

STIMSON

The Unfinished Crisis:
US Crisis Management after the 2008 Mumbai Attacks

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Preface

In late November 2008, a terrorist incident of extraordinary scale and duration occurred in Mumbai, India's largest city and commercial hub. Over three days at multiple Mumbai tourist and cultural landmarks, 172 people were killed. It quickly was determined that the attackers were members of Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT) who had come by sea from Pakistan to conduct the attack. The Mumbai crisis is now part of the long legacy of violent incidents short of full-scale war between India and Pakistan.

The purpose of this study is to provide policymakers in Washington, Islamabad, New Delhi, and beyond, useful insights into the conflict-management efforts in multiple capitals during and after this particular crisis. It also documents in vivid detail the events themselves, reminding us that international security analysis need not be dry and clinical, but can capture all the human drama and intrigue that are part of political relationships in times of crisis. Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon have made a valuable contribution to the literature on US policy towards South Asia and on counterterrorism. In a decade where many people perceive the US military as the key player in US global engagement, this study reminds us of the critical roles of diplomats, intelligence officers, and law enforcement professionals in defusing crises and managing the geopolitical consequences of a terrorist incident.

This study is the latest in a series of works by Stimson co-founder Michael Krepon and collaborating authors on South Asian security topics, from works on how to strengthen deterrence stability and prevent nuclear war between India and Pakistan, to a more recent focus on terrorism and crisis management.

The Stimson Center wishes to acknowledge the generosity of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the National Nuclear Security Administration, which support the Stimson Center's work on deterrence stability and regional security in South Asia. Stimson wishes to thank, in particular, Robert Gallucci, president of the MacArthur Foundation, who has long been engaged in these issues, as well as Amy Gordon and Emma Belcher. Our thanks go to Ann Harrington and Robert Swartz at the NNSA.

Sincerely,



Ellen Laipson, Stimson President and CEO

Executive Summary

- ▶ The 2008-2009 Mumbai crisis remains unfinished. Ignited by terror attacks in late-November 2008 that were demonstrably launched from Pakistan, Indian grievances remained unresolved, while Pakistani policies remain dangerously subject to miscalculation. Further attacks in India by extremists trained, equipped, and based in Pakistan can be expected, making another crisis likely.
- ▶ Senior officials in the outgoing Bush administration had prior experience in crisis management on the subcontinent. They executed a crisis management plan – “Plan A” – that included familiar elements: top-level diplomacy, high-level official visits, playing for time, and close cooperation with British officials. There was no Plan B.
- ▶ US crisis management in 2008-2009 also gave unprecedented weight to sharing evidence with India and Pakistan. A related innovation in managing this crisis was US forensics and intelligence assistance to Indian authorities investigating the attacks. Institutionalizing law enforcement ties to India—and expanding them to Pakistan—could help resolve future crises and bolster US relations with both sides.
- ▶ US crisis management was helped by improved US-Indian ties, but hampered by strained ties to Pakistan and poor civil-military relations within its leadership. A continuation of these trends could reduce Washington’s efficacy as an “honest broker” in future crises.
- ▶ Despite the spectacular nature of the 2008 Mumbai attacks and considerable loss of life, most US officials saw this crisis as less dangerous than the 1999 Kargil and 2001-2002 “Twin Peaks” crises. The Mumbai crisis carried risks of escalation, but the challenges facing US crisis managers were smaller in scope and duration.
- ▶ US and Indian leaders had very little leverage on Pakistani officials to take serious, lasting steps against Pakistan-based groups and individuals linked to attacks on Indian soil. The aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attacks confirmed anew that Pakistan’s military, political, and judicial authorities could not—or would not—take punitive action against the perpetrators.
- ▶ The mid-crisis presidential transition from the George W. Bush to the Barack Obama administration had little effect on crisis management moves open—or not open—to Washington. The constraints on US leverage and diplomatic options were common to both White Houses.
- ▶ US crisis management after the Mumbai attacks was exemplary—but it was effective largely because Indian political leaders did not wish to risk an open-ended war that could lead to uncontrolled escalation and jeopardize other equities. New Delhi’s cost-benefit calculus could change.

- ▶ A key question will be how confident Indian officials are of Washington's ability to influence Pakistan's security establishment in a crisis, and how willing they remain to lean on Washington's good offices. If they lose faith in US diplomatic clout, Indian officials may be more inclined to respond militarily in the event of a future attack linked to Pakistan.
- ▶ Even if Washington has increased difficulty playing the role of an "honest broker" on the subcontinent, there is no obvious substitute on the horizon for the US as crisis manager.
- ▶ US crisis management will always pivot on a few individuals in Washington, but all plays in the US crisis management playbook require periodic re-evaluation and updating in advance of the next crisis. Successful strategies must take account of changing contexts and trends.
- ▶ Thoughtful contingency planning based on scenarios—not forecasts—can help sharpen preventive diplomacy and US crisis readiness by identifying emerging actors and developments in the region. Senior US officials would be well-advised to participate in contingency planning for high-level crisis prevention and management.
- ▶ Potential game-changers for US crisis management include an attack on the US homeland that could be traced back to Pakistan; the withdrawal of most US and NATO forces from Afghanistan; domestic political changes within Pakistan and further deterioration in US-Pakistan ties; changes in Indian political leadership; and strengthened Indian conventional military capabilities.
- ▶ US crisis management works best when ties between India and Pakistan are improving. Attempts to improve bilateral relations could prompt crisis-generating spoiler attacks, but such attacks could occur regardless of normalization efforts. Postponing efforts to improve bilateral ties merely guarantees more unfinished crises, any of which can fuel future escalation.

Acronyms

ALAT	Assistant Legal Attaché
CENTCOM	Central Command
CG	Consul-General
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINC	Commander in Chief
CSC	Cabinet Security Committee
DCM	Deputy Chief of Mission
DGFI	Directorate General of Forces Intelligence
DM	Deccan Mujahadeen
DOD	Department of Defense
EST	Eastern Standard Time
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FIA	Federal Investigation Agency
GoI	Government of India
HUJI(B)	Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami/Bangladesh
IM	Indian Mujahadeen
ISI	Inter-Service Intelligence
I&W	Indications and Warning
JeM	Jaish-e-Muhammad
JuD	Jamaat-ul-Dawa
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
NCTC	National Center for Counterterrorism
NSC	National Security Council
NSG	National Security Guard

ODRP	Office of Defense Representative-Pakistan
PACOM	Pacific Command
PAO	Public Affairs Officer
PC	Principals Committee
PoK	Pakistani-Occupied Kashmir
POTUS	President of the United States
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
RSO	Regional Security Office
SCA	South and Central Asia
SOP	Standard Operation Procedure
SRAP	Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
SVTC	Secure Video-Teleconferencing
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USG	United States Government
USIC	US Intelligence Community
VTC	Video Teleconference

Introduction

During the limited war between India and Pakistan in the heights above Kargil in 1999, and again after an attack on the Indian Parliament building in 2001 by Pakistani nationals, the United States engaged in intense diplomacy to defuse a severe crisis. Then, in late November, 2008, the world watched in horror for three days as extremists, once again based, trained, and armed in Pakistan, carried out attacks in Mumbai against two luxury hotels, the city's central train station, a Jewish center, and other targets. As a senior US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) official later recounted:

On November 26, 2008, several men armed with hand grenades, automatic weapons, and satellite phones landed in a rubber raft on the shores of Mumbai. They scattered to soft targets across the city, launched simultaneous attacks that held India's financial capital under siege for days, and killed more than 170 individuals, including six American citizens.¹

These events in Mumbai are referred to in India as “26/11”—an Indian analog to the 9/11 attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.²

Once again, an escalatory spiral between India and Pakistan seemed imminent. President George W. Bush's outgoing administration faced the challenge of containing tensions between the two neighbors.³ The attacks in Mumbai were quickly linked to militants affiliated with the Lashkar-e-Taiba (“Army of the Pure,” or LeT), a group with a long record of terror assaults and ties to Pakistan's military and intelligence services. International concerns about the potential for war between India and Pakistan—whether intentional or inadvertent—were stoked by their history of conflict since they became independent states in 1947, and by the unresolved nature of bilateral crises since both countries demonstrated their nuclear weapons capabilities in 1998. These crises were marked by miscalculations on both sides, overconfidence in their ability to calculate “red” lines, and the demonstrated potential for Pakistani-based militants to play the role of spoilers when New Delhi and Islamabad sought to improve bilateral relations.

This case study is the first detailed account of US crisis management after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, one that will no doubt be amplified by future first-person accounts and the release of additional details. We conclude that this crisis is both unresolved and unfinished, as our title suggests, and that further attacks in India by militants trained in Pakistan are likely. Although the circumstances, targets, and venues of any future attacks may differ significantly, our analysis and conclusions might help inform US planning for and management of resultant crises between the two countries.

We hope that this case study, like our earlier assessment of the 2001-2002 “Twin Peaks” crisis—so named because it featured two periods of high tension sparked by militant attacks, separated by an interval of relative calm⁴—will be especially useful to South Asia specialists, to readers interested in US foreign policy-making, and to those with a particular

interest in conflict prevention. This case study is intended to complement earlier accounts and assessments of the 2008 Mumbai attacks.⁵

In this study, we focus especially on approaches and mechanisms adopted by American officials after the 2008 attacks, as they tried both to address terrorism-related issues and to steer India and Pakistan away from confrontation. Some of these mechanisms were honed in earlier crises between India and Pakistan, notably the reliance on top-level diplomacy and on the choreography of high-level official US visits to Islamabad and New Delhi with other key capitals. After the 2008 Mumbai crisis, however, information sharing and law enforcement cooperation assumed new importance, and the Bush administration undertook an unprecedented attempt to broker direct counterterrorism cooperation between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Like previous crises, the Mumbai crisis entailed policy coordination among US officials in multiple layers of government and diverse locales. National Security Council (NSC) officials coordinated policy on behalf of the White House, with the Department of State taking the lead in crisis management. Policy inputs and implementation were coordinated at senior-working levels by standing interagency groups in Washington and US officials at embassies and consulates in South Asia. Crisis task forces played their assigned roles. This crisis, however, also marked important technology-enabled advances in sharing and coordinating information, analysis, decision-making, and policy actions among American officials, wherever their location.

The 2008 Mumbai crisis marks the latest in a procession of crises that continued despite the advent of covert, and then overt, nuclear weapon capabilities. The 1986-1987 Brasstacks crisis was followed by others in 1990, 1999, and 2001-2002.⁶ As in earlier India-Pakistan

This crisis marked important technology-enabled advances

confrontations, US responses to the Mumbai crisis were complicated by Indian and Pakistani signaling to Washington and to each other, as well as by competing plays for US sympathy, for control of the international narrative, and for support from other governments. The Bush administration followed elements of policy “playbooks” developed during earlier crises. At the same time, our research found significant differences between the US responses to the Mumbai crisis

and its predecessors. This also was the first crisis on the subcontinent that occurred during a period of presidential transition in Washington, as the Bush administration was winding down and the Obama administration was preparing to take office.

This case study draws on numerous interviews with key US officials. We owe particular thanks to individuals who were generous with their time, insights, and advice relating to this study. We are grateful to Richard Boucher; members of the US Defense Attaché Office in New Delhi, to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which arranged a discussion with headquarters-based officers in Washington, DC; Gerald Feierstein; Lynne Gadkowski; Peter Garretson; Anish Goel; Stephen Hadley; Thomas Lynch; Bill McQuilkin; James Moriarty; William Mulford; Michael Newbill; Michael Owen; Anne Patterson; Condoleezza Rice; Bruce Riedel; Les Viguerie; Mark Webber; Juan Zarate; and other individuals who preferred not to have their names acknowledged. These interviews have been supplemented by and

cross-checked with each other, with diverse eyewitness and media reports, with government statements, and with knowledgeable observers who had independent access to parts of the story. The authors also owe special thanks to Sam Black and Nate Cohn, research assistants at the Stimson Center at various stages of this project, and to Crystal Chiu, Alison Yost, and April Umminger for their production support.

The Mumbai case study is organized in broadly chronological order. For each period, we describe how US officials saw and responded to the crisis from their different vantage points in Washington, Mumbai, New Delhi, Islamabad, and Dhaka. Section I examines the effects of the crisis' timing and of initial information deficits, as well as of US concerns from these locales. US crisis management played out across time zones —Eastern Standard Time (EST) in Washington, ten hours later in Pakistan, and 10.5 hours later in India.⁷

Section II analyzes the formulation by senior US officials of a coordinated response to the attacks, which we have dubbed “Plan A.” Section III looks at how the implementation of Plan A both impacted and was affected by US-India-Pakistan dynamics—how it broke new ground and why the crisis remains unfinished. In Section IV, we look at what US officials might learn from the 2008 Mumbai crisis about anticipating and responding to a future crisis. This section considers what aspects of contingency planning might be most helpful to future crisis prevention and management, and how future crises between India and Pakistan might differ from earlier ones. In Section V, we offer conclusions.

I. Scoping the Crisis: November 26 – November 29, 2008

The First Three Days: The View from Washington, DC

When the siege of Mumbai began on Wednesday, November 26, 2008, Americans were focusing on the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, news of the deepening domestic financial crisis, and the election victory of Barack Obama. Speculation about President-elect Obama's likely cabinet picks and what policies they portended was front-page news, including reports the day before Thanksgiving that Obama planned to retain Defense Secretary Robert Gates, an appointment touted as evidence of likely policy continuity on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸ The obligatory Thanksgiving piece by the *Associated Press* on George W. Bush's and Obama's respective holiday plans was released on schedule around midnight on November 26, just in time for holiday editions of newspapers and online news summaries across the country.⁹

On the Monday and Tuesday before Thanksgiving, a decision before many senior officials in Washington is whether the week will be quiet enough to leave town. On November 24 and 25—as the Bush administration contemplated the final turnover of responsibilities to the incoming Obama team—key foreign-policy officials began slipping out of the capital and heading to hometowns and family gatherings around the country. Word of a late-scheduled Wednesday morning NSC meeting on Afghanistan forced at least one senior staffer to turn his family car back toward Washington on Tuesday afternoon.¹⁰ By early Wednesday afternoon, however, most of Washington's senior officials on South Asia had taken off for the long weekend, and the US ambassadors to both India and Pakistan began long and gratefully anticipated holidays in the US. President Bush traveled to Camp David, where he and the First Lady recorded a lengthy “exit interview” on their White House years with Charles Gibson of ABC News.¹¹ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and several other senior officials were to join them there for the holiday. National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley left Washington for Ohio to be with his family for the holiday break.

Thus, when the first sketchy news reports of multiple terror attacks in Mumbai began trickling in early on the afternoon of the Wednesday before Thanksgiving EST, it was mostly watch officers at government departments and agencies who took note. Watch offices are staffed 24/7, holiday or no holiday, with watch officers typically working 12-hour shifts in operations centers. “Ops centers” are filled with information receivers of every sort. Watch officers screen vast amounts of data and warn pertinent officials in their organizations of emerging developments that may affect US interests. As a longtime watch officer wryly described his function to one of the authors years ago, “I run the right flag up the right pole when something goes ‘boom!’ in the night.”

First Intimations

The first US media reports at around 1 pm EST on Wednesday, November 26, were fragmentary—relaying disparate eyewitness information from India’s financial capital, Mumbai. A short wire report from Mumbai issued at 1:19 pm EST quoted a senior Mumbai police officer as saying that “terrorist gunmen” using automatic weapons and, in some places, grenades were attacking two luxury hotels, the main commuter rail station in southern Mumbai, and a restaurant. Several people were wounded, the officer said, and the police were still battling gunmen.¹² There was no mention yet of hostage-taking or violence at the Jewish center and hostel or at the hospital.¹³

The volume of information and misinformation grew geometrically over the next 12 hours—much of it drawn from social media messages. The dominance of social media in initial reporting on this crisis has been touted as a “first.” “Last night (Wednesday, November 26, 2008) the social media came of age,” wrote a London *Telegraph* reporter. Safety concerns and the scattered locations of the attacks made it difficult for even large news organizations to cover the story directly.¹⁴ Reporters and bloggers relayed cell phone and Twitter updates from people caught in the attacks; amateur photographs flowed to the Internet via Flickr. Trapped people sent S.O.S.’s to friends outside the attack zones for information on rescue operations. *The Guardian* contacted and interviewed a member of the European Parliament on his mobile while he was barricaded in the basement of the Taj Hotel.¹⁵ A new Wikipedia page on the attacks was continuously updated for days. Someone created a Google map with links to news articles.¹⁶

Media websites and television news channels streamed live video feed, much of it from outside the Taj Mahal hotel, a photogenic landmark near the Gateway to India in the south of the city, as attacks continued inside and smoke and flames became visible. These images circled the globe, reinforcing a widespread misconception that the violence was centered mainly at the hotels, where affected foreigners were concentrated. Later reports from the Chhatrapati Shivaji railway station of far greater casualties, all Indian, failed to supplant the vivid images of the burning Taj hotel.

The volume of information and misinformation grew over the next 12 hours

As US government watch personnel scrambled to piece together early information, the senior officials left in charge around Washington began to ascertain its crisis potential and to pulse the US Consulate in Mumbai and the US Embassy in New Delhi for information. Donald Camp,

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, was the senior stay-behind official for the Department. He worked closely with the Executive Assistant to Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia (SCA) Richard Boucher, who was away from Wednesday until Saturday. At the NSC, it was Jorgan Andrews who stayed behind over the holiday period; Andrews’ normal area of responsibility was Central Asia. NSC staffers Mark Webber and Anish Goel were each a phone call away. Then-Senior Director Juan Zarate, who was planning to celebrate the holiday in Washington, instead coordinated the US counterterrorism response on behalf of the White House.¹⁷

During the Wednesday-Thursday period, everyone's questions were: What happened? How serious was this? How had the Indian police responded? Was this going to become something bigger?¹⁸ One official at the State Department who was informed of the attacks around 3 pm EST on Wednesday before Thanksgiving recalled: "We first heard about the Oberoi, and I thought it wasn't particularly remarkable. But when word came in about the attacks on the other locations, things started sounding worse and worse and I started to realize that this was going to be important." He drafted a few bullets summarizing what he knew and e-mailed them to Secretary Condoleezza Rice and to Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher.¹⁹ Secretary Rice was just preparing to head to Camp David.²⁰

Another longtime South Asia watcher who had lingered in his Washington office to finish up tasks before the holiday heard the news as he prepared to leave for the day: "It wasn't a surprise that there was an attack," he said, "but the length and extent—[that] was all surprising."²¹

Within hours after the attacks started unfolding on CNN, the J-3 Navy captain who had the regional ops duty on the watch floor at the Pentagon took a picture board and slides to Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff James Cartwright. The materials presented what was known about the attacks plus some classified background information on past terrorist attacks, India-Pakistan tensions, and military capabilities on each side. Cartwright took them to the White House. The initial message implicitly was: "We are on top of this... There are no US military equities; we are watching their military assets as I&W [indications and warning] of their intent."²² Another early question was whether US citizens could be evacuated from India in the event of a war between India and Pakistan. The common-sense answer was no; there were far too many Americans in India.²³

At home on Wednesday evening at the start of the Thanksgiving weekend, Tom Lynch, then-Special Assistant to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral "Mike" Mullen, started taking notes as he listened to television reports on the attacks. He finally went to his office in the Pentagon to prepare for what he assumed would be upcoming "NSC activity" related to the attacks. Cell phone discussions started immediately. The formal activity started the following day, leading up to a meeting of the NSC principals on the issue, held in the usual place—the basement White House Situation Room—newly scheduled for Saturday afternoon.²⁴

For Lynch, as for other seasoned US foreign-policy participants, the Mumbai attacks sparked concerns about a replay of escalatory actions by India and Pakistan like those that followed the December 2001 assault by Pakistani militants on India's Parliament. Following the assault, the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security decided to deploy forces to its borders with Pakistan. Pakistan responded in kind. US officials vividly recalled their fears in 2002 that New Delhi and Islamabad could slide into a war culminating in a nuclear exchange.²⁵ Washington policy veterans also remembered that the attack on the Indian Parliament triggered the redeployment of Pakistani troops from the frontier with Afghanistan to the borders with India in early 2002, just as undermanned US forces were seeking to block and intercept the retreat of Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders from their redoubt in the Tora Bora Mountains.²⁶

Mobilizing Out-of-Town Policy Makers

Initial word of the attacks in Mumbai reached some traveling US officials by mobile phone or e-mail. Answering his insistently ringing cell phone late Wednesday afternoon on the drive to an out-of-state holiday gathering, one senior staffer was asked by a White House Situation Room watch officer if he was aware that there was “a situation” in Mumbai. “Not WMDs?” he queried anxiously. “No, gunmen,” came the reply. “The event sounded like a relatively minor event,” the official later recalled; only after more detailed media reports starting coming in around 7 pm EST did the seriousness of the attacks become unmistakable.

Arriving at a relative’s house that evening, he apologetically “set up shop” in his host’s study to help stay-behind colleagues in Washington in any way he could. He spent parts of the holiday weekend sitting in the family car with his mobile phone. On the Friday after Thanksgiving, he began “working the traps” long-distance with Steve White, who was acting Chargé d’Affaires in the US Embassy in New Delhi for the holiday week. White, a consular officer by training, was “very engaged in the details.”²⁷ By mid-day Friday, the vacationing NSC staffer realized that he would need to return to Washington on Saturday to brief the President before a planned Sunday telephone call to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Because of the holiday, senior US officials were mal-deployed

Another official who had joined the Thanksgiving exodus from Washington recalls trying to ignore his Blackberry while navigating holiday traffic. “It had been vibrating like mad. I found like 800 messages when I checked it later.” South Asian crises, he remarked ruefully, always seemed to happen on US holidays—the tsunami, the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, and that of a Sri Lankan prime minister, to name a few.²⁸

Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher was in a house in the woods in West Virginia for Thanksgiving with no Blackberry service—“just gmail and a phone.” But his Principal Deputy, Donald Camp, was in Washington, as was Boucher’s special assistant. Despite being in different places, “we were able to work it.” The lack of classified information did not impair the policy response until a few days into the crisis, Boucher thought.²⁹

Because of the Thanksgiving holiday, senior US officials were “mal-deployed” [i.e., scattered] which “makes getting on the same page very difficult,” in the words of one such individual.³⁰ Nonetheless, coordination worked surprisingly well. Everyday technology, notably Blackberries, enabled teamwork and coordination despite “almost everyone’s” absence from Washington, says another Washington policy official.³¹ “We got in touch with everyone—the UK, and all the other agencies,” Boucher recalls.³²

In this as in other crises, the White House Situation Room, which is effectively the “ops center” for the president and senior NSC staff, became the nerve center for communications among the scattered senior foreign policy team and close allies. The “Sit Room” enabled President Bush to be briefed remotely. He plugged in from Camp David, as did Secretary of State Rice; National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley plugged in from Ohio on a speaker phone.³³ As another White House veteran put it, “The White House Sit Room’s role in coordinating

among key players all through and after the attacks, a virtual role, made it all possible but was uncelebrated. Its personnel are nameless, tireless, and extremely qualified.”³⁴

Task Forces, Old-Style and New

Well before the attacks in Mumbai stopped and the identity of the attackers was known, officials at the State Department, the Pentagon, the pertinent regional military commands, and US intelligence agencies stood up task forces or crisis action teams, as they are variously known. Setting up such groups in a crisis is “SOP,” or “standard operation procedure,” in the militarized jargon of Washington bureaucracies. Their job is to sift through all available information on the crisis at hand, flag urgent developments, and issue summaries for senior policy makers every few hours.

A new State Department task force on the Mumbai crisis was up and running in a few hours. SCA had already set up a standby task force in case problems in Pakistan boiled over during the holiday. When news of the Mumbai attacks came in, this “shadow team” was activated in rotating eight-hour shifts. Task force draftees included four people from the India/Nepal/Sri Lanka office, whose shifts were staggered with those of the others to make their regional expertise available to teammates who normally worked on other regions. Like other task forces in the Washington area, State set up this activity in its operations center. The State Department “ops center” has room for three concurrent task forces. The Office of Consular Affairs separately set up a response team at the Department to handle inquiries about the status of American citizens in Mumbai.³⁵

One participant in the State Department’s task force recalled that, “DoD (Department of Defense) and CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) also had people working on this, and we all talked to each other and to NSC.”³⁶ Discussions among government task forces and ops centers on evolving situations are common practice.

By Thanksgiving, a quite senior crisis-management cell, or task force, was up and running out of the Strategy and Policy Directorate (J-5) of the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. Its focus was broadened quickly to India-Pakistan tensions writ large; its membership expanded to include diverse organizations, military and civilian. Headed by senior Navy Captain Bill McQuilkin, the J-5 cell, like the other newly launched task forces, was a “pressure cooker.” It was required to hold a video teleconference (VTC) within two hours of receiving new information and to update the White House within two—and then again four to six hours later.³⁷

One of the achievements of the J-5 cell was establishing a Mumbai web page

One of the signal achievements of the J-5 cell was establishing a continuously updated, central, secure “Mumbai web page” that was available to policy makers, analysts, and operators across the US government. The web page became a “go-to” place for information, reviews, and assessments relating to the India and Pakistan sides of the evolving crisis.³⁸

In addition, the Pentagon’s cell became a forum for weighing acts of terrorism on the subcontinent and military scenarios. When McQuilkin set up the group, he reflected that, “we could not tell what the two militaries might do. . . . What might motivate another terrorist

attack?...We knew the Indians were not good at [detecting and interdicting] maritime infiltration—there was poor coordination between the Indian Coast Guard and the Navy, which was in charge....What if terrorists were trying to get the Pakistanis to deploy their nuclear weapons in order to seize them?”³⁹

The J-5 cell also broke new ground in broadening and routinizing interagency civilian-military cooperation on India-Pakistan at senior-working levels. Using the Pentagon’s secure video-teleconferencing (SVTC) system as a hub, the J-5 cell held daily meetings with State Department and DoD officers in Washington and the field, CENTCOM and PACOM (Central Command and Pacific Command, the regional commands that cover Pakistan and India, respectively), and counterterrorism and intelligence professionals in the Washington area—creating a virtual task force.⁴⁰ In functional terms, the cell brought together, from across the US government, key colonel-level intelligence officers, operators, and political-military planners who worked on India or Pakistan or both. Scheduling SVTCs was a challenge, given time differences among Honolulu, South Asia, and the east coast of the continental United States.

The Mumbai crisis thereby became a catalyst, through McQuilkin’s crisis-management cell, for increased intra-military coordination on South Asia that involved military operators, policy and intelligence officials, and the two regional commands.⁴¹ The crisis cell “pushed at the seams between policy (the J-5) and operations (the J-3)—saying, in effect: “Here’s what the country teams need to do. Here is what the operators are doing.”⁴² One former PACOM analyst recalls the contact with peers at CENTCOM through the daily “McQuilkin SVTCs” as a “sparkplug” for later efforts to coordinate between senior-working levels of the two commands.⁴³ The SVTCs also bridged the parallel divide between the defense attaché teams in Islamabad and New Delhi. One participant recollected that the two groups got into heated discussions about the intentions of each other’s host governments, but at least they were talking.⁴⁴

The coordinating function of the India-Pakistan interagency crisis team was modeled on an experimental “AfPak” cell launched earlier by General Stanley McChrystal, with the blessing of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, as an “exemplar of how we should operate,” in Tom Lynch’s words. The cell was conceived of as an interagency “action loop” in the larger government information network. The key enabler was the use at least once a day of the SVTC to pull everyone together. The AfPak cell was deemed so effective that it was made permanent. McChrystal had personally pushed its creation through the Pentagon bureaucracy, with the concurrence of the State Department and the National Center for Counterterrorism (NCTC). In his view, getting to know one’s opposite numbers by SVTC was second-best only to face-to-face collaboration. McChrystal’s approach to improving coordination was: “When we build it [the system], they will come.”⁴⁵

The J-5 task force worked in shifts 24/7 for many months, before going to daytime monitoring and working-group status later in 2009, recalls Tom Lynch. Key Washington-based personnel remained on the task force full-time for five or six months. To broaden their perspective, McQuilkin was occasionally brought into the SVTC discussion with US scholars and think-tank experts who were working the same issues outside of the US government.⁴⁶

Confusion and “Red Herrings”

There was little intelligence on the attacks for the first two days. All the US government task forces “were watching CNN to get information to relay,” recalled one seasoned South Asia watcher. “All of our initial reporting came from the media.”⁴⁷ From a US policy perspective, relying totally on news media meant that senior officials initially were chasing, not shaping, the emerging public narrative on the attacks and on US vulnerabilities to similar attacks.

The effect of conflicting reports about unfolding events in Mumbai was evident in CNN listener comments and questions that were posted in real-time on the Anderson360 blog on Wednesday, starting at 10 pm EST: If the shooters really arrived in Mumbai by boat, were they pirates? Or might these be revenge attacks for India’s recent role in apprehending a Somali pirate ship? Does al Qaeda take hostages? What demands had been made at the price of releasing them? What did the search for US and UK passport holders at two luxury hotels portend? Might the attackers be Hindu extremists?⁴⁸

The response by Indian authorities to the ongoing attacks seemed to be moving slowly. Reporting from Mumbai revealed that at least 11 police officers, including the chief of Maharashtra state’s anti-terrorism squad, had been killed in the attacks.⁴⁹ A CNN viewer on the Anderson360 website voiced his hope that a recent mass-casualty exercise in Mumbai would improve the city’s ability to cope:

Stu in New York, November 26, 2008 11:26 pm EST:

It’s [sic] uncanny that a group of us from the US were in Mumbai just a few weeks ago running a mass casualty simulation for the city and the medical system. I hope that the exercise has helped the city respond more efficiently to save lives quicker.⁵⁰

Some officials in Washington worried that the terrorists were gleaned targeting information from media reports on the unfolding situation. A television interview by the home minister of Maharashtra state, for example, “divulged that there were hostages holed up and hiding in a certain place [in the Taj Mahal Hotel]—potentially useful information to the terrorists and their handlers if they were also watching TV.”⁵¹ It later became clear that the attackers and their handlers in Pakistan were indeed using such media revelations to guide their operations.⁵²

Two false leads added to confusion about the attacks—the first, a diversionary claim of responsibility for the attacks; the second, a fraudulent phone call threatening Indian military retaliation against Pakistan for the attacks.

The “Deccan Mujahadeen”

The false claim of responsibility was e-mailed to several media outlets in India before dawn on Thanksgiving EST from the “Deccan Mujahadeen” (DM). Experts disagreed as to the likely identity of this unknown group. Some thought that it was “an amalgam of existing Indian terror groups, including the Mujahideen Kashmir.”⁵³ Ashley Tellis, an expert on South Asian security, initially guessed that the DM was an Indian Muslim organization.⁵⁴ A senior intelligence officer of unspecified nationality reportedly said that the head of the operation

was a Bangladeshi and the militants were Indians, Kashmiris, and Bangladeshis.⁵⁵ Others saw Al Qaeda's *modus operandi* in the fact that the Mumbai attacks involved simultaneous attacks on westerners and Jews.⁵⁶ Global terrorism in 2008 was unlike that of 2001–2002—“a witch's brew of groups in the same physical and operational environment,” one American counterterrorism official noted. He had wondered why Al Qaeda did not focus more on India, which seemed to offer “a bonanza” of multiple-target attack possibilities, including Jewish institutions in Mumbai.⁵⁷ For still other US counterterrorism officials, the sophistication of the attacks in Mumbai seemed to point to LeT and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), Pakistan-based and -supported militant groups responsible for previous attacks in India.⁵⁸

The Fake Call

The second “red herring” was a call purportedly made to President Asif Ali Zardari by India's Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee. On Friday, a traveling senior NSC staffer heard from a foreign diplomat that someone had called Zardari claiming to be Mukherjee and warning that India would launch a war on Pakistan the following day. The staffer first

Mukherjee reportedly replied, “Would I be preparing for war in Calcutta?”

wondered if there had been such a call; then he worried about the inexperience of the newly elected civilian government in Islamabad—“an inexperienced government with nukes!” President Bush had met Zardari on the margins of the fall United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York and concluded that “this was someone we can work with”—a leader who, while inexperienced, at least was taking advice from a variety of sources.⁵⁹

Even without knowing who had really spoken with Zardari, US officials realized that his reaction to the call raised the stakes for Washington and its close allies. First, it conjured the specter of Pakistani military action to preempt a feared Indian attack. Second, the call placed US credibility with both Indian and Pakistani governments on the line. Each expected Washington to ensure the other's restraint and cooperation. One of the out-of-town NSC officials contacted Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher's executive assistant about the need to reach out to the government of India to find out what was going on.⁶⁰ Others were in touch with Deputy Chief of Mission Jerry Feierstein, who was heading up Embassy Islamabad in Ambassador Anne Patterson's absence.

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Secretary Rice was still at Camp David, when her staff called her about the threatening phone call to Zardari, allegedly from India's foreign minister, a report that did not sound right to her. She was about to go for a walk with First Lady Laura Bush. Instead, as Secretary Rice wrote in her memoir, “I asked the operations center to get the Indian foreign minister on the phone, but they couldn't reach him. Now I was starting to get nervous. Is he avoiding my call because they are preparing for war? I wondered.”⁶¹ When Secretary Rice finally reached Mukherjee and asked about his alleged call to Zardari, Mukherjee indignantly asked Rice what she was talking about. “I'm in Calcutta,” Mukherjee reportedly replied. “Would I be preparing for war in Calcutta?” Still

worried, Pakistani officials appealed to Chinese, Saudi, and United Arab Emirate officials for help in representing Pakistani concerns to US officials.⁶²

According to a former NSC official, “The fake phone call recounted by Pak officials changed everything—risked having all spin out of control. The key was that we were confident that India did not say this [that India was preparing to attack Pakistan], but they [Pakistani officials] were all ramped up. Our job was to bring them down.” This official added, “One lesson of the fake call to Zardari is that the secondary and tertiary effects [of a side-event] can encompass so much oxygen in the room that you can’t get to the real issues.”⁶³

Only later did it become clear that the crank call to President Zardari’s office was from the same individual had who attempted to call President Bush via the White House switchboard. That “clearly suspicious call” was not put through to the President. Even so, “we still had to unwind the Pakistanis,” according to another NSC staffer.⁶⁴ The caller may have been the “same imposter who also attempted to talk to the Secretary, but was screened by the ops center,” speculates a State Department official.⁶⁵

Reaching Out to India – and Then Pakistan

Within 24 hours, once NSC staff realized the magnitude of the attacks and did some information gathering, they “got POTUS [President of the United States] on the phone with both leaders, offered aid to India, and publicly counseled restraint by both sides.”⁶⁶ The tempo of outreach to the Indian public and Indian—later, also Pakistani—official counterparts ramped up quickly. President-elect Obama joined in the effort.

President Bush’s first public message of US concern and sympathy for India was issued in writing by Press Secretary Dana Perino on Wednesday night. It was echoed by a similar statement by an Obama campaign spokesman. An out-of-town senior NSC staffer called Deputy Chief of Mission Arun Singh at the Indian Embassy in Washington; Singh had been in his position for barely three months. President-elect Obama contacted Indian Ambassador Ronen Sen to let him know that he was being briefed by Secretary Rice and was monitoring the situation.⁶⁷ Rice updated Obama periodically on the crisis for the remainder of the Bush administration, rather than working through his transition staff.⁶⁸ The outgoing Bush administration’s diplomatic phone calls were also coordinated with Mark Lippert, who was helping to manage the NSC transition for the incoming Obama administration.⁶⁹

Coming just two weeks after Election Day, the Mumbai attacks were Obama’s first brush with South Asia and became the first crisis of his administration, an Obama advisor recalls. “Jim Steinberg had been selected to be the foreign policy guy,” but Obama did not yet have his transition team in place. He was still relying on the brain trust from his campaign. The key person was Denis McDonough, Obama’s National Security Council Chief of Staff. “Denis McDonough knew what the POTUS-elect needed but nothing about India and Pakistan.” Obama’s campaign advisory group on South Asia—which was “largely virtual, meeting only a couple of times before Obama took office”⁷⁰—was not involved in advising Obama concerning the Mumbai crisis. Instead, a former official who had been close to the campaign and had South Asia policy experience was feeding advice to President-elect Obama and his press people via McDonough. He got “questions such as what should Obama

say to the press, and should Obama call Prime Minister Singh....Obama did call Singh; it was a delicate call. The easy part was expressing outrage and condolences, and promising to work closely on counterterrorism. The tricky part was that the Prime Minister would raise Pakistan at some point. The obvious answer was not to dwell on this.” The former official’s advice to Obama before the call was: “Don’t worry, Singh will not trap you....he is not interested in setting you up. This prime minister of India will not tell you that ISI did it. This would not be in his interest and not his style. This will be as normal a phone call as you can get in the middle of a terrorist incident. Indeed, Singh said, ‘In these dark, dark days, this is the one measure of light that emerges.’”⁷¹

On Thanksgiving morning, President Bush called Prime Minister Singh to condole directly. Bush’s only preparation for the call was a situation report, but the Bush-Singh relationship was strong, particularly after the Bush administration’s exertions to secure for India an exemption from the Nuclear Suppliers Group’s rules of civil nuclear commerce. Bush was “very genuine in offering to assist [India] however we could,” said one former White House official.⁷² Also on Thanksgiving, the White House issued a statement of concern and condolence on behalf of President Bush. White House press officer Gordon Jondroe called a holidaying NSC staffer to consult about the statement just as the staffer was sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner with relatives. The staffer pleaded for time to eat. “I had 59 minutes to do so,” he laughingly remembers.⁷³

By Friday, Secretary Rice had called Pranab Mukherjee twice, as well as Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari.⁷⁴ Also on Friday, President-elect Obama issued his first public statement of sympathy. “These terrorists who targeted innocent civilians will not defeat India’s great democracy, nor shake the will of a global coalition to defeat them,” Obama said, in part.⁷⁵ He added:

There is one president at a time. I will continue to closely monitor the situation on the ground in Mumbai, and am grateful for the cooperation of the Bush administration in keeping me and my staff updated. We fully support the Bush administration’s efforts to protect American citizens and assist the government of India during this tragic time.⁷⁶

Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin issued a statement of his own. He urged that, “as we continue to learn the details about the attacks and those responsible for them, we must not allow them to undermine the progress that has been made to foster better relations between India and its neighbor Pakistan, two critical partners in our global fight against terrorism.”⁷⁷

On Friday afternoon, the administration divulged plans to send US law-enforcement assistance to Mumbai. “The administration...has continued to work with the Indian government at all levels and has offered assistance and support,” White House Press Secretary Dana Perino said. “Officials were working out the final details with Indian diplomats Friday for the departure of an FBI team,” US officials told the press on background, and “a second group of investigators was on alert to join the first team if necessary.”⁷⁸

The situation on the ground in Mumbai remained confused. An unidentified official from Maharashtra state’s home office erroneously declared on Thanksgiving that the sieges at the Oberoi and Taj hotels were over and that the hostages had been rescued from the Jewish center.⁷⁹ In fact, the Oberoi was not cleared of attackers until Friday, and the Taj, until late

Saturday morning. On Friday, the State Department warned that US citizens were still at risk in Mumbai.⁸⁰ Soon afterwards, State published the first list of US victims at the Jewish center and the Taj Hotel. On Saturday, Department officials raised the American death toll in the attacks to six, as the first batch of FBI agents prepared to fly to Mumbai.⁸¹

On Saturday, November 29, President Bush addressed the Indian people in a broadcast from the South Lawn. After mentioning his Thursday phone conversation with Prime Minister Singh, Bush emphasized the priority being given to the Mumbai attacks by his security team.⁸²

The President spoke again with the Indian Prime Minister very early on Sunday. One of the newly returned senior NSC staff rose even earlier to go the presidential residence with the NSC Executive Secretary for the call. The Executive Secretary, a retired brigadier general, projected an on-duty demeanor—but it was hard to be “fully aware, suited, and caffeinated” enough to function well that early,” the staffer confessed.⁸³ The State and Defense departments and US federal agencies had been ordered to make resources and personnel available to investigate the attacks in Mumbai, Bush said. This was an opportunity to demonstrate a “shared commitment” against terrorism. Together, the world community would bring the terrorists to account.⁸⁴

The First Three Days: The View from India

Mumbai Perspectives

Late November marks the start of the high-society wedding season in Mumbai, India’s business and cultural capital. A season of soft sea breezes, early winter is also a favorite time of year for high-level corporate meetings and posh tourism in southern Mumbai. The visual hallmarks of the area are the stately Victorian-Mughal-style Gateway of India, at the edge of the harbor, and the historic Taj Mahal Hotel opposite the Gateway. On a typical evening, except at the height of the summer monsoon rains, the area between these landmarks swarms with local families patronizing balloon and ice-cream vendors and snapping cell-phone camera shots of relatives in front of the handsome Gateway.

On November 26, 2008, however, the streets had been largely empty of locals all day. Mumbai-wallas, like most of their countrymen, were glued to radio and television broadcasts of the long-awaited India-UK cricket match in Cuttack, Orissa, starting at 9:30 am local time. Soon after 8:30 pm, the match ended in a 5-1 victory for India. Mumbai citizens were preparing to celebrate as the attackers moved into position to begin their coordinated assaults.⁸⁵ There were few witnesses to their movements.

The Taj Mahal Hotel

Security at the Taj and nearby Oberoi Trident hotels had been briefly tightened after the CIA reportedly passed warnings to Indian officials in September 2008 of possible militant attacks on targets in Mumbai, including both hotels. These warnings were said to have been buttressed by Intelligence Bureau evidence of LeT reconnaissance operations around South

Mumbai hotels and suburbs.⁸⁶ Queuing for x-ray machines and pat-downs at entrances were unpopular with guests, and there seemed to be no new indications of trouble. The added security was quietly rolled back.⁸⁷

Confusion abounded inside the Taj during the start of the assault the night before Thanksgiving. Arriving in the elegant hotel lobby on the evening of 26/11, Taj Mahal Hotel manager Karambir Kang was greeted by the sight of a corpse. A gang war was in process, he warned his wife by telephone; he would return shortly to their in-hotel apartment to be with her, he promised. A call to the Mumbai police chief about the shooting under way at the Leopold Café similarly characterized the attack there as gang warfare. For Mumbai residents, it was reasonable to suspect local mafia factions or gangs, which often engaged in shootouts.⁸⁸

Hearing explosions in the Taj, a concerned guest called the concierge at 9:45 pm local time, about 15 minutes after terrorists entered the hotel. She asked if construction was under way there. When told that it was not, she urged the concierge to summon police because a bomb evidently had gone off. She must have been hearing fireworks, the concierge reassured her.⁸⁹ In fact, what she had heard was an exploding grenade.

“Taj people [hotel staff] did very brave things. They took people through the kitchen and put them in the ‘Chambers’ [members-only club] area,” recalls a diplomat who was then serving at the Mumbai Consulate. Many Taj employees died protecting guests. Watching news reports during the early hours of the attacks there, Taj guests learned that other places in south Mumbai also were under assault.⁹⁰ Taj security personnel later cut the television feed to avoid informing the attackers.⁹¹

After initial efforts by the terrorists to single out British and US citizens, the shootings at the Taj became indiscriminate. “The ten minutes around 2:30 am [local time on Thursday] were the most frightening,” recalled American Michael Pollack, a guest at the Taj. “Rather than the back-and-forth of gunfire, we just heard single, punctuated shots. We later learned that the terrorists went along a different corridor of The Chambers, room by room, and systematically executed everyone: women, elderly, Muslims, Hindus, foreigners.”⁹²

The initial police response to the attacks in Mumbai was chaotic. The municipal and Maharashtra state police were untrained to cope with such a crisis. Even the state police were out-gunned. Their service “had bought the wrong holsters for their guns,” recalls a US diplomat. “Their force was losing huge numbers to the Naxalite insurgency. They are overstretched.”⁹³ State authorities requested National Security Guard (NSG) commandos. The commandos, who are based near Palam Airport in New Delhi and are under the authority of the national government home ministry, took nine and one-half hours to reach the Taj and Oberoi in Mumbai. The reasons ranged from difficulty in securing an aircraft to the unavailability of floor plans for the two hotels once an NSG team reached the area.⁹⁴

Taj guest Michael Pollack succeeded in establishing contact with an FBI agent who was outside the Taj hotel with Indian security personnel.⁹⁵ An FBI official later testified before Congress that, on being notified of the attacks, the Assistant Legal Attaché from the US Embassy New Delhi’s FBI office “immediately made his way to the Taj Mahal hotel, which was still under siege, and contacted his Indian counterparts. From there, he took part in

efforts to rescue Americans trapped in the hotel, set up lines of communication with his FBI and US Intelligence Community (USIC) counterparts, and coordinated the arrival of our Los Angeles Rapid Deployment Team.”⁹⁶

The US Consulate in Mumbai

Consulate personnel were shaken by the attacks. As one diplomat recalls, “In September, I heard a rough report warning about the possibility of an attack. I didn’t follow up—it was RSO (Regional Security Office)-related—but I knew about it and forgot about it. Some hotels increased security, then relaxed....In retrospect, [however,] the attack was no surprise. The RSO had said that Mumbai ‘was due.’ In 2008 India felt invincible about economic growth....The attack was a huge blow” to Mumbai, the country’s business capital.⁹⁷

On the night of Thanksgiving, this diplomat was planning to go to the American Center and the Leopold Café. At 5 pm local time, however, a friend was stricken with salmonella, so he went instead to a hospital, thereby missing a talk by Gary Samore of the Council on Foreign Relations, a former arms control official in the Clinton administration.⁹⁸ “I went home at 9 pm, just missing the attack [at the Leopold Café] at 9:30 pm, the official recalls. “The cab driver heard shots. He assumed it was fireworks. Ten minutes later at home I saw the news. I got a call from the RSO. I knew something was seriously wrong by 11 pm. The boss said to go to bed and come in early.” Other Consulate officers came in as well.

The biggest shock for this officer was that, after one year in Mumbai in which Pakistan was never mentioned, it suddenly became the focus of attention for the Consulate. The officer had told the newly arriving Consul General in Mumbai that he would never hear about Pakistan during this assignment, but after the attacks, “Pakistan was discussed nonstop until we left.”⁹⁹

The Consulate’s Public Affairs Officer (PAO) was at home in her apartment in the American Center when she received news of the attacks. “We had just finished a program with a speaker from the Council on Foreign Relations [Gary Samore], who was staying at the Taj with his wife and daughter. I was hosting a post-event reception at my home and all the guests had left just before we learned about the attacks. We were getting ready to host 30 people for Thanksgiving dinner the next day.”¹⁰⁰

The Thanksgiving plans were shelved. Instead, the PAO kept the State Department office director for India/Nepal/Sri Lanka, a former Mumbai Consulate colleague, apprised of her observations from apartment windows that overlooked the train station and the Jewish center.¹⁰¹ Her reports were relayed to watch officers and to seniors in Washington, providing the first official US on-the-ground feed on what was happening in Mumbai.

One immediate concern for the Consulate was the safety of the Samore family and other Americans in the Taj Hotel. Around 9:30 pm local time, soon after Gary Samore’s return from the American Center, the family heard loud bangs outside the room. Paula Samore looked out and, as she later wrote, “saw three armed men in black on the floor below running toward the main staircase. Get inside fast and shut door. Out front window, we see security forces and dogs arriving and clearing the area around the India Gate and front of the hotel. Turn on television and see breaking news in English and Hindi that attacks are underway at

the Taj and other places in Mumbai. TV cuts out. Call the front desk. No answer.” Warned subsequently by hotel staff to “stay in the room, turn off the lights, be quiet, and don’t answer the door,” the family heard explosions and heavy automatic gunfire in the hallway starting around 3 am local time. “Very, very scared now,” Paula Samore recalled. “American consulate e-mails at 3:35 am that hotel roof is on fire. Look out and see fire engines arriving and putting up ladders at the far end of the hotel, away from our room. Around 4 am, we peek out the door and see thick smoke in the hallway. Decide this is it. Time to go....Ninja moment.” By 5 am, the family had reached safety by way of a fire escape.¹⁰²

With returning officials swelling the ranks of the stay-behinds, the Mumbai Consulate swung into action on Thanksgiving Day, coordinating closely with the “7th floor”—the Secretary’s office—and the Embassy. The staff initiated a telephone tree to locate US citizens who had registered with the Consulate and began checking local hospitals for casualties.¹⁰³ One diplomat at the Consulate recalls working from 7 am to midnight on Thanksgiving.¹⁰⁴ “We worked closely with other consulates for information and tracking/providing support to [foreign] citizens in need,” says another formerly Mumbai-based US official.¹⁰⁵

The Consulate reached out “to contacts, authorities, anyone for up-to-date information.” In the words of one official serving there at the time, “We had update calls with Washington every three to four hours and did three sit rep [situation report] cables daily. The RSO, CG [Consul-General Paul A. Folmsbee], and PAO did on-the-ground observations of the hotels and Chabbad house,” the Jewish center, to supplement incomplete and conflicting information from local contacts. Unlike Embassy New Delhi, “we were in crisis response mode and not really paying attention to official Indian intentions, aside from the local police or fire brigade.”¹⁰⁶ Another US official saw the local police as semi-paralyzed in the face of the crisis, and the Indian Prime Minister’s speech as very late in coming. “There was no place to get answers, there was little support for victims aside from what the hotels provided to guests,” she recollects.¹⁰⁷

By Friday, recalls another US diplomat, FBI, and [Central Intelligence] Agency folks from New Delhi were on the ground in Mumbai, trying to figure out what had happened. Together with the RSO, they worked their Indian contacts. The Assistant Legal Attaché (ALAT) from the embassy—the FBI’s #2 official in New Delhi—was laying the groundwork for cooperation with Indian investigators before the expected arrival of FBI forensics experts.¹⁰⁸ Late on Saturday morning, the siege at the Taj hotel finally ended. The death count continued to mount as Indian police found more victims over the next several days.¹⁰⁹ By the end of the weekend, US and British officials had begun assisting Indian authorities with the investigation.

The Embassy New Delhi Optic

On the Wednesday evening before Thanksgiving local time, US embassy officers who were staying in India for the Thanksgiving holiday luxuriated in a seasonably warm and sunny Delhi winter day. Some left work early to join spouses and children at the American Club across the way. Others went home to start preparing Thursday’s holiday meal. Most had left before the first news of the attacks in Mumbai reached the Chargé d’Affaires and the Political Counselor at around 10 pm local time.

The ALAT was in New Delhi when he received a call from the RSO flagging the attacks in Mumbai. He went into the Embassy immediately. The first he knew about possible American casualties was from a phone call from FBI Director Robert Mueller, who wanted to know the game plan. Like others in Washington, Director Mueller was getting his information from CNN.¹¹⁰

On annual leave at home in New Delhi at the time, one diplomat remembers receiving a curt message from his boss via Embassy Control telling him to turn on his television. He stayed up all night watching, missing an early morning Emergency Action Committee meeting at the Embassy on Thanksgiving. Quietly canceling his vacation plans for a “grand driving tour” through central India, he went into his office, where “the pace was pretty much 24/7” for several days, even with embassy staff trickling back in from Thanksgiving travels.¹¹¹ Electronic “warden” messages from the Embassy warned US citizens in India to keep a low profile.

“There was a certain fatigue about terrorism,” recalls the same diplomat. “What gets lost... was the prior series of monthly bombings”—30 people had died in September 2008 alone—so it took a brief time to catch on that this was “not just another IM [Indian Mujahadeen] market attack....The planning for the attacks in Mumbai—hotels, Nariman House [the Jewish center], etc.—seemed extraordinary,” however. The *nature* of the attacks also was a surprise—“so fedayeen-style.” Similar attacks had occurred in Kashmir and New Delhi in 2001-2002, but not since. The diplomat found himself worrying about what might come next.¹¹² Then, he jokingly added to one of the authors of this study, “Because we had read the [Stimson Center’s] 2001-2002 report [on the “Twin Peaks” crisis] the USG kicked into gear.”¹¹³

Decision making in the Cabinet Security Committee was incredibly murky

For embassy officers, the initial priority of accounting for US citizens in India quickly shifted to trying to assess Indian intentions. The SVTC process had started up, “with Washington worried about where to go. There was no panic, but concern about the lack of knowledge of intentions....Decision making in the CSC [Cabinet Security Committee] was incredibly murky. And what role did Sonia and Rahul play?”¹¹⁴ There were indications of strain within the government: “External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee was pushing for a military response, with the Prime Minister counseling restraint....We were flying blind.”¹¹⁵

Pressure on Embassy New Delhi to assess Indian intentions grew after the crank call in which Mukherjee allegedly threatened Zardari. Like the NSC, “the embassy thought that an exchange of information between India and Pakistan could decrease the risk of war.” The crank call briefly became “a fixation in Washington. There was a concern that these guys were irresponsible. Mukherjee denied calling; the question was whether it was someone else in the GoI [Government of India]. It was probably not the GoI at all. But the call increased the sense of crisis.”¹¹⁶

It was ironic, one diplomat recounted, that Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi was in India at the time of the attacks—“un-briefed and caught flat-footed. He did not know what to say. He was there to discuss ‘follow-through’ on the productive talks

the preceding month on increasing trade ties to circumvent ‘stuckness on the composite dialogue.’” So from the vantage point of Embassy New Delhi, it appeared initially that official Pakistan’s intentions were almost as uncertain as Delhi’s. It was unclear what the new civilian government in Islamabad would do; there were mixed signals from Zardari and Pakistan’s National Security Adviser.¹¹⁷

Washington was doing everything possible to reassure India. As one US diplomat recollected, “The Embassy was pushing for a statement about standing with the Indians, without pointing a finger. State pushed out a statement on November 26; the White House, on November 29. There was action in the [UN] Security Council.”¹¹⁸

Ambassador David Mulford was in Phoenix when he received news of the attacks. He left immediately to return to New Delhi, reaching India on Thanksgiving night to relieve Deputy Chief of Mission Steve White from the role of “acting Chargé.”¹¹⁹ Concerned that investigators in Mumbai would trace the attacks to Pakistan and initiate a military response, Secretary Rice sent guidance to Mulford with the talking point for the GoI “to not take precipitous action,” recalls a State Department official.¹²⁰

Some in the State Department had previously viewed Mulford as single-mindedly focused on advancing the US-India civil nuclear deal and bilateral trade, and thus uninterested in

Domestic pressures grew for the Singh government to act

the “old stuff—India-Pakistan and terrorism.”¹²¹ On his return to New Delhi, however, Ambassador Mulford “pivoted quickly to the strategic significance of the Mumbai attacks... the opportunity [it presented] in relations with India,” a former official in Washington observed.¹²² “He quickly became the guide for the process from this end,” recalls an experienced South Asia hand.¹²³

Increased friction between India and Pakistan notched up the sense of urgency for US diplomatic intervention. Indian foreign minister Mukherjee blamed “elements with links to Pakistan” for the attacks. R.R. Patil, Maharashtra state’s deputy home minister, announced that the assailant who had been captured alive was a Pakistani national. In the course of his sympathy call to Prime Minister Singh, President Zardari took the opportunity to blame “non-state actors [who] wanted to force upon the governments their own agenda, but they must not be allowed to succeed.”¹²⁴ In a later interview with *Newsweek*’s Lally Weymouth, Zardari underlined these themes, portraying himself and Pakistan as victims of terrorism.¹²⁵

Domestic pressures grew for the Singh government to act. Particularly in Mumbai, the public railed at the failure of authorities to prevent and then to respond effectively to the attacks. Failure to share, as well as act on, advance intelligence was said to have contributed to India’s inability to prevent and respond to the Mumbai attacks. Indian and foreign media reported that US officials had passed warnings to Indian counterparts in mid-October 2008 of possible terrorist attacks on “touristy areas frequented by Westerners” in Mumbai, including the Taj Mahal Hotel. Demonstrators in Mumbai, New Delhi, Hyderabad, and Bangalore marked the one-week anniversary of the attacks with protests against the government’s lack of response.¹²⁶ Indeed, “some threat information had been passed to the Indians beforehand,” one US embassy official recalled.¹²⁷ The Indian government was

said also to have had advance warnings that an attack by sea was likely and had belatedly tried to boost coastal security. Adding to the public disquiet after the attacks, the Mumbai fishermen's union claimed that it had earlier told the police of suspicions that explosives were being smuggled into the city by boat.¹²⁸

By Sunday, Prime Minister Singh had accepted the resignation of India's home minister, Shivraj Patil, who took "moral responsibility" for the attacks in Mumbai, and had replaced him with Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram. Chidambaram "answer[ed] the call of duty" and moved into the hot seat.¹²⁹ Maharashtra's chief minister, Vilasrao Deshmukh, and his deputy, R.R. Patil, also stepped down. Public outrage at R.R. Patil focused on his reported statement, regarding the terror attacks, that such "minor incidents do happen in big cities."¹³⁰

Like other Western officials in New Delhi, those at the US Embassy took care to avoid commenting on the Indian government's response to the attacks in Mumbai in an effort to "avoid making waves," as one US diplomat recalls. Coordination between Washington and London was particularly close. On the ground as in Washington and London, American and British counterparts met frequently, sharing notes and orchestrating their messages. The number of such bilateral meetings at the ambassador level was "impressive," according to one diplomat, who noted the United States coordinated in a more general way with "the Aussies, Japanese, and Canadians and kept others informed...talked with the French a bit and shared readouts of the big visits...the Chinese seemed a bit more neutral at first," then became more engaged.¹³¹

The First Three Days: The View from Islamabad

In contrast to US officials at Embassy New Delhi, those posted to Embassy Islamabad enjoy few local diversions from work. The walled and razor-wired compound is heavily guarded against potential terrorist attacks—a final set of defenses after a maze of security checkpoints leading into the diplomatic enclave where foreign embassies are located. All US officials assigned to the US Embassy or consulates in Pakistan must go unaccompanied—that is, they must leave behind children and spouses who are not on official assignments in their own right. They receive "danger pay" for serving in Pakistan. They work non-stop. The line between work and personal time and space is further blurred by the fact that most embassy personnel live "on campus," a stone's throw from their offices. In recognition of these hardships, many embassy officials are on one-year tours, rather than the usual two- or three-year stints.

Thus, as the attacks unfolded in Mumbai, Embassy Islamabad was still abuzz with activity. Those who planned to celebrate Thanksgiving in earnest had left Pakistan several days earlier. Most of those staying in Islamabad through the holiday stuck to their routine of 12-14-hour work days, six or even seven days a week.

Ambassador Anne Patterson—whose spouse, like those of other officials at Embassy Islamabad, stayed behind in the United States during her three-year tour—was about to head to Washington for the holiday week when she heard a sketchy report about terrorist attacks in Mumbai. From a television news update as she transited Doha, she realized

that the attacks were serious. She did not, however, “put together Pakistani involvement” until she reached Washington. Forty-eight hours after arriving there, she started back to Islamabad. For Patterson, the attacks were “a total shock.”¹³² Like other American officials, she had been focused on Pakistan’s western border with Afghanistan.

Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) Gerry Feierstein was still in his office on Thanksgiving Eve as crucial details of the attacks trickled in, including the likely involvement of LeT, and hence, relations between India and Pakistan. Although familiar with the history of militant attacks on India, Feierstein and others at the embassy felt “blindsided” by this turn of events. One diplomat recalls being shocked because relations between India and Pakistan were moving forward at the time. “I’d been in the Interior Ministry the day before, seeing Interior Minister Kamal Shah. There was an Indian delegation that had been there shortly beforehand, as part of the composite dialogue, and I remember Shah being pleased with the progress being made.”¹³³

Arriving back in Islamabad from Washington, Ambassador Patterson got herself “briefed up” by DCM Feierstein and other key officials. She, in turn, briefed President Bush long-distance on her impressions of the situation.¹³⁴

The First Three Days: The View from Dhaka

Angst About Possible Links to Mumbai Attacks

In Bangladesh, US Ambassador James Moriarty, who had served in 2002-2004 as senior NSC director for South as well as East Asia, received news of the Mumbai terror attacks with alarm. Moriarty’s immediate focus was how the attacks might affect Bangladeshi ties to India and the United States. Under pressure from western donors after 9/11, Dhaka had grudgingly banned the most radical terror groups operating from Bangladesh and arrested their leaders. But Bangladeshi officials had stonewalled Indian complaints that militant groups, including LeT and others with ties to Pakistan, were plotting and mounting attacks on Indian soil from Bangladesh. Now there was reason to worry about possible Bangladeshi links to the attacks.¹³⁵

The caretaker government in Dhaka at the time of the Mumbai attacks was “in a weird symbiotic relationship” with the military, recalls a former senior diplomat. When Moriarty arrived in Dhaka as ambassador in April 2008, the counterterrorism head at the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), Bangladesh’s main military intelligence agency, showed little interest in counterterrorism. He was the driving force behind recognizing the terrorist group Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami/Bangladesh, or HUJI(B), as Bangladesh’s Islamic Democratic Party.¹³⁶ The State Department had designated HUJI(B) as a global terrorist organization earlier in 2008.¹³⁷

The magnitude of the attacks in Mumbai shocked Bangladeshi officials, however. Their reaction, according to a former senior US diplomat, in effect was: “Omigod, look what is happening in India! What would happen to us [Bangladesh] if an attack in India had a link back to Bangladesh? What would the Indians do to us in retaliation?”¹³⁸

Dhaka Delivers to India

One former US official recalled that, “Suddenly, Indian officials got great cooperation on long-languishing cases relating to organizations operating from Bangladesh and suspected of terrorism against India.” The return of elected government in the person of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed of the Awami League (AL) in January 2009 reinforced this new pattern. Hasina was “not forgiving toward Islamic terrorism,” having herself been attacked by such groups. For the first time Bangladeshi officials acknowledged that they had a problem with Pakistan-based terrorists, not just with domestic groups. The ensuing efforts by the AL government to curb activities by the Pakistani LeT and JeM were political “freebies” for the AL government—that is, had no domestic political costs because these groups enjoyed little support in Bangladesh, especially among AL members, according to the former official. Emblematic of Bangladesh’s new stance toward India under AL leadership was Dhaka’s more painful decision to send back the “ULFA folks” [members of the separatist United Liberation Front of Assam and their families], who had sheltered in Bangladesh for decades, reportedly with support from Pakistan’s Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).¹³⁹

II. Formulating a Coordinated US Response: November 29 – December 2, 2008

Regrouping in Washington

By Saturday afternoon, most of the US foreign policy principals were back in Washington for the newly scheduled NSC Principals Committee (PC) meeting on the attacks and rising India-Pakistan tensions. Mid-level officials had geared up after an abbreviated Thanksgiving break for interagency deliberations at their level, widely referred to as “the interagency.” Convened by the NSC—often at the State Department—the interagency generates coordinated suggestions on policy options for the principals to consider, as well as following up on their decisions.

From a crisis management standpoint, one NSC staffer observed, “the length of the standoff in Mumbai—some three days—worked in our favor...The GoI could not focus on a response to Pakistan while events were still unfolding on the ground. Meanwhile, the US government got information and intelligence and settled India down a bit.”¹⁴⁰ Task forces, including the one under J-5 auspices, were now receiving field reports and folding them into the “sit reps.”¹⁴¹ PACOM had begun disseminating advisories from the US military liaison office in New Delhi. The newly opened Office of Defense Representative-Pakistan (ODRP) at Embassy Islamabad, led by Rear Admiral (now, Vice Admiral) Mike Lefever, was reporting on exchanges with senior Pakistani military officials.¹⁴² Intelligence relating to the attacks and to India-Pakistan tensions was beginning to flow and analysts were assessing it.¹⁴³ While the information base for US decisions on the Mumbai crisis was improving, it remained uneven.

A Growing Certainty: “It’s Lashkar-e-Taiba”

The perpetrator of the attacks looked like Lashkar-e-Taiba early on. Despite statements by US spokesmen urging caution about rushing to judgment on the identity of the attackers, “there was no initial consideration that anyone other than LeT was responsible,” said a senior US diplomat who was then serving at Embassy Islamabad. The Indian authorities had an intercept of Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, who was thought to have directed the Mumbai attacks from Pakistan, giving orders to the attackers in Mumbai. “We had the smoking gun in the intercept of Lakhvi...Lakhvi was clearly LeT.”¹⁴⁴ The sole attacker captured alive in Mumbai had given Indian and FBI interrogators a detailed account of his recruitment, training, and guidance during the attacks by LeT operatives in Pakistan.¹⁴⁵

The issue of Pakistan-based terrorism against India had been a renewed US concern since the Twin Peaks crisis of 2001-2002. With US officials focused mainly on Al Qaeda and the Taliban, however, LeT had slipped to the back burner. Consequently, Washington and its

close allies had focused intensively on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, to the west, at some expense to developments to the east.¹⁴⁶

LeT's efforts to target US and UK citizens in Mumbai vaulted the organization to the level of a major threat to the United States.¹⁴⁷ Suddenly, "a bunch of guys with AK-47s in Mumbai was having a major world impact," a member of the J-5 task force recalls.¹⁴⁸ "US law enforcement and intelligence attention pivoted to LeT after the attacks." The J-5 crisis cell badgered CENTCOM to focus more on LeT, arguing, in effect: "This is not just your mother's terrorist group in Kashmir any more."¹⁴⁹ Earlier reports of LeT threats to western interests were dusted off and reviewed.

With US officials focused mainly on Al Qaeda and the Taliban, LeT had slipped to the back burner

By Sunday, Indian reporter Praveen Swami had published Indian intelligence computer forensics evidence that the so-called Deccan Mujahadeen was a "fig leaf" for attackers with ties to Pakistan. The e-mail claim of responsibility had been generated on a computer in Pakistan. The Russia-based e-mail address from which the e-mail was sent had been opened early Wednesday by a computer user in Pakistan. Similarities between the "Deccan Mujahadeen" e-mail and earlier English-language messages from the home-grown Indian Mujahideen after bombings in New Delhi in September seemed to be intended to mislead investigators.¹⁵⁰

Key Uncertainties

While investigators were clarifying that LeT was responsible for the attacks, other important uncertainties remained. One key question was whether another LeT attack on India was underway or in preparation. A former senior US official summarized what Prime Minister Singh was telling Washington as follows: "(1) I need help from Pakistan. (2) If there's a second one of these, we have to go. You don't know this isn't the first of a series."¹⁵¹ Some US "seniors," including General Stanley McChrystal, reportedly believed that a second attack on India could dissolve restraint and "undo the whole [US diplomatic] ball game," in the words of a US military official. These concerns added urgency to ramping up intelligence efforts against LeT and pressing Pakistani officials once again to crack down on the group.¹⁵² LeT operated openly at Muridke in the heart of Pakistan's Punjab province; it still had links to the ISI, although it was not necessarily under ISI operational control, said one US military officer.¹⁵³ Policy makers did not know if there was another attack coming, or if Pakistani authorities would be able to "turn it off."¹⁵⁴

Emerging information on LeT's role begged a second key question: Did Pakistani officials have foreknowledge of and thereby complicity in the attacks? No one disputed LeT's ties to Pakistan's military and intelligence services. Information emerging from Mumbai indicated that the attack had been launched from Pakistani territory by Pakistani nationals. Initially, "there was no real inside [US intelligence] scoop," a former official recalls. "They [US intelligence] knew that LeT had done it. So did CNN. They could not answer the question of what ISI knew in advance."¹⁵⁵ US officials soon learned that the ISI had known of

preparations for the Mumbai attacks, said a former senior policy maker—but not whether they were directed from above.¹⁵⁶

A third key uncertainty was whether New Delhi would respond militarily to the attacks in Mumbai. “There was a risk that the Indians might think the attacks could not happen without the knowledge of the Pak authorities,” one former NSC official recollected.¹⁵⁷ Any evidence that Pakistani intelligence had directed and planned the Mumbai attacks could cross an Indian “red line” and reverse recent improvements in Indo-Pakistani ties—or worse.¹⁵⁸ US officials recalled that Indian officials had said even before the attacks in Mumbai that any further attacks would leave them no choice but to attack Pakistan.¹⁵⁹ The car bombings at the Indian Embassy in Kabul on July 7, 2008, in which Pakistan’s ISI was widely believed to be complicit, had already soured many Indian officials on Pakistan, one Pakistani analyst observed.¹⁶⁰ Prime Minister Singh seemed to want to hold back, but he faced great political pressures. The Congress Party-led coalition would soon face nationwide parliamentary elections.

Some in Washington feared that New Delhi would retaliate with cross-border air attacks on known LeT camps in Pakistan, implementing plans developed under the so-called “Cold Start” doctrine adopted by India’s military soon after the Twin Peaks crisis. Announced in 2004, “Cold Start” aimed to allow India to launch limited retaliatory attacks in response to Pakistani incursions or terrorist attacks, before a general mobilization. In 2001-2002, India’s protracted mobilization process allowed Pakistan’s military to take advantage of more compact lines of communication to deploy troops quickly so as to counter a large-scale Indian retaliation for the attack on the Parliament building.¹⁶¹ As one high-ranking US official put it, at that time, “India had no short-fuze options.”¹⁶² “Cold Start” was intended to avoid another all-out Indian mobilization without military follow through, leading to an “embarrassing climb down.”¹⁶³

Other US officials thought that New Delhi’s options for retaliation against Pakistan were limited. Some doubted that India’s armed forces were ready to attempt a “Cold Start”-type operation.¹⁶⁴ Still others believed that India lacked acceptable targeting options in Pakistan. As one US official saw it, LeT’s home base of Muridke, in heavily populated Punjab province, the Pakistan Army’s stronghold, would “have not been a very satisfactory choice....It would have meant a conventional war or worse. Plus the bad guys would have been long gone. So risk-benefit analysis militated against military action....If Gol had done anything, it would most likely have been in PoK [Pakistani Occupied Kashmir, known in Pakistan as Azad Kashmir], not across the international border.”¹⁶⁵

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A fourth key uncertainty was whether Pakistani forces might try to preempt a “Cold Start”-type attack by India. Lending credence to this possibility was the Pakistan military’s preoccupation with Cold Start. In 2010 Pakistani-armed forces conducted their first corps-level exercise in 14 years to prepare to counter a Cold Start-type offensive.¹⁶⁶ In

conversations with US officials, Pakistani military planners regularly invoked the threat posed to Pakistan by “Cold Start.”¹⁶⁷

A fifth and related uncertainty concerned how Pakistan viewed the trilateral US-India-Pakistan dynamic. Would Islamabad see Washington as an honest broker in this crisis, despite US deaths in the Mumbai attacks and US-Pakistani tensions over counterterrorism and counterinsurgency? Some Americans hoped that Pakistani officials would view the US presence in, and logistics train through, their country in support of NATO military operations in Afghanistan as insurance against Indian attacks. Others worried that India might attack Pakistan anyway, discrediting Washington. Still others feared that Islamabad might see the US presence as a reason not to take New Delhi’s anger seriously.¹⁶⁸ It was unclear what, if any, difference the advent of a new civilian government would make to the answer to any of these questions.

With anxiety high in Washington about possible Indian cross-border attacks or Pakistani preemptive moves, military movements on each side were being monitored as validation of information received from the respective governments. Having to infer intentions from observable actions is “not a good place to be,” a former NSC official observed.¹⁶⁹

De-Escalation, De-Escalation, De-Escalation

Despite the uncertainties about Indian, Pakistani, and LeT intentions, the principals who gathered in the White House Situation Room on Saturday, November 29—and those patched in remotely by SVTC or secure audio link—were united on the urgency of de-escalating India-Pakistan tensions. The perceived risks merited an immediate US response.

It was “the worst possible point for a crisis with India and Pakistan....quite serious,” one former senior policy maker observed more recently—with the US presidential transition under way and with US relations with Pakistan strained. The recently completed civil nuclear agreement with India worked both for and against the administration’s crisis management efforts—facilitating diplomacy with India but not helping in Pakistan. As one high-ranking US official recounted:

We were trying to turn India into a strategic partner and Pakistan didn’t like it, including the India civil nuclear deal. De-hyphenation didn’t go over well in Pakistan....The Pakistani government was exceptionally weak—civil-military relations were poor. We were trying to communicate the importance of fighting terrorism to the new government.¹⁷⁰

The risk of war between India and Pakistan would be “high on anyone’s list” of possibilities after the attacks in Mumbai, a former Bush administration official recalled.¹⁷¹ He added that senior Bush administration officials had already been through one intense crisis on the subcontinent: “2001-2002 was clearly in everyone’s mind early on....There was no sense that the [Pakistani] militant networks had been disrupted” in the intervening years.¹⁷² Another former US official noted that Indian officials were already blaming Pakistan for the attacks. Any conflict between the two nuclear-armed neighbors could get out of hand.¹⁷³ Pakistani leaders vowed to respond to any attack by India as a threat to Pakistan’s sovereignty and survival, while Indian leaders pointedly did not take off the table limited-war scenarios. Of particular concern to one diplomat with long experience on South Asia was that Indian

and Pakistani leaders expressed confidence that they knew each others' red lines.¹⁷⁴ Many in Washington believed that India and Pakistan wanted to avoid war, but no one was willing to leave the outcome to chance.

As in 2001-2002, US officials (and those of other NATO countries) wanted Rawalpindi to keep its troops positioned on the frontier with Afghanistan, not to move them to the borders with India.¹⁷⁵ Even so, one former US official contends, "in contrast to '01-02...the [dominant] issue was not Afghanistan and Operation Enduring Freedom. The concern here was [more] India-Pakistan....[In 2008] we were in a different place with India and with Pakistan."¹⁷⁶ If New Delhi ordered a mobilization of forces, or signaled a readiness to pursue Cold Start-related operations, the redeployment of Pakistani troops from the Afghan border would probably follow.

“Many in Washington believed that India and Pakistan wanted to avoid war, but no one was willing to leave the outcome to chance”

There was consensus within the interagency on how to begin reducing tensions between India and Pakistan after the Mumbai attacks.¹⁷⁷ As one official later recounted, the priorities on the diplomatic front were "(1) to seek to persuade India not to employ military options, and (2) to get the Pakistanis to cough up people and clamp down."¹⁷⁸ A Pakistani crackdown was critical to meeting New Delhi's concerns, as well as lessening the risk of more LeT attacks. US officials hoped that, once immediate tensions were reduced, Indian and Pakistani officials would resume their "composite dialogue" fairly quickly, as they had after the Twin Peaks crisis.¹⁷⁹

The principals' policy menu did not include evacuating US personnel, dependents, or other US citizens from India. "They did not want to send an alarmist message like that conveyed by [then-]Ambassador Bob Blackwill's ordered evacuation of Embassy dependents in 2002, in anticipation of a war," recalled a former US official.¹⁸⁰ An alarmist assessment might spur preemptive military actions by one side or the other, something Washington sought to avoid.

“Plan A”

In the words of a former senior official, "the plan was, first, to show support for India. The Bush administration was very popular with the GoI, had plenty of capital in the bank. We went as a friend. In Pakistan, the message was to convey the seriousness of the situation, that Pakistan needed to 'own up' to the LeT." Neither country wanted a war, and neither wanted escalation. The US crisis management role was to convince Pakistan to take enough steps to defuse the crisis. What was needed, as one participant recalled, was Pakistani confirmation that the terrorists were Pakistanis and trained in Pakistan—"for Pakistan to take responsibility...to own up and do something...arrest people...look into who was behind the attacks." The GoI needed a face saver.¹⁸¹

By all accounts, Plan A was the only course of action entertained by senior administration officials after the Mumbai attacks. There was no Plan B under consideration. "We didn't

think we needed one,” said one former senior official. Others confirm that the NSC principals did not really consider the possibility that Plan A could fail. Plan A looked do-able. As one former senior official commented, “My Plan B is always to make Plan A work because discussing fallbacks loses focus....I am not sure we had a Plan B or had people working on it,” he said. As to a Plan C, “I’m not sure we ever had people working on it; we did in other crises....There was no Plan C.”¹⁸² With the administration preparing to leave office, there would not be time to modify the initial crisis response, in any case.

“My Plan B is always to make Plan A work because discussing fallbacks loses focus”

One attendee at NSC meetings initially saw hubris in senior US officials’ confidence that they could “keep a lid on the India-Pakistan situation.” He soon recognized that

Washington was playing a role that was familiar to and evidently welcomed by New Delhi and Islamabad. “While each side says it does not want direct US involvement, in fact, it does. Each side knew we had some control over the other,” the official concluded.¹⁸³

Plan A: High-level Engagement

To implement Plan A, the principals turned first to the classic diplomatic strategy that had helped unwind the 2001-2002 confrontation, as well as crises in other parts of the world. The goal was to contact the top leadership quickly and “exert every possible effort to keep them calm,” one diplomat recalls.¹⁸⁴ This entailed visits by senior US officials to each capital and coordinated calls to key officials in Islamabad and New Delhi, using assigned call lists.¹⁸⁵

One reason for the Bush administration’s return to this formula was that it had worked in the 1999 Kargil and the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks crises, according to a former NSC staffer. A second was that US officials still “don’t want to be seen as taking sides in a military conflict,” in contrast to the Cold War period, “even though we are closer to India.”¹⁸⁶ A third reason, US officials agreed, was that there are few US policy alternatives in such situations. The toolkit is limited. “The maneuverability of [foreign] policy is super-narrow,” in the words of a senior diplomat.¹⁸⁷

As with the Twin Peaks crisis, the Mumbai attacks were defined from the start as a diplomatic problem; there was no consideration of using US troops in South Asia. The Department of State, the NSC, and the Intelligence Community were therefore the prime movers of the Bush administration’s game plan. At the State Department, Secretary Rice, Undersecretary William Burns, and Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher took the lead. At the NSC, Juan Zarate led the initial counterterrorism response. The focus then shifted quickly to diplomacy—to Mark Webber, Anish Goel, and up the line to National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley.¹⁸⁸ The Pentagon participated in the principals and deputies-level NSC meetings. Senior US military leaders engaged their Indian and Pakistani counterparts.

Plan A: Information Sharing

The second mechanism for implementing Plan A was to be information sharing with India and Pakistan relating to the attacks.¹⁸⁹ Information sharing had played only a limited role in

US efforts to reduce India-Pakistan tensions during Twin Peaks. In 2008-2009, American policy makers hoped that such sharing would keep the governments of India and Pakistan from acting impulsively.

Initially, US participation in investigating the attacks in Mumbai was viewed by senior US policy makers as a short-term adjunct to information sharing. “Sending in an FBI team is a routine response when US citizens are killed overseas; we told the Indians we were sending them and they didn’t object,” says a State Department official.¹⁹⁰ This particular investigation promised an unprecedented opportunity to learn who had planned and executed these terror attacks in India—and perhaps, therefore, to prevent the next ones. As one US official noted, “The big difference this time was that one of the attackers [and]...a lot of the cell phones and other forensic evidence were recovered.”¹⁹¹ The information gleaned would be of high interest to Western counterterrorism officials, as well as to the Indian government.

The Bush administration hoped ultimately to achieve a three-way flow of information among Washington, Islamabad, and New Delhi. A few in Washington thought that fostering information sharing between Indian and Pakistani law enforcement and intelligence personnel in this crisis might even create durable new bilateral channels for the two countries to deal with politically charged terrorism issues in the future. The experiment seemed worth trying, although sensitivities in India and Pakistan predictably limited what information could be conveyed.¹⁹²

Other US officials worried that information sharing with Indian and Pakistani officials could backfire. “The relationship between all this law enforcement and intel activity and potential military action was unclear. We gave them all this information, and it could have led to Indo-Pakistani conflict,” in the words of one diplomat. What if an FBI-assisted investigation in Mumbai came up with definitive evidence of Pakistani government complicity in ordering or directing the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai?¹⁹³

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“We became brokers of information” between India and Pakistan and also a “direct object of their efforts to influence,” observed another US official.¹⁹⁴ At this stage, Washington felt that it had to be in a brokering role. “There was a liability issue in the mediation role: US-Indian relations could fail. Or US-Pakistan ties could fail.”¹⁹⁵ Washington’s investments in both bilateral relationships were on the line; a perceived error or failure of judgment in US information vetting and sharing could impair US ties to both countries.

The Division of Labor for Plan A

“Mumbai became a principal focus for Condi [Rice], who spearheaded the effort to see that there was no action or language that could escalate to the brink of war,” a former NSC official recalled.¹⁹⁶ There was no explicit mandate for her to take the lead; as Secretary of State, it was part of her job description.¹⁹⁷

Secretary Rice viewed having experienced ambassadors in India and Pakistan as a crucial asset. They knew the key players, had access to them, and understood nuance. This was a big help.¹⁹⁸ A senior Bush administration official adds:

Since we had ambassadors on SVTC, we gave them direct instructions on what to do, and we had the assistant secretary and Condi all together, which minimized confusion and the risk of a 'telephone effect.' Ambassadors don't usually have enough context because they don't get it directly from the national security principals. We got them that context and they knew the anxiety from Washington, they got to contribute in filling in the initial strategic picture. I'm a big believer in that as a crisis management tool.¹⁹⁹

Plan A built on ties already established by Bush administration officials to counterparts in New Delhi and Islamabad. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns, for example, had cordial relations with Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon. Trust between senior Indian and US officials had grown over years of interaction including, but not limited to, the recently concluded US-India civil nuclear agreement. In the view of one American diplomat, the nuclear deal cleared away an old obstacle to bilateral ties, India's resentment of US "discrimination" against the acquisition of nuclear weapons by countries that were not among the original five states possessing nuclear weapons.²⁰⁰ On the Pakistan side, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani had just visited the White House in July, followed by President Zardari in September. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen was in touch with military officials in India and Pakistan, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates who, as an NSC staffer helped manage the 1990 India-Pakistan crisis, talked with both sides.²⁰¹ FBI Director Mueller became more involved as his agency became immersed in the Mumbai investigation.²⁰²

As to telephone diplomacy, "we had a lot of pathways for communication that were reliable," recalled a former senior Bush administration official. We "farmed it out."²⁰³ It fell to Undersecretary Burns to call the foreign secretaries on both sides. "He was the senior-most official at State that understood India-Pakistan, but he was never out front." Assistant Secretary Boucher played a central and "highly effective" role in communications through the acute phase of the crisis.²⁰⁴ As a Pentagon official describes the process, "If someone needed at a given time to call Menon, he or she would ask the others: 'Have you called your guy yet?' [Indian Navy chief Admiral Sureesh] Mehta and Mullen had known each other, so Mehta was Mullen's guy. This worked incredibly well."²⁰⁵

Secretary Rice regularly compared notes and coordinated high-level visits by phone with counterparts in other governments.²⁰⁶ As in the Twin Peaks crisis, US officials worked most closely with London.²⁰⁷ After the Mumbai attacks, it was really just the UK [with which we consulted closely]," recalled a former official. The narrower range of diplomatic engagement by the Bush administration in 2008-2009 was not solely because of the impending transition. After nearly eight years in office, "the White House felt that it had a [greater] diplomatic handle on the situation. Administration ties to India and Pakistan had deepened, and US policy makers were more confident of their influence."²⁰⁸

Members of Congress played a supporting role during the Mumbai crisis. "The State Department provided briefings [to Congress] on what we knew and what we were doing," said one US diplomat.²⁰⁹ Senior staff of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC)

regularly received updates on the disposition of Indian and Pakistani troops—described by one military officer as the “where-is-everyone?” question. Among other issues, SASC staffers worried about the possibility of Pakistani troop redeployments and the potential implications for US equities in Afghanistan.²¹⁰ Senate Foreign Relations Committee members from both parties voiced concern about India-Pakistan tensions after the attacks and endorsed Secretary Rice’s mission to the region, scheduled for December 2, 2008.²¹¹ Senators visiting India and Pakistan reinforced White House messages.

III. Plan A in Action

Early December 2008 – US Diplomacy Toward India

At the US Embassy in New Delhi, Ambassador Mulford was back in the driver's seat as soon as he returned from his truncated Thanksgiving holiday. Mulford was "running the show, and talking to the Indians himself," said one diplomat. There was little initial guidance from Washington, recalls another; much was guided by Mulford's "force of nature."²¹² It helped greatly that the United States and India were "co-victims" in the attacks and that the Singh government was seasoned.²¹³ "India was generally more reliable than Pakistan because its [Pakistan's] government was new," in the view of one former senior American official.²¹⁴

Even so, Washington's direct engagement with Indian leaders was crucial, in the views of many US observers. "The sense of crisis in New Delhi was high. In terms of reducing that sense, the Indian government agreeing early on to a visit to Secretary Rice within a few days... was a sign that nothing would happen while she was there" or en route, in the view of one former NSC staffer.²¹⁵ Secretary Rice's visit was based on the premise that, "No matter how sound the bilateral relationship, you have to show up."²¹⁶ Admiral Mullen met with leaders in Pakistan on December 3 as Rice arrived in New Delhi; Mullen went on to India, and Rice to Pakistan. A diplomat who was then serving in New Delhi describes the approach as "working from a script of back-to-back high-level visitors while also learning more about India's decision cycle. This gave the necessary appearance of producing results."²¹⁷

"No matter how sound the bilateral relationship, you have to show up"

When Secretary Rice arrived in New Delhi on December 3:

The atmospherics were bad. The leadership looked shocked at the attacks—[National Security Advisor M.K.] Narayanan reminded Rice of how stunned she and other US officials were after 9/11. The local press was calling for strong actions against Pakistan. Indian leaders showed her media articles and effectively said: 'Look at the pressures we are facing. We don't want to take military action; we don't want escalation. Do something that will help us satisfy the considerable blood lust that's out there. You need to pressure Pakistan to take actions.'²¹⁸

As Rice recollected later in her memoirs, "When I arrived at Prime Minister Singh's home that night, it was easy to see how much pressure he was under. But he was determined to avoid war. The foreign minister felt the same, 'But you have to get Pakistan to do something.' Clearly the impending elections made the situation even more difficult."²¹⁹

Indian counterterrorism experts were stunned by the incapacity of their system to cope with the Mumbai attacks. “We are looking at a system which does not have the capacity to either generate adequate intelligence, or to respond to it,” Ajai Sahni, a prominent non-government expert, acknowledged in an interview. “The scale of the task before us is colossal.”²²⁰

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“Rice’s decision to go to the region was key—she showed up in their hour of need with advice and sympathy,” recalls Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher. He added:

In New Delhi, Rice had great discussions with Singh and Chidambaram. Rice told them about our experience with 9/11, especially that we found that we knew more about how to investigate after an attack took place than about how to stop attacks from happening. She told them that we had to change our security establishment and that the US could help India do the same. It was clear from the beginning that the Indian security establishment was not organized to deal with global terrorism....We were there with a willingness to change our whole counterterrorism relationship. We weren’t apologists for Pakistan’s behavior. Rice was key in this.²²¹

Secretary Rice was struck by the change in the tenor of US-Indian ties since 2001, when the Twin Peaks crisis began. “...When I arrived in India, I could see and feel the difference. A lot had changed since 2001; most important, the Indians trusted us,” Rice wrote in her memoirs.²²²

Soon after Rice’s early-December visit, in the words of one US diplomat, “by happenstance, John McCain came here [New Delhi]...with Lindsay Graham and [Senator] Lieberman. Their objective was Bhutan, but they got stuck here.” The three senators met with Prime Minister Singh and other Indian officials; they listened sympathetically and said all the right things on behalf of the US Congress.²²³ “[Senator] John Kerry came to New Delhi on December 15, then [Deputy Secretary of State John] Negroponte around the same time. They used their visits to try to determine Indian intentions. The Indian government was very careful in its public statements. It was clear that there was a discussion about how to respond, but not clear how that would go....”²²⁴

By all accounts, Indian officials were genuinely conflicted about how to respond to Pakistan. They certainly did not want to risk a nuclear exchange. They also wanted to avoid undercutting a new and fragile civilian government, having long ascribed Islamabad’s bellicosity to military rule. But they also did not want their country to appear weak.²²⁵

“Indians went from anger, to frustration, to bitterness, and then resignation in a matter of two weeks,” recalled one US policy maker. “I never heard anything in my circle that India needed to hit Pakistan. Those that did said they would just hit back. There was a feeling of hopelessness that India has no Pakistan foreign policy.”²²⁶

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A former Bush administration official offered another perspective on India's decision calculus: "New Delhi was already soul-searching about the [Indian] interior ministry's responsibility and capabilities," he recounted. "India took a moment to garner sympathy. The attacks gave the Indians the moral upper hand with Pakistan regarding Kashmir, so maybe they don't rush to war—or even to mobilization, as they did in 2001-2002. India's own self-perception as an economic power may have played into this."²²⁷

The Joint India-US Investigation

The appointment of Chidambaram as India's home minister opened unanticipated and welcome opportunities for US-India cooperation in investigating the attacks and—by extension—on some common terrorism concerns. It also boosted the Indian public's confidence. "The appointment... was critical," in the view of one US diplomat. Chidambaram was "a strong figure, incredibly articulate, and willing to meet with American diplomats... a lawyer with incredible ability to pick out a key point from a piece of paper and [an]...ability to reassure the public that the government was in charge and could prevent this from happening again."²²⁸

**"We'll never
hear 'what do
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table' again"**

"One thing that was very different from 2002 was that the FBI and Agency got involved because Chidambaram opened the door. Mulford pushed for this and they agreed," recalled the American diplomat. "We [the United States] were trying in the two years before" to engage with New Delhi on counterterrorism." Three weeks before the attacks, US officials had gone to National Security Adviser Narayanan and offered FBI forensics assistance on recent terrorist bombing attacks; Narayanan replied that the FBI experts would have to prove themselves. In contrast, "now we saw a sea change of accessibility. This was a different track. We still had the India-Pakistan track. This was a new inside-GOI track, law enforcement plus political."²²⁹

"We argued that US government involvement would magnify international pressure on Pakistan," according to an American law enforcement official. "The government of India took a chance, and it worked. Attitudes have now fundamentally shifted. We'll never hear 'what do you bring to the table?' again."²³⁰ The replacement of Narayanan by Menon as national security adviser further opened the way to a growing FBI role after the attacks.

While "it was clear that Ambassador Mulford wanted to control the crisis from Delhi," according to a US official who was serving in India in 2008, the Consulate in Mumbai had a front-row seat on one of the most promising US-India developments to emerge from the attacks. The first steps toward inserting an FBI team into Mumbai went surprisingly smoothly. "There was no pushback on getting visas for them (which happened over the first weekend)," one US official recalled.²³¹ "After initial hiccups, they gave us visas and access," recalled another. The biggest "hiccup," according to a US official, was "eight hours on the tarmac [at the Mumbai airport] waiting for customs." But the arrival of the team was clearly a breakthrough. "Before Mumbai, I was told India wouldn't tolerate the US on the ground. Eight FBI agents was ground-breaking—front page news...I knew that we didn't have effective cooperation with India....There wasn't a high level of engagement....I knew

the gaps...We're seen as the 'spies' and as 'an extension' of the CIA. There wasn't a real warm and fuzzy."²³² Cooperation after the Mumbai attacks constituted a breakthrough, but backsliding could still occur.

One complication was—and is—the absence of a natural Indian counterpart to the FBI. India's Intelligence Bureau does intelligence; its Central Bureau of Investigation does prosecutions.²³³ Similarly, India's military has no role in counterterrorism comparable to that of the US armed forces. As a result, US defense officials at the embassy in New Delhi could find no Indian interlocutors on counterterrorism issues after the terror attacks in Mumbai.²³⁴

"There was some defensiveness initially from the Mumbai police," recalled an American diplomat, "but that lifted quickly when they saw what the FBI could do. They wowed the Indians. The Indians had shown them a melted cell phone. An FBI tech put leads on the cell phone and lifted fingerprints off an unexploded bomb." The new ALAT was well suited to respond to 26/11.²³⁵ The terrorists had deleted the GPS coordinates from the handheld device they left in the rubber dinghy they used to get to shore. The Mumbai police didn't know how to recover this deleted data. The FBI did, and they traced the data back to Muzaffarabad in Azad Kashmir.²³⁶ "We [also] established proven value by solving phone numbers and IED [Improvised Explosive Device] origin," a USG official recalls.²³⁷ India was impressed with both the effort and the technology.

**Defensiveness
lifted quickly when
they saw what the
FBI could do**

"The FBI was very culturally sensitive and modest," another US diplomat recalled. "They knew the Indians would look for excuses to kick them out. The FBI made sure no one was offended."²³⁸ Other US officials, too, remained on message about India's lead role in the investigation. Assistant Secretary Boucher, for example, publicly reaffirmed in early January 2009 that the probe into the Mumbai attack was an

Indian investigation and that the US personnel were in India primarily in a support role. "It is a big task," Boucher added.²³⁹

US officials had "seamless cooperation" as well with New Scotland Yard and MI-6 personnel who were on the scene in Mumbai. "We agreed on an FBI lead in dealings with Mumbai Police Commissioner Hassan Ghafoor. This was crucial. Evidence was going to India, and four copies were being distributed—to MI-6, Scotland Yard, FBI, and CIA."²⁴⁰

The FBI investigation was both inherently useful and also "allowed people time to cool down," said one American diplomat. "Singh's inclination seemed to be to get all the information first, and the FBI team was helpful in slowing down the decision making process in Delhi." This "gave Singh space to work things out."²⁴¹ A former senior US official added that, in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks, the FBI proved to be a crucial new tool for crisis management. Providing technical expertise afforded some assurance to the Indian government that positive steps would be taken.²⁴²

Even so, it was unclear to many US officials at the time how the joint investigation might influence New Delhi's decisions with regard to a military response to the attacks. "We [still] feared that there would be a military retaliation that we wouldn't get warning of," according

to one US policy maker who was serving in India from 2008-2009.²⁴³ Findings from the investigation might even precipitate such attacks.

From an FBI perspective, increased law enforcement-based counterterrorism cooperation with India represented a potential step toward a new “global model of justice” that was in the works—but never publicly launched—soon after President Obama came to office. Seen as a potential corrective for the perceived dominance of CIA covert activities in US counterterrorism after 9/11, the “global justice” approach reportedly proposed by the US Attorney General would have given FBI “a central role in overseas counterterrorism cases. They will expand their questioning of suspects and evidence-gathering to try to ensure that criminal prosecutions are an option,” officials familiar with the effort said.²⁴⁴

The FBI was not the only official American entity responding to New Delhi’s awakening to deficiencies in homeland security capabilities. As home minister, Chidambaram also opened up cooperation with the US Coast Guard, New York Police Department, and other US organizations. As one US diplomat recounted, “He wants to create Indian versions of the NCTC [National Counterterrorism Center] as well as the FBI, and has both visited them and hosted them in India. This has led to a big improvement on counterterrorism intel sharing in India.”²⁴⁵ Thus, Indian officials have been particularly interested in US models for integrating intelligence and law enforcement, as well as for sharing and coordinating law enforcement information among local, regional, and national legal entities.²⁴⁶ In turn, cooperating with US officials at all levels after the attacks has brought a somewhat greater Indian recognition that that the two countries have a shared interest in cooperating on counterterrorism, according to a former NSC official.²⁴⁷

US-Indian law enforcement-based counterterrorism cooperation is not yet institutionalized and remains a function of personal relationships. To some extent, these can be built in advance of crises. Like other US departments and agencies, the FBI has found shared training opportunities with counterparts from other countries to be an important source of contacts and trust on which officials can draw later for crisis cooperation.²⁴⁸ When the ALAT, whose role was so critical in bridging between the US and Indian security establishments on the ground in Mumbai, handed off his portfolio to his successor, he recalled that, “We went through pre- and post-Mumbai challenges and lessons.” What happens in the future still “depends on the relationship. We have a crisis response plan, but it’s up to the LEGAT to get access and make sure we have authority.”²⁴⁹

Early December 2008 – US Diplomacy Toward Pakistan

Initial Obstacles

Ambassador Patterson’s return to Pakistan on the weekend after Thanksgiving marked the initiation of Plan A there. “Active diplomacy and trying to walk it back were the only actions we considered. There was no real consideration of backup plans if that failed,” recalled a senior US diplomat. The concrete objective was securing Pakistan’s cooperation on the investigation, as well as Pakistani follow-through in prosecuting terrorists based

there.²⁵⁰ These steps were needed to encourage Indian restraint but might also help prevent a follow-on attack by LeT in India.

Embassy Islamabad initially saw “no evidence that they [Pakistani officials] weren’t surprised by the attack.”²⁵¹ “We knew soon afterward of ISI knowledge of preparations for the Mumbai attacks,” added a former senior official, “but we didn’t know whether they were directed from above. And we didn’t know if there was another attack coming, and we didn’t know if Pakistani authorities would be able to turn it off.”²⁵² One American diplomat who was then serving in Islamabad recalled that, “The information base in the White House was

“We didn’t know if there was another attack coming, and we didn’t know if Pakistani authorities would be able to turn it off”

good, and we had the smoking gun [on LeT] in the intercept of Lakhvi. But I think Pakistan was telling us the truth: that LeT had disintegrated and was selling its services as hired guns.... These guys are just out there in a big terrorist blob....”²⁵³

The first appointment Ambassador Patterson had on her return was with the army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani. She “made no headway with...[her] message, which was ‘you’ve got to take action against these guys,’ including the JuD [Jamaat-ul-Dawa, a

charity widely believed to be a public front for LeT] and Hafiz Saeed [JuD’s leader]. Pakistan, however, was extremely reluctant to admit any sort of involvement, even non-government-sanctioned.”²⁵⁴ Patterson took the same message to Prime Minister Gilani and President Zardari and then back to Kayani in an effort to “soften them up” before Secretary Rice’s anticipated visit in early December. Patterson’s house calls were followed by a “frank” phone call by Admiral Mullen to Pakistan’s army chief—one of the most important interventions by Washington, a senior US diplomat recalled.²⁵⁵

In 2008, Patterson and other US officials had to deal with “the dispersion of power and decision-making” within Pakistan. One official noted:

In 2002 you had a one-stop shop....Helping to draft speeches like those given by [former president and army chief Pervez] Musharraf is no longer an option [for Washington.] If Zardari gave a speech he wouldn’t be believed; Kayani doesn’t have the formal standing in the structure of the government to give such a speech, and at the time, Gilani didn’t have the prominence.²⁵⁶

The dynamics in Islamabad were “flaky” both within the new civilian government and between the civilian and military leaderships, in the view of a US military official.²⁵⁷ Americans served as the bridge between Pakistani civilian and military officials. Zardari’s Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), which led the new civilian governing coalition, had “bad history” with the military.²⁵⁸ In the words of an NSC official, “We had a brand-new government building on strained PPP-military relations....And the attacks did not even make sense from a strategic perspective for the [Pakistan] military.” The civilian government was now also being held accountable for what they did not do, and did not know about.²⁵⁹ Regrettably, said another US official, “the important meetings were with Kayani and [ISI Director-General Ahmad Shuja] Pasha because they were the ones who could get stuff

done. The meetings with the civilians were not fruitful.”²⁶⁰ “Our preference is to deal with the civilians, but that’s not always practical,” another American agreed.²⁶¹

On the Friday after the attacks in Mumbai, Prime Minister Gilani pledged to cooperate with the investigation of the Mumbai attacks and offered to send the Pakistani ISI chief to help. The overture presumably was partly a response to international pressure, well as Pakistani worries about India’s potential reaction to the attacks. Two days later, the ISI chief, shrugging off Gilani’s implicit attempt to assert civilian authority over the military-affiliated intelligence organization, said he would instead send a representative.²⁶² The incident recalled President Zardari’s short-lived declaration, soon after his election, that the ISI would henceforth be controlled by the elected civilian government. “Things got pretty hairy with the whole business of ISI Director-General Pasha’s visit to India getting called off,” recalled a senior US diplomat.²⁶³

It was the Pakistan Army, not Washington, that countered rumors of Indian military movements along their border areas. An India-Pakistan cease-fire had remained in effect across the Kashmir divide since 2002, despite violations.²⁶⁴ Denying that India’s armed forces had mobilized, a Pakistani army spokesman announced on November 30 that the “ceasefire is holding.”²⁶⁵ From the perspective of Embassy Islamabad at the time, this was “very responsible.” The announcement that Pakistan’s military was not going to preemptively mobilize “had a calming effect”²⁶⁶—at least momentarily.

Newly installed Pakistani civilian leaders, meanwhile, kept a high profile during the crisis. Prime Minister Gilani convened an all-party conference on national security on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving to discuss “how Pakistan should act in the prevailing situation and what steps should be taken if it gets worse.” President Zardari continued efforts to level the diplomatic playing field for Pakistan vis-à-vis India—and to dilute US pressure—by courting other governments. He reportedly phoned Afghan, French, and British leaders to seek their help in “normalizing” the India-Pakistan situation.²⁶⁷ Zardari’s appeals drew on Islamabad’s time-honored strategy of parrying charges of Pakistani terrorism against India by invoking the Kashmir issue as the root cause of India-Pakistan tensions.²⁶⁸ He also highlighted the role of poverty in Pakistan as the “root cause” of terrorism, another familiar talking point.²⁶⁹

A proposal advanced by Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi just before Secretary Rice arrived in Islamabad took another leaf from Pakistan’s traditional diplomatic playbook. Speaking to a gathering of foreign diplomats in Islamabad, Qureshi proposed a joint India-Pakistan investigation of the Mumbai attacks, to be headed by the respective national security advisers.²⁷⁰ Qureshi’s effort to treat the Mumbai attacks as a bilateral issue was at odds with the US push for an investigation-based international response, as well as with India’s bid for a UN Security Council (UNSC) ban on the JuD. New Delhi was looking instead for a global response to what it saw as another incident of international terrorism against India emanating from Pakistan.²⁷¹

Mullen received a lukewarm reception from civilian, military, and intelligence officials in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. He reportedly pressed for a crackdown on LeT training camps and recruitment in discussions with President Zardari, National Security Adviser Mahmud Durrani, General Kayani, and Lt. Gen. Pasha.²⁷² During Mullen’s visit to Pakistan, the Indian

press cited claims by unnamed sources that India had proof of Pakistani intelligence's involvement in planning the Mumbai attacks. One article asserted that, "the Americans actually had even more intelligence on Pakistan's links to the Mumbai attacks than India, given their presence in Pakistan and the tabs they kept on movements in and out of the Karachi port."²⁷³

Arriving in Islamabad on Mullen's heels, Secretary Rice sought to convince the Pakistani government to take responsibility and concrete actions. First she met with Prime Minister Gilani and had a "brutal" conversation with him. Gilani took the position that Pakistan didn't have anything to do with the attacks. As Rice recalled in her memoir, she said to him, "Mr. Prime Minister, ... either you're lying to me or your people are lying to you." I then went on to tell him what we—the United States—knew about the origins of the attack."²⁷⁴ Unless Pakistan changed course, "You are just about to stumble into a war." Next she visited

“Mr. Prime Minister, either you’re lying to me or your people are lying to you”

President Zardari and heard a very different message: "We'll go to all lengths....If there is any involvement, we'll take action."²⁷⁵ "Zardari got it," says a veteran US diplomat. "Zardari also thought Rice had gotten Mukherjee...off his back."²⁷⁶

US crisis management efforts were hampered by a lack of cohesion among government elements in Islamabad. As one former senior US official reflected, "Pakistan was weak, disorganized, and didn't want to appear to make concessions to India or the US."²⁷⁷ In fact, he added, "We and the Indians were asking the same things of the Pakistanis."²⁷⁸ But the evidence was clear, recalled a senior US diplomat, and "Condi nailed them on this repeatedly" in face-to-face meetings with Kayani, Zardari, and Gilani. "Rice's visit was key...She walked both [civilian and military] sides back....She got Kayani to sort of take responsibility.... [It] was hugely helpful that we had such access to the Pakistanis.... [At the time] the relationship with them was much better than under Musharraf. Kayani was being reasonable and not a grandstander; the civilians were scared."²⁷⁹

Back from the Brink?

By the time Secretary Rice left New Delhi and Islamabad, she "thought that a war could be averted."²⁸⁰ Soon after Rice's departure, John McCain arrived in Islamabad after his unplanned visit to New Delhi. He met with Pakistani newspaper editors in Islamabad and reinforced the message Rice had forcefully conveyed in private. India would be left with no choice but to carry out surgical strikes against individuals and groups linked to the Mumbai terror attacks in a "matter of days" if Pakistan failed to act on the "irrefutable evidence" against such elements, McCain warned.²⁸¹ As one US diplomat recalls, "McCain came, and was very agitated when he got to Pakistan." He "over-dramatized the degree of Indian upset, which was useful. He got their attention."²⁸²

Following Secretary Rice's early-December visit, as one senior US official noted, "Some Pakistani authorities publicly acknowledged that some Pakistanis took some actions on Pakistani soil and that there were LeT links; they apprehended some figures." When this happened, Rice thought the worst was over.²⁸³ As a former NSC staffer recounted, "Regarding

the Pakistanis' short-term reaction: they understood the severity at the time, that they could not sit on their hands....In the early days and hours, they saw the need to deal with LeT in a more aggressive way and to hold the group to account."²⁸⁴

Admiral Mullen publicly praised Pakistan's raid on a major LeT camp in Azad Kashmir on December 7 and the arrests of several prominent LeT actors. The latter included JuD leader Hafiz Saeed; Zarar Shah, an LeT operational commander; and Zakir Rehman Lakhvi, the alleged leader of the Mumbai attacks from Pakistan.²⁸⁵ One Washington-based diplomat read Pakistan's moves "to get Lakhvi and Saeed secured" as "a step to tamp down the crisis...a sign that neither [side] wanted war."²⁸⁶

Some reports credited Chinese pressure on Islamabad with inducing Pakistani officials to arrest key JuD and LeT figures, however briefly. In early December, Chinese officials evidently had warned Islamabad in advance that Beijing would not veto the upcoming UNSC initiative to list and sanction some key militant leaders in Pakistan as terrorists for the first time.²⁸⁷

Mid-December 2008 – January 19, 2009

Pakistan Digs In

As one former US official recollected, the "long-term reaction" by Pakistani officials to evidence from the Mumbai attacks "was not so good."²⁸⁸ A former senior US policy maker recalled his frustration with "Pakistani recalcitrance" in the face of overwhelming evidence that Pakistani nationals recruited, trained, and equipped in Pakistan perpetrated the Mumbai attacks. As one senior US official recalled:

We encouraged Pakistan to invite forensics experts from the FBI. The FBI and Pakistani authorities found links to Pakistanis, and we gave our data to the Pakistanis. We said we wanted to share the intelligence with India, and Pakistan initially said 'no.' We asked for a public statement that they would find and prosecute those responsible for the attacks. Initially we couldn't even get that. It was a weak country and a weak government in its first crisis. It was very hard work to turn Pakistan's authorities around—'pick and shovel' work.²⁸⁹

As one American diplomat noted:

There was a huge debate inside Pakistan about the nationality of the attackers. We were clear from the very beginning that the roots of the plot went back to Pakistan. We made the case that the fact that US citizens were killed in the attacks gave the US a direct interest in what was going on. We told Pakistan that we had evidence that Pakistanis were involved, and we showed it to them. We believed we had evidence that implicated individuals and that planning was done inside Pakistan. But many there remained skeptical.²⁹⁰

Islamabad's resistance also disappointed Indian hopes that the fledgling democratic government would be more disposed to cooperate with New Delhi than a military-led government. Indian officials had tried from the start of the crisis to distinguish the alleged complicity of the military and intelligence services in Pakistan from the bystander role of the new civilian government. Even before Secretary Rice arrived in Islamabad, unnamed

Indian sources described to the Indian press the “clear disconnect between the Pakistani civilian government and the all-powerful military establishment, which is causing difficulties for India in dealing with the situation.”²⁹¹

Indeed, Pakistan’s “playbook” after the 2008 crisis differed little from that of Twin Peaks because the same military and intelligence institutions were still calling the shots. Both Indian and western diplomats feared that they were witnessing a replay of events after the 2001 attack on India’s parliament, when Pakistani authorities banned militant groups, including LeT, and arrested their senior leaders, only to release them in due course. The banned groups then went back to operating openly.²⁹²

The banned groups then went back to operating openly

Accepting the evidence-based law enforcement model of counterterrorism exemplified by the FBI and advocated by other US officials starting in late 2008 would have required Pakistan’s military and intelligence services to punish LeT militants who had long served as presumed force multipliers and proxies against India and Afghanistan.²⁹³ Apart from issues of loyalty to longtime militant allies, such a stance would have carried several risks to the Pakistan security establishment’s perceived interests. It was unclear whether the army would fare well and retain popular support in irregular warfare against the LeT. Moves against the LeT could prove especially divisive in Pakistan’s Punjab province, the stronghold of the army as well as the LeT.

Indeed, a former US official added, “one question remaining for us was whether the Pakistanis think they can control the militants.” In his view, this question is complicated by the fact that there seem to be “four ISIs”—(1) the professional military (like ISI Director-General Pasha); (2) the field officers, many of whom are scattered in “Pashtun land” and are unhappy with the government’s counterterrorism operations; (3) retired ISI officers; and (4) people who claim they are ISI.²⁹⁴

India Steps Up Pressure

Skeptical of Pakistani intentions from the outset, New Delhi “elected for harsh rhetoric without military retaliation,” recalled a senior diplomat; “there was no end to the peace process and no dismantlement of past gains, but they just put the process on the shelf for a while.”²⁹⁵ New Delhi’s harsh rhetoric was provocative, however. On December 7, Mukherjee publicly dismissed Zardari’s account of a call—allegedly from Mukherjee—threatening war. “I have seen several misleading stories about a hoax telephone call from me to President Zardari of Pakistan,” Mukherjee told the press. “The facts are as follows:

We were informed by friends from third countries that Pakistan President Zardari believed that he had received a threatening telephone call from me on November 28, after the attack on Mumbai. We immediately clarified to those friends, and we also made it clear to the Pakistan authorities, that I had made no such telephone call....

It is, however, worrying that a neighbouring state might even consider acting on the basis of such a hoax call, try to give it credibility with other states, and confuse the public by releasing the story in part. I can only ascribe this series of events to those in Pakistan, who

wish to divert attention from the fact that a terrorist group operating from the Pakistani territory, planned, and launched a ghastly attack on Mumbai.²⁹⁶

Indian officials also dismissed the December 7 arrest by Pakistani authorities of Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, the apparent operational mastermind of the Mumbai attacks, as a response to veiled threats of Indian air strikes against LeT camps in Pakistan if Islamabad did not act.²⁹⁷ Whatever else was accomplished by New Delhi's threats, they raised the temperature of India-Pakistan ties, to Washington's distress.

Rising Tensions – Beyond Signaling

An American diplomat recalled that “the period between December 15 [2008] and New Year’s [2009] was the tensest.”²⁹⁸ An official with long South Asia experience “thought that there would be the usual saber rattling and that that would be the end of it. The escalatory potential became apparent a few days after the attacks ended, and built over a month’s time, with growing evidence pointing to the possible ISI involvement. By Boxing Day [the day after Christmas], escalation looked more likely because more evidence was out in the open, suggesting possible involvement of official Pakistani government organs.”²⁹⁹ He added, “There was a period of uncertainty because this was India’s military training season: Was this war, in fact? There was a flood of analysis with charts and indicators with arrows pointing up. But the exercises did not look like Cold Start, and activities associated with mobilization did not materialize.”³⁰⁰

In mid-December, Pakistani officials charged that Indian air force planes violated Pakistani airspace. Indian officials retorted that the charges were intended to divert attention from Pakistan’s failure to act on India demands for extradition of a list of 20 individuals deemed to be terrorists.³⁰¹ As one diplomat recalled, “When [Indian] planes flew over [Pakistani territory] around Christmastime [2008], that got our attention. There was a lot of signaling going on, to the USG and the GoP” [government of Pakistan].³⁰² Another feared that this brinkmanship could spark a military incident, “whether by accident, on purpose, or a combination of both.”³⁰³ One concern was that an Indian aircraft might stray across the border and get shot down.

In a move guaranteed to focus US as well as Indian attention, unidentified Pakistani military and intelligence officials told the press that “some” Pakistani forces had been redeployed from the western frontier area, where anti-Taliban operations were taking place, to its eastern border with India. Pakistani air force assets, they said, were on high alert around high-value targets in Pakistan. The reason reportedly related to new intelligence suggesting that India might launch an attack inside Pakistan by the following week.³⁰⁴

**By the last week
in December, the
war of words was
escalating**

As Admiral Mullen headed to Islamabad once again to urge Pakistani officials to pursue judicial proceedings against detained militants, Indian and Pakistani officials traded charges of non-cooperation. Mullen arrived in Pakistan for talks with Chief of Army Staff Ashfaq Pervez Kayani on December 22, amid exercises by Pakistani fighter jets over the capital and several other areas of the country.³⁰⁵

By the last week in December, the war of words was escalating, a former senior US official recalls. Pakistan's "flamboyant" foreign minister made a "provocative statement which set things off—he suggested that they would retaliate if India resorted to force [even surgical strikes]... This led to an Indian verbal response.... We had some of these ripples to massage."³⁰⁶ External Affairs Minister Mukherjee angrily rebutted his Pakistani counterpart's demand that India "de-activate air bases" and "re-locate its ground forces to peace time positions." Indian armed forces were engaged in seasonal exercises, Mukherjee replied. "[This] is not an India-Pakistan issue. This is an attack perpetrated by elements emanating from the land of Pakistan and the Pakistan government should take action against it."³⁰⁷

Some US officials interpreted New Delhi's December 2008 diplomatic and military maneuvers as pressure on Islamabad after Pakistani authorities failed to round up accused terrorists. In addition, India's moves were certainly intended as goads to Washington to press Islamabad to cooperate by clamping down on the LeT. "India's Plan A, B, and C was to rely on the US," an American diplomat opined in retrospect. "Delhi had more leverage on the United States than on Pakistan."³⁰⁸ New Delhi, however, was not counting on Washington (or London) alone to press its brief against Pakistan. Indian diplomats also appealed to the Chinese and Saudi governments to press their traditional ally, Pakistan, to act against the accused militants.³⁰⁹ Saudi and Chinese, as well as US, officials privately urged Islamabad to prosecute militants allegedly linked to the Mumbai attacks.³¹⁰ China's foreign minister telephoned counterparts in India and Pakistan in late December to urge dialogue, official Chinese sources reported. The head of the Saudi intelligence service met with Pakistani officials in Islamabad on January 13 (2009) to underscore the urgency of progress on all of these issues.³¹¹

Other US officials interpreted India's military moves mainly as an effort to satisfy domestic opinion. As one official recounted, "The [Indian] government had taken actions to respond to domestic compulsions. We were still unsure of its intentions continuing into 2009, but the USG felt more comfortable by early 2009."³¹² Many Indian commentators and officials,

Delhi had more leverage on the United States than on Pakistan

on the other hand, worried that New Delhi's decision to avoid a military response would be misunderstood by Pakistan and other states as weakness. Ten former Indian ambassadors and other retired officials urged the government to increase demands on Pakistan, end all bilateral negotiations, and put India-Pakistan economic and cultural ties on the line.³¹³ Asked by Indian reporters in Mumbai whether he viewed India's response to the 26/11 attacks as a "sign of maturity or spinelessness," Boucher replied, "I would say India's responses

are responses we would cooperate with and support."³¹⁴ In fact, many US officials were praising Prime Minister Singh's approach as singularly mature.

As evidence mounted that Pakistani militants had carried out the attacks in Mumbai, US officials notched up pressure on Islamabad to cooperate with the US-UK-Indian investigation. Pakistani military and intelligence officials once more appeared to yield a bit, announcing in late December that Zarar Shah, arrested at the same time as Lakhvi, had confessed to participating in the Mumbai attacks. The admission was said to corroborate US intercepts of a phone call between Shah and one of the attackers at the Taj hotel in

Mumbai. Pakistani officials subsequently announced, however, that New Delhi had yet to provide sufficient information for prosecutions to move forward.³¹⁵ So “LeT was not contained,” recalled a former NSC official. “It does not help that you have Saeed and Dawood Ibrahim out there talking publicly...I worry about Indian restraint after a next attack.”³¹⁶

For Washington, “the...question now was how to get the LeT brought to justice...they had killed Americans....There was a lot of pressure to get the Paks to take responsibility. [The lone surviving militant attacker in Mumbai, Mohammed Ajmal] Kasab was singing. There were intercepts,” whose contents have since been made public.³¹⁷

LeT was not contained

There was disarray even within the civilian government in Islamabad, however. On January 7 (2009), Gilani dismissed Durrani for acknowledging that Kasab was a Pakistani national. Hours later, other Pakistani officials confirmed Durrani’s statement, as did Kasab’s father and neighbors.³¹⁸ But “even Pakistani civilian officials’ admission of Kasab’s Pakistani citizenship didn’t change things,” another US official remembered. “Hafiz Saeed’s house arrest amounted to getting a police escort when he moved around....And for others, being ‘jailed’ meant that Pakistan was just paying their rent.”³¹⁹

India-Pakistan Information Sharing Ends

US efforts to foster information sharing on terrorism between India and Pakistan through their law enforcement and intelligence services also foundered. Mutual mistrust was high, and Pakistan’s security establishment was especially uneasy about pursuing with Indians any evidence implicating LeT militants. Reporters who had an opportunity to examine the dossiers on the Mumbai attacks exchanged by Indian and Pakistani officials observed:

The dossiers show that at the level of the police, the two countries can cooperate, and have exchanged DNA evidence, photographs, and items found with the attackers to piece together a detailed portrait of the Mumbai plot.

But the files are laced with barbs and recriminations, reflecting the increasingly acid tenor of their relations. Despite pledges to work together to fight terrorism, the Pakistani and Indian intelligence services are not on speaking terms, according to officials in both countries and the United States....

“The only cooperation we have with the Pakistanis is that they send us their terrorists, who kill our people, and we kill their terrorists,” a senior Indian intelligence official said in an interview.

Asked how much his agency communicated with its Indian counterpart, a senior Pakistani intelligence official made an O with his thumb and forefinger. ‘Zero,’ he replied.³²⁰

Stresses between Embassy New Delhi and Embassy Islamabad

The perspectives of officials at the US embassies in New Delhi and Islamabad often differ significantly, given their respective investment in advancing US ties to governments that are often at loggerheads. For India, US diplomatic priorities are to enhance strategic partnership, trade, and investment. For Pakistan, current US objectives are to maintain logistics support for coalition forces in Afghanistan and secure cooperation against militants operating from

safe havens, ensure that the country's nuclear arsenal is secure from unauthorized seizure or use, and prevent the bilateral relationship from deteriorating further.

Such differences in perspective increase during crises even though, in the case of the Mumbai attacks, both embassies shared in the wider US government consensus on the actions required for crisis management. One US diplomat characterized the tensions between the US embassies in New Delhi and Islamabad as arising from “general differences in the nuances of interpreting actions. For example, we in the Pakistani Embassy were more aware of the domestic constraints on the Pakistani government's response.”³²¹ Another diplomat who was serving in Islamabad after the Mumbai attacks added, “Our sense was that they [the Pakistanis] were still trying to tamp this down as the culpable party in the attacks.”³²²

In contrast, some at Embassy New Delhi saw Washington as “indiscriminately” and “ill-advisedly” protecting Pakistan from any “consequences” of failing to cooperate on the investigation because of US logistics requirements for American forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan was, in the view of one American in New Delhi, “hiding behind ‘AfPak’ from consequences for supporting terrorists whose victims include Americans.”³²³ Unlike colleagues in Islamabad, many at Embassy New Delhi doubted the Pakistani military's claims that it did not have operational control of LeT. Counterparts at the two embassies periodically sorted out their different perceptions by SVTC. There “was tension, but we were in contact with them,” said a diplomat who was at Embassy Islamabad.³²⁴

Competition between the US ambassadors to Pakistan and India is also a frequent occurrence, even when both envoys are as skilled and knowledgeable as Ambassadors Mulford and Patterson. One American diplomat recalled that Mulford “pushed on the assumptions” of other US officials in the course of the crisis. “He was going to get what was needed to preserve this relationship” with India.³²⁵ The conduct of senior NSC meetings by SVTC played to Mulford's strengths. As one diplomat recalls, “Mulford was so adept at SVTCs. He handled the President with deference but as a peer. He could hold his own with anyone in that room—Condi, Gates.”³²⁶ Moreover, the Mumbai attacks, as with previous mass-casualty attacks on India originating from Pakistan, had brought Washington and New Delhi closer together.

US diplomacy got caught in molasses

The Mumbai attacks had the opposite effect on US-Pakistan ties, further complicating Washington's efforts to deal with a divided Pakistani establishment on the Mumbai crisis while also advancing broader US diplomatic, military, and counterterrorism objectives. As a US diplomat who had worked on both India and Pakistan noted:

By way of context, Patterson had to deal with a weak civilian government, many power centers, Pasha on the intel side and Kayani for the Army. Embassy New Delhi, for India, was singleminded about pushing them to have Saeed arrested and the Mumbai attack planners tried and convicted. Solidarity with India was the only message.

Inevitably, he added, US diplomacy:

[G]ot caught in molasses...on the third judge in the Pakistan trial [against LeT defendants]. Everyone knew something needed to be done about the JuD and LeT. Policy differences concerned what must be done about the organization. There was no unity. With a fragile government [in Pakistan], you can't push that hard...you were dancing around links, ISI-LeT...What do we expect, given the JuD charitable works' importance with a weak government? We knew that would be the rub.³²⁷

New Delhi Adjusts Expectations

With prospects dimming for near-term Pakistani cooperation in the investigation of the Mumbai attacks, Foreign Minister Mukherjee told an Indian television channel in mid-January that New Delhi would be satisfied if those involved in the Mumbai attacks were tried in Pakistani courts, provided they were “tried fairly.” This statement seemed tacitly to withdraw New Delhi’s latest demands for the extradition from Pakistan to India of a cumulative list of 40 alleged terrorists believed to be sheltered in Pakistan and accused of involvement in various attacks in India, from December 2001 through the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Mukherjee’s statement followed a similar one two days before in New Delhi by visiting British Foreign Secretary David Millband.³²⁸ Like their US and British counterparts, Indian officials seemed to be narrowing their demands.

Indian assessments of the incoming Obama administration’s policy plans were doubtless part of the internal discussion in New Delhi on how best to deal with Pakistan regarding the Mumbai attacks. As an Indian academic said in mid-January 2009, it would be unwise for India to rely too much on the United States for support on the issue, given the President-elect’s stated intention to intensify the Afghanistan war. This, the academic said, called for cooperation from the Pakistan Army and “limits the amount of pressure the US can mount on Pakistan.”³²⁹ New Delhi, like Washington, needed to weigh policy preferences in Afghanistan with those vis-à-vis Pakistan: Indian officials viewed a continued NATO presence in Afghanistan as consistent with their desire to keep the Taliban out of power.

As the clock ran down on the Bush administration’s tenure, Vice President-elect Joe Biden made a fact-finding trip to Islamabad in his capacity as the outgoing Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Prime Minister Gilani chose the occasion to announce that Pakistan had taken what he characterized as a step toward cooperating with India: the ISI had provided “feedback” to the Indian government on a 52-page dossier of evidence provided by India to the CIA, and then by the CIA to the Pakistanis, Gilani told reporters.³³⁰

Bangladesh Reaps Rewards of Cooperation

Dhaka, meanwhile, continued efforts to distinguish its counterterrorism policy from Islamabad’s—eagerly pursuing opportunities for counterterrorism cooperation with Washington as well as New Delhi. A large-scale mutiny of Bangladesh’s border guards just two months after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took office on January 6 (2009) provided an opening for US officials to bring in the FBI to demonstrate the conduct of a completely professional investigation. The FBI pushed local investigators to interview all

3,000-4,000 witnesses, not just a few. One US diplomat noted that, “It was touch and go” for the new government....The Army was outraged that the government did not move faster on the investigation” and advanced diverse conspiracy theories: “It was the Indians...the Pakistanis...the Americans,’ not just the border guards. The FBI set up a clearinghouse for information on the mutiny and showed the way.”³³¹ As this diplomat noted, the FBI has become a permanent presence at Embassy Dhaka, working on terrorism issues continuously with Bangladeshi officials. This could improve the chances of averting international terrorist attacks in or from Bangladesh, as well as providing a mechanism for working such problems immediately, if they occur.³³²

There was still more “26/11 payoff”: India and Bangladesh worked closely to prevent attacks in India, following up on “credible threats” of terrorism in early 2010. Counterterrorism also was the “price of admission” for Prime Minister Hasina’s visit to India and a new bilateral border agreement in January 2010. Cooperation on counterterrorism unlocked cooperation on electricity, railroads, and transit for Bangladesh’s trade with Bhutan and Nepal—long stalled India-Bangladesh issues.

This model of bilateral India-Bangladesh partnership after 26/11 inspired Embassy Dhaka to support renewed calls for South Asia-wide security cooperation on counterterrorism, including a proposal for a regional counterterrorism center based in Dhaka. The deal-breaker again proved to be the India-Pakistan deadlock on terrorism issues.³³³

Late January – February 2009: Coming to Grips with Obstruction

Barely eight days after President Obama’s inauguration, Pakistan’s High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Wajid Shamsul Hasan, became the first Pakistani official to publicly question whether the Mumbai attacks were planned in Pakistan and to charge that New Delhi might have “fabricated” evidence passed to Islamabad earlier that month. The Indian dossier reportedly included transcripts of cell phone conversations between the attackers and their handlers in Pakistan, in which the handlers ordered hostages killed, and then cheered.³³⁴ The participation of UK and US law enforcement officers in vetting the evidence evidently did not impress the High Commissioner.

In mid-February, renewed pressure from the Obama administration on both New Delhi and Islamabad to cooperate elicited a cautious and short-lived response from Pakistan’s civilian government. During a visit to Islamabad by then-Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) Richard Holbrooke, Interior Minister Rehman Malik publicly acknowledged that Lakhvi was “under investigation” as the possible mastermind of the Mumbai assault. Malik also acknowledged allegations that e-mailed claims of responsibility for the attacks originated with LeT’s communications coordinator.³³⁵ These concessions followed Obama’s first presidential phone call to Zardari. Indian officials formally welcomed Pakistan’s admission that part of the planning on the 2008 Mumbai attacks took place on its territory, as well as Islamabad’s “first information report” to Pakistani police, based on information provided by India. New Delhi also repeated calls for Pakistan to dismantle the “infrastructure of terrorism.”³³⁶ Islamabad was again silent on this point.

Pakistani authorities backed away also from the findings of a law-enforcement investigation led by Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) chief. The FIA investigation reportedly had concluded "beyond any reasonable doubt" that the Mumbai attacks were perpetrated by Lashkar militants over three days starting on November 26, 2008. The FIA's findings encountered resistance in Islamabad and at several levels in Pakistan's courts, in part because of differences with India over who should try Kasab. The Lahore High Court finally dismissed the underlying Indian evidence in February 2011, including Kasab's confession.³³⁷

Reflecting on Islamabad's protracted u-turn, one longtime US official concluded that a politicized judiciary in Pakistan had effectively reaffirmed Islamabad's "longtime reliance on militant groups as proxies in an uneven military contest with India... [and] the legitimacy of its two-track regional policies led by the Army and ISI since the 1980s."³³⁸

A politicized judiciary in Pakistan had effectively reaffirmed Islamabad's longtime reliance on militant groups as proxies

Pakistani authorities again reverted to their default position of denial, accompanied by requests for additional information from outsiders while internal investigations and prosecutions stalled. US officials seeking a silver lining in this dispiriting, if familiar, progression, noted that the FIA findings at least went through Pakistan's judicial system. But this is where they lost all traction. Hafiz Saeed was once again released from police house detention, and those involved in planning the Mumbai attacks have not been greatly inconvenienced.

Stepping Back from Crisis Mode in Washington: Mission Incomplete

In tacit recognition that the crisis was moving to "maintenance" status in Washington, US government Mumbai task forces went to shorter hours and then were dissolved, one by one. Some six months after 26/11, the Pentagon-based J-5 crisis cell morphed from 24/7 to part-time, at the ready to reverse course if the crisis heated up again. The frequency of SVTCs meetings dipped to twice-weekly and then—in late 2009—to once a week. The virtual meetings remained a valuable forum for information exchanges among scattered working-level counterparts working South Asia. When the task force closed up shop in fall 2010 after its leader moved to a new assignment, some lamented the loss of a mechanism that had bridged geographic and bureaucratic divides, notably between CENTCOM and PACOM.³³⁹

Indian Frustration

On the face of it, New Delhi had responded pragmatically to Pakistani stalling. Senior Indian officials refocused on improving the country's ability to foil and respond to future terrorist attacks. Despite the furor over the government's handling of the Mumbai attacks, the governing Congress Party won the spring 2009 national elections with little difficulty.

In June 2009, B. Raman, a former senior counterterrorism official, expressed the frustration felt by many Indian officials over the unresolved status of the Mumbai crisis:

Thus, India finds itself in an unenviable position. It is not in a position to make the US and the rest of the Western world act against Pakistan for its inaction against the LeT....

In the meanwhile, there has been a window of respite in acts of Pakistan-origin jihadi terrorism in the Indian territory. There has been no act of terrorism by the so-called Indian Mujahideen since September last. There has been no major act of terrorism by the LeT in the Indian territory outside J&K since November last.³⁴⁰

Raman's implicit view—that Islamabad still had some control over the LeT, despite its protestations—was widely held in India. Nevertheless, with strong encouragement from Washington, London, and other concerned governments, India returned to talks with Pakistan beginning in early 2010—although these talks have yielded little on the terrorism issue.³⁴¹ The respite in terrorist attacks described by Raman was to end in mid-July 2011 with a round of lethal, coordinated bombings in southern Mumbai.³⁴² These bombings reignited Indian anger at Pakistan's failure to move against terrorists operating from its territory. On July 23, 2011, at a South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation meeting of home ministers in Thimphu, Indian Home Minister Chidambaram underscored “that no country can escape its responsibility by blaming non-state actors for terrorist activities emanating from its soil” and that such a country “owes a legal and moral responsibility to its neighbours and to the world to suppress those non-state actors and bring them to justice.” He added:

Sometimes, I think that the distinction between state actors and non-state actors is misplaced and intended to misdirect our efforts to deal with terrorist groups at the very source—the recruitment centres, the training camps, and their safe havens and sanctuaries.³⁴³

Divided US Perceptions of Post-Mumbai Crisis Management

Many officials credit Plan A with helping to contain the Mumbai crisis. In the words of one US policy maker, however, “Mumbai never reached the level of the two spikes of the Twin

The 2008 Mumbai crisis was more manageable than its two immediate predecessors

Peaks crisis.” Consequently, the challenges for US diplomacy were shorter-lived and of a lesser scale.³⁴⁴ Despite the spectacular nature of the Mumbai attacks and the considerable loss of life, the 2008 crisis never approached the military brinkmanship of Twin Peaks, when India and Pakistani armed forces mobilized for war in their fighting corridors.³⁴⁵ Although it carried risks of escalation, these were less dangerous than those of the Twin Peaks crisis in the views of some US officials. Richard Boucher viewed Indian “crisis learning” during and after Twin Peaks as one

reason why escalation to nuclear weapons use was far less of a US concern in the Mumbai crisis: “They [India] realized the world wouldn't let it get to a nuclear confrontation.” Some in the Indian establishment argued [during Twin Peaks] for a “quick surgical strike before anyone could stop them.” But “there was nothing they could achieve with that except for chest-beating.”³⁴⁶

New Delhi learned during the Twin Peaks crisis that its nuclear arsenal did not deter terrorist attacks and that mobilization of its conventional forces did not compel corrective actions by

Pakistani authorities. Because of another full-scale mobilization without war—which New Delhi was still unwilling to risk—could mean another embarrassing draw down of forces without satisfaction. Absent mobilization by India or the execution of “Cold Start”-like military operations, the 2008 Mumbai crisis was more manageable than its two immediate predecessors, the 2001-2002 crisis, and the limited war in the heights above Kargil in 1999.

The aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attacks clarified, once again, that Pakistan’s military, political, and judicial authorities could not—or would not—take action against the alleged perpetrators of terror assaults in India, even when these involved iconic targets or mass casualties. Indian grievances were unresolved, while Pakistani policies remained dangerously subject to miscalculation.

The 2008 Mumbai crisis was, above all, unfinished. As one US diplomat noted, the crisis “is not an historical event; it is a current event.”³⁴⁷ “The USG felt more comfortable by early 2009” with Indian intentions, another American diplomat recollected.³⁴⁸ That said, “there was no specific event that made me think that the threat of escalation was over,” another seasoned official observed.³⁴⁹ The possibility of another crisis—and of an Indian riposte—remains. US crisis management in 2008-2009 was exemplary, but it succeeded largely because Indian political leaders did not wish to risk an open-ended war that could escalate out of control or damage Indian economic or diplomatic equities. India’s calculus could change.

IV. Preparing for a Likely Next Crisis

All the US officials interviewed by the authors of this study believe that a return to crisis between India and Pakistan is inevitable. As a former senior White House official has warned, “There is always the possibility of a terror attack from Pakistan.”³⁵⁰ The list of potential triggers for renewed crisis continues to expand—now including, for example, more possible assaults on Indian interests in Afghanistan or cyber attacks on India.³⁵¹

The risk of more confrontations between India and Pakistan adds urgency to assessing the US approaches, assumptions, and decisions adopted during the Mumbai crisis. Particularly important will be identifying factors that would warrant revising or discarding parts of “Plan A.”

Learning from Mumbai

The Importance of Timing

The timing of a crisis matters. The Mumbai crisis was unique in that it occurred soon after a presidential election, when Bush administration officials were preparing to leave and the Obama administration was organizing to take office. Most of the officials, current and former, who were interviewed for this study agree on the following observations about the effect of the transition on management of the Mumbai crisis in Washington.

First, the fact that the crisis began seven weeks before the end of the administration did not dilute the focus or effort of outgoing officials on crisis management. As one said, “We all believed that you had to keep running till you cross the finish line.” Work on the crisis continued until right before Inauguration Day. Outgoing NSC directors were packing up their offices at midnight on the final night, one official recalled.³⁵² This was “a seasoned and mature response from a bunch of seasoned actors,” another said. “Gates [who] had been there for two years, Negroponte, Mike Hayden at CIA [were] an all-star team who were very savvy and on the same page. Well-rehearsed and practiced.” President Bush, Secretary Rice, and National Security Adviser Hadley were all veterans of the Twin Peaks crisis. For them, managing the Mumbai crisis was “relatively straightforward. There was no question when we went into meetings that we would use the levers and channels we had already established to manage the crisis...all the cylinders were working together....We were at the top of our game.”³⁵³

As one former senior White House official recalled, “We were still dealing with threats right through the inauguration; there was no lag in vigilance” on issues ranging from the Mumbai crisis to the Somalia-related threat warnings during President Obama’s inauguration.³⁵⁴ Outgoing Bush administration NSC officials were briefing incoming Obama administration officials, including the new National Security Advisor, General

James “Jim” Jones, and Obama’s counterterrorism advisor, John Brennan.³⁵⁵ Secretary Rice briefed Obama directly.³⁵⁶

Second, counterterrorism policies, including those relating to the Mumbai attacks and the crisis that followed, changed little after the Obama team came in. Some ascribe this continuity to the great effort by outgoing officials to distill and pass crisis management know-how to the Obama team during the transition, including some of their learning on India-Pakistan crises. “Crises require expertise of their own,” recalled one senior Bush administration official. “We had a lot of experience by ‘08. We tried to hand down expertise and knowledge to the new administration. We gave them new briefing documents in terms of a hypothetical terror attack. We outlined the resources available in the event of a crisis. We had a role-playing session on a hypothetical crisis so that they could see the capabilities and hear it in action.” Such an effort to jump-start crisis know-how “never happened before,” he noted.³⁵⁷ Many other observers agree.

Third, while most cabinet and deputy-cabinet-level positions turned over as President Obama entered office, there was some helpful personnel continuity on counterterrorism. Departing Senior NSC Director Juan Zarate’s deputy stayed on. A number of other experienced counterterrorism hands either remained in or returned to government when Obama came into office—including John Brennan; Michael Vickers, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities; the Treasury Undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, Stuart Levey; and Steve Kappes at CIA.³⁵⁸ President Obama asked Ambassador Mulford, a political appointee of the Bush administration, to remain in New Delhi until March 2009 to provide continuity. Anne Patterson, a professional diplomat, was asked to extend her tour in Islamabad for a third year, until late 2010.³⁵⁹

Even so, some policy momentum on the Mumbai crisis inevitably was lost in the transition.

The Obama administration turned quickly to reviewing US policy options regarding Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Mumbai attacks went to a back burner. With the passage of time, concern about an Indian military response faded, even though Pakistani leaders were unwilling or unable to clamp down on or prosecute the attackers. “With the change of administration, there was no focus on this at all...on getting the Paks to try these guys [in court],” recalled a US diplomat. “By the time they focused, Obama that is, there were changes politically in the US, India, and

“There is a ‘playbook’ we use for these crises; they know what we will do”

Pakistan...to the ‘AfPak’ focus.” One question for India after the transition might have been: “how effective is the implied quid pro quo [that] you, India, should not attack, and we, the US, will sort these Paks out?”³⁶⁰

Did the transition in Washington contribute to the unfinished nature of this crisis and the resulting stalemate? If the crisis had occurred earlier in President Bush’s second term, would the results have been different? US officials who worked on the Mumbai crisis under both administrations doubt that the outcome would have been different for several reasons.

For one, there are few policy alternatives to those “we pursued in trying to get Pakistan to do what India required after the Mumbai attacks,” according to one senior US diplomat. “Any US administration would act the way we did.” The main options open to Washington are what US officials sometimes refer to as the “US playbook” for India-Pakistan crises. As one diplomat noted, “There is a ‘playbook’ we use for these crises [between India and Pakistan]; they know what we will do. This offers some reassurance for India and Pakistan....Second- or third-order decisions will vary—e.g., what should be the tripwires for AmCit evacuation.”³⁶¹ The Bush administration’s certainly changed. In 2002, during a critical stage in the Twin Peaks crisis, US Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill ordered non-essential personnel to leave New Delhi.” There was no consideration of such an option during the Mumbai crisis.

The Pakistan military’s dominance will continue to limit US diplomatic options

Timing mattered less than leverage in the 2008 Mumbai crisis. Washington quite simply “has few levers in Pakistan,” in the words of a former Obama foreign policy advisor. “Those we have are, at best, marginal,” particularly while the US must rely on Pakistani cooperation for the re-supply of NATO forces in Afghanistan.³⁶² Despite the advent of a civilian government in Pakistan, it was still the military there that was calling the shots.

Thus the outgoing Bush and incoming Obama administrations were faced with the same limits on leverage with Pakistan as well as the same potential for disruptive acts in Pakistan, India, or Afghanistan. As one longtime South Asia-watcher observed:

US officials have become acutely aware that the Pakistan military’s dominance will continue to limit US diplomatic options, even though the military’s relationship with militant organizations hurts the country’s [Pakistan’s] prospects. The Pakistani military has recognized that explosions in India hurt their country’s potential growth and thus the military’s interests. But these explosions and bilateral tension also justify the praetorian state and the military’s grip on the state. They need the Indian threat as much as it limits them. Without India, there is no Pakistan.³⁶³

Assessing Key Elements of “Plan A”

Turning now to the Bush administration’s Mumbai crisis management playbook, several key elements were common also to the 1990 crisis, with subsequent refinements during the Kargil and Twin Peaks crises. Some are basic tools of American crisis diplomacy in general—including that of the Obama administration.

Top-down Crisis Management

“Crises don’t work well on a bubble-up level,” observed a former senior official in the Bush White House. “They need to be handled top-down....Whenever your nose tells you that you have a problem, jump on it....Take it out of ordinary business and get the principals on it and high-level officials dealing with it early.”³⁶⁴ Looking back, Secretary Rice concurred. Crises need to be handled “at the very top: Make sure the USG has strong relationships

with both India and Pakistan—excellent rapport with top leaders. Personal relationships matter....Act early. Get a sense of mood and intentions. Use ambassadors. Go there. Show up.”³⁶⁵ Echoing part of this message, a US diplomat noted that the “quickness of the response, trying to get out in front of events” was key to Washington’s effectiveness after the Mumbai attacks—although, he acknowledged, “US efforts to influence Pakistan’s response had mixed results....”³⁶⁶

High-level, Personal Diplomacy

The context and content of crisis management are shaped by a few key bilateral relationships. “The management of this [Mumbai] crisis was totally driven by personal, high-level diplomacy,” recalled a senior US diplomat—adding that “it might have been different without Rice’s influence in India.”³⁶⁷ For this sort of crisis management, “you don’t need a State Department or embassy—just a personal relationship between a Singh and an Obama” and some other key counterparts in the respective governments, another seasoned diplomat observed.³⁶⁸ On the down side, personal ties can be extremely hard to repair if they sour before or during a crisis.

“Act early. Get a sense of mood and intentions. Use ambassadors. Go there. Show up.”

Reliance on personal ties guarantees some disruptions with each change of players on either side, and requires the cultivation of successor ties. India has understood the need to do this through the White House, said the same seasoned diplomat. Since inheriting the Mumbai crisis from the Bush administration, the Obama administration has worked hard to build equivalent relationships in Islamabad as well as New Delhi.

Choreographing Messages and High-level Visits

After the 2008 Mumbai attacks, Secretary Rice, Deputy Secretary Negroponte, Assistant Secretary Boucher, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mullen visited the region. The visits of Rice, who had excellent ties with the Indian political leadership, and Mullen, who had spent more time with Pakistan’s military leaders than any other foreign military or political leader, were particularly important. Washington also coordinated high-level messages and visits with dignitaries from other governments. In the three months after the attacks, visitors to India and Pakistan included British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Foreign Minister David Miliband, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister He Yafei.

Information Sharing/Law Enforcement as a Brake on Crises

US sharing of crisis-related information with both India and Pakistan figured far more prominently after the Mumbai attacks than in the playbook inherited from earlier crises. As discussed previously, the premise of such sharing was that clarity could help avert miscalculations by India or Pakistan, and might open the way to law enforcement collaboration with the US (and perhaps each other) on terrorism cases.

A key question remains whether information sharing would serve as a restraining or enabling factor in New Delhi's calculations on whether to opt for a military response if a future attack were clearly traced back to Pakistan. Ambiguity concerning Pakistan's culpability arguably has provided cover for New Delhi to avoid even limited military operations against Pakistan. In the future, evidence shared by the US or acquired with US assistance could potentially strengthen the case for Indian military action.

The role of the FBI in assisting the GoI with forensics after the 2008 Mumbai attacks serendipitously added a new element to Washington's playbook for India-Pakistan crises. The jury is still out on whether the good will and cooperation fostered by the joint investigation of the Mumbai attacks with India will become institutionalized.

Achieving cooperation on terrorism investigations with Pakistan would be far more difficult. The episodic cooperation of Pakistani authorities against Al Qaeda leaders and some militant groups that have turned against the military establishment, notably the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has not carried over to the LeT or JeM. The failure of the experiment in US and Indian investigative cooperation with Pakistan, in contrast to the outcome in Bangladesh, highlights the resistance of Pakistan's security apparatus to the logic of evidence-based law enforcement against terrorism suspects.

Is US Crisis Management Indispensable?

A guiding assumption in US crisis management even before the Kargil, Twin Peaks, and Mumbai crises was that Washington's role is unique and irreplaceable. In the view of one former NSC staffer, "the US role [in Mumbai] was critical. Indo-Pak relations were so frayed after the attacks that they stopped communicating with each other....The US relayed information, served as a clearing house, put our reporting in the mix."³⁶⁹

**"The only way
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"Above all else, the only way to deal with a crisis like this is to have a trusted interlocutor," Boucher observed. "And the only interlocutor is the United States of America....No way could Russia, China, or the Europeans do this. Maybe the UN Secretary General."³⁷⁰ A former senior official agreed: the US role was "crucial—no one else can play this role."³⁷¹

"The US has earned its stripes as prime interlocutor not by being a superpower, but by dint of effort," according to Boucher.

You need the expertise and approach of the US. We had something to offer each of them. Our ties didn't happen just because we're the US. We worked to establish reliable ties with India and Pakistan back from when [former Secretary of State Colin] Powell and [Deputy Secretary Richard] Armitage took office, and back to the 2002 crisis. It 'was one of the Bush administration's goals to have individually solid relationships with India and Pakistan."³⁷²

A former senior White House official believed that US problem-solving skills will continue to earn Washington a unique role in unwinding India-Pakistan crises. "Americans are problem solvers. We're great at strategic thinking and scenario planning. Other countries

don't necessarily do this well. If our friends let us, we can be very helpful because we can choreograph solutions. This former senior White House official added, "We need to be active because they may be paralyzed," and "We are very helpful for friends that want our help," and "We're good at coming up with scenarios for de-escalation."³⁷³

Beijing and Washington might find themselves collaborating to prompt Islamabad and New Delhi, respectively, to reduce tensions

The assumption that US good offices are indispensable begs the question of what would happen if the United States did not intervene diplomatically in a serious India-Pakistan crisis, for whatever reason. For example, it is worth considering whether India and Pakistan might find reasons and ways to reach an understanding on their own. After Twin Peaks, they restarted bilateral talks with little outside encouragement. One senior US diplomat points out that in the Mumbai and Twin Peaks crises, "the most important thing [for escalation control], at the end of the day, was that neither side saw it in its interest

to exacerbate things." Neither really wanted war.³⁷⁴ Presumably, this calculus would apply whether or not Washington played a central role as crisis manager.

Alternatively, would other governments, in time, try to fill the vacuum? The European Union might adopt a larger role were the US to pull back, but its leverage in South Asia would be limited. China's growing international clout might argue for a higher profile in future crisis diplomacy. US observers may have underestimated China's diplomatic efforts during the Mumbai crisis, including its role in persuading Pakistani officials to arrest key militants, however briefly. Many American observers argue, though, that China's longtime tilt toward Pakistan and rivalry with India would confine Beijing's influence in a crisis to the Islamabad side of the equation. Should US ties to Pakistan worsen significantly while relations with India continue to improve, Beijing and Washington might find themselves collaborating to prompt Islamabad and New Delhi, respectively, to reduce tensions.

Crisis Management in the Obama White House

Despite the continuity of policies pursued by the Bush and Obama administrations regarding the Mumbai crisis, the policy mechanisms they relied on have differed somewhat. The changes made by the Obama White House reflect different preferences on how to organize foreign policy, not lessons learned about crisis management. According to one policy maker who has served in both administrations, Bush relied on existing government structures and policy flow charts. Obama preferred to rely on special envoys who are outside the system and who report directly to the Secretary of State and White House—for example, on AfPak issues, the SRAP.³⁷⁵

One former official speculates that the policy structure adopted by the Obama administration would have impeded executive branch management of the Mumbai crisis, had the crisis begun after the presidential transition. "Good advice does not come from a bad structure," he remarked.

A bad structure leads to incomplete advice. The creation of a Special Representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan is a mistake. If you step back in terms of understanding, the US-Pakistan relationship and the India-Pakistan issue really require a strong Assistant Secretary and a strong senior director at the NSC. We need a real South Asia bureaucracy.³⁷⁶

The inherited separation of India and Pakistan in the NSC bureaucratic structure and in DoD have remained impediments to crisis policy coordination on South Asia, in the view of other officials we interviewed. Many advocate “a separate CINC [formerly Commander in Chief—now Commander of the Combatant Commands] for South Asia, rather than dividing the region between CENTCOM and PACOM,” in the words of one former official. A concern for some is that the Director of National Intelligence structure, created after 9/11 at Congress’ direction, added more layers of communication “between the president and the analysis or ops [operations]” at the expense of efficiency and clarity.³⁷⁷

Regardless of organization charts, future US crisis management will likely continue to pivot on a few individuals in Washington. Evolving communications technologies will continue to reshape decision processes, but presidents will still make essential telephone calls. The national security adviser will orchestrate “whole of government” crisis management through his or her staff. Ambassadors will remain key players, but the secretary of state and a few other senior State Department officials will take the lead in dealing with civilian leaders in India and Pakistan, as well as in coordinating diplomacy with other governments. The chairman of the joint chiefs will work with Pakistan’s military leadership, receiving critical support from the Joint Staff, CENTCOM, and PACOM. The secretary of defense will weigh in, as needed. The FBI and the US intelligence community will vet information and broker its sharing.

Updating the US Playbook

One former US official argued that a slavish replay of the Twin Peaks or Mumbai policy playbook in a next crisis would be “like Russian roulette.” Most policy makers would agree. As one argued, “The presumption that US officials think we could successfully use the same playbook” is questionable.³⁷⁸ Even timeless

strategies such as top-down crisis management and choreographed high-level foreign travel will continue to vary with the context and specifics of the crisis at hand. US reliance on certain plays in the playbook will change as bilateral US-India and US-Pakistan relations advance or deteriorate. All plays in the US crisis management playbook, no matter how standard, require periodic re-evaluation and updating.

Future US crisis management will likely continue to pivot on a few individuals in Washington

The Value of Contingency Planning

One option for updating the current US policy playbook is scenarios-based contingency planning. As one diplomat intensely engaged in US efforts to find constructive ways to end the Mumbai crisis noted, “The train wreck of the next Mumbai needs to be thought of in advance³⁷⁹—but not with the goal of developing a canned Plan B or C. “Recipes for situations are useless.”³⁸⁰ Another advised that, “Policy makers would be reluctant to

consider using an off-the-shelf Plan B... We have a tendency to believe that even if we had a Plan B, in the end people would stand around and say, 'but what the hell are *we* going to do?'"³⁸¹

Contingency planning fortunately does not require accurate forecasts, which would be impossible in South Asia's dynamic environment. As one US policy maker has observed,

All plays in the US crisis management playbook, no matter how standard, require periodic re-evaluation and updating

"I guarantee that, if we had a new young prime minister in India, we don't know how that plays out." The same could be said of any new Indian political leader or Pakistani army chief; even longtime public figures may display different risk-taking propensities in office. Thus, it is unclear how future Indian officials might assess an attack deemed to have been launched by Pakistani militants in relation to prior incidents and India's stake in ties to Pakistan. As an American policy maker noted, "When we do the analysis [of the Mumbai crisis, for example] the Indians saw this as part of a series of

three: the [militant] attack on the trains [in Mumbai in July 2006], the attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul [in late July 2008], and these."³⁸² The next attack could be a 'number six' for the Indians," which might shape their response.³⁸³

Crisis Prevention

Thoughtful contingency planning can contribute to crisis prevention, not just to Washington's crisis response plans. "The utility of contingency planning is in identifying key questions and information needed: where could it be gotten or tasked," according to a former NSC official. "What can we do now to ensure high US influence? What relations would you need? Can we build them?"³⁸⁴

Improving Readiness

The process of contingency planning can be intrinsically valuable to senior policy makers. Most of the specific contingencies against which planning typically takes place fortunately will never occur, Harland Cleveland observed decades ago. "Yet contingency planning is never wasted, for it develops the analytical skills of the contingency planners and thus puts the government in a more 'ready' position."³⁸⁵

Thus, gaming plausible, challenging India-Pakistan crisis scenarios could be an indispensable means to identifying new issues for consideration and planning. Such gaming is most likely to influence policy formation if the senior officials who manage crises participate in person, rather than sending their aides.

Tactical Checklists

One policy veteran of midnight calls from the White House Situation Room noted that "people short-circuit in a crisis... what works is a checklist kind of thing."³⁸⁶ After the terror attacks in Mumbai, the US Consulate there developed a tactical playbook from a drill

set up by the RSO involving local quick-reaction forces, as well as the fire department. In addition, the consular section of Embassy New Delhi produced an internal-use-only “lessons-learned” memo about getting Americans out of India in a crisis.³⁸⁷

Key Assumptions from Past Crises Worth Reconsidering

- ▶ *There will be no war if US VIPs are in or en route to India and Pakistan.*
- ▶ *Concerns by Indian and Pakistani leaders over unintended escalation will continue to trump adventurous military options.*
- ▶ *The window for “Cold Start”-type operations is limited to the early days of a crisis.*
- ▶ *Indian armed forces would likely achieve their military objectives against Pakistani forces.*
- ▶ *Indian political leaders would not preempt a terrorist plot by attacking targets in Pakistan even if they possessed actionable intelligence.*
- ▶ *Improved US-India ties would mean greater US leverage with New Delhi in the event of another India-Pakistan crisis.*
- ▶ *Improved US-India ties mean that Indian leaders would share their intentions with US counterparts.*
- ▶ *Deteriorating US-Pakistan ties would make Pakistani military leaders more inclined to assent to, authorize, or turn a blind eye to planned attacks in India by groups based in Pakistan with which they retain contact.*
- ▶ *US leaders could successfully execute Plan A even if US relations with India continued changing for the better while relations with Pakistan worsened.*

Potential Sources of Change to the US Crisis Management Model

Any of several developments, separately or in combination, could prove to be “game changers” for US crisis options regarding India and Pakistan. These include the following:

1. An Attack on the US Homeland Traced Back to Pakistan

The number one game-changer, according to a senior American diplomat, would be “an attack on the US—even an attack on one of our allies wouldn’t shatter faith” in the established model to a comparable degree. Evidence of Pakistani government complicity would matter, if there was such an attack. “But whether the [Pakistan] government can’t or won’t control their territory, the result is the same” for US-Pakistani ties if a successful attack on American soil were found to have originated in Pakistan, in this senior diplomat’s view.³⁸⁸ In this scenario, Washington would presumably shift its focus from diplomacy in Islamabad to finding and punishing militants.

2. Changing US Ties and Foreign Policy Priorities

US diplomatic intervention in crises between India and Pakistan has been a given since 1990. In the future, however, Washington might be less well-positioned or inclined to play this role. Most immediately, Washington's credibility as an "honest broker" between the parties may erode further if ties to New Delhi continue to improve while those to Islamabad—specifically, Pakistan's military leaders—deteriorate, making the latter unreceptive to US diplomatic intervention.

Competing foreign policy troubles elsewhere also could reduce Washington's attention to a future crisis in South Asia. Attacks by terrorist groups with global reach from new safe havens, for example, could reorder US geographic priorities. "Issue competition" for White House attention is fierce, given the limited "bandwidth" of top policy makers.

Alternatively, US policy makers might conclude that the risks of escalation to nuclear use in recent India-Pakistan crises have been overblown or have subsided. The presumed nuclear dangers entailed by tensions on the subcontinent have impelled US crisis management since 1990. American policy makers may read India's and Pakistan's caution in recent India-Pakistan crises as evidence that the risk of nuclear consequences is far lower than worst-case projections.

Or Washington could simply weary of its crisis management role in South Asia. The perception that Pakistan's leaders are impervious to western pressure to crack down on militants might prompt US policy makers to leave Pakistan to deal on its own with the regional tensions to which they have contributed.

Changing views in Washington regarding the genesis of and solutions for India-Pakistan tensions also could reshape US crisis management. One premise of recent US policy toward Pakistan has been that LeT attacks are a by-product of the Pakistan military's idiosyncratic regional balancing strategy against India. In this view, it is Pakistan that needs to change strategies. Pakistan has publicly justified its development of nuclear forces as a deterrent to India's superior conventional capabilities but also has clandestinely trained, equipped, and at times directed militants as force multipliers. Once active primarily against Indian troops in Kashmir, these Pakistani militants have been implicated with increasing frequency in terrorist attacks against civilian Indian targets. Thus, the focus of Washington's effort has been to get Pakistan to shut down these militants to prevent more terrorism-driven crises.

Other Americans argue that India, as the dominant power, must take steps to help make the Pakistan military feel more secure and less in need of groups like the LeT or JeM as a regional counterbalance. In this view, India will need to visibly lower its threat profile—for example by cutting force levels in Kashmir or even by forgoing plans for a missile defense system—to avoid making Islamabad more nervous and (it is assumed) more provocative. If a future US administration signed onto this perspective, US diplomacy—including crisis diplomacy—would presumably be rethought. One problem with this line of analysis has been that steps by Indian and Pakistani leaders to improve bilateral relations—which should assuage concerns of Pakistan's military leaders about India's intentions—have been typically followed by "spoiler" attacks in India by militant groups with ties to Pakistan's military and intelligence services.

Changing US views on Kashmir already have altered Washington's perspective on the importance of that issue to the management of India-Pakistan crises. Most US analysts see Kashmir as increasingly marginal to India-Pakistan tensions, as evidenced by the fact that terror attacks in India by groups such as the LeT have increasingly targeted urban areas far south of Kashmir. A minority in the US foreign policy community remain convinced that only resolving the contentious issue of Kashmir will diminish or lessen the disruptive actions of groups such as the LeT. This analysis makes two assumptions that are questioned by many US observers: First, that after a Kashmir settlement is reached, militant groups would dutifully stop their activities against India, even if Pakistan's military and intelligence services had agreed to the settlement. Second, that a Kashmir settlement would make Pakistan's military less disposed to seek dangerous counterbalances to India's growing military and economic power.

Helping Indian and Pakistani leaders to reach a settlement over Kashmir is not a crisis management strategy

Helping Indian and Pakistani leaders to reach a settlement over Kashmir may or may not be deemed advisable for Washington. Helping Indian and Pakistani leaders to reach a settlement over Kashmir is not, however, a crisis management strategy.

3. Declining US Military Presence in Afghanistan

Without the constraint of having to rely on Pakistani cooperation for the re-supply of US and other NATO forces in Afghanistan, might Washington respond differently to a future crisis sparked by militant attacks linked to Pakistan? With NATO forces mostly out of Afghanistan, the US could theoretically adopt a tougher posture toward Pakistan's military and intelligence establishments. Others speculate that Washington instead would continue to avoid weakening fragile civilian government structures in Pakistan.

Some seasoned US diplomats believe that US leverage with Pakistan will decline as US forces leave Afghanistan.³⁸⁹ Others suspect that the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan would end any semblance of US strategic partnership with Pakistan; the growing asymmetry of US ties to India and Pakistan will weaken US crisis management efforts.³⁹⁰ Still others guess that Pakistan's declining economic fortunes might increase the importance to Islamabad of winning favor with foreign donors—although it is not clear how.

4. Evolving Pakistani National Security Calculations

A key variable in the future of US crisis management in South Asia is whether Pakistan's military leaders will recognize that some of their longtime policies have failed to bolster national security and will be willing to change course. This factor is central because Pakistan's civil-military relations have tilted quite far in the favor of military leaders under every civilian-led government since Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Some US officials foresee a Pakistan five to ten years hence with its military and intelligence services still firmly in charge of national security decision making, and still committed to adversarial policies

toward India.³⁹¹ Others believe that slow but important and beneficial changes are under way in Pakistan's national security establishment.

The personality of the Indian Prime Minister is key for crisis management

Some point to Pakistan's new openness to cross-border trade with India and hope that this reflects a new pragmatic commitment by the military establishment to the country's economic security. Others see small but hopeful changes in Pakistan's attitude toward terrorism. "The utility of terrorism in pressuring India is much more open to debate than before," in the view of one US diplomat who has served in Pakistan.³⁹² Whether or not this judgment is correct,

the LeT and other Pakistan-based militant organizations are still likely to play the role of spoilers.

5. Evolving Indian Calculations

For many US officials, the Mumbai crisis underscored the importance of the personalities of top leaders in shaping India's response both to terrorism originating in Pakistan and to US crisis diplomacy. "The personality of the Indian PM [prime minister] is key for crisis management," noted one diplomat with long experience on Indian issues. "Singh's analytic style was much more conducive to crisis management than, say, [opposition politician Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra] Modi would be."³⁹³ Singh's leadership "makes all the difference," said another former senior policy maker: "He's soft spoken, but tough. He and Bush couldn't be more different, but they liked each other and developed a trusting relationship. When Singh told you something, you could trust it." with the Pakistanis "not so much."³⁹⁴ "Prime Minister Singh had taken considerable political risks over the past several years to engage the Pakistanis," according to a US military officer. After the attacks in Mumbai, "there was tremendous pressure to retaliate, but he held everyone at bay. He played for time until the window for military retaliation closed."³⁹⁵

Another former official viewed New Delhi's commitment to avoid conflict with Pakistan as broader—anchored in the Congress Party's leadership, not just the current prime minister's: "My judgment of this prime minister and of [President of the Congress Party] Sonia Gandhi is that they are not interested in a war with Pakistan....it is not part of their policy agenda," he said. By implication, as long as either has power, the Congress Party will lean against conflict.³⁹⁶ "Next time, if there is a different leader in India, things could turn out differently," noted one policy maker. "What if there were more militant attacks with a new young prime minister trying to establish a name, with a different calculus?"³⁹⁷

6. Perceived National Interests

A veteran US foreign policy maker suggested that this focus on Indian leaders as the key variable in India's restraint in the Mumbai crisis is misplaced. The similarity of India's stances in the Twin Peaks and Mumbai crises, he said, reflects a persistent risk-benefit calculation. India acted with restraint in both these crises, even though India had a BJP leader for one and a Congress leader for the other.

The same policy calculations will likely persist in New Delhi—‘If we [India] strike back, what will we gain? What’s our next move after the Pakistanis retaliate? Does this warrant the possibility of a nuclear war?’ The Indian military didn’t mobilize—it didn’t want to get ready for war and then have to stand down again—the shadow of [India’s all-out military mobilization in] Twin Peaks...and the Indians have demonstrated a very high threshold for pain.³⁹⁸

Despite the relative stability of Indian crisis conduct over the past decade-plus, it would clearly be unwise to assume that India’s definition of its national interests is unchanging. Neither can we assume that we will know when and how India recalibrates its priorities.

7. Different Thresholds for Military Retaliation

India’s patience during the Mumbai crisis might presage a stronger reaction next time, in the view of one US policy maker who had a front-row seat on the Mumbai crisis. “Despite being a rising power, India felt impotent. India has stopped issuing ultimatums. There will be great pressure on Indian leaders to react strongly the next time.”³⁹⁹ Indian officials have sought to keep the possibility of this scenario alive as a deterrent to “Pakistani adventurism.” Pakistani officials claim that India has already retaliated for the Mumbai attacks by reverting to a policy of supporting separatists in Pakistan—specifically, in the province of Balochistan.⁴⁰⁰

Some believe, as one longtime South Asia-watcher noted, that a “next [militant] attack will have to be more outrageous if it’s going to be an attention-getter [in India]. For India to react forcefully...[it] might take an attack on the political leadership—otherwise it’s not personal for them.”⁴⁰¹ The all-out deployment of Indian forces after the December 2001 attack on India’s Parliament by Pakistan-based militants was a reaction to an unsuccessful effort to kill senior political leaders who were fortuitously elsewhere at the time.⁴⁰² Unless New Delhi’s red lines for retaliation after such an attack have moved significantly, it is difficult to imagine a lesser response to a successful attack on India’s leaders. Plan A has tacitly assumed that Indian restraint will hold up under most circumstances. But it would be risky for Washington to assume that New Delhi would not launch limited attacks on militant targets in Pakistan in response to advance evidence of a coming militant attack in India.

Next time, if there is a different leader in India, things could turn out differently

8. Changing Indian Confidence in Washington’s Good Offices

After the Mumbai attacks and during Twin Peaks, Washington’s presumed sway in Islamabad encouraged restraint in New Delhi. As one US diplomat noted, “India thinks the US-India partnership buys them outcomes with Pakistan through US influence.”⁴⁰³ Some American policy makers believe that the failure of two successive US administrations to get Pakistan to prosecute, let alone try, accused terrorists will affect India’s future inclination to defer to US diplomacy instead of taking unilateral action.⁴⁰⁴ As another US diplomat noted, “Back then, the Indians thought that we had some influence. They don’t think that anymore.”⁴⁰⁵ A key question is whether India will be confident of and willing to lean on US good offices with

Pakistan in New Delhi the future. Declining Indian confidence in US good offices might conceivably make New Delhi more willing to deal directly with Pakistan. Alternatively, losing faith in US diplomatic clout with Pakistan could tilt Indian decision makers toward military options.

9. New Delhi's Commitment to Normalization with Pakistan

Indian government leaders might conclude that reconciliation with Pakistan “is a chimera,” and not worth the bother, one US diplomat noted. “The LeT is still in business, and if it strikes again, India will be over a barrel” once more.⁴⁰⁶ Writing off rapprochement to Pakistan could remove one obstacle to future Indian military retaliation—but New Delhi would presumably also weigh the risks to India's economic gains and global diplomatic strategies.

10. New Military Options

Progress toward implementing India's “Cold Start” doctrine could give New Delhi different kinetic options for an immediate response to a future terror attack linked to Pakistan, in the view of a former military US official.⁴⁰⁷ “I don't know any more if it's possible to stop India in its tracks,” mused another policy maker. “India's confidence in their military capabilities is rising. The [presumed shortcomings of the Indian] air force has been a dampener, but it is getting new planes.”⁴⁰⁸ New military capabilities could prompt India to review its choices if and when the next time crisis with Pakistan occurs. At a minimum, US officials will need to consider that “the time available for diplomacy may be shorter” in the event of another major Pakistan-linked terror attack on Indian equities.⁴⁰⁹

The effect of growing military capabilities on Indian decision making will depend, in the first instance, on the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security's confidence in the viability of new options and plans. Over time, India's conventional choices on land, in the air, and at sea will undoubtedly grow more rapidly than Pakistan's. Indian military modernization plans are notoriously slow moving, however. Doctrinal adjustments that require land purchases and the repositioning of equipment tend to be contentious. Joint operations—the hallmark of mobile, adaptive warfare—are rather new for the Indian armed forces. Moreover, the Indian and Pakistani armies have not fought a major war in four decades. National leaders may therefore find it difficult to assess the viability of proposed military plans with high confidence. Finally, previous wars between India and Pakistan have demonstrated that it is easier to defend than to seize and hold hostile territory. Such concerns could well continue to discourage Indian leaders from a military response even as Indian capabilities expand—although Pakistan will doubtless continue to focus more on India's military strengths than its weaknesses.

11. An India-led International Campaign Against Pakistan

US policy makers tend to focus on India's potential military options, in part because these pose an obvious risk of military or even nuclear escalation. A decision by New Delhi to

stigmatize Pakistan instead would pose different challenges to US crisis diplomacy. Indian counterterrorism expert B. Raman has suggested several initial steps India could take:

Seek UNSC action against Pakistan's ISI for violating Resolution 1373, which was passed after the 9/11 terror attacks in the US and which re-affirmed the responsibilities of member states to prevent terrorist activities on their territory against other states. 'Indian action may not succeed because of a possible Chinese veto in support of Pakistan, but that should not deter us from bringing the evidence to the notice of the UNSC [Terrorism] Monitoring Committee,' Raman writes.

Insist that the US treat the ISI's involvement in the Mumbai blasts 'on par with the involvement of the Libyan intelligence in an act of terrorism directed against a Pan Am aircraft (the famous Lockerbie case) in 1988, which resulted in the death of all the passengers and crew, many of them US nationals. The US insisted on the trial of the Libyan intelligence officers involved and the payment of compensation to the families of the victims by the Libyan government. It succeeded on both counts. The government of India should immediately set up a task force to study how the US handled the Lockerbie case and follow the same procedure in this case,' involving the relatives of all victims and seeking the trial of the ISI officers, as well as compensation by the government of Pakistan to the relatives.

Reenergize India's efforts to get the State Department to list Pakistan as a state-sponsor of international terrorism.⁴¹⁰

A "shaming-and-naming strategy" by New Delhi would be unlikely to gain traction unless Washington joins and major European capitals follow suit. Even with notable abstentions, beginning with Beijing, the mere prospect of such a campaign could spur Pakistan's military leaders to try to prevent terror attacks on India or the United States, or to punish perpetrators after the fact.

Past US administrations have decided against a shaming-and-naming strategy out of concern that US influence on Pakistan would drop if it were named a state sponsor of international terrorism, especially since states that are added to this list are rarely removed from it. Such an action could empower Pakistani parties inimical to Washington and New Delhi at the expense of those who support "pro-western" policies. In this view, the threat of naming and shaming might influence Pakistan more negatively than positively.

Further major attacks on Indian, US, or Afghan soil by militants who enjoy safe haven within Pakistan, however, could increase support in Washington for a naming-and-shaming policy. One such scenario might be a sharp increase in Taliban attacks—with Pakistani support—on US troops withdrawing from Afghanistan. In such circumstances, improving US-India relations could add weight to a naming-and-shaming strategy.

V. Conclusion: The Next Playbook

To date, US crisis management efforts, scripted as well as *ad hoc*, have helped slow the momentum of crises between India and Pakistan but have not reduced factors contributing to the next crisis or to its potential escalation.

Crises between India and Pakistan remain unfinished and unresolved. Militant groups that operate from Pakistan against Indian targets remain in business after receiving slaps on the wrist from Pakistan's security establishments and judicial bodies. With no satisfactory resolution or outlets, Indian grievances risk becoming cumulative.

The most effective crisis management playbook will be one that supports normalization of ties between India and Pakistan. Paradoxically, such efforts at reconciliation are likely to prompt crisis-generating explosions designed to halt this process. Terror attacks in India and Pakistan will occur, however, whether or not national leaders attempt to improve bilateral relations. Postponing efforts to seek more normal ties invites unending terror attacks and more unfinished crises, one of which could result in uncontrolled escalation.

The most effective crisis management playbook will be one that supports normalization of ties between India and Pakistan

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Our Mission

"The primary responsibility of the RSO is to create a safe environment in which the US Government can carry out its diplomatic mission. The RSO does this by instituting procedures and countermeasures that decrease the possibility that our personnel and facilities be targeted by hostile elements. In addition to serving as the Ambassador's principal liaison with host country law enforcement, the RSO conducts both criminal and personnel investigations, assists other US law enforcement agencies, reports on incidents involving terrorism and crime, and provides security related guidance and training to Mission Personnel as well as to the American private sector. Finally, the RSO coordinates the protective requirements for visiting VIPs."

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