

Front lines of terrorism

by [Vatsala Vedantam](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

September 11 and December 13—to Indians, the events of these days were startlingly similar. On one day, suicide bombers used hijacked planes to destroy the centers of industry; on the other, suicide terrorists used hand grenades and AK47s in an aborted attempt to bring down a nation's government. In both cases, the targets represented a country's main citadels—America's economic and military strength, in the one case, and the seat of India's democratic governance, in the other.

In terms of numbers killed, India was more fortunate. Security guards shot and killed the five armed suicide bombers before they could carry out their deadly mission. The terrorists attacked when the two Houses of Legislature were in full session, with 400 members of Parliament waiting to hear an address by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. The aim of this attack was unambiguous: to wipe out the country's elected leaders.

Terrorism is nothing new to India. The nation has seen two recent prime ministers assassinated. Indira Gandhi was gunned down by her own security guards, while her son, Rajiv Gandhi, was killed by a suicide bomber. Several other political leaders, including state chief ministers, have died violent deaths in similar circumstances. An estimated 55,000 men, women and children have been victims of terrorism in different parts of India. The assault on the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly in Srinagar two months ago, when 38 legislators were gunned down, was the beginning of more daring attacks. The modus operandi of the suicide terrorists in both cases point to the same suspects—the dreaded Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), terrorist groups operating from Pakistan.

The Indian government has found convincing evidence regarding these groups' involvement in the December 13 attack. This attack shows what is in store for other countries if this kind of terrorist culture is allowed to escalate.

The world needs to realize, first and foremost, that there is no such thing as a holy war. The perpetrators of such notions are merely exploiting religion for their own ends. Whether it is the Taliban or the JeM or the LeT, each is pursuing its own

agenda in the guise of religion. The militant groups in Kashmir, for example, are fighting for territory, not to promote or defend Islam. By projecting their activities as a religious struggle, these groups have succeeded in mobilizing followers. Jihad is a bait to whip up feelings of religiosity in those who are more easily swayed by faith than by politics.

Consider the bloodstained history of Kashmir. Ruled by a Hindu maharaja, the state of Jammu and Kashmir continued to enjoy independent status even after India became free of British rule. Continuing their policy of divide and rule, the departing colonial powers not only carved up the country into two nations, but left to the 600 other princely Indian states the option of choosing to join either India or Pakistan or retain independent status. This was a recipe for balkanization.

Most of the states merged with India, and a few opted for Pakistan. Jammu and Kashmir preferred to wait. But when the newly formed dominion of Pakistan attempted to capture that state through military invasion, the maharaja formally acceded to India. It was then that the Indian army entered Kashmir to stop further incursions at the point now called the Line of Control.

In 1949, India asked the United Nations to free the area held by Pakistan. A plebiscite was recommended by the UN on condition that Pakistan first withdraw its forces. That did not happen. Instead, a reign of terror was unleashed by Pakistani terrorist cells which forced hundreds of Buddhists and Hindus to flee. This situation continues even today.

The chief cause for all this friction is the two-nation theory—the idea that Muslim-occupied areas should be attached to Pakistan, and that the country should be divided on communal lines. The theory itself is flawed, as there are more Muslims living today in India than in Pakistan. In fact, India has the second-largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia.

Indian Muslims have the freedom to establish their own teaching and religious institutions and follow their own social practices. They hold highly ranked judicial and ministerial positions. Two of them were even elected as presidents of the country. Having declared itself a secular state in which all religious and linguistic minorities can live with the same rights and privileges as the majority Hindu community, India's constitution does not allow discrimination among minority groups. The world's largest democracy has sheltered followers of Islam, Christianity,

Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism, among others, whereas Pakistan declared itself a Muslim state at the time of independence.

It is against this background that proxy wars have been waged in Kashmir to “liberate” the Muslims there from Indian rule. These attempts at insurgency have now advanced to more blatant attacks on India. The reasons for the attacks are not hard to grasp: the success of India’s open, pluralistic and multiethnic society governed by democratic norms gives the lie to the two-nation theory propagated by Islamic rulers in Pakistan. By using terrorist tactics, they may be hoping that India will retaliate with war. If that happens, one more call to jihad could mobilize more Islamic supporters.

The greater danger is that homeless, rootless Afghan refugees will join hands with Pakistani terrorists. It is even feared that the two may overthrow the Pakistani government and establish Taliban-style rule in Pakistan.

India is walking a tight rope: common sense says avoid war, but the impatient electorate cries for action of some sort when the enemy has openly struck. Decision-making will not be easy for a nation nagged by these terrorist forces for more than 50 years. Engaging in war would be suicidal. But even giving away Kashmir to Pakistan will not end the problem. Hundreds of Kashmiris will surface with more terror in store.

India needs a permanent solution with the help of strong allies like the U.S., which has its own interests in the region. If India and Pakistan go to war, the latter will have to deploy troops and resources to the Indian border. It has been estimated that 35,000 Pakistani troops are posted in western Pakistan to protect U.S. equipment and military personnel. Another 60,000 soldiers are guarding the Afghan border. American interests will certainly be compromised if Pakistan diverts these to the Indian border. Its support of the U.S. on the Afghan front will naturally get diluted. Of course, the nuclear arsenal in both countries is not the least of concerns in the event of war.

India has turned to the U.S. to contain the terrorist forces since it is the only country that can prevail on Pakistan to do so. India is confident that America will also be helping itself in the process. The example of the JeM founder, Masood Azhar (now in Pakistan), who had to be released by India in exchange for 155 passengers when an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked from Nepal to Kandahar in 1999, and who is said

to be one of the architects of the September 11 attack on America, is a case in point. If terrorism in India is not curbed, America is not safe.

The U.S. is also walking a tightrope. It cannot alienate either India or Pakistan at this point. To ignore Indian concerns could send the signal to other nations that the U.S. rhetoric about fighting terrorism is empty, since it is tilting toward the very country harboring terrorists. To alienate Pakistan would jeopardize its own agenda, since it is desperately depending on Pakistan to pursue Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda group within that territory. No wonder President Bush is forced to play hot and cold with Pakistan's military leader General Pervez Musharraf, whom he first reprimands sternly to "eliminate" the terrorist groups which are threatening its neighbor, and then praises him in the same breath for taking the right course of action. And whenever he pulls up Pakistan, he also has to advise India to be less "belligerent."

In addition to amassing troops and equipment along the Indo-Pak border (official estimates put the former at over a million), India has withdrawn 50 per cent of its diplomatic staff from the Indian High Commission in Islamabad, while advising Pakistan to do the same in New Delhi. Following a recent high-level cabinet meeting, the NDA government in New Delhi decided to deny Indian airspace to Pakistani aircraft, both civil and military. By these visible actions, India is sending a loud message that, if further provoked, it is ready to go to war.

Still, Prime Minister Vajpayee and Foreign Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh have expressed their willingness to hold dialogues with Pakistan about Kashmir and other issues, provided that that country is willing to jettison its program of using terror as a means of achieving its ends. Just as it acceded to the U.S. dictates of severing its links with the Taliban last September, Pakistan must condemn all the terrorist organizations functioning within its territory and take decisive steps to liquidate them.

A possible silver lining in the gathering war clouds is that the situation could be an opportunity for India, Pakistan and the U.S. to come together and jointly wage another war against all those terrorist forces that threaten to weaken their security. All three countries are directly imperiled. All three stand to lose if they do not share this common agenda.