

# Operation Swift Retort: The US and Chinese Response and Analysis

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## **Manipulation, Miscalculation, and Unintended Escalation**

Pakistan and India are trapped in an inherent security dilemma that is further complicated by the growing United States-China rivalry. While Pakistan is attempting to [balance](#) its relations with the two superpowers, India seems to have shown an [inclination](#) towards the US. The rise of China is seen as a mutual threat by the US and India, which is ultimately driving their strategic partnership. Pakistan and China, the two major military powers of the region, perceive this strategic partnership as a threat to regional [stability](#) and order. Pakistan's concern is that unconditional US military support to India would result in the latter exhausting or threatening to exhaust its arsenal against Pakistan which may lead to miscalculation, and unintended escalation. A similar case was witnessed in a series of events that unfolded when Indian Balakot strikes allegedly claimed to have attacked a militant group Jaish-e-Muhammad's camp using Israeli SPICE 2000. The Balakot strike was said to be a retaliation to a suicide attack on an Indian paramilitary police convoy in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir that killed 40 people. The Balakot strike inside Pakistan's territory, however, could not inflict quantifiable damage as a [precision](#) strike is still a science and art that demands both awareness of the enabling systems and practice. Nonetheless, India's Ministry of External Affairs released a statement that the attack was a counter-terror strike and achieved the intended objective, yet great [controversy](#) remains. The Balakot strikes, where India preferred to showcase its military might instead of dealing with the issues at home, led to unwanted escalation with Pakistan.

## **Operation Swift Retort**

The kinetic phase of the escalation terminated when the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) conducted Operation Swift Retort (OSR) under its new warfighting concept of quid pro quo plus strategy to put out the blazing entwining between Pakistan and India. OSR was an aerial dog fight that took place on the morning of 27 February 2019 in which Indian Air Force's (IAF) mis-adventuring pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was shot down and captured by the Pakistan Army, before being released to India as a peace gesture, when his jet MiG-21 crashed in Pakistani territory. OSR was conducted as a response to Balakot strike, the so-called Indian non-military and pre-emptive surgical strike. The purpose of the OSR was to instruct India about the capabilities of the Pakistan Air Force when its boundaries would be challenged. The Balakot strikes by India and the subsequent OSR by Pakistan shows that tensions between the two states can take an unintended and unwanted turn towards escalation.

## **The US Response**

The international community advised both states to exercise restraint but blamed the wrong party for perpetrating terrorism. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo supported the Indian airstrike as self-defence against terrorism and urged Pakistan to avoid military action even when its sovereignty was violated. According to the statement by Secretary Pompeo, the US supported India's action because it was a [counter-terrorism](#) operation and Pakistan was urged to take meaningful action against terrorist groups. The National Security Advisor to then-President Trump, John Bolton also openly endorsed India's right to self-defense since there is a misperception in the international community that the Pulwama attack

masterminds were based in Pakistan. The fact that needs immediate attention is that the attack on the Indian paramilitary force was a result of [homegrown](#) discontent that India is nurturing with grave and brutal [violation](#) of basic human and civil rights in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJ&K). The suicide attacker was a young boy named Ahmed Dar, a resident of IOJ&K. The Kashmiri youth had grown up witnessing the atrocities committed against families and fellow Kashmiris by the Indian government in the occupied region. The Pulwama suicide attack was unleashing of anger and frustration of a young Kashmiri who was a victim of heinous crimes of a cruel and callous Indian government.

The US' silence over Indian injustice in IOJ&K and voices that held Pakistan liable for hosting terrorist groups indicated that the US was unwilling to manage its role as a balancer in the region. Furthermore, the lack of push-back and criticism from the international community over Indian mayhem created an [asymmetry](#) between India and Pakistan which emboldened New Delhi to act assertively towards Pakistan. If the US wishes to maintain its status as a relevant player in South Asia, it must not neglect the catalytic reasons, mentioned above, being the cause of escalation between Pakistan and India.

### **The Chinese Response**

China, on the other hand, responded diplomatically by remaining silent over the escalation between Pakistan and India. China, however, did receive the message that Pakistan is a state capable of defending its borders. In August 2020, China and Pakistan, after six months of OSR met at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Strategic Dialogue and released a joint [statement](#) that underlined 'peaceful, stable, cooperative, and prosperous South Asia was in the common interest of all parties.' The settlement of disputes and issues, the joint statement mentioned, should be through dialogue based on 'equality and mutual respect.' China preferred cooperation through multilateral fora such as the United Nations and opposed unilateral and coercive practices in Kashmir. This meeting reaffirmed the 'time-tested all-weather strategic cooperative partnership' between the two states.

### **Pile of Indian Mishaps**

Although India is chosen as the US' strategic partner as a counter-weight to China, the question whether Indian defence forces are capable of influencing China or even Pakistan was very loudly answered during Operation Swift Retort. The Operation exposed that the level of reliability on Indian military defences was weak due to poor employment of military tactics and inadequate understanding of their defence equipment.

After the encounter, a list of grave mishaps by the IAF came to light: the IAF, in the heat of the aerial encounter, shot down one of their own helicopters and lost a MiG-21 to the Pakistan Air Force. It also exposed the lack of training and awareness of the maneuvering capabilities of the aircraft by the pilot. The Indian military also demonstrated unprofessional and unethical attitude by disseminating false information and propaganda.

The Indian military forces have always projected their military doctrines, equipment, and manpower as [superior](#) to Pakistan's yet the track record of their [failures](#) prove otherwise. In comparison to Pakistan, China's military power is manifold. If the IAF's performance was so abysmal during an encounter with the PAF, how would India perform when encountering Chinese military power? This implies that India failed the test of its defence capabilities

before an actual showdown could take place. This also suggests that despite a larger conventional force, there are clear loopholes in India's operational capability and the US would need to put in a great effort to modernize and train the Indian defence forces so they can weigh heavy on the Chinese. Nevertheless, the US must not forget that enabling the Indian defence forces while neglecting the importance of Pakistan could have consequences for regional peace.

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