

# PUSHING BOUNDARIES: ON BALAKOT AIR STRIKES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

The [Indian Air Force's strike](#) on a Jaish-e-Mohammad terror training camp in Pakistan's Balakot delivers a robust but calibrated message. The latter is manifest in New Delhi's diplomatic utterances. While the strikes followed the [Pulwama attack](#) by a couple of weeks, Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale referred to the action as a "non-military pre-emptive strike". The phrase indicates the action was based on an assessment of an imminent threat, and had ensured that Pakistan's military personnel and infrastructure were not targeted, and civilian casualties were actively avoided. In effect, New Delhi's line is that the operation was an intelligence-driven counter-terror strike rather than escalatory military aggression. The government said all other options had been exhausted in making Islamabad keep its commitments since 2004 on curbing the activities of groups like the JeM. There is no denying that the decision to send Mirage jets across the Line of Control (LoC) to fire missiles 70 km inside Pakistan represents a major shift. During the Kargil war in 1999, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had drawn a red line over the IAF crossing the LoC, to avoid international recrimination. This strike was carried out in Pakistani territory, not in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, the theatre for retaliatory action in the past. It is still to be determined how far the JeM has been set back, but the strikes mark a new chapter with New Delhi's willingness to push the war against terror into Pakistan territory. The government has judged, perhaps correctly, that global opinion has shifted and there is little tolerance today for terror groups that continue to find shelter on Pakistan soil. Significantly, with the exception of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, there has been no global criticism of India's statement on the strikes, and most have just counselled restraint to both countries.

In Pakistan, Prime Minister Imran Khan has called for a joint session of Parliament and for its diplomats to raise the matter at international fora. He has convened a meeting of the National Command Authority that oversees Pakistan's nuclear policy. However, Pakistan's options are limited. It could continue to deny that the Indian strike caused any damage on the ground, and obviate the need for retaliatory strikes; or it could escalate the situation with a military response. It could also make a break from its past, and begin to shut down the terror camps on its soil, which would win friends internationally and ensure peace in the region. The Modi government would do well to continue the restrained approach it has adopted after the latest operation, and avoid the triumphalism that clouded the 'surgical strikes' of September 2016. With a response to Pulwama duly executed, it must reach out to residents of J&K who have borne the brunt of the jingoism unleashed after Pulwama. In the long term, building strong counter-terror defences, partnering with its own citizens to gather intelligence, and creating deterrents will be key.

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