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## CIA chief's visit to India to institutionalize intel cooperation

April 04, 2009 04:07 IST

The decision by the new Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Leon Panetta who chose India for his first overseas trip-- unprecedented in the annals of the spy agency's history-- was deliberate and intended to sustain the momentum and institutionalize the unprecedented intelligence cooperation between Washington and New Delhi that began in the aftermath of the horrific 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, say intelligence officials.

Panetta visited India from March 18 to 20 even before he went over to Pakistan and met with Home Minister P Chidambaram, National Security Adviser M K Narayanan and the new heads of the Research & Analysis Wing and the Intelligence Bureau K C Verma and Rajiv Mathur respectively.

The intelligence officials told *rediff.com* that preceding the Mumbai terror attacks, although there had been some cooperation and sharing of intelligence between the US and India, "on an operational level, the level of cooperation of the intelligence services on both sides were far from satisfactory."

"Neither side, for whatever reasons, were prepared to take the kinds of steps that you see for instance routinely between the United States and Britain or the United States and Japan, or even between the US and Jordan," these officials acknowledged. "And, of course there were all these mutual suspicions."

But, the officials explained how "all this changed after Mumbai and things went to a different level. There was a level of operational confidence and cooperation that occurred after Mumbai that anything that had taken place previously."

Thus, according to the officials, "The DCI (Director of Central Intelligence) by going to India first wanted to clearly convey a message (that the US was looking towards operational cooperation with India) and to reaffirm his support for that improvement in cooperation."

In the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks, it was reported in The Washington Post that the CIA had "orchestrated back-channel intelligence exchanges between India and Pakistan," allowing both countries to "quietly share highly sensitive evidence while the Americans served as neutral arbiters."

The report said that the exchanges, "gradually helped the two sides overcome mutual suspicions and paved the way for Islamabad's announcement," in early February that the conspiracy and planning of the attack had been launched in Pakistan.

But the intelligence officials told *rediff.com* that it was not so much the sharing of information by Pakistani intelligence, as it was the FBI and CIA confronting Pakistani with irrefutable communication intercepts and physical evidence that these agencies had collected on its own as well as in concert with Indian intelligence that forced Islamabad to acknowledge that some of the planning had occurred on Pakistani soil because it was faced with a fait accompli.

Former CIA analyst Lisa Curtis, currently a senior fellow with the conservative Heritage Foundation, who heads up the think tank's South Asia Program, who has consistently urged for closer intelligence cooperation between the US and India, said she was extremely pleased that Panetta had made India his first stop and argued that it signaled something that went beyond mere symbolism and clear indication a desire by the US to institutionalize and operationalize this intelligence relationship.

Just two days after the Mumbai terror attacks, Curtis lamented in a report titled "India Terror Attacks Point to Need for Stronger US-India Counterterrorism Cooperation," that "despite their agreement on the need to aggressively contain terrorist threats, Washington and New Delhi have failed in the past to work as closely as they could to minimize terrorist threats." She wrote that "this failure is largely the result of divergent geo-strategic perceptions, Indian reticence to deepen the intelligence relationship, and US bureaucratic resistance toward elevating counterterrorism cooperation beyond a certain level." But Curtis argued in her paper that "the gravity of the threat posed to both countries from terrorists in the region require New Delhi and Washington to overcome past suspicions and recognize that they both stand to gain considerably from stepping up their cooperation."

In an interview with *rediff.com*, Curtis hailing Panetta's decision to visit India first and signal the Obama Administration's desire to institutionalize and operationalize US-India intelligence cooperation, said US officials had told her that "the attacks in Mumbai has shaken loose some of these mistrust issues and bureaucratic obstacles and have led to a really fulsome dialogue and actual cooperation."

"The DCI's visit shows the importance that the US now attaches to its relationship with India, more broadly but specifically in the area of counterterrorism. And, it also shows how concerned the US is about the situation in Pakistan and hence its desire to have a more robust dialogue with India," she said, and added, "because India would be the most impacted by events spiraling downward in Pakistan."

Curtis said, "Also, it comes out of practical issues, which is that the greatest concern in terms of US security lies in South Asia, and particularly in Pakistan, and thus the need to consult mostly with India on these concerns and after Mumbai, a desire to support India in its counterterrorism efforts, but also to share lessons learned and to share US' own lessons learned from the 9/11 attacks and to create a more productive relationship with India."

"So, this is really the driver behind his (Panetta) making India his first visit," she said.

Curtis said that in the past several years, despite the progress on the US-India civilian nuclear deal, "which was a major breakthrough in establishing trust on the nuclear issue specifically, what I saw was that we hadn't really made the counterterrorism relationship all that it could be."

"We really had failed to establish the kind of trust in tactical and strategic cooperation in this area, despite the fact that we have the same concerns and the urgency of our concerns, at the same level," she said. "We had failed to exploit the opportunities that are available and to deal with the issue and commensurate to the level of urgency both countries have in seeing the terrorist threat dealt with."

She acknowledged that much of it was also fueled by Indian paranoia over the CIA's ties with the ISI that had been formed in the wake of the erstwhile Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, and New Delhi perhaps felt that intelligence sharing or even close cooperation with the CIA could lead to leaks to the ISI.

Even events over the past few years like India being convinced that it was the CIA who ferreted out a senior RAW official, who had been a US agent and transplanted him in the US as well as other such incidents with lower ranked Indian intelligence operatives had further compounded New Delhi's concerns over close links let alone cooperation with the CIA.

"Certainly that contributed to the distrust between our two governments," Curtis agreed. "But events over the summer, particularly following the bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul and the fact that the US shared information with Indian intelligence even before the attack warning that they had picked up information that something was coming up even though unfortunately there wasn't enough information to prevent it," had led to the developing of trust between the CIA and Indian intelligence.

What catalyzed this even more, she said was the US acknowledgement that "there was an ISI connection to this bombing--although it was not clear at what level also contributed to India's recognizing that the US was now much more aware and recognized that there is

still a problem within the ISI and its connection to extremism."

Moreso, that Washington was now "more willing to call a spade a spade and recognize that even publicly. So, all this helped to inspire some confidence within India that the US was looking more realistically at the challenge in Pakistan."

Other intelligence officials also told rediff.com that there was also a vested interest behind the CIA's efforts to both solidify and operationalize its intelligence cooperation with India in that its links and trust of the ISI "has eroded to a extent," in the wake of some high value al Qaeda targets escaping just before US attacks that had led to US intelligence being convinced that they had been tipped off by some elements within the ISI.

These officials said that Panetta who had visited Pakistan after his visit to India to meet with senior Pakistani military and intelligence officials was intent on restoring this trust and confidence "and ultimately the best case scenario is for US, Pakistani and Indian intelligence to work cooperatively together to combat the common threat of terrorism in the region."

Aziz Haniffa in Washington, DC