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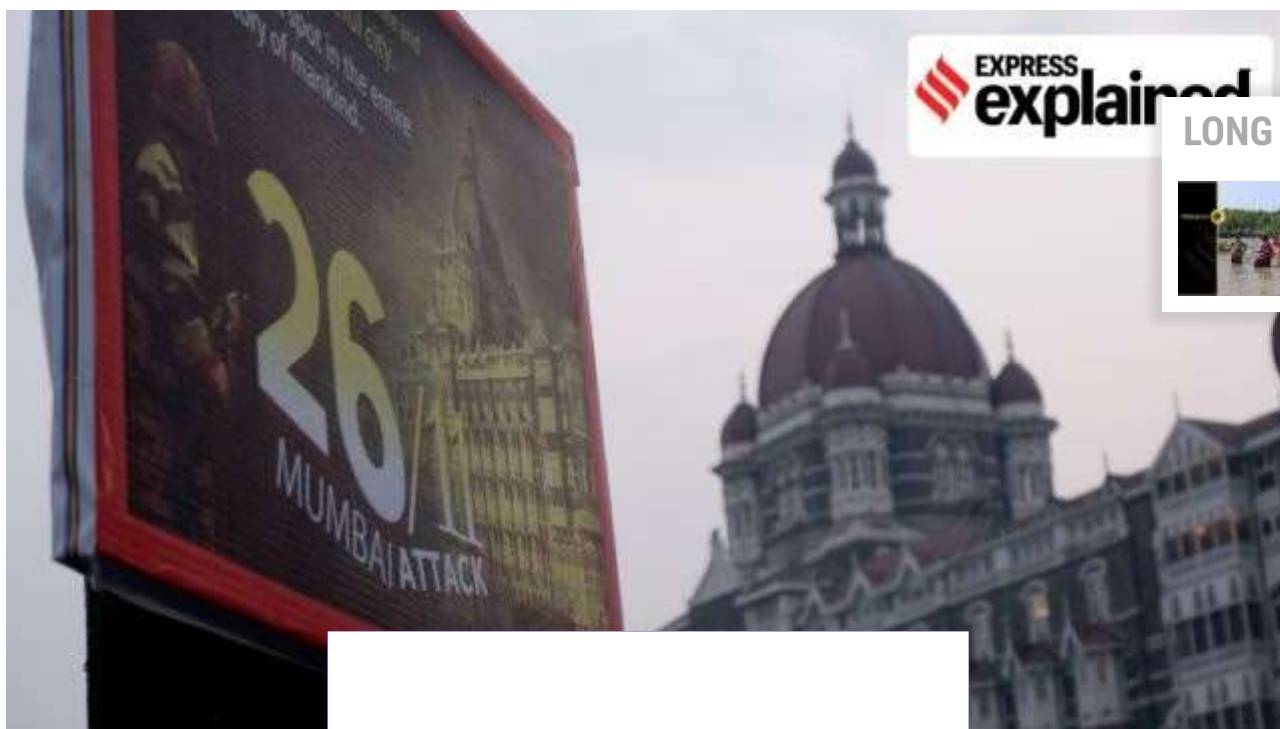
15 years of 26/11: How Mumbai terror attacks changed India's security infrastructure

From tightening of maritime security and fixing of loopholes in the intelligence grid, to strengthening of the legal framework to deal with terrorism, and setting up special agencies to probe terror cases, the 26/11 attacks brought some fundamental changes to India's security apparatus.

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Outside the iconic Taj Palace Hotel in Colaba where terrorists went on an absolute rampage on November 26, last year. (Express Archive Photo)

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If the 9/11 attacks woke up the West to the threat of global terrorism, the **26/11 attacks on Mumbai** forced it to acknowledge and focus on India's security concerns vis-à-vis its neighbourhood. It also exposed India's under-preparedness in combating asymmetric warfare of such scale.

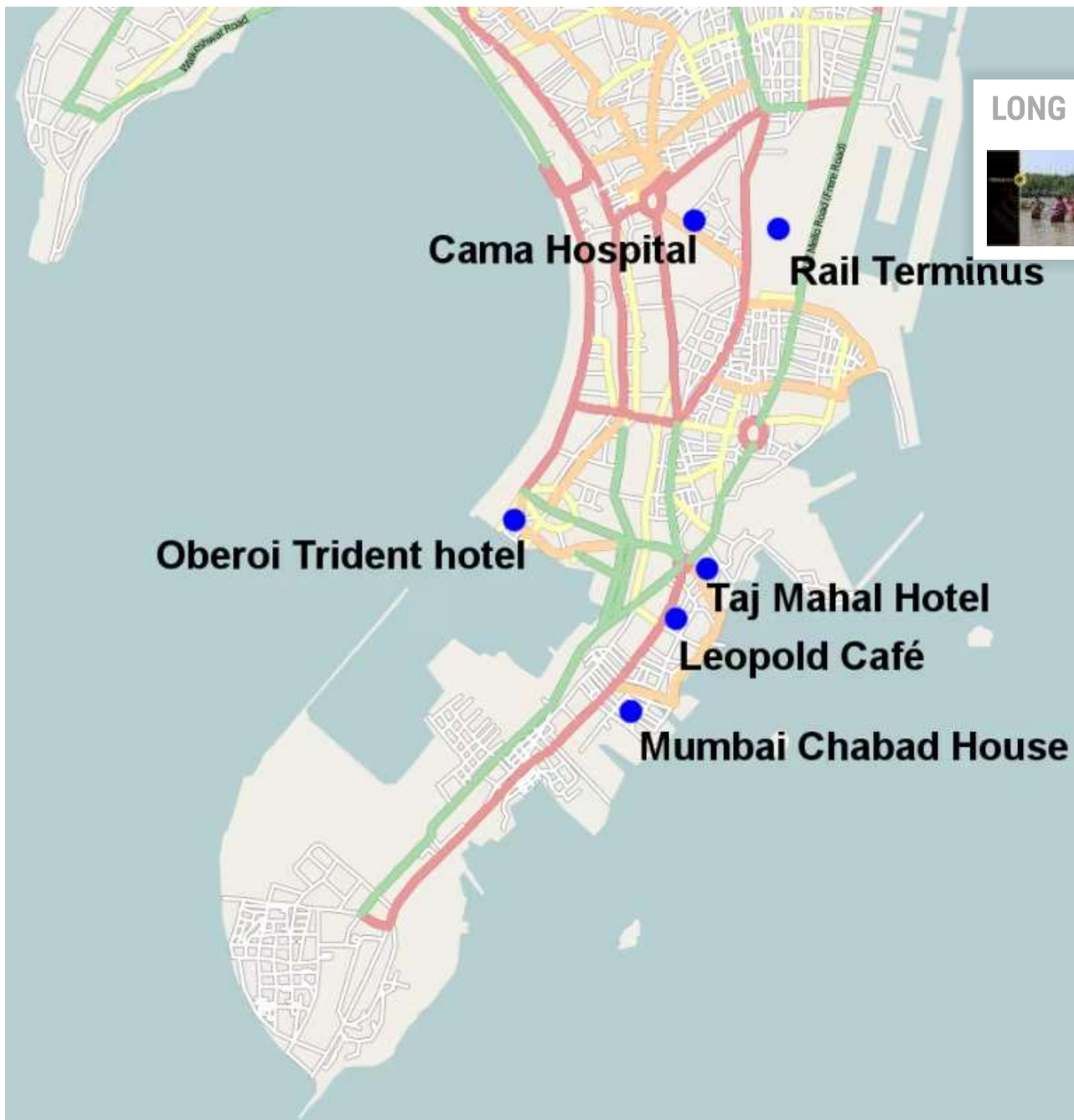
The ease with which the 10 Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) gunmen sailed across the Arabian Sea, from Karachi to Mumbai, and went on the rampage in the city for four long days, exposed the gaping holes in India's maritime security, the chinks in its internal security grid, and the inadequacy of its counter-terrorism infrastructure and local police.

Soon after the attacks, some key decisions on the security front were taken by the government. These included the tightening of maritime security, fixing of loopholes in the intelligence grid, strengthening of the legal framework to deal with terrorism, and creation of special agencies to probe terror cases.

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Where the terrorists struck in Mumbai. (Wikimedia Commons)

Maritime security revamp

Post 26/11, the Indian navy was given overall charge of maritime security, and the Indian Coast Guard was given the responsibility for territorial waters and to coordinate with hundreds of new marine police stations that came up along India's coastline.

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The government also made it mandatory for all vessels longer than 20 metres to have an Automatic Identification System (AIS) that transmits its identification and other information — in addition to the international regulation under which AIS is compulsory for any vessel heavier than 300 gross tonnage.

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Intelligence coordination

A decision was taken to strengthen the Intelligence Bureau's (IB's) Multi Agency Centre (MAC), whose primary job is to coordinate exchange of intelligence between central agencies, the armed forces, and the state police. Subsidiary MACs that had gone defunct were re-invigorated. Regular meetings were made mandatory for real-time exchange of information and analysis.

“These meetings have now been made a daily exercise. Its charter too has been expanded to include radicalization and terror ecosystems. The meetings also now discuss specific topics and are not limited to just exchange of information,” a senior intelligence official said.

Change in laws: UAPA and NIA Act

The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) was amended to expand the definition of terrorism, and the National Investigation Agency (NIA) Act was passed by Parliament to create the first truly federal investigation agency in the country.

“Had the 26/11 attacks not happened, such an Act that gives powers to a central agency to take over any terrorism case in any state suo motu would never get the support of all parties, since it clearly violated the existing federal structure of policing. But the pressure of public opinion was such at that time that everyone came on board,” a Home Ministry official said.

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Another such project, the National Counter Terrorism Centre, floated by the then UPA government could never take off for precisely this reason.

Modernisation of police forces

Given the spectacular failure of local police despite the exemplary bravery shown by some police officers and men, the Centre trained its focus on modernisation of state police forces. More funds were allocated by the MHA to state governments to make their police stations state-of-the-art, equip them with modern technology, train their policemen to deal with challenges of modern day policing that included terrorism, and to give them better weapons.

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Apart from this, emphasis was given on the creation of crack commando teams among all police forces. And the National Security Guard (NSG) established four regional hubs across the country.

Cooperation from the West

The biggest impact of the 26/11 attacks, however, was the willingness of the West to cooperate with India on matters of security.

“When the US declared global war on terror post 9/11 attacks, we thought now the West will listen to us and put pressure on Pakistan to end cross-border terrorism. But we soon realised it was only interested in targeting groups with ‘global

outreach', and thus our pleas again fell on deaf ears. The US got engaged in Afghanistan, where it needed Pakistan's assistance. It was only after the 26/11 attacks, during which American citizens got killed, that the US started serious engaging with Indian agencies," a senior intelligence official said.

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According to sources in the Mumbai Police, which investigated the 26/11 attacks, and in India's intelligence set-up, the US not only provided real time information during the attacks, but also a lot of prosecutable evidence through the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that helped India nail Pakistan's culpability and embarrass it internationally.

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It was the US that arrested David Coleman Headley, the man who conducted the reconnaissance for the 26/11 attacks, and provided crucial information on the way the conspiracy was hatched in Pakistan with active involvement of the ISI.

"The real success was in organising the international community, in isolating Pakistan, and in making counterterrorism cooperation against the LeT effective. India began to get unprecedented cooperation from Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf countries, and China, too, began to respond to requests for information on these groups," India's foreign secretary during the 26/11 attacks, Shivshankar Menon, wrote in his book 'Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy'.

It was also this spirit of cooperation and global understanding on the need to deal with Pak-sponsored terrorism that helped put Pakistan in the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF's) grey list in 2018, forcing the country to take action against the terror infrastructure of the LeT and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM).

Some lacunae remain

Despite these successes, gaps in the security grid remain. State police forces continue to remain ill equipped and poorly trained with continued political interference.

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On maritime security, there are limited options to track ships that do not transmit AIS signals. Also, many of India's smaller shipping vessels have no transponders. An official from the security establishment said that of the 2.9 lakh fishing vessels in India, around 60% are smaller than 20 m, and most of them are without transponders.

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