

Post-Discussion Thoughts on the Mumbai Terrorist Attacks: Where Do We Go from Here?

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From November 26-28, a small, well-trained group of assailants struck terror in the heart of India's financial capital, Mumbai, by killing 163 people and wounding almost 250 others at the city's two five-star hotels, largest train station, and a Jewish center, among a number of other locations.

Indian officials believe that Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), a Pakistani-based militant group, and elements of Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI are behind the attacks. LeT was in part founded by ISI to fight the Soviets toward the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Since the Soviet withdrawal, Indians have accused LeT of turning its focus towards the Indian-Pakistan conflict in Kashmir and organizing numerous attacks on New Delhi in 2000.

Despite the Pakistani civilian government's assurance that it will extend its full support in the Mumbai investigations, the attacks have resulted in a diplomatic standoff between the two countries. This comes at a time when the diplomatic relationship between India and Pakistan had been improving. There is now talk of suspension of dialogue, possible troop build-up, and an end to the five-year old cease-fire.

In the midst of this madness, on December 6, 2008, a group of Cornell graduate students from India, Pakistan, the U.S., Mexico, Costa Rica, and Nepal convened to share our thoughts on the attacks and discuss how we may respond to the larger issue of extremism and violence without resorting to the blame-game that frequently follows such incidents.

Coming from Pakistan, which is undergoing a military operation and suffers from a now permanently volatile law-and-order situation due to a recurrent series of suicide bombings, I am familiar with the anguish and frustration that follows such attacks. Why isn't the government doing anything? Who are these people committing these atrocities? Where do they come from? Who do you blame and what can you do?

At the discussion, considering the sensitivity of the issue – the historical rivalry between the two countries, the dispute over Kashmir and the hotly disputed role of Pakistan's intelligence, and the fact that none of us were strategic experts – we found it difficult to confront the problem head-on and deal with it in concrete terms. However, it was very encouraging to see that both Indians and Pakistanis largely welcomed the recently improving diplomatic ties between the two countries. This is crucial because it reveals a definite shift in priorities among both Indians and Pakistanis over the past five years.

Following the improvement of diplomatic ties with India, one could sense relief among Pakistanis – an eagerness to close the “war-with-India” chapter of our history and move forward. I am sure this holds true for Indians as well. However, talk of rogue ISI and army elements' involvement in the Mumbai attack and Pakistani reports of India's foreign intelligence agency, Research and Analysis (RAW)'s support of the insurgency in the Pakistani province Balochistan raises the troubling question of whether things have really changed at the state level at all.

Since none of us at the discussion had the expertise to address this issue, we did not attempt to. Instead we focused our attention on the question that inevitably follows such an incident – what can we do?

As future policymakers, managers, business executives, journalists, and professionals, we have to try to address the source of anger that provokes such acts in the first place. This could range from poverty to a lack of opportunity to a historical sense of injustice and victimization. Although the dynamics of terrorist attacks in these countries are significantly different (In India, violence is linked to militants in the disputed area of Kashmir, whereas in Pakistan, it is related to the Pakistan Taliban and militants that have emerged in parts of North West Frontier Province and in the tribal areas.), we agreed that in both cases, they are related to the larger question of underdevelopment and the states' failures to provide for their citizens.

One of the major reasons some madrassas¹, which in some cases impart fundamentalist teachings to students, are so popular in Pakistan is because they provide free board and lodging to poor students. Similarly, my Indian colleagues pointed out that one of the reasons Narendra Modi, the controversial chief minister of Gujrat considered by Indian media to be complicit in the massacre of over 700 Muslims in 2002, continues to be so popular is because of his development and philanthropic work. The failure of moderate forces to understand the needs of communities needs to be addressed quickly. As an MBA student at the discussion pointed out, this can be done by the corporate sector as well, which can invest further in social responsibility initiatives.

Secondly, it is important to counter the hateful rhetoric and propaganda on both ends not only during times of crisis but also in times of relative peace. Such rhetoric deepens misunderstandings between groups and succeeds in polarizing communities. Alaka Basu, a professor in Cornell's Development Sociology department, highlighted at the meeting the importance of civil society speaking out and creating a sort of counter-discourse to the rhetoric that comes from extremist organizations. In addition, I would like to stress that the counter-discourse must be extended to a wider audience. Normally, attempts to create a deeper understanding of critical issues and sentiments on both sides are confined to the urban elite. In order for the counter-discourse to have a more meaningful effect, it is important that peace-making initiatives and dialogue are encouraged among the larger public.

Lastly, we must vote and lobby. The harmful policies (both domestic and foreign) of our respective governments have led to the current security crisis. One of the primary reasons the Pakistani government initially supported the Taliban in Afghanistan was because of tense relations with India and the subsequent need to secure its western border. While our peace-making efforts will certainly not take immediate effect, it is important to at least start trying to put alternative policy preferences on the government agenda. As I mentioned earlier, we already find that a significant shift in focus and priorities among Indian and Pakistani people has occurred. It is now time for government actions and policies to start taking these new priorities into account in a more consistent and meaningful manner.

Suggested Readings

Crumley, Bruce. "Terror's Tactical Shift." TIME 29 Nov. 2008.

Robinson, Simon. "Why Pakistan Matters." TIME 3 Jan. 2008.

¹ It is important to note that the term, 'madrassa' refers to any school, religious or secular. Not all madrassas impart extremist teachings or are 'hot beds of terrorists'

Varadarajan, Siddharth. "India's Pakistan problem is Pakistan's problem too." The Hindu 3 Dec. 2008.