



# THE BALAKOT STRIKE: A LESSON IN USE OF AIRPOWER FOR POLITICAL SIGNALING



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It's a defining moment for use of Air Power by India. A combination of exploiting the unique capabilities of Airpower, political decisiveness, optics and accurate intelligence – a new chapter has been opened. Air Power has been used across the Line of Control (LoC) and International Border (IB) for the first time since 1971. While many say it's an attempt at posturing to signal intolerance to terrorist activities sponsored by Pakistan, some still believe it to be a miscalculation against a nuclear armed state. The response from Pakistan that came in the form of air strikes may prove the skeptics wrong.

The night-time strike by Mirage-2000 aircraft of the Indian Air Force (IAF) with precision weapons (Spice -2000 guided bombs) against the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) camp at Balakot in the early hours of February 26, 2019 appears to be a well deliberated option. The assessment of the damage caused has not yet been released, but it may not be that important either. The prominent aspect of the event that should be given importance is that IAF aircraft went across the LoC on an offensive mission against terrorist targets and came back safely. It is the political messaging and punitive aspect of the strike using Air Power that needs emphasis, and not the effect or the fact that there were retaliatory strikes. After all, any military action would have a certain degree of risk, attrition, inaccuracies and retaliation factored into the decision making process. The strike across not only the LoC, but also the IB, busted the belief that conventional deterrence is no longer effective under a nuclear shadow. On the contrary, the strike by India, and the retaliatory strike by Pakistan have both established that adequate space exists for conventional military action between two nuclear armed adversaries, albeit, under responsible leadership.

Besides the political intent for a strike across the IB and willingness to use Air Power, another feature which was demonstrated was the 'capability'. Precision air strikes from standoff ranges using

standoff weapons are now a reality, and the IAF has demonstrated this capability. Once again, the results of damage assessment which may prove the weapons to be very accurate are not as important at this stage as to know that the IAF has demonstrated the use of precision weapons against terror targets. The weapons are after all just as accurate as the intelligence they get. It is but natural that precision air strikes will now become the preferred option for eliminating a terror network, provided accurate actionable intelligence is available.

The notion that the situation may escalate beyond control and Pakistan may respond with the nuclear option has been demolished. The Indian Foreign Secretary's statement of India having carried out an Intelligence-led pre-emptive strike against non-military targets was perhaps the ace of all diplomatic astuteness. What needs to be recognised is that there is a modicum of freedom for conventional military action that exists between two nuclear armed states. This means that the targets have to be selected carefully in terms of their location – close to the LoC / IB – and of low direct military value, though significant otherwise. Another vital aspect to be considered is minimising collateral damage. These considerations would mean using a standoff capability to avoid aircraft transgressing the IB, and use of precision weapons to eliminate collateral damage. Accurate intelligence is a pre-requisite in terms of target value, target dimensions, terrain, time sensitivity, satellite imagery, precise coordinates and Air Defence environment of the target area. All these variables would affect the mission planning process. Satellite imagery helps a great deal in post mission analysis.

What next? Terrorist attacks will not stop – at least in the near future. The nation will look up to the IAF to conduct precision air strikes in future for dismantling terrorist infrastructure. The option of sending in troops across the LoC seems a thing of the past. IAF therefore needs to innovate with tactics and keep trained crew in readiness. Availability of accurate actionable intelligence is a necessity. This needs to be topped up with pre and post strike imagery analysis using Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) and Satellites.

The message from the Balakot strike is clear – India will not hesitate in using the option of air strikes to rein in terror exported from across the borders, even if it means crossing the IB / LoC. Use of Air Power should become the norm for any military response to terrorist acts. Use of Air Power in contemporary warfare is not always escalatory. Rather, it is transformative and game changing.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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