



Five Years of Balakot: A New Nuclear South Asia

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Summary

How has South Asia's nuclear dynamics shifted after five years of India's air strikes against terrorist safe havens in Pakistan's Balakot? This paper argues that India's punitive military action not only imposed direct costs on the Pakistani Army but also called into question Pakistan's nuclear redlines. Balakot has allowed India to overcome from the stranglehold of self-deterrence obtained in the aftermath of the 1998 tests and nuclear tests by the two South Asian rivals.

It has been almost five years since India conducted air strikes inside Pakistani territory in Balakot in response to the attack on Indian security forces in Pulwama in Kashmir. The deadly terrorist strike on 15 February 2019, which claimed the lives of 44 security personnel, triggered a major military crisis between South Asia's two nuclear-armed adversaries. The crisis and its culmination have changed Indo-Pakistan's nuclear and conventional dynamics significantly.

Two weeks after the Pulwama terrorist attacks, the Indian government launched [air strikes](#) against alleged terrorist training camps deep inside Pakistani territory in Balakot. The action was [unprecedented](#). Successive Indian governments have shown [immense restraint](#) in the face of continuous provocation and cross-border terrorism by Pakistan-based groups. India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi has tried to alter that tradition of military restraint by ordering [limited kinetic action](#) against terrorist hideouts across the border in Kashmir. However, the use of air power in mainland Pakistan was highly unexpected. The last time the Indian Air Force targeted Pakistani territory was during the 1971 war over Bangladesh. Even at the height of the Kargil war in 1999, the air force was strictly instructed [not to cross](#) the 'Line of Control' separating the Indian and Pakistani-administered regions of Kashmir.

Modi's use of force during the Balakot attacks was the most emphatic response in its fight against Pakistan-based terror groups so far.

India's retaliation invited an immediate Pakistani response. First, the Pakistani government convened a meeting of its nuclear command body – the [National Command Authority](#) – suggesting that any further escalation would invite a Pakistani nuclear reaction. Islamabad's linking of the crisis with nuclear escalation was a desperate ploy. Since the 'surgical strikes' against terrorist hideouts across the Line of Control in [September 2016](#), India's tactic of conventional escalation was called into questioning Pakistan's nuclear bluff.

However, Islamabad's response was purely conventional. Just a day later, on 27 February 2019, Pakistani Air Force planes breached Indian airspace and attempted a bombing raid on

an Indian military base close to the line of control in Kashmir. In the ensuing air battle, India lost a fighter jet. The Pakistan Army captured the pilot and paraded him on Pakistani media. The Indian Air Force also claimed to have [shot down](#) a United States (US)-supplied F-16 fighter jet of the Pakistani Air Force. The stage was set for the crisis to escalate further. In fact, as Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan [Ajai Bisaria](#) has argued, New Delhi was ready to up the ante by launching missiles at Pakistani targets if the captured fighter pilot was not released immediately. The international community, led by the US, [forced Pakistan](#) to release him, paving the way for the eventual de-escalation of the crisis.

The crisis and its culmination introduced two new variables in South Asia's strategic scenario.

First, India's military action and its use of air power have [redefined the cost calculus](#) of the Pakistani state's support for anti-India terrorist groups. India's earlier restraint allowed Islamabad to continue its support for such groups without costs. The Indian air strikes at Balakot signalled that New Delhi will henceforth hold the Pakistan Army directly responsible for terrorism in Kashmir and will engage in punitive military action. The Pakistan Army could not continue to support terrorism on the cheap. Of course, India's military action invited a Pakistani response, as was the case on 27 February 2019. However, directly engaging the Pakistani military was a much better strategy than allowing its generals to sleep peacefully while letting the terrorists do their bidding. In fact, months after the Pulwama crisis, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence provided Indian counterparts [information on a possible terrorist attack in Kashmir](#) to avoid another military response from New Delhi.

Second, India's response to the Pulwama attack and Pakistan's counter to Indian air action also shattered the idea that any limited military engagement would lead to a nuclear war. Since the 1998 nuclear weapons tests in South Asia, India's military restraint resulted partially from the fear of a conventional military crisis escalating into a nuclear one. Pakistan also used its nuclear weapons as a shield under which it could continue to support terror without inviting a conventional riposte from India.

After the December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, the government [mobilised the military](#) but desisted from initiating any action against Pakistan. Even after the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, New Delhi opted for a [diplomatic rather than a military offensive](#) against Islamabad. Taking its cue, Pakistan, has over the years, continued to lower the threshold for nuclear use in the subcontinent, and its introduction of [tactical nuclear weapons](#) has been a part of that strategy. The crisis proved that Pakistan's threshold for nuclear use is much higher. Pakistan opted for a conventional response to India's initial escalatory air strikes. Even when New Delhi threatened to use conventional missiles – the second rung of the escalation ladder – Pakistan prepared only for a [conventional response](#). The crisis has opened a new space for limited military action in the subcontinent.

The conventional military and the nuclear dynamics in the subcontinent underwent significant revision after the Balakot incident. New Delhi finally discovered a political will to punish Pakistan militarily. Henceforth, every time a Pakistan-based terrorist group aims to target India, the Pakistan Army will have to gear up for some kinetic action. Islamabad has also been forced to revise its nuclear 'red lines', at least in practice if not in theory. This does

not mean that the two nuclear adversaries will always be able to calibrate military escalation short of a nuclear war. However, it has shown that the use of nuclear weapons is not inevitable in a crisis between the two countries.

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