



**Prem Mahadevan**

***The Politics of Counterterrorism in India***

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India suffers dreadfully from terrorism. It is host to an enormous number of separate organisations: indigenous, foreign state-sponsored and global terrorist groups are all active. The Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) are the country's two most prominent counterterrorist agencies, and thus receive most criticism when atrocities are committed. Being such an extremely complex country, with multi-layered political and social forces at work in all spheres of life, any binary evaluations of India's security apparatus are bound to be short-sighted and simplistic.

Mahadevan is an ideal candidate to write this extremely detailed and informative contribution to the security studies field. A native Indian, educated at King's College London, and a senior researcher at Zurich's Center for Security Studies, he combines extremely rigorous conceptual scholarship with an in-depth empirical knowledge of India's security apparatus and political environment. Such a work is well overdue and fills a gap in the literature addressing South Asia's insecurity, and is strengthened by the author's analysis of sensitive data and materials that a foreign researcher would in a weaker position to examine. In the wake of India's worst terrorist attack, Mumbai 2008, this is a highly relevant work, as the conclusions he draws have significant implications for security in neighbouring states, and globally. He employs meticulous and original analyses of three Indian counterterrorism operations responding to: Kashmiri separatism, Sikh separatism (Khalistan) and pan-Islamist organisations. However, in-depth knowledge of India or its conflicts is not necessary to benefit from this comprehensive book and it is accessible for the general reader.

The book helpfully starts with a timeline of significant events and explanations of key terms, and in several respects, the author has endeavoured to make his work comprehensible and readable for a non-specialist, dense though it is. His use of quantitative data is excellent but he wisely employs it to support his qualitative analysis rather than making it the focus. Security agencies are by nature opaque and disclosure of intelligence can endanger operations and assist terrorists, rendering data collection for such a work reliant on open sources. The scope and insights of this work are a testament to his phenomenal labour and knowledge transfer efforts, commendably bringing Western studies of intelligence and security to the Indian context.

Contemporary studies of terrorism have mostly focused on its genesis, mobilisation of terrorists, their ideologies and structural causes. The inverse of this, the 'response side' has not been adequately analysed, including the impacts of counterterrorism strategies, government policies and security forces' strengths and weaknesses. Mahadevan unpacks the multiplicity of factors hindering India's counterterrorism efforts, of which decision making apparatus within government emerges as one of the key variables. Whereas standard assessments of security failures have tended to emphasise blaming individuals or agencies, Mahadevan here suggests they are the result of inadequately defined mandates and lack of clarity over what is best counterterrorist practice: repeated attrition of terrorist groups or threat-reactive responses. He identifies four major shortcomings affecting on Indian counterterrorist efforts: political consistency, political consensus, operational capacity and operational coordination.



India's counterterrorism experiences suggest that many 'intelligence failures' would be more accurately called 'action failures', whereby the political decision makers misread the strategic environment and undertake counterproductive activities. Mahadevan's insight is that intelligence 'consumers' (security forces and policy makers) only use what intelligence agencies supply to them. An important distinction is drawn between 'strategic' intelligence (long term threat assessments for policy makers) and 'tactical' (short term information for security forces' consumption). The consumers assume that intelligence agencies will make use of tactical intelligence instead of accepting it is the responsibility of security forces. The author concludes that this dissonance means that a terrorist threat warning does not automatically lead to preventative actions being taken, and is thus the major weakness limiting India's counterterrorism activities.

What emerges in the book is a systematic exoneration of India's security agencies: "at no point did intelligence agencies fail in predicting major shifts in terrorist strategy" (p.182), but that they are weaker at developing actionable warnings. STRATFOR, the American private security company, declared India's Intelligence Bureau to be one of the world's top five intelligence agencies. The weakest point however is the policy makers' lack of comprehensive response to strategic assessments. Mahadevan identifies the reason for this to be the excessive expectations placed on intelligence agencies, as they have responsibility for both tactical and strategic analyses. They have finite resources, and if they prioritise counterterrorist operations and tactical intelligence as demanded by policy makers, they cannot simultaneously provide in-depth strategic insights. The author suggests that investing intelligence agencies with arrest powers would greatly strengthen their capacity to autonomously employ both strategic and tactical intelligence, without relying on decision makers, which adds an additional level of organisational complexity and takes more time. This conclusion can be summarised into the vast differences between intelligence collection failures, and failures to act effectively on receiving this intelligence. Mahadevan's conclusion is that "action taken on strategic intelligence is more important than the quality of the intelligence itself" (p.13).

The analysis would have benefitted from including the security dimensions and state responses to the Naxalite insurgency, which the Prime Minister labelled India's "biggest internal security threat". The Naxalites are listed as a terrorist organisation in India and thus their inclusion in this analysis would have made the book more comprehensive. Another minor criticism is slight repetition of examples from the three case studies, meaning the book is not always as succinct as it could be.

This book is highly recommended to anyone interested in counterterrorism and security studies. An interested reader will not find a more comprehensive investigation; this work is a major contribution to the field and breaks new ground in the analysis of organisational and security failures. It highlights vital considerations for security policy, and most importantly, that increased funding and capabilities for intelligence agencies will not necessarily lead to improved counterterrorism efforts. One point that comes across very convincingly, in an objective and dispassionate way, is the extent that Pakistan, through its ISI (Inter Services Intelligence), is responsible for attacks on Indian civilians, and the restraint that New Delhi demonstrates in its diplomatic communications with Islamabad.

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