

The danger of benign neglect

By Stanley A. Weiss

NEW DELHI - Imagine for a moment that 15 months after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Indian authorities captured attack mastermind and Osama bin Laden henchman Khalid Shaikh Mohammed in a raid in southern India. Imagine how loudly and quickly the American government and media would have demanded extradition from India to the United States. Now, imagine the outrage if India announced instead that it had struck a plea bargain with Mohammed and not only refused extradition, but refused to allow American authorities to interview him.

And yet, since his arrest in Chicago on Oct. 3, 2009, American authorities have had in their custody a Pakistani-American named David Coleman Headley, who has confessed to playing a lead role in the deadly terrorist attack in Mumbai on Nov. 26, 2008 that left 170 dead and 300 wounded. More than seven months later, not only have Indian authorities yet to interview Mr. Headley, but a team of interrogators who traveled to Washington to investigate his connection to the Pakistani terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba was turned away.

Three weeks ago came word of what one newspaper here dubbed "a kick in the gut": In exchange for admitting his role in the Mumbai attack, among others, Mr. Headley was granted a plea deal by U.S. authorities that he would not be extradited to India. Outrage in this country has reached such heights that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was forced to raise the issue with President Obama at last month's Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, reportedly earning a pledge from the president that India would "get access."

Friends do not make friends beg for cooperation. But even as U.S. Ambassador Timothy J. Roemer tells me that "relations between the U.S. and India have never been better," there is a growing perception in the markets and chat rooms here that the friendship between the world's oldest democracy and its largest is souring - driven by an American administration that thinks it is doing a better job in Delhi than it actually is.

"What we worry about regarding the future of U.S.-India relations is general uncertainty and China's new role since this global economic crisis," says Indian National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon. "Those are Henny Penny worries right now. The real worry is the Afghanistan situation and Pakistan's negative statements and terrorism."

"The U.S. dilemma in Afghanistan," says former Indian Ambassador to Pakistan G. Parthasarathy, "is that the war is unpopular domestically. Ninety percent of Indians believe that means America will cut and run - they will cut a deal with the Taliban and withdraw prematurely, before the Afghan army is ready. It will be a disaster."

Maj. Gen. Afsir Karim agrees: "A timeline that precludes an open-ended U.S. deployment has been welcomed in Pakistan because most people and the army believe this will motivate the Taliban to fight with great vigor and hasten the withdrawal of U.S.-backed forces," he says. "On the other hand, the Taliban will be able to evade American attacks by crossing over to Pakistan border areas and waiting until the U.S. offensive loses momentum."

Adds Shekhar Gupta, editor-in-chief of India Express, "We aren't so much worried about the U.S. going home, but we are worried about the hardware left behind when they do."

Since 2001, America has given its nuclear-armed ally in Islamabad more than \$15 billion in direct aid and military reimbursements. Most worrisome to India are the 18 F-16s due to be delivered by summer, along with 115 M-109 self-propelled howitzers and 20 Cobra attack helicopters - on top of 5,250 anti-armor missiles already delivered.

"When's the last time you heard about F-16s being used to take down the Taliban?" asks Y.K. Sinha, Indian joint secretary in charge of Pakistan. "These aren't weapons that will be used against al Qaeda. Those are weapons that will either be used against India, or go to China."

Adds scholar Brahma Chellaney: "The vast majority of Pakistanis rate America as [Pakistan's] biggest enemy, with India second. Washington isn't focusing on this. How will these weapons be used?"

What can Washington do? Three immediate steps:

First, give Indian authorities immediate access to Mr. Headley, with no more delays. Rumors here that he is a CIA agent gone rogue only poison the relationship more.

Second, condition ongoing aid to Pakistan on Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani making good on his pledge to track down the Pakistanis responsible for the Mumbai attacks - and to open an investigation into evidence that Pakistanis planned February's attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul. With 45 terrorist training camps rumored in Pakistan, if Pakistan doesn't act to curb violence against India - India soon will.

Third, refocus the discussion on economic relations. A record number of U.S. executives disillusioned with doing business in China are flooding into India. Business-to-business cooperation is stronger than ever. Bringing public attention to those growing ties will help counterbalance disillusionment over security issues.

As a high-ranking Indian businesswoman told me, "The U.S. and India are an unhappy couple, but they will never get a divorce. They need each other too much."

Stanley A. Weiss is Founding Chairman of Business Executives for National Security, a nonpartisan organization based in Washington. This is a personal comment.