



Delhi Policy Group

DPG POLICY BRIEF

Balakot and the New Normal

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Volume IV, Issue 4

MARCH 1, 2019



Delhi Policy Group

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DPG Policy Brief Vol. IV, Issue 4 March 1, 2019

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(Photographs top to bottom)

Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, India's Minister of External Affairs, delivers her address as guest of honour at the 46th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Abu Dhabi, March 01, 2019. Source: hindustantimes.com

Air Vice Marshal R.G.K. Kapoor, Rear Admiral Dalbir Singh Gujral and Major General Surinder Singh Mahal at the joint press conference by the Indian military on February 28, 2019.

Source: <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/india-is-in-a-heightened-state-of-alert-armed-forces-asianewsnetwork>

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Balakot and the New Normal

by
Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal

When Pakistan has had time to reflect beyond its addiction to bluff, bluster and deception, it might discover that it now faces a new reality.

India's attack on a Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorist camp in Balakot (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province), flying across Pakistani air space and beyond Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), has finally put Pakistan's strategy of single rung escalation to rest. Thus far, the Pakistani military and ISI have been perpetrating their proxy war of cross-border terrorism against India, secure in their belief that India's conventional response calculus will remain stymied by the Pak nuclear strategy of "full spectrum deterrence".



Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, India's Minister of External Affairs, delivers her address as guest of honour at the 46th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Abu Dhabi, March 01, 2019.

Source: hindustantimes.com

By establishing the new benchmark of punitive non-military retaliation against terror targets anywhere, whether in POK or in Pakistani territory, **India has signalled a retaliatory norm below the conventional threshold**. The Balakot episode in a sense opens up India to exercising wide spectrum retaliation against "non-military targets", should the situation so demand. This implies that before planning any major terror attack against India in the future,

Pakistan will now have to factor in the almost certain likelihood of an Indian retaliatory response.

Pakistan, of course, always has the option of attempting military escalation in response to India's counter-terrorism strikes. The Pak air force action on February 27, 2019 in which a 24-aircraft cluster was used to violate Indian air space and target Indian defence installations, was essentially an act of armed aggression. However, the attempt failed. The fact that Pakistan's plans were thwarted highlighted that the Indian military is prepared to deal with any escalation or eventuality, and was in fact expecting just such a response from Pakistan. India will continue to deal with escalations of this kind by the Pak military as and when the need arises. And the results will not favour Pakistan.

The meeting of Pakistan's Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) on February 27, 2019 was very much as per the expected script played out among experts in numerous war games: a great show of brinkmanship but largely a self-delusional exercise.



Air Vice Marshal R.G.K. Kapoor, Rear Admiral Dalbir Singh Gujral and Major General Surinder Singh Mahal at the joint press conference by the Indian military on February 28, 2019.

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Any expectation that the international community would come to Pakistan's rescue evaporated after the Russia-India-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on February 27, 2019 where China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated: "We agree to jointly combat all forms of terrorism through closer policy coordination and practical cooperation. Especially important is the need to eradicate the breeding grounds of terrorism and extremism." To make matters worse, Pakistan's hopes that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) would intervene by withdrawing its invitation to the Indian Foreign Minister to speak as a guest of honour at the OIC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Abu Dhabi on March 1, 2019 did not materialise.

Caught in a downward spiral, Pakistan tried to link the release of the captured Indian Air Force pilot to mutual de-escalation and talks. This was rejected outright by India as the onus of escalation lies entirely on Pakistan. A detailed dossier was handed over to Pakistan regarding the direct involvement of JeM in the suicide bombing at Pulwama on February 14, 2019 together with the demand for action. Meanwhile, India continued to crank up full scale operational readiness along the border, in the air and at sea.

Finally, Pakistan's belated attempt at face saving, reflected in their Prime Minister's purported gesture of peace and other statements, carries no credibility whatsoever unless it is accompanied by categorical assurances backed by demonstrable actions against the JeM, LeT and other Pak-based terrorist groups, starting with bringing to account their leaders, even those who are reportedly ill and ailing.

The Pakistani leadership and more so the military needs to consider whether and for how long an incendiary gaggle of rabid, internationally sanctioned terrorists can hold the 220 million people of Pakistan, their security and their economic future, hostage. But don't hold your breath as to when that realisation might dawn. It is not for nothing that India has been repeatedly threatened with a thousand year war of a million cuts. For the sake of regional peace and stability, India cannot afford to ease off on diplomatic-military pressure and international isolation of Pakistan.



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