



Mumbai Terror Attacks: Revisiting the U.S.-Pakistan-India Triangle by Sourabh Gupta

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As Islamabad's shadowy linkages to the gruesome terror attacks in Mumbai come under the scanner and as calls for reprisals range the spectrum from covert operations to an internationally supervised disbanding of the Pakistan-based *jihadi* infrastructure, the history of previous episodes of Indo-Pakistani tension – and ensuing U.S.-engineered, stopgap palliatives – bears revisiting. Looming steadily behind all remains the unresolved final status of the decades-old Kashmir dispute.

In the spring of 1990, under the shadow of a raging Kashmiri insurgency, backed in part by Islamabad-aided infiltration, and a military buildup and veiled nuclear ultimatum following Pakistan's largest ever peace-time military exercises, then-deputy national security advisor Robert Gates arrived hastily on the subcontinent to ease tensions. Following Gates' shuttle diplomacy and reported communication to New Delhi of a Pakistani promise to clamp down on its terrorist training infrastructure, the tension abated with India withdrawing its military forces and proposing a package of border-related confidence building measures (CBMs). The insurgency in Kashmir and its cross-border nourishment would only scale greater heights in the months and years ahead, however.

On Dec. 13, 2001, two months after a similarly brazen attack on the Kashmir state assembly building that had taken 26 lives, five heavily armed Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)-linked militants attacked India's Parliament building. Following an ensuing months-long, million-soldier standoff on their international border which seemed at times to descend into outright war, tensions were finally eased when – communicating once again through U.S. interlocutors – Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage relayed to New Delhi a Pakistani commitment *to the U.S.* to permanently end cross-border infiltration.

Not until two years hence however, when Prime Minister Vajpayee was to independently initiate a peace process and – in exchange for specific bilateral discussions on Kashmir – elicit a direct, written undertaking from Islamabad to desist from state support for cross-border terrorism, did externally aided violence in Kashmir subside by any significant measure.

As high-level Western officials descend yet again on the subcontinent in fire-fighting mode in the wake of another LeT-manufactured tragedy – this time in Mumbai – common threads intertwining the previous episodes of terror and tension are not hard to discern.

First, even as the region has stumbled progressively from ill-tempered diplomacy and limited war to the possibility of a broader conventional war and possible use of a nuclear weapon, Western intervention has remained narrowly directed toward averting the immediate possibility of an inadvertent escalation to war. Addressing the structural roots of the subcontinent's recidivist ways has been notably absent.

Second, even as senior U.S. interlocutors have successively prised ever more supposedly solemn commitments from Islamabad to clamp down on its India-directed infrastructure of terror, these have mostly been false assurances subsequently passed on to New Delhi. Notwithstanding a few half-hearted investigative raids, arrests, and detentions, only autonomous Indian engagement of Pakistan in a dedicated bilateral diplomatic mechanism has served to stanch this pipeline of terror.

Third, even as the terror attacks have expanded, both in terms of geographic reach and brazenness, the central cast of characters and fundamental grievance have remained unchanged. While LeT's long-term goal remains the quixotic struggle to fasten Muslim rule upon a reimagined undivided India, its near-term mobilization, training, infiltration, and liberation-related goals remain Kashmir-focused. While manipulatively preying on a fierce grievance within emerging pockets of India's Muslim community, the group's outlook continues to be colored by the formative memory of Partition-era massacres etched in the consciousness of the group's founder, Hafiz Sayeed.

Finally, notwithstanding the intrusive external demands on the Pakistani-state, LeT's now-banned parent organization (Jama'at-ud Dawa – JuD) continues to remain a valued constituent within Islamabad's shadowy "army-ISI-Jihadi" complex. Belonging to an Islamic school of jurisprudence that advocates revivalism, not rebellion, against the state and possessing an extensive grassroot organizational strength within Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, JuD remains an entity unique even among its radicalized peers that draw their foot-soldiers from predominantly rural and Sunni-dominated Pakistani Punjab.

Rarely a direct security risk to the Pakistani state (unlike their more Talibanized tribal/frontier territories-based counterparts) and serving as a valuable instrument of state for pursuing domestic sectarian cleansing, *ad hoc* detention rather than dismantlement and elimination of JuD will likely remain Pakistan's mode of punishment – even in the aftermath of Mumbai.

Constraints, dilemmas and ... Kashmir

Cumulatively, then, as a pattern of constraints and dilemmas have settled within the U.S.-Pakistan-India triangular relationship, the predicament at New Delhi's end is

the most searching: able to inflict diplomatic punishment but not extract Pakistani compliance with its political demands, it is likewise unable to induce or influence its ally, the U.S., to impose credible sanctions on Islamabad. Neither a request for a Iran/North Korea-style denial of economic privileges, designation of Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism, nor support within the Security Council for an intrusive mechanism for verifying implementation of the recent U.N. Sanctions Committee decision against *jihadi* groups in Pakistan is likely to pass muster at the American end.

Indeed to the extent that Pakistan, geopolitically, remains a frontline state in the war on terror and within the larger purposes of U. S. foreign policy goals, as was the case during the early-Cold War containment system, New Delhi's scope to parley a demand for "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" of Pakistan's infrastructure of terror is likely to remain short-changed. And indeed on the singular occasion when New Delhi did manage to impose its military and political will on Islamabad and coercively obtain crucial concessions on the status of Kashmir (1971-72), U.S.-India relations were at a historical low.

U.S. influence remains, hence, both an indispensable factor for subcontinental calm and a limiting factor to New Delhi's pursuit of credible means of strategic coercion vis-à-vis Pakistan – regardless of Islamabad's behavior.

Militarily, meantime, the effort by India's defense planners to demarcate strategic space to prosecute a limited cross-border war under the nuclear shadow is likely to remain a non-starter, given Islamabad's history of lowering its nuclear threshold to invite international attention. Besides, a dangerous mismatch exists between New Delhi's newly devised doctrine of limited war-fighting and its armed forces' operational capabilities.

At Islamabad's end, meantime, recent decisions to deactivate the Inter-Services Intelligence's (ISI) political wing and dissolve the Musharraf-era National Security Council suggest a commendable, albeit belated, sense of political will. Yet so long as the retrieval of Kashmir remains the lowest common denominator holding together the political nation, means – fair or foul – will continue to be an obsession of revisionist Pakistani state and state-sponsored actors.

And yet, ironically, every successively "looser rein" Pakistani strategy of armed intervention in Kashmir has only served to further distance the Kashmiri prize from Islamabad's diplomatic horizon.

Even as its military strategy in Kashmir has evolved from direct intervention behind a forward column of tribal invaders (1947-48) and trained guerillas (1965) to the threat of intervention in aid of *jihadist* fighters (1990s-on), the diplomatic status of Kashmir has receded from being a Security Council-recognized international dispute (1948), then one to be solved through exclusively bilateral means (1972), to finally being one among a basket of seven items discussed within the confines of the Indo-Pakistani "composite dialogue" process (late-1990s on). In the wake of the Mumbai terror attack, bilateral discussions on the status of Kashmir is likely to be catapulted to the farthest end of the negotiating queue.

For the United States, meantime, each successive patchwork solution has served as much to highlight Washington's capacity to stand down the subcontinental protagonists as its incapacity to address the underlying grievance that is Kashmir. Ever-less credible in its ability to compel Pakistan to divest itself of its India-directed arsenal of terror-sponsorship, its inclination and will to press India toward a humane and compelling solution to its Kashmir conundrum stands at an even lower ebb.

In fact, even on that rare occasion, when - in the immediate aftermath of India's 1962 loss to China in a short border war - the U.S. briefly stood as New Delhi's first and only defense guarantor and extracted in return New Delhi's presence at Indo-Pakistani peace talks, U.S. facilitation could no more than induce Prime Minister Nehru to offer to part with only a sliver of non-essential Kashmiri territory.

Attempts in the 1990s by President Clinton's first term assistant secretary of state to inject herself in the status and semantics of the Kashmir dispute was met with a rude rejection in New Delhi – a cautionary note for any future Obama administration South Asia emissary. Only to the extent that U.S. diplomats are viewed in New Delhi as being India-centric in their approach to the Kashmir dispute (as they are widely assumed to be Israel-centric in the context of Middle East peace talks) will American peacemaking on the subcontinent likely gain traction.

Yet, at bottom, Kashmir and its unresolved status *is* the underlying problem. With almost mathematical certainty, each successive phase of indigenous Kashmiri rebellion against Indian authority has had its origin, among other causes, in New Delhi's misrule - in turn, inviting thereafter a predictably armed and roguish pattern of Pakistani interference in the affairs of Kashmir. From the local agrarian uprising against provincial and central authority (in the late-1940s) to the unilateral extension of New Delhi's constitutional prerogatives over-and-above Kashmir's autonomy provisions (1964) to the widespread electoral rigging and arbitrary dissolution of the state's elected assembly (in the late-1980s), each Indian spark and subsequent Kashmiri revolt has been the prelude to Indo-Pakistani tensions. Each standoff thereafter has spilled over into open (1947-48, 1965) or limited war (1999).

Even as Islamabad's interference in the affairs of Kashmir enters a period of remission, itself on the back of a broken and exhausted cycle of rebellion in Kashmir, a fresh cycle of misrule, uprising and armed cross-border infiltration and violence awaits. Never a good time to broach this sensitive subject with New Delhi, the United States needs, nevertheless, to goad its Indian interlocutors to bridge the gaping void between their soaring words and underwhelming deeds insofar as addressing the autonomy aspirations of their Kashmiri subjects. This, even as Washington, separately in Islamabad, prioritizes an uncompromising policy of "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" of the Pakistan-based factories of terror – within government and beyond.