

Why Pakistan's military is gun shy

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

KARACHI - The attack on Mumbai on November 26 by Pakistan-linked militants opens a similar opportunity for India to what happened to Washington after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. The US was able to further its regional designs with global support and was able to coerce Islamabad into cracking down on its own strategic partner, the Taliban in Afghanistan.

New Delhi also now has the international community on its side, but Pakistan is in a very different position from where it was seven years ago, and the new political and military leaders are not in a position to take similar steps to those of their predecessors.

In a new round of international pressure following the Mumbai attack, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, arrived in Pakistan this week to meet with senior Pakistani officials. The chief of Interpol was also scheduled to visit Islamabad on Tuesday to discuss the mechanism for the arrest and interrogation of wanted people such as Zakiur Rahman, the chief of the Lashka-e-Toiba (LET), which was connected to the militants who attacked Mumbai; Maulana Masood Azhar of the outlawed Jaish-e-Mohammed and former Mumbai underworld kingpin Dawood Ibrahim.

India is reported to have mobilized forces near the Rajasthan-Sindh Pakistani border areas and Pakistani intelligence sources have talked of possible surgical strikes on militant bases in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and in Lahore, at the central offices of the Jamaatut Dawa, which this month was declared by the United Nations Security Council a front for the LET, which is banned as a terror group. The Pakistan Air Force has been placed on red alert.

Earlier, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, both in public statements and private meetings, urged Pakistan to understand the gravity of the current situation and to take immediate steps to stop terrorists from using its soil for attacking others. The US warned Pakistan that in the absence of appropriate steps, it would be hard for the US to prevent Delhi from carrying out strikes inside Pakistan in retaliation for the Mumbai attack in which 10 militants held the city hostage for three days and killed 175 people, including top police officials.

In a speech at Washington's Council on Foreign Relations, Rice said what Pakistan had done so far to catch those responsible for the attacks in Mumbai was not enough. "You need to deal with the

terrorism problem," she said when asked what her message was to Pakistan. "And it's not enough to say these are non-state actors. If they're operating from Pakistani territory, then they have to be dealt with."

According to reports, Islamabad has assured Indian leaders and international leaders such as British Prime Minister Gordon Brown that it is ready to take all steps demanded by the world community to avoid a war.

All the same, actions speak louder than words and the prevailing opinion in Western capitals and in New Delhi is that Pakistan will not undertake any real crackdown on militants.

This view is reinforced by the contradictory statements of Pakistani officials. On December 7, Pakistani authorities issued a statement that Azhar, the founder of the Jaish-e-Mohammad, had been placed under house arrest at his Bahawalpur residence in Punjab. But on December 17, first the Pakistan envoy to New Delhi and then Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi stunned everybody by saying that Azhar was at large and not in Pakistan.

Azhar, a firebrand orator in favor of jihad although he has never been a combatant, was arrested in India in 1994 over his connections with the Kashmiri separatist group Harkatul Mujahideen. In December 1999, Azhar was freed along with separatist guerrillas Mushtaq Zargar and Omar Shiekh (the abductor of US reporter Daniel Pearl in Karachi in 2002) by the Indian government in exchange for passengers on the hijacked Indian Airlines Flight 814 that was held hostage in Kandahar, Afghanistan, under Taliban control.

In 2000, Azhar, claimed by Pakistan to have never entered Pakistan, announced the formation of the Jaish-e-Mohammad, at a press briefing at the Karachi Press Club, along with the now slain Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai. Jaish was banned in 2002 under US pressure, but Azhar remained close to the Pakistani establishment, mainly because he refused to support al-Qaeda against the Pakistan military.

Following the Mumbai attack, Delhi has demanded that Azhar, along with others such as Dawood, be handed over. This was refused by Pakistan, which said Azhar was a Pakistani national and had never been tried by Indian authorities. Then came the surprise announcement that he was not even in Pakistan.

What complicates the situation is the lack of unity between the civilian government in Islamabad and the military. The government managed

to get the international community to support it by having the Jamaatut Dawa declared a front for the LET to justify a crackdown on the organization against the will of the army. (See [Pakistan's military takes a big hit](#) Asia Times Online, December 13.)

But the military establishment, which has been humiliated over the past seven years, has good reasons not to back the government.

The problems started after September 11, when the US forced the then-military government of president General Pervez Musharraf to abandon the Taliban. Up to 2001, Afghanistan had virtually been a fifth Pakistani province for which Pakistan arranged day-to-day expenditures. Even the communications network was run by the Pakistan Telecommunication Corporation Limited.

By 2003, Pakistan had been forced to send the army into the restive tribal areas bordering Afghanistan to crack down on al-Qaeda and militants, in breach of its agreements with the tribes.

In 2004, Pakistan was forced to shut militant camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and to accept India's fencing of the Line of Control that separates the two Kashmirs. As a result, militant operations into India-administered Kashmir were badly interrupted. When Pakistan changed its Afghan policy, Musharraf, who was also chief of army staff, informed all jihadi organizations that the policy was necessary to preserve Pakistan's interests in Kashmir. However, when the Kashmir policy changed and operations started in the tribal areas, the jihadi organizations reacted.

By 2005, all the big names in the LET had left the Kashmiri camps and taken up in the North and South Waziristan tribal areas. The same happened with Jaish and other organizations. The most respected name of the Kashmiri struggle, Maulana Ilyas Kashmiri, the commander of Harkatul Jihad al-Islami, also moved to Waziristan.

This was the beginning of serious problems for Pakistan and also resulted in a change in the dynamics of the Afghan war. Trained by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence's India cell, these disgruntled militants caused havoc in Afghanistan and played a significant role in bringing the latest guerrilla tactics to Afghanistan. They also introduced major changes in the fighting techniques of the tribal militants against the Pakistani forces.

By 2006, the Taliban had regrouped and launched the spring offensive that paved the way for significant advances over the next two years. At the same time, militants escalated their activities in Pakistan and

forced Pakistan into virtual neutrality in the US-led "war on terror".

An unprecedented number of attacks were carried out on Pakistani security forces in 2007 and by February 2008 suicide attacks in Pakistan outnumbered those in Iraq. Militants carried out dozens of attacks on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) supply lines from Karachi, virtually bringing them to a halt. According to Strategic Forecasting, a Texas-based private intelligence entity: "Pakistan remains the single-most important logistics route for the Afghan campaign. This is not by accident. It is by far the quickest and most efficient overland route to the open ocean."

In this situation, the only peaceful place in Pakistan is Punjab, the largest province and the seat of government. But this peace can only be ensured through central Punjabi jihadi leaders like Hafiz Muhammad Saeed of the LET and southern Punjabi jihadi leader Azhar. Azhar has influence in the jihadi networks in Punjab and he convinced jihadis, after a wave of suicide attacks in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad, to go to Afghanistan and spare Punjab.

The highly demoralized Pakistan army has failed in the tribal areas and in the Swat Valley it has had to solicit peace accords. Opening up a new front in Punjab, which could spread to the port city of Karachi - the financial lifeline of the country - would be a disaster.

This explains the military's resistance to the government push to go full out against militancy, a move that would also compromise NATO's lifeline to Afghanistan.

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