



Three Years Since *Op Bandar* – Lessons from Employment of Air Power



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February 2022 marks three years since the Balakot airstrikes that followed the Pulwama terrorist attack mounted by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) on Indian paramilitary forces. On February 26, 2019, the Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft flew across the line of control (LoC) between India and Pakistan to target a terrorist camp in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This was the first time since 1971 that Indian aircraft penetrated into Pakistani territory. Over the intervening almost five decades, it had come to be widely assumed that Indian military action beyond POK would be too risky and that the use of Indian airpower would be too escalatory. But, India's airstrikes in 2019, or *Op Bandar*, rewrote the template for the use of airpower as a means to address cross-border terrorism that Pakistan foists upon India

Operation Bandar demonstrated a different application of military force from the manner in which it was employed in *Op Parakram*. In the latter operation, in 2001-02, after the attack on the Indian parliament, the military had undertaken a full-scale mobilization against Pakistan. For the better part of 2002, the military forces of the two countries remained on high alert without actually going to war. As the operations wound down, the ineffectiveness of such mobilization against a nuclear-armed adversary was quite clear. It was also found difficult to define politico-military objectives of such an action. Normally, an operation of this type and scale should involve the capture of territory or large-scale military attrition. But both of these objectives raised the risk of escalation of the conflict to the nuclear level and were found undesirable

Over the last twenty years, Pakistan-supported and sponsored acts of terrorism have continued. So has India's search for credible and 'safe' ways of punishing Pakistan. In this quest, traditional war aims such as territorial occupation and military blitzkrieg have been found unsuitable. The inclination

has been towards options that can ensure punitive retaliation and that can be quickly executed with precision and with minimal chance of escalation.

The surgical strikes in 2016 and the airstrikes in 2019 were found to meet these requirements. In both cases, India got its message across the border, literally and otherwise. New Delhi discovered in these tools a sharpness that could be more effective against a nuclear-armed adversary than the blunt edge of full mobilization. The covertness of the actions also offered the advantage of their being denied or underplayed by the adversary, thus freeing him from the necessity of retaliation. Both actions also trashed the assumption that Pakistan's nuclear weapons have tied India's hands in responding to Pakistan's provocations. Rather, they exposed the lack of credibility of the low nuclear threshold that Pakistan projects with its tactical nuclear weapons.

Utility of Air Strikes

From the Indian perspective, the airstrikes achieved two other tasks. Firstly, they exhibited resolve and showed an appetite for risk taking, which India had shied away from practising during past incidences of terrorism. By attacking terrorist infrastructure in Pakistani territory, India made Pakistan a stakeholder in the risks that could erupt, instead of bearing this burden alone, as it had mostly done in the past by absorbing the acts of terror. This should weigh on Pakistan's mind the next time a terror strike leads to a response from the Indian military.

Secondly, the air action dispelled the impression that had persisted since 1962 that airstrikes expanded the envelope of destruction and thereby magnified the risk of escalation. Such a view was likely created by the lack of precision targeting from the air and the consequent indiscriminate damage. But, with the advances in precision airstrike capabilities, as seen in Balakot, controlled air to ground strikes with high accuracy can actually minimise collateral damage.

The use of airpower at Balakot illustrated the unique advantages of strategic reach, speed, surprise, and calibrated lethality. The benefits also included flexibility of employment and tight control over military engagement. The airstrikes showed the ability to quickly raise the tempo for strategic effect while also being able to quickly wind down in order to avoid the risk of further escalation. It also offered the additional benefit of a surprise since the aircraft could take off from any airfield, or even a sea-based platform, with any combination of weapon systems onboard. This has demonstrated the value of airpower as a potent tool of coercive diplomacy.

In the future, airstrikes may be executed by air assets owned by any of the three Services. The important point is not which military Service executes the action, but the unique attributes of airpower

that enable flexible response with maximum effect. By transcending borders and terrain barriers, attacks from the air can punish an adversary without having to defeat him first. This is of particular significance in the presence of nuclear weapons, where airpower may actually prove to be less escalatory than sending armies across the borders.

Recognition of these advantages is likely to make airpower applications the preferred instrument of political choice. Therefore, it is imperative that adequate capability build-up be prioritised. This would naturally include building sufficient squadron strength with an optimum mix of high and less-than-high end aircraft, the right weapon systems, Beyond Visual Range (BVR) capability, the correct kind and number of force multipliers, and necessary training to optimise utilisation of the flying machines. Better stand-off capabilities of aircraft and weapon systems will ensure better reach as well as own safety. In fact, India should be able to exploit its advantage of geographical expanse or strategic depth for this purpose and to deep base the aircraft. Robust air defences are also necessary to ensure better protection of our own assets. Also high on the priority list would be the modernization of reconnaissance, surveillance, intelligence capabilities, and high-quality data fusion and analysis that can enable precise target acquisition and attack. Such an ability to undertake calibrated strikes with minimal collateral damage would also be useful to garner legitimacy for action from major world capitals.

Indeed, *Op Bandar* has brought several aspects of the application of airpower into the public and policy imagination to counter Pakistan's terror adventurism. It has opened new possibilities on the choice of targets and for curating the quantum of force to make Pakistan's nuclear weapons redundant. However, it must be remembered that no military action is without the risk of escalation. It would be best if Pakistan does not create situations that might call for such a response from India. The country has recently announced its first National Security Policy. It places emphasis on the security of its citizens, national cohesion, and the prosperity of the people. While many actions will be necessary to achieve these objectives, one of the most effective may be for Pakistan to break its bonds with the elaborate terrorist infrastructure that has drained its resources and blood. Making genuine peace with itself, and India could be the best guarantee for the security of Pakistani citizens. For this to happen, however, Pakistan's military will need to overhaul its belief systems. This, alas, appears a very difficult proposition at this moment.

(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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