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The Hysteria and Confusion Over Mumbai-Style Attacks in Europe

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October 4, 2010

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The State Department has issued a travel warning^[3] for U.S. citizens visiting Europe. The alert comes after U.S. and European officials said there was a credible threat of commando style terror attacks against Britain, France, and Germany, similar to the attack in Mumbai almost two years ago.

In Bob Woodward's new book, *Obama's Wars*^[4], a senior FBI official responsible for thwarting similar attacks in the United States said that for U.S. intelligence, "Mumbai changed everything":

The ease of the planning and execution, the low cost, and the alarming sophistication of the communications system that LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba] had used were all troubling. The attacks relied on an easily obtainable global positioning system device, Google Earth maps, and commercially available encryption devices and remote control triggers.

[...]

The FBI was horrified by the low-cost, high-tech operation that had paralyzed Mumbai. American cities were just as vulnerable.

Critics of the State Department-issued alert say the warning was too vague, given that the threat is credible but not specific. Although many travelers were left wondering what to do^[5] in the face of a broad warning, the Obama administration has decided to take decisive action. It has stepped up drone strikes along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border against militants affiliated with the [Haqqani network](#)^[6], Hafiz Gul Bahadur's group, and other terrorist outfits.

But because every action has an equal and opposite reaction, militants in the region have increased their attacks on NATO supply trucks—which 140,000 international forces currently in land-locked Afghanistan rely on—that must travel through the deteriorating security environment in neighboring. [Gunmen have attacked](#)^[7] NATO tankers in Sindh, the outskirts of Islamabad, and vowed more assaults on the vital military supply line.

In addition, after several NATO helicopter strikes crossed into Pakistani territory last week, the Pakistani government closed the Torkham checkpoint in northwest Pakistan that NATO supply trucks must cross. Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik [said](#)^[8], "We will have to see whether we are allies or enemies."

On the one hand, drone strikes have crippled al Qaeda's global capabilities. On the other, the United States is in a proxy war with Pakistan and the terrorist threat against the West has not gone away. Nearly a decade after 9/11, these issues underscore a deeper problem with U.S. policy: determining what constitutes a terrorist sanctuary and deciding what course of action is most prudent for eradicating them.

Drone strikes are imperative for a policy of offshore balancing. Nevertheless, they are piecemeal, tactical efforts that do little to alter the Pakistani security establishment's support for Islamist proxies as a hedge against India, Pakistan's primary enemy. Indeed, massive aerial bombings did not win the war in Vietnam, and it's not going to change the bigger picture in South Asia.

Perhaps the more disturbing aspect of the current debate over Afghanistan, drone strikes, et cetera, has been the inadequate examination of core assumptions. Mainly, that the neo-jihadists that threaten America are not held hostage to the outdated notion of "territory." Only we are. We seem to have forgotten that 9/11 was planned not only in Afghanistan, but also in Germany, Spain, and the United States. Even the radicalized youths suspected of plotting the recent Mumbai-style terror plot in Europe came from the same mosque in Hamburg where the 9/11 hijackers gathered.

We must confront the uncomfortable truth that we will never eradicate the threat of terrorism. [But we can take measures to rein in the public fear produced by terrorism](#)^[9], which often leads to misdirecting our country's limited energies and scarce resources toward self-defeating policies that do more damage than the terrorists potentially could.

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[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/03/world/europe/03security.html?_r=1&ref=europe

[4] <http://www.amazon.com/Obamas-Wars-Bob-Woodward/dp/1439172498>

[5] <http://media.bulletinnews.com/playclip.aspx?clipid=8cd31493946a8fd>

[6] <http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?lr=qtviz6cab&et=1103742925530&s=7679&>

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[7] http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20101004/ap_on_re_as/pakistan

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[9] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/malou-innocent/terrorism-hysteria_b_404307.html