



The new base against terror

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During the last few weeks, 'terrorism' has again made the headlines in the media. In India commentators have even forgotten the controversy of whether Jinnah was 'secular' or 'communal' or both, to comment on the events in Ayodhya and London. After the euphoria generated by the opening of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus journey and the general thaw in the Indo-Pakistan relationship, the public as well as the government tended to believe that terrorism was a thing of the past. On July 5, the UPA Government woke up to the sad reality; terrorism's ugly head had not vanished; it was very much in our midst. Six militants stormed the high-security Ram temple in Ayodhya. Thanks to the alertness of the CRPF, five militants were killed before they could make it to the shrine. A sixth one blew himself up. Four AK-47 and AK-56 rifles, hand grenades and ammunition were recovered from the bodies of the slain militants. They probably belong to the banned terrorist outfit Lashkar-e-Toiba, a wing of Markaz-ud-Dawa-wal-Irshad, a fanatic organisation based in Muridke near Lahore. In a pamphlet titled, 'Why we are waging jihad', this group, which attacked the Indian Parliament in 2003 had openly declared: "One of our objectives is the restoration of Islamic rule over all parts of India, not just in Jammu and Kashmir."

One can imagine what would have happened in North India had the militants come near the idols of the makeshift Ayodhya Mandir. Two

days later, four explosions in the London Underground and in a bus in centre of the City attracted even larger media coverage. Of course, when this type of terrorist attack occurs in the West, it immediately becomes an attack against Western civilisation, while when it happens in India, the tendency is to blame India's animosity with Pakistan.

But why fault Western media and politicians; India's own Foreign Minister declared that he hoped "the peace process with Pakistan would continue unimpeded unless there is a terrorist attack like the one witnessed in London". Obviously for him, Ayodhya was no terror.

A couple of days before the events in UP, the word 'terrorism' was also the mantra of the leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a grouping of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and China who met for two days in Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan. Though termed as 'anti-terrorist summit', the head of states of the Central Asian countries seemed more interested to see how the Shanghai group could be a counterweight to the increasing presence of the US in the region. During his 4-day stay in Russia, the Chinese President Hu Jintao had already reaffirmed Beijing's strategic alliance with Moscow. With President Putin, they declared their opposition to "any one state's (read the US) domination of international affairs".

At the SCO gathering, India, Pakistan and Iran were given observer status. The Indian Foreign Minister gave the standard speech: "The SCO was one of the first major international organisations to take concrete steps in the war against terrorism, much before the events of September 11, 2001 focused the attention of the international community on the need to pool their resources in the war against terrorism, extremism and intolerance. As terrorism today has become a sinister transnational activity... it can be successfully countered

through joint efforts by all states."

In theory, everybody can only agree. The problem remains: Is Delhi ready to spoil the newly found relaxed relation with Islamabad by calling a spade a spade? Indeed, the jihadi activities have recently increased in the subcontinent and the Government has not always done its homework.

In this context, a news item which did not get any coverage in India appeared in The Washington Post on July 3. In an investigative piece, the existence of a top secret center in Paris, code-named Alliance Base was disclosed. This intelligence centre was set up by the CIA and French intelligence services in 2002.

According to The Washington Post: "Funded largely by the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, Alliance Base analyses the transnational movement of terrorist suspects and develops operations to catch or spy on them. Alliance Base demonstrates how most counterterrorism operations actually take place: Through secretive alliances between the CIA and other countries' intelligence services. This is not the work of large army formations, or even small special forces teams, but of handfuls of US intelligence case officers working with handfuls of foreign operatives, often in tentative arrangements."

The journalist added, "Such joint intelligence work has been responsible for identifying, tracking and capturing or killing the vast majority of committed jihadists who have been targeted outside Iraq and Afghanistan since the Sept 11, 2001, attacks."

The interesting aspect of this success story is that it was conceived at a time when the relations between Paris and Washington were fast deteriorating. It was a few months before the beginning of the Iraq War, when all over the United States the 'French fries' had become 'Freedom fries' while Dominique de Villepin, the then French Foreign

Minister was criticised a great deal in the US for giving a spirited speech against the war in the UNSC.

During the time that Mr Donald Rumsfeld, the hawkish US Defence Secretary was telling everybody that France was not doing its share in fighting terrorism, the anti-terrorist cell was operational. A CIA officer familiar with the Alliance Base told the American paper, "It's really an effort to deal with some of the cooperation issues; I don't know of anything like it."

The Alliance Base is headed by a French general working for the General Directorate for External Security (DGSE), the French equivalent of the CIA. The base has officers from Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia and the United States. The report explains: "To play down the US role, the centre's working language is French. The base selects its cases carefully, chooses a lead country for each operation, and that country's service runs the operation."

At a time when the Indian Prime Minister is visiting the United States and is scheduled to meet President Bush, could a similar set up be envisaged between India - which had been subjected to hundreds of terrorist attacks during the past decades - and the United States?

A report of Pacific Council on International Policy (from the US) and the Observer Research Foundation (from India) covering growing aspects of the relationship between India and the US, particularly areas such as technology, healthcare, higher education and culture, was recently released.

This report is certainly a good effort and will help opening new vistas, except for a misplaced remark: "(In the strategic relationship) it would appear that India needs the United States more than the United States needs India. For the United States, good relations with India are desirable but not essential, whereas they remain essential for India."

In the long-drawn battle against terror, the United States certainly needs India more than vice-versa. A collaboration "of equals" (as in the French case), would undoubtedly be immensely beneficial to both. Just take the madarasas and the jihadi camps in Pakistan: Information could be shared and common action undertaken by the US and India which would go a long way to muzzle terrorists elements operating from Pakistan. If this could be the sole outcome of Mr Manmohan Singh's visit to the States, it would be worth the trip. Though if it ever occurs, we will know about it only in 30 years!

There could be a collateral: The CIA would learn that the Siachen is in India's possession. In its website (updated on June 30, 2005), it still shows the glacier as occupied by Pakistan. "Mountain of peace" or not, the US agency would be forced to get its facts together.