

Message is the Fight

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The intensity of the car bomb attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul, with a loss of over 40 lives, makes it the worst attack in Afghanistan's capital since the ousting of the Taliban. The significance of Afghan visa seekers to India amongst the dead is no less tragic than the loss of highly competent and experienced Indian diplomats. The message is directed as much against those cooperating with or seeking to develop interests with India, as against India's carefully projected soft power presence in Afghanistan. Its implications are both immediate and far-reaching.

There is no denying that the Taliban has strengthened its control in Afghanistan. What is more, it has demonstrated this year its ability to choose and attack targets at will in Kabul. Even if the writ of the Karzai government, as claimed by his critics, extends only to Kabul, the series of daring and innovatively planned attacks this year are evidence of a new state of power play in Afghanistan. President Karzai himself narrowly escaped being assassinated earlier this year. The attacks and casualties on the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have increased. The attack on its embassy shows an emerging pattern of a new front being opened against India.

Opposition from Pakistan to an Indian influence in Afghanistan is not new. Its history — with twists and turns through five decades — is well-known. Afghanistan was claimed as Pakistan's strategic depth against India. That Pakistan was allowed to provide strategic depth for the Taliban and al-Qaeda is also part of acknowledged history. The post-9/11 denouement, in which the Taliban and al-Qaeda have found refuge in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, is due to their being considered strategic assets by Islamabad. Their sustenance and availability for regaining its former influence in Afghanistan are defining elements in Pakistan's policy. A growing Indian presence in a stable, democratic Afghanistan works against these interests.

The attack is thus part of the competition between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan. India's interests in continuing to maintain a relationship with elements of the Northern Alliance are an aggravating factor in Pakistan and the Taliban's perspectives. Its aid projects in Afghanistan are widely perceived by the public in favourable terms. India is the fifth-largest donor to the country. Its projects cover people-friendly areas like road construction, power transmission, education and health. More importantly,

India looks at Afghanistan as a conduit to the Central Asian states. Its over 200 km road project will link Afghanistan to sea ports in Iran. These are developments with long-term strategic consequences for Pakistan's Afghan policy.

India is faced with the growing control of the Taliban in Afghanistan. That Kabul, which is ringed by armed police with an outer ring of foreign forces, can be penetrated by the Taliban is indicative of the precarious security environment which prevails. After the March 2009 attack against a US military base, a DVD doing the rounds showed the powerful blast and the damage it caused. More importantly, the DVD showed the pro-Taliban warlord, Jalaluddin

Haqqani, taunting the foreign forces by saying, "Now you see I am still alive." The suicide bomber in the attack was reportedly a German-born Turkish citizen trained in Pakistan. The daring jail break and other incidents in Kabul are seemingly proof of the Taliban's boast of taking over Kabul by the spring of 2010. Indian interests in Afghanistan will continue to be challenged. The Taliban and al-Qaeda will be the flag-bearers of this challenge which will, from now, direct attacks against Indian interests locally and ever more powerfully. Attacks on Indian workers and officials will increase. The usual precautions of better security procedures and intelligence coordination with local authorities, and the advice to be resolute in retaining presence in Afghanistan, will only marginally secure the Indian nationals — 3000 of them currently. A suicide bomber can only be prevented but not stopped, once he or she is able to penetrate the security cordons. Every new security device will inevitably produce a new variant of terrorist attack. That need not distract Indian policy planners from their clear-eyed understanding of the national interests involved.

The close timing of the Kabul attack with the Red Mosque anniversary attack in Islamabad, and the attack in Jaipur soon after the civilian government took office in Pakistan, are disturbing signs. They indicate a growing inability of the Pakistani establishment to control the right wing political fringe and to prevent bomb attacks in and outside Pakistan. It is useful to remember that Jalaluddin Haqqani (of the DVD) had reportedly critiqued the Mullah Omar group and the Quetta based elements for incompetence. The Haqqani faction is reportedly closer to the ISI than some others in Quetta. Perhaps this indicates a schism within the Taliban, which the Pakistani authorities are unable to control.

A situation in which Pakistan's internal and external controls over terrorist groups operating from its territory are unravelling can lead to a number of consequences. The first is of a competitive series of bomb attacks against "infidels" and their supporters at the most vulnerable spots, in which scale Kabul would rate highly. Second, Indian interests in other places in Afghanistan, like our consulates, would be obvious targets. Third, Indian officials and offices in other countries would be easy targets.

India, with its regional and enhanced global footprint, its strong relations with the developed world, and a growing capacity to play a meaningful role against terrorism, can only expect to be in the cross-hairs of extremist elements. It needs to further strengthen the global campaign against terrorism through its intelligence and security cooperation with all countries. It should also insist on ever stronger action by major powers to demand of Pakistan evidence of concerted action against the Taliban and al-Qaeda presence in its territory. The Kabul attack will remain one more piece of evidence, if it was needed, of the price India has and will continue to pay in its fight against terrorism.

The author is also a former DGMO.