

DECISIVE AND RESTRAINED

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He is a serving Air Vice Marshal of the IAF.

In a calibrated, decisive and yet restrained show of force, the Indian Air Force (IAF) converted Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s promise of punitive action into reality as it pounded jihadi training camps in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) in a series of coordinated air strikes in the wee hours of Tuesday. Seen in isolation from a contemporary conflict scenario, air strikes in counter-terrorist operations are the preferred first option across the Western world for a few reasons.

First, they are safer than committing boots on the ground. Second, the seductive technological capability of precision allows for pinpoint targeting and the possibility of carrying out effective decapitation missions against terrorist cadres. And lastly, air strikes are no longer seen as escalatory mechanisms in a sub-conventional conflict.

India's hesitation in the past to use airpower as an effective tool of deterrence in sub-conventional operations had its reasons and some of them may well have been justified. However, this writer has for long argued that while many of these reasons — responsibility, restraint and escalation — may hold true while conducting sub-conventional operations in the hinterland, different paradigms have existed in Jammu and Kashmir ever since Pakistan raised the tempo of its covert war by employing proxies like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM).

Through the Nineties, the IAF argued that it had the capability to hit terrorist camps in PoK and that this ought to be a critical element of a clear punitive policy, which many Northern Army Commanders have suggested. Successive governments, however, failed to bite the bullet and continued with reactive response strategies that eschewed the use of air power because of a lack of understanding of what air power could and could not do.

During the Kargil conflict, the IAF wanted to hit the logistics lines opposite the Kargil area that would choke supplies but was held back with restrictions to not cross the LoC. Similarly, in 2002, the IAF conducted some strikes, albeit without crossing the LoC, during the closing stages of Operation Parakram when Pakistan made some effective incursions in the Neelam-Gurez sector.

It is believed that the IAF had options ready after the 2008 attack, but the overarching need to be seen by the world as a "responsible and restrained" state saw India baulk at the use of force.

Tuesday's action, when viewed through the prism of the issues discussed above, answers a few long-standing dilemmas and raises a few questions. The first is that there seems to be an emerging understanding within the strategic community and the political establishment that offensive air power can be employed as a credible tool of punitive or proactive deterrence, a policy that has been attributed to the more muscular national security posture of the Modi government.

Does this constitute a crossing of the Rubicon or is it just a decisive operational response? The

Rubicon, a point of no return, has always been in the mind of our strategic establishment and one only hopes that this enhances their understanding of the utility of air power as a kinetic tool of statecraft that can be employed with restraint. For the IAF, I am sure it was an opportunity to walk the talk and demonstrate what it has been training for years in the sub-conventional domain.

When PM Modi announced that he has given a free hand to the armed forces to act after the Pulwama attack, he was criticised for abdicating political responsibility for any military action — his critics failed to distinguish between reality and rhetoric.

I will argue that what he meant was he would give full freedom to the armed forces to ideate and plan for multiple options without imposing any restrictions, but the final green signal would obviously come from the PM himself. The fact that the air attack plan is said to have been explained in detail by the air chief to the raksha mantri, and that PM Modi monitored the attack in real time, reflects that there was good synergy between all stakeholders in the operation.

The IAF must be commended for not engaging in mission over-reach, considering that it does not regularly conduct such operations and unlike many reports in the popular media that the Pakistan air force goofed up its air defence response, I will argue that the surprise element and the timing may have caught the best air forces by surprise. It was a mission well-executed and from the first statement issued during an MEA briefing and subsequent statements from the NSA, it is assessed that significant damage was caused to the target systems chosen.

Whether there will be consequences is too early to say and depends on numerous variables — China will condemn the attacks, but is likely to advise restraint. They have too much at stake with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The West will be cautious in any criticism, but as always, focus on the nuclear dimension as a means of diffusing tension.

The internal situation in Pakistan and its precarious economic condition may preclude the possibility of any escalated conventional response. What remains is continued subversion and prosecution of its time-tested covert war using proxies as a low-cost option, albeit with a changed flavour.

An outside chance, of course, is a Eureka moment that brings home the realisation to the Pakistani deep state that war of any kind is a losing proposition for the country as its asymmetry vis-a-vis India grows. In the meantime, India cannot afford to let its guard down. War as we know it is not an option but full-spectrum and hardened deterrence is an absolute necessity. The radars must keep churning.

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