

## Preventing Another Mumbai: Building a Police Operational Art

By John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus

HALF A YEAR after the devastating Mumbai attack in November 2008, its lessons have yet to be learned. Many have commented on the disorganization of the Indian police and security forces' response, but fail to address the problem's root cause. The Mumbai police's command and control failures, slowness and disorganization of tactical response, and inability to prevent the terrorists from entrenching are rooted in a central doctrinal flaw: the lack of police operational art. Police operational art is defined as the capacity to go beyond managing single tactical incidents to influencing the effects of multiple incidents in multiple locations over time. Current police practice, for example, conceives response as a series of tactical engagements, rather than a campaign with many different elements that must be intricately coordinated to achieve a larger aim. Operational myopia is not exclusive to Mumbai—even the best American police units do not effectively recognize or utilize the operational level of maneuver.

A piecemeal, tactic-focused response will work in isolated tactical engagements, but it founders against an opponent utilizing multiple forces and resources to achieve an operational aim. When such a foe emerges, police command and control breaks down and the adversary achieves success. To defend against future urban sieges, police forces must generate an operational—instead of purely tactical—response to paramilitary terrorism. This approach must integrate operational swarming, maneuver tactics, and real-time intelligence support across the entire urban operation or battlespace.

### A Modern Massacre

Mumbai, like many modern “global cities,” is a commercial and cultural megapolis rich with symbolic and “soft” targets. The complexity of the urban battlespace makes command and control difficult to maintain when defending against swarming attacks.<sup>1</sup> The *fidayin*

(high-risk commandos) carrying out the Mumbai assault were willing to risk everything for the cause, and exercised enough security to hide their pre-operational planning.

The Mumbai attackers achieved high levels of mobility through tight coordination, synchronicity, and unit autonomy. This was enabled by real-time digital communications networked via handheld devices.<sup>2</sup> The terrorists also exploited a remote command and control node that provided a common operating picture.<sup>3</sup> Using these tools, the terrorists were able to greatly increase their mobility and lethality. In short, they “swarmed”:<sup>4</sup>

The attack was sequential and highly mobile. Multiple teams attacked several locations at once—combining armed assaults, carjackings, drive-by shootings, prefabricated IEDs, targeted killings (policemen and selected foreigners), building takeovers, and barricade and hostage situations...By dispersing into separate teams and moving from target to target, the terrorists were able to sow confusion and create the impression of a greater number of attackers. The explosive devices that would go off after the terrorists departed heightened the confusion.<sup>5</sup>

The attackers arrived in Mumbai at multiple locations. After leaving Karachi on a Pakistani vessel, the terrorists hijacked an Indian trawler mid-route to Mumbai, adding a maritime

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battlespace in an earlier paper published in *Small Wars Journal*. See John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “Postcard from Mumbai: Modern Urban Siege,” *Small Wars Journal*, February 18, 2009.

2 Angel Rabasa et al., *The Lessons of Mumbai* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), pp., 5, 7.

3 According to case documents released by the Mumbai police, the attackers allegedly spoke to a Pakistani colonel during the entire incident. The cell phone calls were made using Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP), and the call was traced to an IP address created with a New Jersey-based VoIP provider. See C. Unnikrishnan, S. Ahmed Ali and Kartikeya, “26/11 Calls Traced to Pak Serving Colonel,” *Times of India*, February 26, 2009.

4 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Swarming and the Future of Conflict* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000).

5 Rabasa, p. 5.

piracy dimension to the attack.<sup>6</sup> Once the terrorists landed in Mumbai, they maintained the advantage of surprise and complicated the Indian police's response by attacking in several locations simultaneously. Attackers generated operational shock through the combination of heavy weapons and speed.<sup>7</sup> They were armed with Chinese assault rifles, MP-5 submachine guns, multiple hand grenades, and a host of improvised explosive devices.<sup>8</sup> Indian police were outgunned and unprepared to deal with the well-armed adversaries.

Another lethal element of the attack was “pulsing.” In swarming theory, pulsing is when the attacking units change the point of attack, often rapidly. The Mumbai terrorists exploited the freedom of action generated by their operational maneuver to rapidly pulse in response to the situation's changing conditions. During the attack, assault elements repeatedly switched the point of engagement, further confusing police response.

Without an effective police response, attackers continued to rampage at will throughout the city until they settled into an entrenchment pattern and took hostages. The hostages were soon killed and police faced a daunting room-to-room fight, with the terrorists often moving through previously secured areas as police command and control weakened within the confines of the buildings. Police observers noted after the attack that they were intimately aware of the buildings' layouts, suggesting that the attackers intended to reach the buildings once their relative advantage had eroded to finish their assault with a Beslan-style siege.

The attack was not spontaneous—it took a high degree of preparation, training, and some reflexive control by superiors in the rear during combat. Precise planning may have started in mid-2007, and pre-operational reconnaissance was detected in February 2008.<sup>9</sup> The attackers' preparation enabled the

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

7 Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 31.

8 Rabasa, p. 4.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

1 The authors elaborated on the urban operations or

flexibility and mobility of the assault inherent in the their swarm-pulse approach.<sup>10</sup>

Police failures during the Mumbai response can be characterized broadly as deficiencies in intelligence, prevention, command and control, and counterterrorism capability. When terrorist groups, nominally dispersed and hidden, wish to launch an attack, they slowly assemble a “kill chain”<sup>11</sup> that can be seen and targeted. Indications and warning missed the emergence of this “kill chain” due to gaps in coastal surveillance and processing of information.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, security at many of the chief targets such as the Oberoi Hotel was minimal at best. Yet while poor synthesis of intelligence and poor protection of “soft” targets created the opportunity for the attack, it was inadequate command and control and counterterrorism capability that allowed it to succeed.

Fire and emergency first responders were unable to contain the damage and operate effectively in combat conditions. There was no plan for dealing with the media, whose 24-hour coverage increased the chaos and allowed the attackers’ handlers to give them real-time tactical intelligence and advice.<sup>13</sup> Hostage rescue response and tactical planning were not up to the task of fighting through the entrenchments terrorists created. Command, control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance were not integrated and provided in real time.<sup>14</sup> There was no immediate action to stop the attackers’ momentum—and ordinary Indian police were simply unprepared to deal with the militants’ operational shock. These problems arise from a lack of operational doctrine and capabilities and are not unique to the Indian police.

#### Thinking About the Operational Level

As British Lieutenant General Sir John Kisely noted in the *Royal United Services Journal*, the operational level refers to the theater level of engagement where campaigns and major operations

are used to accomplish strategic objectives. While campaigns consist of battles, operational victory is not an accumulation of tactical victories; rather, operational art is defined as “the skillful orchestration of military resources and activities.”<sup>15</sup> Operational art is the meeting point between the strategic accomplishment of grand objectives and the tactical winning of battles.

Current U.S. police practice and informal doctrine concerns itself with tactics. Police drill endlessly for tactical response with Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units, and programs for specialized emergency responder mobilization and “active shooter” response are becoming more common. The problem, however, is that few law enforcement agencies and police tacticians consider the “operational dimension of maneuver” involved in complex responses, instead focusing on excellence in tactical operations.

Police often operate in limited time and space, responding reactively to “calls” for service. This results in an organizational framework built from the bottom up that is tailored from tactical engagements. The bulk of routine police activity is also focused on a “beat” or neighborhood, which results in an emphasis on a much smaller scale than a traditional theater of war.

Large operations, especially those involving an opposing force with multiple fronts and points of contact, require sophisticated coordination, harnessing of police and civil resources, real time intelligence support, and excellent command and control. Operational planning is necessary to delegate objectives to subordinates, deal with the fog and friction generated in conflict, and react to the adversary’s plan in its entirety instead of simply responding tactically without an overall common operating picture or concept of operations.

Translating operational thought to police operations is difficult, but it can be accomplished. In traditional military thought, the operational level primarily

concerns itself with the winning of campaigns. The operational commander uses individual battles and maneuver to implement the strategic objective. Obviously, many routine police operations occur on a much smaller scale than a traditional military campaign. A raid, for example, constitutes a police “battle,” something that would barely rise to the level of a skirmish in a traditional force-and-force maneuver warfare campaign.

The operational level for Los Angeles County, for example, is the usage of police forces in a combination of operational-level strategies for accomplishing a strategic aim such as community policing, tactical urban response, and countergang raids. Intelligence Preparation for Operations (IPO) is the primary tool for creating operational plans for usage of police and paramilitary forces in urban environments. IPO helps not only properly define the parameters of the operational space, but creates courses of action (COA) for combined response from different types of security forces.<sup>16</sup> Like its military analog Intelligence Preparation of the Battlespace (IPB), IPO systematically identifies all elements of the operational space and creates COA for forces in the field. Most importantly, IPO stresses a holistic “geosocial” approach to building operational plans.

The concept of “full spectrum policing” is also important to create the tactical and operational capability for police response. Full spectrum policing units have the ability to transition between traditional policing tasks such as community policing, investigations, countergang operations, and “high-intensity” tasks such as riot control, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency. In Europe and Israel, gendarme-type units and “formed” paramilitary policing units are capable of carrying out full-spectrum policing and frequently deploy abroad in peacekeeping missions.<sup>17</sup>

10 Ibid.

11 A “kill chain” is a sequence of events that must occur for a threat to successfully engage and kill its target.

12 Ibid., p. 9.

13 Ibid., p. 17.

14 Ibid., p. 11.

15 Lt. Gen. Sir John Kisely, “Thinking About the Operational level,” *Royal United Services Journal*, December 2005, p. 38.

16 John P. Sullivan and Alain Bauer eds., *Terrorism Early Warning: 10 Years of Achievement in Fighting Terrorism and Crime* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, 2008).

17 For a discussion of expeditionary police (Expol) for stability policing, see John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “Expeditionary Law Enforcement,” *Small Wars Journal*, July 2, 2008. The authors also introduced the concept

Lastly, real-time intelligence support in the operational space, especially in the midst of a chaotic battle such as the Mumbai incident, is needed to coordinate police response. This can be accomplished through the use of command and control visualization technologies and a competent command staff monitoring the engagement.

### Operational Art and Tactics

When translated to the tactical realm, police operational art is distilled into active shooter response and swarming. Modern urban terrorists thrive on the unimpeded use of kinetic energy to drive force. Police must immediately act to fix the attackers in place and halt their momentum. Once stalled, terrorists are disrupted and vulnerable to well-equipped reinforcements that can arrive and neutralize the threat. Non-tactical units must form active shooter response teams and quickly counterattack the terrorists' lead assault elements. Opposing forces' lines of operations are thin, dispersed, and will not hold up once their movement has ceased. The very qualities that enable criminal-terrorist operational swarming to be successful present an inherent weakness that can be exploited by police and military forces. Once fixed in time and place they can be captured or neutralized with the successful and surgical usage of special operations forces, SWAT teams, or hostage rescue-level tactical response forces.

To conceptualize what is required for such operational fixing, one can examine Sun Tzu's concept of the "ordinary" and "extraordinary force." An "ordinary" force holds the adversary in place while the "extraordinary" force loops around to assault them at the weak point.<sup>18</sup> Transposed to an urban setting, the "ordinary" forces are "full spectrum" patrol units capable of standing up to operational shock. Ordinary police must fix the threat in place. Otherwise, command and control fragments, public panic ensues, the enemy maintains and enhances his relative advantage, and deaths accumulate.

The "extraordinary" force will require the creation of more regional high-quality SWAT units capable of deploying at a moment's notice. If and when another Mumbai or Beslan attack happens, local police cannot afford to wait for a national tactical team to activate and deploy. In fact, one of the key problems of the Mumbai response was the long deployment time of high-quality special operations forces into the urban conflict zone. The "extraordinary" force, however, does not inherently have to be a designated tactical team, as the purpose is merely to neutralize the terrorist group fixed in place by the "ordinary" force. This can be achieved with well-trained local police prepared to form into flexible immediate action, rapid deployment teams built from "beat" patrol officers, as well as local SWAT teams.

Swarming is also an integral part of police response. Since building mass in urban environments is extremely difficult, slows down response, and makes police vulnerable, small teams must quickly move through the city in a semi-autonomous manner to reach the zone of engagement and fix the adversary or engage criminals. In urban counterterrorism or counterinsurgency, this will require real-time distributed situational awareness and active intelligence support.

Streets, roads, subways, and other access roads that police know intimately can be used to rapidly swarm adversaries. Police forces should practice mobilization, especially along alternate routes that could be used in case of a disruption of traffic during an urban assault. The key to tactical success is refusing to move along traditional lines of urban maneuver and utilizing the various lines of the city to fix and destroy urban assailants spread around dispersed lines of operations.

### Conclusion

The Mumbai attack was essentially a virtual urban siege. It combined swarming and pulsing with tactical urban sieges to generate mass casualties to further the terrorists' strategic goals and message. In their adept blend of these tactical approaches, they were able to dominate the urban operational space. Police response was compromised by its inability to rapidly adapt to the swarm

and follow-on pulses and sieges. Most importantly, the attack demonstrates the need to develop operational art as a key component of "full spectrum" police practice that addresses the full range of crime control and public order issues facing contemporary cities and their public spaces.

The contemporary police service—in Mumbai and elsewhere—lacks the doctrinal foundation to recognize and exploit the operational level of maneuver. Operational art needs to be fully developed within police practice, a necessary step toward developing police doctrine for addressing terrorism and high intensity crime. Mumbai is neither the first nor the last paramilitary urban siege in a "global" city.<sup>19</sup> Paramilitary terrorism and urban siege in major cities is more likely to occur than the use of weapons of mass destruction, and if tactical excellence continues to be confused with operational virtuosity, another tragedy is inevitable.

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of "full spectrum policing" in the essay "Postcard from Mumbai: Modern Urban Siege."

<sup>18</sup> Leonhard, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> John Robb, "The Coming Urban Terror," *City Journal*, Summer 2007.