



Why Obama needs to learn the rules of cricket

Analysis: Targeting cricket is a short cut to raising the political temperature in South Asia.

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ISLAMABAD — One afternoon in late January, in a house on the postcard-perfect southern coast of Sri Lanka, I joined a family watching their beloved national cricket team play a game against the Pakistani side.

Beach bums taking breaks from riding the Indian Ocean waves dropped in to the open veranda of the house every few minutes to check on the score, and also to taunt me — the only Pakistan fan present — for what was an appalling performance on the field by my team on its home turf.

The game ended in an embarrassing loss for Pakistan. But it was difficult to resent the talented Sri Lankans, even if they had just handed the Pakistani team one of the worst defeats in the history of the game.

The truth is, Pakistan cricket fans couldn't help but be grateful to the Sri Lankans. By agreeing to come to Pakistan, they had made a statement in support of Pakistani cricket at a time when no other team would tour the country.

Both the Australian and Indian sides had pulled out of scheduled tours (in fact, Australia has not played there since 1998), insisting that Pakistan was not safe for their cricketers, leaving the country at risk of becoming a pariah in a sport that it had once reigned over as world champions.

But little Sri Lanka — which first entered the international cricket scene in 1975, long after its much bigger rivals, and quickly built itself into a powerhouse, defeating Australia in the 1996 cricket World Cup — was willing.

On Tuesday, I woke up in Islamabad to the news that the Sri Lankan team had been attacked by gunmen on its way to their last game in Pakistan. The attack took place in Liberty Chowk, one of the busiest traffic circles in Lahore, a budding metropolis of 10 million people. But when the bus carrying all the Sri Lankan cricket players was riddled with bullets that bright sunny morning, Liberty Chowk also became the deadly intersection of South Asian sports, politics and terrorism.

A political conversation on cricket and terrorism is now being heard in South Asia, the region that the last Democratic president in the White House called the "most dangerous place on earth." The United States will have to listen in closely and quickly to learn the rules of the game as it's played in South Asia, if it has a chance of dealing with a region so central to its own safety.

The ambush seems almost a copycat attack. Like those who attacked hotels in Mumbai in November the gunmen were girded with automatic weapons and grenades, and they carried backpacks full of food and ammunition on their backs. A Pakistani police official said that the gunfight lasted for nearly a half hour before the attackers bled back into the side streets of Lahore.

Seven Sri Lankan players were wounded in the attacks and six Pakistani police officers and two civilians were shot and killed. Much like in Mumbai, this seemed the work of professional terrorists. Security officials are speculating that the gunmen were prepared to hold the bus hostage — a nightmare scenario.

But it was the Indian team that was originally scheduled to be in Pakistan this winter. After the Mumbai attacks, as relations between the nuclear-armed neighbors turned icy cold, the Indian government instructed its team to cancel its tour in Pakistan. Pakistan asked the Sri Lankans to tour in place of the Indians and they agreed.

When Sri Lanka jumped in to replace India, Pakistan officials were grateful for the "lifeline." The Indians on the other hand seemed unhappy. Local Indian media reported that Sri Lanka's decision to tour Pakistan "had irked the Indian authorities," with the matter discussed "at the highest levels in Colombo." The head of the Sri Lankan national cricket management lost his job in the diplomatic tussle that ensued.

(The Indians even offered the Sri Lankans a tour to India — a much more lucrative offer. But in the end the Sri Lankans decided to come to Pakistan in January, fit in a short tour of India in February and then come back to Pakistan to finish up the tour in March. The Sri Lankans were ready for a hectic schedule and some extra travel to keep both India and Pakistan happy.)

The attack in Lahore could pass as just another violent crime in a country where bloodshed, death and terrorism have now become almost mundane. In the past two years mosques, schools, theaters and churches have been attacked. Not much is scared anymore — an independence day rally last August in the city of Lahore became the target of a suicide bomber. Yet somehow the cricket pitch remained immune to upheaval and war.

On Tuesday, that changed and cricket became the latest forum for South Asian terrorists to air their grievances.

When I visited Sri Lanka in January, the Sri Lankan military was engaged in its own battle with terrorism and militancy in the northern forests of the country against the militant and terrorist group known as the Tamil Tigers.

One pro-government Sri Lankan told me over a game of beach cricket: “Tamil Tigers are like the Taliban — one day Pakistan will defeat them, too.” He added that his country was close to finishing off the guerrilla group that has waged a war for self-government for nearly three decades.

The Tigers — the inventors of the tactic of suicide bombing — have made cricketing teams and events targets of terror attacks in the past, though rarely successfully, and their biggest targets have remained political. Once backed by the ethnic Tamil population in India, and recipients of deep sympathy from India’s political elite, they lost most of that support when a Tamil suicide bomber killed the popular Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

But Sri Lanka also has been used as a pawn in the regional power play between the South Asian nuclear giants. While India has acted as an interlocutor for the Tamils, the Pakistani government has always undermined India by aiding the Sri Lankan government in its fight against the Tamil Tigers.

So it's little surprise that suspicion in Pakistan over the latest attack has fallen on India.

The interior minister has said that the “enemies of Pakistan-Sri Lanka friendship” are to be blamed — a veiled allegation against India. If the Pakistanis finally do blame India for the attacks, it’s likely to set off another showdown between the nuclear rivals.

Was Pakistan behind the attacks on Mumbai? Was India behind the attacks on the Sri Lankans in Lahore? Further, are the Indians and Pakistanis fighting for influence in Sri Lanka as they have in Afghanistan?

Regardless, it is evident that terrorism is shaping diplomatic relations in the region.

And whoever carried out the attacks in Lahore knows well that targeting cricket is a shortcut to raising the temperature in the region.

President Obama has moved the focus of America’s war on terror to South Asia. But he, like most Americans, probably still doesn’t understand the rules of cricket.

The United States will have to listen in closely — and learn the rules of the game as it is played in South Asia — if it has a chance of dealing with a region that is so central to its own safety.