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## **INDIA CALLED OUT PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR BLUFF WITH IAF AIRSTRIKES, BUT NEEDS TO REMAIN ALERT; HERE'S WHY**

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Many articles have been written after the Pulwama incident that took place on the Valentines Day and the air strikes by India on 26 February 19. After the din and buzzle of the events have gone down, it is advisable to take a step back and look at a few issues that have emerged from these incidents.

Firstly, the attack on the CRPF convoy on 14 February 19 brought out a few issues. The large number of casualties that the Central Reserve Police Force suffered whipped up the emotions of the entire country. Pakistans reactions after the incident showed it in poor light and highlighted its role as a perpetrator of terrorism. Indias reaction was sombre and sober. The high number of body bags coming back to various parts of the country stirred up an anger that was very palpable. The emotions ran so high that a retaliation was inevitable. This incident brought the discourse of terrorism into focus throughout the world.

The reaction of the countries was one of unanimous condemnation of the gory act. Even the Organisation of the Islamic Countries invited India to their conference much against the wishes of Pakistan. Indias diplomacy was at its best in handling this situation. Militarily, some lessons need to be taken home. One needs to realise that such sneak attacks are possible if an attacker is adequately motivated even if a country has a strong intelligence and defence capability. A large convoy is both a strength and weakness. It is a strength because of the reaction capability that is available within the convoy and a weakness because it becomes unwieldy. We need to put measures in place to effectively counter such black swan attacks and plug the loop holes, if any, that is revealed by the analysis of this event.

Secondly, the retaliation that took place at the early hours of 26 February 19 brought a number of things to the fore. Ever since Pakistan tested its nuclear device, there was a self-belief that its nuclear capability acted as a deterrence against India. For long, many strategists had suggested that India should call Pakistans bluff. That Pakistans bluff was called by the airstrike has been acknowledged by them. The air strikes on Balakot also brought to the fore that there are conventional options available below the nuclear threshold and India will not hesitate in employing them.

The strike also exhibited Indias resolve to take on terrorism at its base and expose Pakistans complicity to the world. India took 12 days to retaliate. Needless to say, this period would have been used to plan, coordinate and shape the international environment before the air strikes were

carried out. No country criticised the strike on the Jaish e Mohammad (JeM) base and it is a proof that the preparatory work done for it paid off well. Indian Airforce (IAF) carried out the strike with precision and showed that it is capable of getting through Pakistans air defence system by striking a target that is located deep inside Pakistan territory. It is to the credit of the IAF that much older MiG 21 Bison aircraft, which were scrambled to intercept the Pakistan Airforce (PAF) aircraft that were more modern, acquitted themselves admirably. The sharpest message that the air strike brought out was that it doesnt take much time in combat situations for the tides to turn. This fact was borne out clearly when India experienced a sense of euphoria on 26 Feb with sadness and despair on 27 Feb when Wing commander Abhinandan had to bail out from his fighter aircraft who was captured by the Pakistanis. Some writings have highlighted technical issues on the dog fight that took place between IAF and Pakistan Air force aircraft. The learnings from these actions that IAF must work on will come out after IAF it carries out a thorough analysis of the action.

Thirdly, the issue of proscribing Masood Azhar, chief of JeM, came to limelight. The responsibility for the Pulwama incident was claimed by JeM immediately after the incident. That brought pressure on China to support the motion in the UN Security Council to proscribe him. Mr Kong Xuanyou, Chinas Vice Foreign Minister, visited Pakistan on 06 March 2019 amidst expectations that Masood Azhar s case would be discussed. India also mounted a diplomatic offensive to get the terrorist leader proscribed. However, China placed a hold on the motion to ban Azhar. The downside for India and other countries that sponsored the motion was that they could not succeed in their effort. However, there is an upside to it and that is China did not paint itself in glory because of its action. In fact, it has been singled out as a country that is not supporting the efforts of countries in combating terrorism. Pakistans own statements that were often contradictory to each other confirmed its role in housing terrorist elements on its soil. These two countries will face increased pressure to act against terrorism. Reports have quoted Syed Akbaruddin, Indias Permanent Representative at the UN, as saying that patience is the hall mark of diplomacy and India will continue to work on China over this issue.

Fourthly, perception management plays a major role in international relations. There has been some criticism that India lost out in the same to Pakistan. Pakistans Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) was seen to be proactive. Whether its efforts were successful is a moot question. On the contrary, Indias public information campaign was done by official media briefings. The media and the public speculated a lot and that resulted into all kinds of insinuations. It may be better if a media plan is incorporated along with the main operations plan to win the perception management campaign, if it had not been done so.

Fifthly, the veracity of the air strikes was questioned by some quarters. Some others argued whether armed forces are beyond question or not. All those need to understand that while carrying out combat operations, the foremost aim of the armed forces is to complete them successfully with least number of casualties and damage to own equipment. Any action that deviates from this aim will result in casualties and loss of such valuable resources. Collecting proof of damage or casualties caused will be the last thing on their mind. Armed forces are responsible for the safety of the people of India from external threats and one can be confident they understand that very well.

In sum, India came out on top in the recent tense situation that was created by the Pulwama incident and combat actions in its aftermath. However, it needs to remain alert and conscious to the clear and present danger from its neighbourhood.

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