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After Mumbai: Could It Happen Here? What to Do

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On Wednesday, armed groups of terrorists equipped with a variety of weapons and explosives fanned out across the Indian city of Mumbai. In coordinated assaults, they attacked areas frequented by foreigners, killing indiscriminately and taking hostages. While the rationale and responsibility for the attacks are still under investigation, the incident raises questions about U.S. Domestic security. It is unwise to draw specific lessons and suggest trends based on any one particular incident, particularly when all the facts are not known. Nevertheless, there are do's and don'ts that should be followed in thinking about the unthinkable—armed assaults in America.

Unthinkable, but Possible. While the armed assaults in Mumbai are horrific, they are not unprecedented. Russia, for example, has experienced a string of such incidents perpetrated by Chechen separatists. For instance, in 1995, 1,000 hospital patients were held captive at Budyonovsk, near the border with Chechnya. Russian troops stormed the hospital twice, a battle that resulted in 100 civilian deaths.

In October 2002, 50 heavily armed Chechen rebels seized a Moscow theater and held hundreds hostage. The rebels booby-trapped entrances with mines and rigged an explosive bomb in the center of the theater. Russian special forces pumped the theater full of gas; over 100 captives died from the effects of the gas.

On September 1, 2004, a well-armed group of Chechen rebels invaded a school at Beslan in the

North Caucasus. Armed with automatic weapons and explosives, they took more than 1,000 hostages. After a bloody stand-off, 334 hostages were killed.

Even the United States has not been immune from the danger of planned armed assaults. For instance, in August 2005, a Pakistani national was arrested as part of a terrorism investigation into a possible plot to attack the Israeli consulate, California National Guard facilities, and other targets in southern California. In 2007, the FBI arrested six men from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, for allegedly planning an armed assault on Fort Dix.

Is the U.S. at Risk? On the one hand, there is no question that the United States is a much “harder” target for transnational terrorism than it was before 9/11. Likewise, federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies have paid much more attention to the threat of “homegrown” terrorism. Since the September 11 attacks, government agencies have thwarted over 19 conspiracies aimed at killing Americans on U.S. soil.

Nevertheless, it is unrealistic to believe that all homeland security efforts will deny every attack every time. In particular, armed assaults and vehicle-borne explosive attacks are tactics that are not

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beyond the reach of any modestly funded and committed terrorist group.

What Not to Do. If and when the next attack occurs, there are things that the U.S. should not do:

- **Throw money at the problem.** If another terrorist attack occurs, shrill cries will dominate the public discourse, claiming that this new attack occurred because our nation was not spending enough. But few problems can be solved by money alone. In fact, our nation is still not doing a very good job spending the money already allocated. The government knows, for example, that it needs to do a better job spending the money already allocated to emergency responders. A study cited in *Time* magazine, for example, found that most grants to state and local governments have been distributed “with no regard for the threats, vulnerabilities and potential consequences faced by each region.” Our nation needs a system that will spend the money allocated for homeland defense efficiently and effectively.
- **Trade safety for civil liberties.** Calls for new security measures that require temporary impositions on basic civil liberties will also dominate the aftermath of any hypothetical future attack. Yet this argument is almost devoid of logic. On the other hand, Americans should beware that, despite hysterical claims to the contrary, not every government action to fight terrorism is a slap at the Constitution. The USA PATRIOT Act is a case in point: Its detractors have yet to identify a single abuse or prove that any of its provisions are unconstitutional. The debate over the balance between civil liberties and security warrants thoughtful debate, not knee-jerk histrionics.
- **Blame America.** If there is another attack, one explanation will be that the U.S. deserved it. Critics might offer any number of reasons supporting such claims, but generally these assertions should be summarily dismissed. No nation is perfect, but our country strives to be a force for good in the world. Some may not like American politics or policy—or even our pop music, for that matter—but nothing the United States has done justifies terrorist acts aimed against innocent people.

- **Say the U.S. is on the wrong course.** In all wars there are advances and setbacks, victories and casualties: Every such incident is not a call for change in strategy. There is a reason why the United States has not been attacked since 9/11. It is not because there is no threat or that the nation has just been lucky. In many respects, U.S. counterterrorism programs are working—and not just at home, either. While there has been a flare-up of terrorism in India and the Taliban is resurgent in Afghanistan, as a recent report by the Human Security Project shows that, globally, the trend in transnational terrorist attacks and the appeal of the radical Bin Laden agenda have been declining for several years.

What to Do. No administration can guarantee it will stop every attack everywhere. But if our nation assumes the offensive, the U.S. can take the initiative away from the terrorists, lessen their chances of success, and mitigate the damage they cause. Consequently, Washington should continue to:

- Emphasize cooperation and information sharing between federal, state, and local law enforcement;
- Retain an integrated approach to homeland security. When an explosion happens, the government cannot wait until it knows if the incident was a terrorist attack or an industrial accident. Rather, our nation needs to respond with alacrity, and that means taking an integrated “all-hazards” approach from the local to the national level. As such, the Federal Emergency Management Agency must remain an integral part of the Homeland Security Department; and
- Maintain valuable terrorism-fighting tools established under legislation like the USA PATRIOT Act and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Amendments Act of 2008.

Now is not the time to grow complacent about homeland security.

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