Urban Counterterrorist Sieges

The 2008 Mumbai Attack and Police (In)capacity

Prem Mahadevan

The Mumbai terrorist attack of 2008 exposed key vulnerabilities in India's defences against urban terrorism. Not only did it reflect an unprecedented degree of sophistication on the part of jihadist planners, but the attack also demonstrated that the Indian policing system was woefully inadequate for the task of combating suicidal assaults. This work will provide an analysis of the tactical and operational aspects of the Indian security response, with a view towards identifying lessons which might be valuable for the international security community. Its findings are expected to be particularly relevant in light of similar attacks carried out in Europe, Africa and North America from 2013-2016. The work describes the actual conduct of security operations on the ground in Mumbai, during the period 26-29 November 2008. It studies the response of the Indian police, army, navy and National Security Guard and demonstrates that inter-force cooperation was severely lacking. Besides clear protocols for communicating situational updates and pooling crisis intelligence, counterterrorism in India lacked a coherent public relations doctrine. Together, these shortcomings contributed to the spread of panic and multiplied the disruption caused by the attack. The work concludes by offering suggestions for improving police responses to future urban terrorist sieges.

Keywords: Terrorism, Intelligence, SWAT, India, Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba

Prem Mahadevan (2016), 'Urban Counterterrorist Sieges: The 2008 Mumbai Attack and Police (In)capacity' *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 10, no. 2: 33-56.

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Introduction

Following the 13 November 2015 shooting rampage by 'Islamic State' militants in Paris, Western security agencies are paying close attention to the threat of 'active shooters.' Unlike regular hostage-takers, active shooters are gunmen who randomly kill anyone they see and do not stop until cornered and either arrested or shot by security forces. Europe and the United States have hitherto been insulated by geography and strict external border controls from such threats, which have a long and bloody history in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. But with the ongoing migrant crisis, as well as recurrent warnings from intelligence services that more 'Paris-style' active shooter attacks are being planned, there is a need to study such attacks in greater operational detail. The template that security forces across the world are concerned about however is not Paris, but the Mumbai attack of 2008, known as '26/11.'[1]

There are two typical types of security crisis: that which is small-scale and appears suddenly, and that which is large-scale and appears slowly. There is also a third, rarer, category: the large-scale security crisis that appears suddenly and confounds decision-makers. Certain terrorist attacks, like the jihadist assault on Mumbai, the commercial capital of India, fall into this category. Such attacks are highly destructive because they feature the use of innovative techniques by terrorists, making their impact more harmful compared to other incidents that unfold along previously witnessed, predictable lines.[2] They do not fit neatly into one academic category or another. They partly represent urban warfare between individual guerrilla-type fighters and the security forces of established states, with elements of gangland-style killing conducted at close quarters. These individual fighters have a rage-filled desire to experience 'power' by deliberately targeting unarmed civilians who are incapable of self-defence or retaliation.

This work shall describe how and why the Indian security forces responded on 26/11 in a manner that received considerable criticism, both in India and abroad. It shall demonstrate that at the level of security practice, defence measures remained static amidst a worsening threat environment. Little effort was made to prepare Indian cities to cope with the kind of shooting rampage that had always been thought possible but unlikely. Because the attack did not fit any of the previously recognised patterns of jihadist activity, and thus defied easy

identification, it posed a unique challenge that required an improvisational response (one that ultimately proved to be sub-optimal). The operational study of Indian counterterrorism is likely to be instructive for Western governments that face homeland security threats from radicalised members of immigrant populations, and well as returning foreign fighters from the so-called 'Islamic State.'

What Happened?

On the night of Wednesday 26 November 2008, ten Pakistani gunmen from the jihadist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) landed on the Mumbai shoreline in a rubber dinghy. Splitting into five 'buddy pairs' they dispersed across the city. A short while later, they attacked simultaneously at five different locations, randomly shooting passersby while also planting time bombs in public places. Indian security forces took a full 60 hours to eliminate the last of the terrorists and bring the attack to a close. When the fighting was over, 166 civilians had been killed, including 25 foreign tourists. The bulk of the deaths occurred within the first two hours. The security response must be evaluated according to three criteria:

1. The number of dead
2. The length of time needed to re-establish control of the situation
3. The number of potential victims evacuated from affected sites while under imminent threat

Under these criteria, public and academic criticism of the Indian security response may only be partially justified. While there is little doubt that the attack represented a failure of preventive security, there are grounds for suggesting that security forces reacted promptly and professionally. Where they went wrong was in succumbing to collective paralysis caused by a failure of leadership, and relying on a top-heavy command system which denied police first responders the freedom to carry out their jobs.

Why did the Attack Happen?

26/11 was a state-sponsored attack, masterminded by the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI).[3] The actual planning was handled by at least 20 mid-level ISI officials. Final approval came from a former

ISI chief, who was then commanding an army corps.[4] Preparation was coordinated by a LeT operative named Sajid Majeed, who served as No. 2 in the LeT's external operations division. Majid was also a liaison officer between the ISI and LeT and wanted to strike at a prestige target in India. His aim was to fulfil a long-standing ISI wish to damage the Indian economy, which was roaring at this time (2006-2008). He accordingly dispatched a Pakistani-American named Dawood Gilani to reconnoitre possible economic targets in Mumbai, including the Taj Palace Hotel. According to US court documents, funding for the reconnaissance was provided by a serving ISI officer, holding the rank of army major. Of the $29,500 USD paid to Gilani, only $1000 came from Sajid Majeed.[5] The remainder came from the major. Gilani himself had been introduced to the LeT by another serving ISI officer. For all intents and purposes, LeT and the ISI cooperated so closely in planning and preparing for the Mumbai attack that any distinction between them disappeared.

Sajid Majeed, coordinator of the Mumbai attack and liaison man between Pakistan's ISI and Lashkar-e-Taiba (Source: Press Information Bureau of India)[6]

When India partially liberalised its economy in 1991, the ISI became focused on scaring away foreign investors through 'false-flag' or misattributed operations.[7] The idea was to conduct cross-border terrorist attacks, which could then plausibly be blamed on indigenous Indian

militants. There was to be no provable link to Pakistan. Through carrying out a number of such attacks, the ISI hoped to convince the international business community that India was a politically unstable state, riven by ethnic and religious conflict and thus offering few long-term commercial prospects.

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In March 1993, the ISI conducted a spectacular false-flag operation when it co-opted the Indian drug-lord Dawood Ibrahim to simultaneously bomb 13 locations in Mumbai. The death toll was 257—to date, the bloodiest terror attack in Indian history.[8] However, the operation was not a complete success, as only its first phase (the bombings) was executed. Phase II had envisaged armed assaults on multiple targets across Mumbai. For this purpose, the Pakistani agency had shipped several tons of military-grade explosives and assault rifles to Dawood Ibrahim's gang. Unnerved by the chaos that the bombings caused, the would-be shooters decided to abort the second phase of the operation. Indian investigators later discovered the arms and several explosives caches intact. Forensic analysis established that this ordnance came from Pakistani government stores.[9] Naturally, the ISI denied any involvement. It was helped by the unwillingness of the United States to condemn a former Cold War ally. Pakistan thus escaped any punishment for having sponsored an act of mass-casualty terrorism.

Encouraged by this impunity, the ISI continued to plan urban bombings in India throughout the 1990s. But the domestic instability which wracked Pakistan after 9/11 raised the stakes dramatically. The Pakistani army and ISI had become increasingly unpopular among their own public for aiding the US 'War on Terror' against Al-Qaeda. Following a series of jihadist attacks against the Pakistani military, the ISI began searching for instruments to drive a wedge in the jihadist movement. One such instrument was Lashkar-e-Taiba ('Army of the Pure'). As a group that espoused the fringe *Ahle Hadith* school of puritanical Islam, it did not have a mass support base in Pakistan. This meant it would be too weak to challenge the Pakistani army politically and would remain dependent on state protection, in the event that the international community targeted its assets for involvement in cross-border terrorism.

LeT was chosen as the medium through which the ISI would deflect domestic militancy abroad, in the direction of India. The Pakistani group set up a fictitious network called 'Indian Mujahideen' which consisted of Indian jihadists, many of whom had been taught

bomb-making.[10] These jihadists were controlled by a rival of Sajid Majeed, named Abdur Rehman Pasha. Indian investigators believe that a secondary motive for 26/11 was that Majeed wanted to upstage the older Pasha, by carrying out a single high-visibility terrorist operation that would kill, in a single blow, as many victims as Pasha's men were killing through their constant small-scale attritional bombings in India.[11] The primary motive, however, was to refocus the energies of Pakistani jihadist cadres towards a foreign target. Disheartened by years of operational inactivity and falling increasingly susceptible to anti-government rhetoric, many low-level LeT operatives needed to be reminded who their 'real' enemy was—not the Pakistani army, which protected and funded them even as it collaborated with the hated Americans for tactical reasons, but their 'eternal enemy', India. A major strike on the Indian financial capital, Mumbai, seemed the best answer to LeT's morale problem, and would also please the ISI.[12]

Why Was the Attack Unexpected?

It has been reported that between 2006 and 2008, at least 26 warnings were passed by Indian intelligence agencies to the Mumbai police about a possible LeT attack.[13] Three of these warnings mentioned the use of 'fidayeen'—suicidal gunmen—while eleven spoke of simultaneous incidents at multiple sites. Most importantly, six intelligence reports suggested that the method of infiltration would be via the Arabian Sea. From the specificity of some reports that came from the US Central Intelligence Agency, it was clear to Mumbai police that the Americans had a high-level human source within LeT.[14] Only much later would it emerge that the source was Dawood Gilani, Sajid Majeed's reconnaissance agent in India. The CIA had known about the 26/11 conspiracy in detail for some time, but either due to incompetent tradecraft or, more likely, a cynical readiness to risk Indian lives for the sake of protecting its prized spy, only passed incomplete information to Indian security agencies.

According to a senior Indian intelligence officer, the Americans learnt about the scale of the Mumbai attack plan and were worried that it would lead to an India-Pakistan war. So they forwarded a sanitised stream of reports to New Delhi which could later be cited as 'proof' that the Indians had been complacent despite being forewarned. This same officer said that the strategic surprise on 26/11 came from

the sea-borne method of infiltration and the operational flexibility it gave the terrorists.[15] Previously, arms and explosives had been shipped to India by the ISI via maritime smuggling networks. But none of these led to the immediate execution of a commando-style raid. In November 2008, it seemed highly unlikely that a motley group of semi-literate youth from the landlocked interior of Pakistani Punjab (most LeT cadres tend to be ethnic Punjabis) would become proficient in seamanship within a short span of time, without significant preparatory activity that would be detected by intelligence assets.

Even the aborted Phase II of the ISI's 1993 operation in Mumbai had involved shipping arms to India with the help of *locally-recruited* smugglers and stashing the weapons for several days before they were to be used. Never before had a group of *foreign* terrorists landed on Indian shores, entered a city whose streets they were unfamiliar with, navigated to their targets precisely (thanks to GPS coordinates provided by LeT operative Dawood Gilani) and started shooting immediately. The reaction time thus available to the entire Indian security bureaucracy was compressed from weeks and days, into minutes, but the intelligence agencies were unaware of the changed paradigm at the time.

An Irrelevant Model for Predictive Analysis

Past attacks by suicidal gunmen from Pakistan had followed a set pattern: Terrorists would infiltrate via a land border (through either the states of Jammu or Kashmir, or via Nepal/Bangladesh). They would hide in safe houses prepared by LeT sleeper operatives in India. Usually, Indian police would pick up information about their presence thanks to human and technical sources, and neutralise them before their operation could be launched. On rare occasions, such as the 2001 assault on India's parliament, the gunmen would succeed in conducting an assault, though the level of casualties would be low due to good protective security measures. However, they enjoyed better success in Kashmir, where the time lag between their infiltration and the actual moment of deployment would be kept as short as possible, leaving security forces with a narrow time window to prevent casualties or to detect the attackers' presence in a locality. LeT planners recognised this pattern, and resolved to send a group of terrorists directly from Pakistan to India via a ship owned by the terrorist organisation. En route, the gunmen hijacked an Indian fishing boat and massacred the

crew, so as to steer into Indian territorial waters undetected by the coast guard. The final approach to Mumbai's shoreline was made on a rubber dingy launched from the fishing boat. The boat itself was abandoned (the terrorists had been ordered to sink it, but failed to do so) and continued to drift at sea until intercepted by Indian authorities some days later.

Despite the intelligence warnings delivered to the Mumbai police, it is hard not to sympathise with them. They were operating in a political climate where terrorism was perceived as a problem of border provinces in the north and east of India. Maharashtra, the province of which Mumbai was the capital, was further to the south and suffered mainly from Maoist terrorism, which was a rural phenomenon. Furthermore, the Maoists were restrained in their attacks and avoided mass-casualty operations which would lose them support among the Indian middle classes. Pakistani jihadists had no such compunctions, but were erroneously thought to be such a geographically distant threat that they were discounted, except to the extent they might carry out bomb attacks using the 'Indian Mujahideen.'

What Was the Initial Response?

When the first reports of shooting at Mumbai's main railway station and at a popular tourist café arrived, senior police officials believed that a gang war between drug trafficking syndicates had erupted. Shootouts were rare in the city, but when they did happen, their motives were criminal and the victims were usually mixed up with local mafias, either willingly or as victims. However, there was something different about these attacks—there was just too many of them. New reports arrived of gunmen having stormed into two luxury hotel complexes, the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower hotel and the Oberoi Trident hotel. Each of these hotels consisted of two separate buildings and, potentially, several thousand hotel guests were at risk from the attackers. It soon became clear that the killings were random and opportunistic—what the US security community terms 'active shooter' events. Like the crazed gunmen who occasionally barge into American schools and massacre teachers and students until they themselves are either killed or commit suicide, the LeT terrorists were only interested in chalking up a high death toll. They did not want to negotiate, only to kill and die—that was what their trainers had brainwashed them to do.

So much commentary has been made about the poor quality of firepower and weapons training available to Mumbai's policemen on that fateful night that it need not be repeated here.[16] Suffice to say that at the railway station, policemen on duty were gunned down, in some cases because their poorly-maintained and antiquated firearms jammed after a few missed shots. In contrast, the two terrorists who opened fire on them were no amateurs—they fired controlled bursts, killing 58 people almost immediately. Elsewhere, in the two hotel complexes, their comrades met with even less resistance. With no one to intervene, they calmly walked through the luxurious interiors, shooting anyone they saw. Because most guests and staff in the hotel did not immediately recognise that what was happening was a terrorist strike, they initially ran towards the sound of the shots before fleeing, panic-stricken, in the opposite direction.

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Dispersed active shooter incidents in Mumbai, 26 November 2008.

Cama Hospital was attacked by the same pair of shooters who had previously opened fire at the nearby railway terminus.

The initial reports of shooting at five different locations came literally within minutes of each other. The first arrived at 21:48 hours and the last at 22:02 hours. There seemed no clear pattern—a tourist café, a train station, two hotels and a Jewish cultural centre. What the 19th century Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz called the 'fog of war' truly descended on the operational vision of the Mumbai police. Within one hour of the opening shots being fired, at 22:40, the police leadership recognised that the crisis was too big for them to handle alone. They needed the help of the Indian Army and the National Security Guard (NSG), the country's premier counterterrorist force, which was based over a thousand kilometers away in the national capital, Delhi. In the interim, policemen on the ground struggled to understand what was happening and contain the potential for further escalation. It goes to their lasting credit that one of them, at the loss of his own life, grappled with a Kalashnikov-wielding Pakistani terrorist for long enough for the latter to be overpowered and arrested. This arrest and the subsequent interrogation, conducted both by Indian and American officials, exposed the cross-border nature of the conspiracy and dealt a serious blow to the ISI's effort to maintain total deniability.

The Quick Response Teams (QRTs) of the Mumbai Police were best-suited to deal with the crisis, having been trained in commando operations by the Army. But they were caught in traffic seven miles to the north of the attack zone, which was concentrated in the prosperous southern tip of Mumbai. When they finally reached the affected locations, the shooters had moved indoors through the labyrinthine hotels and the Jewish cultural center. Hesitant about losing more men—the force had already lost three experienced officers to a terrorist ambush early in the crisis—the city police chief ordered his subordinates not to engage the terrorists. Clearly, his decision was in part motivated by a legitimate concern for their safety. But it also seems to have been driven by a sense of personal helplessness at the enormity of the crisis and the suddenness with which it appeared.[17] His individual feeling of being overwhelmed with a responsibility that was too heavy for him to bear, was transmitted down the chain of command in the form of oral orders to 'do nothing' until the NSG's specialist counterterrorist hostage rescue teams arrived from Delhi.[18] Police QRTs were left to do nothing more than crowd control, which they failed at for want of adequate numbers—there were only 56 men in all the QRTs

combined. A full two hours after the first pair of terrorists opened fire at the Taj Palace, only six policemen had entered the building. As they stumbled through its unfamiliar layout, which most of them normally would never visit on their meagre salaries, they radioed for reinforcements. Their horror and bewilderment in the following hours can only be imagined, as they were left to engage four heavily armed terrorists while carrying only a few pistols and carbine rounds themselves. Reinforcements did not arrive, as they had deferred to the police chief's order to stay clear until the NSG took over the situation. Running desperately low on ammunition, the six policemen were soon themselves being hunted down and had to focus on ensuring their own survival first.

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Improvising with the Navy

So wide is the gulf between civilian and military expertise in the Indian government that it was only by coincidence that the Maharashtra authorities learnt of the Indian Navy's commando capability. As the headquarters of India's powerful Western Fleet, Mumbai hosted a marine commando base. A civil servant recalled one of his social contacts in the Navy mentioning this unit and its sophisticated fighting skills, and as the crisis developed, he thought to ask for its assistance. Given the complicated bureaucratic procedure under which military force can be used in aid of civil authority in India—a backhanded compliment to the strength of its democracy—it was not until 02:00 that the first marine commandos arrived at the attack sites. Numbering just 16 men, they split into two teams and entered the Taj Palace and Tower and the Oberoi Trident. At the latter location, they were only able to block passageways connecting the two hotel wings (the Oberoi and the Trident) and isolate the terrorists in the former. At the Taj Palace however, their colleagues' intervention proved crucial.

When the first shots rang out in the Taj Palace, hotel staff alerted as many guests as possible to stay in their rooms and barricade themselves until rescued. Other guests were herded to safety in an isolated part of the hotel complex known as 'the chambers.' Eventually, roughly 200 civilians were gathered there, including several political and business leaders from Mumbai. Believing that their VIP status entitled them to priority evacuation, many telephoned news channels on their

mobile phones. In live interviews, they revealed their identities the location of their hiding place, taking care to emphasize their own importance so that rescuers would be instructed to save them first.. Unbeknownst to them, hundreds of miles away in the Pakistani port city of Karachi, their every word was being heard by Sajid Majeed and other attack masterminds from the ISI and LeT. Clustered in a control room equipped with satellite phones, television screens and four laptops, the attack planners listened to Indian newscasts, then relayed operational information in real-time to the terrorist gunmen in Mumbai. It was through media channels for instance, that they learnt about the paralysis of the Mumbai police and the lack of any proper hostage rescue capability in the city. It was also through the media that they learnt of the arrival of the marine commandos at the Taj Palace.

Like their civilian police counterparts, the marine commandos were unfamiliar of the topography of the hotel complexes. At the Taj, a small-scale floor plan was provided to the team leader by a hotel staffer. Unable to make any sense of the details, he stuffed the plan into his pocket and instead proceeded instinctively towards the sound of gunfire.[19] The aim at that moment was not to devise an elaborate counter-assault plan, but instead to save as many lives as possible in what was a fluid situation where the terrorists were roaming freely and still held the upper-hand. The commandos had arrived at a decisive moment in the crisis. Alerted by their long-distance handlers in Karachi about the hundreds of civilians hiding in the chambers, the four terrorists at the Taj were hunting for them. Had they succeeded, they would have been able to commit yet another massacre on an even larger scale. The determined intervention of the marine commandos surprised them and they fell back into the depths of the building after a brief but vicious firefight. Thus were the civilians rescued.

It is important to note that the marine commandos were few in number, operating night-blind in unfamiliar surroundings. They fired at the muzzle flashes of the terrorists in what was otherwise a dark maze of corridors and rooms. Yet, due to their weaponry, advanced combat training and personal motivation, they regained tactical control of a rapidly deteriorating situation. Had a similar set of attributes been available to the policemen who had been ordered to remain outside the hotels, the 26/11 attack might have been terminated earlier. However, such systemic preparedness did not exist because the dominant institutional and political mindset had failed to anticipate that a condition similar to urban warfare could erupt on Mumbai's streets.

The marine commandos were military professionals trained for high-risk assaults, but policemen could not have been asked to deliver a comparable performance without the requisite infrastructure for psychological and physical hardening and weapons-handling.

Waiting for the NSG

One of the much-hyped points of criticism regarding the Indian security response on 26/11 was the apparently 'slow' deployment time of the NSG. Based in the town of Manesar, outside Delhi, the force took over nine hours to reach Mumbai. This was not however, for want of preparedness on its part. On the contrary, the NSG had mobilised its Counterterrorist Task Force 1 (CTTF-1), a 100-man assault team which remains on constant 30-minute standby, within a mere 22 minutes of the first shots being fired. Whatever delays ensured thereafter were no fault of the unit, but rather, a result of Clausewitzian 'friction' as civilian bureaucrats scrambled to understand what was happening and work out the correct procedures for federal government intervention. Being a federal force, the NSG could not on its own initiative fly to Mumbai without a formal request from the provincial authorities in Maharashtra. Under the Indian constitution, the maintenance of public law and order was a provincial responsibility. The federal government could only intervene in the event of a grave threat to national security. Although, in hindsight, it is clear that 26/11 was certainly such a threat, at the time no one could definitively say so. It must be remembered that the Mumbai police had initially dismissed the first reports of shooting as signs of a gang war that would not affect civilian bystanders.

Besides the actual flying time from Delhi to Mumbai, the nine-hour travel time was due to lack of a suitable aircraft to ferry the rescue team and to traffic congestion on the national highway connecting the NSG's base at Manesar with Delhi airport. Although an aircraft was provided by the Indian intelligence service, the loading of equipment and personnel took a full hour. Some additional time was wasted when a cabinet minister insisted on travelling to Mumbai with the rescue team, holding up its departure. But beyond this, it is hard to see just how CTTF-1 could have reached the crisis area any faster. Readers would do well to remember that during the 1980 Iranian embassy siege in London, the British Special Air Service took much longer to deploy an assault team from Hereford. Fortunately for the SAS, it escaped criticism

because terrorists of that bygone era were inclined to carry out 'conventional' hostage-taking which featured prolonged negotiation, thus buying time for police and military units to react in an organised and pre-planned manner. No such luxury was available to the NSG in 2008.

After the 26/11 attack was investigated and analysed by experts, what became painfully evident was that LeT had identified a crucial weakness in international hostage rescue procedures: the vital importance of negotiation as a method to stall for time and ensure that hostages remained unharmed until a swift and surgical assault could be mounted. According to the established rulebook for dealing with hostage situations, expert negotiators would keep the terrorists busy with meaningless dialogue while commandos arrived and gathered preparatory intelligence. Ideally, the negotiations would continue right up to the very last minute so that the terrorists would be distracted when the rescue team made its forcible entry into the building/room where hostages were being held. This maximised the chances of killing the terrorists before they could kill any hostages.

Unfortunately, among the ranks of LeT trainers were several veterans of the Pakistani Army Special Forces. These men came from Zarrar Company, the army's counterterrorist team.[20] They had been dispatched by the ISI to ensure that LeT battle tactics stayed one step ahead of Indian security forces, especially regarding attacks involving hostage-taking. Owing to their advice, the LeT ensured that its attack plan for Mumbai would do as much damage as possible, and kill as many people as possible, before the Indian government had a chance to begin negotiations. If negotiations were to commence, they would only be used to propagate a false impression that 26/11 was the work of militants originating from within India. LeT gunmen were instructed to tell Indian news-channels that they had no connection with Pakistan and were fighting 'oppressive policies' of the Indian government. Any hostages that might be taken would only be used as human shields to prolong the media spectacle—eventually they were all to be killed, execution-style, and the gunmen themselves would die fighting Indian troops.

Even as the NSG was air-dashing to Mumbai, two points became clear during the on-flight briefing: 1) that the terrorists had attacked multiple sites simultaneously precisely because they had realised that this would overwhelm the NSG's finite resources; and 2) that they had already murdered civilians because this would deprive the Indian gov-

ernment of an opportunity to hold credible negotiations. No state can offer amnesty to hostage-takers who have already perpetrated a massacre—the best that the LeT hoped for was to take foreign tourists in India captive, so that their governments would force New Delhi to slow down its response operations and further prolong the attack's duration. As electronic intercepts of the terrorists' conversations later revealed, the idea all along was to kill foreign nationals so as to spoil the international the Indian government's international reputation, for failing to save them.[21]

Topography of Terror

Having discussed the sequence of events, it is now necessary to look at the physical constraints that the NSG had to operate with once it reached Mumbai. The force engaged with the terrorists for 48 of the 60 hours that the 26/11 attack lasted (80 per cent of the total time) but the worst damage had already been done in the 12 hours before it took over operational control from the police and navy. During those 12 hours, the police had been frozen by shock, the navy heroically but blindly struggled to probe the situation with a small number of marine commandos and the Indian Army limited its role to cordoning off the attack sites. Being untrained in close-quarters battle for urban environments, the average Indian infantryman was unsuited to the task of hostage rescue, which required precision shooting skills and specialised equipment. Final responsibility fell to the NSG alone.

From the moment the NSG commander arrived at the Taj Palace and Tower, the scale of the rescue mission became frightfully clear. He had to divide up his force, sending men to both the Oberoi Trident hotel complex and the Jewish cultural centre, where several foreigners were being held captive by two of the terrorists. This meant that for room clearance operations at the Taj hotel itself, he would have just 40 of the 100 officers and men who constituted CTTF-1. Although there were another 50 personnel who could serve in support roles, the NSG detachment in Mumbai was badly over-stretched.[22] The Taj Palace had roughly 80 per cent occupancy on the night of the attack. This meant that around 3,000 people had been in the building. Although a large number extricated themselves once it became clear that a terrorist assault was underway, several hundreds were still trapped in their hotel suites, awaiting rescue. It would take an average of four to five minutes

to clear a single room, assuming there was no resistance from the terrorists or from the frightened guests themselves.[23] In total, sanitising the entire hotel complex and neutralising the terrorists would take days. And still there were other two sieges to consider.

The NSG troopers had been trained to anticipate panic among hostages and communicate calmly and clearly with them, in order to avoid any accidental deaths. Even so, officers would have to personally lead the room clearance operations to make sure that minimal force was used against uncooperative civilians. There was also the possibility that the terrorists might abandon their weapons and try to escape by masquerading as hotel staff or guests. Based on the manpower available, the NSG commander decided that each hotel floor must be cleared completely before proceeding to the next. There simply was not enough personnel to guard the areas that had already been secured. Initial efforts to get policemen to act as blocking forces foundered because they had received oral orders from their chief not to take any risks.[24] They remained in parts of the hotel which were relatively safe, and dealt with the task of evacuating civilians who had been rescued by the NSG. This meant that the NSG troopers risked being ambushed as they went from one floor to the next, still not knowing their way around the complicated floor plan. In fact, one of the NSG's finest officers was killed in just such an ambush.

At the Oberoi Trident hotel, on the other side of south Mumbai, things went better. After massacring whoever they had seen during the first hours of their rampage, the two terrorists in the hotel complex had barricaded themselves in a guest room which was relatively isolated but difficult to storm. Incessant gunfire and grenade-throwing over several hours eventually accounted for both of them. Because the Oberoi had fewer guests than the Taj, room clearances went faster. However, the open plan of large parts of the complex impeded unobserved movement, which meant that the NSG had to enter cautiously in order to avoid being ambushed from the upper floors. Also, the force lacked night-vision equipment which would work without any ambient light—lengthy corridors and isolated storage rooms in many parts of both hotel complexes (the Taj and the Oberoi Trident) required that clearances be conducted in daylight in areas where the electricity had failed. Knowing that the Indian security forces would use CCTV footage to track the gunmen's movements, the ISI/LeT terrorist handlers in Karachi had advised that whole floors be set ablaze to short the wiring

system. This meant that localised power failure added to the operational difficulties of the NSG.

The biggest challenge, in a tactical sense, came at the Jewish cultural centre. For many hours, the NSG held off storming the building out of concern for the safety of foreign nationals held captive by the two terrorists there. Only once Indian intelligence confirmed, based on electronic intercepts, that all the captives had already been killed upon personal instructions from Sajid Majeed in Pakistan, did the assault begin. Live media coverage led to death of one NSG trooper, who was shot by the terrorists as he tried to enter their stronghold. With no way of approaching unobserved, the NSG wore down the terrorists by a combination of sniper fire and room assaults. A final push let to both attackers being killed. During the operation, the NSG had to contend with large number of spectators on the ground, many of whom were literally a stone's throw from the cultural centre. Without any prospect of evacuating the densely populated surrounding area (only the local police had authority to do), the NSG was forced to operate in the public spotlight. This later led to facetious comments about lack of professionalism of the force's personnel made by ill-informed Western commentators. From their far-away perch of safety, they went by what they saw on television screens, rather than the facts on the ground. The death of those taken hostage by the terrorists was initially blamed on the NSG, until it emerged during the post-attack investigation that they had in fact been executed much before the building was stormed.

Lessons for the Future?

At the start of this work, three criteria were identified for assessing the performance of Indian security forces on 26/11:

1. The number of dead
2. The length of time needed to re-establish control of the situation
3. The number of potential victims evacuated from affected sites while under imminent threat

From what is known about the timeline of events, it appears that two-thirds of those killed (around 100 of the 166 fatalities) died in the opening stages of the attacks. Blaming the Mumbai police, the Indian Army and Navy, or the NSG for failing to prevent these murders is nonsensical. If any culpability is to be attributed for these deaths, it would lie with Indian intelligence agencies. However, they too were badly un-

der-resourced for the task of combating cross-border terrorism. Even five years after the 26/11 attack, the Intelligence Bureau (India's premier security agency) had just 30 analysts and field personnel on its operations directorate.[25] Counterterrorism teams set up shortly before 26/11 had been disbanded due to lack of funding. So 'intelligence failure'—the favourite excuse of decision-makers when caught unawares—seems more like a structural problem than anything else. Furthermore, in both previous and subsequent cross-border attacks by Pakistani jihadists, the Indian intelligence community did an excellent job of anticipating the assaults and alerting local security forces. But Indian intelligence did not possess the manpower, strength or equipment to stop the attacks from being launched. Since India-Pakistan relations were very cordial at the time, the Indian political establishment was itself complacent about Pakistan's readiness to trigger a confrontation. And besides, at a purely functional level, it seems as though suicidal operations—*fidayeen* raids—constitute a tactic which will assuredly cause some level of casualties no matter how well-funded intelligence agencies are, or how competent are police and military response units.

Regarding the second criterion, the drawn-out process of terminating the Mumbai attack was due to manpower shortages and the very large size of the two hotel complexes, which gave the terrorists plenty of room to manoeuvre and hide. Both the NSG and the marine commandos were critically undermanned for the scale of the crisis that they were confronted with. Both forces were operating in a situation different from what they had trained for. The NSG was an intervention force meant to rescue hostages according to a well-rehearsed assault plan that had been adequately shaped by intelligence reports. The marine commandos were experts in undersea warfare and demolition, who were only drafted into the counterterrorist response on 26/11 because of their superior combat skills. Both forces did the best that they could, but, in retrospect, it is clear that they would have needed much greater numbers if they were to conduct both missions—evacuate civilians and hunt down the terrorists— simultaneously. Also, it must not be forgotten that they had to do all this in an information vacuum. They did not even know the layout of the buildings they were operating in, much less the terrorists' exact location.

Finally, the Navy and NSG together evacuated roughly a thousand civilians who had been trapped in the two hotel complexes. The Navy in particular, deserves credit for rescuing at least 200 civilians who

were at imminent risk of death in the chambers area of the Taj Palace. Western tourists later informed their countries' intelligence agencies that the Indian security forces had behaved professionally and courteously during the evacuation.[26] During the entire 60-hour terrorist attack, only one civilian was confirmed killed as a result of cross-firing between the terrorists and security forces. All other civilian deaths had been cold-blooded executions, often consisting of a gunshot to the head.

Using these criteria, one could say that the Indian security forces produced a flawed, but valiant, effort on 26/11. The flaws were due to systemic weaknesses relating to lack of funds for specialised equipment and trained manpower, but these cannot be assumed to have led to a higher loss of life. Instead, they may have stretched out the attack, by slowing down the speed of evacuation and room clearance operations. The Mumbai police did a bad job, but largely due to a lack of nerve on the part of their top leaders as well as poor command and control. Having never 'wargamed' such a crisis, the police were psychologically ill-suited to dealing with its numbing effect. In the years since, Mumbai has raised a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) squad named Force One, which has been rated as quite professional by NSG experts. Whether this capability would be a real improvement over the QRTs is another question, as Mumbai has a history of experimenting with 'special' police units, only to disband them after a few years or divert their personnel to other duties.

There have been at least eight major terrorist attacks since 26/11 bearing a strong resemblance to the carnage that was wreaked upon Mumbai. These are: the massacre of children at a summer camp in Norway (2011); the attack on expatriate workers at a gas facility in Algeria (2013); the Westgate Mall attack in Kenya (2013); the massacre of schoolchildren in Peshawar, Pakistan (2014); the Garissa University attack in Kenya (2015); the Paris Massacres of January and November 2015; and the Orlando nightclub shooting in the United States (2016). The number of killers varied in these incidents, as did their motives and the duration of the attacks. In each case, however, several civilians were killed before security forces intervened effectively. The massacre in Norway was perpetrated by a 'lone-wolf terrorist' armed only with semiautomatic weapons; still, he managed to kill 77 children before surrendering to the authorities. Western policymakers should keep in mind two facts about the risk of 26/11 style attacks: 1) Rich societies

are as vulnerable to terrorism as developing societies; and 2) having better-equipped police forces does not necessarily translate into more public security when an incident actually occurs. Case-specific preparation is required. Just because resource-starved Indian security forces were slower to respond in Mumbai than their Western counterparts might have been, this does not imply that the West can terminate 'active shooter' incidents without incurring similarly high levels of casualties.

One lesson that can be drawn from Mumbai is that government communication during a crisis is vital. The Indian public relations effort was shambolic, with military and civilian authorities rushing to brief the media without coordinating with each other. Sensitive information was leaked by talkative ministers unaware of its operational ramifications. Briefings were ad hoc, feeding the international media with the impression of a multi-headed and bombastic security leadership. In future attacks, it is necessary that the media should be 'managed' in order to keep them away from areas where security operations are underway, and, if that is impossible, to keep them from broadcasting operations in real-time. It is also necessary to identify a storyline early enough which can be weaved into post-incident commentary by sympathetic journalists who can shape the public impression in a manner that favours the government. After 26/11, the Indian media had a field day criticising the political leadership, inadvertently giving ammunition to India's enemies, including Pakistan—in short, they were blaming the victim (India). In the process, what was conveniently obfuscated was the fact that 26/11 was an exceptional attack because it was state-sponsored. Only recently (in summer 2016) has the Indian media woken up to the fact that the Pakistani government actively interfered with the security response to 26/11. A few hours before the attack, Islamabad had ensured that officers of the Indian home ministry's internal security division (who were visiting Pakistan as part of a bilateral dialogue aimed at improving relations) were sequestered in a remote area beyond mobile phone coverage.[27] Once the attack began, their panicky subordinates tried to ring for orders, only to find that their supervisors were inaccessible. On reflection, it seems that Pakistan had a better understanding of how to carry out a coordinated 'whole-of-government' terrorist operation than India had of conducting a coordinated response.

Another lesson is that multiple crisis intelligence centres should be set up to pool information from any and all sources, regarding the

current situation in a terrorist-hit zone. Because so many incidents were reported across Mumbai in the early hours of the attack, the police were overwhelmed by panicked callers. It became difficult to sift fact from fiction. The same problem will arise in the future — a localised command and control structure needs to be put in place to deal with the threat of information overload. Situating of fusion centres and allocation of crisis-management responsibilities would depend on which areas intelligence agencies identify as 'high-risk.' Usually, there is some warning of a terrorist group's general intention to strike a locality. Unfortunately, the security practice in India has been to act on such warnings piecemeal, not to introduce systemic changes that ensure an entire urban zone can be 'hardened' against terrorist attack. By liaising with business owners and holding regular drills to assess the speed of counterterrorist responses, police forces can minimise the damage done in the opening stages of an attack. It is worth noting that at both the Taj Palace and the Oberoi Trident, it was the professionalism of the hotel staff which saved many lives. Thinking on their feet, staffers ensured that guests were herded into safe areas, kept calm and evacuated at the first opportunity. If employees at public buildings and major multinational companies could be routinely sensitised about emergency protocols to be followed in event of a terrorist attack, it would make the job of security forces much easier.

Finally, the most important lesson of 26/11 is that fighting defensively is a foolish policy. Planners of mass murder take a voyeuristic thrill in watching death hundreds of miles away, knowing that modern technology allows them to ratchet up the level of destruction by a phone call to their cadres on the ground. Ordinary methods of criminal justice do not work against such individuals. India has long tried to get the Pakistani state to implement its own laws against terrorist groups who target Indian citizens. This approach has failed. The masterminds of 26/11 still roam freely under ISI protection.[28] Although there are grounds for restraint in the targeting of high-profile LeT and ISI leaders, no hesitation is needed in the case of mid-rank cadres. Individuals such as Sajid Majeed can and should be physically liquidated at the earliest opportunity. Islamabad claims that Majeed—the main link between the ISI and LeT in the 26/11 case—does not exist, even though he has been designated a global terrorist by the United States.[29] By Pakistani logic, the Indian government would not be violating any law if it quietly vaporises a 'non-existent' person together with his 'non-existent' ISI bodyguards. Since Islamabad insists that it is committed

to combating terrorism, it can hardly object if international terrorist fugitives are killed within its jurisdiction. As the United States killed Osama bin Laden, so too must India neutralise LeT operatives in Pakistan through a campaign of assassination.

Conclusion

It is worth remembering that during and immediately after the 26/11 attack, both domestic and foreign commentators with little operational insight lambasted Indian intelligence agencies and security forces. Condescending statements about lack of professionalism were made by armchair Western analysts, secure in the knowledge that their own countries did not face a large-scale and state-sponsored terrorist threat from any adjacent territory. Such insouciance has disappeared after the November 2015 Paris attack. Europe is now worried about more shooting rampages that could convert its touristic old town squares and city centres into jihadist death traps. There is a greater sense of appreciation that stopping multiple active shooters, who have reconnoitred their targets beforehand and possess tactical skills, is an immensely complex task. Blood will be spilt. This work is intended to educate counterterrorism practitioners about some of the challenges faced in 2008 by the Indian security establishment, as well as highlight the growing relevance of these same challenges for the West.

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Notes

1 One American analyst describes Mumbai as the 'gold standard for how a small group of suicidal fanatics can paralyse a major city, attract global attention, and terrorise a continent.' See Bruce Riedel, 'Modeled on Mumbai? Why the 2008 India attack is the best way to understand Paris', *Brookings.edu*, 14 November 2015, accessed online at http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/11/14-paris-attacks-mumbai-isis-terrorism-riedel, on 17 June 2016.

2 Assaf Moghadam (2013) How Al Qaeda Innovates, *Security Studies*, 22:3, p. 467.

3 For an academic treatment of this issue, see Arabinda Acharya and Sonal Marwah (2011), Nizam, la Tanzim (System, not Organisation): Do Organizations Matter in Terrorism Today? A Study of the November 2008 Mumbai Attacks, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34:1, pp. 1-16.

4 The information was provided to the author by a former US Central Intelligence Agency official in June 2011 and corroborated by a serving top officer of the Indian Research & Analysis Wing a few days later.

5 See indictment by Special July 2010 Grand Jury in US District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, available at https://www.justice.gov/archive/usao/iln/chicago/2011/pr0425_01a.pdf, accessed on 17 June 2016.

6 For brief biographies of some of the key conspirators in LeT and the ISI, see http://pib.nic.in/archieve/others/2011/may/d2011050901.pdf, accessed online on 17 June 2016.

7 Praveen Swami (2003), Terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir: Theory and Practice, in Sumit Ganguly ed. *The Kashmir Question: Retrospect and Prospect* (London: Frank Cass), p. 81.

8 Marika Vicziany (2007) Understanding the 1993 Mumbai Bombings: Madrassas and the Hierarchy of Terror, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 30:1, p. 45.

9 For an insider account of how Pakistani complicity in the 1993 bombings was established, see B. Raman, 'Lessons from the Mumbai blasts', *Rediff.com*, 14 March 2003, accessed online at http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/mar/14raman.htm, on 17 June 2016.

10 Saroj Kumar Rath (2014) New terrorist threat to India's internal security: the danger from Pakistan's "Karachi Project", *Defense & Security Analysis*, 30:3, p. 199.

11 For a thorough study of the interface between the Indian Mujahideen and the Lashkar-e-Taiba, see Shishir Gupta (2012), *Indian Mujahideen: The Enemy Within* (Gurgaon: Hachette).

12 *Interrogation Report of David Coleman Headley*, compiled by the Indian National Investigation Agency, 2010, p. 61.

13 This claim has been disputed by some Indian intelligence officials. They insist that the actual number of warnings was lower, and that Western intelligence agencies proved reluctant to share information that could compromise Pakistan for being a state-sponsor of terrorism. Allegedly, this reluctance continues to this day, with British and American intelligence agencies unwilling to share electronic intercepts obtained during the period 26-29 November 2008, which would demonstrate real-time supervision of the attack by the ISI. See Praveen Swami, '26/11: 7 years on, India waits for West intelligence on 'ISI links", *The Hindu*, 19 February 2016, accessed online at http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/david-headley-mumbai-attack-2611-7-years-on-india-waits-for-west-intelligence-on-isi-links/, on 17 June 2016.

14 Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark (2013), *The Siege: The Attack on the Taj*

(New Delhi: Penguin), pp. 25-26.

15 Conversation with the same R&AW officer referred to in footnote 3. An officer within the Indian Intelligence Bureau, though not commenting on the specificities of the CIA's handling of Gilani, readily stated that the Americans played a double game against India in the hope of getting information on Al Qaeda through Gilani.

16 For a good analysis of this point, please read Sanjay Badri-Maharaj (2009), The Mumbai Attacks: Lessons to be Learnt from the Police Response, *Journal of Defence Studies*, 3: 2, pp. 145-156.

17 'Pradhan Committee finds serious lapses on Gafoor's part', *The Hindu*, 21 December 2009, accessed online at http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/pradhan-committee-finds-serious-lapses-on-gafoors-part/article68262.ece, on 17 June 2016.

18 Levy and Scott-Clark, *The Siege*, pp. 128-129 and p. 207.

19 Sandeep Unnithan (2014), *Black Tornado: The Three Sieges of Mumbai* (New Delhi: Harper Collins), p. 56.

20 Syed Saleem Shahzad (2011), *Inside Al Qaeda and the Taliban* (London: Pluto Press), pp. 82-83.

21 Siddharth Varadarajan, 'Dossier: handlers used virtual number to contact a mobile with one of the terrorists', *The Hindu*, 7 January 2009, accessed online at http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/dossier-handlers-used-virtual-number-to-contact-a-mobile-with-one-of-the-terrorists/article369913.ece, on 17 June 2016.

22 Unnithan, *Black Tornado*, p. 93.

23 Anonymous, 2009, Fighting from room to room, in *Inside 26/11*, edited by the Indian Express Team (New Delhi: Rupa), p. 39.

24 Saroj Kumar Rath (2014), *Fragile Frontiers: The Secret History of Mumbai Terror Attacks* (New Delhi: Routledge), pp. 151-152.

25 Praveen Swami, 'Five years after 26/11, Intelligence services still crippled by staff shortage', *The Hindu*, 26 November 2013, accessed online at http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/five-years-after-2611-intelligence-services-still-crippled-by-staff-shortage/article5391698.ece, on 9 February 2016.

26 Author's conversation with an Australian intelligence officer, 2009.

27 'Counterterrorism officers were in Pakistan as 26/11 unfolded: Ex-MHA officer', *Times of India*, 10 June 2016, accessed online at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Counterterrorism-officers-were-in-Pakistan-as-26/11-unfolded-Ex-MHA-officer/articleshow/52695352.cms, on 17 June 2016.

28 Sebastian Rotella, 'Four Disturbing Questions About the Mumbai Terror Attack', *ProPublica*, 22 February 2013, accessed online at https://www.propublica.org/article/four-disturbing-questions-about-the-mumbai-terror-attack, on 17 June 2016.

29 US Department of the Treasury Press Release, 'Treasury Designates Lashkar-E-Tayyiba Leadership', 30 August 2012, accessed online at https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1694.aspx, on 17 June 2016.