

India-Pakistan Standoff: What We Know, What We Do Not Know and What They Want Us to Know

Iqbal Singh Sevea

Executive Summary

On 26 February 2019, Indian Air Force planes carried out what the Indian government described as pre-emptive strikes on a terrorist camp in Pakistan. The next day, Pakistan responded by carrying out air strikes in India. These strikes marked the most serious escalation of tensions between the two nuclear powers in the past decade. In the aftermath of the strikes, both India and Pakistan continue to make claims and counter-claims about the nature and success of the strikes.

Both India and Pakistan have indulged in a media and information battle with government and military officials actively utilizing various forms of media – including newspapers, news channels, Twitter and Facebook – to put out their versions of what happened. In Pakistan, the military has also been able to control the information available to the public through censorship. In India, public opinion is being shaped, not just through the media, but also through electoral rallies. India is months away from a general election and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is keen to demonstrate that it is willing and able to take a strong stance against Pakistan.

This paper analyzes what we know and still do not know about the strikes. It evaluates the claims being made by India and Pakistan. This paper shows that while official statements from India and Pakistan confirm that Indian planes bombed a site in or around Balakot, we do not yet know what these bombs struck. It is also shown that there are outstanding questions over the specifics of the subsequent Pakistani strikes. It remains to be determined what targets Pakistan struck and where exactly the subsequent aerial engagement between India and Pakistan took place. Intertwined in this is the issue of whether Pakistan deployed American made F-16 planes against India. If so, this may have violated the terms of purchase agreed upon between Pakistan and the US.

India-Pakistan Standoff

On the morning of 26 February 2019, Indian Air Force planes carried out what the Indian government described as pre-emptive strikes on a terrorist camp in Pakistan. The next day, Pakistan responded by carrying out air strikes on what it claimed were non-military targets in India. These strikes marked the most serious escalation of tensions between the two nuclear powers in the past decade.

While tensions seem to have calmed down in the past week, both India and Pakistan continue to make claims and counter-claims about the nature and success of the strikes. Indeed, both sides have indulged in an information battle and attempted to utilize the media to support differing narratives of what happened on 26 and 27 February 2019.

India is months away from a general election and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is keen to demonstrate that it is willing and able to take a strong stance against Pakistan. The airstrikes will be utilized as a major rallying point by the BJP. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not made an official address on India's airstrikes, he has repeatedly celebrated the airstrikes as a major achievement at various BJP rallies. The strikes, he asserts, demonstrate how, unlike the Congress Party, the BJP "will take the fight against terrorists into their homes".¹

On his part, Imran Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, and Pakistan's military leadership are keen to stress two points to its domestic audience. First, that the Indian encroachment of Pakistani airspace did not reflect a failing on the part of the Pakistani military. Second, that Pakistan has parity with the Indian Air Force. Moreover, with a view towards an international audience, they are keen to present India as the aggressor and Pakistan as the power seeking to find solutions through diplomacy. Imran Khan has given a number of televised speeches in which he has invited India to the negotiating table.

Given the differing narratives surrounding the events, this paper tries to ascertain what we know and still do not know about the strikes. It also seeks to evaluate the claims being made by India and Pakistan.

Tracking What Happened

At around 3.30 am on 26 February 2019, Indian Air Force planes carried out airstrikes targeting a Jaish-e-Mohammad training camp in Balakot a town in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The airstrikes were carried out in response to a suicide attack by Jaish-e-Mohammad on Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel in Pulwama, Kashmir, India, on 14 February 2019. More than 40 CRPF personnel were killed in the attack.

¹ 'Will Enter their homes and eliminate them', *NDTV*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/terrorists-will-be-hunted-even-if-they-hide-deep-beneath-the-earth-pm-narendra-modi-2002597> (Assessed 5 March 2019).

The Jaish-e-Mohammad has been listed as a terrorist organization by the United Nations and the governments of India, Pakistan and the United States. It was formed in 2000 by Masood Azhar, a militant suspected of having links with several terrorists groups including the Harakat al-Mujahidin and al-Qaeda. Its aims include ensuring that Kashmir secedes from India and imposing its own brand of sharia in Pakistan. It has carried out a number of attacks both in India and Pakistan. Despite being listed as a terrorist organization in Pakistan, it continues to be based there.²

The mission to bomb a target in Pakistan has been described as ushering in a “new paradigm”.³ This is the first time that Indian planes flew across the border to carry out airstrikes since the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. Indian planes did not just fly across the Line of Control, the ceasefire line that divides the parts of Kashmir administered by India and Pakistan, but flew into undisputed Pakistani territory.

Equally significant is the fact that these strikes were officially described as pre-emptive. The Foreign Secretary of India, Vijay Gokhale, described them as “non-military pre-emptive action” that specifically targeted a Jaish-e-Mohammad training camp where further attacks against India were being planned.⁴ Gokhale, went on to state that “a very large number of JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and jihadis ... were eliminated”.⁵

Pakistan responded by stating that Indian planes had crossed the Line of Control but were forced back. At 7.42 am on 26 February 2019, the chief spokesperson for the Pakistani military, Major General Asif Ghafoor, tweeted: “Indian Air Force violated Line of Control. Pak Air Force immediately scrambled. Indian aircrafts gone back”.⁶ He went on to state in a press conference on 26 February 2019 that upon being challenged, Indian Air Force planes “jettisoned their payload [bombs]” at an uninhabited area in Balakot and “did not carry out any strike”.⁷ He asserted that there is no evidence of infrastructural damage or casualties and displayed images disputing India’s claims. He also went on to invite “ambassadors, defence attaches, United Nations Military Observers Group ... [and] civilian population or army reps [sic] from India” to Balakot to observe the site.

On 27 February 2019, Pakistan Air Force planes carried out airstrikes across the Line of Control. Pakistan claims to have struck six targets in India. Its foreign ministry issued a statement stating that Pakistan had undertaken “strikes across the Line of Control from within Pakistani airspace ... at non-military target[s], avoiding human loss and collateral damage”.⁸ India, however, claims that Pakistan targeted military installations. Both India and

² See Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³ Omar Abdullah: <https://twitter.com/OmarAbdullah/status/1100281496911396865> (Assessed 26 February 2019).

⁴ ‘Statement by Foreign Secretary on 26 February 2019’, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31089/Statement+by+Foreign+Secretary+on+26+February+2019+on+the+Strike+on+JeM+training+camp+at+Balakot> (Assessed on 27 February 2019).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Asif Ghafoor <https://twitter.com/TOLOnews/status/1100242051046801409> (Assessed on 27 February 2019).

⁷ DG ISPR Press Conference, 26 February 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wppc--qD1L4> (Assessed 26 February 2019).

⁸ ‘Indian Aircraft Violating Airspace’, *Dawn*, 27 February 2019 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466347> (Assessed 27 February 2019).

Pakistan claim to have shot down each other's planes in the dogfight that ensued. What is clear amidst the claims and counter claims is that Pakistan captured an Indian pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman. On 1 March 2019, Pakistan released Varthaman as a "gesture of peace".

What We Do Not Know

Official statements from India and Pakistan confirm that Indian planes bombed a site in or around Balakot. We do not know, however, what these bombs struck and the number of casualties. When announcing the strikes, India's Foreign Secretary had stated that "a very large number of JeM terrorists ... were eliminated" but he did not provide any figures. Following this statement, Indian newspapers and channels claimed that Indian officials had unofficially revealed that there were more than 300 casualties.⁹

Intelligence reports have indicated that Balakot housed one of the oldest Jaish-e-Mohammad training camps. In 2005, Balakot was struck by a devastating earthquake and charities linked to the Jaish-e-Mohammad were amongst the first to carry out relief work in the area. This is believed to have allowed it to establish an institutional presence. The Jaish-e-Mohammad established a *madrassa* here; the Madrasa Taleem-al-Quran. Tellingly, a signboard on the road to the *madrassa* lists it as being under the "*zer sarparasthi*" (foundational tutelage of) Masood Azhar.

The Jaish-e-Mohammad is also said to have acquired a training facility on Jaba Top, a hillock in Balakot. A secret US Department of Defense memo dated 31 January 2004 leaked by Wikileaks described the facility as being "known to house a training camp that offers both basic and advanced terrorist training on explosives and artillery".¹⁰ This is clearly the facility being referred to by Foreign Secretary Gokhale. However, the Indian authorities have thus far not shared any satellite imagery or images from munition mounted cameras to back up their claims.

On its part, the Pakistani military has strenuously denied that the strikes inflicted any casualties and infrastructural damage, as noted above by Major General Ghafoor. It is pertinent to note that he followed this invitation by immediately stressing that unfavorable weather conditions did not currently permit travel to the site.¹¹ It is equally important to note that the Pakistani military is infamous for its censorship of the media and control over the spread of information deemed to be sensitive.

⁹ Statement made on 'Balakot Airstrikes', *NDTV*, <https://www.ndtv.com/video/news/truth-vs-hype/balakot-air-strikes-the-unanswered-questions-508140>.

¹⁰ 'Memorandum For Commander, United States Southern Command', 31 January 2014. <https://wikileaks.org/gitmo/prisoner/301.html> (Assessed on 01 March 2019).

¹¹ Asif Ghafoor <https://twitter.com/TOLOnews/status/1100242051046801409> (Assessed on 27 February 2019).

Local Pakistani journalists and reporters from Reuters, BBC and Al-Jazeera who managed to gain access to the site on the 26 February 2019 reported witnessing little infrastructural damage. In a report for Al-Jazeera on 28 February 2019, the award-winning journalist, Asad Hashim, reported that the bombs had hit uninhabited areas and a farmer's field.¹² Videos circulating in Pakistan, purported to be made by local journalists, seem to support these reports. In these videos, a cluster of buildings resembling the facility on Jaba Top is visible. Residents interviewed also point out that the facility was not hit. Some local residents have told reporters that while a training camp had existed on Jaba Top, it had been vacated.¹³ Moreover, an audio recording attributed to the Jaish-e-Mohammad acknowledges the presence of the facility and that it was targeted but goes on to state that there were no casualties.¹⁴

Open access satellite images from 27 February 2019 analyzed by researchers at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) also indicate that the bombs fell in uninhabited areas. Nathan Ruser, a researcher at ASPI, who specializes in satellite data concluded that there is "no evidence of damage to the facility".¹⁵ Similarly, a comparison of satellite images from 25 February and 27 February 2019 by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Laboratory indicated that the bombs landed in a wooded area "with no damage being visible to surrounding structures".¹⁶

It is also important to note that Indian planes are said to have dropped Spice 2000 glide bombs. These bombs are guided by pre-programmed coordinates. As such, they are not dependent upon the pilot's judgement. These bombs are said to have less than 0.2 per cent probability of falling further than 10 meters from the pre-programmed target. The precise nature of the bombs raises questions about the intent of the strike itself. Could it be that the strategic intent of the strikes was not necessarily to eliminate terrorists but to send a message to Pakistan that India was setting new rules and was now willing and ready to strike targets in undisputed Pakistani territory?

There are also serious questions over the specifics of the subsequent Pakistani strikes in India. Pakistani authorities have maintained that they targeted and struck six non-military and uninhabited sites. They also assert that Pakistani planes had not crossed into Indian airspace. However, Raveesh Kumar, a spokesperson for India's Ministry of External Affairs, stated that Pakistani planes had violated Indian air space and that an "aerial engagement" ensued.¹⁷ It remains to be determined what the "six targets" struck were and where exactly the aerial

¹²'At raid site, no casualties', *Al-Jazeera*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/indian-air-raid-site-casualties-mysterious-madrassa-190227183058957.html> (Assessed 28 February 2019)

¹³ See, for instance, *ARY News*, 26 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqZd64HL9CM> (Assessed 27 February 2019).

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvHSF22I3TA>, 2 March 2019 (Assessed 2 March 2019).

¹⁵ Nathan Ruser, 'Did Balakot Strikes Hit Their Target?', *The Wire*, 1 March 2019, <https://thewire.in/security/balakot-airstrikes-india-pakistan-satellite-images> (Assessed 2 March 2019).

¹⁶ 'Surgical Strike in Pakistan', *Medium*, 1 March 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/surgical-strike-in-pakistan-a-botched-operation-7f6cda834b24> (Assessed 2 March 2019).

¹⁷ 'IAF Shoots Down Pakistan's Jet', *Times of India*, 27 February 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pakistani-jets-violate-indian-air-space-in-jks-nowshera/articleshow/68179676.cms> (Assessed 28 February 2019).

engagement took place. Intertwined in this is the issue of the type of planes that carried out the strike.

India is arguing that the type of bombs dropped indicate that the Pakistani airstrikes were conducted by F-16 aircrafts that Pakistan purchased from the US. The Indian Air Force had earlier also claimed to have shot down a Pakistani F-16.¹⁸ On its part, Pakistan refutes these assertions but has thus far not provided details on the aircraft used. This is controversial because the deployment of F-16s against India could be a violation of the terms of purchase agreed upon between Pakistan and the US. The US embassy in Islamabad has stated that it is investigating the matter.¹⁹ For India, this presents an opportunity to put further international pressure.

Conclusion

Both India and Pakistan have presented differing narratives targeted at their respective domestic and international audiences. In the aftermath of the strikes, both have indulged in a media and information battle. Government and military officials have actively utilized various forms of media – including newspapers, news channels, Twitter and Facebook – to put out their versions of what happened. In Pakistan, the military has also been able to control the information available to the public through censorship. In India, public opinion is being shaped not just through the media but also through electoral rallies. The fact that the BJP's president, Amit Shah, declared in a recent rally that “over 250” terrorists were killed by the Indian airstrikes²⁰ despite no official numbers being released by the government, provides an insight into how important an electoral issue it will be for the BJP.

.

Associate Professor Iqbal Singh Sevea is a Visiting Associate Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at iqbal@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

¹⁸ ‘Pakistan Used Missile Meant for Terrorists’, *NDTV*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pakistan-used-missile-meant-for-terrorists-against-india-says-indian-air-force-2000881> (Assessed 2 March 2019).

¹⁹ ‘US wants to know if Pakistan Violated Agreement’, *Huffington Post*, 4 March 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/us-wants-to-know-if-pakistan-violated-agreement-used-f-16-jets-to-down-indian-fighter_in_5c7c92b1e4b0e1f776535849 (Assessed 5 March 2019).

²⁰ ‘Over 250 killed’ Says Amit Shah’, *NDTV*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/amit-shah-on-iaf-air-strikes-in-balakot-pakistan-over-250-killed-no-official-figure-yet-2002182> (Assessed 4 March 2019).