Urban Counterterrorist Sieges: The 2008 Mumbai Attack and Police (In)capacity

The Mumbai terrorist attack of 2008 exposed key vulnerabilities in India’s defences against urban terrorism. Not only did it reflect an unprecedented degree of sophistication on the part of jihadist planners, but the attack also demonstrated that the Indian policing system was woefully inadequate for the task of combating suicidal assaults. This paper will provide an analysis of the tactical and operational aspects of the Indian security response, with a view towards identifying lessons which might be valuable for the international security community. Its findings are expected to be particularly relevant in light of similar attacks carried out in Europe, Africa and North America during 2013-16.

The paper describes the actual conduct of security operations on the ground in Mumbai, during the period 26-29 November 2008. It studies the response of the Indian police, army, navy and National Security Guard and demonstrates that inter-force cooperation was severely lacking. Besides clear protocols for communicating situational updates and pooling crisis intelligence, counterterrorism in India lacked a coherent public relations doctrine. Together, these shortcomings contributed to the spread of panic and multiplied the disruption caused by the attack. The paper concludes by offering suggestions for improving police responses to future urban terrorist sieges.

Keywords: Terrorism, Intelligence, SWAT, India, Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba

Introduction

Following the 13 November 2015 shooting rampage by ‘Islamic State’ militants in Paris, Western security agencies are paying close attention to the threat of ‘active shooters’. Unlike regular hostage-takers, active shooters are gunmen who randomly kill anyone they see and do not stop until cornered and arrested or shot by security forces. Europe and the United States have hitherto been insulated by geography and strict external border controls from such threats, which have a long and bloody history in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. But with the ongoing migrant crisis, as well as recurrent warnings from intelligence services that more ‘Paris-style’ active shooter attacks are being planned, there is a need to study such attacks in greater operational detail. The template that security forces across the world are concerned about however is not Paris, but the Mumbai attack of 2008 (known as ‘26/11’).1

There are usually two kinds of security crisis: that which is small-scale and appears suddenly, and that which is large-scale and appears slowly. But there is a third, rarer category: the large-scale security crisis that appears suddenly and confounds decision-makers. Certain terrorist attacks, like the jihadist assault on Mumbai, the commercial capital of India, fall into this category. Such attacks are highly destructive because they feature the use of innovative techniques by terrorists, which makes their impact more harmful compared to other incidents that unfold along previously witnessed, predictable lines.2 They do not fit neatly into one academic category or another. They partly represent urban warfare between individual irregular (ie. guerrilla) fighters and the security forces of established states, with elements of gangland-style killing conducted at close quarters, and a rage-filled desire to

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experience ‘power’ by deliberately targeting unarmed civilians who are incapable of self-defence or retaliation.

This paper shall describe how and why the Indian security forces responded on 26/11 in a manner that received considerable criticism, within India and abroad. It shall demonstrate that at the level of security practice, defensive measures remained static amidst a worsening threat environment. Little effort was made to harden Indian cities to cope with the kind of shooting rampage that was always possible but never thought likely. Because the attack did not fit any of the previously recognized patterns of jihadist activity, and thus defied easy identification, it posed a unique challenge requiring an improvisational response, one that was sub-optimal. The operational study of Indian counterterrorism is likely to be instructive for Western governments that face homeland security threats from radicalized members of immigrant populations, and well as returning foreign fighters from the so-called ‘Islamic State’.

What happened?

On the night of Wednesday 26 November 2008, ten Pakistani gunmen from the jihadist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) landed on the Mumbai shoreline in a rubber dinghy. Splitting into five ‘buddy pairs’ they dispersed across the city. A short while later, they attacked simultaneously at five different locations, randomly shooting passersby while also planting time bombs in public places. Indian security forces took a full 60 hours to eliminate the last of the terrorists and bring the attack to a close. When the fighting was over, 166 civilians had been killed including 25 foreign tourists. The bulk of the deaths occurred within the first two hours. So the security response must be evaluated according to three criteria:

1) The number of dead
2) The length of time needed to reestablish control of the situation
3) The number of potential victims evacuated from the affected sites, while under imminent threat.

Going by these criteria, public and academic criticism of the Indian security response may have only been partially justified. While there is little doubt that the attack represented a failure of preventive security, there are grounds for suggesting that security forces reacted promptly and, as far as threat perceptions were oriented until that point of time, professionally. Where they went wrong was in succumbing to collective paralysis caused by a failure of leadership, and relying on a top-heavy command system which denied police first responders freedom to carry out their jobs.

Why did the attack happen?

26/11 was a state-sponsored attack, masterminded by the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). The actual planning was handled by at least 20 mid-level ISI officials. Final approval came from a former ISI chief, who was then commanding an Army Corps. Preparation was coordinated by a LeT operative named Sajid Majeed, who served as No. 2 in the LeT’s external operations division. Majid was also a liaison officer between the ISI and LeT and wanted to strike at a prestige target in India. His aim was to fulfill a long-standing ISI wish to damage the Indian economy, which was barreling from strength to strength at that point of time (2006-08). He accordingly dispatched a Pakistani-
American named Dawood Gilani to reconnoiter possible economic targets in Mumbai, including the Taj Palace Hotel. According to US court documents, funding for the reconnaissance was provided by a serving ISI officer, holding the rank of an army major. Of US$ 29500 paid to Gilani, only $1000 was received from Sajid Majeed. The remainder came from the major. Gilani himself had been introduced to LeT by another serving ISI officer. For all intents and purposes therefore, LeT and the ISI cooperated so closely in planning and preparing for the Mumbai attack that any distinction between them disappeared.

Sajid Majeed, coordinator of the Mumbai attack and liaison man between Pakistan’s ISI and Lashkar-e-Taiba (Source: Press Information Bureau of India)

Ever since India partially liberalized its economy in 1991, the ISI had been focused on scaring away foreign investors through ‘false-flag’ or misattributed operations. The idea was to conduct cross-border terrorist attacks, which could then be plausibly blamed on indigenous Indian militants. There was to be no provable link to Pakistani territory. Through carrying out a number of such attacks, the ISI hoped to convince the international business community that India was a politically unstable state, riven by ethnic and religious conflict and thus offering few long-term commercial prospects.

In March 1993, the ISI conducted a spectacular false-flag operation when it co-opted the Indian druglord Dawood Ibrahim to bomb 13 locations in Mumbai simultaneously. The final death toll was 257 – to date, the bloodiest terror attack in Indian history. However, the operation was not a complete success because only its first phase (the bombings) was executed. Phase II had envisaged armed assaults on multiple targets across Mumbai. For this purpose, the Pakistani agency had shipped several tons of military-grade explosive and assault rifles to Dawood Ibrahim’s gang. Unnerved by the chaos that the bombings caused, the would-be shooters decided to abort the second phase of the operation.

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6 For brief biographies of some of the key conspirators in LeT and the ISI, see http://pib.nic.in/archive/others/2011/may/d2011050901.pdf, accessed online on 17 June 2016.
Indian investigators later discovered the arms and several explosives caches intact. Forensic analysis established that this ordnance came from Pakistani government stores. Naturally, the ISI denied any involvement. It was helped by the unwillingness of the United States to condemn a former Cold War ally. Pakistan thus escaped any punishment for having sponsored an act of mass-casualty terrorism.

Encouraged by this impunity, the ISI continued to plan urban bombings in India throughout the 1990s. But the domestic instability which wracked Pakistan after 9/11 raised the stakes dramatically. The Pakistani army and ISI had become increasingly unpopular among their own public, for aiding the US ‘War on Terror’ against Al Qaida. Following a series of attacks by jihadists against the Pakistani military, the ISI began searching for instruments to drive a wedge in the jihadist movement. One such instrument was Lashkar-e-Taiba (‘Army of the Pure’). As a group that espoused the fringe Ahle Hadith school of puritanical Islam, it did not have a mass support base in Pakistan. This meant it would be too weak to challenge the Pakistani army politically and would remain dependent on state protection, in the event that the international community targeted its assets for involvement in cross-border terrorism.

LeT was chosen as the medium through which the ISI would deflect domestic militancy abroad, in the direction of India. The Pakistani group set up a fictitious network called ‘Indian Mujahideen’ which consisted of Indian jihadists, many of whom had been taught bomb-making. These jihadists were controlled by a rival of Sajid Majeed, named Abdur Rehman Pasha. Indian investigators believe that a secondary motive for 26/11 was that Majeed wanted to upstage the older Pasha, by carrying out a single high-visibility terrorist operation that would kill at a single blow, as many victims as Pasha’s men were killing through their constant small-scale attritional bombings in India. The primary motive was however, a desire to refocus the energies of Pakistani jihadist cadres towards a foreign target. Disheartened by years of operational inactivity and falling increasingly susceptible to anti-government rhetoric, many low-level LeT operatives needed to be reminded who their ‘real’ enemy was. Not the Pakistani army, which was protected and funded them even as it collaborated with the hated Americans for tactical reasons, but ‘Eternal Enemy’ India. A major strike on the Indian financial capital Mumbai seemed the best answer to LeT’s morale problem, and would also please the ISI.

**Why was the attack unexpected?**

It has been reported that at least 26 warnings were passed by Indian intelligence agencies to the Mumbai police between 2006 and 2008, about a possible LeT attack. Three of these mentioned the use of ‘fidayeen’ – suicidal gunmen – while eleven spoke of simultaneous incidents at multiple sites. Most importantly, six intelligence reports suggested that the method of infiltration would be via the

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13 This claim has been disputed by some Indian intelligence officials. They insist that the actual number of warnings was lower, and that Western intelligence agencies proved reluctant to share information that could compromise Pakistan for being a state-sponsor of terrorism. Allegedly, that reluctance continues to this day, with British and American intelligence agencies unwilling to share electronic intercepts obtained during the period 26-29 November 2008, which would demonstrate real-time supervision of the attack by the ISI. See Praveen Swami, ’26/11: 7 years on, India waits for West intelligence on ‘ISI links’’, *The Hindu*, 19 February 2016, accessed online at http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/david-headley-mumbai-attack-2611-7-years-on-india-waits-for-west-intelligence-on-isi-links/, on 17 June 2016.
Arabian Sea. Going by the specificity of some reports which originated from the US Central Intelligence Agency, it was clear to the Mumbai police that the Americans had a high-level human source within LeT. Only much later would it emerge that the source was Dawood Gilani, Sajid Majeed’s reconnaissance agent in India. The CIA had known about the 26/11 conspiracy in detail for some time, but either due to incompetent tradecraft or more likely, a cynical readiness to risk Indian lives for the sake of protecting its prized spy, only passed on incomplete information to Indian security agencies.

According to a senior Indian intelligence officer, the Americans learnt about the scale of the Mumbai attack plan and were worried that it would lead to an India-Pakistan war. So they forwarded a sanitized stream of reports to New Delhi which could later be cited as ‘proof’ that the Indians had been complacent despite being forewarned. This same officer said that the strategic surprise on 26/11 came from the sea-borne method of infiltration and the operational flexibility it gave the terrorists. Previously, arms and explosives had been shipped to India by the ISI via maritime smuggling networks. But none of these led to the immediate execution of a commando-style raid. In November 2008, it seemed highly unlikely that a motley group of semi-literate youth from the landlocked interior of Pakistani Punjab (most LeT cadres tend to be ethnic Punjabis) would become proficient in seamanship within a short span of time, without significant preparatory activity which would be detected by intelligence assets.

Even the aborted Phase II of the ISI’s 1993 operation in Mumbai had involved shipping arms to India with the help of locally-recruited smugglers and stashing the weapons for some days, before they were to be used. Never before had a group of foreign terrorists landed on Indian shores, entered a city whose streets they were unfamiliar with, navigated to their targets precisely (thanks to GPS coordinates provided by LeT operative Dawood Gilani) and started shooting immediately. The reaction time thus available to the entire Indian security bureaucracy was compressed from weeks and days, into minutes, but the intelligence agencies were unaware of the changed paradigm at the time.

An irrelevant model for predictive analysis

Past attacks by suicidal gunmen from Pakistan had followed a set pattern: terrorists would infiltrate via a land border (either in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, or via Nepal/Bangladesh). They would hide in safehouses prepared by LeT sleeper operatives in India. Usually, Indian police would pick up information about their presence thanks to human and technical sources, and neutralize them before their operation could be launched. On rare occasions, such as the 2001 assault on India’s parliament, the gunmen would succeed in conducting an assault but the level of casualties would be low due to good protective security measures. However, they enjoyed better success in Kashmir, where the time lag between their infiltration and the actual moment of deployment would be kept as short as possible, leaving the security forces with a narrow time window to prevent casualties, or detect the attackers’ presence in a locality. LeT planners recognized this pattern, and resolved to send a group of terrorists directly from Pakistan to India via a ship owned by the terrorist organization. En route, the gunmen hijacked an Indian fishing boat and massacred the crew, so as to steer into Indian territorial waters undetected by the coast guard. The final approach to Mumbai’s shoreline was made by a rubber dingy launched from the fishing boat. The boat itself was abandoned (the terrorists had been ordered to sink it, but failed to do so) and continued to drift at sea until intercepted by Indian authorities some days later.

15 Conversation with the same R&AW officer referred to in footnote 3. An officer within the Indian Intelligence Bureau, though not commenting on the specificities of the CIA’s handling of Gilani, readily stated that the Americans played a double game against India in the hope of getting information on Al Qaeda through Gilani.
Despite the intelligence warnings delivered to the Mumbai police, it is hard not to sympathize with them. They were operating in a political climate where terrorism was perceived as a problem of border provinces in the north and east of India. Maharashtra, the province of which Mumbai was the capital, was further to the south and suffered mainly from Maoist terrorism, which was a rural phenomenon. Furthermore, the Maoists were restrained in their attacks and avoided mass-casualty operations which would lose them support among the Indian middle classes. Pakistani jihadists had no such compunctions, but were erroneously thought to be such a geographically distant threat that they were discounted, except to the extent they might carry out bomb attacks using the ‘Indian Mujahideen’.

What was the initial response?

When the first reports of shooting at Mumbai’s main railway station and at a popular tourist café arrived, senior police officials believed that a gang war between drug trafficking syndicates had erupted. Shootouts were rare in the city, but when they did happen, their motives were criminal and the victims were usually mixed up with local mafias, either willingly or as victims. However, there was something different about these attacks – there were just too many of them. New reports arrived of gunmen having stormed into two luxury hotel complexes, the Taj Palace and Tower Hotel, and the Oberoi-Trident Hotel. Each of these consisted of two separate buildings, meaning that potentially several thousand hotel guests were at risk from the attackers. It soon became clear that the killings were random and opportunistic – what the US security community terms ‘active shooter’ events. Like the crazed gunmen who occasionally barge into American schools and massacre teachers and students until they are either killed or commit suicide, the LeT terrorists were only interested in chalking up a high death toll. They did not want to negotiate but only to kill and die – that was what their trainers had brainwashed them to do.

So much commentary has been made about the poor quality of firepower and weapons training available to Mumbai’s policemen on that fateful night that it need not be repeated here. Suffice to say, that at the railway station policemen on duty were gunned down, in some cases because their poorly-maintained and antiquated firearms jammed after a couple of missed shots. The two terrorists who opened fire on them were in contrast no amateurs – they fired controlled bursts, killing 58 people almost immediately. Elsewhere, in the two hotel complexes, their comrades met with even less resistance. With no one to interfere, they calmly walked through the luxurious interiors, shooting anyone they saw. Because most guests and staff in the hotel did not immediately recognize that what was happening as a terrorist strike, they initially ran towards the sound of firing before fleeing, panic-stricken, in the opposite direction.

The initial reports of shooting at five different locations came literally within minutes of each other. The first arrived at 21:48 hours and the last at 22:02 hours. There seemed no clear pattern – a tourist café, a train station, two hotels and a Jewish cultural center. What the 19th century Prussian military philosopher Clausewitz called the ‘fog of war’ truly descended on the operational vision of the Mumbai leadership. Within one hour of the opening shots being fired, at 22:40, the police leadership recognized that the crisis was too big for them to handle alone. They needed the help of the Indian Army and the National Security Guard (NSG), the country’s premier counterterrorist force, which was based over a thousand kilometers away in the national capital, Delhi. In the interim, policemen on the ground struggled to understand what was happening and contain the potential for further escalation. It goes to their lasting credit that one of them, at the loss of his own life, grappled with a Kalashnikov-wielding Pakistani terrorist for long enough for the latter to be overpowered and arrested. This arrest and the subsequent interrogation, conducted both by Indian and American officials, exposed the cross-border nature of the conspiracy and dealt a serious blow to the ISI’s effort to maintain total deniability.

The Quick Response Teams (QRTs) of the Mumbai Police were best-suited to deal with the crisis, having been trained in commando operations by the Army. But they were caught in traffic seven miles to the north of the attack zone, which was concentrated in the prosperous southern tip of Mumbai. When they finally reached the affected locations, the shooters had moved indoors through the labyrinthine hotels and the Jewish cultural center. Hesitant about losing more men – the force had already lost three experienced officers to a terrorist ambush early in the crisis – the city police chief ordered his subordinates not to engage the terrorists. Clearly, his decision was in part motivated by a legitimate concern for their safety. But it also seems to have been driven by a sense of personal...
helplessness at the enormity of the crisis and the suddenness with which it appeared. His individual feeling of being overwhelmed with a responsibility that was too heavy for him to bear, was transmitted down the chain of command in the form of oral orders to ‘do nothing’ until the NSG’s specialist counterterrorist hostage rescue teams arrived from Delhi. The police QRTs were left to do nothing more than crowd control, which they failed at for want of adequate numbers – there were only 56 officers and men in all the QRTs combined. Even two hours after the first pair of terrorists had opened fire at the Taj Palace Hotel (soon to be joined by another pair which had stopped to attack the nearby tourist café), only six policemen had entered the building. As they stumbled through its unfamiliar layout, which most of them normally would never visit on their meagre salaries, they radioed for reinforcements. Their horror and bewilderment in the following hours can only be imagined, as they were left to engage four heavily armed terrorists while themselves only carrying a few pistol and carbine rounds. The reinforcements did not arrive, as they had deferred to the police chief’s order to stay clear until the NSG took over the situation. Running desperately low on ammunition, the six policemen were soon themselves being hunted down and had to focus on ensuring their own survival first.

Improvising with the Navy

So wide is the gulf between civilian and military expertise in the Indian government that it was only by coincidence that the Maharashtra authorities learnt of the Indian Navy’s commando capability. As the Headquarters of India’s powerful Western Fleet, Mumbai hosted a marine commando base. A civil servant recalled one of his social contacts in the Navy mentioning this unit and its sophisticated fighting skills, and as the crisis developed, he thought to ask for its assistance. Given the complicated bureaucratic procedure under which military force can be used in aid of civil authority in India – a backhanded compliment to the strength of its democracy – it was not until 02:00 that the first marine commandos arrived at the attack sites. Numbering just 16 men, they split into two teams and entered the Taj Palace and Tower Hotel and the Oberoi-Trident Hotel. At the latter location, they were only able to block passageways connecting the two hotel wings (the Oberoi and the Trident) and isolate the terrorists in the former. At the Taj Palace however, their colleagues’ intervention proved crucial.

When the first shots had rung out in the Taj Palace, hotel staff had alerted as many guests as possible to stay in their rooms and barricade themselves until rescued. Other guests were herded to safety in an isolated part of the hotel complex known as the Chambers. Eventually, roughly 200 civilians were gathered there, including several political and business leaders from Mumbai. Believing that their VIP status entitled them to priority evacuation, many telephoned news channels on their mobile phones. In live interviews, they revealed their identities and their location in the hotel. Unbeknownst to them, hundreds of miles away in the Pakistani port city of Karachi, their every word was being heard by Sajid Majeed and other attack masterminds from the ISI and LeT. Clustered in a control room equipped with satellite phones, laptops and television screens, the attack planners listened to Indian newscasts, then relayed operational information in real-time to the terrorist gunmen who were causing mayhem in Mumbai. It was through media channels for instance, that they learnt about the paralysis which had set into the Mumbai police and the lack of any proper hostage rescue capability in the city. It was also through the media that they learnt of the arrival of the marine commandos at the Taj Hotel.

Like their civilian police counterparts, the marine commandos were unfamiliar of the topography of the hotel complexes. At the Taj, a small-scale floorplan was provided to the team leader by a hotel staffer. Unable to make any sense of the details, he stuffed the plan into his pocket and instead

18 Levy and Scott-Clark, The Siege, pp. 128-129 and p. 207.
proceeded instinctively towards the sound of gunfire.\textsuperscript{19} The aim at that moment was not to devise an elaborate counter-assault plan, but instead to save as many lives as possible in what was a fluid situation where the terrorists were roaming freely and still held the initiative. The commandos had arrived at a decisive moment in the crisis. Alerted by their long-distance handlers in Karachi about the hundreds of civilians hiding in the Chambers, the four terrorists at the Taj were hunting for them. Had they succeeded, they would have been able to commit yet another massacre on an even larger scale than they had previously done. The determined intervention of the marine commandos surprised them and they fell back into the depths of the building. Thus were the civilians rescued.

It is important to note that the marine commandos had been few in number, operating night-blind in unfamiliar surroundings. They had fired at the muzzle flashes of the terrorists in what was otherwise a dark maze of corridors and rooms. Yet, due to their weaponry, advanced combat training and personal motivation, they regained tactical control of a rapidly deteriorating situation. Had a similar set of attributes been available to the policemen who stood outside the hotels the 26/11 attack might have been terminated earlier. But as has already been mentioned, such systemic preparedness did not exist because the dominant institutional and political mindset had failed to anticipate that a condition similar to urban warfare could erupt on Mumbai’s streets. The marine commandos were military professionals trained for high-risk assaults, but policemen could not have been asked to deliver a comparable performance without the requisite infrastructure for psychological and physical hardening and weapons-handling.

\textit{Waiting for the NSG}

One of the much-hyped points of criticism regarding the Indian security response on 26/11 was the apparently ‘slow’ deployment time of the NSG. Based at the town of Manesar, outside Delhi, the force took over nine hours to reach Mumbai. This was not however, for want of preparedness on its part. On the contrary, the NSG had mobilized its Counterterrorist Task Force 1 (CTTF-1), the 100-man assault team which remains on a constant 30-minute standby, within a mere 22 minutes of the first shots being fired. Whatever delays ensured thereafter were no fault of the unit, but rather, a result of Clausewitzian ‘friction’ as civilian bureaucrats scrambled to understand what was happening and work out the correct procedures for federal government intervention. Being a federal force, the NSG could not on its own initiative fly to Mumbai without a formal request from the provincial authorities in Maharashtra. This was because under the Indian constitution, the maintenance of public law and order was a provincial responsibility. The federal government could only intervene in the event of a grave threat to national security. Although in hindsight it is clear that 26/11 certainly was such a threat, at the time no-one could definitively say so. It must be remembered that the Mumbai police themselves had mistakenly dismissed the first reports of shooting as signs of a gang war, which would not affect civilian bystanders.

Besides the actual flying time from Delhi to Mumbai, the nine-hour travel time was due to traffic congestion on the national highway connecting the NSG’s base at Manesar with Delhi airport, and lack of a suitable aircraft to ferry the rescue team. Although one was provided by the Indian intelligence service, the loading of equipment and personnel took a full hour. Some additional time was wasted when a cabinet minister insisted on travelling to Mumbai with the rescue team, holding up its departure. But beyond this, it is hard to see just how CTTF-1 could have reached the crisis area any faster. Readers would do well to remember that during the 1980 Iranian embassy siege in London, the British Special Air Service took much longer to deploy an assault team from Hereford. Fortunately for the SAS, it escaped criticism because terrorists of that bygone era were inclined to carry out ‘conventional’ hostage-takings which featured prolonged negotiation, thus buying time for police and...

military units to react in an organized and pre-planned manner. No such luxury was available to the NSG in 2008.

What became painfully evident after the 26/11 attack was investigated and analyzed by experts, was that LeT had identified a crucial weakness in international hostage rescue procedures. This was the importance of negotiations as a method used by governments to stall for time and ensure that hostages remained unharmed until a swift and surgical assault could be mounted. According to the established rulebook for dealing with hostage situations, expert negotiators would keep the terrorists busy with meaningless dialogue while commandos arrived and gather preparatory intelligence. Ideally, the negotiations would continue right to the very last minute so that the terrorists would be distracted when the rescue team made its forcible entry into the building/room where hostages were being held. This maximized the chances of killing the terrorists before they could kill any hostages.

Unfortunately, among the ranks of LeT trainers were several veterans of the Pakistani Army Special Forces. These men came from Zarrar Company, the Army’s counterterrorist team. They had been dispatched by the ISI to ensure that LeT battle tactics stayed one step ahead of Indian security forces, especially with regard to attacks that would involve taking hostages. Owing to their advice, LeT ensured that its attack plan for Mumbai would do as much damage as possible, and kill as many people, before the Indian government had a chance to begin negotiations. If at all negotiations were to commence, they would be used to propagate the false message that 26/11 was the work of indigenous militants from India. The LeT gunmen were instructed to tell Indian news-channels that they had no connection with Pakistan and were fighting ‘oppressive policies’ of the Indian government. Any hostages that would be taken would only be used as human shields to prolong the media spectacle – eventually they were all to be killed, execution-style, and the gunmen themselves would die fighting Indian troops.

Even as the NSG was airdashing to Mumbai, two points became clear during the on-flight briefing: the terrorists had attacked multiple sites simultaneously precisely because they had realized that this would overwhelm the NSG’s finite resources. Also, they had already murdered civilians because this would deprive the Indian government of an opportunity to hold credible negotiations. No state can offer amnesty to hostage-takers who have already perpetrated a massacre – the best that LeT hoped for was to take foreign tourists in India captive, so that their governments would force New Delhi to slow down its response operations and further prolong the attack’s duration. As electronic intercepts of the terrorists’ conversations later revealed, the idea all along was to kill foreign nationals so as to spoil the international reputation of the Indian government, for failing to save them.

**Topography of Terror**

Having discussed the sequence of events, it is now necessary to look at the physical constraints that the NSG had to operate with once it reached Mumbai. The force engaged with the terrorists for 48 of the 60 hours that the 26/11 attack lasted (80% of the total time) but the worst damage had already been done in the twelve hours before it took over operational control from the police and the Navy. During those twelve hours, the police had been frozen by shock, the Navy heroically but blindly struggled to probe the situation with a small number of marine commandos, and the Indian Army limited its role to cordoning off the attack sites. Being untrained in close quarters battle for urban environments, the average Indian infantryman was unsuited to the task of hostage rescue, which required precision shooting skills and specialized equipment. So the final responsibility fell to the NSG alone.

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From the moment the NSG commander arrived at the Taj Palace and Tower Hotel, the scale of the rescue mission became frightfully clear. He had to divide up his force, sending men to the Oberoi-Trident Hotel complex as well as the Jewish Cultural Center, where several foreigners were being held captive by two of the terrorists. This meant that for room clearance operations at the Taj Hotel itself, he would have just 40 of the 100 officers and men who constituted CTTF-1. Although there were another 50 personnel who could serve in support roles, the NSG detachment in Mumbai was badly over-stretched. The Taj Palace and Tower Hotel had roughly 80% occupancy on the night of the attack. This meant that around 3000 people had been in the building. Although a large number extricated themselves once it became clear that a terrorist assault was underway, several hundreds were still trapped in their hotel suites, awaiting rescue. It would take an average of four to five minutes to clear a single room, assuming there was no resistance from the terrorists, or frightened hotel guests. In total, sanitizing the entire hotel complex and neutralizing the terrorists would take days. And there were the other two sieges to consider.

The NSG troopers had been trained to anticipate panic among hostages and communicate calmly and clearly with them, in order to avoid any accidental deaths. But even so, officers would have to personally lead the room clearance operations to make sure that minimal force was used against uncooperative civilians. There was also the possibility that the terrorists might abandon their weapons and seek to escape by masquerading as hotel staff or guests. Based on the manpower available, the NSG commander decided that each hotel floor would be cleared completely, before proceeding to the next. There simply were not enough personnel to guard the areas that had already been secured. Initial efforts to get policemen to act as blocking forces foundered because the latter had received oral orders from their chief not to take any risks. They remained in parts of the hotel which were relatively safe, and dealt with the task of evacuating civilians who were rescued by the NSG. This meant that the NSG troopers risked being ambushed as they went from one floor to the next, still not knowing their way around the complicated floorplan. In fact, one of the NSG’s finest officers was killed in just such an ambush.

At the Oberoi-Trident Hotel, on the other side of south Mumbai, things went better. After massacring whoever they had seen during the first hours of their rampage, the two terrorists in the hotel complex had barricaded themselves in a guest room which was relatively isolated but difficult to storm. Incessant gunfire and grenade-throwing over several hours eventually accounted for both of them. The fact that the hotel had fewer guests than the Taj meant that room clearances went faster. However, the open plan of large parts of the complex impeded unobserved movement, which meant that the NSG had to enter cautiously at first in order to avoid being ambushed from the upper floors. Also, the force lacked night-vision equipment which would work without any ambient light – lengthy corridors and isolated storage rooms in many parts of both hotel complexes (the Taj and the Oberoi-Trident) required that clearances be conducted in daylight for those areas where the electricity had failed. Knowing that the Indian security forces would use CCTV camera footage to track the gunmen’s movements, the ISI/LeT terrorist handlers in Karachi had advised that whole floors should be set ablaze to short the wiring system. This meant that localized power failure added to the operational difficulties of the NSG.

The biggest challenge, in a tactical sense, came at the Jewish cultural center. For many hours, the NSG held off storming the building out of concern for the safety of foreign nationals held captive by the two terrorists there. Only once Indian Intelligence confirmed, based on electronic intercepts, that all the captives had already been killed upon personal instructions from Sajid Majeed in Pakistan, did the assault begin. Live media coverage led to death of one NSG trooper, who was shot by the terrorists as

22 Unnithan, Black Tornado, p. 93.
he tried to enter their stronghold. With no way of approaching unobserved, the NSG wore down the
terrorists by a combination of sniper fire and room assaults. A final push let to both being killed.
During the operation, the NSG had to contend with large number of spectators on the ground, many of
whom were literally a stone’s throw from the cultural center. Without any prospect of being able to
evacuate the densely populated surrounding area (which only the local police had authority to do), the
NSG was forced to operate in the public spotlight. This later led to facetious comments about lack of
professionalism of the force’s personnel by ill-informed Western commentators, who only went by
what they saw on television screens while safely ensconced far away, rather than the facts on the
ground. The death of all those taken hostage by the terrorists was initially blamed on the NSG, until it
emerged during the post-attack investigation that they had in fact been executed much before the
building was stormed.

What lessons for the future?

At the start of this paper, three criteria were identified for assessing the performance of Indian security
forces on 26/11:

1) The number of dead
2) The length of time needed to reestablish control of the situation
3) The number of potential victims evacuated from the affected sites, while under imminent
threat.

From what is known about the timeline of events, it appears that two-thirds of those killed (around 100
of the 166 fatalities) died in the opening stages of the attacks. Blaming the Mumbai police, the Indian
Army and Navy, or the NSG for failing to prevent these murders is nonsensical. If any responsibility is
to be attributed for these deaths, it might lie with the Indian intelligence agencies. But they too, were
badly under-resourced for the task of combating cross-border terrorism. Even five years after the 26/11
attack, the Intelligence Bureau (India’s premier security agency) had just 30 analysts and field
personnel on its operations directorate.25 Counterterrorism teams set up shortly before 26/11 had been
disbanded due to lack of funding. So ‘intelligence failure’ – the favourite excuse of decisionmakers
when caught unawares – seems more like a structural problem than anything else. Furthermore, in
subsequent cross-border attacks by Pakistani jihadists, the Indian intelligence community did an
excellent job of anticipating the assaults and alerting local security forces. But the latter did not
possess the manpower strength and equipment to stop the attacks themselves from being launched. It
seems as though suicidal operations – *fidayeen* raids – constitute a tactic which will assuredly cause
some level of casualties no matter how well-funded intelligence agencies are, or how competent police
and military response units.

Moving to the second criterion, the long-drawn process of terminating the Mumbai attack was due to
manpower shortages and the very large size of the two hotel complexes, which gave the terrorists
plenty of room to maneuver and hide. Both the NSG and the marine commandos were critically
undermanned for the scale of the crisis that they were confronted with. Both forces were operating in a
situation different from what they had trained for. The NSG was an intervention force meant to rescue
hostages according to a well-rehearsed assault plan that had been adequately shaped by intelligence
reports. The marine commandos were experts in undersea warfare and demolitions, who were only
drafted into the counterterrorist response on 26/11 because of their superior combat skills. Both forces
did the best that they could, but in retrospect it is clear that they would have needed much greater
numbers if they were to conduct both missions simultaneously – evacuate civilians and hunt down the

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25 Praveen Swami, ‘Five years after 26/11, Intelligence services still crippled by staff shortage’, *The Hindu*, 26
November 2013, accessed online at [http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/five-years-after-2611-intelligence-
terrorists. And it must not be forgotten, that they had to do all this in an information vacuum. They did not even know the layout of the buildings that they were operating in, much less the terrorists’ exact location.

Finally, the Navy and NSG together evacuated roughly a thousand civilians who had been trapped in the two hotel complexes. The Navy in particular, deserves credit for rescuing at least 200 civilians who were at imminent risk of death in the Chambers area of the Taj Hotel. Western tourists later briefed their countries’ intelligence agencies that the Indian security forces had behaved professionally and courteously during the evacuation.26 During the entire 60-hour terrorist attack, only one civilian was confirmed killed as a result of cross-firing between the terrorists and security forces. All other civilian deaths had been cold-blooded executions often consisting of a gunshot to the head.

Going by these criteria, the Indian security forces produced a flawed but still valiant effort on 26/11. The flaws were due to systemic weaknesses relating to lack of funds for specialized equipment and trained manpower, but these cannot be assumed to have led to a higher loss of life. Instead, they may have stretched out the attack, by slowing down the speed of evacuation and room clearance operations. The Mumbai police themselves did a bad job, but largely due to a failure of nerve on the part of their top leaders as well as poor command and control. Having never ‘wargamed’ such a crisis, the police were psychologically ill-suited to dealing with its numbing effect. In the years since, Mumbai has raised a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) squad named Force One, which has been rated as quite professional by NSG experts. Whether this capability would be a real improvement over the QRTs is another question however, since Mumbai has a history of experimenting with ‘special’ police units only to disband them after a few years, or divert their personnel to other duties.

There have been at least eight major terrorist attacks since 26/11, which bore a strong resemblance to the carnage that was wreaked upon Mumbai. These are: the massacre of children at a summer camp in Norway (2011), the attack on expatriate workers at a gas facility in Algeria (2013), the Westgate Mall attack in Kenya (2013), the massacre of schoolchildren in Peshawar, Pakistan (2014), the Garissa University attack in Kenya (2015), the Paris Massacres of January and November 2015, and the Orlando nightclub shooting in the United States (2016). The number of killers varied in this incidents, as did their motives and the duration of the attacks. In all cases however, several civilians were killed before security forces intervened effectively. The massacre in Norway was perpetrated by a ‘lone-wolf’ terrorist armed only with semiautomatic weapons. Yet he managed to kill 77 children before surrendering to the authorities. If any fact should warn Western policymakers about the risk of 26/11 style attacks, it is this: rich societies are as vulnerable to terrorism as developing societies and having better-equipped police forces does not necessarily translate into more public security when an incident actually occurs. Rather, case-specific preparation is required. Just because the resource-starved Indian security forces were slower to respond in Mumbai than their Western counterparts may have been, does not imply that the West can terminate ‘active shooter’ incidents without incurring similarly high levels of casualties.

One lesson that surfaced from Mumbai was that government communication during a crisis is vital. The Indian public relations effort was shambolic, with military and civilian authorities rushing to brief the media without coordinating with each other. Sensitive information was leaked by talkative ministers unaware of its operational ramifications. Briefings were ad hoc, feeding the international media with the impression of a multi-headed and bombastic security leadership. In future attacks, it is necessary that the media should be ‘managed’ to stay away from areas where security operations are underway, and if that is impossible, to avoid broadcasting such operations in real-time. It is also necessary to identify a storyline early enough which can be planted into post-incident commentary through sympathetic journalists who can shape the public impression in a manner that favours the government. After 26/11, the Indian media had a field day in criticizing the political leadership and

26 Author’s conversation with an Australian intelligence officer, 2009.
thereby inadvertently gave ammunition to India’s enemies, including Pakistan, to focus on blaming the victim (India). In the process, what was conveniently obfuscated was the fact that 26/11 was an exceptional attack because it was state-sponsored. Only recently (in summer 2016) has the Indian media woken up to the fact that the Pakistani government actively interfered with the security response to 26/11. A few hours before the attack, Islamabad had ensured that officers of the Indian home ministry’s internal security division (who were visiting Pakistan as part of a bilateral dialogue aimed at improving relations) were sequestered in a remote area beyond mobile phone coverage.27 Once the attack began in India, their panicky subordinates tried to ring for orders, only to find that their supervisors were inaccessible. On reflection, it seems that Pakistan had a better understanding of how to carry out a coordinated ‘whole-of-government’ terrorist operation than India had of conducting a coordinated response.

Another lesson is that multiple crisis intelligence centers should be set up to pool information from any sources, regarding the current situation in a terrorist-hit zone. Because so many incidents were reported from across Mumbai in the early hours of the attack, the police were overwhelmed by panicky callers. It became difficult to sift fact from fiction in this context. The same problem will arise in the future as well – a localized command and control structure needs to be put in place to deal with the threat of information overload. Siting of fusion centers and allocation of responsibilities for crisis management would have to be handled depending on which areas are identified as ‘high-risk’ by intelligence agencies. Usually, there is some warning of the general intention of terrorist groups to strike a locality. Unfortunately, the security practice in India has been to act on such warnings piecemeal and not introduce systemic changes to ensure that an entire urban zone can be ‘hardened’ to terrorist attack. By liaising with business owners and holding regular drills to assess the speed of counterterrorist responses, police forces can minimize the damage done in the opening stages of an attack. It is worth noting that at both the Taj Palace and Tower Hotel and the Oberoi-Trident Hotel, it was the professionalism of the hotel staff which saved many lives. Thinking on their feet, staffers ensured that guests were herded into safe areas, kept calm, and evacuated at the first opportunity. In case employees at public buildings and major multinational companies could be routinely sensitized about emergency protocols that should be followed during a terrorist crisis, it would make the job of security forces much easier.

Finally, the most important lesson of 26/11 is that fighting defensively is a foolish policy. Planners of mass murder have a voyeuristic thrill in watching death hundreds of miles away, knowing that modern technology allows them to ratchet up the level of destruction by a phone call to their cadres on the ground. Ordinary methods of criminal justice do not work against such individuals – India has long tried to get the Pakistani state to implement its own laws ie., Pakistani laws, against terrorist groups who target Indian citizens. This approach has failed. The masterminds of 26/11 still roam freely under ISI protection.28 Although there are grounds for restraint in the targeting of high-profile LeT and ISI leaders, no hesitation is needed in the case of mid-rank cadres. Individuals such as Sajid Majeed can and should be physically liquidated at the earliest opportunity. Islamabad anyway claims that Majeed – the main link between the ISI and LeT in the 26/11 case – does not exist, even though he has been designated a global terrorist by the United States.29 Going by Pakistani logic, the Indian government would not be violating any law if it quietly vaporizes a ‘non-existent’ person together with his ‘non-existent’ ISI bodyguards. Since Islamabad insists that it is committed to combating terrorism, it can

27 ‘Counterterrorism officers were in Pakistan as 26/11 unfolded: Ex-MHA officer’, Times of India, 10 June 2016, accessed online at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Counterterrorism-officers-were-in-Pakistan-as-26/11-unfolded-Ex-MHA-officer/articleshow/52695352.cms, on 17 June 2016.
hardly object if international terrorist fugitives are killed within its jurisdiction. As the United States killed Osama bin Laden, so too must India neutralize LeT operatives in Pakistan through a campaign of assassination.

**Conclusion**

It is worth remembering that during and immediately after the 26/11 attack, both domestic and foreign commentators with little operational insight lambasted the Indian intelligence agencies and security forces. Condescending statements about lack of professionalism were made by armchair Western analysts, secure in the knowledge that their own countries did not face a large-scale and state-sponsored terrorist threat from any adjacent territory. Such insouciance has disappeared after the November 2015 Paris attack. Europe is now worried about more shooting rampages that could convert its touristic old town squares and city centres into jihadist death traps. There is a greater sense of appreciation that stopping multiple active shooters who have reconnoitered their targets beforehand and possess tactical skills is an immensely complex task. Blood will be spilt. This paper is intended to educate counterterrorism practitioners about some of the challenges faced in 2008 by the Indian security establishment, as well as highlight the growing relevance of these same challenges for the West.

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