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MUMBAI'S AFTERMATH: Can India, Pakistan Close Ranks?

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After the terror attacks in Mumbai, nuclear neighbours India and Pakistan have shown significant restraint amidst widespread fears of a military escalation. Their ability to avoid a conflict, however, depends on the uncertain prospects for concrete bilateral cooperation against terrorist groups.

AFTER THE terror attacks on Mumbai, the conventional wisdom in the Sub-continent and beyond is that the weak governments in New Delhi and Islamabad may find it impossible to manage the gathering crisis in Indo-Pakistani relations. Inevitably, they will drift towards a conflict that could escalate to the nuclear level.

There have been some suggestions that generating yet another military confrontation between India and Pakistan may in fact have been the real political purpose behind the Mumbai attacks.

Can they cooperate against terror?

Let us assume for a moment that the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari recognise this danger. But are they in a position to control this crisis and embark upon much needed bilateral cooperation against terrorists and extremists in South Asia?

That the two governments are politically vulnerable at home is not in doubt. In Pakistan, after nearly a decade of Army rule, a civilian coalition has barely taken the reins of power. The balance between the civilian leadership and the Army remains a shaky one in Islamabad.

For the Manmohan Singh government, the Mumbai attacks could not have come at a worse time. Many states in India, including the sensitive Jammu and Kashmir, are in the middle of provincial assembly elections. The national elections are due in about four months.

Meanwhile, the Mumbai attacks have reinforced the opposition charge in India that the ruling Congress Party is weak on national security. This criticism now resonates with popular anger in India at the inability of the central government to protect the nation from the growing frequency and

audacity of the terror attacks against the nation. The Manmohan Singh government is now under enormous pressure to act, and be seen as responding purposefully to the Mumbai attacks.

In Pakistan, President Zardari faces many woes of his own. The Pakistani economy is on a downward spiral, terror attacks are on an upward curve, and pressure is mounting from the United States and NATO to intensify an unpopular war against the militants on its western borderlands with Afghanistan.

Forced restraint

For all their manifest weaknesses and vulnerabilities, Prime Minister Singh and President Zardari have responded with considerable restraint. Contrary to the impression in the media on both sides of the border, official India has not blamed the Pakistan government or held its leaders responsible for the Mumbai attacks.

In their carefully-worded statements Prime Minister Singh and his Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, have said that the preliminary investigations into the Mumbai attacks point to “elements inside Pakistan”. They also reminded Pakistan of its solemn promise first made in 2002 and reaffirmed repeatedly since then that Islamabad will not allow its territory to be used by those groups plotting terror against India.

President Zardari, too, has sought to be helpful. He ordered the foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi to stay on in India, where he had begun a visit before the attacks, and keep in touch with the Indian government. President Zardari himself talked to the Indian leadership over the phone and reached out to the Indian public to emphasise the common threat the two nations face from terrorism. He promise full cooperation with the investigations into the Mumbai attacks.

Surely it was a lot easier for Premier Singh and President Zardari to wrap themselves with the national flag and lash out at the other side. Instead they maintained restraint and kept open the channels of communication. India has said it will provide evidence on the “elements” in Pakistan that it holds responsible for masterminding the Mumbai attacks. The Pakistani leadership has promised to act against them once it reviews the information given by India and is satisfied with the evidences produced.

Real test yet to come

So far so good. But the real test for the two leaders, however, is rapidly shaping up.

In a formal communication to Islamabad, New Delhi has named a list of 20 individuals and entities in Pakistan that India believes are responsible for the relentless terror attacks against India. The list is said to include the leaders of well-known terrorist organisations such as ‘Lashkar e Toiba’ and ‘Jaish e Mohammed’ and individuals like Dawood Ibrahim, the underworld don that India has long sought to extradite from Pakistan for his involvement in previous bombings in Mumbai.

New Delhi has no reason to doubt the good intentions of Pakistan’s civilian leadership led by President Zardari. India is also prepared to take at face value the promises by Pakistan’s civilian leadership to join hands with India in the fight against terrorism. New Delhi, however, keeps its fingers crossed, because it is not clear whether President Zardari has the political will and administrative authority to act against groups that are linked to terrorism in India.

New Delhi’s doubts have been reinforced by the inability of the Pakistan government to follow up on the bombing of India’s embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan earlier this year. Indian and American governments have held Pakistan-based terror groups responsible for that attack. New Delhi also

expects that the US — whose top diplomat Condoleezza Rice and top soldier Admiral Mike Mullen are traveling in the region — to persuade Pakistan to act decisively.

For the moment, India is waiting; but it will not for too long.

It needs visible and tangible counter-terror actions from Pakistan very soon. Prime Minister Singh's best hope for avoiding an escalation and prevailing over the terrorists over the longer term rests on President Zardari's cooperation. President Zardari's ability to move forward depends critically on the institutional responses of the Pakistan Army that has traditionally maintained a veto over the India policy.

Prime Minister Singh and Zardari have managed the first stage of the crisis reasonably well. But they may not necessarily have all the cards to control the dynamic in the second stage.

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