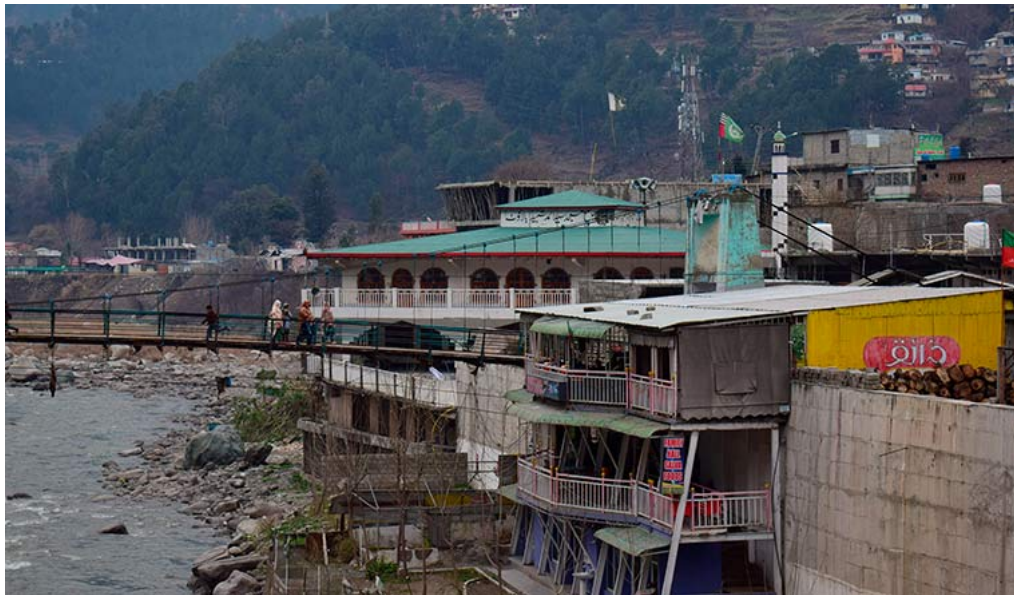


Hit and run

Balakot strike was a triumph of planning and execution



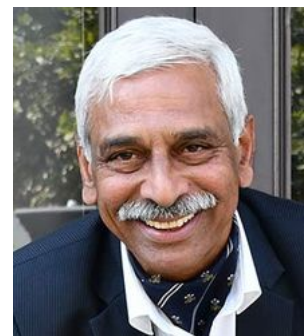
By Air Marshal (Retd) C. Harikumar | February 29, 2020 16:39 IST



In the line of fire: A view of Balakot town; the Indian Air Force chose Balakot as its target on February 18 last year, four days after the Pulwama attack | AP

THE PUNITIVE AIR strike at Balakot changed the security narrative in the subcontinent. Having been a victim of the Pakistani deep state's sponsored terrorism for too long, India raised the costs for Islamabad with the punitive air strike. A new normal also emerged. India's political leadership realised that use of airpower need not be escalatory; that there exists a large window for sub-conventional or limited war options between two nuclear powers.

The action also exposed the existence of state-run terrorist camps in Pakistan. The proof of the pudding is that there has been no major terrorist attack since then.



The attack on a CRPF convoy at Pulwama on February 14 killed 40 jawans. By evening, Jaish-e-Mohammad's involvement was confirmed. By the time the cabinet committee on security met the next morning, the Western Air Command (WAC), on the directions of the air chief, had briefed him on the options for punitive action.

Operation Parakram was ordered after the 2001 attack on Parliament, in which the militaries on both the sides were deployed for a full-fledged conventional war. A sub-conventional plan was formulated, post Parakram, involving select squadrons. A few fighter squadrons and units were put on standby 24/7 for short-notice missions. After the Kaluchak massacre of May 2002, we prepared for air strikes against terrorist camps in Pakistan. After the 26/11 Mumbai attack of 2008, we had a tacit clearance from the government for a punitive strike.

This time, Balakot in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, which was across Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, was finalised as a target when the national security adviser met the service chiefs, the Research and Analysis Wing chief and his deputy on February 18. The R&AW had good intelligence on a large Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp on the crest of a ridge called Jaba Top. It was an ideal target—the location was on an isolated hill, which reduced collateral damage; the target was big enough to be clearly identified; and it was a single target with multiple DMPI, or designated mean point of impact.

“ We simply defeated their superior weapons with superior manoeuvring. Pakistan's retaliation was a giveaway that our Balakot strike was successful. ”

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Fresh images of the site were obtained, and the eight-figure GPS coordinates reverified. The strike was planned to be conducted after Aero India in Bengaluru ended on February 24. The exact date was left to the political leadership. February 26 was tentatively picked, though we knew we could get better weather two days later. The weather was marginal, with five western disturbances rolling in one after the other. Those who remember the National War Memorial inauguration on the evening of February 25 would recollect the thunder showers over Delhi after the event. The weather affected satellite imagery, which was needed to check on enemy deployment and defences.

There were more challenges. We had to ensure secrecy. Units not involved were kept at a lower readiness state or peace-time mode. Briefings with the operational crew were done personally or over secure lines. Mobile phones were a no-no. The boys were eager, but told not to show excitement.

The next problem was to keep it all under cover. Twenty Mirages were to be armed with multiple weapons; the upgraded Mirages carried six MICA missiles each. Six Mirages were armed with SPICE bombs and six with Crystal Maze surface-to-air missiles. Arming these would itself be a major event involving three Mirage squadrons. So much activity on the Gwalior tarmac would be noted.

The next worry was, how to fly such a massive force across from Gwalior to the target without the world and our own civil radars knowing about it. Sixteen aircraft took off from the runway and taxi track simultaneously to save time. Once airborne, hiding them was tricky. Commercial aircraft taking off and landing in Delhi were in the process of climbing or descending, thus taking up large height bands. We resolved this by rehearsing the event partially two days earlier and getting a person with authority at Delhi area control.

The planes flew over 1,500km on a dark night, refuelling in mid-air from IL-78 aircraft; all the while, real-time information was being relayed from AWACS. We planned a strike route over the mountains to evade enemy radars. So the team flew from north of Srinagar in a westerly direction. Everything was monitored at the operations room in the WAC.

Five impact points were selected. The largest structure in the Balakot complex, a mosque, was not targeted. The first hit was at 3:28am IST on February 26, by Mirage 2000s with SPICE-2000 penetration bombs. Each bomb was planned to be followed by a Crystal Maze, which has a two-way data link with the aircraft through which it could provide imagery for assessing battle damage. One SPICE bomb failed for technical reasons; none of the Crystal Maze missiles were released because of procedural issues.

The time was selected as 3:28am as it would be 2:58am in Pakistan; the terrorists would be asleep and the moon would have risen above 30 degrees. (February 19 was a full-moon night.) We knew that the terrorists prayed five set times a day, starting with salat al-fajr before sunrise. So, the strike was timed accordingly.

Yes, there was no precise body count. But the issue was not about how many terrorists were killed; it was about sending a strong message. Was Pakistan caught off guard? Yes, in spite of their readiness. Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had moved squadrons to their satellite bases, and increased the number of aircraft in operational readiness platforms. We were aware of these moves.

Did we encounter the enemy? Yes, we picked up the PAF's Saab 2000 early warning aircraft holding south of Kamra on a north-south pattern. At 3:05am, we spotted two F-16s getting airborne and flying east-west over Murid. This was a close call. To divert them, we sent two Su-30s and four Jaguars towards Bahawalpur. The decoy pilots were ordered

not to cross the border. The ruse worked beautifully. When the first bomb hit the Balakot camp, the closest PAF combat air patrol was 230km away.

As soon as the Mirages reached their bases, we declared a pan-India air defence alert. We were prepared for a full-blown conventional war, but we made all out efforts not to escalate the conflict.

Yet, we were certain that Pakistan would retaliate quickly. The next day, February 27, saw action from their side. Our air defence was on full alert; the AWACS was on station northeast of Adampur in the morning and so were the aircraft on combat air patrol. At 9:42am, the Integrated Air Command and Control Station warned of an increase in air activity over Pakistan. Fighters were launched from Kamra, Murid, Chander, Sargodha, Rafiqui and Jacobabad. They were at medium altitude, and some had their friend-or-foe identification on initially. That was a decoy—they were showing themselves on our radar to make it seem like routine activity; some aircraft tried to hide at low altitude. Some of these airfields are close to the border and fighters are routinely airborne for training. Unless hostile intent is seen, taking action would require a lot of effort.

Soon, PAF fighters regrouped and turned east for the attack. The first enemy package crossed the border in the Line of Control sector at 9:58am on the Akhnour axis, and approached the LoC around 10:06am. Another package approached the Poonch axis, staggered by five to seven minutes. A third package was opposite Anupgarh sector.



Thwarted counterattack: Indian Air Force officers show parts of an exploded AMRAAM missile fired by Pakistani fighter jets, in Delhi on February 28 | PTI

Each package had eight to ten aircraft, supported by multiple combat air patrols, Saab 2000s and Dassault Falcon 20s for electronic support. On our side there were two upgraded Mirages on combat air patrol east of Udampur, and two Su-30s near Srinagar. Two MiG-21 Bisons were scrambled in two lots (10:01am and 10:03am) from

Srinagar, two Bisons from Awantipur, two MiG-29s from Adampur and two Su-30s each from Halwara, Bathinda and Jodhpur.

The PAF ensured that they did not cross the International Boundary or the Line of Actual Control. Two MiG-21 Bisons, flown by Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman and Squadron Leader Vyas, were scrambled from Srinagar at 10:03am for the package on the Poonch axis. On reaching the sector, Abhinandan spotted enemy aircraft at low level, and the radar informed him that all aircraft to his west were hostile. He went for the target in contact on close combat mode with R-75 missiles.

The radar had asked the formation to turn back because of the threat developing on them. Vyas heard the call and turned around. Jammers prevented Abhinandan from getting the call. In the melee, it is presumed that the Bison shot down an F-16D, while breaking off from the attack.

The enemy dropped 11 weapons—two each at Kishan Ghati, Bhimber Gali (Hamirpur), Kesbowl and Tackundi Bowl, and one each at the 251 Ammunition Point in Rajouri and Bharat Gala—but could not cause any damage. The debris indicated use of H4 bombs (range 120km) and range extension kits (60km) on Mk-83 bombs.

Why did the weapons not cause damage? I see two reasons. One, the enemy was forced to turn back by IAF interceptors before weapon release. Or, they were not allowed effective follow-through. Five AMRAAM missiles were fired by the F-16. Debris of AMRAAM AIM-120C5 were picked up and shown on national TV at 7:30pm on February 28.

Why were such beyond-visual-range missiles ineffective? One theory is that PAF wanted to draw our air defence forces to a planned kill box without crossing the LoC and use their superior AMRAAM to get aerial kills. Since this ploy did not succeed, they launched their missiles at longer ranges. We simply defeated their superior weapons with superior manoeuvring. Anyway, Pakistan's retaliation was a giveaway that our Balakot strike was successful.

There were many tactical lessons for us. One, the PAF's superior beyond-visual-range missiles give them an advantage of first-shot capability with better kinematic range. Our planned induction of the Meteor missile with Rafale fighter jets would change that. Two, weather and mountains do impose physical limitations on aerial surveillance. Good and real-time intelligence will always be the most critical requirement in any conflict.

Three, communication jamming was a vulnerability. The IAF has been crying hoarse for years for securing communications and progressing the case for operational data link. The case has got traction now. Four, dominance in the electromagnetic spectrum will play a key role in future conflict. Five, clear rules of engagement are important in less-than-war situations. These rules need to be reviewed quickly. Seven, combatants need to be trained to quickly switch from peacetime rules to wartime activities.

The shooting down of our own Mi-17V5 helicopter is unpardonable. It was a combination of many mistakes, including personnel being trigger-happy at the first exposure to a conflict. The conflicts of 1965, 1971 and 1999 have shown that the maximum attrition for any air force is in the first three days of conflict, when we experience the 'fog of war'. The US air force, which leads in combat experience, realised this over years of iteration. The main objective of the Red Flag exercise in the US is to train personnel in handling the first three days of combat with reduced attrition.

With stand-off ranges increasing, involving air power for sub-conventional operations will open more windows of conflict and conflict resolution. Today's rule is that military planes should not operate less than 10km from the border. At normal speeds, this distance can be covered in less than a minute. The issue gets compounded with induction of weapon systems which have assured stand-off ranges, like the Meteor missile (which has a range of more than 100km), SCALP (300km) or S-400 (380 km), with AWACS giving cross-border visibility of 450km. Thus, the fight could take place without crossing the border. We need to remember that it works both ways.

One may ask, why use aircraft when surface-to-surface missiles or cruise missiles are available? The answer is: they are more dangerous because of the warhead options or the threat of disproportionate retaliation. Perhaps long-range artillery or rockets and armed drones or unmanned aerial vehicles are more acceptable. The conflict in the Middle East has shown effective use of affordable low-tech drones causing unacceptable damage.

Our response reflected a strong political will, quick decision-making, good intelligence in selection of target, meticulous planning, good tactical acumen, maintenance of secrecy, excellent execution in adverse weather, robustness of the Integrated Air Command and Control System and excellent tactics and training.

Total war between countries is slowly becoming history. We need to be prepared and trained for border conflicts like Kargil, heightened tensions at Doklam or punitive surgical strikes, as in Pakistan and Myanmar.

The bigger message: If major terrorist strikes reoccur, we will hit again and hit harder.

Air Marshal C. Harikumar was the air officer commanding-in-chief of Western Air Command during the Balakot strike.

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