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## After Balakot: India-Pakistan Relations Heading Nowhere

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*The ‘all or nothing’ policy that the Narendra Modi government has followed towards Pakistan has failed. Bilateral relations have deteriorated and violence in Kashmir is at a new high. Now all hopes rest on new initiatives after the Lok Sabha polls.*

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Pakistan policy began well in June 2014 when the newly elected prime minister invited Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to attend his swearing in ceremony, which the latter did. In December 2015, Modi made an impromptu visit to Lahore on, and, after the 2016 Pathankot terror attack, invited the Pakistani investigation team to visit the site of the attack.

However, the rising insurgency in Kashmir in the wake of the killing in late 2016 of Burhan Wani, a local commander of Kashmiri militant group Hizbul Mujahideen that the Pakistani deep state fully supported, and then the Uri terror attack, which led to “surgical strikes” across the border by the Indian army in September that year, brought an end to those attempts at a rapprochement. Things have not been the same again between the two sides since then. The problem with Modi’s Pakistan policy is that he, in his typical style, expected a grand breakthrough, a dramatic moment of historic conflict resolution with Pakistan. That didn’t happen, because that is not how conflict resolution works. It takes time, patience and prudent diplomacy. More to the point, the Modi government simply lacks a coherent Pakistan policy; it goes from one extreme to the other, from stopping over to meet Nawaz Sharif in Lahore on his way back from Kabul, to warmongering. So in a sense, then, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government’s “all or nothing” approach to dealing with Pakistan has been a major reason for the failure of its Pakistan policy.

From the time of the surgical strikes in 2016 to the air strike against Balakot in February 2019 in response to the attack against a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy in Kashmir’s Pulwama district on 14 February, the violence between the two sides on the Line of Control (LoC) as well as in the Kashmir Valley has increased drastically.

The year 2018 was the bloodiest since 2003, when the Indian and Pakistani militaries under directions from the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, decided to bring an end to the heightened levels of violence on the Line of Control (LoC). The following year, the new Indian government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh decided to strengthen the peace process with Pakistan. The result was immediate and unmistakable: there were only four ceasefire violations in 2004 as compared to 5,767 the year before the ceasefire was agreed to. Not only did the two sides stop firing at each other, violence in general drastically reduced from 2004 onwards. Fifteen years on, we are perhaps witnessing the return of violence in all forms inside the Kashmir Valley and on the LoC. The deadly terror attack in South Kashmir’s Pulwama is just the latest.

In 2018, Pakistan accused India of violating the ceasefire agreement 2,350 times and India claimed Pakistan fired across the LoC 2,140 times. The Kashmir insurgency is also intensifying. While only three local boys had joined the ranks of militancy in 2013, last year the figure went up to 200. Infiltration from the Pakistani side as well as terror attacks in Kashmir have also spiked. So make no mistake, we are back to the bad old days of India–Pakistan relations. Today India is in the midst of exploring options to carry out an effective military strike against Pakistan should there be another high-value terror attack. If the 2016 surgical strikes were the response to the Uri attack and the 2019 air strikes to the Pulwama attack, we do not know what the Indian response will be to another terror attack or whether there will be a response at all. In any case, such a situation only goes to show that the Indo-Pak bilateral environment is currently filled with immense escalatory potential.

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What further vitiates this rather toxic atmosphere is that Modi, since 2016, has not been keen on a dialogue process with Kashmiri dissidents or with Pakistan even though Pakistan under Imran Khan has repeatedly asked for a dialogue. Pakistan is not interested in a dialogue with India which does not have Kashmir on the agenda, and the Kashmiri dissidents are keen that India negotiates the Kashmir issue with them and Pakistan. New Delhi is unwilling to do either: talk Kashmir with Pakistan or talk Kashmir with Kashmiris

and Pakistan simultaneously. The result of the “no talks” scenario has been an uptick in violence in Kashmir and between India and Pakistan.

### Political uses of Violence

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But why does the establishment not take adequate steps to stem the violence within Kashmir and on the LoC? The answer lies in the fact that violence has its political uses in contemporary India. The domestic political utility of violence increases manifold if the “source” of violence is Pakistan, India’s existential *bête noire*. While unrelenting violence on the borders should logically be seen as the government’s inability and hence failure to calm the borders, the opposite seems to be its claim today. In that sense, then, increasing violence on the LoC and in Kashmir is perversely increasing the political stock of the ruling regime led by the BJP since terrorism sells in contemporary India.

The highly-politicised surgical strikes of 2016 has further vitiated the atmosphere. Data on violence in J&K and ceasefire violations (CFVs) indicate a sharp increase in the months following the September strikes. In reality, surgical strikes and tactical operations by Border Action Teams (BATs) have traditionally not been a major part of the India–Pakistan military stand-off on the LoC. The 2016 strikes, which were widely publicised, and the politicisation thereafter have only made matters worse on the border and inside Kashmir. But for the ruling party, surgical strikes may have increased its political “*josh*.”

Not only has the deliberate political use of violence in J&K and its borders been a matter of concern, but even more crucially, there has been an alarming abdication of responsibility by the politico-military classes both in India and Pakistan with regard to the dynamics on the LoC and the international border. There is a certain belief within the political class (including within the bureaucracy) that “these things happen on the border and let them continue.” This is a dangerous belief since what happens on the LoC doesn’t stay on the LoC any longer.

So, on the one hand, the political classes are content to let things boil on the LoC and in Kashmir (meaning that they are not keen on putting in place mechanisms on the LoC to stem violence) and, on the other hand, they are keen on extracting political mileage out of what happens there. In that sense, then, governments have strong political incentives for creating a permissive political environment which facilitates violence for perceived political gains.

In this rather toxic mix of violence and politics, talks with the Pakistan are unacceptable for the Modi government nor is a rapprochement with Pakistan desirable.

The Pulwama terror attack and what happened thereafter needs to be viewed against this broader background of India–Pakistan relations.

### Pulwama and after

The deadly terror attack against a CRPF convoy in South Kashmir’s Pulwama district, which was orchestrated by a Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) suicide bomber, Adil Ahmad Dar, 22, once again brought nuclear-armed India and Pakistan close to a potential armed confrontation. In the wake of the Pulwama attack, the Indian Air Force carried out an attack against Pakistani’s Balakot which, according to the Indian government, killed several hundred terrorists, a claim that has not been independently verified. Soon after the Indian strikes, Pakistan retaliated with an air attack of its own. The limited air war over the LoC, the shooting down of each other’s aircraft and, equally important, the capture of an Indian fighter pilot by Pakistan, further complicated what was initially believed to be a crisis that might not go beyond round one (the terror attack in Pulwama and the Indian air strikes on Balakot).

The crisis, which many feared would take the two sides to the brink of a full-blown conventional war, was contained immediately thereafter. By confining the military engagement to the LoC skies, it is possible to argue that the two countries wanted to keep the engagement limited with the possibility of some air skirmishes and then perhaps call it quits. More so, Pakistan’s decision to return the captured IAF pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, “as a gesture of peace” further deescalated tensions between the two sides.

### Strategies and the Aftermath

By carrying out an air strike deep inside the Pakistani mainland, India crossed the redline from the Pakistani point of view, which meant clear and present reputational damage for the Imran Khan government as well as the Pakistan military. Their retaliatory strike against India was something they therefore felt compelled to undertake. On the Indian side, coming in the run-up to the general election, the BJP-led government could not but have responded to a terror attack that took the lives of 40 of its men in uniform. A military response was expected, but choosing to strike inside mainland Pakistan was not.

But, then, New Delhi's war planners were also trying to stretch the success of the surgical strikes of 2016 (since Pakistan did not respond to them) by extending its scope beyond Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), a strategy that may not have panned out as planned.

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From a more conceptual point of view, by carrying out a strike against Pakistan in its Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, India wanted to create a new military normal between the two sides, that is, counter-terror air strikes inside Pakistan would now be a regular feature, something, one could argue, is straight out of the United States (US) and Israeli counter-terror playbooks. If Pakistan had faked ignorance of an attack in Balakot, which it initially did, or decided not to respond to it, India would have set the new military normal in stone. Moreover, yet another denial from Rawalpindi would have run the risk of Pakistan's military threats being rendered hollow and the associated conventional and nuclear bluffs being called in full public view. Knowing fully well the implications of a non-response, Pakistan therefore opted for, I would say, a minimal air strike across the LoC.

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What further complicated matters for the Pakistani war planners was India's use of the phrase "non-military pre-emptive strike". While the term "non-military" was meant to signal to Pakistan that the attack was against the terror camp and not against its military, the "pre-emptive" part was, I would imagine, unacceptable to the Pakistani side. A successful and un-responded to Indian pre-emptive strike, once again from the American playbook, would have meant that India could now keep the option of striking anywhere inside Pakistan to take out terror camps which it believed pose a threat to India. Unlike the attack on Balakot which was projected as "a pre-emptive strike," recall that, the 2016 surgical strikes were projected as a "retaliatory strike." That again, would have been a major problem for Pakistan.

In that sense, the escalation in February is the fallout of an Indian belief that it could change the military normal between the two sides, and the Pakistani refusal to let that happen. To that extent, since the crisis didn't escalate beyond the Pakistani counterattack, Pakistan, one could argue, dissuaded India from altering the status quo. And yet, given that there were no nuclear overtones in the standoff despite the Indian strike inside Pakistani heartland, Indian strategists could argue that the Pakistani nuclear threshold is not so low and that New Delhi may have found space for conventional operations under the Pakistani nuclear threshold.

### Implications for Strategic Stability

Post-Balakot, both sides claimed victory. Pakistan strongly argued that it not only hit back at India for violating the Pakistani air space but more importantly, it managed to shoot down one Indian fighter aircraft and capture its pilot, while ensuring that none of its airplanes were shot down. More so, an Indian M17 helicopter was reportedly shot down by friendly fire killing seven people. So from a Pakistani perspective, it emerged victorious at the end of the dogfight above the LoC skies.

India also claimed victory even as its claims of material military gains are not sustained by irrefutable evidence. The core of the Indian argument is this: by carrying out an attack deep inside the Pakistani territory, India has now made it clear that it has finally shed its strategic restraint vis-a-vis terror attacks. That is, it has now demonstrated the resolve and will to respond to terror attacks through military action no matter what the consequence is. India also claimed that it shot down an F-16 fighter jet of the Pakistani Air Force even as neutral observers suggested otherwise.

While it would be an overstatement to argue that by doing so New Delhi has called Islamabad's nuclear bluff, the fact that there were hardly any nuclear threats made by Pakistan in the wake of the IAF attack shows that its nuclear threshold is not so low. This then will strengthen the Indian belief that there exists space under the Pakistan nuclear threshold for conventional operations initiated by India in the wake of terror strikes.

If such a belief persists, the propensity of the two sides to wage conventional war might increase manifold. However, would a limited conventional war remain limited and conventional? Let us consider some odds. For one, during the recent military standoff most established communication links between the two sides had broken down. There was no National Security Advisor (NSA) level conversation since Pakistan has not had an NSA since Imran Khan became prime minister. The High Commissioners of the two countries were recalled for consultations. The Director-General of Military Operations (DGMO) level conversation was not initiated for conflict de-escalation and there was no backchannel in operation between the two sides. In conflicts as serious as this, with every chance of further escalation, it is dangerous not to have proper channels of communication.

It is also important to note that soon after the Indian pilot was returned by Pakistan, the India-Pakistan tensions shifted to the LoC where violence increased dramatically. While CFVs are widely viewed as non-escalatory or de-escalatory (latter being when they occur at the end of a major crisis), the proper perspective to view CFVs, I would argue, is that they constitute war by other means. And unlike earlier, today CFVs are not contained at the local level thanks to the media focus and hyper-nationalist narratives surrounding them.

There is however some hope that once the fiercely fought Indian elections are over, the two sides might start a dialogue process which might bring about some semblance of normalcy between them and in J&K.