

# The right lessons from Pulwama and Balakot

The events of February 2019 need to be extricated from the electoral straitjacket and boastful political utterances



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The ghost of Pulwama and Balakot (picture) has been exorcised nearly 20 months after the twin events happened (2019). In Pakistan, former Speaker and Opposition MP, Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, alleged in the Pakistan National Assembly last month that the PTI government, fearing an imminent missile strike from India, had capitulated and released the captured Indian fighter pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman. The allegation was denied by the Pakistan government and the all-powerful military, and even Mr. Sadiq partially backtracked within a day, but it brought the spotlight back on an incident where the two nuclear-armed neighbours were threatening a military escalation.

## Overtaken by politics

The revival of the focus on Pulwama and Balakot provides us with an opportunity for an honest appraisal of the incident. Unfortunately, this happened in the midst of the Bihar election campaign, and in a throwback to the parliamentary polls last year, an event of strategic importance was only seen through the narrow political prism of its electoral utility for the ruling party. The events of February 2019 need to be extricated from the electoral straitjacket to draw the right lessons.

Mr. Sadiq was referring to a meeting held by Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi with parliamentary leaders of other political parties on February 27 last year, where he discussed the threat of an Indian missile attack that night. A day earlier, the Indian Air Force (IAF) had targeted a se-

minary at Balakot in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, avenging the suicide car bomb in Pulwama 12 days earlier that led to the death of 40 Central Reserve Police Force personnel. On the morning of February 27, the Pakistan Air Force attempted its riposte in Jammu and Kashmir, and in the ensuing aerial combat, Wg. Cdr. Abhinandan was captured by the Pakistan military.

On February 28, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan announced in Parliament that he was releasing the Indian fighter pilot and sending him back home “as a peace gesture”.

## Aspects about Pulwama

The full details of backroom happenings between the suicide car bombing of February 14 and Wg. Cdr. Abhinandan’s return on March 1 are not publicly available but 20 months later, there is definitely greater clarity. Even though a video of the suicide bomber was released by the Jaish-e-Muhammad, there have been constant whispers about certain aspects of the Pulwama terror attack. Those questions have not been answered satisfactorily, even after the 13,800-page National Investigation Agency charge sheet was filed in August and a Pakistani Minister, Fawad Chaudhry, last month claimed, and immediately backtracked from his country’s involvement in the suicide bombing. The responsibility for the intelligence failure, violation of standard operating procedures by security forces and the possible involvement of disgraced Jammu and Kashmir police officer, Davinder Singh, remain unexamined. Davinder Singh was posted in Pulwama from May 2017 to August 2018, and was caught transporting two absconding militants to Delhi in his private car earlier this January. He had earlier been named by Afzal Guru, who was hanged in 2013, as a key go-between in the 2001 ter-



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rorist attack on the Parliament.

## The conduct of the forces

If there are some unanswered questions about Pulwama suicide bombing, the questions about the Balakot air strike have, more or less, been answered by foreign governments and international media. Those answers are unflattering to the professional image of the IAF: from actually hitting the designated targets to providing proof of the destruction, the IAF is seen to have lost the battle of the narrative to its Pakistani counterpart – not that a fumbling and bumbling Pakistan military was anywhere near perfect, making ridiculous claims. The performance of the IAF in aerial combat the next day, where it claims to have shot down a Pakistan Air Force F-16 fighter jet, has been received with scepticism in most western capitals. Wg. Cdr. Abhinandan’s defiant behaviour in Pakistani custody deserved the praise that came his way, but the fact remains that the IAF came second best that morning, as it lost a fighter aircraft and the pilot ended in Pakistani custody.

That day, the IAF also shot down its own helicopter in friendly fire, close to Srinagar. It cast a shadow on the IAF’s report card of those days, but what made it worse were the IAF’s efforts to prevent any media reportage of the fratricide incident before the Lok Sabha elections were over. It was not just dishonest on the part of a

professionally respected force but a partisan act in support of one political party. In a healthy democracy, apolitical armed forces are supposed to follow the elected government’s lawful orders but do not work to further the partisan aims of the ruling party – that would be more in tune with China, where the armed forces are loyal to the Communist Party and not the Chinese state.

Military veterans and nationalist commentators, quick to take offence to any perceived slights on behalf of the uniformed, have conveniently ignored this grave misdemeanour of the IAF during an election campaign. Unless corrected, this would set a wrong precedent for the armed forces and its senior leadership. Two decades ago, the then Army Chief, General V.P. Malik, had lodged a strong complaint with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee during the Kargil war about the use of the images of three service chiefs on the Bharatiya Janata Party’s election posters. While the crumbling of institutions like Parliament, the judiciary and the media in recent years has earned a lot of attention, scholars have been shy of making robust enquiries about the conduct of the armed forces, an institution even more critical to the health of Indian democracy.

## Claims, facts and the audience

Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat claimed on November 6 that the Balakot strike had sent a strong message that Pakistan no longer enjoys impunity of pushing terrorists into India under the nuclear bogey, and a new Indian template to deal with terror has injected uncertainty in Pakistan. It is a claim which does not hold against the facts on the ground this year, as senior Indian Army officers regularly claim that Pakistan is pushing militants into the Kashmir Valley and has hundreds of militants ready to be pushed across the Line

of Control (LoC) at launchpads. Neither the surgical strike of 2016 nor the Balakot air strike have infused deterrence or altered Pakistan’s policies, whether in the Kashmiri hinterland or on the LoC, where Indian security forces personnel continue to lose their lives. However, the Balakot air strike was definitely a punitive move, a tactical act, which demonstrated India’s willingness to cross the threshold of using air power against Pakistan, that too on its mainland. The target audience, as evident in hindsight, was largely domestic – the voters at the polling booth, who responded approvingly.

## Gravity of the crisis

The real focus from February 27 last year should be on the Indian threat and Pakistani counter-threat of firing missiles at each other, an escalatory move that could have taken the conflict into uncharted territory. That the situation was serious is recognised from the urgent interventions by the United States, the United Kingdom and others that night who pressed on both the governments to step back. Narendra Modi’s election campaign speech about the incident, claiming that nuclear weapons were not kept for Diwali, points to the gravity of the crisis. That the two countries could deescalate so quickly is a positive sign but the fact that any miscreant with a few kilos of explosive and an old car can bring these two nuclear weapon states to the brink of war should leave us worried. The current shenanigans in Pakistan’s Parliament should warn us of those dangers and force us to think of ways to minimise them, instead of the usual dose of more bravado and boastful utterances from our political leadership.

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The views expressed are personal