

INDIAN AIRSTRIKES COMPLICATE PAKISTAN'S MILITARY OPTIONS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

The February 14 terrorist attack in Pulwama left India seething with rage. There was a groundswell of opinion that Pakistan and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) — the terrorist group that claimed responsibility for the attack — should be taught a lesson. It would have been difficult for any prime minister to not pay attention to this populist sentiment, especially in an election year. The airstrikes that the Indian Air Force (IAF) carried out deep inside the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan proves that the latter may have overused its terrorism-under-the-nuclear-umbrella card. According to a press statement by India's foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale, IAF fighter jets, in the early hours of Tuesday, “struck the biggest training camp of JeM in Balakot”. The attack eliminated “a very large number of JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadis”.

What's new about these airstrikes? One, this is the first time one nuclear power has used airpower to strike inside the territory of another nuclear power. Two, the airstrikes were not in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) but on undisputed Pakistani territory — the first by India after 1971. The surgical strikes of 2016 did not invite, according to some experts, nuclear or any other kind of retaliation from Pakistan because it was in PoK just across the line of control (LoC). Three, unlike the 2016 strikes, these airstrikes did not target terrorist “launch pads” along the LoC, but a training camp. The difference would be realised in the number of casualties too, though exact figures are not known yet.

There are, however, some key similarities with the 2016 surgical strikes and previous Indian operations. The official briefing after the airstrikes was restrained and professional. India presented it as a “non-military pre-emptive action” against terrorists (not the Pakistani military) based on credible intelligence that the targeted camp was being used by JeM to train jihadis for suicide bombings. By not framing it as retaliation to Pulwama, India signalled that it is not walking into any pre-selected escalatory spiral. The selection of target and execution ensured that there were no civilian casualties.

The reaction from Pakistan has been confused. The spokesperson of the Pakistan armed forces started by playing down the airstrikes. He claimed that the payload actually fell on open land and did not do any damage. However, the political response has been different. Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan's foreign minister, has called the Indian action one of “grave aggression”, and asserted that Islamabad has the “right to respond”. The way out of an escalation in September 2016 was Pakistan denying that anything like the surgical strikes even happened. India did not force Pakistan's hands by choosing to hold back the video footage, which was released much later. On this occasion, the Pakistani army has had to accept the IAF intrusion but it has tried to find an escape route out of the escalation ladder by playing down the impact. One does not yet know whether Pakistan will choose to retaliate or not.

Where does this leave us with the subcontinental escalation dynamics? Pakistan claims to follow the concept of full-spectrum deterrence, which aims to completely eliminate any possibility of conventional war with India. It has been able to get away with low cost, subconventional warfare against India by flaunting its nuclear weapons. The 2016 surgical strikes had already dented Pakistan's fantastical doctrine. Tuesday airstrikes have now punched a bigger hole in its full-spectrum deterrence. These two events have shown that there is ample space for a one-off conventional operation, including the use of airpower in undisputed Pakistani territory, and below

the nuclear threshold. Even if Pakistan chooses to escalate, unless it uncorks its nuclear options, which is almost unimaginable, it further expands the space for conventional warfare below the nuclear threshold.

This, precisely, is the big dilemma for the Pakistani security establishment. Its air defence systems have been caught napping. The option of airstrikes left its battlefield nukes ineffectual. The use of strategic nukes against airstrikes, which, the Pakistani army claims, hardly damaged anything, can be safely ruled out. Any conventional response from Pakistan hurts its own professed full-spectrum deterrence. India should be alert nonetheless. Pakistan's response could be conventional or through its terrorists proxies. These airstrikes alone won't end Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism. However, India should embed such strikes into a long-term strategy of increasing Pakistan's costs for pursuing subconventional warfare. Progress will be gradual and uneven but India will need to persist with a military, diplomatic and economic strategy to counter Pakistan whether an election is approaching or not.

First Published: Feb 26, 2019 18:50 IST

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