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## Military-militant nexus in Pakistan and implications for peace with India

By Wilson John

On November 26, 2008, 10 terrorists who attacked Mumbai undid in less than 60 hours what governments of two sovereign nations had been struggling for over four years to achieve-peace and stability in the region. These terrorists were from Pakistan, recruited, trained and armed by Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT), a terrorist group with visible presence across the country. The group has clear allegiance to the global terrorist groups like al Qaida and has a presence in over 21 countries.

It is well known that terrorist groups like LeT could not have weathered eight years of global sanctions without the support of the State, and in case of Pakistan, it has to be the Pakistan Army and its intelligence agency, ISI. The simple fact that LeT first operated out of its headquarters in Muridke, near Lahore, and subsequently from Masjid Jamia Qudasiya in Lahore, all within the sight of Pakistan Army's key Corps Headquarters (IV Corps) and its major recruitment centre indicates a clear complicity.

There is otherwise substantial evidence that shows the Mumbai attack was planned and executed with the help of present and former ISI and Army officers who form part of a clandestine group set up to pursue the Army's duplicitous policy of protecting its allies among the terrorist groups operating within the country while fighting others for the US as part of the Global War on Terror.<sup>1</sup>

This strategic military-militant collusion in Pakistan, which shows no signs of breaking up, will remain the most critical stumbling block in any future attempt to mend the relationship between India and Pakistan. Arguing the case for dismantling the terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan as a pre-condition for reviving the peace process, this paper reviews the present status of this dangerous liaison and the action taken against terrorist groups like LeT and JeM which have targeted India for over a decade.

### Strategic collusion

The alliance between the Pakistan Army, the ISI and terrorist groups can be traced back to President Zia-

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ul Haq's tenure (1977-'88). In fact, the genesis of the strategy to use terrorist groups to achieve foreign policy objectives in India and Afghanistan can be found in the report prepared by Ayub Khan's Bureau of National Reconstruction, an intelligence and research group. The report suggested "irregular warfare" as the solution to Pakistan's security compulsions.<sup>2</sup> This nexus has been well documented over the years and hence for the sake of not repeating what has been widely known, the paper, taking the November 2008 Mumbai attack as the starting point, focuses on the contemporary Pakistan Army leadership and its past and present alliance with terrorist groups like LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM).

The involvement of LeT in the Mumbai attacks has been admitted even by the Pakistan government.<sup>3</sup> What has not been acknowledged by Islamabad, so far, is the embryonic relationship which exists between LeT and the Pakistan Army. In 1999, it was the LeT cadres, along with others, who formed the first line of intrusion into the Indian territory in Jammu and Kashmir as part of the Pakistan Army's plans to capture key heights along the Srinagar-Leh Highway. These terrorists were armed, trained and pushed into the high mountains along Kargil to act as cover for the regular troops to hold ground largely through the 62 Brigade Headquarters in Skardu.

The officer in charge of the Brigade was Brigadier Tahir Mahmood. Mahmood is today a Lt General and heads the Rawalpindi Corps Command. Interestingly, he was the General Officer Commanding Special Services Group (SSG) till 2008, a Special Forces unit suspected to have trained the terrorists who attacked Mumbai. It is widely suspected that the Mumbai attackers began their training in December 2006.

Three months before the Mumbai attack, LeT was involved in an attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, which revealed its linkages with the military establishment. The July 2008 bombing was carried out by a suicide bomber who was

subsequently identified as a LeT member. The conspiracy was masterminded by the ISI and there were reports (*The New York Times*, September 12, 2008) which indicated that Army chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani was most probably in the know of the attack plan.

It would not be out of place to probe a little deeper into General Kayani's career to understand his commitments and attitudes which have been camouflaged by the 'golf playing, chain smoking professional soldier' line played repeatedly by the Pakistan and western media. As DG ISI, Kayani was responsible for the release of Harkat-ul Mujahideen chief Fazlur Rehman Kahlil (December 2004) and Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami chief Qari Saifullah Akhtar (May 2007), two of the Afghan jihad veterans who were instrumental in re-organizing terrorist strategies and operations on behalf of ISI and the Army. In September 2006, Kayani agreed to release more than 2,600 terrorist suspects; two of them were HuJI operational commander Sohail Akhtar (involved in the suicide attack in Karachi that killed 11 French engineers in May 2002) and Fazl Karim (one of the prime suspects in the 2002 Daniel Pearl murder).

Kayani was also aware of several ISI officials, forcibly retired in a purge carried out by his predecessor, Lt. Gen. Ehsan ul Haq, returning to work for the agency as contractual employees to aid the Taliban network in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These re-employed ISI officials are part of the clandestine group<sup>4</sup> or division created to pursue the Pakistan Army's two-track policy. Offices were established in private homes in Peshawar, Quetta and other cities. The group did not maintain any contact with ISI Headquarters in Aabpura in Islamabad or the Rawalpindi GHQs. This organisation worked more like an NGO with minimum hierarchy and casual working hours and an untraceable system of command and control. One such officer, whom the CIA tracked down was 'General Yusef' who recruited and trained men to fight in Nuristan and Kunar provinces. He reported to an ISI office in Chitral and received a monthly

stipend.<sup>5</sup> The training camp, interestingly, was run by LeT. Chitral incidentally happens to be one of the places where Osama bin Laden is suspected to be hiding.

Kayani, as the ISI chief, must have known about the new training camps set up by ISI in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) for terrorists leaving for Kashmir and Afghanistan. *Herald*, a widely read English monthly published by the Dawn group of publications, reported in June 2006 about the fresh recruitment drive launched by the terrorist groups and the sprouting of training camps. Dozens of aspiring recruits from the Frontier and FATA towns were sent each month to training camps in Wana in South Waziristan.

According to the report, at least three major *jibadi* groups maintained their liaison and recruitment offices in the Timergara area of Lower Dir District. These included the Hizb-ul Mujahideen (HM), Al Badr Mujahideen, now re-named as Al Suffa Foundation, and LeT, renamed as Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JUD). Other *jibadi* organisations that have either offices or training camps in the Timergara and Warai areas of Dir include the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM), which now calls itself Al Rahman Trust, the Harkat-ul-Ansar (HUA), the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM) and a Kashmiri group called the Pasban Millat.

In August 2006, while President Pervez Musharraf was striking deals with the Taliban and its allies in the tribal areas, *Herald* reported the presence of more than a thousand trained militants in three camps in the Hazara region of NWFP alone. Of these, the Hisari and Batrasi camps were located in the Manshera District while a third camp was located in Boi in district Abbotabad. The magazine quoted sources as saying that thousands of other militants were in camps in NWFP and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir regions run by predominantly Pakistani outfits such as LeT, JeM, HuM and Al Badr Mujahideen.

It was during Kayani's tenure as the ISI chief that India witnessed three major terrorist attacks. On

October 29, 2005, three powerful serial blasts killed over 70 people in New Delhi. Four months later, on March 7, 2006, three synchronized terrorist attacks killed over 20 people in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. The biggest attack, which the Indian authorities accused ISI of plotting, was the July 11, 2006 serial train bombing in Mumbai which killed over 200 persons.

The officer who succeeded Kayani as the ISI chief was Lt. General Nadeem Taj, a close confidant of General Pervez Musharraf. Taj was instrumental in implementing Musharraf's duplicitous game of supporting the Taliban elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan while claiming to be a strategic ally in the US-led Global War on Terrorism. Taj, for instance, allowed Kashmiri terrorist groups like Harkat ul Mujahideen, al Badr and JeM to set up "new offices, changing their names, putting up flags and posters, holding large rallies, and delivering sermons in mosques to publicise the groups' activities".<sup>6</sup> HuM relocated itself from Islamabad to the outskirts of Rawalpindi and called itself Ansar-ul Ummah. These developments, according to US analysts, implied "ISI returning to commissioning attacks in Kashmir" as part of a new phase in its militant proxy saga.<sup>7</sup> Taj was removed under pressure from the Bush administration as it became clear that the ISI was sharing the intelligence with the terrorist groups.<sup>8</sup> The CIA, in fact, presented a dossier to Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani containing information about contacts between the ISI and the Taliban through the Haqqani network.<sup>9</sup> Taj today heads the Gujranwala (XXX) Corps Command, quite close to the Indian border.

One of the key officers who worked both under Taj and Kayani was retired Brigadier Ijaz Shah, a close confidante of Musharraf.<sup>10</sup> He was the head of ISI bureau in Lahore in 1999 when Musharraf overthrew Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Shah was closely associated with ISI's networking with anti-India terrorist groups like Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami (HuJI) and JeM. He had in fact persuaded the Taliban to hand over two of its training camps in Khost to al Qaida to train Kashmiri *jihadis*. Ijaz Shah

had worked closely with Lt. General Mahmoud Ahmad, the ISI chief at the time of 9/11 attack. Mahmoud was under cloud for his suspected links with al Qaida and the Taliban and was retired by Musharraf, only to be reappointed, in 2003, as the head of the Fauji Fertiliser Company, a cash rich organisation run by the Army's welfare organisation, the Fauji Foundation. Shah, who could not become the Chief Secretary of Punjab, too was rehabilitated as the chief of Intelligence Bureau in 2004. Musharraf, in fact, had tried his best to appoint him as the Ambassador to Australia but failed as the Australian government refused to accept the nomination because of his links with LeT and JeM. Despite the rejection, Musharraf took him along on his 2005 official visit to Australia.

Shah's active involvement in the Kashmir jihad is well documented. He was handling Syed Omar Sheikh, the JeM mastermind behind several terrorist attacks in India besides the brutal assassination of American journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002. JeM, created by ISI in 2000, is closely associated with Osama bin Laden's al Qaida. JeM chief Maulana Masood Azhar, who studied at Jamiat-ul-Ulum ul-Islamia madrasa along with Taliban chief Mullah Omar, worked in tandem with Laden's strategy of expanding the *jibadi* base beyond Pakistan into India. Shah was responsible for running JeM and HuJI.

Omar Sheikh, the prime accused in the Pearl murder case, had surrendered to Shah at his home and remained with him for five days before his arrest was made public. A telling pointer to Shah's nexus with terrorist groups was made by Benazir Bhutto in an interview (*The Daily Times*, August 13, 2007): "Brigadier Shah and the ISI recruited Omar Sheikh, who killed Danny Pearl. So I would feel very uncomfortable making the Intelligence Bureau, which has more than 100,000 people underneath it, run by a man who worked so closely with militants and extremists."

Bhutto also named former ISI chief Hamid Gul as one of the possible suspects. A year after Benazir

was killed, the Bush administration, forwarded a two-page unsigned document to the Pakistan government highlighting former ISI chief Hamid Gul's involvement with the Taliban and al-Qaeda networks.<sup>11</sup> The document accused Gul of giving financial assistance to Kabul-based criminal groups and involvement in spotting, assessing, recruiting and training young men from seminaries. According to the document:

"Hamid Gul has maintained extensive contacts over the years with Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives located in Pakistan, providing financial support and encouragement to these groups. In 2005, Hamid Gul provided general, over-arching guidance to the Taliban leadership on operational activities in Afghanistan. In 2008, Hamid Gul was in contact with the militant group Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its leadership, including Baitullah Mahsud, and provided the TTP leadership and operatives with guidance on the conduct of militant operations in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region... "Hamid Gul was a regular contact for Sirajuddin Haqqani and regularly apprised Sirajuddin of Pakistan government activity in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). As of early 2007, Gul was involved in spotting, assessing, and recruiting young men from various Pakistani *madrassas* for training in eventual attacks against US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. The training consisted of techniques for laying mines, arson and suicide bombings. As of late 2006, Gul was also involved in the training camps. In late 2006, Gul provided money to a Kabul-based criminal group for every International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) member that the group kidnapped and turned over to the Taliban. In addition to these kidnapping-for-ransom activities, this criminal group sold weapons and explosives to the Taliban and acted as travel facilitators for Taliban members in Afghanistan. As of mid-2008, Gul has knowledge of the resettlement of al-Qaeda members from Iraq to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region".

Another retired ISI officer named by Benazir Bhutto was Brigadier Riazullah Khan Chibb.<sup>12</sup> She

had accused Chibb along with his friend Ijaz Shah, of setting up a rigging cell in Islamabad. Chibb and Shah had become close when the former headed the Anti-Narcotics Force at a time when Shah was the chief of ISI Punjab. Benazir was to hand over a confidential report on the cell and its activities to US Senator Patrick Kennedy, a Democratic Congressman, and Arlen Specter, a Republican member of the Senate Sub-committee on Foreign Operations, at a dinner on December 27, 2007, the day she was assassinated.

Chibb, before his retirement, was a senior officer in ISI's Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB) which dealt with the internal security matters, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit and Baltistan. JIB is one of the most powerful divisions of ISI and its primary agenda is anti-India activities. Brigadier Chibb, re-employed after his retirement early 2007, was awarded with a Sitara-i-imi'iaz (military) on December 17, 2007 for meritorious services in operational field.

Chibb's name surfaced in India in August 2006 when Delhi Police arrested one Abu Anas in August 2006<sup>13</sup> who said he was the PSO of Zaki ur Rahman Lakhvi, the key conspirator in the Mumbai attacks. Anas disclosed that LeT commanders, Army and ISI officers met every month to share information. ISI officials briefed LeT commanders about regular updates on the Indian security forces and discussed plans to counter the Indian strategy. US agencies have documented regular meetings between ISI and LeT leaders in the past to share intelligence on Indian counter-insurgency operations in Kashmir.<sup>14</sup>

One of the officers Abu Anas named was Brigadier Riaz Chibb. Incidentally, at about the same time in 2006, US intelligence agencies had found Lakhvi alias *Chachaji* (uncle) training suicide bombers for Iraq. Lakhvi, who led operations in Chechnya, Iraq, Bosnia and South-east Asia in the past, had sent recruits to Iraq in 2003. Lakvi also raised funds for the group along with Haji Muhammad Ashraf, LeT's chief finance manager.<sup>15</sup>

Chibb, along with others, was also constantly in

touch with another LeT commander, Abdul Wajid of Sheikupura (Punjab), better known as Zarar Shah.<sup>16</sup> Shah is known to be an expert in communications and is one of the key plotters of the Mumbai attack. Chibb's boss in ISI was Maj Gen Sikander Afzal, head of JIB, who reported to Lt. General Kayani, the ISI Director General. Lt. General Afzal today heads the Multan Corps Command.

To sum up, it is fairly certain that the Pakistan Army's alliances with terrorist groups, even after the Mumbai attacks, remain as intertwined as before and cannot therefore be wished away.

### India-Pakistan relations

Given these conditions, the prospect of an enduring bilateral relationship built on mutual trust in future seems uncertain. The Mumbai attack has broken the fragile sense of cooperation between the two countries and exposed the peace process being hostage to Pakistani state as well as non-state actors engaged in terrorist activities. Without the Pakistan Army giving up its support for anti-India terrorist groups, all efforts to build bridges between the two countries will remain doomed.

But India, in the larger interest of peace and stability, must find ways and means to undo the stranglehold of the military-militant nexus on the people of the region. India can pursue the following policy options in neutralising this dangerous nexus:

1. **Encourage democratic forces in Pakistan.** One of the effective means to neutralise the military-militant nexus is to encourage democratic institutions and forces in Pakistan. This can be achieved by much more robust and extensive interactions at the government and public level with institutions like the judiciary, the election commission, legislatures, universities, research organisations, industry associations and the media.

2. **Initiate broader social interactions.** Social interactions between the people should be encouraged by relaxed visa norms, university and

educational institutional admissions, easier access to medical facilities, cultural exchange programmes and intense tourism promotion. Such interactions should be encouraged among the émigré community from both the countries. The Indian diplomatic missions should take an active role in building these bridges.

**3. Engage with the young leadership.** India must engage with the young leadership in politics, business, media, academia and social sector with greater focus. Exchange visits between the young communities on both sides of the borders should be frequent and widely publicised. This will help expand the community of stakeholders in peace and stability in the region.

**4. Vigorously pursue the anti-terror agenda.** India must vigorously pursue the objective of dismantling terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan. All future official-level talks must rest on the pre-condition of Pakistan keeping its January 2004 commitment of not allowing its soil to be used by

terrorist groups targeting India. There must not be any laxity on this front.

**5. Peace must be projected as peoples' option.** India must project peace as a viable option before the people of Pakistan, and the international community. The rhetoric of war must be kept low, and preferably avoided. India must initiate measures to keep the status quo on its western borders and state unequivocally that it was not in favour of an armed conflict with Pakistan.

**6. Persuade the international community to direct aid to civilian institutions.** India must persuade the international community, especially the United States, to direct aid and other assistance to civilian institutions in Pakistan rather than the military. A substantial part of the aid is usurped by the military establishment to strengthen its hold over the country and its people. This can be achieved to a large measure by closely monitoring the usage of the aid and its impact on the people's lives.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wilson John is Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation. He can be contacted at [wjohn@orfonline.org](mailto:wjohn@orfonline.org) or [wjohn60@gmail.com](mailto:wjohn60@gmail.com).

#### Ends Note:

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20, Rouse Avenue, New Delhi-110 002  
Phone: +91-11-43520020 Fax: +91-11-43520003  
[www.orfonline.org](http://www.orfonline.org) email: [orf@orfonline.org](mailto:orf@orfonline.org)