

Political crisis in India very difficult to diffuse

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Canadians were understandably focused on their own homegrown political crisis last week. The vaulting ambition of Bob Rae and Jack Layton, the infinite and prissy resentment of Stephane Dion, the pusillanimity of Michael Ignatieff, and the mischievousness of Gilles Duceppe constituted a volatile and dramatic combination. So far the cool heads and moderation of the prime minister and Governor General have prevailed and a political and constitutional crisis has been averted.

On the other side of the world, two weeks have passed since the much larger crisis, India's 9/11, began. The attack on Mumbai has created enormous difficulties for Pakistan, India and the United States. Events have not yet spun out of control there either, though the potential remains high.

Compared even to the major attack seven years ago by the Islamist terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba on the Indian parliament, the Mumbai operation was more complex and far more sophisticated. Consider: at least two separate groups were involved. The first, made up of Indian Muslims, including members of the Mumbai underworld, was already in place. A second, after travelling by boat from Karachi, Pakistan, hijacking an Indian fishing vessel, decapitating its crew, and avoiding Indian naval patrols, landed on a Mumbai beach and made for their objectives.

Their preparations were thorough. They undertook lengthy surveillance of the targets months ago. They pre-positioned stockpiles of explosives and weapons at the two prime targets, the Oberoi and Taj Mahal hotels. They mounted diversionary attacks on the main train station, the Cama Hospital, a popular cafe and a major theatre. They attacked Chabad House, adding Jews and Israelis to the list of targets along with Indians and foreign VIPs. This side of the attack indicated they were part of a transnational jihadist group, probably affiliated with al-Qaeda. They killed several senior counterterrorism police officers along with more than 170 civilians. They wounded many more. Throughout the operation they made no attempt to negotiate with the Indian authorities.

In short, they were well trained and well disciplined. Such operational sophistication immediately suggested Pakistani involvement. Indeed, U. S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pointed to "irrefutable evidence." She had in mind a satellite phone used to call Karachi from Mumbai, a captured terrorist's statement, and the identification found on the bodies of nine of the attackers. Other intelligence suggested the involvement of a "rogue" cell within the Inter-Services Intelligence agency operating out of Karachi. During the days after the attack, Pakistan authorities identified several Lashkar-e-Taiba people involved and have promised to act against them.

Beyond killing a lot of people, the larger strategic purpose of the attack was to shape the response of the Indian government to the jihadis' benefit. In 2001 India mobilized its army and nearly went to war with its neighbour. If India mobilized again, Pakistan has said it would transfer 100,000 troops from its western border with Afghanistan to the eastern one with India. This move would drastically reduce the effectiveness of U.S. and NATO operations against the Taliban. Ensuring Pakistan remains the anvil to the NATO hammer is also a major priority for the incoming Obama administration.

The implications of the attack are, therefore, significant. With the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party calling for the government to "avenge the repeated terror attacks," India has demanded Pakistan destroy the intelligence agency cells responsible. But even the much stronger government of Pervez Musharraf was unable (or unwilling) to do so. If the current government tried, it would likely collapse.

There is, therefore, a significant gap between what each of the players wants to accomplish and what they are able to do. The Americans want to keep India's response moderate and avoid troop movements away from the Afghanistan border, but India may not allow itself to be restrained. Pakistan may wish to reign in rogue elements in the intelligence agency to avoid a showdown, but likely lacks the capability. India wants to influence Pakistan without going to war, but domestic pressures may make that impossible.

So far, apart from some sharp diplomatic words, the only thing India has done is cancel a cricket tour of Pakistan. But the fallout from the Mumbai attack may push India, Pakistan, and the U. S. into a crisis that everyone wants to defuse but nobody knows how to avoid.

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