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Terrorists Can Think Strategically

Lessons Learned From the Mumbai Attacks

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Affairs Committee on January 28, 2009

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Terrorists Can Think Strategically
Lessons Learned From the Mumbai Attacks²

Before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

January 28, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today. The Mumbai attack was still ongoing when RAND initiated an analysis to determine what lessons might be learned from it. This analysis, part of RAND's continuing research on terrorism and homeland security, was documented in a report I co-authored along with other RAND analysts. Specifically, I contributed the sections on the terrorists' strategic motives and the execution of the attack.

We relied on both informed official sources and media reporting. My analysis benefited greatly from the detailed descriptions of the attack provided by officers from the New York Police Department, who were on the scene and whose reports were shared with law enforcement and others in the United States.

Copies of our report have been made available to members of the Committee. Additional copies are available here, and the report is also on RAND's website. For convenience, I have appended the key findings to my testimony. The following observations derive from this report and other relevant research.

Terrorism has increasingly become an effective strategic weapon. Earlier generations of terrorists seldom thought beyond the barrels of their guns. In contrast, the masterminds of the Mumbai terrorist attacks displayed sophisticated strategic thinking in their choice of targets and their efforts to achieve multiple objectives. They were able to capture and hold international attention. They sought to exacerbate communal tensions in India and provoke a crisis between India and Pakistan, thereby persuading Pakistan to redeploy troops to its frontier with India, which in turn would take pressure off of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and other groups operating along the

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Afghan frontier. All terrorist attacks are recruiting posters. The Mumbai attackers established their terrorist credentials and now rival al Qaeda in reputation.

Al Qaeda is not the only galaxy in the jihadist universe—new contenders that have signed on to al Qaeda’s ideology of global terror. Even as we have degraded al Qaeda’s operational capabilities, the idea of a violent global jihad has spread from North Africa to South Asia. The Mumbai attack foreshadows a continuing terrorist campaign in India. More broadly, it suggests that the global struggle against the jihadists is far from over.

Terrorists can innovate tactically to obviate existing security measures and confuse authorities. Authorities are obliged to prevent the recurrence of the most recent attack, while knowing that other terrorists will analyze the security in place, devise new tactics, and do the unexpected. The Mumbai attackers did not plant bombs in crowded train coaches, as in the 2006 Mumbai terrorist attack. Instead, gunmen attacked the train station. They did not detonate car bombs as in the 1993 Mumbai attacks or the more recent terrorist attacks on hotels in Indonesia, Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan. They seized control of hotels where they started fires. Multiple attacks at different locations prevented authorities from developing an overall assessment of the situation.

Once again, terrorists have demonstrated that with simple tactics and low-tech weapons, they can produce vastly disproportionate results. The Mumbai attack was sequential, highly mobile, and a departure from the now common suicide bombings, but the tactics were simple—armed assaults, carjackings, drive-by shootings, building takeovers, barricade and hostage situations. The attack was carried out by ten men armed with easily obtained assault weapons, semi-automatic pistols, hand grenades, and simple improvised explosive devices—little more than the arsenal of an infantryman in the 1940s—along with 21st century cell phones, BlackBerries, and GPS locators.

Terrorists will continue to focus on soft targets that offer high body counts and that have iconic value. Nationally and internationally recognized venues that offer ease of access, certainty of tactical success, and the opportunity to kill in quantity will guide target selection. Public spaces are inherently difficult to protect. Major investments in target hardening make sense for government only when these provide a net security benefit, that is, when they do not merely displace the risk to another equally lucrative and accessible target.

Terrorists view public surface transportation as a killing field. One of the two-man terrorist teams went to Mumbai’s main train station and opened fire on commuters. While the attacks on

the other targets were theoretically aimed at killing foreigners, the attack at the train station was aimed solely at slaughter. It accounted for more than a third of the total deaths.

This underscores a trend that should be a priority issue in the United States. Public surface transportation offers terrorists easily accessible, dense populations in confined environments—ideal killing zones for gunmen or improvised explosive devices, which remain the most common form of attack. According to analysis by the Mineta Transportation Institute's National Transportation Security Center, two-thirds of all terrorist attacks on surface transportation were intended to kill; 37 percent resulted in fatalities (compared with between 20 and 25 percent of terrorist attacks overall); 75 percent of the fatal attacks involved multiple fatalities; and 28 percent of those involved 10 or more fatalities.

Terrorist attacks on flagship hotels are increasing in number, in total casualties, and in casualties per incident. This trend places increasing demands on hotel security. However, while terrorist attacks are spectacular, they are statistically rare in comparison to ordinary violent crime. In the past forty years, fewer than five hundred hotel guests in the entire world have been killed by terrorists, out of a total global hotel guest population at any time of nearly ten million.

Pakistan's principal defense against external pressure is not its nuclear arsenal, but its own political fragility—its government's less-than-full cooperation is preferable to the country's collapse and descent into chaos. Pakistan continues to play a prominent and problematic role in the overlapping armed conflicts and terrorist campaigns in India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan itself. Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba and other insurgent and terrorist groups find sanctuary in Pakistan's turbulent tribal areas. Historically, some of them have drawn on support from the Pakistan government itself. While the Government of Pakistan has been helpful in capturing some key terrorist operatives, Pakistan is accused of protecting others. And it has been understandably reluctant to use military force against its own citizens in the remote tribal areas where these groups reside. When it has used military force, government forces have not fared well. Public sentiment imposes further constraints. Many Pakistanis regard India and the United States, not al Qaeda or the Taliban, as greater threats to Pakistan's national security. This was perceived as an obstacle to U.S. counterterrorist efforts even before 9/11.

The success of the Mumbai attackers in paralyzing a large city and commanding the attention of the world's news media for nearly three days will encourage similar operations in the future. Terrorists will continue to effectively embed themselves among civilians, taking hostages and using them as human shields to impede responders and maximize collateral casualties. We should expect to see more of this tactic.

Could a Mumbai-style attack happen in the United States? It could. The difference lies in planning and scale. Assembling and training a ten-man team of suicidal attackers seems far beyond the capabilities of the conspirators identified in any of the local terrorist plots discovered in this country since 9/11. We have no evidence of that level of dedication or planning skills.

However, we have seen lone gunmen and pairs of shooters, motivated by mental illness or political cause, run amok, determined to kill in quantity. The Long Island Railroad, Empire State Building, LAX, Virginia Tech, and Columbine cases come to mind. In 1955, four Puerto Rican separatists opened fire in a then unguarded Capitol Building, wounding five members of Congress. Firearms are readily available in the United States. And some of the perpetrators of the attacks mentioned above planned for their attacks for months, while building their arsenals. Therefore, an attack on the ground, carried out by a small number of self-radicalized, home-grown terrorists armed with readily available weapons, perhaps causing scores of casualties, while still far beyond what we have seen in the terrorist plots uncovered thus far, is not inconceivable.

Could a team of terrorists, recruited and trained abroad as the Mumbai attackers were, be inserted into the United States, perhaps on a U.S.-registered fishing vessel or pleasure boat, to carry out a Mumbai-style attack? Although our intelligence has greatly improved, the answer again must be a qualified yes. It could conceivably happen here, although I would expect our police response to be much swifter and more effective than we saw in Mumbai.

Key Judgments

India will continue to face a serious jihadi terrorist threat from Pakistan-based terrorist groups for the foreseeable future. However, India lacks military options that have strategic-level effects without a significant risk of a military response by Pakistan. Neither Indian nor U.S. policy is likely to be able to reduce that threat significantly in the short to medium term. Most likely, the threat will continue to grow. Other extremists in India inevitably will find inspiration and instruction from the Mumbai attack.

Safe havens continue to be key enablers for terrorist groups. Safe havens allow terrorist leaders to recruit, select, and train their operators and make it easier for terrorists to plan and execute complex operations, such as the Mumbai attack. Therefore, at the strategic level, the Mumbai attack underscores the imperative of addressing the transnational sources of Islamist terrorism in India. How to do this is an extraordinarily difficult question that will require the reassessment of basic assumptions concerning policy toward Pakistan by members of the international community.

The focus on Pakistan in this case should not obscure the likelihood that the attackers had local assistance or that other recent terrorist attacks in India appear to have been carried wholly or partially by Indian nationals. Local radicalization is a major goal of the terrorists and will remain a major political and social challenge for India.

The masterminds of the Mumbai terrorist attack displayed sophisticated strategic thinking in their choice of targets and tactics. The attack appears to have been designed to achieve an array of political objectives. This indicates a level of strategic thought—a strategic culture—that makes this terrorist foe particularly dangerous.

Given that the terrorists seek to maximize the psychological impact of the attacks, we can expect that future attacks will aim at both large-scale casualties and symbolic targets. The jihadists have stated, and the Mumbai attack demonstrates, the determination of the terrorists to seek high body counts, go after iconic targets, and cause economic damage.

The terrorists will continue to demonstrate tactical adaptability, which will make it difficult to plan security measures around past threats or a few threat scenarios. Terrorists innovate. They designed the Mumbai attack to do what authorities were not expecting. There were no truck bombs or people attempting to smuggle bombs onto trains, as in previous attacks.

Since attacks against high-profile soft targets are relatively easy and cheap to mount, such institutions will remain targets of future attacks. The protection of those targets presents particularly difficult challenges. Many of India's older symbolic buildings were not built with security considerations in mind or are in exposed locations.

Iconic institutions that are likely to be potential targets of terrorist attack must work with local police and intelligence agencies to receive timely alerts about possible threats. They must work with local municipalities and police to curtail open vehicular access to their premises and

must consider putting in place screening barriers at some distance from their physical premises where this is possible. They must also develop preplanned response strategies, in coordination with local law enforcement, to the wide variety of possible threats that can be reasonably envisaged.

One of the most important lessons of this attack is the continuing importance of an earlier operational form: the firearms assault. While the counterterrorism world has been focused almost exclusively on explosives, this attack demonstrates that firearms assault, while not as deadly as mass-casualty bombings, can be an effective tactic in creating prolonged chaos in an urban setting.

Intelligence failure, inadequate counterterrorist training and equipment of local police, delays in the response of NSG commandos, flawed hostage-rescue plans, and poor strategic communications and information management all contributed to a less-than-optimal response. These gaps suggest the need for improved counterterrorist coordination between national-level and local security agencies and for strengthened counterterrorist capabilities on the part of first responders. Unless India can improve the quality and functioning of its entire internal security apparatus, it will remain acutely vulnerable to further terrorist penetration and attacks.