

Analysis

Outside View: The United States, India and the politics of benign neglect

By STANLEY A. WEISS
UPI Outside View Commentator

NEW DELHI, April 28 (UPI) -- Imagine for a moment that 15 months after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Indian authorities captured attack mastermind and Osama bin Laden henchman Khalid Sheik Mohammed in a raid in southern India. Imagine how loudly and quickly the U.S. 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 at all.

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 – memorialized in India as 26-11 – that left 170 people dead and 300 wounded.

More than seven months later, not only have Indian authorities yet to interview Headley, a team of interrogators that traveled to Washington to investigate his connection to Pakistani terror group Lashkar-e-Toiba was turned away.

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

Friends don't make friends beg for cooperation. But even as U.S. Ambassador Tim 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 in India that the friendship between the world's oldest democracy and its largest is souring – driven by an Obama 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.”

Retired Indian army 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-Qaida. 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 its 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 Headley, with no more delays. Rumors in India 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 last 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 is 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 of senior executives who use the best practices of business to strengthen the nation's security. This is a personal comment.