After the Mumbai siege, India-Pakistan tensions rise

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The political fallout from last week's terrorist siege of Mumbai is beginning to emerge in India and neighbouring Pakistan. Tensions between the two nuclear-armed rivals are on the rise as the Indian government, facing a barrage of criticism at home, seeks to pin the blame for the attacks on Pakistan.

India's Ministry of External Affairs summoned Pakistan's High Commissioner Shahid Malik yesterday to issue a formal demand that Islamabad take "strong action" against those responsible for the 60-hour rampage that left at least 172 people dead and 239 injured. In a letter handed to Malik, New Delhi criticised Islamabad for allowing "the use of Pakistani soil for terrorist activities".

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, India also demanded that Pakistan hand over two terror suspects—Dawood Ibrahim and Maulana Masood Azhar—warning that relations between the two countries would suffer if swift action were not taken. While accused of involvement in previous terrorist attacks, neither man is directly implicated in the Mumbai outrage. Pakistan has previously refused to hand over the two men and the renewed demand is certain to fuel animosities in Islamabad.

The Pakistani government has repeatedly condemned the attacks in Mumbai, denied any involvement and offered to cooperate fully with Indian authorities. However, divisions are developing between the Pakistani military and a weak, unstable government that confronts a deep economic and political crisis at home. The *Dawn* newspaper reported "clear differences" when army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani met President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani.

Last week Islamabad offered to send the head of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI)—Pakistan's military intelligence—to India to assist in investigations. When the military top brass vetoed the plan, the government was forced to offer a junior ISI officer instead. Now even that proposal is in doubt. Indian media and politicians routinely accuse the ISI of responsibility for terrorist attacks inside India, particularly in the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir.

At this stage, it is still unclear who was responsible for the slaughter in Mumbai. Media reports in the course of the three-day siege were inconsistent and unreliable. Only now does it appear confirmed that just 10 gunmen were involved in the attacks at the Chhatrapati Shivaji railway station, Café Leopold, a Jewish centre and two luxury hotels—the Taj Mahal and Oberoi-Trident. They were all young, highly organised, well-trained and well-equipped.

Beyond these sketchy details, the only additional information comes from unnamed Indian officials involved in the interrogation of the one gunman captured alive. He is named as Ajmal Amir Kamal, a Pakistani citizen, who has allegedly told police that he belonged to the Kashmiri separatist outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba, trained in Pakistan, and arrived with the others in Mumbai via a captured Indian fishing vessel.

While it is certainly possible that Lashkar-e-Taiba or other Islamist militias based in Pakistan were involved, none of the details being circulated throughout the Indian and international media has been publicly confirmed by Indian authorities. And while it is also possible that a faction of the military or ISI supported the Mumbai attacks, it is unlikely that the Pakistani government was directly involved. It cannot be ruled out that other groups—including Indian-based extremists—were responsible.

Even though investigations are barely underway, the Indian government is already escalating its rhetoric against Pakistan. Yesterday's carpeting of the Pakistani high commissioner followed an all-party meeting in New Delhi on Sunday, presided over by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which canvassed various actions against Pakistan. All the parties involved, including the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), agreed India had to retaliate.

A number of steps are being openly discussed, including cancelling the India-Pakistan cricket series, cutting the size of India's diplomatic mission in Islamabad, putting the so-called composite dialogue between the two countries on hold, or, more provocatively, suspending the five-year-old ceasefire on the border. In an interview on Sunday, Indian Deputy Foreign Minister Anand Sharma declared: "We are a nation outraged right now. And such incidents are always a grave setback to the peace process between India and Pakistan. This time our response will be very serious."

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The government is under fire in the media for its inadequate response to the crisis, prompting a string of resignations. After a reportedly heated meeting of the ruling Congress Party, Home Minister Shivraj Patil resigned over the weekend. Yesterday, both the chief minister and deputy chief minister of the state of Maharashtra, which covers Mumbai, offered their resignations.

An angry protest took place yesterday outside the gutted Taj Mahal Hotel following a series of media reports that US and Indian intelligence warnings of an attack in Mumbai had been ignored. An article in yesterday's *Hindustan Times*, for instance, detailed a series of phone intercepts by India's external intelligence agency—the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)—stretching back to September that pointed to a possible attack by sea on hotels in Mumbai.

Such reports not only raise the question of incompetence, but whether sections of India's security apparatus might have allowed the attack to take place for their own political purposes. The Indian military has recently come under intense scrutiny following revelations that Hindu extremists in its ranks have been responsible for a spate of terrorist bombings. In the wake of the Mumbai atrocity, the issue has been conveniently brushed aside.

The real danger exists that the groundswell of popular anger over the Mumbai attacks will be diverted in reactionary directions. With national elections due next year, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is hoping to exploit the crisis by demanding tougher action on "terrorism" and against Pakistan. While initially supporting a unified national response, BJP leader L.K. Advani pointedly failed to attend Sunday's all-party meeting.

Seeking to undercut the BJP, Prime Minister Singh is already promising to bolster the country's security apparatus by establishing a new federal investigative agency and a boost to the army's commando units that were used to end the Mumbai siege. The BJP, however, is demanding that the government go further, calling for the reinstitution of the draconian POTA anti-terrorist laws, under which hundreds of "suspects" were previously held indefinitely without trial.

Ominously, the BJP is also calling for India to take action against "terrorist training camps" inside Pakistan. BJP leader Yashwant Sinha told the media: "It is time for unilateral action against the training camps in Pakistan. If the US can go into Afghanistan to punish the Taliban and chase Osama bin Laden, why should India hesitate?"

Such a step carries the grave danger of a rapid escalation into all-out war. The two countries have already fought three wars since independence in 1947. After an attack on the Indian parliament building by Kashmiri separatists in December 2001, India massed hundreds of thousands of troops, backed by tanks, artillery and warplanes, on the Pakistani border. For months, South Asia was on the brink of war before India pulled back under international pressure.

The Bush administration has dispatched US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to India in a bid to stem the rising tensions. Washington has a close strategic relationship with India, but is relying at the same time on Pakistan, both as a major supply route for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and to wage war against anti-US insurgents operating from Pakistan's tribal border areas. Pakistan authorities are threatening to pull out army units along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the event of a confrontation with India.

Rice has made clear that Washington intends to pressure Pakistan to meet Indian demands. She declared in London that the US expected "complete, absolute, total transparency and cooperation" from Pakistan. While pressing India to back away from any military action against Pakistan, the US will no doubt exploit the Mumbai attacks to insist that Islamabad steps up its support for Washington's bogus "war on terrorism" in Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding Washington's intervention, tensions between India and Pakistan can easily spiral out of control. Since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 into Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India, the ruling elites in each country have repeatedly responded to political crises by whipping up communal tensions at home and military confrontation with each other. Confronted with rising social discontent over the impact of the global economic crisis, the governments in both countries are once again under immense pressure.

As Kamran Bokhari, director of Middle East analysis for the Stratfor think tank, warned in the *Washington Post*: "The domestic politics of India, Pakistan and the United States are leading up to an inevitable flare-up on the Indo-Pakistani border. In cases like this, the preference of policy makers matters little. Each country is getting locked into place, and the logic appears to be pointing to a crisis."

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