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India-Pakistan: where do we go from here?

While it delivered short-term victories for Khan and Modi, the India-Pakistan standoff might set an unwelcome precedent

The most recent India-Pakistan standoff threatened to escalate into a full-blown war. It was triggered by the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad's (JmE) terrorist attack in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir on 14 February 2019. A fortnight later, India responded with aerial strikes against the JeM camps at Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. This provoked an aerial engagement between the two countries leading to the capture of Indian Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman. Varthaman's release, announced by Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, allowed the situation to de-escalate.

This entire episode has raised important questions that highlight the key takeaways: the international pressure on Pakistan to curb terrorism will remain limited in the short-term, the long-term significance of the Balakot airstrikes for India-Pakistan bilateral relations is unclear, and both Imran Khan and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi can fashion success stories for themselves.

Is the international community turning on Pakistan?

The lack of international criticism of the Balakot strikes was an unprecedented development. France supported India's right to defend itself, and, along with the US, Germany, UK, and the European Union, called upon Pakistan to take stronger measures against terrorist groups operating freely on its soil. The pressure exerted on Pakistan by two of its closest allies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to release Varthaman was equally significant.

This international pressure on Pakistan represents a vindication of both India's diplomatic efforts and its economic potential. The most striking

case is that of the Gulf countries, with which Modi has worked closely to raise India's profile. The Gulf countries are also keen to strengthen their economic partnership with India; something that Pakistan cannot offer to them at the moment. That was clearly demonstrated by the decision of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to invite India's foreign minister, amidst the recent standoff and despite Pakistan's protests, as a main guest at its summit. The international response also shows the growing international fatigue towards Pakistan's incapability and/or unwillingness to curb terrorism on its soil.

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However, it's also premature to argue that this episode means the beginning of Pakistan's international isolation. US President Donald Trump's U-turn on Pakistan shows its geostrategic importance. After threatening aid cuts at the beginning of 2018, Trump is now openly calling upon Pakistan to help facilitate the Afghan peace talks. Pakistan also continues to look upon the Gulf countries, with which it enjoys historically strong diplomatic and defence ties, as sources for foreign aid. Despite improved relations with India, the Gulf countries are also keen to balance their relations between the two subcontinental countries. This was evident from the OIC resolution on Kashmir, which criticised India for its 'barbarities'.

Finally, Pakistan's close relations with China need to be considered. Beijing may not have condemned the Balakot airstrikes, but is likely to continue supporting Pakistan in an effort to balance India in South Asia. China has repeatedly blocked India's efforts at the UN to ban the JeM founder, Masood Azhar, - most recently this past week - and to black list Pakistan at the Financial Action Task Force.

Overall, this episode has been a diplomatic victory for India. But until the geopolitical realities that favour Pakistan change, leveraging international pressure to effectively compel Pakistan to withdraw support from such terrorist groups will remain a long battle.

Are the Balakot air strikes strategically significant?

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Pakistan since 1971 and, for the first time ever, on Pakistan's sovereign territory. They signal a clear political intent on India's part to retaliate against cross-border terrorism, and a willingness to test Pakistan's nuclear threshold. This represents a departure from the past, where Pakistan's threat of nuclear retaliation has prevented India from responding to clear provocations. Such an overt display of intent on India's part could have an impact on the strategic balance between the two countries in the long run. Similar strikes in the future, and the costs of the subsequent escalation, may force a strategic rethink on Pakistan's side.

However, it's too soon to determine whether such strikes can be a long-term deterrent. For that, they would have to become the norm in the face of terrorist attacks, the tactical success would have to be less disputed, and India would have to consider striking deeper into Pakistan. The last option in particular would require a strong and sustained political will and the capacity to carry out precision strikes, which New Delhi may not possess at the moment. Moreover, this is also a calculated risk because gradual escalation can quickly spiral out of control and bring the conflict closer to the nuclear threshold.

Despite these short-term gains for Khan and Modi, the long-term implications at the international and bilateral levels are far from clear.

The airstrikes—the strategic signalling to Pakistan notwithstanding—are unlikely to be the long-term answer to the problem of cross-border terrorism. It would have to remain just one of the tools at India's disposal, along with diplomacy and covert operations, to contain the problem.

Who won the battle of perceptions – Khan or Modi?

The whole development has been a far more resounding victory for Khan among his domestic audience, as compared to Modi. He has won tremendous support domestically for his statements and public calls for de-escalation. Even as the aggressive rhetoric from India rose, Khan was able to project himself domestically as a responsible leader striving to achieve peace in the region. The PR management around Varthaman's release and videos showing his humane treatment also did their part. Pakistan's retaliation to the Indian air strikes and Varthaman's capture, hailed by some sections of Pakistan's press as a military victory and an appropriate response, had also allowed Khan to allay the demand in Pakistan to respond to what was seen as Indian aggression. Thus, the international pressure on Pakistan to de-escalate aside, Khan was on a strong domestic footing that allowed him to call for peace.

For Modi, the timing is far more delicate. With India gearing up for general elections in less than two months, Modi is under far greater scrutiny domestically. He has been criticised both for escalating tensions with Pakistan through such an overt display of military aggression and for the politicisation of the entire episode for domestic electoral gains. Despite the criticism, Modi will likely have some immediate benefit—the strategic message to Pakistan and the international response to the incident—to shore up his domestic image as a strong leader, unwilling to appear soft on Pakistan. These gains do not give clarity on India's long-term strategy to Pakistan and cross-border terrorism. However, it will allow Modi to fashion a successful narrative for himself that would resonate with large sections of his domestic audience. For a leader at such an important political juncture, this is the most immediate concern.

Despite these short-term gains for Khan and Modi, the long-term implications at the international and bilateral levels are far from clear. Pulwama highlighted the continued resilience of cross-border terrorism as a major flashpoint between India and Pakistan and the potential dangers of a gradual escalation between two nuclear-armed states. And until there's greater international pressure on Pakistan to act against terrorism on its own soil, and India can formulate an effective long-term strategy against cross-border terrorism, such episodes are likely to remain a recurrent theme in India-Pakistan relations.



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