Op-Ed Contributor

Fresh Blood From an Old Wound

By PANKAJ MISHRA

Published: December 1, 2008

MIDWAY through last week’s murderous rampage in Mumbai, one of the suspected gunmen at the besieged Jewish center called a popular Indian TV channel. Speaking in Urdu (the primary language of Pakistan and many Indian Muslims), he ranted against the recent visit of an Israeli general to the Indian-ruled section of the Kashmir Valley. Referring to the Pakistan-backed insurgency in the valley, and the Indian military response to it, he asked, “Are you aware how many people have been killed in Kashmir?”

In a separate phone call, another gunman invoked the oppression of Muslims by Hindu nationalists and the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. Such calls were the only occasions on which the militants, whom initial reports have tied to the Pakistani jihadist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, offered a likely motive for their indiscriminate slaughter. Their rhetoric seems all too familiar. Nevertheless, it shows how older political conflicts in South Asia have been rendered more noxious by the fallout from the “war on terror” and the rise of international jihadism.

Pakistan, a nation-state founded on Islam, has long claimed Muslim-majority Kashmir, and has fought three wars with India over it since 1947. In the early 1990s, as an anti-India insurgency in Kashmir intensified, groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba became the Pakistani government’s proxies in its war of attrition with its neighbor.

American pressure after 9/11 forced Pakistan’s president, Pervez Musharraf, to ban Lashkar-e-Taiba, which had developed links with the Taliban and Al Qaeda. With General Musharraf’s departure from office in September, it would be no surprise if this turned out to be the Muslim group’s first major atrocity since 2001.

Pakistan’s new civilian government is too weak to control either the extremist groups within the country or the various rogue elements within its military and intelligence. The American military was reported to have started bombing supposed terrorist hideouts inside Pakistan’s borders even as General Musharraf stumbled to the exit. As its increasingly desperate pleas to the Bush administration to stop the attacks go unheeded, Pakistan’s government appears pathetically helpless to its own citizens.

The sense of humiliation and impotence that this loss of sovereignty creates in Pakistan, a country with a strong tradition of populist nationalism, cannot be underestimated.

Meanwhile, India’s influence in Afghanistan has grown as it pours reconstruction money into the country, as have its military ties with Israel. Add to this the Bush administration’s decision to reward India with an extraordinarily generous nuclear deal and to more or less ignore Kashmir, where in August Indian security forces brutally suppressed the biggest nonviolent demonstrations in the valley’s history, and recent attacks against the Indian Embassy in Kabul, the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, and now in Mumbai begin to appear to be connected by more than chronology.

Meanwhile, Indian intelligence experts and others suspect that jihadists and disaffected members of Pakistan’s armed forces and intelligence agencies have forged closer links and, as the string of recent bomb attacks on Indian cities reveals, are rapidly making new allies among the 13 percent of Indians who are Muslim.

It is very likely that Barack Obama will take a different tack from the Bush administration in antiterrorism efforts in South Asia. In an interview with MSNBC last month, he said that his administration would encourage India to solve the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan, so that Islamabad can cooperate with the United States in Afghanistan.

The idea that the road to stability in South Asia goes through Kashmir is as persuasive as the notion that the path to peace in the Middle East goes through Jerusalem. It is also equally hard to realize. Mr. Obama could act quickly to stem growing extremism in Pakistan and strengthen civilian authority by ending American missile attacks within its borders and shifting the allied strategy in Afghanistan away from military force and toward political nation-building and economic reconstruction. At the same time, he will have to find a solution in Kashmir that endows its Muslims with a measure of autonomy while pacifying extremists in both India and Pakistan.

The new president’s moral and intellectual authority will be vital in negotiations with India, which, like China regarding Tibet, adamantly rejects third-party mediation in Kashmir. Mr. Obama could point out the obvious to Indian leaders: they have paid a huge price for their intransigence over Kashmir, with an estimated 80,000 dead in the valley in the last two decades and a resultant rise in terrorist attacks across India.

Indeed, the outrage in Mumbai is the latest and clearest sign that the price of India’s uncompromising stance on Kashmir has become too high, imperiling its economy as well as its security. Indian anger over the fumbling response to the brazen attacks disguises the panicky realization that there can be no effective defense against terrorists in a country with a long coastline and densely populated cities. The best India can hope for is to improve what Ratan Tata — the country’s leading industrialist and the owner of last week’s main terrorist target, Mumbai’s Taj hotel — calls “crisis management.”

As the economy falters (Mumbai’s stock market has lost nearly 60 percent of its value this year), India can barely cope with homegrown violent movements like the Maoist insurgency in its central states, which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has described as the biggest internal security threat to India since independence.

Pointing to the Bush administration’s vigorous response to 9/11, Indian commentators lament that India is a “soft state,” unable to defend itself from internal and external enemies. But India cannot turn into a “hard” state without swiftly undermining its secular, multicultural democracy.

The government has already experimented with draconian laws like the Prevention of Terrorist Activities Act of 2002, which among other measures allowed the police to hold suspects without charge for six months. It was repealed in 2004 after many abuses against Muslims were revealed. While these attacks may lead to calls for more tough measures, Indians cannot lose sight of the peril that 150 million Muslims would lose their faith in India’s political and legal system. And it is obviously dangerous to threaten Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state, with war.

As president, Mr. Obama could conceivably persuade India and Pakistan to see the virtue of a political solution to Kashmir. But he would first have to set an example by rejecting the false assumptions of a global war on terrorism based primarily on military force — assumptions that the elites of powerful countries with restive minorities like India, China and Russia have eagerly embraced since 9/11.

“The people of India deeply love you,” Prime Minister Singh said to President Bush in September while thanking him for the nuclear deal. Yet it is President-elect Obama who has the opportunity to create deeper and more enduring alliances for the United States in South Asia — and he should start with Kashmir.

Pankaj Mishra is the author of *“Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet and Beyond.”*