

Balakot Airstrike - Lessons Learnt: RSTV – Big Picture

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What's in the News?

- February 26th marks the first anniversary of the Balakot airstrike which was conducted by the Indian Air Force to target the terrorist camps operating in the town of Balakot in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan.
- India carried out airstrikes 12 days after a convoy of vehicles carrying CRPF personnel was attacked by a suicide bomber belonging to Jaish-e-Mohammed, in the Pulwama district of Jammu & Kashmir.
- On 14 February last year, 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were killed in the attack. In retaliation, the Indian Air Force destroyed the biggest terror training camp of JeM at Balakot on February 26, 2019.
- A dozen IAF Mirage 2000 fighter jets crossed the India-Pakistan border to attack the terror camp.
- While India claimed to have preemptively killed a large number of JeM terrorists, Pakistan claimed there was no terror camp at Balakot and it was a grave provocation by India.
- The next day, PAF responded with an attempted attack against Indian military installations. In this ensuing dogfight, both sides reportedly shot down an aircraft each and IAF fighter pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan ended up being taken into Pakistan's custody after he landed in PoK following his ejection from the Mig-21 which was shot down by the PAF.

What are the biggest lessons we have learnt from the Balakot airstrike?

- There are four major aspects related to Balakot which must be looked at:
 - The political will and the buildup to the Balakot strike.
 - The strike itself
 - Reaction from Pakistan on 27th.
 - The lessons learnt by the IAF
- **Political Will:** Indian surgical strikes following the Uri attacks and the Balakot air-strike put forth India as a strong nation which would fightback state-sponsored terrorism with the use of force on the soil of the sponsorer. It was quite contrary to the image the nation had, prior to the strikes.
- **The Balakot Strike:** A strike such as the Balakot strike requires extensive planning, which includes the availability of time as a major factor. The strike was carried out at 3 am, a time when the human biological activity is at the lowest. The last time IAF crossed the LoC and used the Mirage aircraft was during the 1971 war. Even during the 1999 Kargil war, the IAF had not crossed over to the LoC.
- **The countries world over observe extreme caution when they decide to violate a foreign country's airspace as doing so is considered to be an act of war.**
 - **Choosing the target:** the intelligence establishments of the country, such as RAW, had the responsibility of choosing the target, and they chose the training centre of Jaish-e-Mohammed, which was the mastermind of the Pulwama attack.
 - However, care was taken to ensure that Pakistan's armed forces and its citizens were not affected. The attack was planned to cause damage only to the terror training camp.
 - Indian government sources say that terrorist launchpads in Balakot, Chakothei, and

Muzaffarabad were completely destroyed in the IAF airstrikes, and that Jaish-e-Mohammed control rooms were also destroyed.

- **Choosing the Weapon:** The Israeli-developed SPICE-2000 was chosen due to its high precision. Several Mirage 2000 aircraft were flown in with the SPICE-2000 to attack the terrorist training camps.
- The attack: Despite the warning by Indian Prime Minister that India would retaliate, the Pakistanis were not prepared and were taken by surprise.
- **Doubts regarding the attack:** Several footages were circulated to question whether the attacks were effective or not, because these footages showed little or no damage to the structures. However, India clarified that the weapon is designed to penetrate the roof of the structure and then blow up inside the building. Questions were raised even on the casualty claims made by India.
- **Reaction by Pakistan:** The measures taken by Pakistan were controlled keeping in mind, that any action of theirs would be met with retaliation by the Indian Air Force which was very well prepared for such an eventuality. However, in its retaliatory attack against India's strike in Balakot, the Pakistan Air Force was not able to hit a single military installation in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri-Poonch sector despite launching precision-guided bombs on February 27.

What are the effects the Balakot strike has had towards the eradication of terror?

- The Balakot strike is just a small measure to depict how a strong stance should be taken while dealing with terror activities.
- The airstrike surprised Pakistan, as it hadn't expected such an attack, though one attack would not be enough to eradicate terror activities or terrorism.
- The strike, however, showed a new political will in India to tackle its adversaries and has acted as a reminder to Pakistan for taking action against terror groups operating on its soil.
- Accepting India's airstrike as a justified act in self-defence against a terror threat from the Jaish-e-Mohammad, several countries including the U.S., the U.K. and France moved swiftly to support India's case. The FATF has been putting pressure on Pakistan to stop terror funding which wasn't the case earlier.
- Several nations began to move to enlist the group's founder, Masood Azhar in the list of designated terrorists, at the UN Security Council's 1267 sanctions committee.
- However, recent information reveals that the terror training camps have been re-established. Thus, a lot more needs to be done to eradicate terror activities from the root, but India can't do it alone and definitely the use of force alone cannot achieve this objective.
- India will have to rely upon a mix of hard power and coercive diplomacy with like-minded countries in order to achieve this objective.

Can a strike like Balakot be repeated?

- It is important to understand the series of events that led to a strike such as Balakot.
- After India's surgical strike inside Myanmar, Pakistan warned India that if India tried any similar operation in Pakistan, it would retaliate with a nuclear attack.
- India called Pakistan's nuclear bluff by responding to the Pulwama attack. India had used the Air Force, which is used as a controlled escalatory measure.
- The Balakot strike was not carried out in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), but in Pakistan itself. India had gone deep inside the Pakistani territory to destroy the terror launch pads.
- The post-Uri attack surgical strikes had marked a major shift in India's response to Pakistani terror.
- India established that Pakistan had escalated the issue and the onus of de-escalation too would be on Pakistan. Pakistan had returned the Indian pilot, who was caught by the Pakistan army as a peace gesture aimed at offering the willingness to de-escalate the tensions.
- The main intention of the Balakot strike wasn't to stop terrorism directly, but an indirect message as to how India is aware of the location of terror training camps and it would not hesitate to attack if a

move is made against India.

- India has also established that it wouldn't remain quiet and would retaliate if it were to be attacked again.

Does the Balakot strike expose Pakistan's retaliatory capabilities or vulnerabilities?

- Yes, it exposes Pakistan's vulnerabilities to retaliate.
- Pakistan was completely unprepared despite the warning given to them by the Indian Prime Minister.
- The Indian aircraft went deep into Pakistan, carried out the attack and then came out before the Pakistani aircraft became airborne despite them being on alert and after the warning given by the Indian Prime Minister. This demonstrates the capabilities of the Indian Air Force and the vulnerabilities of Pakistan.
- India had placed restrictions on flights for two days after the attack, however, Pakistan had placed restrictions on its flights for two months after the attack showcasing the level of insecurities that had set-in in Pakistan after the attack.
- They had also immediately called for a meeting of the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA), which also showed the level of Pakistan's insecurity to the rest of the world.
- The Balakot strike was not a retaliatory strike to the Pulwama attack, those responsible were killed as India had gotten information regarding a similar attack being planned. Hence, India had launched a pre-emptive attack on Balakot to send a message that India would retaliate if its a question of its national security.
- India's response has established a "new normal." The world now acknowledges India's right to retaliate before the attack has taken place. This has shifted the dynamics of how India would be handling such issues in the future.

Post Balakot effects: India and Pakistan relationship

- Relations between India and Pakistan have been complex and largely hostile due to several historical and political events. Bitter relations originated between the two countries after the partition in 1947. The **Indo-Pakistan War of 1947, 1965 and 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War** illustrate the history of bitter relationship between the two nuclear powers.
- Through the Balakot strike, India made it clear that it would retaliate if the country were to be attacked. India also took a series of measures which left Pakistan completely at a disadvantage as it had not anticipated such actions from India. **Balakot operations have established air strikes as an effective tool of deterrence in dealing with Pakistan.**
- **Abrogation of Article 370 has changed the dynamics of the discussion when it comes to resolving the Kashmir issue.** India has made it clear that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of its territory. The abrogation of Article 370 has also had a drastic influence on the political situation between India and Pakistan. This move by the Indian Government also raises questions regarding the CPEC project between Pakistan and China. Hence posturing is also very important and the right moves have been made by India in this regard.

Has India learnt its lesson from the Pulwama attack and prepared well to face any similar challenges in the future?

The lessons learnt from the Pulwama attack have been documented and many steps have been taken by the Indian Government to be better prepared for any form of challenges. For instance -

- The manner in which the convoys move has been changed.
- The assembly points for the para-military forces have been changed.
- However, there always exists the possibility that terrorists have infiltrated and are looking to attack the convoys and paramilitary forces.

Way Forward:

- The issue of Kashmir is no longer in Pakistan's control as they are unable to garner international support and it has been termed by the UNSC as an internal issue of India. The alarmist scenario painted by Pakistan and China at UNSC was rejected as baseless. This established India in a new light to its neighbours, as a country which would claim what is rightfully its and has a new political will to fight against adversaries that pose a threat to the country's internal security.
- India should also be prepared for the downstream of terrorism striking it due to the Afghanistan issue. In the case of the US withdrawing completely from Afghanistan, there is a possibility that Afghan-based terrorists may focus on Kashmir and India should be prepared to defend itself against such possibilities. It should also raise the question whether the exit of the US would permit Pakistan to have a free hand in Afghanistan.
- Focus on the developmental agenda for the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It should focus on getting the administration and the criminal justice system working in J&K at a much faster pace.
- Information warfare and influence operations have to be thought upon by India in order to influence the local people in PoK and Aksai Chin.
- India also has to work on the modernisation of its Armed Forces. Adequate funds must be allotted in the budget for equipping the Armed Forces and to be able to modernize quickly in the face of a simultaneous two-front war with Pakistan and China.

Conclusion:

The Balakot strike was a calibrated, decisive and yet restrained show of force by India through its Armed Forces. The takeaways on the one year anniversary of the Balakot strike is that India has shown the world that it has the political will to take on terror emanating from across the border. India has also achieved its stated goal as far as Balakot strikes are concerned. India called Pakistan's nuclear bluff and exposed Pakistan's vulnerability in terms of their reaction to the entire situation.