

Chance for rivals to unite against common enemy

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Australian Financial Review

2 December 2008

P. 55

The tangled politics of the Mumbai tragedy are as much about Pakistan and Afghanistan as they are about India. Its aftershocks could reshape the security of South Asia as well as the wider struggle against terrorism.

Risks include Hindu-Muslim polarisation and communal violence in India, military tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, and a diversion of international efforts from the Afghanistan front.

But further disaster is not inevitable. Mumbai may even contain seeds for new activism and understandings among New Delhi, Islamabad and Washington in coordinating their responses to terrorism.

This, however, will demand unusual political courage in all three capitals, at a time when India is preparing for elections, Pakistan's civilian government is shaky and the United States is caught in transition.

The vital task now is to deny the planners of last week's attacks the strategic fruits of their murderous scheme. The right response is neither to lash out blindly nor lapse into fearful inertia.

This is a challenge not only for India and Pakistan but for all countries with an interest in regional counter-terrorism and stability, including Australia.

The intelligence effort is paramount. Mumbai was a major failure by India's opaque and old-fashioned spy agencies; as with 9/11, valuable clues were neither pieced together nor shared. In its wake, Western governments should offer all the help they can, while strengthening links with what could and should become a reformed Indian intelligence community.

Information about the perpetrators is emerging. There is evidence to suggest they were trained in Pakistan by Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET), a group originally fostered by Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence division (ISI) for its proxy wars in Afghanistan and Kashmir. It almost certainly now has much closer allegiance to al-Qaeda than to Pakistan, but that will not make Indians any less forgiving.

If the Mumbai assault was the work of LET, with inspiration and perhaps guidance from al-Qaeda, its aims were probably multiple. One was simply to maim India - to dent its confidence and economic rise, frighten off its foreign friends and shake its multicultural democracy.

But timing suggests even more calculated motives. India and Pakistan are five years into détente. India is a strong supporter of the embattled state of Afghanistan. Elections in the disputed Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir have been going well, with scope to restore New Delhi's credibility after violently-suppressed protests there earlier this year. And Indian national elections are due in months.

Against this backdrop, jihadist forces have an interest not only in sowing discord in India but also in driving New Delhi into confrontation with Pakistan.

Such a plot has a grim logic, demonstrated by recent history. After Pakistan-based gunmen - probably from LET - attacked India's parliament in December 2001, India mobilised its army. Pakistan did likewise. For months, a million men were poised for battle. New Delhi backed down only after intense US diplomacy, Pakistani action against terror organisations, and the realisation that war could have turned nuclear.

By moving troops from its Afghanistan frontier to India, Pakistan eased pressure on the Taliban and al-Qaeda, then fleeing America's initial post 9/11 onslaught. Already Islamabad is warning it will do this again, at another crucial time in the Afghan campaign, if India were to mass its army. This would have direct consequences for the safety of NATO and Australian forces.

The good news is that this feared chain of events is unlikely this time. Therefore concerned governments such as Australia's should be careful not to allow Pakistan to use the current situation as an excuse for doing less than its utmost against the Taliban.

The Indian government has already rejected media claims that it is mobilising. India's strategists begrudgingly accept that conventional war with Pakistan under the nuclear shadow is not a sane option. While bloodshed in Mumbai might shake foreign investor confidence in India, the prospect of major war would sink it. Across the political spectrum, India's elite knows this.

India's Congress-led coalition government has blamed 'elements in Pakistan' for the attack. But its rhetoric has been more measured than was that of the previous government, led by the largely Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, during the 2001-02 episode.

Still, New Delhi will need demonstrable cooperation from Islamabad on the Mumbai investigation, both to manage public anger and reduce the chances of further such attacks. And this goes to the question of whether Pakistan's rickety civilian government can compel the military and ISI to help India. The signs here are mixed.

In any case, the outrage of most Indians seems aimed first at their government's failure to prevent the Mumbai catastrophe and a string of bombings earlier this year. So the government's priority is to set its own house in order. The relevant minister – notorious for paying more attention to his wardrobe than his job – has resigned. Improvements to the creaky national security apparatus are being promised. A desperate bid for consensus on domestic security issues among India's many political parties is being made.

This may be enough to forestall communal unrest, but it will not stop the BJP and other non-Congress parties from reaping electoral gains.

Ultimately, though, Mumbai will reinforce the view in India that its terrorism problem is international. And the deaths of foreigners in that city's glittering hotels underlines for Western governments that their and India's contests against terrorism are intertwined.

One intriguing question now is whether Mumbai will mark the moment when India seriously began considering a military role in Afghanistan. If so, it would be a consequence those behind the attack might yet regret.

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