

# Mumbai attack: US, western pressure worked

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NEW DELHI: Why did Pakistan do a volteface on the Mumbai attacks? After flinging around disinformation for the past few weeks, tossing names from Austria to UK, US and Bangladesh, what possessed the government of Asif Ali Zardari to tread the straight and narrow?

It's easy to detect the hand of US and western pressure, particularly as it came a day after US special envoy Richard Holbrooke exited Islamabad. Even if Mumbai was not discussed with Holbrooke, as Pakistani foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi insisted, a phone call from US President Barack Obama to Zardari on Wednesday had an entirely different effect.

According to sources, Pakistan's admission had a lot to do with its precarious finances and a threat of aid cut-off by the US which is trying to undercut its dependence on Islamabad for the success of the fight against Taliban.

Former high commissioner to Pakistan G Parthasarathy said, "Pakistan's acknowledgement of reality was brought about by relentless US pressure despite lack of concrete Indian action."

A Pakistani denial would not have held any credibility but this is not the end. India would still maintain pressure because, going by experience, it suspects that there must be a catch. Pakistan, said sources, could spin this out for many more months before reverting to its bad old ways after international attention is diverted. India is unlikely to get much satisfaction from Pakistan on this score.

India's response has to be calculated as well. India would have seemed churlish if it had continued to sulk after Pakistan's admission on Thursday. By terming the development "positive", the government has the opportunity to claim some kind of victory. It's the first time in almost 20 years that Pakistan has admitted to its citizens planning and executing terrorist acts against India.

But officials here believe that Pakistan's admission could also be intended to confine the terror tag to 'men' associated with LeT, but not let it get further to touch either the leadership of Lashkar, leave alone official agencies who support this terrorism. India will also have to guard against making the Mumbai case only a legal one of targeting the perpetrators of this attack, but remaining silent on the larger issue of Pakistan's support to terrorism, keeping the infrastructure of terror intact.

India's basic scepticism is evident because there is a question of the Pakistani government leveraging this admission for more US concessions, which Indian officials argue, will ultimately weaken the campaign against terrorism.

India's response will be conditioned by these realities. India will also continue to insist that Pakistan serves up these suspects to the US for trial, but not in Pakistan. For a country that has outsourced the investigation of Benazir Bhutto's assassination to the UN, its judicial system doesn't fill India with confidence. Certainly not after the release of A Q Khan last week. India suspects that the cases filed against the perpetrators in Pakistan would keep them inside Pakistani protective custody for years, while the case continues and the issue diminishes in importance.

Still, the importance of Pakistan's move cannot be overestimated.

This is the same government that sacked its national security adviser Mahmud Durrani for admitting Amir Ajmal Kasab was a Pakistani.

On Tuesday, the Pakistani defence committee of cabinet squashed any hopes of giving a response to the dossier to India, by issuing a statement that the information from India was "insufficient" and they would revert with more questions. This was preceded by days of studied leaks from "government officials" who gave teaser-trailers about the dossier, designed to infuriate India.

The Indian government looked on helplessly as Pakistan took several tactical steps back from its initial response — of arresting Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi and Zarar Shah. Thursday's admission may seem like progress, but actually, the story is back to where it started -- with arrests and the promise of prosecution of some of the planners and conspirators.

But to observers in India, it seems significant that the denials came from PM Yousuf Gilani's office while the admissions have come from Zardari's office. The simmering disaffection between Gilani and Zardari and the prevailing atmosphere of infighting within the Pakistani establishment could also be playing out in the Pakistani response. It is significant that the FIA is a civilian agency, while the ISI which is holding Lakhvi and Shah in 'protective custody' is a military outfit. Indian officials say that ISI has denied FIA access to the two masterminds. This could have impact in the coming days on Pakistan's future responses.

It's also not clear whether Zardari has the army and ISI's backing for this response, or whether he faces isolation and popular opprobrium after the admission. How politicians like Nawaz Sharif exploit the current situation in Pakistan and what kind of popular pressure will be brought by the impending long march by Iftikhar Chaudhry will determine the kind of internal pressure within the Pakistani system and its effect on the next steps in this investigation.