

13 SUNDAY STORY



Representatives of the three services addressing the media in front of the Defence Ministry in South Block on February 28. Tashi Tobgyal

In 2011, then a Flight Lieutenant who flew a Sukhoi fighter jet, Abhinandan Varthaman was asked in a TV documentary: What makes a good pilot? "Bad attitude," he said, amid peals of laughter from fellow pilots.

Eight years later, Wing Commander Abhinandan has emerged as the face of the Indo-Pak tension in the past fortnight following the February 14 Pulwama terrorist attack and the February 26 Balakot air strike. With Islamabad handing him over in two days as a "peace gesture", after Delhi had ruled out any negotiation, Abhinandan had possibly spent the shortest stint as an Indian pilot in Pakistani captivity. This was long after the 1965 war when Pakistan's Field Marshal Ayub Khan had offered General KM Cariappa the release of his son, KC Cariappa, a downed pilot, within a day, but General Cariappa had refused saying he didn't want special favours. He was released after four months.

This fortnight, from Pulwama to Balakot, marked a milestone in India's retaliatory response to terror. But it were 12 long days fraught with risks.

A NEW LINE OF CONTROL

With the Balakot strike, India has set a fresh template for terror response against Pakistan, for any government that follows. SHUBHAJIT ROY on what went on beyond the 12 days between Pulwama and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

government was also clear that the punitive action should not be knee-jerk and not swayed by public opinion. "There were no impossible demands made of us," a senior defence official said.

As PM Modi publicly declared that he had given full freedom to the Indian forces to respond, the understanding within the higher echelons was that the time frame should be six weeks from the Pulwama terror attack.

Meanwhile, the MEA was tasked to "prepare the international environment" for a military option. "The political dial was spinning, so the diplomatic dial was also spinning," in an official's words.

Joint Secretaries in charge of territorial divisions in the MEA started working their phones. While India had deployed such "coercive diplomacy" after the Uri attack in 2016 and the Mumbai attack in 2008 as well, the effort this time was unprecedented in scale.

The first tweet on the incident came from US Ambassador Kenneth Juster as early as 7.42 pm on February 14 — hours after the attack. Juster expressed condolences and said the US "strongly condemns" the attack. "The United States stands alongside India in confronting terror and defeating it," he tweeted, signing off with #KashmirTerrorAttack.

Working through the night, officials urged other ambassadors as well to either issue statements or ask their foreign ministries — if they were awake and available — to do so. Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale held fort over the next few days, summoning Pakistan envoy Sohail Mahmood, meeting ambassadors of P-5 countries, envoys of South Asian neighbours and a majority of the G-20 countries.

Over the next few days, all P-5 countries, and all South Asian neighbours, and strategic partners, issued statements condemning the attack. The big gains were statements from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey and Iran, all major partners of Pakistan who routinely support Islamabad on the Kashmir issue. By the time of the Balakot strike, India had got condemnation statements from more than 110 countries in 12 days.

But Delhi knew it may not be enough. In his book *The People Next Door: The curious history of India's relations with Pakistan*, T C A Raghavan, former Indian envoy to Pakistan, wrote, "Diplomacy as a means to induce Pakistan's action against the planners of the attack had its limits, and these were revealed in the aftermath of 26/11 as older anxieties and paranoia about India asserted themselves in Pakistan."

At that juncture, in a significant signal to New Delhi as well as the international community, US National Security Advisor John Bolton supported India's "right to self-defence" against cross-border terrorism, in his

RECENT TERROR ATTACKS

URI, SEPTEMBER 2016
19 SOLDIERS KILLED
RESPONSE: Surgical strike, boycott of SAARC summit

PATHANKOT, JANUARY 2016
7 SECURITY PERSONNEL, 1 CIVILIAN KILLED
RESPONSE: Cancellation of bilateral dialogue, global outreach, Pakistani investigators visited Pathankot air base

MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 2008
166 PEOPLE KILLED
RESPONSE: Global outreach, dossiers handed over to Pakistan, trial led to Ajmal Kasab's hanging in 2012. Trial in Pak inconclusive despite sharing of evidence

PARLIAMENT ATTACK, DEC 2001
9 PEOPLE KILLED
RESPONSE: Global outreach, condemnation, Operation Parakram, Afzal Guru hanged in 2013

phone conversation with his Indian counterpart Ajit Doval. The underlying message was a nod to a retaliatory strategic response by India, including military.

This was different from the conversation the Obama Administration's NSA, Susan Rice, had with Doval in September 2016, after the Uri attack. Then, the message was to exercise restraint, even as Pakistan was asked to act against terror outfits.

Another big breakthrough came when China, after a week of diplomatic wrangling, signed on the dotted line of a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) statement that "condemned in the strongest terms" the Pulwama terror attack and named Jaish for the "heinous and cowardly suicide bombing". The statement was significant because China has singlehandedly blocked the listing of Jaish chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist at the UNSC for the last 10 years, thrice at Pakistan's behest. After the Balakot attack, US, UK and France moved a proposal to list Azhar again.

The UNSC statement was the first time a terrorist attack in J&K had been condemned by the UN body. The UN considers J&K disputed territory, and has been unable to come to a consensus on the definition of terrorism. As a result, it has never been involved in past terrorist attacks in Kashmir.

"Uncle Sam took the lead," an Indian official told *The Sunday Express*, saying the US had done the heavy lifting to persuade China to come on board.

It was nearly a week after Pulwama though that the UNSC statement came,

though South Block had hoped for one in two days — like after the 26/11 attack or Parliament attack. Explaining the reason for this delay, an official said that China wanted UNSC members to use UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres's language, which was part of his spokesperson's statement on Day One: "We strongly condemn today's attack in Jammu and Kashmir Pulwama district..." But Delhi wanted stronger language. So, on February 19, Guterres's spokesperson said: "We're deeply concerned at the increase in tensions between the two countries in the wake of the attack on Indian security personnel on 14 February in Pulwama."

China initially wanted a mention as Indian-administered Kashmir, but remaining P-5 countries prevailed upon Beijing.

So, the language had changed from "attack in Jammu and Kashmir" to "attack on Indian security personnel". "That made the difference," an official said, adding that Beijing soon came on board. "China also agreed to name Jaish in the statement as they wanted to cut their losses. Sometimes you take a decision to gain something, sometimes you don't want to waste political capital on something like this," a source said.

The change in China's stance also meant clarity on one of the uncertainties surrounding the escalation ladder — how Beijing would respond if a military option was exercised. The sense in Delhi was that China was also worried about terrorism on its soil, and hence had a better understanding of the challenge.

New Delhi also believed that Beijing would not react negatively as long as Chinese interests, including its infrastructure, and personnel who are part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, were not targeted. "Any limited, coercive action, that does not hamper Chinese interests, would not invite retaliation from China," a South Block official said.

Having created an international environment against Pakistan, India had three military options — surgical strikes by special forces, air strikes and shallow conventional thrust.

While surgical strikes lacked the surprise element after Uri, shallow conventional thrust had the potential of leading to a more prolonged and protracted conflict. Hence air strikes were decided as the most effective option.

But there were many challenges to this too. US or NATO strikes in Afghanistan are generally carried out in sparsely populated, semi-urban areas, unlike the location of the Jaish headquarters in Bahawalpur, Pakistan. Other targets around urban centres like Karachi or Lahore were also densely populated.

Indian establishment was able to gather reasonably good intelligence on this, and finally zeroed in on Balakot, located on a hilltop in a forested area, away from military installations and a civilian population.

So, less than a fortnight after the attack, in the wee hours of February 26, India conducted air strikes deep inside Pakistan — the first time after the 1971 war.

The world got the first inkling of the attack around 5.12 am, when Pakistan Army spokesperson Major General Asif Ghafuroo tweeted: "Indian Air Force violated Line of Control. Pakistan Air Force immediately scrambled. Indian aircrafts gone back. Details to follow." By 5.15 am, a mid-level Indian diplomat had seen it.

In its announcement at 11.30 am, India said it had struck the "biggest training camp" of Jaish, in Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), killing "a very large number" of Jaish terrorists and their trainers. The government fielded the Foreign Secretary to announce the strike rather than a military official (the Director General of Military Operations had announced, for example, the surgical strikes after Uri), to convey that it was a counter-terror operation, and not a military operation.

A top official told *The Sunday Express*, "By striking in KPK, India made the LoC and the International Border irrelevant when it comes to cross-border strikes." According to him, "More than the casualty numbers and damage, what matters most is that you were able to hit them inside their country, and that is a huge strategic achievement."

India also noted in its statement that it had chosen "non-military" targets, and that the strikes were "pre-emptive" as the Jaish was planning another hit.

Till now, the official noted, the Indian establishment's response to such situations has been marked with reflection and restraint. It is mindful of global opinion, and prefers giving diplomacy a chance. The Balakot strike, he said, "...showed the intent that if you hit us, we will hit back, inside your territory. And, this will be limited to not just PoK, it can go beyond to other provinces of Pakistan. The idea is to instil some sort of fear in the minds of the Pakistani establishment."

According to sources, a senior official declared at the government war room in Delhi that terrorists like Hafiz Saeed and Masood Azhar would not be able to sleep peacefully at night now. "Because, you never know what the Indians will do," he told fellow officers.

The Indian calculation had factored in a Pakistan retaliation. While many warned the escalation ladder between the two nuclear-armed countries couldn't be predicted, Delhi's sober assessment was that Pakistan would not use nuclear weapons, considering the international outrage that would follow and how India might retaliate. Delhi also assessed that given Islamabad's economic and political realities — it has barely US \$8 billion forex reserves and is looking for an IMF bailout — it would not be able to go in for an all-out war.

"See, Pakistan is an army with a country. They would have hit back for a face-saver, so we were prepared," an officer said.

On February 27, over 20 Pakistani aircraft breached the LoC and launched laser-guided bombs. Contrary to the Pakistan Army's claims of having "rocks and trees" — to keep the tensions simmering but low — they actually narrowly missed Indian military targets. Delhi was quick to call it an "act of aggression", and claim that while it was not looking at escalation and had conducted a "non-military counter-terror pre-emptive" strike, Pakistan had tried to hit Indian military installations.

Also, in the dogfight, while one Pakistani aircraft was shot down, India too lost a fighter jet with Abhinandan getting captured in PoK.

As India pressed for its pilot to be returned, Islamabad dialled major countries, including the P-5, and claimed Delhi was planning three offensive actions. It claimed movement of Naval ships towards Karachi, a plan to launch ballistic missiles, and amassing of troops along the India-Pak border.

Rattled, the foreign governments reached out to New Delhi. The Indian side told them this was "fictitious and manufactured". In fact, they said, Indian Naval ships were moving away from Karachi, and this fact could be verified by them themselves.

Soon, Islamabad found itself isolated, with none of the P-5 countries backing it and many asking Pakistan to act against the terrorist groups. It also found itself at the receiving end of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), where it is still on grey list, and that drives away potential investors to the country.

The UAE too snubbed Pakistan's demand that the Organisation of Islamic Countries withdraw its first-ever invitation to India after a 1969 fiasco.

With the P-5 countries, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE leaning on Pakistan, Islamabad had few options. The assessment in Delhi is that the Pakistan Air Force's action in India was meant by PM Imran Khan for his domestic audience, while releasing Abhinandan gives the Pakistani army a chance to portray itself as a professional force. Imran's announcement on Abhinandan's release prompted India to dial down too.

"Pakistan used the limited elbow room they had. Just like they had announced the Kartarpur corridor and forced India to reciprocate, this time as well, they forced India to de-escalate," said an Indian diplomat.

A statement by the Indian tri-services military that they were in a "state of readiness" but would not escalate any further also brought relief to not just Pakistan but to the international community as well.

But even as Abhinandan came home, what was clear was that the strategic red line between India and Pakistan had moved decisively. Pakistan had been clearly conveyed that India "reserves the right to take firm and decisive action to protect its national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity against any act of aggression or cross-border terrorism".

In his book *Choices*, former NSA Shivshankar Menon, in his concluding paragraph in the chapter on 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, wrote, "Lastly, personalities matter. With a different mix of people at the helm, it is quite possible that India would have chosen differently. In fact, if India is forced to make a similar choice in the future, I am sure it will respond differently."

A top official told *The Sunday Express* that with Balakot, the Modi government had created a template for future governments to come, irrespective of their political affiliation. Said an official, who has worked closely with the UPA government and now with the Modi government, "This was unlike the Manmohan Singh government, where there would be naysayers and discussions and debate. Once the top brass had decided to act, everyone was supposed to implement."

But, for Delhi, the tone remains the demand that Pakistan show credible, verifiable action in its crackdown on terrorist groups, their proxies, their infrastructure and cross-border terrorism. To that effect, the detailed Jaish dossier was handed over to Pakistan.

Given the long and complicated nature of India-Pakistan conflict, it is also clear India can't depend on aggressive posture alone. With Pakistan desperately trying to correct its international image and making peace initiatives, any government would also require to think on its feet.