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## **THOSE TINY FOOTPRINTS<sup>1</sup>**

*(Strategic perspectives to confront terror groups having access to disproportionate destructive power)*

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### ***The Sicarii Syndrome***

The carnage of 26/11 Mumbai, left in its wake one more gory reminder to the government that neither could it defend its institutions and way of life nor protect its citizens. That terror had struck and the establishment had failed to deter, defend or respond for a full sixty hours, was beamed across screens that penetrated homes world wide.

Historically, terror as an instrument of state or an instrument of anarchy is not new. Its covenant with religion is almost as old as the idea. 2000 years ago it was the Zealots and the *Sicarii*<sup>2</sup> who wielded this bloody weapon. Today the matter appears to have come full circle where the contemporary practitioner is equally motivated by religious convictions; only in this avatar the instruments of destruction are far more potent than the humble dagger. Also, the use of the sea routes for illicit movement of arms, munitions, drugs, human trafficking, the smuggler's wares and indeed terror is hardly novel to the Indian coast.

### ***The Gift of Disproportionality***

Globalization and its hand-maidens, the free flow of ideas, material and personnel, has in addition to releasing individual creativity, conferred upon small groups

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws from a presentation made by the author at "The Seminar on Coastal Security" hosted by the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, in November 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The Sicarii were a secret society of Jewish contract assassins in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD during the Roman occupation of Jerusalem.

disproportionate destructive and disruptive power. Access to this power and its illicit use involves a process which leaves frustratingly tiny footprints. The narrative of 26/11 and its chronology (See Table in Annexure) are well documented. What is not so well known is the evolution of the operational plan and the tell-tales that this process may have left for a discerning establishment to perceive and act upon. My case is to emphasize that our campaign against terror essentially involves the cognizance of these tiny footprints, tracking them and assuring the failure of inimical acts before they are committed. The 26/11 episode and the maritime domain provide the canvas for this enquiry.

### ***The Precarious Present***

Over the last three years, the Indian State has initiated several measures at the highest level to come to grips with the problem. Salient amongst these is the passing of the anti-terror legislation 'The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act' which empowers security forces to hold suspects for a period of six months without a charge; the establishment of the National Investigative Agency responsible for centrally investigating acts of terrorism and for processing intelligence and the creation of the Multi Agency Coordination Committee. Organisationally, coastal commands have been set up under existing Naval Commanders-in-Chief who would provide the necessary teeth (it is expected) to the legislation in as much as the maritime domain is concerned. From the material angle two hundred in shore and off shore interdiction vessels are in the process of being acquired. Marine police units are in their infancy, and their ability to sprout 'sea legs' is tardy if not unworkable. In addition, tortuous command and control structures along with rudimentary standard operating procedures are being redrawn, and the demarcation of responsibilities between disparate forces, States and Centre appears to be, to say the least, fragile.

What would be apparent is that retooling existing wiring diagrams and injecting additional hardware cannot in any way replace the primary imperatives. These essentials would be firstly, the need for structural changes to empower commanders-in-chief with unfragmented military power (26/11 witnessed one C-in-C with neither command nor control over the army or air forces in area); secondly, the setting up of special cadres for

intelligence gathering collation and dissemination; lastly and, most critically, the drawing up of a unified strategy that will provide the ‘soul’ to the coastal security scheme. In the meantime, the maritime domain remains murky, it’s more vicious denizens less regulated and water-tight security at sea, chimerical.

While it may be premature to pass such a harsh judgement, it is unfathomable that after the passage of three years no concrete measures are in place at sea, in our harbours and along the coastline that have either enhanced surveillance or brought hard intelligence to the man at sea or indeed, inspired confidence in those that stand watch. Initiatives that have been put in place are more tactical and those which have been enabled are through creativity and imagination in the field. Whilst planning and development may remain strategic we must not fall into the trap of preparing for a future even as we are rooted in an extremely precarious present. For after all security is, in the execution, a field function.

### ***The Strike Process***

It will now be appropriate to do some quick mental callisthenics and examine the chronology of events leading up to 26/11 and flesh out what *could* have gone into the planning and preparation with facts that are available in the public domain. For it is out of such a construct, that will emerge the footprints that we stalk, and so also a strategy in order to defend and respond as we deter. Here we must make three assumptions. Firstly, for a strike of any nature there are five essential steps that would have to be gone through by the perpetrators of terror:

Step 1: Planning and Reconnaissance

Step 2: Generation of an Outline Plan

Step 3: Logistics and Preparation

Step 4: Recruitment and Training

Step 5: Orders to Assailants and Execution

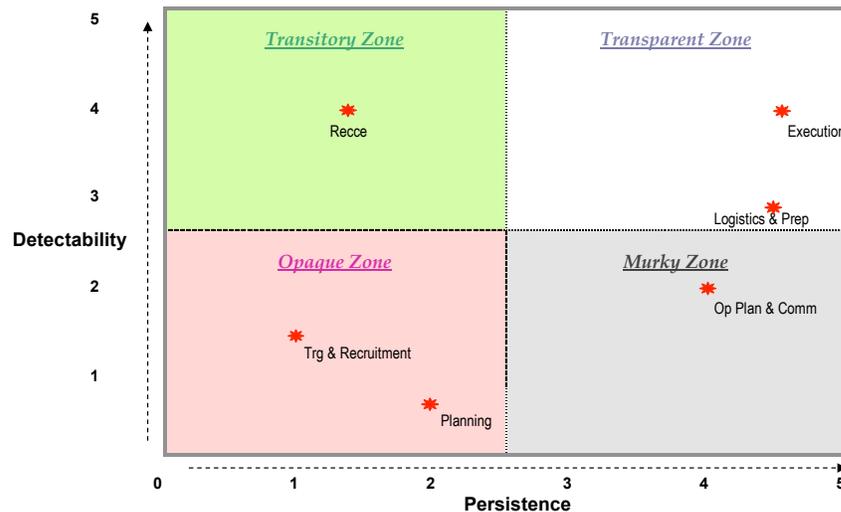
Based on the extent to which the run up to the event can be reconstructed, experience tells us that these five steps could be spaced over anywhere up to 18 months

with Reconnaissance and the Provision of Logistics taking the bulk of time. Also, Planning is an individualistic activity restricted to a few and maybe conducted at a location distant from the target. The second assumption is that between the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’ target, there are no surprise targets and the third is that ‘wild cat’ unplanned strikes do not give destructive benefit to the assailants<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Discerning those Footprints***

A Footprint Matrix has been constructed below (Figure 1) with the ‘5-steps’ as augments marked with red stars (Planning and Reconnaissance have been separated). On the x-axis the ‘Persistence’ of a footprint is graded on a scale of 1 to 5, while on the y-axis, ‘Detectability’ is also graded on the same scale. The notional size of the footprint is determined in terms of these two factors, both of which are more cognitive than absolute. The smallest footprint is the least detectable and of least persistence, graded at (1, 1) and the most prominent at (5, 5).

**Figure 1: The Detectability & Persistence Footprint Matrix**



Source: Author's construct

<sup>3</sup>The bicycle bombing in Mumbai on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2003 had a relatively lesser impact.

The matrix tells us the areas we need to concentrate on in order to achieve the elusive goal of deterring, defending and responding to terrorist acts. As will be noted, four zones have been established, these are the Opaque Zone, the Transitory Zone, the Transparent Zone and the Murky Zone. The various steps of the Terrorist Strike Process have been assessed for Persistence and Detectability levels and plotted within zones, which to the planner provide areas of focus. Obviously, when we deal with the Transitory Zone and the Murky Zone, the returns for effort are extremely small yet they provide early warning. Often due to long gestation periods and a high false alarm probability, the difficulties associated with maintaining prolonged states of vigil may cause the guard to drop, and vital footprints to be lost in a mass of information. This therefore is a zone well suited for electronic surveillance and computer aided collation and analysis.

The Transitory Zone provides opportunities that are not present in the other quadrants, primarily because the period of reconnaissance, while sporadic, has not only to be comprehensive but at some stage must involve the leading protagonists, some of whom maybe quite alien to the area of operation (Abu Ismail, of 26/11 notoriety, hailed from Dera Ismail Khan<sup>4</sup> in the North West Frontier province is a case in point). The Reconnaissance stage is an activity conducted very early in the plan and as in any operational plan, the scope for errors are the maximum at this stage and therefore surveillance that is kept by way of civil measures would in all probabilities record the footprints. The fact that David Headley (alias Daood Gilani, an LeT operative) had been a regular visitor to Mumbai since early 2008 is symptomatic of such tell-tales.

When confronted with the Murky Zone one sees a picture and a pattern that in hindsight is 6/6 and yet Persistence in the Murky Zone of the operational plan is most significant and therefore, had the fact that the Master of *Kuber*, Sri Amar Singh Solanki been profiled after his incarceration in Pakistan, so also the movements of *Kuber* kept track of, 26/11 could well have been nipped during the execution phase. Intelligence, however sketchy, provided on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2008, indicated not only position but also time, both parameters provided the basis for mounting scouting operations, yet none were, and in the absence of deployed forces either at the point of divergence or convergence *Kuber* had a free run. Also, the most vulnerable period of movement from

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<sup>4</sup> *Financial Express*. "Mumbai Police yet to seek Interpol help on terror attack". January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009.

sea to shore observed by local fishermen at Colaba and reported to the local police ought to have been given the due import that it deserved.

The Opaque Zone if exploited, gives us the maximum benefit for it not only deters attack but action in this zone is pre-emptive in nature; it demands comprehensive knowledge of, and information on man and material that potentially could be used for a strike. This must be backed by all-embracing intelligence networks, field operatives and most importantly, the will to take anticipatory action before a potential incident. Here we must also understand that such pre-emptive actions may have ramifications of an international nature and we must be disposed to take that risk. Investments in the Opaque Zone will have to be based on steps initiated on a multilateral basis and through ruthless elimination of potential personnel who could pose a hazard (the targeted killing of Baitullah Mehsud on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2009 carries shades of *Sicarii* action). The complexities of operating in the Opaque Zone is there for a planner to see, it poses great challenges, it will demand heavy investments of both man and finances and will yield the best rewards.

Moving into the Transparent Zone, while both Persistence and Detectability are high, they demand an internal scheme that is not only comprehensive but transcends the travails of Centre-State relations, ill-defined demarcation between agencies and most significantly, the resolve to cut across boundaries that have been drawn for administrative rather than operational purposes. The movement of logistics, creation of safe houses, handling munitions and that too with great discretion is no simple task. It is perhaps for this reason that the sea-route with back-up operating in international waters, can by the very nature of the laws at sea avoid check-posts and regulatory mechanisms that one finds on land. Of course the disadvantages are equally irksome since the environment is hostile, probability of failures due to machinery breakdown is ever present and movement from sea to shore is a very vulnerable period. The Transparent Zone provides for not only early warning but exposes the militant operation over both space and time. Logistics and Preparation is neither momentary nor is it undetectable since it involves safe havens, movement of munitions, hazardous material and hit personnel close to the target area and yet their exposure is subject to the weakest link and least attended virtue, that of municipal regulation, citizenry awareness and unrelenting deployed scouts. The vulnerability of the execution phase lies in the fact that it conforms to a rigid plan; while

in most terrorist strikes there is an element of flexibility, exercising the flexibility option would normally result in failure of the strike or marginal success. And therefore the very rigidity of the execution phase provides opportunity to detect and respond.

### ***The Nuclear Dimension***

The case of MV Musan in August 2009 is symptomatic of sound security intentions not being backed by security savvy. If the MV Musan was in fact carrying fissile material then it is reasonable to assume that this material, a little bigger than a clenched fist between 5 kg and 20 kg in weight, could have been stored in a lead chest and welded into the bilges that would escape detection by the most thorough of our BARC inspectors. What was absent during rummaging of the ship was an integrated team comprising of Naval Architects (who understand and live by ships' architectural drawings, its deck plans and its as-fitted-drawings) and the BARC together to note whether any cabinets (say, 2'x 2'x 2') had been embedded in the structure. After all it is nuclear material that poses the biggest hazard when dealing with a North Korean violator and no amount of orthodox rummaging is going to reveal a lead lined box secured in a fuel tank or even in (say) the sewage treatment plant.

The problem of illicit trafficking in fissile material is potentially far more dangerous (in relative terms) than the black market sale of nuclear technologies. Terrorist access to weapon grade materials would cut years from the complex process of independently producing Plutonium or Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) not to mention the visibility of such large technology sites. Add to this is the ready availability of dual use tools and jigs such as vacuum ovens, high-end precision milling machines, titanium, maraging steel etc. that make the process of putting together a nuclear weapon (once fissile material is in hand ) easy as never before. So that the scale of the problem is clear, between 1991 and 2005 the IAEA recorded a total of 1,440 cases of illicit trafficking.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, 90% of these cases did not pose a significant threat from the perspective of nuclear weapons proliferation, terrorism or the clandestine movement of weapon grade fissile material. However there were 25 credible cases of incidents involving HEU and Plutonium and in one case in 1998 there was an attempt to divert 18.5 kgs of HEU from

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<sup>5</sup> "Nuclear Black Markets: A Net Assessment" *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*. 2007.

Chelyabinsk in the Russian Federation.<sup>6</sup> While there is a paucity of hard evidence of the origin of demands, it is clear that a few kilograms of fissile material are all it takes to satisfy the terrorist.

The AQ Khan affair brought into sharp focus the ease with which independent operators backed by interested States could by-pass and make a mockery of nuclear regulatory regimes. We must suffer from no illusion that, with the unravelling of the AQ Khan nuclear bazaar, India is much safer from the threat of a terrorist nuclear attack; on the contrary the surge in movement of illicit nuclear material in the last decade would suggest otherwise. Conventional wisdom governing a deterrent relationship does not work when dealing with terrorist groups; what does work is the assurance of failure through a wide spectrum of monitoring, regulatory and force measures such as, intelligence networking, zero tolerance fissile material scrutiny, stringent and intrusive export controls, which go well beyond the terms of the toothless UNSCR 1540<sup>7</sup> and most importantly the creation of integrated joint forces special impact groups that are manned and trained to take pre-emptive action. What steps we have put in place to come to grips with this challenge are not at all clear.

### ***A Guiding Strategy***

There is no denying the fact that massive security schemes of the nature currently being contemplated often fail in the details, it is equally true that these details never emerge for want of a 'soul' in the form of a guiding strategy. The coastal security scheme must first integrate into the country's larger security scheme to deter, detect and respond to terrorists attacks. It is by nature a unified scheme that seeks to achieve the following strategic aims:

- a) To protect against personnel who threaten national security
- b) To protect against illicit hazardous material ranging from weapons of mass destruction to arms and explosives
- c) To protect critical infrastructure

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> UNSCR 1540 passed in 2004 requires all nations to implement strict export control legislation to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

- d) To establish a comprehensive intelligence network
- e) To strengthen preparedness and assure all-service response
- f) To integrate seamlessly the Policy-Planning-Operations cycle in both the short and the long terms.

Obviously each one of these strategic aims will precipitate numerous operational objectives which in turn will have to be realised through programmes at the operational and tactical levels. For example, the strategic aim to protect against personnel who threaten national security will demand objectives that range from coastal surveillance to enforcement of immigration laws to screening of travellers and to the establishment of joint forces special impact groups.

### ***Conclusion***

Our review of the current state of the coastal defence scheme would appear to project a disjointed image of a contrivance that depends more on a massed approach to security through the induction of numbers (in terms of human resources as well as surveillance means). While it is true that there is logic in numbers, yet the adversary is one who has perfected the art of visualising the cracks in the system. Obviously with more disparate elements involved, more cracks are there to slip in between. On 26/11, ten men with small arms came in two inflatable boats and held our financial capital to ransom for sixty hours. The mayhem in terms of loss of lives apart, the Bombay Stock Exchange closed down for the same period resulting in trading disruption of close to USD 9 billion per day. And this is the essence of the disproportionality that has been conferred. 'Mass' pitted against 'Knowledge' invariably results in victory to the latter.

The covenant between religion and the terrorist is a volatile one. It is neither appeased by bargains nor is it broken by modernity. Indeed it has fused the ideology that drives them with the source of their being (this may explain the suicide bomber). Under these conditions the only route that can succeed is the promise of failure for which, the answer lies in adopting a unified strategy both in form and content. The Footprint Matrix provides an instrument to channelize national effort. We concentrate on any one Zone at the peril of missing out on the others. Persistence is the key not only to the assailant but

also to the defender, the adoption of large scale electronic means for profiling, surveilling, collating and analyses is a necessity.

The nuclear dimension is the clear and potentially, the most destructive present danger. While a nuclear strike may present a very complex planning task, our adversaries have shown themselves to be up to the most challenging, the most improbable and yes, the most diabolic. The establishments' facility to deter, defend and respond will test its will to coalesce to the extreme.

There appears to be an absence of a guiding national strategy which seeks to marshal all resources towards one aim. If our primary strategic goal is to protect against dangerous people and the ingress of illicit hazardous material then this goal must serve to transform the existing organizational and material structures. The litmus test to ascertain progress lies in the extent to which we have a unified strategy in place and develop a joint surveillance and pre-emption capability; clearly the waters on both these counts remain murky.



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## ***ANNEXURE***

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### **Table: Chronology of the 26/11 Attack**

#### **November 26, 2008 (all times are local)**

21:20 Gunfire outside the Hotel Oberoi at Nariman Point in south Mumbai.  
21:20 Terrorists run into Nariman House, where they take control of the Chabad Lubavich center.  
21:30 Gunfire outside the Leopold Café at Colaba in south Mumbai, about 100 meters behind the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel.  
21:40 Gunfire near the Bade Miyan Café (behind the Taj Hotel in south Mumbai).  
21:45 Terrorists enter Taj Hotel lobby and fire indiscriminately.  
21:45 Gunfire inside the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST), Mumbai's central train station. There are ten fatalities there.  
22:30 Gunfire at the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai headquarters gate 2, opposite the CST.  
22:35 Gunfire at Gokuldas Hospital, near the CST.  
22:40 Gunfire at the Cama & Albles Hospital, near the CST.  
22:50 Gunfire at the Metro Theatre (Metro Cinema Junction).  
23:00 Explosion in a taxi in Vile Parle in north Mumbai. (This is one of the IEDs left behind in the taxi.)  
23:00 Explosion in a taxi in Mazgaon—probably the second IED left behind.  
23:10 Two explosions at Napean Sea Road in south Mumbai.  
23:30 Explosion at Dhobi Talao.

#### **November 27, 2008**

00:30 Gunfire after a police van was hijacked at Dhobi Talao.  
01:00 Immense blast in the Taj Hotel, possibly caused by two grenades.  
02:00 Army arrives at the Taj Hotel.  
03:00 Large fire breaks out at the Taj Hotel.  
09:15 Army arrives at Oberoi Hotel, storm hotel.  
09:15 Security forces engage in first attempt to retake the Taj Hotel.  
10:30 Security forces engage in room-to-room searches at the Taj Hotel.  
17:30 NSG forces arrive at Nariman House. Helicopters begin surveillance.

#### **November 28, 2008**

07:30 NSG forces storm Nariman House.  
11:00 Hostage siege ends at the Hotel Oberoi, hostages released.  
11:00 NSG forces report that they have cleared the new section of the Taj Hotel.  
13:00 Indian security forces report 30 people dead in one Taj Hotel hall.  
18:00 Operations reported to have ceased at Nariman House. However, NDTV reports that one floor still has not been cleared.  
19:45 All NSG forces emerge from Nariman House, stating that no one was found alive.

#### **November 29, 2008**

04:30 Gunfire and explosions heard at the Taj Hotel.  
07:30 Fire breaks out on the lower floors of the Taj Hotel.  
08:50 Taj Hotel hostage siege declared over, according to Indian police.

*Source: The Lessons of Mumbai, Angel Rabasa, Robert D. Blackwill, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, C. Christine Fair, Brian A. Jackson, Brian Michael Jenkins, Seth G. Jones, Nathaniel Shestak, Ashley J. Tellis. RAND Report*

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