**Operation Swift Retort and misperceived aggression**

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Two years have passed since India acted on the dangerous idea of conducting cross-border air strikes in the vicinity of Balakot, allegedly targeting Jaish-e-Muhamad (JeM) training camps. This irrational act of aggression was backed and motivated by political interests and far-right Hindutva nationalism—a political instrument of the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Indeed, the whole episode of Pulwama and the follow-up Balakot strikes were launched with an intent to divert public attention from the poor performance of the previous Modi-led-BJP government and to gain public support for the upcoming national elections. This was also recently revealed in the WhatsApp leak of Arnab Goswami, Indian TV presenter, known for his warmongering and anti-Pakistan agenda.

Balakot operation, launched on February 26, 2019, was a strike package of over twelve planes, loaded with Israeli SPICE-2000 bombs. Despite the availability of latest precision-guided bombs, the Indian Airforce (IAF) failed miserably in hitting the defined targets and flew back to save face, as the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) jets scrambled immediately, after the air traffic controller identified the incoming IAF formation.

[Watchdogs shouldn’t be used as pressure tools: PM Khan](https://nation.com.pk/27-Feb-2021/watchdogs-shouldn-t-be-used-as-pressure-tools-pm-khan)

This failed attempt by the IAF not only undermined the credibility of SPICE-2000 bombs and their effectiveness in modern warfare, but also demonstrated India’s ill-conceived political plan, its overconfidence in its conventional military superiority and flawed assessment of Pakistan’s defensive capabilities and its resolve to strike back.

This confidence was badly shaken, when Pakistan Air Force (PAF) in a tit-for-tat response, surprised India the very next morning by engaging desired military targets inside Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K). The targets were at the last moment switched to unpopulated spaces in a closer vicinity to avoid any collateral damage, signalling the intent and capacity of Pakistan to respond. In the process, two IAF fighter jets—including a MiG-21 and a SU-30 MKI—were also shot down in air-to-air engagement.

This failure of IAF in the Balakot operation can be attributed to poor training, lack of coordination and poor operational preparedness. Indeed, it was a result of this poor coordination that Indian air defence units, which are equipped with Israeli spider surface-to-surface missiles, even shot down one of their own Mi-17 helicopters, with six men on board. India’s own analysts point out that the IAF is worse than PAF in terms of pilot strength and firing range.

[US raise threat level for troops stationed in Iraq after recent Syria strikes](https://nation.com.pk/27-Feb-2021/us-raise-threat-level-for-troops-stationed-in-iraq-after-recent-syria-strikes)

In contrast, Pakistan’s successful Operation Swift Retort is a reflection of the superiority of its PAF pilots in their training and their ability to suppress enemy air defence and conduct stand-off precision strikes, in the face of a much larger and better equipped air force backed by a seemingly formidable multi-layered air defence network.

Apart from its irresponsible kinetic adventurism, India has left no stone unturned to launch hybrid warfare against Pakistan. One such activity recently unveiled by EU Disinfo Lab is a comprehensive worldwide disinformation campaign. A network headed by India-based Srivastava Group has been working internationally to spread fake propaganda against Pakistan by using more than 500 fake news outlets based in different countries around the world. The primary objective of this campaign has been to promote India’s political and national interests by using platforms that could affect international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU).

[Missile attacks by 'terrorists,’ not fighters: Iraq](https://nation.com.pk/27-Feb-2021/missile-attacks-by-terrorists-not-fighters-iraq)

The use of force and disruptive technologies to achieve domestic electoral benefits increases the risk of military conflagration. The same logic is applied in case of Balakot, where chances of escalation grew manifold with the intervention of sophisticated Su-30s and Mirage 2000s. Such technological interventions reduce decision-making timelines, hence creating tighter windows for crisis management. Moreover, the role of misperception and miscalculations cannot be downplayed while contextualising the South Asian stability matrix.

Misperception and miscalculation about Pakistan’s resolve and capability can encourage far-right Hindu extremists in India to weaken the strategic stability of the region. For example, keeping in view India’s confidence in its conventional military superiority, and military escalation, it is likely to initiate hostilities in the future as well, with an indecorous perception that the only available option for Pakistan is to de-escalate. On the other hand, if Pakistan perceives that it can respond to the conventional adventure by imposing prohibitive cost on India then it may not seek to de-escalate. This means that India’s clever strategic planning will be a prepared recipe for disaster, as Pakistan will have an equal incentive to surprise New Delhi; similar to what it did in the aftermath of Balakot incident, demonstrating credibility of her deterrence. In the aftermath of Balakot, Indian analysts argued that the Air Force can be used and still have escalation under control, but General Khalid Kidwai warned India that “while it may be easy [for India] to climb the first rung on the escalatory ladder, the second rung would always belong to Pakistan, and that India’s choice to move to the third rung would invariably be dangerously problematic in anticipation of the fourth rung response by Pakistan.”

[Saudi Arabia 'completely rejects' US Khashoggi report assessment](https://nation.com.pk/27-Feb-2021/saudi-arabia-completely-rejects-us-khashoggi-report-assessment)

The trajectory of Pulwama/Balakot crisis further suggests that any such incident happening in the future would increase the chances of vertical escalation in the region as both India and Pakistan would resolve to secure conventional deterrence pivotal to crises stability.

The idea of war with Pakistan is the most pressing slogan in the domestic constituencies of India. According to former US President Barack Obama, “the quickest route to national unity in India is expressing hostility towards Pakistan.” However, this is a dangerous political thought, as it creates an incentive for the Indian leadership to “routinise” brinkmanship to gain electoral legitimacy. If India attempts another such misadventure in the region, Pakistan will use all available means to attain and ensure peace, while minimising the chances of nuclear holocaust in South Asia.