

The Mumbai Bombing: Limit to tolerance, but options are limited too

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Despite the Musharraf regime's equivocation on terrorism, India will gain nothing by allowing the authors of the Mumbai blasts to disrupt the peace process with Pakistan.

THE WELL-COORDINATED terrorist attacks on commuters in Mumbai on July 11 have paved the way for the re-emergence of two facile arguments, neither of which offers a convincing way of ending this mindless, criminal violence once and for all.

In India, the blasts have led the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party and many security analysts to fault the Manmohan Singh Government for engaging in a peace process with Pakistan, whose military regime has clearly not lived up to its promise of preventing terrorist organisations from operating from its territory. These critics also find fault with the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), claiming the police have been demoralised as a result. According to this discourse, most terrorist acts are a product of Pakistan's intelligence agencies; and India is a victim because of the government's inability to take Islamabad to task and allow tough measures against those suspected of involvement in terrorism. The BJP has also sought to communalise the debate by linking the "soft on terror" charge to "vote bank politics" and the so-called "appeasement" of Muslims, ignoring the fact that people from all faiths and regions in India sought the repeal of POTA because it was used against innocent persons.

The second, equally problematic, argument revolves around the need to solve the so-called "root cause" of terrorism.

Khurshid Ahmed Kasuri, Foreign Minister of Pakistan, provided one variant of this when he suggested that the Mumbai blasts were linked to India's failure to resolve the Kashmir dispute. "I think the Mumbai incident — however tragic it may be and it is undoubtedly very tragic — underlines the need for the two countries to work together to control this environment, but they can only do so if they resolve their disputes," he told Reuters on Wednesday. His remarks drew a sharp rejoinder from India.

At a philosophical level, the idea that a lingering dispute can lead to violence is unexceptionable. Also unexceptionable would be the suggestion — though Mr. Kasuri did not make it — that the "collateral" victims of the Indian government's counter-insurgency campaign in Kashmir might feel driven to commit desperate acts of terror. But what Mr. Kasuri and other root cause-wallahs fail to appreciate is the nihilist nature of the premeditated attack on Mumbai's commuters. Like the London and Madrid bombings, and the atrocious attack on the World Trade Centre, the Mumbai bombings were a deliberate attempt to target non-combatants. The perpetrators do not feel the need to issue a

statement or broadcast a charter of demands because the motive of the attack is not the redress of a grievance or the settlement of a dispute, but the creation of one.

The motive is to provoke more violence and insecurity and reduce the space that exists for dialogue, debate, and dissent in favour of the hawkish certitudes of the security establishment.

Though there is no evidence yet, Mr. Kasuri has chosen to make the link between Mumbai and Kashmir. But what he ought to have said is that those who have taken up arms in the name of a “freedom struggle” or jihad have no right to wage war against unarmed people. Political or religious-oriented groups that claim to resist oppression have as much of a responsibility to conduct their “struggle” according to the laws of war as do the security forces. No unresolved dispute, no human rights violation can ever give an individual — even if he or she happens to be a victim of injustice — the right to blow up innocent civilians on a train or elsewhere. “Root causes” are important and should be debated and addressed but the first priority has to be good police work, forensics, and intelligence so that the perpetrators are arrested. On their part, Mr. Kasuri and his colleagues in Pakistan need to speak out against such acts of terrorism. They must not seek refuge — as they often do — in the dishonest innuendo that all terror that targets civilians is really the handiwork of *agents provocateurs* or the Indian intelligence agencies.

In the case of Pakistan, there is a responsibility not only to condemn such incidents but also to act. In January 2004, General Pervez Musharraf [promised](#) his government would not allow individuals and organisations in Pakistan to plot, finance or launch acts of terrorism against India. Since then, cross-border infiltration by armed insurgents in Kashmir is down, as indicated by official Indian figures. At the same time, the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed — though banned in Pakistan — operate under a variety of assumed names. Both groups sprang to life in the aftermath of last year’s earthquake in Kashmir and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest they continue to have links with the Pakistani military establishment.

As the Manmohan Government ponders over its options as far as engagement with Pakistan is concerned, it must ask itself two questions. First, can anything be done to get the Pakistani establishment to convert its half-hearted efforts against terrorism into a wholehearted one? And secondly, has India conceded anything in the composite dialogue that makes the country more vulnerable on the security front?

My answer is ‘no’ to both but for all their criticism of the peace process, the BJP and its supporters do not have clear-cut answers to either question.

From the mawkishness of Lahore to the hawkishness of Operation Parakram, the erstwhile Vajpayee Government tried it all. Despite the deployment of troops on full alert for 10 months and half-baked theories of “coercive diplomacy,” “surgical strikes,” and “limited war,” it became clear that there was no military solution to the problem of terrorists basing themselves in Pakistan. But if the threat of military action will not produce results, how can putting the peace process on hold or delaying a meeting of the two Foreign Secretaries do the trick? In any case, the peace process so far has been extremely positive from India’s point of view. A number of confidence-building measures have been introduced, which allows India to bypass Gen. Musharraf and the army and build a constituency for peace in Pakistan’s civil society, including its business community. And on Kashmir, the two sides

have begun to articulate a common approach that acknowledges that borders cannot be redrawn.

Based on the record so far, India has nothing to lose from this process going ahead uninterrupted. If anything, it is in Pakistan that one hears concerns about the “CBM trap” India has laid to postpone a settlement on Kashmir.

Three scenarios

This conclusion is independent of the identity of the perpetrators of the Mumbai blasts.

Broadly speaking, there are three possibilities. First, Al-Qaeda — or some organisation linked to it — which is as much at war with the Musharraf Government as it is with India. The motive would be disrupt the peace process, foment a communal backlash by giving a boost to the sangh parivar, and send a message to the world, and the U.S. in particular, that the ‘war on terror’ is far from over. Under such circumstances, surely the optimal Indian response would be to not hand the terrorists veto power over the peace process.

What if the authors of the blast turn out to be the LeT or JeM, operating in collusion with some section of the Pakistani state? If at all the government of Pakistan or one of its agencies is linked to the Mumbai blasts, this can only be because Islamabad is dissatisfied with the way the peace process is going. Perhaps the Mumbai blasts were designed to put pressure on India to make concessions on Kashmir. But the ISI must surely know that what little concessions India appears ready to make are largely the brainchild of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and are being opposed tooth and nail by the bureaucratic and security establishment. If anything, then, the Mumbai blasts make it even more difficult for the political leadership to grant concessions.

There is another point Indian policymakers should consider when assessing whether the Pakistani military establishment might have had a hand in the blasts. Pakistan claims a firewall exists between the anti-American, Al-Qaeda-linked extremists and the anti-India groups such as LeT and JeM. But the Mumbai blasts — their serial nature, the choice of public transport, their proximity to the anniversary of the London bombings — serve to strengthen the link between Kashmir and the ‘global war on terror’ as far as the international community is concerned. They can only lead to even greater pressure on Islamabad to crack down on Kashmir-linked insurgents. It is hard to see how such an outcome — which would have been perfectly predictable to the terrorists who planned the Mumbai bombings — would serve the interests of the Musharraf regime or ISI.

Even so, assuming some element of official Pakistani complicity, India really has few options as far as mounting pressure on Pakistan is concerned. If there are areas where the peace process might make the country more vulnerable — the Army would argue Siachen is one such area — an unstated go-slow might be justified. But on other fronts, the process is clearly working to India’s advantage and there is no sense in scuppering the gains.

There is a third scenario too, that the terrorists are neither Al-Qaeda nor Pakistan-backed but homegrown fanatics, whether Muslim, Hindu or of some other religious or political persuasion. But again, taking our national anger out on the composite dialogue process would be illogical.

Under all three scenarios, the most pressing task is to conduct a swift and professional

investigation. Primary reliance must be on forensics and good detective work and not on knee-jerk crackdowns and special laws. In the Parliament attack case, the police produced spectacular arrests and `confessions' with ease but the real masterminds remained undetected. Mumbai must not go the same way.

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