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Counter-terrorism responses cannot be built around technology acquisition alone

The Mumbai (Bombay) attacks exposed gaping holes in India's security preparedness. Analyst Praveen Swami examines whether India has learnt its lessons.

Ever since last November's carnage in Mumbai, one image captured on closed circuit television has been etched in the memories of Indian citizens.

The image is of police officer Jillu Yadav doing battle with Kalashnikov assault rifle-equipped gunmen at the Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station, armed with nothing more than a bolt-action rifle - and a chair.

For millions of Indians, the image represented the threat that dogs everyday life in an increasingly volatile region - and the apparent inability of the state to defend them.

Late this summer, Indian television gave viewers the opportunity to watch very different images, intended to reassure the public that the government is addressing their concerns.

Flawed modernisation

Mumbai police commandos drew spanking new automatic weapons to eye-level, aiming at imaginary enemies in the distance - a visual metaphor evidently intended to signal to Indians that the government is working to make them safe.

But experts who watched the same programme saw in it a graphic illustration of all that is wrong in the ambitious police modernisation programmes underway across India.

The laser sights fitted to the police's new weapons are designed to eliminate the need to raise the weapon to eye-level before taking aim - a lesson the Mumbai police instructors had evidently neglected to tell their students.

India's security modernisation programme appears based on the false premise that counter-terrorism responses can be built around technology acquisition alone.

Funds have been made available for new weapons and mobility platforms, but there has been no parallel push towards enhancing police skill sets and institutional capabilities.

Effective training programmes and



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Effective training programmes and emergency-response protocols take years to develop, and do not have the same dramatic visibility as new weapons - evidently making them less than attractive to pressured politicians.



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In November 2008, when a 10-man Lashkar-e-Taiba assault squad attacked Mumbai, the weaknesses of the city police were brutally shown up.

Under-equipped and under-trained police officers proved unable to respond in the first few minutes and hours of the attacks - the time when most lives were lost.

Tactical errors

India's elite forces didn't do much better.

The crack National Security Guard (NSG) commandos took more than 10 hours to show up in Mumbai, and more than 72 hours to end the siege. Tactical errors cost dozens of civilians their lives.

Later, evidence emerged that India's intelligence services had good reason to believe a large-scale attack was imminent - part of it passed on by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and some harvested through communications interception by the country's external intelligence service, the Research and Analysis Wing.

However, poor interface between the city police force and the intelligence services meant that warnings were not acted on.

In any case, the Mumbai police simply lacked the capabilities to respond to the warnings, even if they had been taken seriously.

How far are these deficiencies being addressed?

In the months since, the Mumbai police have invested heavily in new weapons - among them, M4 assault rifles and 107 50-calibre anti-material weapons. It has also purchased amphibious platforms to patrol the city coastline and armoured vehicles which will facilitate operations under fire.



Policemen in India are badly under-equipped

For its part, the National Security Guard has set up regional centres to cut its reaction time to crisis.

New skill-enhancement programmes are being initiated for its personnel.

Many police forces elsewhere in the country are also engaged in similar modernisation programmes.

In many states, the Indian navy, coastguard and police are working together to set up marine police stations, in the hope that they will help secure India's coastline against future attacks.

But the larger problem underpinning the modernisation process is this: the infrastructure does not exist to make the technology acquisitions meaningful.

Shortage of instructors

The Mumbai police, like most Indian forces, do not even have an adequately-equipped modern firing range where they can rehearse complex urban combat scenarios.

Like other police forces in the country, the Mumbai police are crippled by a desperate shortage of qualified special weapons and tactics instructors, making do instead with personnel trained by the Indian army - who possess skills quite different from those needed for urban counter-terrorism.

Learning to use the new weapons is another area of concern.

Police officers across the world must regularly obtain re-qualification in marksmanship; nowhere in India is there a certification authority.

NSG officers say their own expansion programme is also less than perfect. The force draws much of its cutting-edge officer component from the Indian army.

The army, which itself faces a

significant officer shortage, has been reluctant to release officers from its special forces to serve with the counter-terrorism organisation.

As a result, the NSG's new units are thinly-led - a deficiency which could cripple its operations during a real crisis.

Many independent experts believe

the NSG's military culture, which is relatively tolerant of collateral damage, also militates against the special mindset needed for counter-terrorism operations in urban environments.

India's coastal defence programme is also beset by capability issues.

New police stations have been set up, and boats purchased - but there is a crippling shortage of personnel who know how to operate them.

Perhaps most worrying is the fact that no-one seems interested in actually putting India's newly-acquired police capabilities to the test.



India's crack commandos took more than 10 hours to show up in Mumbai

Police forces across the world have studied the Mumbai attacks with care, and carried out exercises to test their responses if a similar attack confronts them.

In July, Singapore staged Operation North Star VII, in which more than 2,000 participants from 15 government agencies and the media participated in simulated attacks on hotels, malls and an underground train station.

New York Police Department officials visited Mumbai days after the attacks to study the assault sites, and draw lessons. By December 5, 2008, the New York police had carried out a tactical drill from Emergency Service Unit officers and a tabletop exercise for commanders based on the Mumbai scenario.

Among the lessons drawn was that Mumbai-type attacks would stretch the force's special units to breaking point.

What to do now?

Heavy weapons training was therefore provided to officers in the force's Organized Crime Control Bureau, who were prepared to play a supplementary role during a crisis. Heavy weapons training has now been made a routine part of police academy training.

Worryingly, police forces across India have proved reluctant to learn from their own experiences, let alone those of others.

Barring two states, none have sent officers to study the Mumbai crisis.

There has been no systematic national study of the tactical errors at the higher-command levels of the Mumbai police, which led to chaos in the force's ground-level response to the crisis.

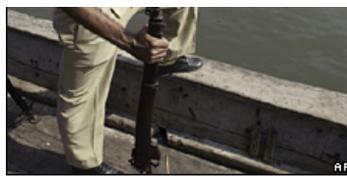
Not one city has conducted a rehearsal involving major government institutions - like the fire and ambulance services - to test its preparedness for an attack.

Even Delhi, which will host the Commonwealth Games next year, has proved remarkably sanguine in its attitudes.



What now needs to be done?

India desperately needs a national counter-terrorism policing centre, which can produce the instructors that state forces will need to make their technology acquisitions of real value.



Coastal security is a big concern

Many state-level police academies still follow curricula rooted in the colonial period, which do little to prepare their students for the challenges of real-world policing.

Not one state has a special weapons and tactics training institute which meets international standards. A national academy will also help generate protocols and standard operating procedures which can then be implemented across the country.

Clearly, had constable Jillu Yadav, the hero of the attack on the Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus, been equipped with an assault rifle, without proper training it is entirely possible there would have been more fatalities last year - not fewer.

Praveen Swami is a Delhi-based journalist with The Hindu newspaper and a leading Indian security analyst.

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