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The Mumbai Terrorist Attacks: An Assessment of Possible Motives for the Mayhem

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On 26 November 2008, a series of terrorist attacks were launched on India's megalopolis and financial capital, Mumbai, by suspected members of the Pakistan-based jihadist organisation, the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT). While earlier attacks such as the July 2006 Mumbai commuter train bombings had caused 209 deaths,² the Mumbai attacks attracted greater worldwide attention. The culprits had not only placed the bombs stealthily; they also carried out their operation in a very public manner. For some 60 hours, the Indian security forces battled with the terrorists. Finally only one, Ajmal Amir Kasab, was captured alive. Indian authorities claimed to have found nine dead bodies of the alleged terrorists. The attackers had apparently come from Pakistan's port city of Karachi, taken the sea route and landed at the Mumbai coast in boats. Indian coastal defence and intelligence apparatuses failed completely to detect them.³ Some writers described the Mumbai attacks as India's 9/11 because the culprits had deliberately targeted symbols of Indian affluence and grandeur such as the Taj Mahal and Oberoi Trident hotels and places where westerners gathered such as the Leopold Café. Targeting the Jewish centre at Nariman House was certainly meant to create maximum effect and capture international attention.

A group calling itself the 'Deccan Mujahideen' claimed to have carried out the attacks. Such a label suggested that it was the doing of Indian Muslims having roots or affiliation with Hyderabad Deccan in southern India but the Indian authorities dismissed it as a fake name and a diversion.⁴ However, it is to be noted that the Indian police had allegedly tortured hundreds of Muslim youths from the Hyderabad Deccan areas during investigation into the bomb blasts some months earlier in that city and some other places; hence the reference to Deccan to indicate resentment against the treatment of the Muslim youths. It has been widely observed that the Indian Muslim minority is economically far behind the other communities, illiteracy is widespread and unemployment is rampant among them. A government study, known as the Sachar Report, pointed out that the economic situation of poor Muslims is worse than the so-called 'Untouchables' who have benefited from affirmative action of the government while the Muslims have not been given any assistance by the state in overcoming

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² The Mumbai attacks claimed 183 lives.

³ Indian Express, 28 November 2008.

⁴ Daily Times, 27 November 2008.

their depressed economic situation.⁵ Considering that Hindu extremists have been targeting Muslims in the recent past, it should not be surprising that the sophisticated and thoroughly executed attacks in Mumbai were facilitated by some Indian Muslims recruited by Pakistan-based militant groups. It is interesting to note that Indian Muslims in general protested against the terrorist attacks. They refused to give a proper Islamic burial to the terrorists and refused permission to bury their bodies in Muslim graveyards.

On the other hand, Pakistani and foreign journalists and TV channels visited Kasab's village, Faridkot, in southern Punjab and interviewed his parents, friends and neighbours. They admitted that the man shown on Indian television was indeed Kasab. That created a furore in India. The Indians believed that such evidence sufficed to incriminate him. However, the Pakistani authorities imposed restrictions on any journalists visiting Faridkot.

I arrived in Pakistan on 29 November 2008. The trip had been planned months ahead as part of my research for the Institute of South Asian Studies on the role of the military in Pakistan. Eliciting the views of senior Pakistani military officers and other public figures on how they explained the role of the military was my main concern. I also wanted to probe the Indian perceptions of the Pakistani military.⁶

I used that trip to record reactions to the Mumbai attacks as well. There was no doubt that relations between India and Pakistan had turned dangerously tense. The peace process in which both sides had invested much effort had been subverted. The clouds of war seemed to have descended on the South Asian horizon. Whoever masterminded the Mumbai attacks succeeded in bringing the two countries to the brink of war. What other objectives motivated the attacks? These questions were uppermost in my mind as I followed the media discussions and met well-informed people who could throw light on these concerns. The insights I gained are given below.

Within hours after the attacks, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh alluded to Pakistani involvement. Other spokespersons also emphasised such a connection. The initial response from Pakistan was conciliatory and sympathetic, and it offered cooperation.⁷ Newly-elected President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani denied their government had ordered the attacks. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi was in deep sympathy for the victims and promised full cooperation in investigating the incident. Prime Minister Gilani even agreed, on India's request, to send the Director-General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lt. General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, to India to examine the evidence the Indians claimed they had to prove that the attacks had been carried out by Pakistanis. Later, however, the Pakistan government retracted the offer, presumably under pressure from the military and no one from the ISI was sent to India.

In any event, diplomacy forthwith went into action to defuse the situation. While the international community, including key players such as the United States and the United Kingdom, expressed sympathy for India and condemned terrorism, they despatched trouble-shooters to the region to urge restraint from both sides. United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown were among those who paid

⁵ Sachar Committee Report 2006.

⁶ Between 29 November and 29 December 2008, I visited Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. On 29 December 2008, I travelled to New Delhi and finally back to Singapore on 5 January 2009.

⁷ Daily Times, 28 November 2008.

visits.⁸ Considering that the two South Asian rivals are nuclear powers, an escalating armed encounter between them could spell disaster not only for the region but for the world as well. The international concerns were understandable.

There is little doubt that the Mumbai attacks reinforced Pakistan's already sullied reputation as 'a rogue state', 'the epicentre of terrorism', and so on. Former United States Secretary of State Madeline Albright succinctly captured the apprehensions being felt in the United States about Pakistan in the context of the Mumbai attacks when she said, 'Pakistan has everything that gives you an international migraine. It has nuclear weapons, it has terrorism, extremists, corruption, very poor and it's in a location that's really, really important to us.'⁹

In the same statement, Mrs Albright emphasised that President Asif Ali Zardari was trying very hard to deal with the situation. She was expressing a view widely shared by the Bush administration and even India that it was not the elected Pakistani government which ordered the attacks. On the other hand, the role of the military and intelligence agencies remained a matter of speculation. India rejected the official Pakistani position that the attacks had been carried out by non-state or independent actors. This position was stressed by no less than Indian President Pratibha Patil in her address on the eve of India's independence anniversary. Without naming Pakistan she said, 'Arguments that terrorism is being perpetuated by independent actors are self-defeating and cannot be accepted. Countries must own up their responsibilities as must the international community in defeating terrorism.'¹⁰

Her reiteration of the accusation made earlier by other Indian leaders reflected the frustration that India felt with regard to the denial mode in which Pakistan had been moving after the initial calm and reasonable statements by the government. Such frustration was partly the product of the so-called 'media war' between India and Pakistan. Some Indian commentators demanded an all-out military attack on Pakistan, others advocated surgical strikes on the offices and training camps of the LeT – Indian anger had manifestly assumed jingoistic overtones. Pakistani warmongers warned India of dire consequences for any military adventure because Pakistan was after all a nuclear weapon state. Some went on to suggest that the Indian intelligence agencies had masterminded the whole operation with a view to tarnishing Pakistan's image and exploiting it to order a military offensive. Agitated Indian commentators began to sound even more belligerent and so-called experts counted the troops and weapons on both sides and concluded that India had a definite upper-hand.

In reaction, the direction in Pakistani media discussions changed from explaining if there was a Pakistani connection to projecting an imminent threat posed by a belligerent India. Responding to the growing sense of insecurity, Prime Minister Gilani invited all political parties to a national discussion on the perceived Indian threat. A resolution was adopted, which expressed condolences for the loss of lives but the main thrust was on all parties pledging support for the government in case war broke out. Even the Pakistan Taliban, who were engaged in daily violent conflict with government troops, announced that if war broke out, they would fight shoulder-to-shoulder with the Pakistan army.

As the days passed by, Indian leaders increased the pressure on Pakistan by demanding that Pakistanis suspected of involvement in the attacks should be handed over to stand trial in

⁸ Daily Times, 3 December 2008.

⁹ Indian Express, 2 December 2008.

¹⁰ Tribune, 26 January 2009.

India. As no extradition treaty existed between the two states, Pakistan refused to comply with such a demand. However, it kept assuring India that if evidence was provided which proved the guilt of some Pakistanis, they would be punished severely through due process of law. International pressure mounted on Pakistan as the United Nations declared the Jama'at-ud-Da'wah, a charitable front organisation representing the LeT (which had formally been banned by Pakistan in 2002) a terrorist organisation. Pakistan followed suit. Some of the top leaders were put under house arrest and its offices sealed.¹¹

Moreover, India supplied both the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Pakistan with material it claimed incontrovertibly established the Pakistani origin of Kasab and the other men. The FBI declared the Indian evidence reliable and authentic, and declared that its own independent investigations clearly established a link with the LeT. The Indians again began to demand that Pakistan hand over culprits involved in terrorism in India. The names of the LeT's chief, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, and of Jaish-e-Muhammad's Maulana Masud Azhar, among others, were on the list. Later, the Indian authorities asserted that during interrogations, Kasab had named Zaki-ur-Rahman Lakhvi as his immediate mentor who ordered him to carry out the killings in Mumbai. He as well as another leader of the LeT, Yousaf Muzzamil, were named as directly responsible for masterminding the Mumbai attacks. On 7 January 2009, the Pakistan government admitted that Kasab could be of Pakistani origin.¹²

Views of senior Pakistani military officers on Mumbai attacks

For analytical purposes, one can distinguish between the Sandhurst-type orientation of the erstwhile Pakistan military establishment and changes in a more populist nationalist direction that began to take place after the 1965 war with India. Later, a radical Islamist orientation also took place during Chief of Army Staff General Zia-ul-Haq's time as president (1977-88). He made concerted efforts to foster a strong Islamist character in the military. After his death in 1988, his successors were not committed to Islamism in any strong ideological sense. Apart from his immediate successor, General Mirza Aslam Beg, who though not an Islamist was a radical nationalist, his successors, the generals Asif Nawaz Janjua, Abdul Wahid Kakkar, Jahangir Karamat and Pervez Musharraf were middle-of-the-road army chiefs who considered Islamism at best a resource they could exploit in some situations. Ordinarily they viewed it as a liability that detracted from the high standards of a professional fighting force. Brigadier (Retd) Yasub Ali Dogar even argued that although General Zia was personally a strict Muslim, his interest in Islamism was more instrumental than ideological. At any rate, it was reported in 2002 that some 30 percent of the officers harboured Islamist sympathies.

I was assured by General (Retd) Jahangir Karamat and Lt. General Javed Ashraf Qazi, who had served earlier as Director-General of the ISI and until recently as a federal minister in the outgoing government of General Pervez Musharraf, that following 9/11, the Islamists had been purged from the military and intelligence services. They conceded, however, that retired Islamists could still wield influence as they were part of different networks. Most of the mainstream senior officers were of the opinion that India was largely to blame for continuing to provide the jihadists an axe to grind by refusing to solve the Kashmir issue, notwithstanding the fact that General Musharraf had gone out of the way to placate Indian fears by announcing that Pakistan no longer insisted on the implementation of the United

¹¹ Daily Times, 12 December 2008.

¹² Daily Times, 8 January 2009.

Nations Security Council resolutions pertaining to Kashmir; and was willing to consider any solution that could reasonably satisfy India, Pakistan and the Kashmiri people. Since that opportunity had been missed the jihadis were again up in arms.

A general who did not want to be named made a clean breast of the Pakistan military and ISI's culpability in creating the Islamist monster that was now striking terror within Pakistan. He said, 'The Americans wanted us to produce Islamic warriors that could be deployed in the Afghanistan jihad. We obliged without thinking out the consequences such brainwashing would carry for our own society. We trained them to become jihadists. We trained them to kill. We sent them into Afghanistan and in the Indian-administered Kashmir. Now, they have unleashed their terror on our own people. They are killing our soldiers and will stop at nothing to impose their brutal ideology on us. I recently saw a video in which the throat of a man was being split open with a long knife, while some bearded men in the background were shouting "Allah-o-Akbar".'

Lt. General (Retd) Naseer Akhtar, who as Corps Commander of Karachi in the early 1990s had considerable experience of dealing with terrorism fomented by the Mohajir Quomi Movement and Sindhi nationalists, was of the opinion that the Mumbai attacks bore the signature of Al Qaeda and that huge amounts of money from Arab patrons must have gone into its preparations. He was of the view that the Kashmir dispute needed an early resolution and converting the Line of Control into some sort of porous border was the only thing the Indians were likely to agree to. He too stressed that the Indian leadership missed a very good opportunity when General Musharraf's overtures on Kashmir were not given a proper response.

A senior officer who until recently held key portfolios in the ISI and was directly responsible for planning national security confided in me on assurances that his identity will not be disclosed that if India had proceeded with military strikes on Pakistan it would have resulted in very extensive losses and damages. He believed that the Indians had gained a lot by behaving as a responsible regional power. He lamented that Islamism and extremism had been imposed on Pakistan because of the Afghanistan jihad. He dismissed suggestions that someone serving at present in the military or the ISI may have ordered the terrorist attacks on 26 November 2008. According to him, Pakistan did not stand to gain anything from such a misadventure. It had much to lose. India derived maximum advantage as a responsible and peace-loving state by not resorting to force while Pakistan was being demonised in the world as a rogue state. He believed that Pakistani Taliban and Al Qaeda had co-operated to carry out the attacks in Mumbai. He was of the view that the extremists had no problem in getting hold of funds to finance their jihad. Huge amounts of money from the drugs trade and donations from Arab patrons in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates furnished abundant resources and incentives to promote extremism and terrorism.

The well-known Islamist, General Hamid Gul, dismissed all suggestions that Pakistan or any Pakistani-based group had carried out the attacks. He asserted that the ISI was wrongly blamed for placing a bomb on the Samjhauta Express in February 2007. Later, it was established by Indian investigators that Hindu terrorists, including some from the Indian military such as Colonel Purohit, were responsible for it. He was emphatic that the Mumbai attacks too were an inside job and Hindu extremists masterminded it. On reports that he had been placed on a terrorist list by the United States General Gul observed, 'I have been told that after the Mumbai attacks I have been placed on a terrorist list by the Americans. What hypocrisy? When they needed us to fight in Afghanistan, they described us as freedom

fighters; now we are terrorists. I am not worried about such a label being put on me. In fact it is an honour to be declared a terrorist by a government that is guilty of unforgivable crimes against humanity by invading Iraq and Afghanistan. The fact is that socialism failed some years ago. Capitalism is now in tatters. The United States is a power in irreversible decline. The future belongs to Islam.”

Indian views

During my brief visit to India, I was able to interview Lt. General (Retd) Dr B. S. Malik, former Chief of Western Command. He was of the view that since Pakistan lacked strong democratic institutions, it was not surprising that the most efficient organisation in the country, the military, began to call the shots from quite early times. He did not believe that the military had ordered the Mumbai attacks but observed that the situation in Pakistan was out of control. Besides the LeT, any set of conspirators could have been involved in the Mumbai attacks.

In meetings with the South Asian Cluster at the Indian Defence Studies and Analysis and the Indian Centre for Land Warfare Studies, it became clear that India had been rudely shaken by the Mumbai attacks. While the experts were aware of the grave dangers a war between the two rivals could pose, they expressed strong scepticism on the normalisation of relations between the two countries unless Pakistan came out clean, co-operated sincerely in the investigation and the culprits were properly punished.

An Indian theory about the Mumbai attacks

While the market abounds with theories about the intentions and origins of the terrorists, one theory put forth by some senior Indian analysts is presented below since it is reflective of some level of sophistication.

It is argued that the Pakistan army was directly involved in masterminding the Mumbai operation. The reason for doing so would be to compel India to send forces to the border with Pakistan. That in turn would provide an excuse to the Pakistan army, whose troops have been suffering heavy casualties at the hands of the Taliban at the Afghanistan border and were not eager to fight them, to disengage from that bloody conflict. If that were to happen, only the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops, and the poorly-trained Afghanistan soldiers would be left to take the Taliban head on. The Pakistani generals, the Indian analysts argued, were convinced that such a turn of events would result in the defeat of the Americans who would be forced to exit from Afghanistan. That would enable the Taliban to return to power in Afghanistan. From the Pakistani military point of view, once again, the balance of power would be established in favour of Pakistan, theorise the Indian defence experts.

Now, intriguing as this theory is, it is too neat to be plausible. Its explanatory power is contingent upon the assumption that once the terrorist attacks take place, the result will unfold according to plan. In other words, the attacks would suffice to set in motion all those necessary reactions for it to achieve the exact results the Pakistan military had calculated. The facts, however, indicate very different reactions. Thus, for example, the primary assumption that India would amass troops on the Pakistan border did not transpire. The Indian government proved smarter than what the Indian experts believed the Pakistanis believed.

Therefore, Pakistan could not disengage its troops from the Afghanistan border and send them to the Indian border.

The second assumption that the United States would lose the battle in Afghanistan and thus be forced to decamp remained a matter of something between pure speculation and wishful thinking. The contrary seems more likely to happen. President Barack Obama is much more determined than was his predecessor George W. Bush to crush the Taliban. Within days of assuming office on 20 January 2009, he ordered an air-strike on a suspected Taliban hideout in the Pakistan tribal areas. It resulted in several deaths.

More significantly, Vice President Joe Biden declared on 25 January 2009 that the United States will not hesitate to order military action inside Pakistan against 'an actionable target, of a high-level Al Qaida personnel'.¹³

The main flaw in the theory is that the Indian analysts have not invested enough effort to work out other important implications and ramifications of the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan. Would not a Taliban government in Afghanistan serve as an incentive to the Pakistan Taliban to extend their writ in Pakistan and make a bid for capturing power? All indicators point out that the Taliban are hell-bent in imposing their version of severe and brutal Islam on Pakistan. Their latest outrages include the destruction of more than 200 girl schools in Swat, stoning to death and beheading of alleged sexual offenders and informers, and abominable treatment of Sufism-oriented Muslims. The News International of Karachi released on 26 January 2009 a Taliban list with 43 names of politicians and representatives from the North-West Frontier Province, whom they want to capture and put on trial and punish according to their version of Sharia. The same newspaper reported that the Pakistan military has ordered a curfew in Swat with orders to kill on sight.

Such confrontations have been going on for a long time, and even a casual familiarity with the lifestyle of the Pakistani officer class should leave no doubt that it would go to any extent to preserve its privileges. Colonel (Retd) Aslam Cheema readily agreed that the privileges of the military officers were almost unique in the world and nobody wanted to barter them away for some extremist ideology. Quite simply, the Talibanisation of Pakistan would necessitate a fundamental transformation of the character of the Pakistan military into a jihadist institution constantly on the lookout for going to war with infidels. That is hardly how the Pakistan military sees its patriotic role.

A Pakistani theory about Indian support for the Taliban

Brigadier (Retd) Dogar drew my attention to a theory upheld by some Pakistani military and defence analysts that the success of the Taliban in their armed conflict with Pakistani forces is indicative of foreign help being rendered to them. Besides drug money and Arab donors, it is suspected that Indian intelligence is actively involved in strengthening the Taliban. India has been establishing several consulates near the Pakistan border in Afghanistan. These serve as sources for the supply of money and materials through clandestine networks to the Taliban. The conflict with the Taliban has been bleeding the Pakistan military the same way that Pakistani militants such as LeT despatched into the Indian-administered Kashmir have been bleeding the Indian military through ambush and sabotage. Quite simply it is tit-for-tat.

¹³ Times of India, 26 January 2009.

A close examination shows that such a theory is equally implausible. If India was providing aid to the Taliban, which helped them expand their power and influence, then such a process could end up with the Taliban capturing power in Pakistan as well as control over nuclear weapons. Such an outcome would be far more threatening to India. An all-out war with India would become even more likely as the Taliban represented the most fanatical and irrational branch of radical Islam. Consequently, in any Indian rational calculation, promoting the Talibanisation of Pakistan made no sense.

What sort of developments prompted the attacks?

The civilian, democratically-elected Pakistani government has not shown any willingness to accommodate the Islamist agenda. The Pakistan military has been fighting the Taliban in the tribal areas and Swat, the jihad in the Indian-administered Kashmir has been virtually abandoned, the United States and NATO forces have been provided facilities to conduct their war in Afghanistan, and India and Pakistan have been moving towards greater trade and people-to-people interaction. The Indians seem determined not to make any concessions on Kashmir, however. Moreover it is emerging as powerful regional power backed by the United States. The Israelis continue their ruthless suppression of the Palestinians. All such developments hurt some interests badly.

Whose interests were served most?

The Pakistan Taliban, the LeT, its reincarnation Jama'at-ud-Da'wah, the Jaish-e-Mohammed in cooperation with Al Qaeda and international donors seem the most likely plotters of the attacks. They share a common ideology even when their operational priorities have differed in the past. Such differences can always be put aside to achieve common goals and objectives. It is possible that the attacks were plotted outside South Asia.

Why target Mumbai?

Bomb attacks within Pakistan and fighting the Pakistan and United States and NATO troops had become routine. Therefore, a target had to be found that would demonstrate dramatically the power and ability of the Islamists to strike terror wherever they chose. From an Islamist ideological point of view, undermining India as a secular-democratic state would cause widespread communal rioting between Hindus and Muslims, which if it gains momentum, could encourage separatists in the north-eastern Indian states as well as to intensify their struggle, while the Naxalites and other disgruntled elements could exploit such a situation to begin a class war. In such a situation India would disintegrate. That would be some achievement. Even if the longer term gains may not be forthcoming readily, an attack on the symbols of Indian affluence and rise as an economic power would produce maximum effect in terms of global attention. Thus the mayhem in Mumbai would serve that purpose amply. It would serve as a warning to the US and Israel and other Western detractors of Islam. This train of thinking most probably resulted in choosing Mumbai as a target.

Could some rogue elements from the Pakistan military and ISI be involved?

This is, of course, the most difficult question to answer. As argued earlier, retired Islamists who served in the military and ISI are dispersed throughout Pakistan. Some may still be serving because they were not shunted out. They maintain support networks within Pakistan

as well as in the Arab world and beyond. It is possible that they too were involved in the attacks.

Could Hindu extremists or Indian intelligence have masterminded the attacks?

While the exact facts are yet to be uncovered about the group involved in the Mumbai attacks, this study has argued that theories suggesting the Pakistan military ordering the attacks or that the Indians helping the Taliban against Pakistan are untenable. Conspiracy theories thrive on irrationalism and sensationalism. The theories that Hindu extremist and/or the Indian intelligence staged the terrorist attacks belong to such a mindset. What great gain could be made by attacking their own symbols of pride and causing the deaths of mostly Hindus besides demonstrating the lack of preparedness of the Indian security services? And to further tarnish Pakistan's reputation as the centre of terrorism? Hindu extremists hardly need to go to such lengths; the Pakistan Taliban have done enough damage already. Such a theory, therefore, must be discarded.

What needs to be done?

A war between India and Pakistan must be avoided at all cost. To believe that India could fight a limited conventional war without Pakistani committing its nuclear weapons to it can be a fallacy because Pakistani reaction cannot be anticipated with certainty in such an explosive situation. Equally the belief in Pakistan that because both countries possess nuclear weapons, a war between them is impossible could be another colossal miscalculation. Cumulative terrorist attacks on India could provoke India to strike back with force. In such a situation too, a lethal nuclear exchange cannot be overruled. Wisdom suggests that whereas initiating hostilities can be planned, bringing them to an end cannot be predicted. Therefore, both sides must desist from provoking a war. As argued above, it is neither in the interest of the Pakistan military and its political class nor that of India that the Taliban should takeover Pakistan.

Pakistan should make all efforts to combat and defeat extremism and terrorism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that these forces will eventually destroy Pakistan and enslave its people to an unreflective, un-intellectual and obscurantist way of life that the Taliban believe is sanctioned by God. The Islamist mindset has been cultivated in far more insidious ways than simply training in jihadist camps. Pakistani educationists and scholars have been pointing out that the educational curricula developed during the time of General Zia imparts anti-India and anti-Hindu prejudices to young people. The distortion of history and the demonisation of perceived enemies that ensue defeat the purpose of education, which is to promote a tolerant and open-minded value system. Therefore, enlightened curricula needs to be developed to enable Pakistanis to think rationally and positively.

Most importantly, both India and Pakistan must revive the peace process. India must show courage and leadership in finding a solution to the Kashmir dispute which has rendered the people of these two countries perpetual hostages to destructive nationalism. The dividends from peace in the form of increasing prosperity need not be emphasised.

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