



What has changed post-Balakot?-Not much

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the post-Pulwama attack timeline shows that India did not cross any Pakistani red line

- The situation between India and Pakistan seems to have returned to the pre-Pulwama position.

The facts

- On February 14, Adil Ahmed Dar drove his vehicle into a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy crossing Pulwama, killing 40 personnel and becoming the first Indian fedayeen.
- Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), a terrorist organisation based in Pakistan, claimed responsibility.
- Facing elections in two months, the Narendra Modi government promised strong retaliation.
- Given looming elections now, clearly, Pulwama demanded a stronger response.
- On February 26 a dozen Mirage-2000 entered Pakistani airspace, targeting a JeM training facility in Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province about 60 km from the LoC.
- In an attempt to downplay the provocation, Indian authorities described it as a 'non-military' and 'pre-emptive' strike in which a large number of terrorists were killed.
- **Events and claims**
- Amid the paucity of facts, both Pak and India resorted to exaggerated claims.
- On the Indian side, there was talk of a doctrinal shift away from strategic restraint, by having struck deep inside Pakistani territory, downing a Pakistan Air Force F-16 (in the dogfight) and having called Pakistan's nuclear bluff.
- The IAF maintains that it hit the identified targets but did not count the

casualties.

- On the diplomatic front, India claimed that most major powers accepted India's right of defence and pre-emption.
- Pakistan maintains that there were no casualties at Balakot.
- Pakistan denied that an F-16 was downed but the Indian authorities did exhibit part of an Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM) missile, normally carried by an F-16.
- Pakistan demonstrated its good faith by returning the Indian pilot promptly.
- Its diplomatic clout is evident that its all-weather-friend, China, stood by it in the UN Security Council.

Rhetoric and reality

- Clearly, rhetoric exceeded reality.
- The unexpected development of the capture of Wg Cdr Varthaman signalled the entry of the U.S. While National Security Adviser John Bolton kept channels open with his Indian counterpart, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Joseph Votel ensured that the Pakistani Army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa played ball.
- The U.S.'s willingness to overlook the use of an F-16 in violation of end-use assurances helped.
- A new development was the involvement of both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the de-escalation.

The nuclear bluff?

- Pakistan's four nuclear red lines are: capture of a large part of its territory, its military facing unacceptable loss, India attempting economic strangulation, and finally, large-scale political destabilisation.
- Clearly, none of the red lines was even close to being crossed.
- Therefore, nobody was calling anybody's nuclear bluff.
- The military realises that such strikes provide temporary emotional satisfaction but not lasting deterrence, either through denial or punishment.
- A strike that targets a bunch of terrorists and is 'non-military' and is 'pre-emptive' rather than punitive cannot be expected to change Pakistan army's policy of using jihadi groups.
- Denying these requires better and timely intelligence, and punitive retaliation requires enhanced kinetic capability.
- Only then will India ensure deterrence through the emergence of home-

grown fedayeen indicates growing radicalisation at home.

- Lack of factual detail may have helped manage the dynamics of de-escalation because the militaries understand the dangers of escalation.

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