

ISAS Brief

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Attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul: Time to Sober Up

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The 7 July 2008 suicide attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul left 41 people dead and some 140 injured, including an Indian military attaché and three other Indians. Immediately after the attack, Kabul started pointing fingers at Islamabad and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. Though New Delhi has officially refrained from blaming Pakistan, many senior officials joined Kabul in accusing the ISI. Islamabad has categorically rejected the allegations. Although conventional wisdom suggests a strong possibility of ISI's complicity, if not outright Islamabad's, the ground realities may be somewhat different.

Kabul has frequently blamed Islamabad for almost all anti-occupation and anti-Karzai government attacks. The rhetoric has gone up in the recent past, less due to a formidable insurgency, and more due to President Hamid Karzai's frustrations with the mired North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces. Relations between the two capitals are at all-time low so much so that President Karzai threatened to attack Pakistan last month.

Washington, despite condemning attacks in the strongest terms, refused to endorse allegations of Islamabad's complicity. United States Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, said, "I haven't seen any evidence or proof that foreign agents were involved." The State Department said that it believed the attack was carried out by the extremists.

There are many reasons to believe that the *Taliban* are behind the attack. The militants have been targeting Indian interests with increasing pace in recent times. The current attack was the fourth in a row this year. Since 2002, the *Taliban*, while at large, have repeatedly demanded the departure of all Indian personnel from Afghanistan; similar demands have been made of the occupation forces.

There could be many propositions on the objective, timing and the high profile nature of the target. First, the stronger the United States-India strategic partnership grows, the more India would be on the militants radar screen. Second, India has reportedly stepped up its military-to-military cooperation with Afghanistan in recent months, short of sending combat troops. In April 2008, Afghanistan's Defence Minister, A. R. Wardak, took a delegation of the Afghanistan Army and Air Force to India and to army establishments in Kashmir, "seeking Indian cooperation against threats of terrorism and extremism." The militants are wary of the greater Indian role, which was instrumental in keeping President Karzai (who faces an

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election next year) in power, with its deep links with the Northern Alliance and efficient intelligence apparatus. Finally, a stable and peaceful cooperative relationship between Pakistan and India would be a nightmare for the militants. The militants stand to gain the most from bad blood between India and Pakistan. There is a precedent of such attacks in the recent history of the relations between the two countries. Whenever some progress is made on peace-building between the two countries, certain elements in Pakistan have attempted to sabotage it, leaving both countries pointing fingers at each other. These elements have links with the Islamic militants, Islamic political parties, and the ISI.

Pakistan's Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, while condemning the attacks and rejecting allegations, said that Pakistan itself is a victim of terrorism, it wants stability in the region, and it wants to push forward with an ongoing four-year (2004-08) effort to reach peace with India. Ironically, hours before the attack, an article by a former Indian career diplomat, M. K. Bhadrakumar, appeared in the Asia Times, which read, "A lot of back-channel activity has been going on between Delhi, Islamabad and Washington ...there is a broad consensus among Pakistani politicians for normalisation of relations with India ...so that they can devote themselves with full energy to the nation's existential crisis."

If sabotaging rapprochement between India and Pakistan was the purpose, then the miscreants seemed to have been successful in their objective. The attack has caused a hiccup in thawing relations between the two nuclear rivals. Both countries were expected to make positive progress in the coming months on major contentious issues, as well as on cooperation in trade and the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. Coincidentally, a day after the attack, Indian troops at the Line of Control exchanged fire with Pakistani troops, a rare incident since the ceasefire in 2003. India also lashed out at Islamabad during the United Nations Security Council's session on Afghanistan's future on 9 July 2008 for making peace deals with the militants.

While the Indian government, on the whole, exercised restraint, the Indian media and the strategic community, as usual, pointed fingers at Islamabad. Many demanded that India should flex its muscle in the region, while sidelining American and Pakistani sensitivities. A case in point was an editorial in the influential English daily, India Express, which stated, "After the Kabul bombing, India must come to terms with an important question that it has avoided debating so far. New Delhi cannot continue to expand its economic and diplomatic activity in Afghanistan, while avoiding a commensurate increase in its military presence there. For too long, New Delhi has deferred to Pakistani and American sensitivities about raising India's strategic profile in Afghanistan."

However, these actions can prove a pet recipe for regional destabilisation. Pakistan has, time and again, expressed its concerns over growing Indian presence in Afghanistan. In fact, many NATO and United States officials are of the opinion that Kabul and Delhi can play a bigger role on the issue of stabilisation in the region by addressing Pakistan's concerns. For example, a former top United States diplomat, Karl Inderfurth, said at a hearing on 24 January this year, "Kabul should address Pakistan's concerns on India, and its allies should urge Kabul to officially accept [the] Durand Line as the border between the two South Asian neighbours." Bhadrakumar, contends that, "It is plain unrealistic to overlook Pakistan's legitimate interests in Afghanistan."

Some analysts, on the other hand, contend that its India's legitimate right to be present in Afghanistan. They believe that the attack is part of a calibrated Pakistani strategy directed at

coercing India into scaling down its growing presence in Afghanistan. These analysts suspect that Islamabad may not be involved in the attack; rather the ISI, which runs its own agenda, being a “state within a state”, is responsible for the carnage. For example, India’s National Security Adviser, M. K. Narayanan, commented on a news channel, “We have no doubt that the ISI is behind this...the ISI needs to be destroyed. We made this point, whenever we have had a chance, to interlocutors across the world... there might have been some tactical restraint for some time, obviously that restraint is no longer present.” Pakistan has rejected these accusations.

However, the issue may not be the ISI per se but rather civil-military relations. The ISI works on orders of the Pakistan Army with a well defined command and control structure. To suggest that the ISI is involved in the attack is to suggest that the Pakistan Army is involved. However, several reasons seem to indicate that the army may not be the culprit in this regard. Today, the global and regional strategic scene is completely different from that of the 1990s. Pakistan has managed to successfully woo the United States and China. Backing the *Taliban* would strain its relations with the United States and alienate China, Iran and the neighbouring central Asian countries, all of whom are wary of Islamic militancy. Islamabad appears to have abandoned the *Taliban*, notwithstanding the fact that there are elements supportive of them within and outside the government machinery.

Furthermore, the Pakistan Army itself has been under attacks from the militants. The militants, once confined to the mountains, have created havoc in Pakistan-settled areas in the recent past, including attacks on Pakistan Army cantonments; army headquarters; the Navy War College; the Intelligence Service headquarters; the Danish Embassy; the United States Consulate; and the political parties and their leaders. Pakistan has deployed more than 80,000 troops in the border regions, more than the total strength of NATO’s coalition force and the Afghanistan Army deployed on the border. More Pakistani troops have died in battle than Afghanistan and coalition casualties put together in the last seven years.

Despite the sacrifices it has made, the Pakistan Army lacks credibility, due to its past misadventures, making it suspect in the eyes of many analysts who continue to doubt its intentions. The Pakistan Army will have to go the extra mile to win its lost trust at home and abroad. On the other hand, the Karzai government and New Delhi can play a bigger role to address Pakistan’s concerns. If the three capitals do not come to terms with the issues at hand and continue the blame game, the militants would be the final winners.

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