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WHY MUMBAI?

Bill Durodié

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A blame-game for the Mumbai attacks between two of the world's nuclear powers – India and Pakistan -- is not in anyone's interest. The target Mumbai -- the Indian city that best captures the sub-continent's aspiration for change and development -- suggests the perpetrators to have been more influenced by Western nihilism and pessimism than by anything else, no matter where they came from.

NOW THAT the carnage in Mumbai has ended, the demand for more facts surrounding the tragedy is gradually being displaced by the need to understand who committed these acts, and why. The interpretation of these incidents is far more important than obtaining more information about them in grasping their true meaning and shaping an appropriate response.

A narrow focus on the events would inevitably lead to demands for more security. But despite the billions of dollars expended by the United States government in pursuing such a goal over recent years, Americans have never felt so insecure. Turning Mumbai into yet another surveillance city is surely not the answer. Ultimately, an obsession to preclude such acts at all costs damages free, open and democratic societies far more than the perpetrators of them ever could.

A Fruitless Blame-Game

Unfortunately, for now, useful insights are lacking too. A blame-game of denial and accusation has developed instead. It is understandable that the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, should have sought to publicly target any overseas elements that may have supported these atrocities. His government will soon face important state elections. Already, there have been accusations from the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that his ruling Congress government was “unwilling and incapable” of dealing with terrorism. To not have done what he did would have been tantamount to admitting some “home-grown” element to these attacks, which could then have been interpreted as an admission of failure by the authorities.

But, coming at a time when Pakistan's new leaders were making genuine overtures to develop better relations with India, this tragedy represents a major setback. Pakistani leaders have been right

therefore to point instead to the global dimension of the problem of terrorism. A stand-off between two of the world's nuclear powers will not be in the interests of either, nor anybody else. And even if some, or all, of the perpetrators came from Pakistan, having possibly also been trained and equipped there, this may still not be the ultimate ideological source of the problem all now confront.

Interestingly, over the weekend, denials also emerged from further afield. The British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, his Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith and Foreign Secretary, David Milliband, all sought to quash allegations that any of the perpetrators may have been British nationals. These self-conscious and systematic protestations and rebuttals revealed much. Of course, it may turn out that none of the terrorists in Mumbai were British, but the motivations that drove them appear to be very Western.

Western Influences

Why do I say this? Well, let us start with Mumbai itself. Why was Mumbai the target rather than the political seat of power, Delhi? Many have already noted that Mumbai is the financial centre of India. But it is much else besides. It is the driver of change and aspiration for the sub-continent, as well as a world centre for cultural innovation. Mumbai aims to become a great world city, like Singapore, Shanghai, London or New York. As such, Mumbai is a symbol of modernity and progress in a way that the capital of India is not. And it is this aspiration to change and develop that was truly targeted by the terrorists.

Nowadays, those who most vociferously and consistently seek to challenge the benefits of growth and development emanate from the West. Numerous academics and commentators there have, over recent years, presented ambition as arrogant, development as dangerous and success as selfish. They have helped to develop a simplistic caricature of the supposed decadence of modern life that presents ordinary people as mindless consumers whose actions inevitably damage the planet.

This narrative of doom has, in its turn, resonated with many of the most destructive individuals in the world today – from high-school killers to terrorists. It is quite striking the extent to which recent acts of terrorism have purposefully targeted people in shopping centres, nightclubs and airports, as well as in hotels and train stations, rather than politicians or security agents. This reflects the new, non-political but profoundly anti-human outlook that prevails – an outlook which is quite widely shared, even among elite circles in the West today.

Of course, human beings produce and innovate, as well as consume. They are problem-solvers rather than problems. It is only because so little of this development and material production now takes place in the West that the critics are unable to conceive of such benefits. Yet, their projection of the problems of human ambition and development impact everywhere.

Their doubts and confusions over the benefits of growth and modernity have provided encouragement to small numbers of frustrated individuals around the world. Far from being particularly pious, they often attach religious motivations to their acts as an afterthought to justify their rage. Such self-styled “Islamist” fantasists have few connections to the causes they claim to be fighting for. They are better understood as products of contemporary Western nihilism and pessimism.

Looking to the Future

Neither enhanced security nor a blame-game between India and Pakistan will serve anyone well. Rather regional leaders would do well to remind their nations of their inherent strengths and dynamism, as well as clarifying the path they seek to set for the future and winning popular support for it. Knowing what you stand for at such difficult times is far more important than identifying what you are against.

The author is Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is Coordinator of the Homeland Defence Programme at the school's Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS).