

# INDIA, PAKISTAN, KASHMIR: A post-July 11, 2006 analysis

10 August 2006

## Key Judgements:

- The deterioration in Indo-Pak relations following bomb attacks in Mumbai on July 11 marked a very public but temporary low point from which the situation has largely returned to previous levels of diplomatic engagement: Delhi clearly realises that engagement with Pakistan is more advantageous in promoting South Asian stability than hostile standoff
- The issue of Kashmir must be resolved
- Nuclear war between India and Pakistan remains unlikely, however India's patience with Pakistani militants is not infinite: future escalations of conventional conflict in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Indian territory outside Kashmir cannot be ruled out
- Entrenched mistrust continues to inform political opinion in South Asia and drives predictable knee-jerk accusatory reactions in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in India
- Maharashtra – the heartland of Hindu nationalism – and Gujarat remain India's most tense states, both with large Muslim populations
- The movement of displaced militants from Pakistan to Bangladesh and Nepal should be monitored

You might be forgiven for forgetting that on July 11, 7 bombs exploded on busy commuter trains in Mumbai, killing nearly 200 people. Events in Lebanon have dominated the headlines since July 12: India's tragedy has been left largely ignored by the international community. Predictably, accusing eyes in India turned towards Pakistan and allegations of involvement, stifled at official levels in the immediate aftermath, became increasingly outspoken as the days passed. Talks scheduled as part of the fragile peace process between the nuclear-armed neighbours were postponed indefinitely. High-level Indian officials indicated the existence of overwhelming cumulative evidence of a Pakistani 'hand' in the attacks. With tension between South Asia's dominant neighbours running high, at any other time the international community's nerves would have been stretched.

Pakistani Islamist Kashmiri rebel group, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), emerged as the primary suspect. The group maintains a known capability to launch attacks on Indian soil outside of Kashmir and a declared desire to witness the demise of a Hindu India. A lesser known organisation, Lashkar-e-Qahar – widely believed to be a front organisation for LeT – later claimed responsibility. The attacks inevitably presaged a marked deterioration in Indo-Pak relations, underpinned by entrenched mistrust and a persistent failure to make real progress in resolving the issue of Kashmir.

South Asian security has experienced a tremor of instability. However, whilst the immediate impact of the Mumbai attacks was ultimately short-term in both diplomatic and economic terms, the pressing strategic concerns highlighted by the attacks must not go unnoticed. They are critically important in the broader context of sub-continental stability.



The seven explosions themselves took place during Mumbai's evening rush hour, the timed devices detonating within minutes of each other. They had been hidden in bags placed on the overhead luggage racks of first class train carriages, carriages that are commonly occupied by the city's Hindus – generally more wealthy than their Muslim counterparts. The exact death toll remains unclear: reports are of fatalities between 180 and 190, with in excess of 700 injured. In the aftermath, Indian police carried out a number of raids across Maharashtra in which

the Muslim dominated slums of Mumbai were a focal point. Hundreds of suspects were detained, but only four men formally arrested. One of these men is Abdul Karim Tunda, arrested in Kenya; Tunda is a suspected member of LeT. However, little information has been made public and the investigation continues to move slowly.

The LeT has denied responsibility. This is unsurprising; an open admission would have forced Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to take direct and public action against them in a display of commitment to fighting global terrorism. In contrast, moves to prove this commitment in the aftermath of the bombings involved the handing over of a number of Taliban suspects to Afghanistan, from where President Hamid Karzai's criticisms of Pakistani support for the Afghan insurgency have been outspoken in past months. President Musharraf has not handed over Syed Salahuddin, leader of Kashmiri rebel group Hizbul Mujahideen, or India's most wanted man, criminal gang leader, Dawood Ibrahim. Both men, believed to be resident in Pakistan, were requested by Delhi but their extradition remains a complex issue both legally and politically.

The difficulty of undertaking truly effective measures to dismantle Pakistan's terrorist groups is complicated by the fact that they have received covert funding and support from Islamabad in order to fight Indian rule in Kashmir. This has largely come through the ISI, Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence Agency. The LeT's ongoing involvement in reconstruction, rehabilitation and aid distribution in Kashmir following the earthquake on October 8, 2005 further discourages real moves by Islamabad to weaken the groups' activities there – despite reports indicating their humanitarian work is closely related to recruitment. Recently, Muslim clerics in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province have called for all female aid workers to be pulled out of earthquake affected areas by the end of the month. The disgruntled preachers in Manshera town, where a number of relief agencies are based, cite improper dressing, mixing with men and the consumption of alcohol – all officially banned in Pakistan – as reasons. LeT officials in the region support the allegations. The growing entrenchment of the group is clear.

## Mumbai

India's commercial hub, Mumbai is a city of dynamism and vibrant business activity. It commonly represents the face of a thriving, globalising India. Alongside Delhi, the country's political capital, Mumbai is a natural target for terrorism. The daily mass movement of commuters across the city – with a population in excess of twelve million – on overstressed transport networks ensures multiple opportunities for strikes against soft targets where high numbers of casualties are guaranteed. By some estimates, half of Mumbai's population travels each day from remote suburbs to central offices, banks, mills and factories. 40% of India's taxes are generated in Mumbai alone: some 5% of national GDP.

On March 12, 1993, Mumbai's economic centre was targeted in the largest attack the city has yet seen. 257 were killed and over 700 wounded in a series of explosions at the stock exchange and throughout the city. Mumbai's potent and active criminal underworld was held responsible with Dawood Ibrahim suspected of masterminding the attacks. In August 2003, 52 were killed and 150 wounded when two almost simultaneous car bombs planted in taxis detonated – one in a busy jewellery market, the other at the Gateway of India, the city's main tourist attraction. Four men and a woman were charged in June 2004 under India's Prevention of Terrorism Act with conspiring to explode not only the car bombs, but an earlier bus bomb in July 2003. They are suspected of working for LeT, an allegation they deny. At the time of the attacks, religious tensions ran high, exacerbated by arguments over a disputed religious location at Ayodhya: a report had recently been released favouring Hindu claims to the site.

Importantly, Mumbai also resides at the centre of Hindu nationalist sentiment in India, with the state of Maharashtra representing the stronghold of the Shiv Sena (SS). The opportunity to strike the heartland of this right-wing Hindu nationalist party, sometimes described as a quasi-fascist organisation with its long history of violent protest and extortion, is clearly attractive to Islamic extremists. Provoking a reaction here to exacerbate volatile religious tensions, undermining the moderate stance of a secular administration is an

obviously conceivable aim of an attack in Mumbai. Although operational only at a state level and without national representation, the SS is affiliated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Having ruled Maharashtra together, the SS-BJP coalition lost control in the 2004 state assembly election. However, despite suffering losses in Mumbai, the SS has gained ground in interior parts of the state.

### Kashmir

The Indian government's carefully cultivated moderate stance towards Pakistan suffered an inevitable loss of public support in the wake of the Mumbai attacks. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh faced pressure from Hindu nationalist opposition parties, frequently outspoken groups with their own violent elements. The hardening of Delhi's attitude towards pursuing a peace process with a government felt to be not simply unable but, critically, unwilling to effectively fight terrorism known to emanate from within its borders reflected this pressure. An initial reluctance to openly draw a firm link to Pakistan was replaced by assertions of overwhelming amounts of cumulative evidence supporting the association. Islamabad denied all accusations, but Delhi postponed peace talks without scheduling a date for their resumption, signalling a determination to take an unyielding approach towards Pakistan while emotions ran high following the attacks.

However, this attitude, initially a public necessity has, as expected, proved to be unsustainable in closeted diplomatic corridors. For all his faults, President Musharraf remains a moderate when it comes to Kashmir: beneath the rhetoric, Delhi has maintained an awareness that continuing engagement with him remains the best option yet for resolving the issue.

Musharraf has floated a number of constructive suggestions for strategies to relieve the dispute. In comparison, despite Prime Minister Singh's temperate attitude towards Islamabad, Delhi has given very little ground and has failed to come up with any solution that Islamabad might begin to find palatable. The impasse rests on India's refusal to cede any territory or sovereignty within Kashmir: it wants the present Line of Control to become an international, permanent border. Pakistan does not. India's share of land represents not

only the more wealthy part of the divided state, but a part where Muslim Kashmiris now outnumber Hindus – a result of Hindu migration in the face of Islamist terror. The large majority of those separatists among them are peaceful; but any Indian efforts at diplomacy without real moves towards negotiating a just resolution of the Kashmir issue will not even appease them, let alone the violent *jihadists* involved. Indian Kashmir's demography continues to underpin Delhi's reluctance to internationalise the conflict: an internationalisation that could result in calls for a referendum in which the outcome may well not be to India's favour.

Despite President Musharraf's failure to rein in militants – either genuine or the desired outcome of dealing in peace with one hand whilst directly or indirectly facilitating terror with the other – neither Islamabad nor Delhi will benefit from his untimely demise. Numerous assassination attempts are testament to the determination of those who wish to remove him, yet it is difficult to know what might come after the president should one of these prove to be successful. The distinct possibility remains that the situation could be a lot worse than what currently prevails, however flawed that may be. Under President Musharraf, recognised as a moderate on both sides of the border, far more progress has been made with India than under any other Pakistani president, furthermore, recourse to nuclear confrontation with him in power is remote. In contrast, a post Musharraf administration led by a dangerously ambitious coalition of mid and low ranking military personnel, and a more potent, less restrained Islamist force, might not show the same self-control. However, even as Delhi recognises the need for a Musharraf led dialogue to continue, its commitment to the peace process sometimes remains difficult to judge. There have been suggestions that Delhi was unprepared for contact on July 20, using the Mumbai bombings as a convenient pretext for delaying the talks.

Whilst those looking for somewhere to lay the blame do so at Pakistan's door, where the president's real control over Islamist militants remains uncertain, it is unlikely that the '*jihad* factory next door' is wholly to blame. Islamist extremism also resides deep within India where a critical disconnect between Muslim Indians and their national homeland persists even in the younger generation. Local support for

terrorist attacks would not be hard to muster. The Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) is suspected of operating with LeT in the past and the involvement of local elements with outside support is a distinct possibility in the Mumbai attacks. This reflects the ability of indigenous units to access a global network which provides the aid, operational linkages and technical expertise needed to allow them to become involved in launching attacks.

### A Waiting Game

India's response to the Mumbai attacks, slow in coming at an official level, was predictable; but notable was Delhi's adoption of a far more cautious tone than in the past. Prime Minister Singh remained careful not to speak of cross border terrorist infiltration for three days after the attack, and in the immediate aftermath there were no troop deployments and no forward movements along the border. This is in stark contrast to the situation following attacks against the Indian parliament in 2001 – for which the LeT is held responsible – where all out war between India and Pakistan loomed dangerously close.

However, while the world continues to focus its attention elsewhere, India will be looking for some clear evidence from Islamabad that President Musharraf is doing as much as he can to clamp down on the terrorist networks believed to have propagated the violence through whatever channels. Delhi's patience is not infinite. Neither is Prime Minister's Singh's ability to maintain a moderate attitude towards Pakistan in the wake of such painful events. Despite its reluctance to internationalise the Kashmir issue, India faces a terrorist threat similar to that in London, Madrid and elsewhere – and Delhi is considerably closer. On the other hand, President Musharraf is unable to continue to take the creative lead in solving the Kashmir dispute without seeing some positive moves from Delhi to match his commitment. Both sides are unyielding; both will need to find generosity and honesty in their diplomacy if real substance is to be expected from future peace talks.

It is undoubtedly the issue of Kashmir that underlies the current standoff. Islamist activity in Indian territory has intensified as the peace process has progressed. The day before the

Mumbai bombings, a series of grenade attacks were launched in the summer capital, Srinagar. Connections between these and Mumbai remain unproven, but London's *Financial Times* reported intelligence sources suggestive of an association. The attacks are clearly disparate in terms of tactics and levels of sophistication, but speculation over linkages inevitably increases pressure on Prime Minister Singh not to give ground – literally and metaphorically – in Kashmiri peace negotiations until Pakistan does more to rein in militants.

Neither leader wishes to see a return to the border skirmishing that has defined the Indo-Pak relationship in the past – especially given the hard work poured into diplomacy over recent years. Encouragement this time can be drawn from the absence of an escalation in conventional conflict in Kashmir and aggressive troop mobilisations along the border following the Mumbai bombings. Prudence has prevailed and a return to previous levels of diplomatic engagement indicates Delhi's awareness that engagement with Islamabad remains the best prospect for promoting South Asian stability than hostile standoff.

However, both President Musharraf and Prime Minister Singh appear to be playing a waiting game. Neither can afford to stall indefinitely: Delhi must do more to improve the situation in Kashmir, itself a powerful strategy in undermining Kashmiri *jihadists*; and Islamabad must prove its determination to effectively confront the terrorist networks it harbours. The effectiveness of such measures may be discernable in the movement of militants to Nepal and Bangladesh, where Islamist extremism has become an increasing worry in the latter.

It may not be the case that the conflict averted this time will not materialise in future. Until genuine moves are made on both sides there will be little progress. The Mumbai bombings are a tragic reminder that once again reiterate the fact that the issue of Kashmir must be resolved.

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