Restraint v. Denial

The Struggle between India and Pakistan

India: The Politics of Restraint

When ten terrorists began their attack on Mumbai on the 26th of November 2008, hour upon hour, day after day, news channels showed the nonchalance and brazenness with which these men followed through with their goals. By the time nine of the ten terrorists were finally killed, fingers were already pointing across the border, to non-state actors in Pakistan. The Indian media hosted a variety of speakers – film stars, politicians, women and men off the street – most of whom seemed to want to carpet-bomb Pakistan, “flush out the militans,” and wage a war. Hordes of television cameras also zoomed in on candle-light vigils in up-market Mumbai where the rich and the vacuous suggested not paying taxes, floating a new political party, or doing away with democracy altogether. Elements of the Hindu Right lauded the “recent” arrival of Hindu terrorists, suggesting these might provide a suitable response to Pakistan’s non-state actors. These pronouncements of the Hindu Right, along with others’ demands to start a war were duly reported in the Pakistani media.

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, however, acted calmly and along several fronts. After belatedly sending commandos to deal with the terrorists still causing havoc, it finally convinced the then Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, to resign. Callous comments from reigning Ministers in the state of Maharashtra and an enraged public ensured more heads rolled. Days later, bills leading to the establishment of a new National Investigation Agency (NIA) and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) were pushed through Parliament. It was pointed out that security services, including those of the elite commandoes, were being used to protect VIPs, and the process of ‘right-sizing’ security began. More resources were sanctioned for the strengthening of coastal security and towards the training of “special commando units” in the states. Although some of these measures have only just been scrutinized, and now require clarification, the need for reforms, particularly of the police, the intelligence and the judiciary, has acquired greater urgency and weight.

Meanwhile, information provided by Amir Ajmal Kasab, the lone terrorist caught alive, through intercepted phone conversations, from boats found by the Coast Guard, as well as other intelligence, helped piece together a complicated picture of the “master-minds” behind the attack. Authorities deemed the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), allegedly banned in 2002 by General Pervez Musharraf, as the prime suspect. Now operating under the name...
Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), this outfit had gained a makeover in the eyes of international community because of the social services it provided during the major earthquake of 2005 in Kashmir and the North West Frontier Province. In light of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, the Indian government moved to have the JuD banned by the United Nations Security Council. India then proceeded to share its intelligence on the attacks with the FBI, Interpol, and other intelligence agencies. One consequence of this attack, which claimed the lives of citizens of the United States, Britain, Israel, Australia, among other countries, was that the international community was perceived as having a vital role to play in the investigative and other processes to follow.

Perhaps it is this perception that enabled the UPA government to act with restraint, secure in the knowledge they would draw support from the international community. However, this perception has proven to be false in the last few weeks. While it is still not clear along what lines the Obama administration will develop its foreign policy, a January 2009 Asia Society Task Force Report ("Delivering on the Promise: Advancing US Relations with India") urges it to take big steps towards expanding counterterrorism ties with India particularly in the wake of the Mumbai attacks that revealed "the shared vulnerability of our open societies."

Pakistan: The Politics of Denial

Almost two long weeks after the Mumbai attacks, the Pakistani government led by President Zardari and Prime Minister Gilani were forced by the UN ban to place the chief of the JuD and LeT founder, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, under "house arrest". The government also conducted raids on a few branches of the JuD and arrested a few members including Zakir Rehman Lakhvi and Zarar Shah, both of whom are believed to have played key roles in the Mumbai attacks. However Pakistani leadership floundered on major counts.

First, its willingness to send the chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to India to discuss the possible role of the ISI itself in the Mumbai attacks swiftly changed to a decision to send a junior-ranking official from the ISI. Second, in response to a careless hoax call questioning war, allegedly from India’s Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Pakistan placed itself on "war alert." There was much saber-rattling across news-rooms. Third, by the time the Pakistan government banned the JuD, the group’s liquid assets had obviously been transferred to safe havens. Fourth, after the much publicized investigative journalism of the London Observer and Pakistan’s own Dawn revealed that the lone terrorist caught alive was indeed a Pakistani citizen, Pakistan moved to disown him and claim that his identity was still to be deciphered. The government also barred the media from access to Kasab’s family in a village in Faridkot, Punjab. As the noted critic of the Pakistani military and commentator Ayesha Siddiq wrote, this might have solved Pakistan’s problem in the short term but there were far too many instances of suicide-bombers, particularly from the Punjab, blowing themselves up in cantonments and other locations for the problem to be swept under the proverbial carpet. (Siddiq, ‘A Social Transformation’, Dawn, 26 December 2008).

Only two days earlier, Dawn published an article called ‘Suicide bombers available,’ that stated that a suicide bomber could be bought to settle personal scores. Pakistani civil society’s unwillingness to ignore the reality of terrorism poignantly calls into question the dangerous lackadaisical response to the problem. Pakistani society, overwhelmed by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December of 2007, voted the Zardari administration to power. It is the domestic constituency that Zardari will fail if he cannot stem the tide of despair – and he cannot do so by pursuing the politics of denial toward terrorism.

A week into 2009, the Zardari government finally conceded that Kasab is a Pakistani citizen. However, now Prime Minister Gilani claims that the Mumbai attacks are India’s “internal matter” and that world governments display double standards when they reveal concern over one set of internal atrocities and not another. It is undeniable that many injustices are occurring across West and South Asia, and indeed worldwide. Nevertheless Gilani’s inability to distinguish between, on the one hand, mindless terror perpetrated by citizens under his own watch, and, on the other hand, terror that is not under his watch, is also a dereliction of moral responsibility.

Towards a resolution: depoliticizing terror

The gulf between India and Pakistan, the politics of restraint and denial seems, at times, unbridgeable. But even in these dark times, there is room for hope. The presence of Pakistani journalists writing for Indian newspapers and
vice-versa is a good sign. If South Asia is to emerge from the wreckage of extremism, it must learn to value voices belonging to different places, inhabiting and shaping worlds of their own.

The verdict of recent state elections in India holds a different kind of promise. In Chattisgarh, Delhi, Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, and Rajasthan, voters queued up to participate in an increasingly familiar ritual, a ritual that has of late begun to perplex even the most seasoned pschepologists. Who could have predicted the turn out in rural Kashmir, especially after the anger displayed on the streets as recently as August 2008? But Kashmiris voted for water, paved roads, electricity, and peace. Will their participation, fragile and treasured, be squandered away, or will Kashmir’s new, youngest Chief Minister Omar Abdullah actually help usher in a new era? Will he engage in a sustained and empathetic conversation with separatists or will he make only the barest of conciliatory gestures? Abdullah might profit from a study of the Indian National Congress’ behavior after their success in the elections of 1937. Although the analogy is not perfect, there are important lessons to be learnt from that historical moment.

As India heads into general election mode, there remain many tasks for the Indian National Congress-led UPA government to accomplish. Although it is unclear who will win the next general election, it is obvious that this particular brand of terrorism is not going to disappear, and might resurface even in the short-term. It is also clear that India has many kinds of challenges: according to the 2008 Human Development Index, an aggregate measure of adult literacy, purchasing power parity and life expectancy, India is ranked 132 out of 179 countries (Pakistan is 139 and Australia, incidentally, is 4).

Rather than fritter away precious resources in fighting each other, verbally or militarily, India and Pakistan need to sort out their differences as efficiently as possible. Beyond the buzz of discreet remarks and finger-pointing that seem to be the extent of interaction between India’s major political parties, there are social and personal bonds that traverse these political formations. It is time for these bonds to take institutional shape. Perhaps a Parliamentary Standing Committee (this would be “bi-partisan” in American speak) that represents the best minds across parties should be formed to deal specifically with terrorism that emanates from Pakistani soil. At the same time India will obviously need to continue engaging with the Pakistani government, various Pakistani civil society organizations, and the international community. India cannot afford to follow the Bush legacy of unilateral military action, recently adopted by Israel in Gaza, that has produced so much grief and loss of innocent life.

The people of Pakistan, whether in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) adjoining Afghanistan, or the Swat district (of the North West Frontier Province), are clearly besieged by multiple and deadly enemies. In the 80s, they were the “collateral damage” of the Cold War. More recently, the war in Afghanistan after 9/11 and the subsequent influx of refugees has further destabilized and Talibanized this area. Between the Pakistani army and Afghan militants fleecing US troops (and now unmanned drones), civilians have borne the brunt of this war: a war that is destroying the ethos of accommodating diversity that is an everyday reality in every corner of South Asia, a war whose repercussions will be felt for generations to come. But the power-brokers of this country have also partaken in a despicable form of double-dealing, documented most recently by Ahmed Rashid in *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*. As the year-old civilian government appears to believe events will move along a pace of their own choosing, we might as well recall the late Eqbal Ahmad’s disgust towards Pakistan’s puerile democratic leadership at another moment in her history when the army interfered in local governance (although this time the United States must take even more credit for buttressing the army): “[Pakistani politicians] have not tamed the warrior caste... it has been a nauseating experience to see them shifting around to stay on the good side of soldiers.” (Ahmad, ‘No, not again’, *Dawn*, 19 July 1992, in Bengelsdorf et al eds., *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad*, Columbia University Press, 2006).

As the weight of past errors and miscalculations begins to be felt ever more severely by the people of Pakistan, it is time the country’s leaders wake up to their responsibilities. If they do not do so, they might not have much of a state left to rule over. The famously limited jurisdiction of the Afghan President—also known as the “mayor of Kabul,” so called because his power does not extend beyond the capital—might end up becoming a reality in Pakistan as well. And such a scenario can only be terrifying to Pakistan’s other next-door neighbour, India. Surely India and Pakistan have the imagination, the ability and the courage to sort through their separate and entangled predicaments.