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India's Failure to Face its Terror Problem

BY **SUMIT GANGULY** 11/28/08 AT 7:00 PM

Last week's tragedy in Mumbai may have finally focused world attention on India's terror problem, but the crisis is nothing new. Yet despite the enormous death toll—since 2004, nearly 4,000 people have been killed in India by terrorist violence—and the huge economic and political costs of all the recent attacks, India's government has so far displayed a remarkable sang-froid on the issue. Apart from expressing its sympathy for the victims and promising to prosecute those responsible, it has failed to forge a coherent strategy to curb the menace.

New Delhi's ineptitude has been evident in three key areas. First, Indian authorities have failed to convince the world that their country is a major victim of terror—despite statistics showing that it ranks second only to Iraq in terms of casualties. Second, they haven't made the institutional and organizational changes necessary or expended enough resources to tackle the problem on a war footing. And finally, India's government has (at least until recently) remained in denial about the fact that the terror problem has shifted, become at least partially homegrown.

Start with India's most glaring failure: its singular inability to convince the international community that it suffers from a serious terror problem. Not all the attacks over the years have been foreign-linked. But many, especially in Punjab and in Kashmir, have—and the culprit has been Pakistan. Yet New Delhi has never made an adequate case proving Islamabad's involvement to outsiders, relying instead on crude rhetoric that's convinced no one. Even now, in the wake of the Mumbai attacks, Indian leaders haven't shed much light on the copious circumstantial evidence tying the marauders to India's great nemesis. As a result, Pakistan's major supporters, especially the United States (and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom), have never brought sufficient pressure to bear on Islamabad to cut off its backing of armed radicals in India.

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New Delhi's PR failure is tied to its institutional one. The country's two main intelligence agencies, the external-oriented Research and Analysis Wing and the domestic-focused Intelligence Bureau (IB), have long been at odds. As a result, critical information on various terrorist groups has not

been shared in a routine, seamless and timely fashion. Worse still, the IB has been chronically short of operatives for years, thanks to its failure to recruit aggressively or offer suitable professional incentives to staff. It has thus been hamstrung in trying to carry out its duties. In the aftermath of a series of bomb blasts in New Delhi in September, the government did discuss creating a new national agency devoted to tackling terrorism. But little effort was made to realize this goal, thanks to bureaucratic sluggishness and the government's preoccupation with other matters.

One consequence of these failures is that Indian policymakers have been forced to work in the dark, deprived of timely threat warnings and other intelligence. Similarly, India's police forces have again and again been caught flat-footed by attacks, since they were not suitably alerted in advance. Even when crises do hit, response time has remained terribly slow. During the Mumbai attacks, for example, it took India's elite National Security Guards a full nine hours to make it to the city.

The last problem is that India has been extremely reluctant to come to terms with the fact that at least some of its terror problem is now homegrown. New Delhi has long trumpeted the claim that the country's approximately 140 million Muslims are immune to the call of jihad. There are two reasons for this insistence. At one level, India's policymakers haven't wanted to accept that, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary, Indian Muslims face substantial discrimination in many facets of everyday life. To cite but one example, Muslims constitute about 13 percent of the population but only about 3 percent of the elite Indian administrative service. Unsurprisingly, their second-class treatment has led some Muslims to lose faith in India's democratic institutions and to violently turn against the state. Yet India's current leaders have been slow to recognize this fact as well—or at least to acknowledge it out loud, for fear of alienating critical Muslim voters.

All this needs to change. In scale, brazenness and viciousness, the Mumbai attacks represented something new for India. As the fires cool, government expressions of sympathy for the victims and promises to prosecute those involved aren't going to cut it. Indian authorities need to move with dispatch on multiple fronts: improving intelligence collection, bolstering metropolitan policing and fashioning new policies designed to address the genuine grievances of the Muslim community. Failure will only invite more attacks from those who wish to tear the country apart.

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