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U.S. not prepared for Mumbai-like terror attacks

John Arquilla

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It took the 10 terrorists just 10 minutes to overwhelm Mumbai's defenses when they struck in November 2008. They were organized in five two-man teams, and the first waded into the crowd at one of India's biggest railway stations, firing AK-47s and tossing grenades. Soon more than 50 people were dead, a hundred more wounded. While this was going on, three other teams got out of cabs in other parts of the city and walked into two luxury hotels and a swanky restaurant, letting loose with guns and grenades. A fifth team stormed a Jewish community center, killing people and taking hostages.

After the initial wave of attacks, most of the Lashkar-e-Taiba hit men moved on before the police tactical units arrived, and soon five more targets had been struck, including a hospital. Bombs left by the terrorists at other points in the city as they moved around also began going off. It would take Indian law enforcement and military elements three days to bring an end to the crisis, by which time the toll of dead and wounded had reached almost 500.

Today, the concept of attacks by small teams at several sites simultaneously - what I have called "swarm" tactics - has caught on among terrorists. This month alone, we have seen such methods employed in the simultaneous bombings in Baghdad, where over 400 were killed, and in Karachi, Pakistan, two weeks ago, where small teams waged gun battles while a truck bomb went off at a major police installation. Recent intelligence revelations have gone further, suggesting that al Qaeda is planning to swarm cities in France and Germany in the same manner. And there is another hard truth: The next Mumbai-, Baghdad- or Karachi-style attacks could happen in San Francisco. Because, for all these warning signs, there is little evidence that our nation has made effective defensive preparations against assaults of this sort.

Our military's Northern Command, responsible for dealing swiftly with major terrorist attacks on American cities, remains largely wedded to the notion of responding by being able to move a brigade-size force - about 3,000 troops - where it's needed in a day or so. This is too much, too late when it comes to trying to counter small teams attacking a city at several points simultaneously.

Instead of this big, bulky approach, planners should aim at being able to deploy many small teams within minutes. This means giving a lot of attention, training and resources to local law enforcement and other first responders. It means doing simple things like providing more small-arms practice for all police. They don't have to become SWAT-like master snipers to take down terrorists - incremental improvements in a patrolman's already strong weapons-handling skills will pay huge dividends.

I recommend the notion of building a swarming capacity of our own. Police, military and other responders should be prepared to seize control from the terrorists at or near the outset of any incident, wherever it might take place.

The military should be preparing in fresh ways to back up the local first line of defense against Mumbai-style terror strikes. A good step would be to break up the brigade-size reaction force into, say, 50 platoon-size (40 to 50 soldiers each) detachments, then disperse them across the country close to major urban centers, within less than an hour's reach of any attack site. Between these first and second responders, a dense network of counterterrorist nodes would be ready at all times, all over the country.

This is certainly the idea that has guided improvements in Indian counterterrorism over the past two years and that is starting to animate German, French and British efforts. The Israelis have long operated in this manner as well. The Saudis also have shown great skill in developing counter-swarmling commando teams in their hard fight against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Our allies are thus becoming increasingly well prepared to cope with what's coming. Why aren't we? Certainly not for lack of understanding. In meetings with local police chiefs and state-level Department of Homeland Security officials from around the country over the past two years, I learned they clearly grasp the nature of the Mumbai-style threat and see an urgent need to prepare better for it.

But these insights have not, for the most part, bubbled up to the tops of the gargantuan Defense and Homeland Security hierarchies that oversee them. Up there, the very idea of a locally led, network-style solution to the coming terrorist swarm is seen primarily as a threat to centralized control rather than as the most appropriate response to a complex new security challenge.

So in all likelihood, the terrorists will continue preparing to mount small-scale swarming assaults along the lines of the Mumbai model. We can't count on detecting or pre-empting all of them. In the wake of such an event, it should be expected that networks of armed Americans would spring up on their own to deter or counter terrorist swarms. Indeed, many in the Tea Party are already calling for the passage of enabling "firearms freedom" acts.

Tea Party favorites would probably sympathize with this self-help view as well. For example, Sen.-elect Rand Paul stated during his campaign that he intended to "fight all attempts at gun control." Sarah Palin's protege in the Alaska Senate race, Joe Miller, had a campaign event last July in which his supporters marched behind a Hummer openly carrying assault weapons.

All of which suggests that the American people are likely to act on their own if government doesn't protect them against the kind of threat that is so clearly looming.

If we fail to act in the face of this swarm warning, the only uncertainties remaining will be about whether the damage done by such attacks is grave or catastrophic.

Let's do something before it comes to this.

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