

Conference Report

**CSSPR – CASS Conference
The University of Lahore
11th November 2019**

Deconstructing Balakot Strikes:

**Pakistan's Conventional
War-fighting Doctrine & the
Way Forward**

A one-day conference titled 'Deconstructing Balakot Strikes: Pakistan's Conventional War-Fighting Doctrine & the Way Forward' was organized by the Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR) in collaboration with Center for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS) on 11th November, 2019 at University of Lahore. This roundtable conference was attended by almost fifty participants, including retired high-ranking air force officers, practitioners, academics and scholars. The main idea behind organizing this event was to understand the Balakot Crisis and its various dimensions from onset of the crisis to its termination with a view to draw lessons from it for policymakers. The conference aimed at highlighting Pakistan's calculated and swift response to India's strikes in Balakot and assessing its implications on Pakistan's conventional war-fighting doctrine. The keynote speech was delivered by the former Chief of Air Staff, President CASS, Air Chief Marshal Kaleem Saadat (Retd) NI (M). The conference had three panels: Deconstructing Balakot Strikes, India-Pakistan Crisis and Nuclear Escalation Dynamics and Pakistan's Conventional War-Fighting Doctrine.

The conference began with a comprehensive overview of the Balakot crisis, politico-military factors surrounding it, Pakistan's responses to crisis trajectory and what it portends for the future. Discussion started with an examination of the changing nature of the Indian state from a secular democracy to a fascist majoritarian state, a fact which is unsettling for Pakistan given its proximity. A reference was made to the Hearing on Human Rights in Asia on October 22, 2019 by U.S. House Subcommittee which discussed the Indian annexation of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh and curfew in the Indian Occupied Kashmir highlighting unprecedented state repression in Kashmir and not just after August 5, 2019.

Examining PAF's Operation 'Swift Retort', participants discussed Indian performance which revealed technical inadequacies in addition to tactical errors. While Indians might have been able to avoid tactical mistakes, systemic technical deficiencies dissuaded them from launching a massive counter aerial action against Pakistan. They could not risk further IAF losses inside Pakistani territory. That is one reason for Indian reliance on operationalization of Rafale and S-400 weapon systems which they think would provide them technical edge and perhaps immunity from any future PAF counter-strike. It would require the PAF to acquire additional capability too, to neutralize perceived Indian advantage. This would further push the region towards more destabilizing arms race however, with superior planning and tactics, Pakistan can burst the Indian bubble and it would only require downing one Rafale to send them back to the drawing board. Participants were also of the view that Indian reliance on SSMs to threaten Pakistan only reveals that they had run out of manned aircraft employment options or had lost confidence in their effective use. Added to this mix was also an ambiguity about Indian re-think on NFU after PAF's Operation 'Swift Retort'. Indian re-think and frustration was discussed to have dangerous consequences for regional stability as any irrational Indian action could escalate situation across the LoC. Participants cautioned that wars in the past started due to misperception, underestimation of enemy's capability or overestimation of one's own potential. Given Indian frustration, Pakistan has no option but to be vigilant on all fronts whereby Pakistan maintains that if attacked, it will defend itself at all costs. Threat of use of force must remain on the table even when Pakistan's support for Kashmiris goes beyond diplomatic, political and moral paradigms. There was consensus that absence of this threat will embolden the enemy.

Participants hailed PAF's response to suggest that in a single strike, Pakistan contributed to crossing the Indian embarrassment threshold and red lines restoring the equilibrium in 30 hours. Some participants debated that Pakistan should have taken this case to the UN to register the Indian act of war after Balakot strikes and it missed the opportunity by not doing so. Participants registered that the Indian air attack was a clear violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which was a case of willful use of force. Participants were also of the view that India remains ahead in this battle of narratives, deceiving Indian public with a false sense of victory. Desperate in its search for heroes, India awarded Abhinandan with a Vir Chakra for being shot down. Participants discussed the evolution of the Indian military doctrine in backdrop of the Balakot strikes. The use of airpower is an instrument of choice for the IAF to use at any level and scale to achieve moral and psychological ascendancy. This shift towards aircentric approach is innovative using technology, flexibility and responsiveness of airpower to achieve desired effects in the political domain. Participants cautioned that Pakistan should be prepared for the Indian use of air-only option as way of war-fighting in future.

Participants asserted that window of conventional conflict at operational and tactical levels will always exist and India will continue to exploit it to achieve its doctrinal objectives. The preparation of Pakistan military at operational and tactical levels will thus determine how quickly this window is shut and strategic deterrence remains intact. This was achieved by the PAF through Operation 'Swift Retort' which also goes to show that a small Air Force when correctly employed can create strategic effects. Participants recommended that Pakistan must formulate its own military concepts that could enhance deterrence value of its conventional forces besides giving it options for strategic and meaningful gains in a future conflict with India. Some participants called for an overhaul of war-fighting doctrine which should not be a static concept divorced from environmental realities, instead should be a living concept which is continuously taking account of regional threats, volatile environment and realities. At the military level, the doctrine must be a product of joint thinking, training and operational understanding to efficiently exploit the tri-service assets in pursuit of national objectives.

Participants further deliberated on how India's Hindutva ideology that promises to adopt a hawkish military stance towards Pakistan relies on building a particular narrative for domestic as well as foreign audience. Emphasis was laid on how the Bharatiya Janata Party-led India went about eviscerating autonomy of the Indian Occupied and now Annexed Kashmir by illegally de-operationalizing Articles 370 and 35A on 5th August 2019. Participants discussed Pakistan's response mix to the Kashmir crisis and how it should adapt in-line with India's continuous bellicosity emanating from the BJP-RSS ideology. International reactions to Kashmir crisis were reviewed and recommendations were given for an effective case before the international community. Participants deliberated on tactical and strategic implications of India's military modernization and posturing, while commenting on Pakistan's evolving threat perception and much needed set of strategies to deal with it.

While appreciating Pakistan's handling of the crisis at military and diplomatic levels, participants outlined the need for better messaging and narrative-building during and after the crisis. There was consensus that more robustness on these fronts in the future would give Pakistan's narrative more traction to counter fake news plugged in social media through Indian

propaganda during the crisis. The need for integrated narrative building in a more coordinated manner early on in the crisis was stressed.

The Twin Peaks mobilization and India's Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) was also discussed in detail. Participants discussed that under the nuclear overhang, long-drawn war is not feasible for a decisive victory and that it is better to have short, sharp, decisive gains than spread-out war which can get stalemated. Change in operational thought is required, but more importantly, time ascendancy is to be achieved. Infrastructure development and reorganization is required and for a forward-leaning posture, forward-leaning logistics will also be required. India through its CSD aims to undertake offensive operations against Pakistan through Holding (pivot) Corps and every Holding Corps now has a mechanised brigade. CSD will reduce preparation time for Strike Corps from three weeks to three to four days, aiming at making shallow thrusts for shallow gains. Participants deliberated on Indian politico-military objectives, foremost being building a new normal of surgical strikes reinforced through narrative building on social and mainstream media focusing on TV channels reaching out to domestic political audiences for political gains. Participants were of the view that Pakistan cannot accept time differential given shorter interior lines. There was a call for reformulation of Pakistan's strategic thought especially post-Mumbai. Participants suggested that Pakistan needs to develop its infrastructure and reorganization of its forces in tandem with forward-leaning posture and that it must guard against strategic surprise. While applauding PAF's role in Operation 'Swift Retort', it was suggested that war will not always begin with ground operations and that India could use IAF for opening rounds. For this strategy, it was unanimously upheld that PAF's role was critical.

Tactical and technical aspects of the Indian airstrikes and PAF's retaliation through Operation 'Swift Retort' were discussed in detail. Participants drew lessons for Pakistan and discussed the importance of airpower in the Indo-Pak theatre. In the backdrop of changing nature and conduct of crisis, participants deliberated on Pakistan's preparation across the power spectrum to respond to challenges stemming from its eastern flank. The role of narratives and diplomacy was highlighted as supporting elements during and after the crisis since outcomes of future crises will hinge upon them. Participants outlined some of the ways through which Pakistan could increase organizational synergy to deal with future Indo-Pak crises. Participants reviewed implications of the Balakot crisis in backdrop of militarized Hindutva nationalism to predict future Indian moves towards Pakistan and debated India's evolving strategic culture and Pakistan's responses in short, medium and long terms.

Participants reviewed previous Indo-Pak crises at length from onset to termination through lens of strategy, domestic political imperatives, deterrence and advent of cutting-edge technologies. It was suggested that the lure of the battle must never lead to complacency and Pakistan must be prepared for all options. Discussants delved on ramifications of ultra-nationalism on escalatory dynamics and how such tendencies make occurrence of crisis likelier. Participants also discussed the impact new technologies are likely to have on Indo-Pak crises and their escalation dynamics and debated whether technology drives doctrine or vice versa.

Discussion on India's evolving military doctrine and its effect on escalation patterns in future crises brought out varying perspectives during the conference. Crises and escalation were also

analyzed through the prism of the Kashmir issue. Participants debated prospects of escalation control at a time when the role played by third-parties is being questioned due to their own geopolitical interests or lack thereof.

Pakistan's conventional capabilities, doctrine and vitality of conventional deterrence in nuclear environments was also reviewed in the conference. Pakistan's carefully calibrated response strategy portrayed that any attack inside Pakistan's territory would invoke Pakistan's nuclear threshold, however, Pakistan through its retaliation after the Indian strikes in Balakot demonstrated that it has valid conventional means of deterrence to raise cost for aggression within its territory. Pakistan's strategy was a mix of 'resolve-prudence trade-off'. India's attempts for escalation during the crisis were not limited to just vertical escalation but also horizontal escalation through operational deployment of its major combat units including the Carrier Battle Group with its aircraft carrier, nuclear submarine and conventional flotilla. Some key takeaways were discussed by the participants while deliberating on the assumption that 'Pakistan would come worse off in the first round and escalate'. This presumption was proven wrong as Pakistan's response busted India's misplaced strategic assessment of Pakistan's conventional response. Participants also opined that India appears to be overconfident that it will be able to control escalation given the types of statements made on gaining jurisdiction over Pakistan administered Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. This misplaced Indian confidence borders on reckless adventurism and risk taking which is detrimental to South Asian strategic stability. Participants observed that the probability of crisis recurrence between India and Pakistan is high and during a crisis, neither side would be able to guarantee controlling or dominating the escalation ladder. A key takeaway being that climbing escalatory rungs cannot be choreographed or be predictable. Participants observed that deliberations on counterfactuals can be an instructive approach to understand future pathways to escalation. India's deployment of nuclear platforms across air and naval domains along with dual-use platforms for military missions speaks of dangerous readiness postures in future crises in South Asia. The technologies that favor first use, BMDs, PGMs, hypersonic cruise missiles, enhanced ISR capabilities etc., alongside integration for rapid decisive action and speed would enhance nuclear readiness levels and might lead to early occurrence of an escalatory spiral that may have dynamics unknown to both countries.

Participants discussed in detail dynamics of deterrence, nuclear signaling and how India's 'band of operation' fits in the scheme of things to highlight the importance of conventional deterrence for Pakistan. Participants discussed some of the threats to deterrence stability in South Asia and analyzed crucial options Pakistan has to enhance its deterrence while avoiding an unbridled arms race in the region. Participants also discussed India's warmongering as something that calls for Pakistan's constant vigilance and formulation of an array of contingencies.

Participants deliberated on the future of air warfare to suggest that BVR (Beyond Visual Range) combat has decidedly taken precedence over Close Combat strategies. Stand-off weapon delivery will be the new mode of Surface Attack and aircraft not equipped with such capabilities must be considered redundant in modern warfare. Thus the selection of aircrew must lay emphasis on superlative psycho-motor skills. In this realm, simulators must have a far greater role in pilot training and Electronic Warfare will be the most significant game changer. What does the future

portend then? For the foreseeable future, participants debated that Indian military actions towards Pakistan will be punitive in nature, driven by domestic compulsions and fanned by media. They will be based on 'Hit and Run' tactics and will involve air attacks by IAF and airborne Special Operations, in addition to usual artillery shelling. They will likely to remain confined in AJ&K and Gilgit-Baltistan. Participants were of the view that Pakistan will always find itself in a reactive mode, therefore, operational preparedness will be the name of the game. Lastly, there will be a premium on prompt decision-making by Pakistan's politico-military leadership in the next crisis between India and Pakistan.

After extensive disquisitions and debate, the conference ended with a note of thanks by Mr. Awais Raouf, Chairman BoG, University of Lahore who appreciated the candid discussions and invited CSSPR to conduct future sessions on deconstructing previous crises to learn key lessons.