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Why Mumbai Was Attacked

The latest terror strike, which killed 17 people on Wednesday, shows India is a powerless easy target against Pakistan's military intelligence agency, says Brahma Chellaney. Plus, photos from the scene.

By Brahma Chellaney

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It is not a mere coincidence that Mumbai, India's commercial hub, has repeatedly been struck by terrorists since 1993. Mumbai has become the favored target because the terrorist aim is to undermine India's booming economy and its status as a rising power by rattling foreign investors and driving away tourists.

India's economic rise has intersected with Pakistan's descent into chaos. Each terror strike on Mumbai raises fresh international concerns about security in India and prompts a sizable number of foreign tourists to abandon or delay travel plans.

Undercutting India's strength by repeatedly targeting its economic capital is a geopolitical objective that only a state sponsor of terrorism can seek to pursue, not street gangs, underworld figures, or local fundamentalists. And that sponsor—which made the mistake of leaving its marks on the [three-day Mumbai terrorist siege](#) in November 2008 that killed 166 people—is the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's notorious military intelligence agency.

The [latest explosions](#) that ripped through Mumbai at the height of the evening rush may have had an additional objective behind them—to blunt international pressure to bring the Pakistan-based coordinators of the 2008 siege to justice. With India now saddled with another terrorist attack to investigate, the international profile of the 2008 siege is bound to decline.



At a time when the U.S. has ratcheted up pressure on the [Pakistani army](#) and [ISI](#), including by putting the release of further military aid on hold, those behind the latest bombings may have had yet another motive—to shift the focus from the deteriorating U.S.-Pakistan relations to the India-Pakistan context so as to raise concerns in Washington about potential subcontinental hostilities and to persuade the U.S. not to lean too heavily on the Pakistani military establishment.

But unlike the 2008 siege by heavily armed commandos from Pakistan on a suicide mission, the bombs in the latest attack were planted and detonated stealthily. This marks a return to an earlier pattern witnessed, for example, in the 1993 and 2006 Mumbai serial blasts. This pattern not only obviates the need for a high level of training and logistical sophistication, but also precludes telltale signs of external involvement by permitting a terrorist undertaking to be outsourced to proxy figures in the criminal or fundamentalist world in Mumbai.

The latest bombings actually raise wrenching questions about India's Pakistan and counterterrorism policies. The unparalleled 2008 siege was supposed to be India's 9/11 and serve as a tipping point in India's forbearance with terrorist violence. This week's explosions are a reminder that little has changed.

For New Delhi, the chickens have come home to roost. Its decision early this year to resume political dialogue with Pakistan at all levels was made without having secured any anti-terror commitment. Even though the Pakistan-based masterminds of the 2008 siege remain untouched and Pakistani terrorist-training camps near the border with India, according to Indian officials, continue to operate with impunity, New Delhi returned to square one by resuming comprehensive dialogue.

After the 2008 attack, an array of options was available to India, especially in the diplomatic, economic and political spheres. Between the two extremes—empty talk and war—New Delhi could have invoked measures commonly available to nations to step up pressure, such as recalling its ambassador from Islamabad and invoking trade sanctions. Yet a feckless Indian leadership did not take the smallest of small steps even as a symbolic expression of India's outrage over Pakistan's role as the staging ground for that attack.

New Delhi actually responded to the 2008 siege by fashioning a new and unique tool—dossier bombing. The weighty dossiers—delivered at regular intervals and containing documented evidence of the involvement of the ISI and its front organization, the Lashkar-i-Taiba terrorist

group, in that attack—only persuaded Pakistan to stay its ground, with India eventually climbing down.

Today, the now-familiar Indian cycle of empty rhetoric is repeating itself—ritual condemnation of the latest bombings and a worn-out promise to defeat terror. Yet the bombers have driven home a clear message: India, despite its rising international stature, is powerless to stop terror attacks. The bombings also have the potential to further undercut the flagging credibility of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Singh is the latest in a succession of weak, aging prime ministers whose absence of decisive leadership over the past 22 years has resulted in India's failure to formulate a prudent counterterror strategy backed by firm resolve.

The fundamental mistake Singh's government has made is to separate its Pakistan policy and counterterrorism strategy and put them on separate tracks. The two are simply not separable.

Increasingly, terrorism has been treated as a law-and-order issue requiring more policing and better intelligence. To regard terrorism as a law-and-order problem is to do what the terrorists want—to sap national strength. No amount of security can stop terrorism if India is reluctant to go after terrorist cells and networks and those that harbor extremists.

The ugly truth is that transnational terrorists see India as an easy target because it imposes no costs on them and their patrons.

What India needs is a concerted, sustained campaign against the forces of terror. But what a succession of leaders has offered are only words to comfort the nation. If India does not break out of this straitjacket, it will only be a matter of time before terrorists strike yet again.