

Strategic Analysis Paper

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India and Pakistan: Pulwama and the Continuation of War by Other Means

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Key Points

- Pakistan-based militants attacked a convoy of Indian police personnel in Kashmir, killing at least forty people.
- Prime Minister Modi is under much pressure to retaliate against Pakistan.
- Any retaliation could, however, spill over into war.
- The outcome of such a war would be very detrimental to the economies of India, Pakistan and China, if it decided to intervene.

Summary

At least forty Indian Central Reserve Police Force personnel were killed when a convoy in which they were travelling was attacked on the Srinagar-Jammu Highway on 14 February 2019. A suicide bomber drove his explosives-laden vehicle into the bus in which they were travelling. The Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a Pakistan-based militant group, which has been proscribed as a terrorist group in India, [claimed responsibility](#) for the attack a day later. Its recruit, a 22-year-old Kashmiri man, Adil Ahmad Dar, was the driver of the vehicle used in the attack.

India lost no time in reacting to that claim. Its Home Minister, Rajnath Singh, blamed the 'Pakistan-based, Pakistan-backed' group for the 'dastardly' attack, on 15 February. The Indian Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley, announced the following day that India had withdrawn

Pakistan's Most Favoured Nation trading status and noted that the Ministry of Commerce would notify the World Trade Organisation of that decision. No matter that the decision was more symbolic than effective – Indo-Pakistani trade in the 2017-18 financial year was US\$2.4 billion (\$3.35 billion), or 0.4 per cent of India's overall trade, of which Pakistan's exports to India accounted for around US\$500 million (\$700 million) – New Delhi also raised its taxes on all Pakistani imports to 200 per cent with immediate effect. It is worth noting that, in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on a military camp, also in Kashmir, in 2016, which New Delhi claimed was at least encouraged by Pakistan, it debated withdrawing Pakistan's Most Favoured Nation trade status but eventually decided against doing so. The fact that it has withdrawn that status this time around as quickly as it did would appear to indicate that New Delhi had decided to take a stronger stand against Pakistan.

Analysis

Recognising the seriousness of the situation and its potential to spill over into all-out war, US President Donald Trump described the situation between India and Pakistan as 'very, very bad'. Speaking to reporters in the Oval Office, he remarked that:

Right now between Pakistan and India, there is a very, very bad situation. A very dangerous situation. We would like to see [hostilities] stop. A lot of people were just killed. We want to see it just stop. We are very much involved in that [process].

He added, however, that in his judgement:

India is looking at something very strong. India just lost almost 50 people in the attack. I can understand that, too.

It is that last sentence that is troubling. It appeared to give the impression that the US would fully understand if India decided to retaliate using military force rather than with relatively insignificant gestures, such as revoking trade nominations. It is even more troubling that the US National Security Advisor, John Bolton, [phoned](#) his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval, to inform him that the US supported India's right to self-defence against such terrorist attacks. According to India's [Ministry of External Affairs](#):

National Security Advisor [Mr] Ajit Doval had a telephone call with his US counterpart Ambassador John Bolton on the evening of 15 February. The call was initiated by the US side to express condolences and outrage over the Pulwama attack by Pakistan-based terrorist group Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM).

Ambassador Bolton supported India's right to self-defence against cross-border terrorism. He offered all assistance to India to bring the perpetrators and backers of the attack promptly to justice. NSA Doval appreciated US support.

The two NSAs vowed to work together to ensure that Pakistan ceases to be a safe haven for JeM and terrorist groups that target India, the US and others in

the region. They resolved to hold Pakistan to account for its obligations under UN resolutions and to remove all obstacles to designating JeM leader Masood Azhar as a global terrorist under the UN Security Council Resolution 1267 Committee process.

That message is being perceived in New Delhi as a tacit nod to any retaliatory military action that India might wish to take against Pakistan-based terrorist groups, including Jaish-e-Mohammed, or perhaps even against Pakistan itself for harbouring and encouraging such attacks on India.

The message is a direct contradiction (and tacit refutation) of the Obama Administration's directive to India in the wake of the 2016 attack, also by Pakistan-based militants, on a military camp in Uri, Kashmir. Following that attack, then US Security Advisor, Susan Rice, phoned Mr Doval, urging him to exercise restraint while the Obama Administration urged Islamabad to take action against the militant groups that were based in its territory. It is worth noting, again, that Ms Rice's phone call took place just hours before India conducted "surgical strikes" against Pakistan and wiped out several militant camps there. Pakistan subsequently denied any such strikes had taken place but it is more than likely that they did occur. Given that occurrence, despite the urging of the US, it is highly likely that India will conduct some sort of attack against the militants, and possibly even Pakistani personnel, to send a message to Islamabad now that New Delhi has Washington's approval to do so.

It is that likelihood that appears to have led Mr Trump to [declare](#) that the situation between India and Pakistan was "very dangerous" and that he could understand India's desire for "very strong" retaliatory measures. Senior officials in his administration, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, publicly named Pakistan as being behind the attacks. Equally telling, on 21 February, the United Nations Security Council issued a [press release](#) that identified the Jaish-e-Mohammed as being the perpetrators of the "heinous and cowardly" attack. The statement noted that:

The members of the Security Council condemned in the strongest terms the heinous and cowardly suicide bombing in Jammu and Kashmir, which resulted in over 40 Indian paramilitary forces dead and dozens wounded on February 14, 2019, for which Jaish-e-Mohammed has claimed responsibility.

This is particularly telling because China, Pakistan's all-weather friend, did not attempt to veto the release, further isolating Pakistan. That could be because, as a recent [FDI paper](#) asserted, China could be working with Russia to entice US allies and potential US allies, such as India, into its camp. Despite that, it cannot abandon Pakistan altogether. Its Belt-Road showpiece, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (in which it has invested around US\$64 billion (\$89.30 billion)), and the geostrategic advantages that the project, and Pakistan in general, provide, are too important to be abandoned. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, [stated](#) in a press conference that:

As for the listing of the certain organisation and individual by the UN Security Council 1267 Committee you asked about, the UN Security Council 1267 Committee has detailed criteria for the listing and designation procedures for terrorist entities or individuals. The Jaish-e-Mohammed which claimed

responsibility for this attack is already on the Security Council sanctions list against terrorism. China will continue to deal with the relevant listing issue in a constructive and responsible manner.

He, however, later made clear that his statement was not to be taken as censuring Pakistan, [saying](#):

Yesterday, the UN Security Council issued a press statement that mentioned that particular organisation but only in general terms. It does not represent a judgment on the attack.

China has made no move to allow the designation of Jaish-e-Mohammad chief, Masood Azhar, as a terrorist even if it has no qualms about the organisation being named publicly. To that extent, Pakistan has every right to be assured that China will continue to defend its interests. It is significant, nevertheless, that the UNSC document names Jaish-e-Mohammed, since no official Pakistani statement has acknowledged that the group took responsibility for the attack.

The Security Council document also stated that its members:

Underlined the need to hold perpetrators, organisers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice, and urged all States, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, to co-operate actively with the Government of India and all other relevant authorities in this regard.

India received support from Iran. About 27 Iranian soldiers were killed in a [suicide bombing](#) in Sistan-Balochistan province on 13 February. According to the Revolutionary Guard Corps, the suicide bomber was a Pakistani national.

In order to maintain the appearance of complying with international norms, Pakistan's National Security Committee conducted its own investigation of the matter and in a press release [stated](#) that:

Prime Minister Imran Khan today chaired a meeting of National Security Committee at Prime Minister's Office. Participants discussed geo-strategic and national security environment and situation arising after the Pulwama Incident. The forum noted that the state of Pakistan is not involved in any way, means or form in the said incident. The incident was conceived, planned and executed indigenously. In this regard, Pakistan has sincerely offered investigation of the incident as well as the offer of dialogue on the issue of terrorism among other disputed issues. We expect India to positively respond to the offers. Based on the investigation or any tangible evidence provided, State of Pakistan shall take action against anyone found using our soil.

That message was met with a degree of incredulity by the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi, which responded with its own [statement](#) that:

We are not surprised that the Prime Minister of Pakistan refuses to acknowledge the attack on our security forces in Pulwama as an act of

terrorism. Prime Minister of Pakistan has neither chosen to condemn this heinous act nor condoled with the bereaved families.

Disclaiming any link between the terrorist attack and Pakistan is an oft-repeated excuse by Pakistan. The Pakistani Prime Minister has ignored claims made by the Jaish-e-Mohammad, as well as by the terrorist, who perpetrated this heinous crime. It is a well-known fact that Jaish-e-Mohammad and its leader Masood Azhar are based in Pakistan. These should be sufficient proof for Pakistan to take action.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan has offered to investigate the matter if India provides proof. This is a lame excuse. In the horrific attack in Mumbai on 26/11, proof was provided to Pakistan. Despite this, the case has not progressed for the last more than 10 years. Likewise, on the terror attack on Pathankot airbase, there has been no progress. Promises of “guaranteed action” ring hollow given the track record of Pakistan.

A war of words is one thing; the promise of military action is a completely different matter, however. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is under considerable pressure to retaliate against not just Jaish-e-Mohammad but against Pakistan itself for its continuing support for that and other militant groups and their leaders. The timing of the attack is also significant. India must hold general elections before May of this year. While he is likely to be returned to office in the absence of any real opposition, it is equally likely that he will not be returned with as large a majority as he enjoyed in 2014.

That is due to several reasons. His unfulfilled pledge to create millions of jobs, his poorly executed roll-out of the Goods and Services Tax, even though the revised tax system itself was welcomed in general, and his decision to remove certain currency notes from circulation in order to destroy India’s parallel economy, have coalesced to contribute to his diminished image and favourability in the polls. Arguably most importantly of all, his decision not to act against the violent measures that his powerful Hindu backers have taken against non-Hindu and secular segments of Indian society, including murder, to curtail the slaughter of cows and the perceived Westernisation of Indian society from the celebration of Valentine’s Day and women going to nightclubs, has taken much of the gloss off his administration.

Apart from that, Mr Modi is a victim of his own success. In the wake of the strikes he authorised against Pakistan in 2016, he made much of the fact that, while the strikes were a complete success, not a single Indian soldier lost his life in carrying them out. Indeed, a hit movie about the strikes is drawing large audiences throughout India. So deeply rooted in the social consciousness have those strikes become that anything less this time around would be seen as weakness. Mr Modi has no option but to carry out another series of strikes – at least. In the interim, he [warned](#) Pakistan that India would not be weakened by such attacks and that it would exact a heavy price from the attackers.

Anticipating an attack on Pakistani territory, Prime Minister Imran Khan met with his military leaders to chart out a plan of action to be taken if such an attack did take place. That led to the usual tit-for-tat message from Mr Khan, [warning](#) India not to attempt any such attack. The Pakistani Army, additionally, provided its own [warning message](#).

The danger in all of this is the potential for the situation to spiral out of control. Mr Modi faces considerable pressure at home, including from media commentators who claim that the Pulwama attack to be termed an [act of war](#), not terrorism. He will definitely lose the election if he does not act against Pakistan-based militants. Pakistan, on the other hand, fears India's conventional military might and has warned that it would use its tactical nuclear weapons against Indian military personnel if they attacked Pakistan. Using nuclear weapons – tactical or otherwise – would, however, be seen by New Delhi as crossing a red line and it could retaliate with its own nuclear weapons. It is precisely that situation that led former US President Bill Clinton to remark that South Asia was the [most dangerous](#) region in the world.

Even if Indian strikes against Pakistan did not devolve into nuclear warfare, New Delhi would still need to remain cognisant of China's own requirement to ensure Pakistan's security. China would need to demonstrate, for the sake of its own credibility, that it is capable of ensuring Pakistan's security and standing up to India, especially after India stared it down at [Doklam](#) in 2017. While it is true that India continues to build up its own military in its [north-east](#) to counter the Chinese build-up in Tibet, it must ask itself if it could afford to fight a two-front war – against Pakistan and China – at this time. A war between India and Pakistan could result in Pakistan suffering badly, putting at risk its recent efforts to strengthen its economy and possibly reducing its viability as a Chinese ally. India's own economy would, similarly, suffer, setting the country back, possibly by decades. China, if it attacked India to protect its ally and to recover Indian-administered territory that it claims as its own, could see India attack it in turn, which would jeopardise its own economy at a time when it is already in trouble. Such a war, in short, would be one that none of the three countries wants or needs.

That reason alone ought to suffice for Pakistan to ensure that its territory is not used by militants as a base from which to launch attacks against India. The consequences could be horrifying indeed.

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