



SVI Talk Series

Report

**Operation Swift Retort: Crisis Escalation in South Asia and Response
Options for Pakistan**

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Executive Summary

A talk on “**Operation Swift Retort: Crisis Escalation in South Asia and Response Options for Pakistan**” was organized on February 27, 2023. Air Cdre (R) Kaiser Tufail joined as a speaker on the subject, and the discussants included Former Chairman PAEC Parvez Butt, Ambassador Fauzia Nasreen, AVM Faiz Amir, DG ISSRA Major General Muhammad *Raza Aizad*, Squadron Leader Waqas Haider, and researchers from ACDA, and CASS. The talk was followed by detailed discussion and a question answer session.

Pakistan launched Operation Swift Retort the very next day in response to India’s surgical strike into Balakot on February 26, 2019. F-16 and JF-17 fighters of the Pakistan Air Force intercepted the IAF aircrafts that were following our attack package and two of them - Mig-21 and SU-30 were hit; the MIG-21 fell into Pakistan’s territory while it is difficult to determine whether the SU-30 was downed, slightly damaged or evaded the AMRAM missile fired by a PAF F-16 on 27 February 2019. The PAF fighters were restrained by the prevalent rules of engagement from crossing over into Indian territory.

The PAF was well-prepared for a whole range of targeting options, and it settled for a stand-off attack similar to the IAF’s, with the important difference that it launched an attack close to a military target in the Poonch-Rajauri-Naushera Sector in Indian Held Kashmir (IHK).

Modi appeared to view punitive measures against Pakistan as critical to securing victory in the impending elections, rendering him entirely unmindful of the possibility of escalation between two nuclear armed states – Pakistan and India. While on the Pakistani side, the risk of escalation weighed heavily on the political and military leadership. Consequently, a consensus was reached over a measured and controlled response. The strategy of restraint in which the PAF agreed to carry out general area bombing of open spaces in military garrisons near the Line of Control (LOC) in Indian-held Kashmir (IHK) was aimed at preventing escalation.

Clearly, Indians miscalculated Pakistan’s resolve and ability to pay back promptly. Therefore, post-failure, a facade of ‘technical asymmetry’ has been propounded by India to cover up IAF’s dysfunction at the operational and tactical levels. To redeem the lost prestige of the military, it is entirely possible that a false flag operation may yet be contrived by Modi – a dangerous prospect that the world needs to be watchful about.

The two nuclear powers were on the brink of a terrible catastrophe is something which needs serious reflection, especially for the initiator of the conflict. Balakot incident indicates that the both sides kept the conflict limited, however, the event also demonstrates the uneasy state of deterrence stability in South Asia.

Pakistan could go beyond what Pakistan did in response to Balakot incident, however, it lacks international credibility at diplomatic, economic, and political fronts. On the other hand, India would continue to maneuver international support in its favour, exercising her considerable international outreach. It is expected that the international community will continue to use their influence on both India and Pakistan in a manner that will promote their own interests and not the south Asian parties.

Operation Swift Retort

Providing an overview of the Indian ingress into Pakistani territory on February 26, 2019, the speaker stated that sixteen IAF Mirage 2000 planes took off from Gwalior, including six armed with one Israeli Spice 2000 bomb each and four armed with Israeli Crystal Maze missile each. They were escorted by six upgraded Mirage 2000I armed with six MICA air-to-air missiles each and supported by an Il-78 in-flight refueling tanker and an Airborne Early Warning and Control System AEW&CS aircraft for surveillance.

The attack package traversed about 40 km in Pakistan's territory and dropped five bombs which fell in a forested area that is a few hundred meters from the intended target that was a seminary at Jabba village near Balakot that housed a boarding facility for over 200 students aged 8-15 years. However, the strike caused no significant damage.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) flew extensive Combat Air Patrols (CAP) with ground radar and AEW&CS aircraft support to anticipate Pakistan Air Force's (PAF) attack in retaliation. . Following the strike, F-16 and JF-17 fighters on patrol were promptly directed to intercept the intruders, but were restrained by the prevalent rules of engagement from crossing over into enemy territory. When the PAF did not attack until sunrise on 27 February, the IAF eased off its highest alert state and waited for the following night.

Pakistan launched Operation Swift Retort On February 27 in which the PAF's strike package consisted of Mirage and JF-17 fighter aircraft, supported by escorts and patrolling fighters. The fighter package was followed at the rear by the PAF's SAAB Erieye AEW&CS aircraft and the DA-20 Falcon. During the operation, two Mirage 5PA armed with H-4 stand-off bombs and two JF-17 armed with Mk-83 Range Extension Kit bombs headed towards targets in southern-western IIOJK. The bombs were meant for a general area bombing of open spaces in military garrisons near the Line of Control in IHK, to demonstrate that Pakistan had the resolve and capability to respond in kind. The purpose of the mission was not to cause mass carnage in Indian military garrisons and to prevent the escalation to an all-out war under a nuclear overhang.

Following the bombing by PAF, the IAF aircrafts followed the PAF's attack package and were intercepted by F-16 and JF-17 fighters of the PAF; and two of them - Mig-21 and SU-30 were hit. The MIG-21 fell into Pakistan's territory while it is difficult to determine whether the SU-30 was downed, slightly damaged or evaded the AMRAM missile fired by a PAF F-16 on 27 February 2019. The PAF fighters were restrained by the prevalent rules of engagement from crossing over into Indian territory.

The Indian Defence Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman claim regarding Abhinandan shooting down a Pakistani F-16 during the conflict was proved to be false and deceitful by ISPR's display of all four of the unfired missiles on his MiG-21 to be intact, which contradicted the Indian claims. Furthermore, the US Foreign Policy magazine's senior staff writer Lara Seligman reported that a US count of the F-16s with Pakistan found that all fighter planes were accounted for, contradicting India's claim of shooting down a PAF F-16. This suggests that Indian authorities may have misled the international community. Indian-origin US associate professor Vipin Narang states that it looks increasingly like that India failed to impose significant costs on Pakistan but lost a plane and a helicopter of its own in the process.

Concerning the matter regarding F-16 as part of the operation, the U.S. dismissed India's complaint about Pakistan's alleged use of F-16s in the operation, stating that they do not publicly comment on bilateral agreements involving U.S. defence technologies. This reinforces Pakistan's claim that the F-16s were used legitimately in self-defense. Additionally, the U.S. also informed India that they would not share information on the subject as it was a bilateral matter between the U.S. and Pakistan. This can be interpreted as a clever marketing ploy for the US military hardware that demonstrated its cutting edge once again during the operation. Operation Swift Retort was a success on the part of PAF as it demonstrated Pakistan's resolve to respond to Indian aggression and also restored the deterrence against India immediately.

However, the Balakot surgical strike by India was a failure. The cause of the failure of the IAF strike on Balakot is subject to speculation, with the most plausible theory proffered by Marcus Hellyer, Nathan Ruser and Aakriti Bachhawat of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), suggesting a mismatch between target elevation sensed by GPS and orthometric elevation given on aeronautical charts. Former PAF Group Captain Parvez Mahmood believes

that such errors are not uncommon in determining precise 3D points on Earth. High-resolution satellite images of the bomb impact craters provided by European Space Imaging indicate that all bombs missed their targets by similar distances, suggesting a mission planning miscalculation. Adrian Zevenbergen, the Managing Director of ESI, released an image of the area day after the IAF's attack and confirmed that the captured image using Worldview-2 did not reveal any indications of bombing the buildings.

Crisis Escalation in South Asia and Response Options for Pakistan

The dilemma of escalation weighed heavily on the political and military leadership in Pakistan, but a consensus was reached over a measured and controlled response. The PAF was well-prepared for a whole range of targeting options, and it settled for a stand-off attack similar to the IAF's, with the important difference that it would be against military targets in the Poonch-Rajauri-Naushera Sector in IIOJK. In the aerial encounter of 27 February, there was a high probability of several more IAF aircraft being shot down, given PAF's definite edge in beyond-visual-range (BVR) air combat. However, the conflict had the likelihood of tit-for-tat escalation to the point of no return. The strategy of restraint in which the PAF agreed to carry out general area bombing of open spaces in military garrisons near the Line of Control (LOC) in Indian-held Kashmir IIOJK was aimed to prevent escalation.

Modi appeared to view punitive measures against Pakistan as critical to securing victory in the impending elections, rendering him entirely unmindful of the possibility of escalation between the two nuclear armed states – Pakistan and India. Significantly, the Indian civilian establishment miscalculated Pakistan's resolve and ability to pay back promptly. Therefore post failure, a facade of 'technical asymmetry' has been propounded by India to cover up IAF's dysfunction at the operational and tactical levels. To redeem the lost prestige of the military, it is entirely possible that a false flag operation may yet be contrived by Modi – a dangerous prospect that the world needs to be watchful about.

India has never acknowledged the fact that its military options against Pakistan have been thwarted by Pakistan's nuclear capabilities. Therefore, to indicate India's posture as a regional player, India is likely to resort to periodic aggression against Pakistan through strategic strikes. India also does not acknowledge the fact that Pakistan and India are now at par, at least at the

strategic level. It is most likely that stand-off weapon attacks are going to be India's strategy for future warfare.

The most crucial assessment of the conflict that Pakistan has to look at for future warfare was the muted reaction of the international community to the Indian aggression. Besides international approval or disapproval of India action, a statement was needed here for '*all parties to exercise a restraint.*' Therefore, that is the kind of indifferent or marginal support that Pakistan has and it has to be kept in mind for peace scenario that might occur in future.

International support could enable Pakistan to go beyond what Pakistan already did in response to the Balakot incident. However, unless Pakistan attains international credibility on diplomatic, economic, and political fronts, India would continue to maneuver international support in its favour, specifically because India's strategic community has a considerable international outreach. Pakistan would be labelled as a terrorist state by India irrespective of the state of the relationship between both the states at that particular time. That necessitates Pakistan to be at the diplomatic forefront to counter any hostile Indian propaganda.

Significantly, the government of Pakistan as well as the armed forces treat the Balakot attack as a textbook lesson in regional crisis escalation and it must remain cognizant of the set precedent in future conflicts. Operation Swift Retort indicates that the two nuclear powers were on the brink of a terrible catastrophe which needs serious reflection, especially for the initiator of the conflict. The International community is capable enough to put a restraint over India's offence towards Pakistan, however, they would use this clout in a manner that will promote their own interests.

While answering the question regarding India's perception of Pakistan's nuclear capability and its impact on conflict escalation between two nuclear armed states, Air Cdre (R) Kaiser Tufail stated that India disregards the nuclear capability of Pakistan while attempting to portray Pakistan as a terrorist state. India perceives space which can be exploited by carrying out surgical strikes whenever they need to portray escalation dominance against Pakistan. Therefore, it is not about the occupation of territory, but an attempt to treat Pakistan as a terrorist state like North Korea. However, Pakistan's response was based on its disregard of India's perception of nuclear parity or the size of the air force, but the resolve to respond to

India's offensive warfare in future conflicts. This needs to be the mode that Pakistan must operate in because escalation should be from both sides if India undertakes an operation of the Balakot sort and it would cause consequent international pressure on India to exercise restraint. This also necessitates communication between both states.

Replying to the matter concerning ground-to-ground and air-to-air strikes as already availed offensives and the possibility of drone being used for similar strikes in future, he stated that the possibility of the use of drones is going to be a regular response from either sides. Referring to the use of drones in the recent conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the conflict sets the precedent of undertaking operation which is quite complex and technologically advanced. India and Pakistan have the capabilities and will undertake attack operations involving drones as well as stand-off strikes.

Responding to concerns over biased international response to the Balakot attack and India's tendency to sell its own narrative, he stated that the international community is capable enough to put a restraint over India's offence towards Pakistan, however, they would use this clout in a manner that will promote their own interests. The progress India has made into international diplomacy is far greater than India's size and actual capabilities and has to be countered by Pakistan via highly capable diplomats and academically learned prime ministers. International diplomacy needs to be completely re-engineered in Pakistan.

Answering the inquiry on 'given the technical precision states have achieved, had the intended target in Balakot strike deliberately been missed?' the speaker clarified the absence of another potential target within one-thousand yards of the target that India tried to attack.

While analyzing the debate over the possibility of similar strikes in future means that the deterrence stability in South Asia is in trouble, thereby necessitating Pakistan's response beyond Quid Pro Quid Plus, rather more in asymmetric terms in order to establish deterrence stability in future, he stated that besides military operation being the most important response, the geopolitical situation and diplomatic clout has an equally significant part to play. With no international support, Pakistan could not have possibly gone beyond what it already did to deter India. Though Pakistan is not diplomatically isolated at the

international level, it is still not at the forefront. Response option rests on diplomacy and is only available if the world is going to accept it.