

# What if Pakistanis Strike India Again?

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In November 2008, Muslim terrorists staged a series of shooting and bombing attacks in Mumbai, India's largest city. At least 173 people died; more than 300 were wounded. One of the perpetrators, captured alive, told authorities that the attackers were members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistan-based militant Islamist group.

At the time, India responded with restraint, deciding not to mount a military counterstrike. But how might India react to another Mumbai-style attack or series of attacks? The question is not of mere academic import.

Memories of the 2008 killings have started to dissipate in the Western world. Tourists, who fled India in the immediate aftermath of the attack, have now begun heading back to the country in general and Mumbai in particular. Even India's own citizens, including most residents of Mumbai, seem to have shrugged off the horror that gripped them for days after the attacks.

On New Year's Eve last year, I detected few if any signs of anxiety in the city. Major hotels were close to full capacity. The holiday revelers staying in the hotels appeared utterly oblivious to danger, beyond that posed by the city's typically frenetic traffic. Admittedly, the police presence at Mumbai's major intersections was more visible than it had once been. The fancier hotels were equipped with metal detectors, and had hired private security personnel to check cars for explosives or weaponry.

But the city's well-heeled class evinced no public signs of nervousness. Bejeweled young women seemed to care most about their attire on that balmy night; the men accompanying them stole furtive glances at their own reflections to ensure

that they were suitably coiffed; and waiters and doormen were at their obsequious best in the hope of obtaining good tips.

The carefree outlook of the city's affluent notwithstanding, the possibility of another attack on one of India's major cities, or against its airlines, still looms large. The reason that this danger persists is not hard to identify. The government of Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari—beyond making some minor, cosmetic gestures, including the brief arrest of Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, the mastermind of Lashkar-e-Taiba (now renamed Jamaat-ud-Dawa)—has done pitifully little to dismantle the infrastructure of the terrorist group that launched the attack.

On the contrary, conditions remain such that in January 2010, Indian authorities issued a public terror alert and bolstered security at all of the country's major airports. In the event, no attack materialized and the month passed without incident. But the threat is still very real.

## THE "COLD START" PLAN

Even before the 2008 attack, India had been seeking to fashion a military strategy for responding to a Pakistani terrorist assault—in fact, the quest for such a strategy had begun shortly after a terrorist attack on India's parliament on December 13, 2001. The resulting doctrine, referred to as "Cold Start," called for a concerted, swift, military response. It also involved the pre-positioning of men and equipment at key points near the Indo-Pakistani border to enable Indian military authorities to act with speed and decisiveness.

Although this doctrine was already in place when Mumbai was attacked, it was not put into operation. Most likely, India failed to utilize the strategy for two compelling reasons. First, the national and state governments were caught completely off guard by the terrorist assault. As a consequence, all their energies were focused on coping with the immediate crisis. Second, by the time the origins of the terrorists became clear, the element of surprise was lost. There

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is little question that Pakistani forces were on alert and an Indian strike would have met stiff resistance.

In the wake of the events in Mumbai, India has bolstered its counterterrorism capabilities. It has enhanced surveillance of its lengthy and hitherto poorly patrolled coastline. And it is in the process of creating a national counterterrorism center. Nevertheless, given the zeal and determination of some Pakistan-based terrorist organizations, these steps, though appropriate and necessary, may simply not be enough to prevent another attack.

So how might India respond next time? Despite the sangfroid displayed by Mumbai's wealthy and comfortable last New Year's Eve, most Indians would find it beyond their tolerance if another attack could be traced back to Pakistan.

Would the national government again muster the restraint that it has displayed in the past? Would Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who is the architect of a strategy of reconciliation with Pakistan, stand fast against precipitate action in the face of widespread demands for retaliation, which would certainly and immediately follow an attack? Confronted with an onslaught of public sentiment calling for a vigorous response, what

might Singh's government do, and what might follow from Indian military action?

Among the least likely scenarios is that India would mount a nuclear attack. But equally unlikely is that India would do nothing. Indeed, the pressure to engage in some form of military retaliation would probably prove irresistible. Diplomatic exhortations and *démarches*, after all, have already been tried, with too little visible effect, and mere public condemnation barely seems an adequate response. Although it is difficult to make any firm predictions on this subject, India would more than likely grasp the nettle.

### TARGET: KASHMIR?

Most Indian strategists realize that a limited attack on Pakistani territory is unlikely to eliminate the terrorist menace. Yet the government may well be forced to undertake some action merely to publicly demonstrate its resolve. Since Pakistani leaders insist that the segment of Kashmir under their administration is formally independent, India might decide to strike at targets in that area. Compared to a mission aimed at the Pakistani heartland, which would threaten that state's territorial integrity, the military consequences of a strike in Kashmir might well be limited.



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Such a strike would serve more than one purpose. It would help pacify an enraged domestic audience clamoring for military action. It would enable the government to quell strident criticism from right-wing members of the opposition. At another level, it would send a clear message to the Pakistani military and intelligence establishments that India's forbearance, though considerable, is not limitless.

That said, even such a limited military approach would not be entirely free of costs. The security apparatus in Pakistan would immediately swing into high gear to portray the country as the blameless victim of wanton Indian aggression. Pliant and unscrupulous elements in the Pakistani press would be duly mobilized to depict India's actions as reckless perfidy. In turn, much of Pakistan's attentive public, especially those who are unremittingly hostile toward India anyway, would immediately rally around the flag. Most important, India might face a retaliatory military response from Pakistan.

The fear of generating an outpouring of chauvinist sentiment and a concomitant escalatory spiral has had, so far, an inhibiting effect on India's willingness to resort to force. However, that fear should not act as a permanent constraint on Indian military choices when the country is faced with the continuing specter of terrorism emanating from Pakistan—whether the terrorism is state-sponsored or state-tolerated.

## THE NUCLEAR QUESTION

What would happen if, in response to an Indian military attack, Pakistan threatened to escalate the conflict to the nuclear level? This prospect has long been the nightmare of many US strategic analysts. However, the actual significance of a Pakistani nuclear threat may be quite limited. At most, such a threat might inhibit India from carrying out further military operations against Pakistan. But, contrary to much popular opinion, it would not likely lead to a nuclear exchange. Pakistan's politico-military leadership is astute enough to realize that any

nuclear strike on India would provoke overwhelming retaliation and effectively finish Pakistan as a viable political entity.

The real question is whether limited, non-nuclear, calibrated Indian strikes against a set of well-defined targets in Pakistan-administered Kashmir would induce the Pakistani state to end its deadly embrace—or tolerance—of a host of terrorist organizations that have nested in that country. Chances are, they would not. However, an Indian failure to respond decisively would virtually guarantee future terrorist attacks.

An Indian military response would create a serious policy dilemma for the United States. Substantial evidence linking a terrorist attack to Pakistani soil would make it difficult for Washington to urge restraint on India's policy makers. But the thornier policy conundrum facing the United States would involve addressing Pakistan's links with terrorists. Sadly, the administration of George W. Bush never mustered sufficient gumption to confront Pakistan over its organic ties to Islamist militants.

The Barack Obama administration has displayed only slightly greater fortitude in this matter. To be sure, the head of Pakistan's army, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, has at America's urging reluctantly taken on elements of the Taliban. In February, US and Pakistani intelligence forces succeeded in capturing the Taliban's military chief, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Nevertheless, it is far from clear that Pakistan's government has done anything to rein in the Jamaat-ud-Dawa and its leader, Saeed, who just recently addressed a massive anti-Indian rally outside Lahore.

A bombing on February 13 in a café in Pune, in western Maharashtra, killed 11 and served as a reminder that Indians remain vulnerable to terrorism. Unless a significant change in American policy is soon in the offing, the United States may find itself bereft of any meaningful options if and when new attacks are committed by Pakistanis on Indian soil. ■