

ISAS Brief

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The Train Blasts: Impact on Indo-Pakistan Relations

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The blasts on the train between India and Pakistan killed 68 on the night of 18 February 2007, many of them Pakistanis. The damage could have been worse had other incendiary material discovered at the site of the incident also exploded. The contents of the unexploded suitcases suggest that the devices contained incendiary materials designed to start fires in coaches rather than destroy them through explosion. Many of those who died would probably have been able to escape had the doors of the coaches not been sealed and had the windows not had bars placed across them. For security reasons, police seal the doors of the coaches in Delhi after a security check and these are only opened at the border between India and Pakistan.

It is clear that security checks were inadequate. Surviving passengers have testified that security checks were quite nominal, and instances have come to light where tickets have been issued to passengers without the appropriate documents. There is also a concern that there were more passengers than on the passenger list. Identification of passengers, and their nationalities, has been difficult to establish. A clear lesson is that security checks on this train need be strengthened for both countries and that sealing of doors and windows is an inappropriate action. Perhaps more guards need to be deployed to prevent illegal entry or exit into the trains. Passenger verification would also have to be more rigorous.

It is interesting that Pakistan has now attempted to paint itself as a victim of terrorism. Even though the accident occurred in India, Pakistani diplomats in Europe and the United States have been quick to offer their comments before talk show hosts to convey that both countries are victims of terrorism and are fighting international terrorism. This is against the backdrop of recent media revelations about linkages of Pakistan to international terrorism. It may be recalled that the British Broadcasting Corporation recently aired footage of the profusion of Taliban training camps within Pakistan. Only last month, United States intelligence officials told a Senate committee in the United States that 'operational connections and relationships radiate outwards from their leaders secure hideout in Pakistan to affiliates throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Europe.' There have been other similar allegations and Pakistan would like to distance itself from such an image. It is perhaps important for Pakistan, both from diplomatic as well as strategic points of view, that the attack on Pakistanis commuters on the train is used to demonstrate the point that Pakistan is a victim of

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terrorism (like India) and not a supporter. As a consequence, there have also been statements that the peace process between the countries should not be derailed, and should proceed.

Leaders on both sides have given statements that this terrorist attack was designed to derail the peace process. Both President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh have expressed the determination that they will not allow the perpetrators to succeed in achieving this objective. A few days ago, it was announced that the first meeting of the joint anti-terrorism mechanism established by Pakistan and India as a result of the Musharraf-Manmohan Singh meeting in Havana last September will be held in Islamabad on 6 and 7 March 2007. Pakistan Foreign Minister Mian Kursheed Mehmood Kasuri is currently in New Delhi on a packed programme that would definitely be overshadowed by this tragedy.

On the Indian side, the incident has again demonstrated the weaknesses in intelligence gathering and preventive action. There are no reports that the intelligence agencies or the police were aware that such an operation was being planned. The perpetrators of the blasts in Mumbai last year as well as those in a crowded market place in Delhi before that are yet to be apprehended, and the alleged Pakistan connection has still to be proved. It is clear that the security agencies would be on the back foot after this incident and their redemption would lie in their ability to detect the persons that committed the act.

The attack also comes at a delicate stage in the peace negotiations between the two countries. The formula for the settlement of the Siachen dispute is almost at hand but both the Indian External Affairs minister as well as the Defence Minister would like to ensure consensus among all concerned, most importantly, the army and the air force, before proceeding further on it. In Kashmir, a form of self government to both Jammu and Kashmir and to parts of Kashmir that is administered by Pakistan is being discussed as also the reduction of military and paramilitary strength.

There is strong momentum in India where several lobbies are keen to see an early settlement of the bilateral issues. Some of these lobbies are clearly influenced by the United States while others see the advantages of the enormous trade opportunities between the two countries that are now being lost. The growing economy of India as well as sound economic performance in Pakistan is seen as a major opportunity for mutual trade and benefit.

There appears to be determination on both sides to carry the peace process forward. A good signal would be the quick resolution of some of the issues, notably the Siachen and the Sir Creek disputes. It is not clear whether there is internal consensus within the two countries on the parameters of this resolution. However, if such a breakthrough comes it may, in the view of many analysts, discourage efforts by extremist elements and opponents of the process to make further attempts at sabotage. Interestingly, the leaders of both the countries are eager to find a common ground for an early resolution.

At the same time, 'the settlement at any cost' approach is viewed with anxiety by several groups on both the sides that, in fact, do not perceive the ticking off of dispute items as a solution for the long standing differences between the two countries. This group is wary of the influence of the United States in pushing through this process and is worried that hurrying through may serve the interests of the United States in its international fight against terrorism, but not necessarily take care of the sensitive and emotional issues between the two countries.

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