

Strengthening Counter Terrorism Cooperation Against Growing Turmoil

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President Barack Obama's Republic Day visit to India in January 2015, an unprecedented second trip in one presidency, comes as the terrorist threat in the subcontinent is evolving and there is growing turmoil particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Multiple massacres in Pakistan and the transition in Afghanistan are challenging the counter terrorism infrastructures built over the last couple of decades. It is a fluid situation that Obama and Prime Minister Narendra Modi need to compare notes on and develop joint strategies.

Pakistan has long been both a sponsor of terrorism and a victim of terrorism but the balance seems to be shifting toward victimhood. Pakistan still sponsors the most dangerous terror group in South Asia, Lashkar e Tayyiba (LeT), which in May 2014 tried to disrupt Modi's inauguration by attacking the Indian consulate in Herat, Afghanistan just hours before his swearing-in ceremony. The Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate, continues to provide support to LeT and its leader Hafez Saeed lives freely in Lahore, Pakistan, with the ISI's protection. The ISI also remains the primary patron of the Afghan Taliban in its war with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led International Security Assistance Force.

But Pakistan has been shaken profoundly by a series of mass casualty terror attacks on its own citizens. On November 2, 2014 a suicide bomber killed 60 Pakistanis attending the regular evening ceremony at the Wagah border crossing with India. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility and said it was in retaliation for the army's Zarb e Azb counter terrorist operation in North Waziristan.

On December 16, 2014 seven members of the TTP attacked an army run school in Peshawar and killed 145 people including 132 school children. The attack prompted an unprecedented public outcry for the government and army to take concerted action to defeat the Taliban and to stop all terror attacks in the country. Not since the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 has there been such a public outcry against terrorism. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif promised collective action to destroy the Taliban and the army said it would no longer differentiate between good Taliban from bad Taliban. (In the past ISI considered good Taliban those that attacked NATO and Afghan government forces and bad Taliban were those that attacked Pakistan.)

Even al Qaeda's new franchise in the Indian subcontinent distanced itself from the school massacre saying, "our hearts are bursting with pain," and urging its Taliban allies to target soldiers in the future. Hafez Saeed took the tack of blaming India for the attack, claiming it was a conspiracy orchestrated by Modi and vowing revenge on India. Former dictator Pervez Musharraf also blamed India and Afghanistan for supporting the TTP.

It remains to be seen whether the Peshawar massacre and other atrocities will actually change the army's behavior toward terrorism. It is more likely than not that the ISI and the COAS will remain patrons of some terror groups for the foreseeable future even as they fight others. The civilian politicians may be more determined to end Pakistan's double policy but they have consistently failed to do so in the last decade.

The ISI is particularly determined to see if its Afghan proxies, the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani network, can exploit the end of NATO's combat presence in Afghanistan to gain control of significant parts of the country. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader who is widely believed to be based in Karachi, has shown no interest in a political settlement and seems determined to try to resurrect his Islamic Emirate.

Two new players in the terror game emerged in 2014 with implications for India and the U.S. First is the al Qaeda franchise for the Indian subcontinent. Al Qaeda's leader Ayman Zawahiri announced its formation and declared war against India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma and Afghanistan. His pronouncement was immediately followed by an attempt to hijack a Pakistani frigate with the intention of using it to attack U.S. Navy ships in the Arabian Sea. The plot included an unknown number of Pakistani naval officers recruited to help al Qaeda. Zawahiri remains hidden somewhere in Pakistan and continues to give lengthy audio messages to his followers.

The other newcomer is the Islamic State (IS), the heir to al Qaeda in Iraq, which proclaimed the creation

of a caliphate in summer 2014. Led by Abu Bakr al Quraishi al Hashemi al Baghdadi, also known as Caliph Ibrahim, the IS has attracted fighters from across the Islamic world to come and join it in Iraq and Syria. Several Indian Muslims have joined the IS and pro-IS propaganda has been distributed in India and Pakistan. Parts of the TTP have voiced support for Baghdadi. Al Qaeda has denounced the caliphate as illegitimate and renounced any connection to Baghdadi and his group. Zawahiri and Baghdadi are rivals for leadership of the global jihad and competing for the loyalty of jihadists around the world, including in South Asia.

Against this unfolding transition and turmoil Obama and Modi should reaffirm their commitment to closer counter terrorism and intelligence cooperation. Much has improved since 2008 when the U.S. and United Kingdom had intelligence on the Mumbai plot but failed to share it with India and failed to analyze it properly themselves. LeT is now a priority for both Washington and London. There is little evidence however in the public domain that any new substantial progress has occurred since Modi's September visit. Certainly none of the safe havens for terrorists in Pakistan have been dismantled. The two sides should provide a read out during the January visit on what has been accomplished in fulfilling the promises of the September 2014 joint statement. Obama should send his Central Intelligence Agency director to New Delhi to further improve cooperation, just as he did after the confirmation of Leon Panetta as director of the Agency in his first term.

Obama and Modi should also upgrade efforts to stabilize Afghanistan after the withdrawal of most NATO forces. Some limited steps have been done in the past in police training but more is necessary. India should consider sending military field hospitals and personnel to help the Afghan Army as it did in the Korean War in the 1950s to support the United Nations forces. It should also help train and equip the Afghan air force, an area that NATO has been remiss in addressing robustly. Obama should rescind his decision to withdraw all U.S. forces by 2017 and commit to a long-term advisory role.

Pakistan remains the heart of the issue. The U.S. just hosted a visit by COAS General Sharif and Indians will be interested in hearing American impressions of him (expect some cynicism about his commitment to fight terror, especially LeT). Obama and Modi should compare notes on Pakistan's support for terrorism. They should also address the blow back in Pakistan to the Peshawar massacre. They should encourage a no tolerance policy by Prime Minister Sharif while recognizing his limitations. They should look for opportunities to encourage Pakistan to take action against all groups, especially LeT. They should make clear that any substantial improvement in ties hinges on action on LeT, while also making clear that serious action to destroy the group will get Pakistan serious dividends.

But they should also plan for the worst. Another LeT attack on India is probably only a matter of time. The interception of a boat carrying arms on New Year's Day may have been a LeT plot. An attack during the President's visit is a very real possibility. President Clinton's visit in 2000 was marred by a major LeT attack on Sikhs in Kashmir. Washington and New Delhi should have some idea of what the potential consequences of such an attack might be. This is not a matter of ganging up on Pakistan or trying to pressure it in advance, rather it is prudent crisis planning and coordination. It might be wise to involve others, like the United Kingdom, in such discussions. If all this seems too sensitive for public officials, then it can be put in the hands of think tanks and former officials to study with a mandate to report to their governments.

