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The Indigenisation of Terrorism in India

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Some of the most recent attacks in India, including the Mumbai outrage, involved at least logistical assistance from Indian citizens. However, considerable neglect of this reality, in the media and otherwise, could undermine efforts to form an effective counter-terrorism strategy and develop functional partnerships with its neighbours.

OVER THE past year, India has suffered a variety of terrorist attacks with differing intensities in terms of size, scope and intended audience. Though some have been blamed on ethno-nationalist groups such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), many others in Jaipur, New Delhi, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, and the most recent attacks in Mumbai have been invariably attributed to a “foreign hand” -- an indirect reference to Pakistan in particular but also to Bangladesh.

Local links

New Delhi claims that all of the Mumbai attackers were members of Lashkar-i-Taiba (LeT), received advanced military training in Pakistan, and arrived in India by boat. Although met with initial skepticism by some, these claims seem to have been validated. However, it should be noted that to carry out an attack of such scale, considerable reconnaissance was required on these symbolic targets -- something that would have taken months or even longer and could not have happened without in-country assets.

In addition, although the devastating effectiveness of this operation was due to its simplicity and lack of complex objectives, it was still a substantial logistical exercise, especially regarding target location. The Taj, Oberoi, Chhatrapati Shivaji rail station, and maybe even the Leopold Café, were not difficult to identify. But the deliberate targeting of Nariman House and the Jewish centre inside was unlikely to have occurred without local knowledge.

This is not to suggest that the operation was not mostly a LeT venture, but much like the serial bombings in Mumbai in 1993, such an ambitious plan could not have been completely developed outside of India, and only by Pakistanis. LeT and its handlers have been pursuing a policy of indigenisation of militancy in India. What this means is that as LeT cells expand throughout the

country, they obtain more Indian cadres and link up with like-minded groups such as the Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI).

Indian authorities believe that this is how the so-called Indian Mujahedeen was formed along with segments of other groups based in Bangladesh. However, without the native component, the Indian Mujahedeen would have difficulty functioning. The Deccan Mujahedeen, which claimed responsibility for the Mumbai attacks, is possibly a bogus name for an already-established group, though that cannot be known for sure at this point in time.

Why now?

So why are some Indian Muslims now willing to be involved in attacks that kill their fellow citizens on a massive scale and damage their own economy by hitting hotels and other commercials sites like bazaars? There are many analysts who attribute this to pervasive and systematic discrimination against Muslims in Indian society. They claim that Muslims die earlier, are less healthy, and do not have the same access to education as their Hindu counterparts. However these allegations could be exaggerated; even if they are not, such disparities are also witnessed in minority communities elsewhere, including the United States, though they do not resort to taking up arms against their own country

A major factor contributing to the resort to terrorism in India is the selective nature of Indian justice when it comes to prosecuting acts of communal violence. For example, India relentlessly pushes for the extradition of Dawood Ibrahim from Pakistan for his involvement in the 1993 Mumbai attacks while many of those who perpetrated or instigated the 2002 Gujarat riots, in which scores of Muslim innocents were killed, were never brought to justice. Contradictions such as these, real or perceived, serve as powerful motivators. Also, evidence is starting to emerge that some Indian Muslims are beginning to identify with the Kashmir dispute. This is something that could prove disastrous if not addressed.

Why it matters

Why does all of this matter? As long as the Indian media and political leadership continue to point the finger exclusively towards external forces, many in the security bodies and the general public will look overseas along with them. Further, if a new counter-terrorism body is formed under these misconceptions, there is little to suggest that it will be any more effective than its predecessors.

In addition, New Delhi's approach could alienate its regional neighbours, thus unnecessarily undermining any potential for inter-state cooperation. Until New Delhi faces up to this, it will unlikely be able to implement a functioning counter-terror strategy and these attacks will tragically continue. This will prove most detrimental to India's internal stability, business climate, and the faith of its people in the political leadership and security forces.

These types of attacks also have the potential to greatly impede peace negotiations between New Delhi and Islamabad, if not derail them entirely. Given the vast array of challenges already facing South Asia, the region can hardly afford another hardening of ties between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

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