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Terrorism and Indo-Pakistani Escalation

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INTRODUCTION

India faces the real prospect of another major terrorist attack by Pakistan-based terrorist organizations in the near future. Unlike the aftermath of the November 2008 attack on Mumbai, in which 166 people died, Indian military restraint cannot be taken for granted if terrorists strike again. An Indian retaliatory strike against terrorist targets on Pakistani soil would raise Indo-Pakistani tensions and could even set off a spiral of violent escalation between the nuclear-armed rivals. Given Washington's effort to intensify pressure on al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and associated militants operating from Pakistani territory, increased tensions between India and Pakistan would harm U.S. interests even if New Delhi and Islamabad stop well short of the nuclear threshold because it would distract Pakistan from counterterror and counterinsurgency operations, jeopardize the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, and place new, extreme stresses on Islamabad.

ASSESSING THE LIKELIHOOD OF ATTACK AND ESCALATION

The threat of another Mumbai-type attack is undeniable; numerous Pakistan-based groups remain motivated and able to strike Indian targets. Many of these groups have incentives to act as spoilers, whether to disrupt efforts to improve Indo-Pakistani relations or to distract Islamabad from counter-terror crackdowns at home. Thus the immediate risk of terrorism may actually increase if New Delhi and Islamabad make progress on resolving their differences or if Pakistan-based terrorists are effectively backed into a corner.

Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed are the two terrorist groups that have proven themselves the most capable and motivated to carry out attacks in India. Al-Qaeda has historically focused its efforts outside India, but if the group's leadership feels threatened in the Pakistan/Afghanistan border areas, it might direct and assist regional proxies to attack India as a way to ignite a distracting Indo-Pakistani confrontation. Other regional terrorist groups, including those based in India, are improving their capacity to inflict mass-casualty violence, but because these groups lack clear-cut connections to Pakistan-based organizations, their attacks are far less likely to spark another crisis between India and Pakistan.

The more clearly a terrorist attack can be identified as having originated in Pakistan, the more likely India is to retaliate militarily. Groups that India perceives to have closer links with Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment—especially LeT—are more likely to inspire retaliation against official Pakistani state targets than those that are perceived as more autonomous, such as al-Qaeda.

In addition to the identity of the terrorists, several other factors are likely to influence India's response. The two most important factors are the death toll and the terrorists' choice of target. Three types of targets would plausibly elicit a significant Indian military reprisal. Listed in descending order of likelihood, they include: (1) India's national political leadership, as exemplified by the December 2001 attack on parliament; (2) major urban centers, especially if radiological, chemical, or biological weapons are used to kill or injure a large number of civilians; and (3) symbols of national unity and strength, such as religious/cultural sites or centers of scientific/economic achievement.

The context of the attacks will also help to determine the potential for escalation. The perception in India that Islamabad has responded inadequately to the Mumbai attacks—trials of accused plotters are moving slowly and LeT ideologue Hafiz Muhammad Saeed is not in custody—strengthens Indian advocates for unilateral military retaliation. Should multiple attacks occur in quick succession, the

cumulative effect would further diminish India's inclination for restraint. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been a strong voice against Indian military retaliation, but his voice could be silenced by a future attack or otherwise drowned out by domestic political pressures.

India's policies will also hinge upon its calculations regarding the efficacy of military action as a counterterror tool and a means to compel Pakistan to take more aggressive action against terrorists on its own soil. After the attacks in Mumbai, India's leadership doubted its military options in both respects. Instead, New Delhi placed greater stock in an indirect approach; by showing restraint, India sought to induce the United States to pressure Pakistan. This gamble has not yet paid off to India's satisfaction. Unless it does, New Delhi will be less likely to place a similar bet the next time around.

India's retaliatory capabilities span a wide spectrum. If New Delhi determines that its assailants acted with little or indirect assistance from Pakistan's military or intelligence agencies, its most likely response would be to conduct airstrikes against suspected terrorist training camps in Pakistan. During these operations, India would attempt to limit civilian casualties and direct combat with the Pakistani military to reduce the prospects for escalation. Such an attack would not significantly curtail the terrorist threat, but it might satisfy India's domestic compulsions to punish the perpetrators.

The more egregious the terrorist attack and the more India's leadership is convinced that members of the Pakistani state sponsored it, the more it will be treated as an act of war. Under these conditions, New Delhi would consider a wider range of options, including, for instance, a large ground-force mobilization of the sort India conducted in 2001–2002 in the wake of the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament or a naval blockade. Unless the initial terrorist attack is nuclear—which is implausible for now because Pakistani terrorists do not appear to have access to nuclear materials or the capacity to utilize them—India would refrain from using its nuclear weapons in retaliation.

Pakistan's leaders would come under tremendous domestic pressure (and for the most part would be inclined) to counter nearly any sort of Indian military retaliation. Even the least invasive of India's possible military options, such as a resumption of artillery shelling across the Line of Control—the de facto border between Indian- and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir—Pakistan's military and civilian leadership would be consumed by the crisis and distracted from other issues. Pakistan's military response could be intentionally disproportionate to the initial Indian attack so as to compel the international community to force a ceasefire. That said, Pakistan's present government and military command also have meaningful incentives to calibrate their actions from the start, not least the desire to limit international pressure and to retain ties with partners in Beijing, Riyadh, and Washington.

A military exchange between India and Pakistan sparked by a terrorist attack in India is not likely to cross the nuclear threshold. Several conceivable circumstances could alter this conclusion, but two stand out: (1) India suffers additional catastrophic terrorist attacks in the midst of the crisis, driving it to intensify the conflict to a point where Pakistan's army determines it cannot defend the state by conventional means, and (2) Pakistan's nuclear command, as yet untested by major conventional attacks, is blinded or confused to the point that it authorizes a first strike.

POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES FOR U.S. INTERESTS

Aside from U.S. humanitarian concerns, the need to protect American citizens and business interests in South Asia, and the risk of nuclear escalation whenever tension rises between India and Pakistan, Washington's immediate concern in the event of another terrorist attack in India lies in avoiding an

Indo-Pakistani crisis that would undermine the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan or distract Pakistan from ongoing counterterror and counterinsurgency operations.

The potential disruption of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan stems in part from the fact that Pakistan serves as a vital—in many ways irreplaceable—logistics hub and overland corridor for U.S. and NATO operations. An Indo-Pakistani military confrontation could close Pakistan’s ports or otherwise delay shipments for a significant time. Short of war, if Islamabad believes Washington is ignoring its concerns, it can manipulate these supply routes to demonstrate its strategic value to Washington. As the Obama administration ramps up its military commitment in Afghanistan, Washington’s logistical dependence upon Pakistan will only deepen.

Previous Indo-Pakistani crises show that Pakistan’s military will give greater priority to the threat from India than to the threat from militants operating along the Afghan border. At the very least, a crisis with India would compel Pakistan’s general staff to redirect attention and time from ongoing operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and could derail intelligence and law enforcement activities connected to a range of counterterror efforts. Even a relatively brief disruption of these activities could impose high costs on the United States, given the fact that al-Qaeda and other anti-Western terrorist groups operate from Pakistani territory.

More broadly, the United States would also suffer if an Indo-Pakistani crisis weakens the stability and capacity of Pakistan’s government or creates new, long-lasting tensions between U.S. partners in New Delhi and Islamabad. The frailty of Pakistan’s governing institutions already offers a permissive environment to antistate militants and extremists. A failed military exchange with India could deliver a body blow to the legitimacy and authority of Pakistani state institutions, opening even more space for extreme alternatives. And although the United States has lived through periods of intense Indo-Pakistani hostility in the past, there has never been a time when bilateral relations with the two countries were simultaneously considered as strategically prized as they are today. Washington’s interest in Indo-Pakistani détente also grows the more the United States invests in Afghanistan’s stability; heightened violence between warring Afghan proxies supported by India and Pakistan would be an almost certain consequence of new hostilities between New Delhi and Islamabad.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS TO PREVENT A TERRORIST ATTACK

Defensive Counterterror Operations

After the attacks in Mumbai, Washington and New Delhi increased their joint investigative efforts, achieving an unprecedented level of cooperation that included significant contributions by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. Although “success” in an endeavor of this sort is always a moving target, the Indian home minister has claimed that several follow-on attacks were foiled in 2009. Since India still lacks adequate intelligence collection capacity, highly trained, equipped, and mobile security forces and protection units for VIPs, and disaster preparedness programs to help limit mass casualties, the United States could share its own resources. For Washington, the primary complicating factor in sharing intelligence or enhancing India’s own collection capacity is the need to avoid actions that Islamabad will perceive as threatening its national security.

Washington could provide defensive counterterrorism aid to Pakistan as well. The United States has a strong interest in obstructing terrorist access to nuclear, chemical, biological, and radiological weapons, materials, and/or know-how. Washington already works with the Pakistani army to im-

prove the safety and security of its nuclear program, but Islamabad's political sensitivities and U.S. nonproliferation laws and treaty obligations—including the U.S. Atomic Energy Act and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)—severely constrain the scale and scope of these activities. Washington could consider amending its laws to permit closer engagement with Pakistan's nuclear program. Even so, it will be difficult to win sufficient Pakistani confidence to permit direct U.S. involvement in implementing security and safety measures for the nuclear arsenal. As for other weapons of mass destruction, Washington could work with Pakistani law enforcement authorities to collect information about points of access to materials and individuals with sufficient training and then provide financial and technical assistance to better monitor these potential threats.

Offensive Counterterror Operations

Progress in efforts to dismantle terrorist groups that operate inside Pakistan is harder to judge. After Mumbai, Pakistan shut down some facilities linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba and its associated humanitarian organization, Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), and made a number of arrests. However, the limited extent of this effort raises serious questions about whether Islamabad is fully willing and able to tackle LeT/JuD in the same way it has gone after elements of the Pakistani Taliban and other extremist sectarian groups in the past. Washington's unilateral ability to act against members of these groups and their associates in Pakistan is also circumscribed by public and official sensitivity about U.S. violations of Pakistan's territorial sovereignty. U.S. intelligence or military operations directed against these groups inside Pakistan might jeopardize ongoing cooperation with Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment in pursuit of other high-priority U.S. goals. Lower risk approaches would include increasing diplomatic pressure on Islamabad to crack down on militant facilities and leaders throughout Pakistan and underwriting demobilization, deradicalization, and vocational education projects for reconcilable members of these organizations.

If the United States is willing to accept greater risk to ongoing cooperative ventures with Pakistan, it might seek to infiltrate LeT and affiliated groups to collect intelligence, foil plots, spread disinformation, and locate specific members for arrest or elimination. Recent allegations that U.S. citizens have independently sought training from LeT suggest that infiltration is a realistic proposition. Absent successful infiltration, Washington could use a range of other standard intelligence tools to track and weaken LeT and could consider attacking terrorist bases inside Pakistan. U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles already target militant groups based along the Afghan border, and, on at least one reported occasion in September 2008, U.S. helicopter-borne commandos raided a militant compound inside Pakistan. That attack spurred a particularly sharp, negative reaction from Pakistan's army, punctuated by a threat to shoot down U.S. aircraft should they again stray into Pakistani airspace. Efforts to extend drone attacks or commando raids farther from the Afghan border and/or into Pakistan's urban centers would be more technically challenging and would also increase the possibility that the Pakistani military, or public, will react harshly.

Deterrent Actions

To the extent that Pakistan-based terrorists are willing to die for their cause, it will be impossible for Washington to level threats that deter them from plotting acts against India. Accordingly, the U.S. deterrent effort must focus on the less ideologically committed facilitators who make it possible for terrorists to operate in Pakistan. Washington can make credible threats against these individuals only

if they are located and if effective points of leverage (such as threats to physical or financial security) are identified. Intelligence operations of this sort would be extremely difficult without some measure of official Pakistani assistance, but might be possible in selected instances.

Pakistan's terrorists operate within a nearly ideal recruiting ground of extreme anti-Americanism, poverty, and limited educational opportunities. The United States could try to reduce the overarching threat posed by extremism in Pakistan, but its efforts are unlikely to pay off in the near term. Even so, U.S. public diplomacy, ideally backed by influential Muslim voices from the region, could be targeted at reducing the popular Pakistani view that waging jihad through terrorism is a religiously or socially justifiable activity. In addition, U.S. economic assistance and trade policy can be crafted with special attention to enhancing opportunities for young, at-risk Pakistani men. But given that some of the most sophisticated international terrorists come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, and that only very small numbers of recruits are needed to execute acts of spectacular violence, these developmental approaches will never take the place of aggressive law enforcement.

Diplomacy and Domestic Politics

Despite its obvious interest in improving relations between New Delhi and Islamabad, Washington should resist the temptation to impose itself as a mediator in Indo-Pakistani normalization efforts. Recent history suggests that India and Pakistan can conduct serious bilateral talks without U.S. mediation, and that a public U.S. mediation effort would likely prove counterproductive, in part because New Delhi would resist it.

India and Pakistan can do little to convince extremists of the merits of bilateral normalization, but leaders in both countries could do more to mobilize domestic political constituents behind any new formal or back-channel negotiating process. In the event of a terrorist spoiler attack, these efforts could help to mitigate political pressures for military escalation. As part of a discreet effort to facilitate better relations between India and Pakistan, Washington could quietly counsel political and military leaders about the need to insulate future negotiations from a domestic political backlash in the event of another terrorist attack.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS TO MANAGE/MITIGATE A CRISIS

Even if efforts to prevent another terrorist attack fall short, the United States has meaningful policy options to manage a future Indo-Pakistani crisis and avoid the worst scenarios of destabilizing military escalation. Some of these policies would need to be in place before the next crisis starts, while others might be implemented after it does.

Pre-Crisis Measures

One lesson to be gleaned from the 2008 attack on Mumbai is that the Indian government felt tremendous domestic political pressure to take action, even if the prime minister believed that military retaliation would prove counterproductive. To help appease popular sentiment and respond to critics within and outside the governing coalition, the Congress Party leadership took several nonmilitary steps, including announcing a pause in its “composite dialogue” with Pakistan, approaching the UN Security Council to proscribe JuD as a terrorist organization, and canceling a

tour of Pakistan by India’s national cricket team. In the months after Mumbai, India used many similar diplomatic “safety valves” to the point that few remain today in the event of another crisis.

Washington could encourage New Delhi to reinstitute similar mechanisms and identify new ones. Obvious points of departure include organizing an expanded range of people-to-people interactions, restarting working-level dialogues on technical issues such as trade and communication, and identifying multilateral settings—not limited to the United Nations—where India could take its case to the international community in the event of another attack. That said, the potential value of these safety valves must be balanced against the prospect that they could also inspire terrorists to launch a spoiler attack. More technical and procedural steps are less likely to provoke extremist groups than are symbolically charged actions, such as high-level summits and joint declarations.

A second lesson from the Mumbai attack is that crisis communication between Indian and Pakistani governments is inadequate. Washington served as an essential, trusted interlocutor and intelligence transmission belt for both sides. Before the next crisis, Washington could work to improve communication, particularly between civilian officials. As another means to calm nerves or counsel restraint in the midst of a crisis, Washington could leverage the influence of—and coordinate its diplomacy with—other major regional and global players, including China, Great Britain, and Saudi Arabia. Building the technical means and political consensus to convene a small Indo-Pakistani crisis contact group on short notice would enhance U.S. capacity in this respect.

Over the years, Washington has compiled a standard tool kit to improve crisis stability between India and Pakistan. U.S.-sponsored track-two dialogues between Indian and Pakistani political and military leaders have emphasized the danger of inadvertent or accidental escalation beyond the nuclear threshold and the urgent need for unified command, control, and communications systems. In spite of these and related efforts, communications between Pakistan’s chief policymakers appear to have suffered multiple breakdowns after Mumbai. One breakdown led to the sacking of the national security adviser by the prime minister; another created ill-timed confusion over whether the nation’s chief intelligence official would travel to New Delhi for consultations.

Divisions between civil and military leaders continue to plague Pakistani politics and are unlikely to be resolved soon. If Pakistan’s president and army chief choose not to coordinate their decision processes, no technical solution or institutional mechanism will fully fill the void. At the margins, however, Washington could make inroads by sharing its concerns with Pakistan’s army and political leaders and supporting the creation of an apolitical civil-military crisis-management cell to improve information-sharing and coordination in the heat of Indo-Pakistani tensions.

Aside from building diplomatic and coordination mechanisms, Washington could also prepare tools for coercing and inducing New Delhi and Islamabad away from military escalation. Granted, the recent U.S. track record on this score is mixed. In instances when either side felt its supreme national security to be at risk—such as during the 1998 nuclear tests—no combination of U.S. carrots or sticks could shake New Delhi or Islamabad from its path. On the other hand, Washington played an important role in walking back conflicts on several occasions, including in 1990, 1999, and 2001–2002, in each instance placing pressure on Islamabad and convincing New Delhi that many of its core demands were better achieved through diplomacy than through force. Yet Washington’s ability to induce restraint by making promises to New Delhi may be ending, as New Delhi believes that past guarantees have yielded too little. Washington would improve its negotiating position with India’s leadership if Islamabad convicts those responsible for prior attacks.

Washington’s ability to threaten sanctions becomes more powerful the more Indian and Pakistani militaries and economies are tied to those of the United States. To the extent that India and

Pakistan purchase or receive weapons systems and platforms manufactured in the United States, they become tied to U.S. suppliers for parts and technologies that could be withheld or slowed by Washington. Washington's influence in multilateral settings also offers a potential means of coercive leverage. At present, for instance, Pakistan is especially beholden to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in which the United States has a powerful voting stake.

On the economic front, if Washington were to extend new preferential trade opportunities to Pakistan, particularly for textiles and garments, they would also offer coercive leverage in a time of crisis. Even the relatively mundane decision to revise official U.S. travel advisories can influence the behavior of U.S. investors and multinational corporations, imposing costs on Indian and Pakistani markets and mobilizing regional businessmen as advocates for stability and de-escalation. To take one step further, preparing plans for U.S. noncombatant evacuation operations in South Asia could also enhance Washington's capacity to level credible economic threats on short notice.

In general, coercive measures are more likely to succeed with Pakistan than with India, in part because the Pakistani state depends more on military and economic assistance from the United States and its allies. Poised on the edge of bankruptcy, Pakistan may be particularly susceptible to economic diplomacy unless it perceives an immediate, existential threat from India. That said, Washington must keep in mind that coercive threats can be costly to U.S. interests. If U.S. threats jeopardize other essential aspects of cooperation with Islamabad and New Delhi, or if they undermine the basic stability of the Pakistani state, they may do more harm than good, even if they avert some degree of military escalation in the near term.

Crisis Measures

Once an Indo-Pakistani crisis starts, Washington's policy options become more limited. One immediate U.S. goal would be to prevent rash actions by either side. Emphasizing the need for a thorough and comprehensive investigation of the terrorist attack, including support from U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies, is one way to introduce tactical delays. Other methods include scheduling a series of senior-level official visits to the region and calling for a special multilateral session—through the United Nations or otherwise—shortly after the attack.

If Washington judges that restraining Indian military action is possible and advisable, U.S. diplomats could begin by warning New Delhi of the economic harm to come from military action and reminding India's leaders of the costs and frustrations associated with the military standoff of 2001–2002. The U.S. government could escalate its pressure by publicly calling for restraint, seeking a congressional resolution that lends bipartisan weight to the message, and encouraging U.S. business leaders with operations and partners in India to express similar concerns through their own private channels. These messages could be combined with a forceful reiteration of Washington's intent to assist India's counterterror operations in the future and to press for the elimination of Pakistan-based terrorist groups.

If the initial terrorist attack is particularly egregious and Washington perceives that Indian retaliation is unavoidable, it has at least two fallback options to limit the escalation of Indo-Pakistani violence. First, the United States could identify the sorts of Indian military operations that are least likely to prompt a significant counterattack from Islamabad, such as surgical airstrikes on a small number of terrorist camps away from urban centers. Washington could privately inform India's leadership that if it stays within these bounds, the United States would provide diplomatic support against international pressure and prevail upon Pakistan to curb its own response. If available,

Washington could also share intelligence about specific terrorist camps that are located away from cities and less likely to spark a direct clash with the Pakistani military. Washington could couple these inducements with threats of diplomatic, economic, and military sanctions if India undertakes more expansive retaliatory actions that target Pakistani population centers or leadership and unduly jeopardize U.S. military and counterterror missions in the region.

If Washington judges that New Delhi is preparing a retaliatory strike that threatens the stability of the Pakistani state, raises an acute risk of nuclear war, or immediately threatens U.S. operations in the region, it has a second option of last resort. To stay the Indian hand, Washington could once again promise to pressure Pakistan into taking more aggressive action against terrorist groups operating on its soil. But to win New Delhi's confidence this time, Washington would need to deliver a new, more menacing ultimatum to Islamabad: "Deal with the terrorists or we will." To make this threat credible, the United States would have to determine that (a) it has the military capacity to address Indian concerns by eliminating important terrorist cells, perhaps using drone strikes or commando raids, and (b) the costs that such an ultimatum would impose on the U.S.-Pakistan relationship are less than the costs that would be imposed by India's military operations. Only under the most extreme circumstances could this option serve U.S. interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States has a clear interest in preventing an Indo-Pakistani crisis. To defend against a terrorist attack, Washington should share information and technical tools with India and work with Pakistan to clamp down on materials that might be used in weapons of mass destruction. Washington should also press Islamabad to accelerate the judicial process against the Mumbai plotters and crack down on militants throughout Pakistan. If U.S. cooperation with Islamabad proves inadequate, Washington should develop its own capacity to infiltrate or attack these groups. Over time, U.S. assistance and public diplomacy could begin to address the socioeconomic roots of Pakistani extremism, but they cannot provide a short term substitute for counterterror efforts.

Washington should not impose itself in Indo-Pakistani negotiations, but should quietly advise both sides to try to insulate their diplomacy from the political backlash sought by terrorist spoilers. To limit prospects for military escalation, the United States should identify new diplomatic "safety valves" for New Delhi and work to improve the quality of crisis communication. Washington should pre-assemble an Indo-Pakistani crisis contact group that includes states with regional influence. To enhance its coercive leverage, Washington should expand its business and military ties with both countries. To avoid breakdowns in Pakistani crisis management, the United States should share its concerns with Islamabad and offer its technical support for a coordination cell.

If another Indo-Pakistani crisis unfolds, Washington should introduce tactical delays to prevent rash actions. The United States must be prepared to assess the likelihood and acceptability of an Indian military reprisal and should either forestall it through tough diplomacy or accept less desirable fallback options. In a worst-case scenario, Washington would have to choose between accepting an Indian strike on Pakistan and leveling its own coercive military threats against Islamabad.

Under any circumstances, the United States should try to avoid policies that are likely to rule out effective working relationships with Islamabad and New Delhi once the crisis is over; both states will remain essential to U.S. regional and global interests over the long run.

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The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. It does so by creating a forum in which representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and civil society can gather to develop operational and timely strategies for promoting peace in specific conflict situations. The center focuses on conflicts in countries or regions that affect U.S. interests, but may be otherwise overlooked; where prevention appears possible; and when the resources of the Council on Foreign Relations can make a difference. The center does this by

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- Building networks with international organizations and institutions to complement and leverage the Council's established influence in the U.S. policy arena and increase the impact of CPA's recommendations.
- Providing a source of expertise on conflict prevention to include research, case studies, and lessons learned from past conflicts that policymakers and private citizens can use to prevent or mitigate future deadly conflicts.