

“Mumbai II?” : why India will again show restraint

Ajaya Kumar Das

2010

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/91089>



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 130/2010 dated 13 October 2010

“Mumbai II?”: Why India Will Again Show Restraint

By Ajaya Kumar Das

Synopsis

In case of another Mumbai-type terrorist attack, soft power will pay more dividends to India than the use of force against Pakistan. Thus there will be neither a conventional nor a nuclear war.

Commentary

PETER BERGEN and Bruce Hoffman, in their recent report “Assessing the Terrorist Threat”, foresee another Mumbai-like terrorist attack on Indian soil by a Pakistan-based terrorist group. In such a contingency, they presume that India might, under domestic pressure, use force against the terrorist bases in Pakistan. And that could drift towards a full-scale war between India and Pakistan, possibly even nuclear.

Pakistan’s military-intelligence establishment does not curb Lashkar -e- Taiba (LeT), and other anti-India jihadi organisations. It continues to believe in their utility to engage India, a perennial enemy, in an asymmetrical conflict. India, thus, remains vulnerable to attacks by these proxy forces. But will India retaliate by using force? Soft power might have turned out to be less substantive in the past, yet using military muscle will be less effective and too risky -- however appropriate it might be in the first place. Thus, India would again maintain restraint. A “full-blown” war can be discounted, let alone a nuclear one.

Limits on the use of force

India’s military policy seems to have been re-examined, partly due to its apparent weakness to defend against the increasing intensity of Pakistan’s proxy war in recent years. Thus India has been building its capability for a limited war -- that meets its objective to punish its adversary quickly and decisively either before the international community intervenes or before Pakistan finds excuses to escalate the conflict to the spectre of nuclear weapons. But until India gets a capacity for such a limited war strategy (which will take several years), the use of its limited force across the Line of Control will not give the desired political advantage.

India could destroy some training camps in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir with limited air strikes, but that specific action will not end the terrorist bases in Punjab, Sindh and other parts of its territory. Again, it will have to make a choice whether that limited objective is worth inviting Pakistan for a conventional war and nuclear blackmail. In case war breaks out after its use of limited force, Pakistan may not keep the war to the smallest possible proportions as India would like. Given its disparity with India in conventional forces, Pakistan will jump to nuclear escalation. That helps explain why India has maintained restraint, despite Pakistan’s covert war in the

last two decades.

India's choice for a prolonged conventional war with Pakistan will not only be risky, but will also undermine its credibility to rise as a responsible world power. Moreover, if Pakistan continues to be the epicentre of Islamist jihadists, the military may be radicalised, and may not remain rational in a future conflict with India. Therefore, India's nationalistic response to a terrorist attack cannot ignore this risk.

Case for Soft Power

India's use of soft power -- mainly, through restraint, resilience and diplomacy -- has paid political dividends and should be the way out.

Firstly, India after the Mumbai attack has been successful to persuade the United States to see Pakistan-exported terrorism in India (especially, through LeT) as part of its own fight against terrorism. The LeT is no longer seen by America merely as a Kashmiri group, but rather as a "common enemy". India's restraint has increased the scope for counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries. The US provided unprecedented access to Indian law enforcement agencies to question David Coleman Headley (a Pakistani-American), who seems to have been instrumental in plotting the Mumbai attack. The US and India have also signed recently a new Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative. These initial cooperation would further a value-based alliance between the two largest democracies to fight against the existential challenge from jihadist terrorism.

Secondly, this time, India has been able -- with American help -- to expose Pakistani links to a major terrorist attack in India before the international community. It has mustered significant international opinion against Pakistan and its jihadi organisations by showing remarkable restraint and resilience. The UN Security Council has declared Jamaat-ul-Dawa (a front organisation of LeT) as a terrorist organisation, and placed four of its leaders on its terrorist list. China, a long-time ally to Pakistan, did not veto the move unlike the past.

Thirdly, any resolution of the Kashmir disputes needs a platform of trust between India and Pakistan. By harbouring Kashmiri groups and fighting selectively against Taliban, Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment is still fostering many jihadi groups -- that not only aim at terrorism in India, but also to establish radical Islamist societies in the subcontinent. Arguably, India's restraint against another attack will help it to legitimise its position on Kashmir, and increase its acceptance as a great power.

The decision by the Indian Muslim community not to bury the bodies of the Mumbai attackers speaks volumes about the difference it makes between murderers and martyrs. And Pakistan's unwillingness to act against the supporters of these murderers will only dissociate them from the intolerant lot in Pakistan. Only through positive measures like resilience and restraint will India be able to identify with the free world.

In short, India's response to conspicuous terrorist attacks in future will be based on recognising the contextual limitations of its military muscle, and relative political utility of soft power.

Ajaya Kumar Das is a Ph.D candidate and Senior Analyst with the South Asia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. Before joining RSIS, he completed his M. Phil from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.