

## LINES BEING CROSSED

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

The February 26 [aerial strike by India on a Jaish-e-Mohammad](#) (JeM) training camp in Balakot, located in Mansehra district of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, came hardly a fortnight after the [Pulwama terror attack on a Central Reserve Police Force \(CRPF\) convoy](#) on the Srinagar-Jammu highway. The terror attack was carried out by a JeM suicide bomber, who rammed his explosives laden vehicle into the convoy, killing 40 CRPF personnel.

The week after: on India-Pak relations

The Pulwama attack on February 14 was the deadliest attack to date on security forces in Kashmir. It was seen as a message to India that 'Terror Incorporated' in Pakistan was upping the ante and taking matters to a qualitatively higher level. That it chose to do so when the general election in India is around the corner further made it an act of dare-devilry, almost inviting India to retaliate.

The aerial attack featured Mirage-2000 jets (designed to fly at speeds of up to Mach 2.2) fitted with state-of-the-art radar and fly-by-wire flight control systems, carrying precision guided missiles. Sukhoi Su-30MKI jets were standing by, and early warning aircraft — the Israeli Phalcon and the indigenously built Netra — were also deployed. The reliance on air power not only induced a new pattern in the India-Pakistan conflict post-1971, but also marks a paradigmatic change in the nature and character of India's battle against Pakistan-based terror.

Abhinandan was not released under any pressure: Pakistan

Two dates, 1971 and 1998, are significant in this context. The first witnessed the dismemberment of Pakistan, accompanied by Pakistan's unremitting hostility towards India. The second marked the year when India and Pakistan formally announced their emergence as nuclear powers — leading to a kind of stand-off between them. Between 1971 and 1998, the South Asian region witnessed the retreat from Afghanistan of Russian forces, and the simultaneous emergence of the phenomenon known as the 'Afghan Jihad'. The latter would thereafter spawn radicalised Islamist violence across the entire region and even beyond, giving rise to organisations such as al-Qaeda and its acolytes. In Kashmir, it led to a shift in tactics, and the commencement of a more radicalised and militant phase of struggle. Kashmir has never been the same since.

Pakistan was the main beneficiary of this. It gained control of the Taliban, which soon achieved ascendancy in Afghanistan's affairs. Recruits and tactics from the Afghan Jihad helped intensify the struggle in Kashmir and tilt it in favour of Pakistan. Terror, thereafter, became the strategic instrumentality employed to keep India in check. That is, until the February 14 attack on the CRPF convoy in Pulwama.

Pulwama was the ultimate provocation. The suicide bomber detonated between 80 and 90 kg of explosives, which experts have identified as RDX, categorised as a military grade explosive available with the armed forces. Preparation for the attack suggests that it was not a one-off event, and that the planning had commenced much earlier. Preparing a suicide bomber to carry out an attack entails a great deal of psychological training, which is conducted over a considerable length of time (this pattern was seen in the case of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and of suicide bomber Dhanu responsible for Rajiv Gandhi's assassination). Intelligence available suggests that the suicide bomber was assisted, guided and propelled to achieve

maximum impact by handlers in Pakistan. The radicalised suicide bomber (Adil Ahmad Dar) was apparently spotted by JeM masterminds in Pakistan many months prior to the attack, and Pakistan controllers continued their 'handholding' almost till the last minute. Pakistan's fingerprints are all over the Pulwama incident.

Nobody wants war, but neither can we tolerate terrorism: Air Marshal Hari Kumar

India's decision to carry the battle beyond the Line of Control and into Pakistan has several implications. At its most basic level, it signifies that in the battle against terror, India is more than willing currently to side-step protocols that dictate conduct among nations not officially at war. No amount of euphuistic chicanery alters this reality.

We live in a highly disruptive world. Nations often find themselves in a state of undeclared war. Tensions and provocations between countries that share borders — among the more prominent being North and South Korea — often remain high. In the present instance, a strong riposte by India was only to be expected, with the debate centring round the degree of restraint to be exercised. Whether an aerial attack on a terror target inside Pakistani territory comes within the ambit of a credible minimum deterrent is, however, debatable.

Employment of air power is per se recognised the world over as an escalatory step. No amount of diplomatic verbiage can obscure this fact. The phrase 'non-military pre-emptive strike' used by the Indian Foreign Secretary and other officials does not in any way change this reality. The nation, hence, needs to brace itself for the consequences that follow such a step. Any hope that international opprobrium on Pakistan for the JeM attack would deter Pakistan from taking a retaliatory step for the attack on Balakot needs to be eschewed.

Think like a civilisation

The reality is that while few would sympathise with Pakistan, well recognised as a country that harbours terrorists of every description, there are much larger issues at stake. There is the matter of maintaining the sanctity of the Westphalian Order, which has helped keep the peace across the world for centuries. This mandates certain rules and procedures as far as the conduct of international relations is concerned. Violation of the territory of another country, whether from land, sea or air, whatever be the degree of provocation, is generally perceived as an act of war. Today, Russia is being pilloried by the West for the former's annexation of Crimea. Russia is also being castigated for interfering in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016. Yet, all countries, including the U.S., have been reluctant to cross the Rubicon and enter into an open confrontation with Russia.

This should, hence, give us reason to pause, and to debate whether the world could construe our action of violating Pakistani airspace, even if it is to carry out an attack on a JeM training centre, as justified or not. There is little doubt that India's policy-makers took the decision to carry out the attack on Balakot — even if it meant violating Pakistan airspace — only after a great deal of deliberation, but it is still a highly debatable step.

Understandably, no two situations are identical. Nor are the conditions prevailing the same at any time. In November/December 2008, on the eve of the general election of 2009, India confronted a similar dilemma following the November 2008 terror attack by Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) on multiple targets in Mumbai city (*picture*), in which nearly 170 persons were killed. Extensive discussions were held at that time as to the possible actions that could be taken against Pakistan, and many ideas were considered — including that of similar pre-emptive strikes on terror training camps along the LoC and beyond — and given up.

## Living on the edge

The reality was — and this still exists — that India did not possess the kind of special forces (with the requisite capabilities) that other countries had, viz. Russia's Spetsnaz, Germany's GSG-9, the U.S.'s SEALs and the U.K.'s SAS and SBS. It was felt at the time that it would not be possible in the circumstances to carry out a pinpointed attack on either the LeT or JeM headquarters. Whether India should violate Pakistan's airspace was also carefully deliberated upon, but wiser counsels at the time felt that this would be perceived as nothing short of war. The failure to take action is being reviled today in certain circles, but it needs to be remembered that some of India's finest years were during the period 2009-2012.

It may be said that having already taken the step, there can be no going back. India's leaders, however, need to be reminded that India's restraint in responding to previous terror attacks is the crucial factor giving India credibility as far as keeping commitments are concerned. It is important to recognise in this context that India is committed to 'No First Use' in nuclear matters, and the world has accepted this guarantee purely based on India's moral capital and stature. The question is whether India's word will be treated as inviolable in the future, even as India seeks a seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This is something that we need to ponder over.

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