan relations and what are the possible Indian responses?

The sheer scale and audacity of the Mumbai attacks clearly set them apart from earlier terrorist incidents in India. It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that those attacks were “India’s 9/11”. To do so would mean ignoring issues that have allowed such horrific attacks to take place, to begin with. After all, the Indian Parliament, symbol of India’s sovereignty, was attacked in 2001, and India’s response was as ineffective then as it was after 26/11.

India, in many ways, faces a unique set of challenges in dealing with terrorism. First, its very location in one of the world’s most dangerous neighbourhoods — South Asia, now the epicentre of Islamist radicalism — gives it an undeniable structural problem. The vast tribal areas in Pakistan, which have never been under the effective control of any Pakistani government since independence, have become a breeding ground for Islamist radicals. Driven out of Afghanistan after the US invasion and the overthrow of Taliban, the Islamist extremists have found a new haven in the Pakistani tribal belt. It is from there that they wreak havoc in Afghanistan and beyond, and their radical Islamist ideology is penetrating far and wide. India cannot expect to remain immune from such influences. Though the Indian government is keen to harp on the fact that very few Indian Muslims have become radicalised, most of the terror attacks in India in the last few years have involved homegrown radicals. In this series of essays, most of the contributions highlight this structural factor as the central challenge facing India. Pakistan’s military-intelligence complex continues to view proxy war vis-à-vis India as a legitimate tool of state policy and an integral part of their grand strategy. This is unlikely to change in the near future, and India must brace itself for attacks on the mainland.

India’s problems on this front are compounded by its lack of effective institutional capacity to first, prevent, and then manage the consequences of 26/11-style attacks. As these essays seek to highlight, while some progress has been made since 26/11 in enhancing the Indian state’s institutional capacity, the overall situation is far from satisfactory and the reforms have not gone far. The appalling state of India’s internal security apparatus became evident in how Indian agencies confronted the Mumbai massacre. As terrorists wreaked havoc over three days, Indian security forces struggled to even get a handle on the situation, and moreso to respond effectively. To be sure, there were efforts at mending certain aspects of existing institutional and legal frameworks. However, the Indian government has not made any attempt towards a systemic overhaul. Major

initiatives like the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) and the National Intelligence Grid are struggling to get off the ground primarily due to political bickering. This brings to fore the third and perhaps most significant challenge to India: the politicisation of the terrorism debate in the country. Indian politics has made it difficult for the country to nurture a coherent response to terrorism. There is no political consensus across the political spectrum on how best to fight terrorism and extremism. Partisan politics has created an environment in which political and religious polarisation has been so complete and embedded that an effective action against terrorism becomes virtually impossible to accomplish.

As long as India's response to terrorism is characterised by a shameless appeal along religious lines — with political parties trying to consolidate their vote banks instead of coming together to fight the menace — India will continue to be viewed as a soft target by its adversaries and the people will continue to fight terrorists in their streets. And while no government can make India immune from terror attacks, what it can and should do is better prepare the country to handle 26/11-like crises more effectively. A decade after 26/11, the Indian people must demand nothing less from our policymakers.

Pakistan's Use of Terror as a Tool

Kriti M. Shah

The Mumbai attacks of 26/11 2008 was a clear demonstration by Pakistan's jihadist organisations' and its military-intelligence establishment's strategic culture of causing hurt and harm to India. Pakistan uses jihad, conducted by subnational groups (with state support) as an instrument that allows it to punch above its geopolitical weight.¹ Part of the country's strategic thinking is believing in the false idea that the only way to preserve its own security is by ensuring that India is weak, defeated or kept in a constant state of chaos. Pakistan believes it can achieve this imperative by supporting militant actors, thereby ensuring the Pakistani State has plausible deniability when the militant group strikes.

Pakistan's strategy of "bleeding India by a thousand cuts" has been implemented by exploiting religious sentiments and whipping up passions on communal and sectarian lines. Before launching its proxy war in Kashmir in 1989, Pakistan exploited the tribal areas in northeast India, and too the discontented youth in Punjab, to fight for the creation of Khalistan, a new Sikh nation-state. By supporting the Sikh militancy in Punjab, Pakistan hoped to tie down Indian security forces and divert them from the defence of Kashmir. When India crushed the Khalistani separatist movement, Pakistan turned its attention once again to Kashmir, fomenting instability in the state to check India's power.

With the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Inter-Services Intelligence agency or ISI, backed by logistical and financial support from the CIA and Saudi Arabia, fostered and supported Islamic militants in Afghanistan and the bordering Pakistani tribal regions to fight jihad against the Soviets. At the time, not only did over a million Afghan refugees flee the fighting and cross the Durand line into neighbouring Pakistan, but thousands of mujahideen warriors found themselves—albeit temporarily—without a cause or enemy after their victory over the Soviets. The war economy of narcotics and weapons had become valuable currency in this region and the tribal area refugee camps served as an easy recruitment ground.² Empowered by their victory over a Great Power's massive, regular

army, the idea that militant campaigns could defeat a strong nation gained force.

Pakistan has applied the same strategic thinking when it comes to India and Afghanistan. While on the one hand it has fuelled Afghanistan's instability by providing weapons, intelligence and protection to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network, on the other, it has used militant proxies to weaken India.³ Terror groups such as Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) have been the Pakistani establishment's preferred tools towards fighting India in Kashmir. LeT's agenda of wresting Kashmir from Indian control and joining it with Pakistan is compatible with the state's own strategic interests and it has provided extensive financial, logistical and military support to the group over the years.⁴ For much of the 1990s, LeT operations were limited to Kashmir. It was only after 2000 that LeT began conducting operations in other parts of the country.⁵ *Fedayeen* attacks, involving heavily armed militants launching large-scale attacks, such as the ones on the Indian Parliament in 2001 and in Mumbai in 2008, are the group's signature tactic. Militants continue to fight in what is primarily a suicide mission, killing mercilessly and maximising damage, until they are taken down by state forces.

The primary objective of the Mumbai attacks was to exacerbate tensions between India and Pakistan. While outright war would not have been the best-case scenario for Lashkar, the intended casualty was the ongoing India-Pakistan peace process.⁶ Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was visiting Delhi the night the attacks began, in what was seen as a sign of improving ties. When news of the attack broke, Qureshi was asked to immediately leave the country.⁷ A key feature of the coordinated attacks was their targeting of popular places frequented by foreigners. The choice of Nariman House and the Taj and Oberoi hotels suggests that one of the objectives of the attacks was to increase the group's stature in the *jihadi* community by conducting targeted killings of Westerners and Jews.⁸ The militants hoped that by targeting a large number of foreigners, India's image in the "eyes of the west" would fall, with people seeing it as an unsafe country.

LeT—which sees India as part of the “Crusader-Zionist-Hindu” alliance, as enemies—has on numerous occasions declared that its objective is not limited to liberating ‘Muslim’ Kashmir from a ‘Hindu’ India but breaking up

India completely. Through the attacks, the group hoped to aggravate tensions between India's Hindu and Muslim communities, and provoke a Hindu reprisal that would help divide the country and facilitate greater recruitment by Islamist extremists.⁹

An argument can be made that the militants did “succeed” in causing large-scale death and destruction, hurting Indian security forces and civilians, humiliating India, and garnering global media attention. The attacks strengthened hardliners in both India and Pakistan, as the militants had expected and hoped for. Keeping India and Pakistan at loggerheads is the only way LeT can justify its existence and “usefulness” to the ISI. Attempts at dialogue between Delhi and Islamabad often fall victim to terrorist violence, perpetrated with the blessings of Pakistan's military-intelligence structure, forcing the political leadership into a corner, and provoking mutual distrust. The policy keeps jihadist groups like the Lashkar relevant. Should peace prevail, the group would fade into irrelevance.

Realising the risks that Indian retaliation would bring, the United States emphasised the importance of restraint, and offered intelligence assistance in investigating the attacks. While the Indian government had a number of military and non-military options to choose from, the decision was made to not attack Pakistan, but find other legal methods to bring the perpetrators of the attack to justice. This united the international community, and worked to ensure that Pakistan faced consequences for its actions.¹⁰ While Pakistan made half-hearted attempts to arrest members of the LeT, and conducted a crackdown on small militant training camps, their idea seems to have been to get by and escape both international censure and a full-blown military response from India, with just the bare minimum. While India did not want to risk an open-ended war at the time, there was an understanding that should the LeT or any other Pakistan group conduct an attack at a similar scale on civilians, India's cost-benefit calculus could change. Perhaps that is why, since 26/11, Pakistan-backed terrorist groups have trained their weapons on the Indian military, attacking a number of army and air force bases in Kashmir and Punjab. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Targeting Mumbai: Future Imperfect

Deepak Sinha

Bruce Riedel, South Asia and Counter Terrorism expert at the Brookings Institute, compares the Paris terror attack of 2015 to the horrific, coordinated attacks on Mumbai on 26 November 2008. He suggests that “Mumbai has been studied by both terrorists and counter-terrorists because it set a gold standard for how a small group of suicidal fanatics can paralyze a major city, attract global attention, and terrorize a continent”¹. He concludes his analysis by observing that the “Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) paid no penalty for its attack, nor did its Pakistani patrons. The group’s senior leadership operates freely in Pakistan and enjoys the support and protection of the Pakistani Army.”² One may recall the three days of mayhem, before the ten LeT terrorists were neutralised (nine of them, killed by Indian security forces) but not before 165 innocent people, including 25 foreigners, were killed and more than 300 were injured. Ten years on, two questions remain: Why Mumbai? And more importantly, can it happen again, and if so, is Mumbai prepared?

While focusing on the reasons for Mumbai being targeted, it would be worthwhile to look at the broader context and understand the motivation that drives Pakistan-based and -supported Islamist radical groups to attack targets outside Jammu and Kashmir. While completely unacceptable, one can still understand the logic followed by the Pakistani establishment to justify not only its interference in Jammu and Kashmir, but also its use of proxy war to attack the Indian security establishment, given the nature and history of the dispute between India and Pakistan. However, attacks beyond the state have invariably increased tensions between the two countries, threatened conflict and hindered dialogue. All of this has impacted economic development in the region, more so Pakistan’s, whose seemingly feeble attempts to distance itself from the groups behind the attacks have also exposed it to the international community as a state sponsor of terrorism.

The motivation for jihadi elements in this respect has been clearly enunciated by Hafiz Sayeed, the founder of the LeT. He has often

proclaimed: “There cannot be any peace while India remains intact. Cut them, cut them so much that they kneel before you and ask for mercy, and India has shown us this path. We would like to give India a tit-for-tat response and reciprocate in the same way by killing the Hindus, just like it is killing the Muslims in Kashmir.”³

The Pakistani establishment’s motivations are more complex and can be viewed through the prism of the Pakistan Army’s domination over its political and civilian space. The military’s centrality in Pakistan’s body politic is wholly dependent on India continuing to be seen as an existential threat—a perception that is universally accepted and is unlikely to change for the better as long as the Kashmir dispute remains unresolved.⁴ That apart, they continue to hunger for retribution and revenge against what they see as Indian interference that led to the formation of Bangladesh and forced a humiliating defeat upon their military in 1971. Finally, they believe that they will be able to achieve victory in Jammu and Kashmir if they are able to destroy India’s secular foundation and turn the majority population against its Muslim minority. They hope to take advantage of the polarisation that has already happened due to the Babri Masjid demolition and its subsequent fallout leading to events such as the riots in Mumbai in 1992-93 and the Gujarat pogrom of 2002.

To be clear, Mumbai has now been under siege for over three decades. 26/11 was not the last time the city would be targeted, though certainly not on the same scale. It was targeted again by multiple bomb blasts just three years later, on 13 July 2011, in which 26 people died and another 121 were injured. Lax security and intelligence lapses have continued to dog Mumbai, despite repeated attacks.⁵ According to the *South Asia Terrorism* portal, Mumbai faced 14 terror strikes between 1993 and 2011 in which 719 people died, and another 2,393 were injured. What truly sets the 26/11 attacks apart from previous ones was not the fact that the attackers came by sea—they have done that before when the consignment used in the 1993 terror attack was landed on the *Shekhadi* and *Srivardhan* coasts. Nor that Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence was underwriting the operation; it had been doing so for decades in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and elsewhere. It was also not the number of casualties—both the 1993 and 2006 multiple bomb attacks resulted in substantially more deaths. The importance of 26/11 lay in the sheer audacity, scale, scope, and complexity of the attacks. That it took three days to subdue and neutralise the terrorists clearly

showed the ineptness and lack of cohesion of India's counterterror policies, infrastructure and capabilities as nothing else could have. It is an observation that the Maharashtra Government's High-Level Enquiry Committee (HLEC) on 26/11 led by Mr. Ram Pradhan has clearly brought out.⁶

The failed attack on Parliament in 2001 resulted in the launch of *Operation Parakram* that nearly led to another war between the two nuclear armed neighbours. While *Operation Parakram*, conducted over 10 months, may not have produced the results that the government had hoped for, it made clear to Pakistan that the response to such "*Fedayeen* attacks" would be robust. Simultaneously, action was initiated to strengthen the security and intelligence infrastructure in the National Capital Region, which made launching of a "commando assault" kind of attack similar to 26/11, an extremely difficult proposition in Delhi. In effect this left Mumbai, the financial and cultural capital of the country, as the most viable choice as target for any high-profile acts of terror being planned, if, as all terror attacks aim to—the intention was to capture international attention and paralyse the state.

Moreover, Mumbai's massive population, densely packed localities and creaking infrastructure, as well as its proximity to the sea and its large and vulnerable coastline made it easier to wreak maximum havoc. Finally, there was the Dawood Ibrahim-controlled criminal network that had spread its tentacles wide, controlled all criminal activity in the area and was known to be influential among the city's political, bureaucratic and police establishments. Dawood was himself under the protection of the ISI and had already been directly implicated in the terror attacks of 1993. His criminal network was ideally placed to provide logistics support for terror groups planning to target Mumbai, which is why the Pradhan Committee raised the question of local networks of support for the terrorists.⁷ In such circumstances, the selection of Mumbai by the LeT was indeed logical.

While Mumbai has continued to grow and thrive in the intervening years since the attacks with minimal changes in its socio-economic and political environment, it is no longer as vulnerable and as soft a target as it was in 2008. This is because of the quantum enhancement of the coastal surveillance infrastructure and better integration and demarcation of responsibilities that have been undertaken in the Navy, Coast Guard and

Marine Police, thereby minimising the ability of criminals and terrorists to avoid detection in the seas off the city. Secondly, the establishment of the integrated NSG hub in Mumbai and the enhancement of the capabilities and training of Force 'Alpha' of the Mumbai Police, its Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team, will certainly impact response timings and prevent terrorists from getting the time, space or flexibility to conduct open-ended operations witnessed earlier. There have also been attempts to upgrade the technical capabilities, communication and training of the police as well as to put in place access control measures in vulnerable areas such as railway stations and hotels. According to reports, however, serious weaknesses remain.

Unfortunately, the two among the three major Central Government initiatives that would have greatly enhanced the country's counterterrorism capabilities have not been followed through. These pertain to the establishment of the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) and its intelligence data exchange architecture (NATGRID). These have not fructified due to differences among various political parties that see it as a threat to the country's federal structure. However, there is little doubt that this initiative, if pushed through as visualised, would have been of immense utility in ensuring that the counterterror establishment was able to prevent and respond to terror threats in a timely and effective manner. Their necessity has become critical in view of the manner in which Pan-Islamic terror has evolved over the past decade, with the advent of ISIS and its effective use of social media to draw recruits and plan and conduct attacks worldwide.⁸

Finally, it must be kept in mind that however much the effort and resources are pushed into improving and enhancing the intelligence and counterterror architecture, the ability of terror groups to hit India in the hinterland will depend largely on whether Pakistan perceives the country as a hard or soft state. If the Pakistani establishment is convinced of serious repercussions in the event of perpetrating such an attack via its proxies, they might deprive terror groups of the resources and training that they require to be able to launch such complex strikes. Unfortunately, as Bruce Riedel argues, there is no reason for the Pakistan establishment to see India as anything but a soft state. India's political leadership has time and again shown that it lacks the resolve to follow through and is extremely reluctant to respond in an appropriate, adequate and timely manner against grave provocations and

attempts to undermine its core interests. While the surgical strikes after the Uri incident in 2017 reflected a perceptible shift in political attitudes, it has not been sufficient to break the Pakistan Army-terror group nexus. However, what has prevented another Mumbai-type attack for the past decade is undoubtedly the growing realisation in Pakistan that public pressure in India will force any government—no matter its ideological leanings—to respond with force against a terror strike, irrespective of the consequences. 

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India's Coastal Security: An Assessment

Abhijit Singh

The tenth anniversary of 26/11 is an apt occasion to review the state of India's coastal security preparedness. In the aftermath of the attacks on Mumbai, the government made concerted efforts to improve coastal security infrastructure and law enforcement. In a radical overhaul of the coastal defence apparatus, a three-tier security grid was installed with the Indian Navy, the Coast Guard, and the marine police jointly patrolling India's near-seas. An existing Coastal Security Scheme (originally instituted in 2005) was accelerated, with greater fund allocations for coastal infrastructure, including police stations and radar stations along India's coastline. The enterprise included measures to improve 'surveillance and domain awareness', through the installation of radar stations and identification systems), and the enhancement of coordination through Joint operation centres (JOCs).¹

A decade later, coastal preparedness is better than before, but the overall picture remains less than satisfactory. While the state of inter-agency coordination has improved, state governments continue to be indifferent to needs of coastal security, and the state-police still reluctant to shoulder responsibility.² The real problem, observers point out, are systemic flaws in the policing apparatus. From low numbers of marine police stations, to the underutilisation of patrol boats for coastal tasks, the absence of shore-based infrastructure, through to manpower shortages and unspent funds, coastal managers are yet to resolve many structural issues plaguing the system.³

Regrettably, the proposal to set up an apex coastal authority remains frozen. India's policymakers recognise the need for a full-time manager to coordinate the large number of agencies (over 15) in the coastal security space. Officials say that the National Committee for Strengthening Maritime and Coastal Security, which presently coordinates joint activities, is at best an ad hoc arrangement.⁴ Yet, parliament has not been able to clear the coastal security bill that would establish a National Maritime Authority (NMA).⁵

Worryingly, there has been a surge in illicit activity in the littorals. Narcotics trafficking incidents have witnessed an uptick, the most prominent incident being the seizure of the MV Henry in August 2017.⁶ Beyond using the country's porous coastline for narcotics smuggling, drug traffickers are turning old harbours like Tuticorin into a hub of contraband and illicit trade.⁷ The government has responded by enhancing coastal security allocations to the states, and by seeking to extend the jurisdiction of coastal police stations up to 200 nautical miles (even if it overlaps uncomfortably with the Coast Guard's area of responsibility).⁸

By some accounts, Indian security agencies have tended to focus on the terrorism threat, placing less emphasis on non-traditional challenges such as human trafficking, IUU fishing, climate-induced crises and maritime pollution. Even so, the Navy and Coast Guard have developed significant capability to deal with irregular challenges and the multiagency exercises such as *Sagar Kavach* have helped improve coordination.⁹ The most heartening development has been the strengthening of the Coast Guard that has built substantial strength in recent years, and even recently revealed plans to become a 190-ship, 100-aircraft force by 2023.

Yet critical gaps persist, particularly at Indian ports, where authorities are yet to install fool-proof security measures. According to an Intelligence Bureau audit in 2016, out of 227 minor ports in India, 187 had little or no security at all. More than six years after the home ministry cleared the setting up of radiation detection equipment in 16 of the major ports in 2011, two of these ports have yet to receive the equipment.¹⁰

**Figure 1: Details of implementation of the coastal security scheme
Operational assets along the coastline (until 2016)**

S.No	State	Coastal Police Station	Boats/Vessels
1	Gujarat	22	30
2	Maharashtra	19	28
3	Goa	7	9
4	Karnataka	9	15
5	Kerala	8	24
6	Tamil Nadu	32	24

S.No	State	Coastal Police Station	Boats/Vessels
7	Andhra Pradesh	21	18
8	Odisha	18	15
9	West Bengal	14	18
10	Daman&Diu	2	4
11	Puducherry	4	3
12	Lakshadweep	7	6
13	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	20	10
Total		1183	204

The security of oil infrastructure poses a peculiar problem. While most of India's crude oil imports are routed through certain identified ports and Single Point Moorings (SPMs), there is no integrated strategy for their protection. Chapter III of the Coast Guard Act 1978 places the responsibility for protection of artificial islands and offshore terminals within the ICG's functional ambit,¹¹ but CG officers say the task of protecting SPMs 15 nautical miles from the shoreline must be performed by the CISF. The latter claims they lack the required assets and trained personnel to discharge the function.¹²

Meanwhile, a proposal for a Central Border Police Force, proposed by Maharashtra is still under consideration. The central government wants the new agency to be modelled after the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) — raised, funded, and administered from New Delhi. But many security experts believe the plan is unviable. With no authority to register offences or carry out investigations, the new agency, they fear, could end up being toothless.¹³

Even as Indian agencies grapple with the security threats in the near-seas, it would be fair to say that security planners have a better sense than earlier of the complexities involved in the coastal project. Indian agencies have begun an active collaboration in the near-littorals and are seeking to align visions and pursue operations with unity of purpose.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) **Surveillance and Interagency Coordination.** For better domain awareness, India needs better surveillance coverage. Beyond

expediting the installation of coastal radar chains and AIS stations and ensuring broad access to information, the authorities must ensure the mandatory fitment of AIS on power-driven vessels with a length more than 10m. The central government must address the problems of coordination arising out of the interactions of multiple agencies (with overlapping jurisdictions) and delayed responses.

- (c) **Stronger Involvement of Coastal Police.** Instead of setting up a coastal border security force with no legal powers, the authorities must move to strengthen and better integrate the coastal police into the littoral security architecture.
- (d) **A Legislative Framework.** Comprehensive legislations must be enacted to place systems and processes for the protection of India's maritime infrastructure, covering both the shipping and port sectors. Statutory duties of government departments, Port Trusts, State Maritime Boards, non-major ports and private terminal operators and other stakeholders need to be clearly outlined, as well as minimum standards of port security requiring statutory compliance.
- (e) **Strengthening of the Coast Guard.** The CG must be strengthened to play a leadership role in coastal security. Ambiguities from the Coast Guard Act need to be removed to ensure all security agencies are clear about the roles and responsibilities they are expected to perform.
- (f) **National Commercial Maritime Security Policy Document.** The government must promulgate a National Commercial Maritime Security Policy Document, to articulate its strategic vision for maritime security. It must also promulgate a national strategy for Commercial Maritime Security for efficient, coordinated, and effective action for protection of the port and shipping infrastructure.¹⁴
- (g) **Reinforce Coastal Regulation Zone Regulations.** There is apprehension among environmentalists that CRZ laws are being diluted in favour of tourism, shrimp farming and industry lobby groups, without taking into consideration the views of experts or the public. The draft coastal regulation zone notification 2018 (CRZ-2018) was twice amended in 2018 by the Union ministry of environment, forests and climate change (MoEFCC) in the "public interest" but without consulting the fish-working community—India's largest, non-consumptive coastal stakeholder.¹⁵ 

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ENDNOTES

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Kashmir as Cause

Khalid Shah

The deep state in Pakistan has orchestrated, sponsored and pushed jihadist groups against India for decades. While many security experts in India call this an “asymmetrical warfare” strategy, at the heart of it lies the doctrine of Jihad. Among the many jihadist outfits running from Pakistan, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Harkat ul Jihad Islami (HUJI) are the main groups that have successfully conducted terror strikes across India, beyond the borders of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

While these jihadist groups have often espoused fighting for the “cause of Kashmir” as their *raison d’être*, Kashmir is used as chimera to disguise their real agenda. Using Kashmir an excuse and a digression has been a recurrent feature of many misadventures of terror groups, and an unstated policy of Pakistan. A glaring example of this policy is the Kargil misadventure of the Pakistan Army, exposing its tactics of deception in the summer of 1999.

At the height of the Kargil War the official position of the Pakistan Army was to deny any direct or indirect involvement in the operation and credit the operation to the “Mujahideen” (militants fighting for ‘freedom’) of Kashmir. In fact, the same line was sold by the Pakistan Army to the country’s civilian leaders of that time — such was the audacity of the group of military officers who planned the operation.

According to accounts that have since appeared in Pakistani media, Nawaz Sharif, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, was kept out of the loop on the strategy to invade Kargil. Gen. Pervez Musharraf (who would later assume power following a coup d’etat in October 1999, four months after the Kargil War) planned the operation, but his team told Nawaz Sharif that Kargil was taken over by Kashmiri militants. This conversation continued till May 1999 shortly before full-scale military conflict erupted. Pakistani commentator Najam Sethi says the Generals assured Sharif there was plausible deniability in case of a strong reaction from India and potential international outrage. For the Indian government, however, Kargil was

decisive proof of how Pakistan and its proxies use Kashmir to create false narratives and justify aggression against India.¹

An analysis of various large-scale terror strikes in India shows that most of them have been attributed to or claimed by terror groups Lashkar e Taiba, Jaish e Mohammad and HUJI. The 26/11 Mumbai attacks finally showed the world what India had been saying all along. It put the LeT on the radar of western powers, by then already engaged in the war on terror. Further, given the specific targeting of foreigners in Mumbai, the international media, academia and experts began to see the LeT and its capacity to conduct spectacular attacks on Indian soil as a potent global threat.

An important aspect of groups like LeT, JeM and HUJI is that most of their activities, attacks and operations are geographically limited to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. A tiny fraction of their cadres consist of ethnic Kashmiris. In a study of 900 biographies of LeT members, a group of scholars at Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Academy in the United States, found that the majority of the LeT cadre (89 percent) are recruited from the Punjab province of Pakistan. Less than two percent have come from Jammu and Kashmir.²

In multiple speeches, Hafeez Saeed, the patron and ideologue of LeT has espoused the “Kashmir cause” as the primary motivation for his jihad against India. This is a false narrative, however, aimed to give terrorists the guise of freedom fighters. If the LeT is fighting for the cause of Kashmir, then why does it attract a negligible number of recruits from Kashmir? And what business or role do Punjabi men and boys have in the “liberation of Kashmir”?

The activities of LeT, JeM and other such groups are not limited to Kashmir; the same groups are also involved in various terror attacks in mainland India. The Lashkar, for example, was behind the Red Fort attack of 2000, bombings in Delhi’s major markets in 2005, the Gurdaspur attack of 2015, and perhaps most importantly the Mumbai attacks of 2008. The Masood Azhar-led Jaish-e-Mohammad was behind the December 2001 attack on Parliament. Each of these attacks showed that the cadre of the LeT and JeM are not only involved and active in Kashmir, but are capable of conducting big terror strikes both inside and outside the state. However, both the attackers and their handlers have attempted to create different narratives.

Ajmal Kasab, the only terrorist captured alive in the Mumbai attacks had told the interrogators he was on “mission Kashmir”. Like other Punjabi boys recruited by the LeT, Kasab was recruited in the name of the “Kashmir cause”. In fact, all the other terrorists involved in the Mumbai attacks were recruited and trained for Kashmir, but at the last moment, were directed to Mumbai. While these facts came out through Kasab’s exhaustive interrogation, his handlers manufactured a different narrative for the consumption of global and Indian audience.³

Intercepted conversations between the terrorists who attacked Mumbai, and their handlers show there was a deliberate attempt to give an indigenous spin to the strike and show domestic reasons as the primary motivation. One of the attackers in conversation with a television anchor claimed to be associated with the Hyderabad Mujahideen group of south India. “So many Muslims were butchered. Our mosques were demolished, and we were not allowed to sleep peacefully. Our sisters and mothers were killed, why did nobody talk of surrender then? Let the commandoes come, we will make their children orphans.” And when asked about his demands, apart from the release of “Mujahideen,” he says “yes, and also Muslims in India should not be harassed. They demolished the Babri Masjid and harass Muslims.”⁴ The intercepts show that handlers tutored the terrorists to make this claim.⁵

That the LeT and JeM have a pan-Islamist ideology and have links with global jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda is well documented. These groups have also sent their cadre to fight in Afghanistan after the American intervention against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the aftermath of 9/11 and the ensuing Global War on Terror. However, they see Kashmir as an “occupied land” and therefore the nearest front for their jihad. A study done by the New America Foundation argues that LeT leaders believe after liberation Kashmir will become the base of operations to take over other parts of India. Stephen Tanker of the New America Foundation writes:

“However, it would be a mistake to suggest the group’s leaders viewed this simply as a territorial struggle. Rather, they claimed (with no regard for the historical record) that the Kashmir conflict was the latest chapter in a Hindu-Muslim struggle that has existed ever since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Once Kashmir was liberated, they argued, it would serve as a base of operations to conquer India and restore Muslim rule to the Indian subcontinent.”⁶

So where does Kashmir fit in this larger Jihadist scheme?

Within Pakistan, the narrative on Kashmir sums up in a simplistic slogan: Kashmir is the jugular vein of Pakistan. While this narrative is exploited by the terror groups for recruitment and propaganda, it does not always work in their favour. During 26/11, the narrative of persecution of Indian Muslims was exploited to highlight domestic motivations and actors as the cause. The global discourse on Islamophobia is also used to bolster these false narratives. For a short while after 26/11 there was an attempt to delink the militancy in Kashmir with the Mumbai attacks, but that has once again turned. In recent years, there has been a brazen attempt to link attacks like those in Pathankot to Kashmir and portray the revival of old terror groups as a form of “revenge”.

Attacks inside Kashmir, like the ones in Sunjuwan and Nagrota, and the creation of the ‘Afzal Guru Squad’ after the attack on the BSF camp in Srinagar in 2017 also indicate that revival. The Afzal Guru Squad is simply Jaish-e-Mohammad by another name.⁷ If the footprint of JeM had faded in the aftermath of 26/11, it now uses the hanging of Afzal Guru as reason for its resurgence, encashing on a sympathy wave for Guru. Afzal Guru was convicted for his role in the 2001 attack on India’s parliament and was subsequently hanged ahead of his scheduled turn on death row.

After 26/11, the focus of the media in India shifted to Hafeez Saeed and LeT — so much so that any conversation on Pakistan was incomplete without a mention of Saeed. But the singular focus on Saeed and demands to bring him to justice as the mastermind of 26/11 relegated Masood Azhar to the background—to India’s detriment. Azhar Masood and Jaish-e-Mohammad rose once again in a new avatar, with a new narrative, targeting security and military installations. In 2018, another Pakistan-based group, Al Badr, has begun to conduct low-intensity grenade attacks in Kashmir. The group was actively fighting against the Soviet Union in the 1990s before shifting its focus to Kashmir.

From Kargil to 26/11 and to the recent attacks on military camps, there is indeed a dynamic shift. Kashmir will be used as a cause and an excuse when it suits the policy of Pakistan. When the environment is conducive for talks, Pakistan’s deep state chooses not to be a spoiler in the dialogue process; Kashmir is downplayed in conversations on 26/11 and terrorism.⁸ However,

in times like these, when India-Pakistan ties seem to have gone into deep-freeze, Kashmir has returned in the discourse as Pakistan's *causus belli*. Therefore, even though Pakistan might constantly adapt its responses, it is imperative for India not to lose sight of this, even as it continues to seek global censure for Pakistan as a state sponsor of cross-border terror. 

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The Chaos that is Counterterrorism in India

Pushan Das

The terrorist attack on Mumbai on 26 November 2008 exposed key vulnerabilities and inadequacies in the tactical and operational aspects of the Indian security response. What followed were episodic reforms in the country's security apparatus, only to go back to default mode in less than a decade. This failing was evident in India's uncoordinated and chaotic response to the terrorist attack on the Pathankot Air Force base in January 2016 that, once again, painfully underscored issues of tasking, synergy and jointness in the country's counterterrorism (CT) capabilities.

There is a need to re-evaluate old doctrines that have determined the use of intervention forces in domestic counterterrorism situations and the way the Indian security establishment prepositions advanced components of special units in a cohesive network covering all of India.

Following the 26/11 attacks, a number of structural reforms were ambitiously proposed for the improvement in the country's counterterror infrastructure and strategy — notably, the creation of regional hubs for National Security Guard deployment in various states, the establishment of the National Investigation Agency (NIA), the setting up of a National Intelligence Grid (NatGrid), and the plan for a National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC).¹

The NCTC was to bring a multitude of agencies under a unified command. It will be responsible for preventing terrorist attacks, containing them in the event they were launched, and guiding a response in the aftermath. A decade since 26/11, the proposal to create this unified command and control structure for counterterrorism responses remains only on paper. The NCTC was supposed to be aided by the National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID), which is networked to the databases of 21 different agencies that contain vital information and intelligence. Previously, each organisation had its own database that cannot be accessed by others.

The Mumbai attacks, however, were not a failure of intelligence gathering; reports indicate that some 26 warnings were passed by Indian intelligence

agencies to the Mumbai police between 2006 and 2008 about a possible attack. New mechanisms like Multi Agency Centres (MAC) and Subsidiary Multi Agency Centres (SMAC), to enable intelligence sharing and coordination amongst multiple agencies, continue to remain deficient in high-level coordination which involves the Home and Police departments working together with their central counterparts.² This is unlikely to come through an administrative fiat, and would need to be subject to legislation.

Complicating matters further, India's police and internal security system is highly disjointed and poorly coordinated. India's federal political system leaves most policing responsibilities to states. State police forces have perennially suffered from inadequate counterterrorism training and equipment.³ Both are required for first responders to be effective in containing a terrorist incident. It is important to note that the majority of deaths in the 2008 attacks occurred in the first hour, followed by a tense drawn-out period of four days when attackers barricaded themselves into buildings, taking hostages with them. The attacks graphically illustrated how ill-trained and -equipped the local police was to handle a major terrorist incident at that time. Many police officers remained passive, seemingly because they were outgunned by the terrorists. In the ensuing years, the Mumbai police has raised a commando force with the moniker "Force One". However, reliance upon a police tactical team even in those jurisdictions where police are armed can only be effective if that capability can respond to multiple threats within a short time.

In the event of another attack similar to 26/11—dispersed and highly mobile—or one like the Paris attacks of 2015, where multiple teams attacked several locations at once, combining armed assaults, carjackings, drive-by shootings, prefabricated IEDs and hostage-taking—it is doubtful that state police forces would be able to adequately respond effectively and in time. As a first step, even a marginally improved quality of basic training, would have a broader effect of increasing the response capacity of India's police forces.

In 2008, the National Security Guard (NSG) was headquartered in south of Delhi and lacked bases anywhere else in the country. Worse, it had no aircraft of its own and needed access to Indian Air Force aircraft in an emergency. Any rapid-reaction force must reach the scene of a terrorist incident as soon as possible, and no later than 30–60 minutes after it has commenced. In Mumbai in 2008, nearly 10 hours elapsed. The NSG was further hampered by the absence of relevant equipment such as night-vision goggles, as well as poor intelligence and planning. It did not even have an operational command centre.

Since 26/11, governments have implemented knee-jerk reforms drawn from the NSG's failure to reach Mumbai quickly. Hubs have been established in Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, and more recently Ahmedabad, each with about 250 personnel. However, as the NSG expands, questions remain about its quality as a force.⁴ In Pathankot, reports indicate that none of the terrorists were shot by members of this 'elite' force. On the contrary, they lost an officer of the rank of Lt. Colonel who broke standard operating procedures in dealing with improvised explosive devices and lost his life.

The undeliberated expansion of the NSG has resulted in falling standards of training and manpower, which has, in turn, weakened key capabilities.⁵ Hubs have been created, but the question of dedicated aircraft is still unanswered. The NSG requires tactical helicopters for timely movement, but this has not even been raised as a policy option.⁶ Its night combat capability is also inadequate — long-range, night-vision devices and hand-held thermal imagers are still unavailable. The world over, special operations units like the SAS (UK), GSG-9 (Germany), GIGN (France), all number between 200 and 400 personnel and work out of centralised locations.⁷ Most special forces that have CT roles are equipped or permanently assigned their own air assets. The British SAS has specially trained and equipped pilots and helicopters at its disposal, and its personnel train extensively with these helicopters.⁸ In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has its own helicopter unit for critical interventions. In India's case, an ambitious INR 1,400-crore modernisation plan has not gone beyond the drawing board.

The nature of terrorism has changed significantly over the years. Dispersed "maximum violence" attacks, like those in Mumbai, and in Paris in 2015 are the new norm. They require rapid intervention. Ten years since 26/11, the NSG continues to face serious logistical and transportation challenges. Simply put, the NSG cannot wait around to execute a planned counter-assault. Time is a luxury that is absent under most modern terror scenarios. In terms of personnel, no matter how well-equipped or trained specialist forces like the NSG are, responding to any terrorist attack requires the development of a strong, police-led capability. Under such an arrangement, the first responders are always the local, armed police officers. The deployment of specialist counterterrorism forces can only be considered an option in the event of failure of the first-liners. Developing interoperability between specialist CT assets and police forces by way of regular training and exercises will address some of the existing inter-agency co-operation gap.

Any CT responses in India needs to start from processing intelligence alerts, mobilising first responders, carrying out counterterror operations under a well-defined command-and-control system. Pre-positioning the advanced components of special units in a network covering all of India and using aviation-based platforms as an enabler hold potential in addressing some of the NSG's shortcomings. Policymakers will also need to consider the introduction of new technologies in the context of counterterrorism and intelligence collection, in the capability assessment and procurement process. In the end, improvement in India's CT capability will require significant infusions of resources, policy consistency, and political will in the coming year if the country wants to effectively prevent another significant terrorist attack. 

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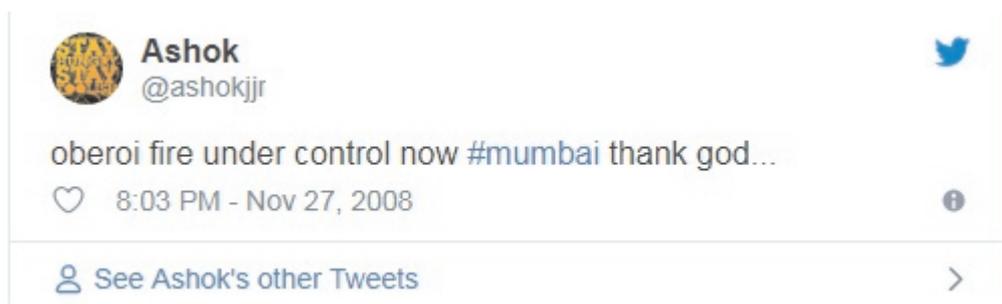
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26/11 and the Media: Where Were the Protocols?

Maya Mirchandani

Walking down the Colaba Causeway, past the renovated face of Cafe Leopold, in the shadow of the iconic Taj Mahal, or in Kalaghoda, abutting the Jewish Chabad house where scars of violence have been swallowed up by the cracks in its decaying walls, it takes a minute to remember the bloodshed and mayhem let loose on these Mumbai landmarks on the 26th of November 2008. In the decade gone by, time has stood as still as it has moved on. While the Indian government still waits for Pakistan to bring the masterminds of 26/11 to justice, grieving families of victims have tried to rebuild their lives in different cities around the world; and social media — a nascent ally of the traditional press in 2008, has become more powerful than anyone could have imagined, in disseminating information and shaping opinions across the world.

It is a little talked about fact, but *The Daily Telegraph's* journalist Claudine Beaumont wrote, just a day after the siege of Mumbai began, that Twitter and Flickr users not only broke the news first,¹ but continued to provide instant, eyewitness accounts² of the unfolding horror in a steady, invaluable stream of information. Onlookers uploaded photos to blogs, hostages inside the hotels tweeted about terrorists demanding to know nationalities of guests from the hotel reception.³ In addition, many hostages were calling their families and sending emails or text messages as and when they could. On Twitter, #Mumbai was trending, and this new trend of hashtags made it easier for families and journalists to receive blow by blow accounts of what was happening on the streets, in the train station, inside the buildings and hotels under attack.⁴ Twenty-four-hour news television cameras were trained on each location. This was a major news story, after all. And, intercepts of phone calls between terrorists and their handlers indicated they were watching the news too—informing attackers of details they gleaned from the reports and reminding them to persist, for the 'glory' of martyrdom awaited them — all in real time.



In times of crisis, all over the world — journalists face a demanding audience while navigating difficult reporting environments. Terror strikes, or unfolding hostage crises make their role even more complex. Everyone looks to news media for information and updates, and journalists struggle to find balance between preserving National (State) interest and Public (Citizen’s) interests. This is naturally easier for State-owned media that follow only one stream of information. But for the rest, the line is often a fine one, and an absence of crisis protocols for news coverage makes things even more difficult.

Off the record, top Indian government sources admit that by and large, when governments and law enforcement authorities put systems in place in a crisis, the media — even privately owned networks and newspapers — do comply. Internationally, such examples abound — the coverage of the aftermath of 9/11 or the 7/7 London bombings are cases in point. The media followed guidelines put in place for both access and display of visuals that could have inflamed passions. They broadcast information released in regular briefings by police, intelligence and administrative officials. In crisis situations, a few things happen immediately. A perimeter is set up by first responders — usually local law enforcement, a crisis group convenes to stay in touch with families, and control rooms are set up where officials deployed to ensure authoritative, credible and clear information give systematic, periodic briefings to the media — a critical player in any national emergency.

None of this happened during the siege of Mumbai. Instead, reporters and camerapersons tried to get as close to the sites as possible, some even stood alongside National Security Guards Chief J.K. Dutt, as he directed operations. As a result, some reporters, themselves in an unprecedented environment ended up reporting operational details, like those of fires being lit inside the hotels under attack, in an attempt to literally smoke out the terrorists. Without appropriate systems and channels of information in place, journalists went by what they saw, what was visible to the naked eye,

and to the ordinary citizen, some of them, breathlessly. It was through news television that terrorists realised fires had been lit and that helicopters were trying to land on the roofs of the Oberoi Hotel and the Jewish Chabad House with an American Rabbi and his family being held inside. Was it poor judgement of the journalists to release this information? With the benefit of hindsight, the answer possibly, is yes. But, for a government under attack for a security failure of epic proportions, deflecting blame was key. News media became the 'fall guy'. Citing phone intercepts between terrorists and their handlers, the political spokespersons placed the lion's share of blame for the mayhem terrorists were able to spread during the 60-hour long siege squarely on the mainstream media, particularly live, commercialised, 24-hour news television. But the truth is, if 26/11 was India's 9/11, India's immediate response was far from optimal.



For any government, live hostage situations are never easy. In the case of the hijacking of IC 814 in December 1999 over a decade before 26/11, and well before the advent of social media, the Indian government held mainstream media responsible for the pressure it faced from families of hostages to act swiftly. Without the government's own standard operating procedures (SOPs) to sequester families in place and set up an organised information channel that both families and journalists could have access to, hostages' relatives held a sit-in outside the prime minister's residence. The pictures were splashed across the few TV networks and all the newspapers. To be charitable to a government that sent its foreign minister as a personal escort

to terrorists being freed in exchange for the hostages who were held on the tarmac in Kandahar for over a week, one can argue that the crisis was unprecedented. But even then, blaming the media was a diversion from the sharp attack that agencies came under for their inability to prevent the hijacking in the first place, and then for their subsequent ineptitude in failing to act while the aircraft was still within Indian territory. 26/11 told us, that even a decade later, the situation was still as chaotic.

We know today that a crisis management group comprising of high-level intelligence officers, defence personnel and bureaucrats met late at night on 26 November 2008 after officials received calls — either to ‘turn on the TV’ and see what was unfolding, or from journalists calling to ask for information. Convening a meeting was, in fact, standard procedure when a crisis unfolded. But officials present that night say it was chaotic and no one was able to take quick, critical decisions. A day after the attacks, as special commandos of the National Security Guard landed in Mumbai, top media owners were summoned to South Block. The government was clear. Wall to wall coverage was against ‘national interest’ as the phone intercepts suggested. Senior government officials from the Defence and Home ministries and across intelligence and security agencies reprimanded television news networks. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting issued notices to two Hindi news channels — Aaj Tak and India TV. However, official sources admit they had no answer when asked if the networks in question had indeed violated any SOP for the media in crisis situations. Why were there no guidelines created — in consultation, by taking media owners into confidence on how best to devise a communications strategy in such situations? While reviewing the failures and addressing new challenges, the absence of a simple protocol was glaring. In fact, it took an attack like 26/11 for both the government and the media industry to evolve new frameworks for coverage.

It is not unusual for governments in crisis or warlike situations (and some bureaucrats argue 26/11 was an act of war), to black out access and filter information. In fact, Indian journalists have seen this with the Kargil war, when daily periodic briefings jointly held by the Army, Air Force and Ministry of External Affairs provided the media with credible information. It is also no secret that terrorist groups, like anyone else — use communications media for propaganda. History tells us that the media is as important a tool for the citizens and the state as it is for those who wreak

havoc on them. And journalists who have sometimes found themselves or their platforms manipulated, have, on their own, changed rules of conduct to safeguard against this manipulation, over the years. Similarly, after the Mumbai attacks of 26 November 2008, under a committee headed by Justice JS Verma, India's News Broadcasters Association, an autonomous industry body for TV news channels came up with a new set of guidelines⁶ for the coverage of emergency situations (armed conflict, internal disturbance, communal violence, public disorder and crime). Even today, the code is governed by the National Broadcasting Standards Association that can issue notice suo-moto, or on the basis of viewer complaints.

NBA GUIDELINES FOR CRISIS AND CONFLICT

- Coverage is to be tested on the 'touchstone of public interest, and must be factually accurate and objective.
- There should be no live reporting that 'facilitates publicity of any terrorist or militant outfit, its ideology or tends to evoke sympathy towards or glamorize their cause.'
- During live hostage situations and rescues, no details of pending rescue operations should be given or broadcast regarding methods or personnel.
- Respect should be shown to the dead and no gory visuals should be shown on TV.
- Reporters should refrain from being in live, direct contact with victims, security forces, technical personnel or perpetrators.
- Networks should refrain from continuous/ unnecessary broadcast of archival footage that may agitate the viewers. (If any such footage is shown, it should clearly indicate 'file', with date and time.)

Self-regulation by an autonomous body — though not always foolproof, has a strong influence on most newsrooms. The threat of excommunication by one's own fraternity is often a far greater control than any government attempts to censure journalists. The National Broadcasters Association (NBA) also tries to ensure that the line between national interest and political interests stays clear. In 2015, the BJP led government sent notices to three channels for their coverage of the hanging of Yakub Memon⁷ — the

brother of one of the masterminds of the serial Mumbai blasts of 1993. In another case, the government cited national security and tried to ban NDTV India⁸ for a day over its coverage of the attacks on the Indian Air Force base in Pathankot in January 2016 where the government alleges that ‘sensitive information’ about the vicinity of the air base was reported. In both cases, given a history of adversarial relations between the networks in question and the party running government, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting show cause notices did not hold up to NBA scrutiny.⁹ While media houses responded to all notices, the ban on NDTV India for Pathankot coverage has been held in abeyance with the possibility it can be invoked at any time.

For the most part, however, evidence now indicates that private broadcast news media in India have complied with crisis reportage guidelines since they were put in place. Whether or not the government evolved better security strategies and developed SOPs for communications in crisis, the media has learned from past mistakes and experience. When they were announced, senior ministers welcomed the NBA’s guidelines as a “step in the right direction”, and accepted that both the government and the media had lessons to learn from the handling of the Mumbai attacks. In the decade gone by since 26/11, reportage of riots and terror strikes, including those on the Indian Air Base in Pathankot and an army camp in Uri in Jammu and Kashmir, has broadly indicated this commitment. The case is similar for coverage of riots around the Delhi gang rape in 2012, or communal riots in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal where newsrooms have tried to exercise control over releasing potentially sensitive information.

Broadly, with a few minor exceptions, networks do display restraint in terms of live visuals and news updates from reporters on the field. The bigger challenge today, however, is news studio debates with ideological anchors and the rapid spread of social media to create echo chambers of hate based on religion or political persuasion. While social media can, and has been a significant force multiplier to mobilise people and/or public opinion in the shaping of national debates, globally law enforcement and intelligence agencies are dealing with its grave potential for incitement and radicalisation. With different national laws governing different platforms, and very little self-regulation possible, Indian agencies are at a loss when it comes to tackling this new challenge. For the moment, their immediate response is to shut off mobile internet facilities when violence erupts. As in

the past, this response too is far from optimal. And the way forward indicates the same lessons of the past — the need for conversations and communication among all stakeholders — governments, mainstream media and now social media organisations — to evolve layered responses in a complex media environment. After all, in a democracy, the role of the media in shaping public opinion can neither be understated, nor underestimated. 

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The Past as Prologue

Sushant Sareen

The old saying, “soldiers are always preparing to fight the last war”, also applies to combating terrorism. Quite like armies that spend enormous amounts of time trying to understand how they could have fought the last war better, security forces often focus on terror attacks of the past to prevent them from reoccurring. But plugging breaches that caused the last spectacular terror attack is often not enough to prevent the next big strike.

History tells us that while incidents of ‘garden variety’ terrorism repeat themselves, there is almost never a repeat of ones that are more spectacular in scope and scale. This is partly because the gaps in security have been filled, and partly because a repeat incident is unlikely to have the same impact or shock value as the first attack. Except for the repeated targeting of Mumbai’s local trains, almost all the other major incidents of terrorism in India have been one-off events — the attack on Parliament, the bombing of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly, the 1993 serial bomb blasts in Mumbai, or for that matter, the 26/11 siege of Mumbai by terrorists. Therefore, conversations around preventing the “next 26/11”, or warning Pakistan against perpetrating another 26/11 are quite pointless. In all likelihood, there will not be another 26/11; but there will be other attacks that are just as horrendous and just as brazen.

After 26/11, Pakistan-based terror groups have tried to carry out audacious attacks that aimed to cause either mass casualties or grievous damage to Indian military assets—the July 2015 terror strike in Gurdaspur where bombs were placed on a railway track to blow up a train,¹ for example, or the Pathankot airbase attack in Jan 2016 in which no aircraft was damaged,² or the series of bomb blasts in 2017 on rail tracks in UP and Bihar.³ Each of these strikes, had they succeeded, would have confronted India with the same stark policy choices on how to respond as the country faced after 26/11.⁴

It is therefore imperative to address the vulnerabilities exposed by past terrorist attacks in order to prevent similar strikes in the future. For example, after 26/11, hotels heightened security protocols, coastal security

was strengthened, National Security Guard (NSG) hubs were set up to ensure quick response, and institutional and legal reforms were undertaken. However, it is more critical to anticipate and game the next big terror attack that will seek to exploit vulnerabilities that are yet to come on the radars of security agencies.

At a time when Pakistan has once again been ratcheting up jihadist violence in Jammu and Kashmir and doing everything possible to reignite the insurgency in the state, opening new fronts in mainland India by proxy terror groups to stretch the capabilities of security agencies is something India should be prepared for. Already, strenuous efforts are being made by Pakistan to revive the Khalistan movement.⁵ Even more dangerous will be Pakistani efforts to recruit Indian Muslims to the jihadist cause. Since the early 2000s, Pakistan managed to do this with the Indian Mujahideen, which was responsible for a spate of attacks before the network was demolished.⁶ However, rising social tensions and communal polarisation in India could make it much easier for Pakistani agent provocateurs to incite Indian Muslims against the Indian State.⁷

The Pakistani reason for trying to recruit Indians to fight their own state flows from the fallout of 26/11. Pakistanis have found it exceedingly difficult to live down the arrest of a Pakistani national — Ajmal Kasab — and the subsequent unveiling of their sinister plot. This is a mistake they would like to avoid in the future. Using Indians to attack India could give Pakistan much needed plausible deniability. The use of Indians as terror proxies is important not only to avoid an external backlash but also to limit the possibility of an internal blowback, something that Pakistan is familiar with. In the years since 9/11, and particularly around 2004—because of both international pressure and domestic compulsions—Pakistan tried to regain control over its own jihad factory, not only in the Tribal Areas straddling the Western border with Afghanistan but also along the Eastern border with India.

The effort, increasingly, is to keep jihadist terror organisations on a tight leash so that they serve the interests of the Pakistani state, instead of going rogue. The entire “mainstreaming” project is part of this effort.⁸ But even as jihadist groups are ostensibly sought to be demilitarised and mainstreamed for public consumption, their terror wings remain intact.⁹ Indeed, in the pre-26/11 period, terror groups operated with complete impunity and openly owned their jihadist operations (or even pre-2004, before the then Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf assured the world that he would not allow

Pakistan territory to be used as a staging ground for acts of violence against India. Today, the difference is that terror groups no longer function as openly as they once did. There is no official endorsement of these groups, public grandstanding is discouraged, media coverage of their activities is tightly controlled, if not entirely shunned, and recruitment has gone underground—there is no more of openly inviting people to jihad with phone numbers of recruiters splashed as graffiti.

The bottomline is that while Pakistan has become more discreet in using jihad, there is absolutely no sign of it dismantling the jihadist infrastructure. In the words of S. Paul Kapur, “support for militants has not simply been one among many tools of Pakistani statecraft. Rather, the use of Islamists militants has been a primary component of Pakistani grand strategy.”¹⁰ Since Pakistan cannot compete with India in the conventional military space, it seeks to balance the military equation through the instrumentality of ‘sub-conventional offensive warfare.’¹¹

Given that jihad continues to remain the central pillar of Pakistani grand strategy, and that Pakistan today exercises far greater oversight and control over jihadist organisations, the fiction of non-state actors operating on their own volition from Pakistan stands exposed. In other words, the next big terror attack in India will be decided and directed by the Pakistani state. What is more, regardless of how much Indian security agencies anticipate, prevent, prepare, pre-empt or, if it comes to that — put out an attack, it is highly likely that there will be another attack with Pakistani fingerprints all over it.

The question is: how will India respond? One option is to exercise restraint and not undertake any kinetic action — not only because of the risks of escalation that such an option entails, but also because while military response (even a limited one) will be emotionally satisfying, it will not solve the problem of terrorism. Therefore, quite like after 26/11, India will continue to use diplomatic and political tools to raise the costs for Pakistan.¹² However, former National Security Adviser, Shivshankar Menon, who defended the policy of restraint after 26/11, himself admits that “it will be virtually impossible for any government of India to make the same choice again” in the event of another spectacular attack.¹³

The response will therefore have to be multi-pronged. While diplomatic and political instruments will certainly be brought into play, India must also start using economic levers to inflict punishment on Pakistan.¹⁴ These measures

will have to be accompanied by some kind of kinetic action, not just to “assuage public sentiment”,¹⁵ but also to unsettle Pakistan by introducing an element of uncertainty and unpredictability in how India will respond to Pakistani provocation.¹⁶ One template of kinetic action is of course the ‘surgical strikes’ carried out in September 2016. But such action does not necessarily have to remain limited to cross-border punitive raids. The armed forces have worked out various options which can be exercised — options that take into consideration the possible dangers of escalation- possibly a greater threat for Pakistan than it is for India. The idea is to ensure Pakistan no longer thinks it can export terrorism to India with impunity and without consequences. 

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