

Commitment traps make Kashmir de-escalation tricky

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On 14 February 2018, a Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) suicide car bomber attacked an Indian paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force convoy in the Pulwama area of India-governed Kashmir. Over 40 Indian police personnel died in the assault, making it one of the deadliest attacks on Indian forces in decades. In the early hours of 26 February, an Indian Air Force formation of 12 Mirage-2000 fighters entered Pakistani territory and bombed JeM and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) training camps, reportedly killing 300 militants.



Despite Pakistan claiming the strike hit only uninhabited forest, India's response constitutes its first air strike in Pakistani territory since the 1971 war. As Pakistan investigates its air defence and intelligence gaps that enabled the Indian operation, its National Security Council vowed that 'Pakistan will respond at the time and place of its choosing'. That response came on 27 February, with retaliatory strikes in India-governed Kashmir and at least one Indian plane being shot down in the ensuing dogfight.

While Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attacks against India are not new, this escalatory sequence and its background are unique. In September 2016, in response to a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack upon an Indian Army installation in India-governed Kashmir, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government authorised a 'surgical strike' against terrorists based in Pakistan-governed Kashmir. This allegedly involved Indian special forces crossing the Line of Control to eliminate terrorists.

While these kinds of Indian operations had been covertly conducted in the past, this time the Modi government decided to aggressively publicise details. BJP election posters highlighted the attack to emphasise Modi's toughness on Pakistan, and Party President Amit Shah boasted that 'for the first time, in this frontal fight against terrorism, India under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi is feeling secure'.

By publicising the surgical strike so heavily and claiming that it had cowed Pakistan from further audacious terrorist attacks, Modi made himself a hostage to fortune that there would indeed be no more such strikes against India.

Given that the government was publicly bragging that the surgical strikes deterred further terrorism from Pakistan, another significant terrorist attack would naturally present Modi with an unwelcome choice of two options. With a similar surgical strike response now proven ineffective, Modi could launch a larger retaliatory attack, with the attendant greater risks of an escalation spiral with nuclear-armed Pakistan. The alternative would be for Modi to realise the extent of these escalation risks and adopt diplomatic and other non-military responses that would amount to a loss of face on his part.

The latter option would emulate the Indian government's strategy following the 2008 Mumbai attacks by Pakistan-based LeT. Seeking to retain flexibility of response, New Delhi did not publicly promise forceful retaliation, but instead met to evaluate available military options. The government recognised that there were none that could be punitive enough to change Pakistani behaviour without risking an uncontrollable escalation spiral. So it decided to build upon India's post-1998 long-term, and successful, diplomatic strategy of ensuring Pakistan's progressive diplomatic isolation by encouraging a global image of Pakistan as an irresponsible, terrorist-sponsoring actor.

Such a strategy has aided in driving a wedge between Washington and Islamabad, to the extent that the latter cannot buy American F-16s and is increasingly dependent upon Beijing for regular injections of capital to stave off a fiscal crisis. This approach has arguably done more damage to Pakistan's national power and long-term trajectory as a state than any Indian military adventure could achieve.

Following Pulwama, Modi instead selected the first, military, option. He limited his room for manoeuvre and entered a commitment trap, repeatedly publicly promising after the attack that the 'time for talks have passed', and that the perpetrators and their sponsors (meaning Pakistan's military establishment) will 'pay a very heavy price for their actions'. He also faced strong pressure from Indian public opinion to launch a military attack, with the additional dimension of this being an election year.

What remains uncertain is the extent to which Modi's administration thought through Pakistan's likely responses to the air strike, and how it plans to meet each potential Pakistani response with an eye toward de-escalation. In publicly promising to retaliate, Pakistan

entered its own commitment trap. The resulting tit-for-tat air strikes and aerial dogfight is unprecedented between nuclear powers.

Without developing de-escalation mechanisms, any Pakistan or Pakistan-sponsored counterattack, even if on the comparatively lower scale of the Uri or Pulwama attacks, worsens Modi's commitment trap. He can either launch an even bigger and riskier attack, or adopt a strategy of diplomatic and non-military pressures that may prove more successful in the long run, but appear as personal weakness on Modi's part.

To get off this escalation ladder, the key is for both parties to identify off-ramps to the crisis. This is especially urgent as this is also the first post-1998 crisis between the two states where the United States appears to be relatively disinterested. While senior US officials have now begun urging restraint, they appear unwilling to get further involved. US National Security Advisor John Bolton offered his condolences and verbal support for India's fight against terrorism following Pulwama, but still appears highly preoccupied with Venezuela. It looks as if the two states will have to resolve this crisis directly. They must begin now.

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