

Mumbai attacks: Investigation focuses on Pakistan

Following the atrocity in Bombay, the focus is now on the area fuelling the Islamist jihad.



Have weapons, will travel: Taliban fighters gather for the funeral of a comrade in Pakistan in April Photo: AFP

By Isambard Wilkinson in Peshawar

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As the body count rises, and the full horror is revealed in the accounts of traumatised survivors and the photographs of the dead strewn around Bombay's (Mumbai's) tourist venues, the investigation into the atrocity is at full pelt.

Already a disturbing theme is emerging: that two of the world's most bitter and intractable conflicts, in Afghanistan and Kashmir, could be merging into one.

According to Indian authorities, the trail of the gunmen who ran riot in the streets and hotels leads back to the wild terrain of Pakistan's tribal border areas, from where groups linked to al-Qaeda plot a global jihad.

The connection is strengthened by the fact that the terrorists singled out British and American citizens as victims for their slaughter, and by reports that the attackers included "British citizens of Pakistani origin", most probably trained in the tribal areas.

But other significant factors are in play, too. In their propaganda, the terrorists named the territorial dispute over Kashmir – for which Pakistan and India have twice gone to war – as a

cause of their actions, along with grievances over the treatment of India's Muslims by the Hindu majority.

This juxtaposition of causes is no surprise to observers of the region. India and Pakistan have long used factions within Afghanistan as proxies in their long dispute over Kashmir.

Earlier this year, US intelligence officials accused the higher echelons of the Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence organisation (ISI) of using jihadis to orchestrate a bloody terrorist attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul.

Pakistan, in turn, is suspicious of India's growing influence in Afghanistan, accusing its old foe of supplying arms and money to the Taliban, and to separatists within Pakistan itself.

There is a vicious irony here. It was Pakistan that first sponsored the Taliban, along with other terrorist groups, operating in Indian-held Kashmir. Yet now it finds itself endangered by the very groups it once supported.

Pakistan's tribal areas have become a nexus for arms and money, a playground for the world's intelligence agencies and for the jihadist groups they both combat and sponsor.

America, in particular, is fighting what is essentially an undeclared war here, one which will only increase in intensity as its attention shifts from Iraq under incoming president Barack Obama.

The tribal area, once cherished by British colonial administrators for its "fiercely independent" Pathan tribesmen, is a series of endless mountainous ramparts cut by hidden valleys and plateaus.

High, fortress-like, mud-walled compounds dot valleys that vary from arid to oases of fruit trees and fields.

Their inhabitants are often engaged in centuries-old feuds, and subsist on trade, smuggling, kidnapping and extracting the maximum price from ever-shifting political allegiances.

Yesterday, near the town of Jamrud, pick-up trucks with white Islamic pendants fluttering on their bonnets ferried posses of long-haired, heavily armed militants, along the main artery of the Khyber Pass.

They belonged to a faction of Islamic warriors fighting against the dominant Taliban chief of the area, Baitullah Mehsud.

"They are with us. At least for now," said Tariq Hayat, the Pakistani government's

representative for the Khyber area. He is a civil servant with nominally god-like powers, whose bodyguards are armed with rocket launchers.

He was there to inspect pickets he had set up to protect convoys transporting supplies to coalition forces in Afghanistan, after 12 lorries, whose cargo included four Humvees, were hijacked this month.

In the areas they control, the militants, who began their campaigns under the guise of "social reform", have enforced a regime of fear, beheading suspected informers, stoning women and committing acts of brutality against Pakistani security forces.

On a recent visit, militants attacked as journalists were being shown the compounds captured by the Pakistani army. Cobra helicopters had to lash down heavy rounds to keep them at bay.

Mr Hayat claims that most militants are "criminals", funded by India. He cites intelligence photographs he says he saw in 2005 of an Afghan leaving an Indian consulate with a large bag. Another photograph showed the man handing the same bag to Baitullah Mehsud. Conspiracy theories rule on the frontier.

The resulting chaos is not just a problem for Pakistan. "The tribal areas are an ungoverned space that make Pakistan a threat to global security," says a senior Western military intelligence official in Islamabad.

As a result, America is taking matters into its own hands. A week ago, a British al-Qaeda suspect, Rashid Rauf, was reportedly killed alongside three others in a US missile strike in North Waziristan where he sought refuge after escaping from custody.

There have been at least 20 such US missile strikes in the last three months, reflecting American impatience over militants from Pakistan fuelling the insurgency in Afghanistan.

The CIA has monitoring stations within the Pakistani tribal areas and along the eastern Afghan border, and a large network of tribal informers.

Last month the first missile strike outside of the tribal areas occurred in Bannu district, while this week tribesmen in North and South Waziristan were reported to have fired on Predator drones hovering above.

On a recent visit to Pakistan, the US central command chief, Gen David Petraeus, explained away the missile strikes, claiming that America is doing Pakistan a favour.

His words were backed by General James Conway, the head of the Marine Corps, who told the

Wall Street Journal this week; "Iraq is now a rearguard action on the part of al-Qaeda. They have changed their strategic focus not to Afghanistan but to Pakistan, because Pakistan is the closest place where you have the nexus of terrorism and nuclear weapons."

Officials say that there is a tacit understanding between the US and Pakistani militaries to allow the missile strikes. But the protests from the Pakistan People's Party, which won the recent election, are growing ever louder.

The PPP fears not just a backlash within the tribal area, but losing its hold on power in the country as a whole: most Pakistanis are broadly anti-American, and strongly opposed to violations of their sovereignty.

A map published by a Right-wing American journal recently, which depicted the region broken down into smaller ethnic states, led to widespread claims that the US wants to break Pakistan apart.

This sense of national insecurity has been heightened by a spate of kidnappings and assassinations, particularly in Peshawar, capital of the North-West Frontier province.

Two weeks ago, a senior American aid worker was shot dead along with his driver. The next day, militants kidnapped a junior Iranian diplomat after killing his police escort.

A botched American commando raid in September in South Waziristan also inflamed public opinion against Washington, and set back the government's efforts to galvanise what President Asif Zardari has tried to sell as "Pakistan's war".

The Pakistani army says that it also fears that US missile attacks will draw it into too many battles, in notoriously difficult terrain.

One Taliban commander said last week that, if there are more missile strikes, he will pull out of a peace deal with Pakistan's military that has held since 2006. "Pakistan is directly involved in aiding America to carry out these attacks," said a spokesman for Hafiz Gul Bahadur.

Despite its eagerness to keep such figures onside, Pakistan is stepping up its efforts in other areas.

Under new army chief, Ashfaq Kiyani, its forces are engaged in fierce fighting against militants in the tribal areas of Bajaur and Mohmand and the neighbouring district of Swat.

When General Kiyani was head of the ISI a year ago, he briefed foreign ambassadors on his attempts to clamp down on the rogue agents who had supported terrorists and jihadis in the

past.

But, according to American and British officials, the massacre in Bombay (Mumbai) represents a devastating setback, both to Pakistani/Indian relations and to the wider war on terror.

Barack Obama had hoped to persuade Pakistan to concentrate its gaze to the west, on Afghanistan, rather than east, on Kashmir. Instead, he may find that he – and his allies – are waging a war on two fronts.

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