Assessing the Mumbai Attacks

The following analysis of the November Mumbai attack by terrorist forces is compiled from open source material and published for use by members of the New Jersey Business Force.

BACKGROUND:

The Mumbai operation was launched from Karachi Pakistan on 11-21-08 and ended on the morning of 11-29-08 when Indian security forces declared the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel clear and safe. On 11-21-08, a team of approximately 12 militants departed Karachi by boat with equipment and weapons. To avoid detection when approaching the Indian coast, the militants hijacked an Indian fishing boat with a crew of five.

The militants immediately murdered four of the fishing boat’s crew and forced the captain to navigate the craft to Mumbai where he was summarily killed. Authorities later found a satellite phone and GPS belonging to the infiltrators on board the boat. Militant assault teams would use satellite phones to maintain contact throughout the Mumbai massacres with an operational authority linked to Lashkar-e Toiba (The Army of the Pure) back in Pakistan. Such technology allowed assault teams to receive situation updates, instructions and orders. What started with “hit and run” actions rapidly escalated into a sustained, devastating “seize and hold” operation.

The militants employed inflatable dinghies to land undetected at Sassoon Dock near the historic Gateway to India monument. From this location, they split into four separate groups and proceeded to predetermined sites on foot and by motorcycle and taxi. What followed is well documented in news accounts.

The teams attacked the following sites:
- Chabad (Nariman House) House
- Café Leopold
- Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (Mumbai’s largest train station)
- Cama Hospital
- The Times of India newspaper offices
- Trident/Oberai Hotel
- Taj Mahal Palace Hotel
- The goal was to inflict a maximum number of casualties

TACTICS:
- Militants moved quickly in small, heavily armed teams against “soft” targets
- Team members carried AK-47 rifles, grenades, pistols, large amounts of ammo, high energy foods, cash, and credit cards
- The dress and demeanor of teams was designed to blend in with an urban populace
- Teams overwhelmed local police with surprise and firepower (intimidation, shock)
- Three attacks culminated in hostage standoffs; however, no known negotiations took place (presence of hostages complicated response by security forces)
- Timed IEDs left inside taxis used by militants exploded at dispersed and random points around Mumbai adding to the mounting confusion

The analysis provided in this assessment is based on open source information.
• Teams placed time-initiated IEDs at two attack locations to target responding security forces
  o IED consisted of RDX in metal boxes containing ball bearings
• One team hijacked a police vehicle
• Simultaneous/near-simultaneous attacks at multiple locations created diversions so teams could move toward primary objectives unimpeded
• The operation’s timing (evening) ensured high activity levels at intended target sites during a period of diminished police presence (off-peak work hours)
• Militants outmaneuvered and gained the initiative against private and government security by using alleyways, back entrances and the placement of IEDs at likely staging and perimeter points
  o Militants outflanked building security, neutralized CCTV at the hotels, quickly gained physical control of their targets, and moved hostages to upper floors
• Militants used grenades inside the hotels and torched rooms to confuse and degrade security force response
• Unsubstantiated sources report the possible booby-trapping of deceased victims
• Smoke, fire and running, room-to-room engagements prevented Indian security forces from overwhelming the militants
• Some news outlets describe the intentional targeting of Westerners and Israelis by militants
• Militants used at least five time-IEDs during the operation
  o Two detonated in taxis
  o One functioned at the Oberoi Hotel
  o Two rendered safe in the Taj Hotel area

ATTACK PROFILE:

• Attacks displayed meticulous planning, reconnaissance, innovation, adaption, and audacity
• Militant training revealed a concentrated and sophisticated training regimen
• Achieved desired effects of chaos, lethality and bewilderment
• Intimate knowledge of “soft” target sets implied extensive rehearsal and the possible insertion of “inside” operatives to include confederates hired as hotel staff beforehand
• Entering Mumbai by sea bypassed roadblocks and checkpoints found frequently along city approaches and outlying highways
• Attacks concentrated on venues frequented by India’s business elite, Westerners and international business people
• Tactics become a force multiplier and caused Indian authorities to vastly overestimate the number of attackers involved
• The Mumbai assault sought to undercut the prestige and reputation of Indian authorities, cripple a global financial center and inflame further discord between India and Pakistan

POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:

• Some security experts see the Mumbai tactics being replicated elsewhere in the West where the employment of IEDs has proved unsuccessful so far
• Previously failed terrorist plots, or “playbooks” are “dusted off,” re-worked, re-employed, and combined with successful tactics
• Workers and patrons at the establishments besieged by the militants suddenly found themselves thrust into the War on Terror
COULD A MUMBAI STYLE ATTACK TAKE PLACE IN OUR REGION?

“When British police arrested him (Aabid Khan) at Manchester International Airport on his return from Pakistan in June 2006, they found a trove of terrorist propaganda and manuals on his laptop that the trial judge later described as "amongst the largest and most extensive ever discovered." The haul included maps and videos of potential targets in New York City and Washington.” “Pakistan Militant Group Builds Web of Western Recruits,” Los Angeles Times, December 8, 2008

“Since the 9/11 attacks, the FBI has warned that al-Qaeda could use suicide bombers to attack shopping centers and other so-called soft targets. No international terror attacks have hit the U.S. since 2001. Yet the Mumbai incident has alarmed security officials because of the simplistic yet lethal nature of the coordinated attacks that killed nearly 200 people over three days last week.” “NYPD Live Exercise - Mumbai Attacks Refocus U.S. Cities,” Kevin Johnson and Thomas Frank, USA TODAY, December 5, 2008

John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, the Beltway Snipers, spread fear across the Maryland and Virginia Metro-area during three suspenseful weeks in October 2002. Their random sniper attacks from the trunk of a 1990 Chevrolet Caprice sedan left 10 dead and three critically injured along with a badly shaken nation.

“Omar Abdel-Rahman, the so-called blind sheik, who was convicted based on investigations growing out of the first terror attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, was the leader of one of the most violent terror groups in modern times.” “Federal authorities charged that Rahman and his followers were planning a coordinated attack on the Holland and Lincoln tunnels, the George Washington Bridge, the United Nations and the Manhattan Federal Building. He was arrested for "seditious conspiracy" in October 1995 and sentenced to life in prison.” “Blind Sheik Was Mastermind Behind 1993 World Trade Center Attack,” Edward Barnes, Foxnews.com, December 14, 2006

“On April 12, 1988, three days before the second anniversary of the 1986 air attack (U.S. strikes against Libya), (Yu) Kikumura (Red Army master bomb maker) was arrested at a rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike after a New Jersey state trooper noticed that he was behaving suspiciously. Kikumura's vehicle was found to contain three powerful IEDs and a map with markings that suggested he planned to target a U.S. Navy recruiting center, the United Nations and a Veteran's Administration building.” “Traffic Stops and Thwarted Plots,” STRATFOR, August 8, 2007

The 1993 and 2001 attacks against the World Trade Center have brought the terrorist threat to our very doorsteps in a grim and dreadful way. In today’s environment, no incident no matter how seemingly distant or remote can be dismissed or discounted.

“History is philosophy teaching by example, and also warning; its two eyes are geography and chronology,” James A. Garfield, 20th President of the United States