

OPERATION SWIFT RETORT REVISITED

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On February 27, 2024, Pakistan commemorated the fifth anniversary of Operation Swift Retort in which the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) successfully downed Indian fighter aircraft which had violated Pakistan's airspace.¹ This historic day demonstrated the resolve of Pakistani people and the elite training of Pakistan's fighting force as compared to India's. Operation Swift Retort served as a testimony that any form of aggression against Pakistan would be met with a swift and effective response. While maintaining this resolve, Pakistan remains committed to regional peace and peaceful co-existence.

Background A series of events unfolded in February 2019 that escalated the tensions between the two nuclear neighbours, India and Pakistan, before Operation Swift Retort and subsequent actions by Pakistan served as a useful means to de-escalate the tensions in South Asia.

Pulwama Attack: On February 14, 2019, a convoy of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel was attacked by a local Kashmiri youth named Adil Ahmad Dar in Pulwama,

¹ ISPR, "The Armed Forces of Pakistan, along with the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (JCSC) and Services Chiefs, commemorate the fifth anniversary of "Operation Swift Retort" press release, February 27, 2024, <https://ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail?id=6757>

Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). Adil's family later revealed that his anger against the Indian state grew after he was injured and humiliated while participating in a protest in 2016.² In a revealing interview given to Karan Thapar on April 14, 2023, the former governor of Jammu & Kashmir Satyapal Malik exposed a series of lapses and ignorance of the Indian government that resulted in lack of security on the route travelled by the paramilitary forces which culminated in the Pulwama attack.³

Balakot Crisis: Without conducting any investigation, the BJP government, however, immediately pinned the blame for the attack on Pakistan, and announced a series of steps against Pakistan in the diplomatic, political and trade arena. On February 26, 2019, India conducted a so-called 'surgical strike' inside Pakistan's territory on an alleged Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) training camp in Balakot located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan using twenty French-made Mirage-2000 armed with Israeli Spice-2000 bombs and Crystal Maze missiles guided by U.S. GPS and targeting systems.⁴ Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale claimed that the strike killed 'a very large number' of militants, including commanders.⁵

However, the strike was termed as 'a very precise miss' by analysts who deeply studied the failed strike through open-source satellite imagery.⁶ Pakistan armed forces' spokesman Major General Asif Ghafoor rejected the claims of casualties by India and informed that the "payload of hastily escaping Indians aircraft fell in open space' in a tweet on X" with images of damage to a tree and a crow.⁷ Regardless, the violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and

² "Kashmir attack: Tracing the path that led to Pulwama," *BBC News*, may 1, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47302467>

³ The Wire, "Modi Silenced Me On Pulwama Lapses, Is Ignorant on J&K, Has No Problem With Corruption— Ex-Gov Malik" YouTube, April 14, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8wmHUHLvOI>; Kavita Chowdhury, "Revelations on Pulwama Attack Return to Haunt Indian PM Modi," *The Diplomat*, April 25, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/revelations-on-pulwama-attack-return-to-haunt-indian-pm-modi/>

⁴ Sara Nazeer, "Operation swift retort: A surprise for India," *Pakistan Today*, February 2024, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2024/02/27/operation-swift-retort-a-surprise-for-india/>

⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, India, "Statement by Foreign Secretary on 26 February 2019 on the Strike on JeM training camp at Balakot" press release, February 26, 2019, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31089/Statement_by_Foreign_Secretary_on_26_February_2019_on_the_Strike_on_JeM_training_camp_at_Balakot

⁶ Marcus Hellyer, Nathan Ruser and Aakriti Bachhawat, India's strike on Balakot: a very precise miss?," *The Strategist*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indias-strike-on-balakot-a-very-precise-miss/>

⁷ @OfficialDSISPR, Twitter post, February 26, 2019, https://twitter.com/OfficialDGISPR/status/1100231826348617728?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5E

territorial integrity prompted Pakistan to deliver an immediate and appropriate response.

Operation Swift Retort: In the early hours of February 27, 2024, under Operation Swift Retort, Pakistan Air Force carried out six airstrikes at non-military targets in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK), announced Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the operation, the Pakistan Air Force depended on F-16 and JF-17 Thunder to down two Indian aircraft that approached Pakistan and violated the territory. India refuted Pakistan's claims of shooting down the jets, while Pakistan denied India's claim of the loss of a F-16 jet, which was also refuted by U.S. Department of Defence (DoD) officials who verified Pakistan's inventory.⁸ The pilot of the downed Indian MiG-21 Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was taken into custody by Pakistan and treated with dignity and under international law before returning to India as a peace gesture.⁹

However, failing to appreciate Pakistan's peace gesture and willingness for peaceful co-existence, a former Indian diplomat, Ajay Bisaria, penned down a distorted version of the history in his recent book arguing disingenuously that Pakistan returned the pilot due to India's aggressive posture and threats to further escalate tensions.¹⁰ These claims were quashed by a Pakistani analyst, underlining that if Pakistan was apprehensive about Indian aggression and escalation, it would have not carried out Operation Swift Retort.¹¹

Contrary to India's false narrative being peddled now, the day (February 27, 2019) clearly belonged to Pakistan. First and foremost, the Indian strikes in Balakot a day earlier had miserably failed and there was no independent verification of the 'losses' that India claimed to have inflicted. Then, Operation Swift Retort demonstrated that Pakistan held adequate defence capabilities as well as the will to carry out defensive operations even against

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- ⁸ "PAF's Operation Swift Retort – Feb 27 continues to haunt IAF," *Daily Times*, February 2022, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/892466/pafs-operation-swift-retort-feb-27-continues-to-haunt-iaf/amp/>
- ⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, "Return of Indian POW, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman" press release, march 1, 2019, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/return-of-indian-pow-wing-commander-abhinandan-varthaman>
- ¹⁰ "Former Diplomat's book shows how PM Modi snubbed Imran Khans' midnight call after Balakote strike," *ANI*, January 9, 2024, <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/qatal-ki-raat-former-diplomats-book-shows-how-pm-modi-snubbed-imran-khans-midnight-call-after-balakote-strike20240109101056/>
- ¹¹ Dr Khurram Abbas, "The tea is still fantastic," *The News International*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1146271-the-tea-is-still-fantastic>

military targets deep inside Indian occupied territory in broad daylight without the fear of consequences. As the day wore on, while the captured Indian pilot was confirmed to be in Pakistan's custody, the Indian forces in the fog of war shot down their own Mi-17 V5 helicopter which killed seven people and also misfired a missile that was intended for its own aircraft. This series of events illustrated that the disoriented Indian forces were hardly in a position to demonstrate firmness, undertake any decisive action, or pursue an 'aggressive posture' – as being claimed, post-facto, now.

Knowledge accounts further corroborate that India's reported message to undertake missile strikes against Pakistan was forcefully retorted by Islamabad, pledging much more than any intended number of Indian missiles in a counter-strike by Pakistan.¹² This had a further sobering effect on India. International interlocutors, reporting back to Islamabad, said they were reassured by New Delhi that India did not intend any further escalation. This clearly shows that India was not in any position -- on 27 February -- to indulge in 'coercive diplomacy,' as being falsely claimed now by some commentators.

Defence Modernization Post February 2019

After the February 2019 stand-off between India and Pakistan, Indian Prime Minister Modi asserted that India could have been victorious had the French fighter jet Rafale deal gone through.¹³ Indian Rafale deal was delayed due to corruption charges; however, even if India had received the much-touted Rafale, India's dream of air superiority would have required extensive and elite operational training. Since February 2019, India has received several batches of Rafael for its Air Force and Navy and is building up its military might aggressively with assistance from its partners under the pretext of countering China, when in reality it is preparing to make up for the loss of 2019.

Since the 2019 events, Pakistan's Air Force has inducted the 4.5 generation Chinese-made J-10C¹⁴ and is set to acquire the fifth-generation J-31 from China¹⁵ and the fifth-generation

¹² Mariana Baabar, "After Balakot strikes: 'Pakistan aimed 12 missiles at India to counter its move'," *The News International*, January 13, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1147418-after-balakot-strikes-pakistan-aimed-12-missiles-at-india-to-counter-its-move>

¹³ S M Hali, "Who gained what from the 27 February 2019 skirmish?," *Business Recorder*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40228582>

¹⁴ "Pakistan officially inducts Chinese-built J-10C fighter jets," *Air Force Technology*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.airforce-technology.com/news/pakistan-inducts-j-10c-fighter-jets/>

fighter jet KAAN from Turkiye.¹⁶ These acquisitions along with unmanned aerial vehicles and JF-17 Thunder, will likely make a formidable combination to deliver a punishing response when required. There is a consensus in the strategic community of Pakistan that the country must continue to fortify its defences and showcase its strengths and capabilities to deter any offensive action by the hostile eastern neighbour. Nevertheless, given the volatility of the regional security environment and the unpredictability of escalation dynamics, prudence demands that neither side should seek to undermine the potential and prospects of regional peace and stability.

Conclusion

The timeline of incidents of February 2019 illustrates that both India and Pakistan possess military capabilities to carry out such strikes. Given these incidents, India's capabilities should not be underestimated; nevertheless, Pakistan's resolve to deliver an immediate and effective response to any aggression from the larger neighbour must also be clearly registered. Operation Swift Retort again demonstrated that Pakistan is well equipped to carry out a counter-defence within a very short span and its latest defence acquisitions may further reduce the response time but double the lethality of impact. Strategic foresight and Pakistan's peace gesture to return the captured Indian pilot should be considered as a show of remarkable maturity that underscores Pakistan's continued commitment to peaceful co-existence. Sustained regional instability will neither benefit India nor Pakistan in the long run.

¹⁵ Usman Ansari, "Pakistan to buy Chinese FC-31 fighter jets, says air chief," *Defense News*, January 4, 2024 <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2024/01/04/pakistan-to-buy-chinese-fc-31-fighter-jets-says-air-chief/>

¹⁶ Akhil Kadidal, "Turkey to engage Pakistan over officially joining Kaan project," *Janes*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/turkey-to-engage-pakistan-over-officially-joining-kaan-project>