



What Did the IAF Air Strikes Achieve?



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A debate rages on the exact number of casualties that the 12 Mirages that targeted terrorist camps and infrastructure in Balakot in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa managed to achieve. But, the number of terrorists killed or the amount of damage caused on ground is really a non-issue. More terrorists can quickly be recruited without much effort and the damaged buildings can be reconstructed. Therefore, the important point is not whether the IAF managed to kill 2 or 20 or 200 terrorists or the extent of buildings demolished. The air strikes were significant for something far more than the actual destruction. They have busted assumptions and created new mind space for retaliation possibilities. These are actions that will have far greater repercussions than the physical impact of the attacks.

Three things particularly stand out and must be recognised for the paradigm shift in response strategies that they have created. First of all, the significance of the action lies in India's debunking of Pakistan's nuclear strategy of brinkmanship. From the time Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons in late 1980s (not 1998 when it merely tested them openly), it had brazenly interfered in Kashmir and used terrorism to create an atmosphere of fear. Pakistan believed that it could do all this without a response from India because it had the shield of nuclear weapons to hide behind.

Accordingly, Pak strategy has been to project a low threshold for the use of its nuclear weapons by suggesting that if India attacked Pakistan to punish it for an act of terrorism, Rawalpindi would immediately press the nuclear trigger. India was thus sought to be deterred from action at the conventional level by heavily suggesting the risk of nuclear escalation. Pakistan was indicating its own readiness to take nuclear suffering even if it seemed like an irrational thing to do. But in projecting irrationality through a rather rationally crafted strategy, it was achieving the twin objectives of directly deterring India from military action while also calling the attention of the international community to the dangerous situation in the region. By following this strategy, it believed that it could

continue to bleed India through periodic cuts but escape any punishment itself for the acts it committed. The IAF air strikes at Balakot busted this assumption by showing that India would not be deterred by the posture of a low nuclear threshold and could conduct military action when it so desired. The surgical strikes had done something similar in 2016. But those had been in POK. The air strikes went deeper into Pakistani territory. And, have managed to demolish Pakistan's cleverly constructed nuclear thresholds.

The second significance of the air strikes lies in the rather intelligently calibrated use of military capability by India. New Delhi well recognises the change in circumstances since 1998 and yet has demonstrated that military power can be undertaken to make Pakistan's nuclear weapons redundant. The use of military force in Kargil was one illustration of this. Learning more lessons along the years from the acts of omission and commission during Op Parakram in 2001, Mumbai in 2008, and surgical strikes in 2016, India has shown the ability to exploit available capabilities to extract maximum effect. Precise use of military power on carefully chosen targets that lie not just in POK but beyond has sent a powerful message. It has shown that the use of air power may not always be escalatory. Its inherent attribute of flexibility and reach allows it to be tailored while retaining international support on the Indian side. This is India's demonstration of a tailored, flexible response to handle a delicate situation.

The third major achievement of the air strikes has been to dent the image of the Pakistani armed forces – the PAF more particularly in this case. The inability of Pak air defence to undertake timely detection of the intrusion by Indian fighter jets has caused heartburn in Pakistan. This is sure to lead to some internal reassessment within the military, as also between the civilian government and military, even if this is never publicly acknowledged. However much PM Imran Khan may be a puppet of the military of his country, he is sure to have expressed his unhappiness to Rawalpindi for having embarrassed his government at a time when he has been scouting around for economic aid.

So, even more important than creating debris on ground, the IAF's achievement may have been to create fissures in the power structure of the nation. Of course, one such attack will never be enough. But along with the earlier strikes, the air action adds to India's efforts at chipping away at the credibility and the image of Pak armed forces. Such actions will have to be part of a larger strategy comprising of military and non-military actions to deal with terrorism, a phenomenon that cannot be expected to quickly die out. In fact, for all that the air strikes have achieved, it should not be believed

that this will put an end to Pakistan's use of terrorism. More Pulwamas will happen and we should be prepared.

However, to minimise their occurrence and to strengthen our ability to deal with them, three suggestions are worthy of consideration. **One**, India needs to make itself stronger – through better intelligence, better border fencing, better interception capabilities, better military procurement suited for calibrated actions, and better handling of the internal issues so that the pool of disaffected youth that the adversary will always want to use dries up. **Secondly**, India must keep the pressure of its diplomatic blitzkrieg on Pakistan. Fortunately, all major powers today recognise the threat that emanates from its support for terrorism and its global risk dimensions. Also, given the fragile state of Pakistan's economy as compared to the lure of India's markets, there are leverages that can be used. Even more significantly, China's increased investments in Pakistan have also ironically increased Beijing's vulnerabilities in Pakistan. While China is unlikely to openly admit its fears from terrorism being nurtured in Pakistan, it is quite likely to privately counsel Islamabad to change course. **Thirdly**, continue efforts to foster an internal change in Pak power structure. This will mean taking overt and covert actions to discredit the Pak military while simultaneously strengthening the hands of those that want the military to behave as an instrument of the state, not the state itself. This will be a long haul and India should patiently stay the course.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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