

## SECURITY

# Reading Between the Lines, from Pulwama to the Balakot Airstrike

The past two weeks provide grounds for optimism sans jingoism – on the timing of the air-strikes, the strength of India’s diplomatic game and other developments in the India-Pakistan face-off.



Narendra Modi and Imran Khan. Illustration: The Wire



## Nilanjan Banik and G. Venkat Raman



POLITICS SECURITY 4 MINUTES AGO

The recent India-Pakistan military exchanges post-Pulwama mark a significant shift in how India deals with terrorist attacks from across the border. The **pre-emptive strike on terrorist camps** was swift and caught Pakistan on the wrong foot. In the exchanges that followed, Pakistan surprisingly decided to return India's fighter pilot **Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman unconditionally**, urging India to settle differences with peace talks.

However, two issues which are yet to be understood with clarity are: the timing of the Pulwama attack and the unexpected and so-called extension of the olive branch from Pakistan.

### **The timing of the Pulwama attack: Why Now?**

It is well known that terrorists strategically plan attacks around elections. India is not an exception to this. In fact, democracies provide a high degree of 'permissiveness' and are therefore under constant threat. Discontented groups get to adopt violent means to voice their disgruntlement from time to time – they craft their strategies just before democratic elections to grab eyeballs.

In recent years, Spain and Germany have been victims of terrorist acts just before elections. In India, this was the case with the Kargil war, the Akshardham attack, the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, 2013 attacks on Mahabodhi temple in Bodhgaya, and now the Pulwama attacks.

There are two possible explanations for the timing of the Pulwama attack.

One – Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) carried out the Pulwama attack to attract global attention and dented the current government's credibility just before elections. In the process it is seeking to influence electoral outcomes. This explanation doesn't cut ice beyond a certain point.

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Two – the JeM conducted the attack to ensure that the current government will flex its nationalistic muscle, politically mobilise the Indian electorate and storm back to power.

What will JeM get out of this? The return of the BJP provides extremist outfits a rallying point by spreading their propaganda that the Indian state is anti-Muslim. This enables radical Islamic outfits to indoctrinate and brainwash young people, especially in troubled spots like Kashmir. This also fits into the designs of the terrorist outfits with the backing of the Pakistani government to continue to bog down India with the doctrine 'bleed India with a thousand cuts'.

### **#WelcomeBackAbhinandan**

The return of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman has been portrayed by the Pakistani leadership as a goodwill gesture. What is actually behind the gesture:

First, India perfectly timed its pre-emptive strikes.

Second, India has been **working on the diplomatic front** to up the ante to ensure that major powers like the US, Russia, France and the UK come down hard on state-sponsored terrorism. It is worth noting that even Pakistan's all-weather friend China has not come out openly empathising with Pakistan since the pre-emptive Indian strikes.

Third, India's pre-emptive strikes to exhibit its zero-tolerance approach in terrorism – and subsequent diplomatic onslaught to claim that there were no civilian casualties and gain moral high-ground – seem to have cornered Pakistan.



People hold a portrait of IAF wing pilot commanded Abhinandan Varthaman as they wait for his arrival near the Attari-Wagah border on March 1, 2019. Credit: PTI

### **Naya Pakistan with an eye towards economic well-being**

Prime Minister Imran Khan has promised to liberate Pakistan from all possible evils – corruption, nepotism, extremism and economic disaster. In terms of market size, the Indian economy (\$2088 billion) is almost ten times that of Pakistan's (\$273 billion).

With a lower market size, falling productivity has left Pakistan with no choice but to approach the International Monetary Fund for a \$8 billion bailout package. Its reliance on China to build roads, ports and invest in the energy sector has only added to Pakistan's woe by burgeoning its debt in the international market. With a budget deficit higher than 5% of national income, the last thing Pakistan will hope is to indulge in a full-fledged war with India.

Contrary to popular commentary in the press, India's withdrawal of the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) may, in fact, hurt Pakistan. True, in \$2.4 billion India's trade with Pakistan, the former has a considerable trade surplus – India exported \$1.9 billion worth of good as opposed to Pakistan's \$0.5 billion.

But a closer look at the major exportable items from Pakistan to India – cement, tropical fruits such as dates and refined petroleum – suggest these items are highly elastic in price (meaning India can source these products from elsewhere with similar import price). In fact, in cement manufacturing,

India has excess capacity and Pakistan may find it difficult to sell cement elsewhere as transport costs determine price competitiveness of cement.

Likewise, India has become one of the major exporters of refined petroleum products. India's major export items to Pakistan such as pharmaceuticals, synthetic coloring and propylene polymers are relatively price inelastic, meaning Pakistan has to shell out more for importing these products from elsewhere.

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**Also Read: [Balakot Madrassa Students Heard Explosion, Kept in Military Safe House After Airstrike: Report](#)**

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China also realises the danger of an all-out war between these two nuclear powers. China has not only invested heavily but also houses more than 60,000 Chinese in Pakistan. Additionally, China has gone through the process of tackling extremism in its own Xinjiang province and very well understands India's hawkish stance post-Pulwama.

Pakistan also knows that the development that Khan's government has promised – for instance, building five million houses for the poor, hospitals and research universities – will be derailed by opting for a military engagement with India. By the same token, surgical strikes and pre-emptive strikes are not sustainable from the Indian perspective.

What is sustainable if both India and Pakistan work towards building economic stability in the region? Remember, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and India's connectivity with eastern neighbors has the potential to connect all the way from Turkey to Singapore. And that is a big market which will make both these countries prosper. The first step for that to happen is Pakistan to genuinely curb the JeM-backed terror.

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