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# Saving India-Pakistan Relations

by Frank Schell

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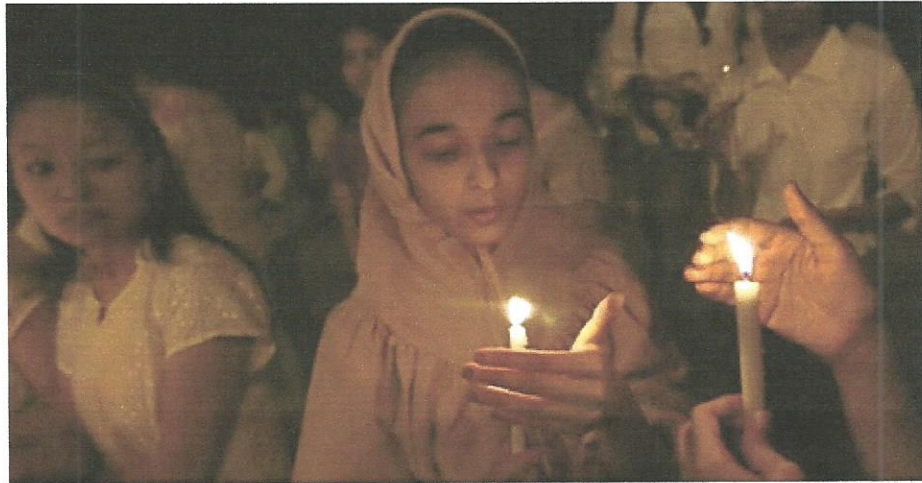
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**Thus far there** is no evidence presented to accuse the Islamic Republic of Pakistan of the sophisticated and well-coordinated Mumbai attacks, although in the informal court of public opinion, Pakistan has been named as the usual suspect. There is evidently the confession of only one individual, a 21-year-old captured Pakistani, a cell phone that was used to call Pakistan, and two Pakistani merchant vessels seized by the Indian navy. Complicity by the Pakistani state, and collusion by renegade elements of the ISI (intelligence service) or army are two acutely different matters.

In any event, the perpetrators of the horrific attacks in Mumbai have hit Indian historical landmarks, and a trifecta of Western interests—U.S. and British hostages and the Nariman House Jewish center. This is all to the benefit of Islamist radicals in Pakistan and central Asia, who may or may not be directly connected to this monstrous crime.

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AFP Photo / Pal Pillai

An Indian Muslim (C) takes part in a candle-lit march in Mumbai to condemn the terror attacks there, No

First, a major U.S. ally in a volatile region is being destabilized. Anything that weakens the secular and federal republic of India, and promotes Balkanization or fissiparous tendencies, benefits al Qaeda, the Taliban, and various Islamist terrorist cells operating with or without their patronage or logistical support.

Second, these attacks have the ultimate potential to topple the Congress Party led government during general elections to be held next May, giving rise to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It is a well-organized political party with traditional Hindu nationalist leanings, much recent experience in governance, and for a seething public, it could be a credible alternative to a discredited Congress Party.

However, the rise of the BJP at this emotional moment also has the potential to ignite India's 150 million Muslims. While generally at peace in a predominantly Hindu nation, Muslims are still viewed with some suspicion, and it is perceived that they have not benefited as much as the rising Hindu middle class. A voluntary union of numerous regions, ethnicities, religions, and languages, India has some strategic fault lines, and the Hindu-Muslim divide is the most dangerous.

Third, there is potential dilution of Pakistan's efforts in the war on terror. There is no question that India must respond, but what that action should be is not so evident. Mobilizing the Indian army on the Pakistan border is one such move, about which there is some speculation, but this would in turn cause Pakistan to mobilize, as Pakistan has already stated. Any redeployment of Pakistan's 600,000-plus military along the Indian border with Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat would have adverse effects on Pakistani troop strength in the Northwest Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where Taliban and al Qaeda influence is entrenched. A reallocation of military resources would adversely affect Pakistan's ability to patrol and interdict in fundamentalist strongholds.

Fourth, the Mumbai attacks damage the improving relations between India and Pakistan, two nuclear powers, as expressed by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Asaf Ali Zardari, Pakistan's new prime minister. Both countries are U.S. allies for different reasons—Pakistan for its geography in the war on terror, and India for its value as a regional offset to China and major business and military partner—and these attacks may serve to fracture what is an uneasy alignment of interests.



Regardless of what is ultimately substantiated by evidence, the interests of Muslims are once again set forth on the world stage. Some of the recent bombings in major Indian cities such as Bombay, New Delhi, Bangalore, Varanasi, Ahmedabad, and Jaipur have been linked to Islamist extremist movements such as the homegrown SIMI, as have attacks in the northeastern state of Assam, where there are believed to be Islamist radicals of Bangladeshi origin. In terrorist attacks in India, usually there is also suspicion of involvement of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a potent Kashmiri Muslim separatist group.

There will likely be major changes in the way India addresses terrorism—extending well beyond resignations of senior government officials such as Home Minister Shivraj Patil. Redeployment of the National Security Guard to major cities, related airborne logistics, preventive detention, structures of government and dedicated resources, and the efficiency of the courts will need to be examined.

With passions and recriminations running exceedingly high, let us hope for a diplomatic effort, and for Indian moderation in the coming days in terms of a military response on its borders. The Bush and incoming Obama administration should do all they can to make sure that cooler heads prevail in New Delhi and Islamabad at this dangerous time. There is an opportunity here—for India to engage Pakistan to root out terrorist havens and training camps on Pakistani soil and for the U.S. to serve as a partner and honest broker between the two. If this does not happen, and India-Pakistan relations deteriorate further, the terrorists will have achieved one of their key goals.

*Frank Schell recently returned from a fact-finding mission to India with the Harris School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago. A former banking executive, he served in the U.S. Peace Corps in India, speaks Hindi-Urdu, and is a member of the Chicago-based National Strategy Forum.*