

Improving India's Counterterrorism Policy after Mumbai

By Paul Staniland

INDIA HAS EMERGED as one of the world's most consistent targets of Islamist militants. Although the Mumbai attacks of November 2008 attracted the most global attention, they were merely the most recent and dramatic in a series of bloody terrorist incidents throughout urban India. On July 11, 2006, for example, terrorists planted seven bombs on the Suburban Railway of Mumbai, causing the deaths of more than 200 people. The November 2008 attacks, however, brought into clear focus the inability of the Indian security apparatus to anticipate and appropriately respond to major terrorist incidents. As one prominent analyst wrote, the government's responses to the Mumbai attacks were "comprehensive failures from the point of view of India's security establishment."¹ While some Indian analysts and politicians prefer to focus on Pakistan's role as a haven for a variety of militant groups, it is clear that India needs to dramatically enhance its domestic counterterrorism infrastructure. Improvement will require significant infusions of resources, policy consistency, and political will that are often lacking in India.

This article outlines the current structure of counterterrorism policy in India, and then assesses some possible reforms. Thoroughgoing institutional reform in India will be challenging. The country suffers from a fragmented and inefficient bureaucracy, far fewer resources than developed countries even though it faces a higher threat level, and a political elite focused primarily on electoral politics. It is likely only a matter of time before another significant terrorist attack occurs. Nevertheless, focusing on a series of substantial but distinct tasks, with the support of India's international partners, can slowly but steadily improve India's counterterrorism capabilities.

Domestic Structure and Capabilities

India's police and internal security system is highly fragmented and often poorly coordinated. The country's federal political system leaves most policing responsibilities to the states, which usually possess their own counterterrorism and intelligence units. These forces, especially local police, are often poorly trained and equipped. Local personnel are frequently hired on the basis of political patronage and are notorious for high levels of corruption.

There is also a variety of central investigative, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies. The Ministry of Home Affairs includes the Intelligence Bureau, Central Reserve Police Force, Indian Police Service, and new National Investigation Agency, while the Research and Analysis Wing and Central Bureau of Investigation are answerable to the prime minister.² The military—which is primarily geared toward foreign threats, including terrorism—also generates intelligence with relevance to domestic terrorism, and there is a centrally controlled National Security Guard (NSG) that specializes in hostage and terrorist attack situations.

The combination of state and central authorities is ostensibly coordinated through joint committees, task forces, subsidiary intelligence bureaus, and a Multi-Agency Center. All of these coordinating mechanisms aim to harmonize the intelligence gathered by these agencies and to generate shared threat perceptions and associated responses, but they are often slow and cumbersome. States and the central agencies frequently compete over resources and bureaucratic autonomy, and they both do a highly uneven job of cooperating with one another.³ In addition to these organizational challenges, many of the security institutions at all levels of government are understaffed, undertrained, and technologically backward.⁴

2 A critical analysis of the Ministry of Home Affairs forces can be found in K.S. Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2007). For a brief overview of RAW, see Jayshree Bajoria, "RAW: India's External Intelligence Agency," Council on Foreign Relations, November 7, 2008.

3 "Securing the Home Front," *India Today*, January 12, 2009.

4 On the understaffing of police, see P. Chidambaram, "A

All of these pathologies were evident in the failure to prevent or appropriately respond to the Mumbai attacks.⁵ There was in fact significant intelligence suggesting a seaborne terrorist attack was likely, and even that prominent sites such as the Taj Hotel would be targeted. This information, however, was ignored by several key bureaucratic actors—including the Coast Guard and the Maharashtra state director-general of police—because it was deemed unactionable.⁶ Others, such as the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad, at least attempted some kind of preparation.⁷ The differences in readiness highlight the extent of fragmentation among the security apparatus. Even when Mumbai police tried to take preventive action, they lacked the manpower to sustain increased security at the hotels. Once the attack occurred, the security forces did not have sufficient night-vision equipment, heavy weaponry, or information about the attack sites, leading to a long response time and the emergence of a disastrous siege.⁸

Previous attempts at reform and improvement have been largely inadequate—politicians have made sweeping rhetorical claims, juggled personnel at all levels, and repeatedly promised better coordination at the national level, but key capacity has not improved. Mumbai finally triggered the resignation of Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil, on whose watch a series of previous attacks had occurred. Yet Patil's resignation and his replacement by the more competent Palaniappan Chidambaram (who worked on internal security under Rajiv Gandhi) marks only the beginning of the necessary changes. India faces a "dire need to

Clear Command Structure," *Outlook*, January 6, 2009.

5 Vijay Oberoi, "Never Again," *Indian Express*, December 2, 2008.

6 Saikat Datta, Smruti Koppikar and Dola Mitra, "The Armies of the Night," *Outlook*, December 15, 2008.

7 The Mumbai police put extra guard on prominent sites and met with hotel officials. The extra guard was not maintained, however, because of the strain it put on manpower. Praveen Swami, "Pointed Intelligence Warnings Preceded Attacks," *Hindu*, November 30, 2008.

8 "'Rot' at Heart of Indian Intelligence," BBC, December 2, 2008; Praveen Swami, "Lethal Lapse," *Frontline*, December 6-19, 2008; Saikat Datta, Smruti Koppikar and Dola Mitra, "The Armies of the Night," *Outlook*, December 15, 2008.

1 Ajai Sahni, "The Uneducated Indian," *Outlook*, December 1, 2008.

redress its numerous deficiencies in its internal security arrangements.”⁹

The Nature of the Threat: Domestic and Foreign

One common response to India's counterterrorism failures has been a quick acknowledgement of domestic weaknesses, followed by a far more vocal demand to “get tough” on Pakistan. While Pakistan's role as a sanctuary (both voluntary and involuntary) for militants is indisputable, India's options are relatively limited. The coercive diplomacy following the December 13, 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament, named Operation Parakram, did not prevent Pakistan's continued patronage of Lashkar-i-Tayyiba and other militant groups operating in Kashmir.¹⁰ Pakistan's nuclear weapon “shield” makes credible Indian coercive diplomacy difficult.

India's current government has learned this lesson well, and instead engaged in a coordinated diplomatic offensive that has brought at least rhetorical results. Military threats against Pakistan are unlikely to bear fruit, while even successful diplomacy will have a limited impact.¹¹ Pakistan simply lacks the capacity, and probably the will, to engage in the kind of domestic policies that will significantly lessen the threat posed to India. Improving India's internal security apparatus must therefore be the primary focus of Indian security and political elites.¹² In addition to Pakistan, India also faces cross-border terrorism from Bangladesh. Attacks attributed to jihadist groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (HuJI) are believed to have been launched from the country. Bangladesh's political instability and weak state capacity, however, make it difficult for India to consistently shape Bangladeshi counterterrorism policy.

In addition to the limits of putting pressure on Pakistan and Bangladesh, a number of major attacks have been carried out with significant help from Indian Muslims under the aegis of the Indian Mujahidin (IM). This clearly shows that the problem is not simply one of containing Pakistan.¹³ The Indian police and intelligence agencies were forced to scramble in the wake of bombings in Jaipur, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and elsewhere claimed by the IM, which revealed a significant indigenous capability for terrorism. Bolstering domestic intelligence will become increasingly central if a trend of radicalization continues among small, but potentially growing portions of India's Muslim community. Although there have been pockets of radicalization uncovered as far south as Kerala, on balance it seems that urban areas of north and west India have been the primary recruiting grounds for Islamist radicals.¹⁴

Therefore, India faces threats spilling out of porous borders and weak governments both to the east and to the west. These foreign threats coalesce with a troubled internal security apparatus and some level of domestic radicalization to create a dangerous situation.

The Path Forward: Coordination and Capacity-Building

The major domestic response to Mumbai has been an emphasis on streamlined coordination between agencies across state and federal lines, and the creation of a new National Investigation Agency (NIA).¹⁵ The aim of the NIA is to empower a federal agency to investigate major crimes such as terrorism and organized crime without having to be asked to do so by the states. There will be special courts that can rapidly

hear terror-related cases.¹⁶ The NIA will be filled out by new staff drawn from existing intelligence and law enforcement agencies throughout India. An infusion of funding and personnel into the overall security apparatus has also been promised, and the NSG has been deployed throughout the country to offer a quicker response to future attacks.¹⁷ These steps represent a useful beginning. These efforts on their own, however, will lead to little substantive results unless they have three major characteristics.

First, they will need to be sustained over a long period of time. Dramatically bolstering the institutional capacity of India's counterterrorism apparatus is a task of at least half a decade, and probably longer.¹⁸ The training of new and current personnel alone is an enormous task, much less properly equipping them. A new federal agency or set of laws will contribute little to this fundamental task unless they are able to sustain the momentum necessary for years of unglamorous but crucial training and institution-building. Locking in lines of budgetary approval over a 5-10 year period will be critical to avoid the effort falling victim to the vicissitudes of domestic politics and elections.

Second, reform efforts must be properly resourced. India is a poor country with many pressing needs, and security funding reflects India's lack of wealth. Compared to the budgets of even much smaller developed countries, India simply does not provide sufficient money for its security agencies on a per capita basis.¹⁹ This causes them to undertrain and understaff their personnel, leading to corruption and a reliance on crude and often counterproductive policing techniques. International assistance, in the form of grants for training and equipping police forces, could reduce the impact of this reform on India's budget. In the current economic environment, large-scale international

9 Angel Rabasa et al., *The Lessons of Mumbai* (Washington, D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 15.

10 On Parakram and its aftermath, see V.K. Sood and Pravin Sawhney, *Operation Parakram: The War Unfinished* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003); P.R. Chari, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, and Stephen P. Cohen, *Four Crises and a Peace Process: American Engagement in South Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

11 Rabasa et al., p. 21.

12 As Shishir Gupta notes, “Pakistan is only part of the problem.” See Shishir Gupta, “Less Blame, More Action,” *Indian Express*, December 5, 2008.

13 Animesh Roul, “India's Home-Grown Jihadi Threat: A Profile of the Indian Mujahideen,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7:4 (2009).

14 These are the areas of greatest Muslim demographic presence and also of communal rioting. Although firm data is elusive, many experts argue that the 2002 Gujarat riots have propelled Islamist recruitment. For more, see “India Fears that Some of its Muslims are Joining in Terrorism,” *New York Times*, August 9, 2006; “Ahmedabad Attacks: The Usual Suspects,” *Hindu*, August 1, 2008.

15 The NIA is discussed in R.K. Raghavan, “Terror Trackers,” *Frontline*, January 3-16, 2009.

16 “Govt Tables Bill to Set Up National Investigation Agency,” *Times of India*, December 16, 2008.

17 “NSG Inks Agreements with Eight Airlines,” *Hindu*, March 1, 2009.

18 See the quote by Praveen Swami in “Will India's Security Overhaul Work?” BBC, December 11, 2008.

19 Sahni, “Uneducable Indian,” argues that the police-to-population ratio in India is 125:100,000.

aid is unlikely, but small measures could make a significant difference, particularly if focused on the cities most likely to be attacked in the future (Delhi and Mumbai).

Finally, India's political leadership must exert the will to push past bureaucratic and state-centric rivalries. This is an enormous challenge for a political class focused above all else on the cut-throat electoral competition that characterizes Indian politics. Despite these challenges, maintaining a degree of consistency and follow-through is essential so that the reform process does not stall or end up wasting huge amounts of time and money. Government ministers must not allow themselves to be used as pawns in bureaucratic battles over turf, resources, and responsibilities. Specialized task forces led by elected officials, and supported at the highest levels, must be given the power to engage in oversight over the security apparatus. This will involve overcoming a traditional aversion to transparency on the part of the police and intelligence agencies.

Given these deep challenges, the Indian leadership is best advised to manage a pair of distinct projects—first, building on the short-term changes in coordination that can leverage existing assets and capabilities, and second, engaging in the much lengthier and broader task of improving training and technical capacities across India's security apparatus. Conflating the two into one grand reform agenda is likely to slow both down and undermine the overall effort. India must pursue a series of discrete, manageable tasks if it is to fortify itself against the threats flowing both from across the border and from among its own population.

An American Role

The United States can play a helpful role in bolstering India's counterterrorism capabilities.²⁰ There has already been extensive cooperation between the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and Indian security services in the wake of Mumbai, illustrating the dramatic improvement in Indo-U.S. relations.²¹

²⁰ Lisa Curtis, "After Mumbai: Time to Strengthen US-India Counterterrorism Cooperation," Heritage Foundation, December 9, 2008.

²¹ "FBI Sends Agents to Mumbai," *Wall Street Journal*,

There has also been increased intelligence sharing with India, most of it obviously related to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The relationship should move beyond investigative collaboration and intelligence sharing into a broader project of training and capacity building. One of the traditional strengths of the U.S. law enforcement establishment has been training other countries' police and domestic intelligence forces. India would benefit enormously from even a small, but sustained program bringing Indian police to the United States for training, and sending American trainers to India to lecture on successful practices. This could be a small program aimed at providing specialized training to state and federal police.

Even basic training would have a broader effect of increasing the professionalism of India's domestic security forces. In addition to helping to prevent and respond to terrorist attacks, increased professionalism might reduce the resentment of the security forces in parts of the Indian Muslim community, which perceive the police as indiscriminate and brutal.²² Small but meaningful grants could also be provided for training and equipping police forces.

Preparing for the Inevitable

Even if significant reform and Indo-U.S. cooperation emerge, however, it is likely that India will be hit once again with a significant terrorist attack. One of the key challenges after the event will be avoiding yet another cycle of rhetorically compelling but under-resourced, soon-forgotten institutional reform. There will be further risks of an Indo-Pakistan crisis spiraling out of control after a dramatic incident.

The United States and India's other partners can be a constituency advocating a certain degree of continuity to avoid disruptive policy shifts that

undermine imperfect but existing reform efforts, while actively trying to reduce tensions on the subcontinent. The process of bolstering Indian counterterrorism capabilities will be long and difficult, and is unlikely to bring any sudden successes, but it is nevertheless essential.

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November 28, 2008. Also see the testimony by FBI Chief Intelligence Officer Donald Van Duyn before the Senate on January 8, 2009 outlining the FBI's investigation in Mumbai, available at www.fbi.gov/congress/congress09/vanduynd010809.htm.

²² Somini Sengupta, "As Indian Police Crack Down After Bombings, Mistrust Grows," *International Herald Tribune*, October 3, 2008.