

2019 Balakot airstrike



Date: 26 February 2019 India

Location: Balakot, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Result: (26 February 2019) Indian bombing raid conducted within Pakistani territory, no consequential targets hit.

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Balakot airstrikes title can be described as a significant military operation conducted by the Indian Air Force (IAF) on February 26, 2019. This marked the first time since the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War that Indian fighter jets crossed the Line of Control (LoC) to strike targets within Pakistan's territory.

The 2019 Balakot airstrike was a bombing raid conducted by Indian warplanes on 26 February 2019 in Balakot, Pakistan, against an alleged training camp of the terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed. Open source satellite imagery revealed that no targets of consequence were hit. The following day, Pakistan shot down an Indian warplane and took its pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, prisoner. Indian anti-aircraft fire accidentally downed an Indian helicopter killing six airmen on board and one civilian on the ground, their deaths receiving little or no coverage in the Indian media, and remaining officially unacknowledged until seven months later. India claimed it had downed a Pakistani F-16 fighter jet. Defence and military analysts found India's evidence to be circumstantial, its claim discredited by the absence of the required US Department of Defense announcement about the loss, and a leak by department officials of the satisfactory enumeration of these aircraft in Pakistan. The airstrike was used by India's ruling party to bolster its patriotic appeal in the general elections of April 2019. The airstrike was conducted by India in the early

morning hours of 26 February when Indian warplanes crossed the de facto border in the disputed region of Kashmir and dropped bombs in the vicinity of the town of Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. Pakistan's military, the first to announce the airstrike in the morning of 26 February, described the Indian planes as dropping their payload in an uninhabited wooded hilltop area near Balakot.

The following day on 27 February, in a tit-for-tat airstrike, Pakistan retaliated, causing an Indian warplane to be shot down and its pilot to be taken prisoner by the Pakistan military before being returned on 1 March. An Indian Mi-17 helicopter was brought down by friendly fire in which all six airmen on board were killed; this was acknowledged by India on 4 October 2019. The airstrikes were the first time since the India-Pakistan war of 1971 that warplanes of either country crossed the Line of Control and also since both states became nuclear powers. On 10 April 2019, 47 days after the airstrike, some international journalists, who were taken to the Jaba hilltop in a tightly controlled trip arranged by Pakistani government, found the largest building of the site to show no evidence of damage or recent rebuilding.

Incident

On 26 February 2019, Pakistan announced the intrusion of Indian aircraft into its airspace, but asserted that the Indian fleet was intercepted, causing them to retreat, to release their bombs which hit an open area, and to dump their fuel. In a press briefing, Pakistan's Director-General Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Major General Asif Ghafoor, stated that three IAF teams were spotted approaching the Pakistan border from various sectors in the early hours of 26 February. He added that the two of these teams did not cross the border following a challenge from Pakistani aircraft flying combat air patrol, but the third one crossed the Line of Control from the Kiran Valley near Muzaffarabad before being intercepted by Pakistani Air Force (PAF) jets within three minutes of the incursion. Pervez Khattak, Pakistani Defence Minister, stated that the Pakistani Air Force did not retaliate at that time because "they could not gauge the extent of the damage". Later on 26 February 2019, India confirmed the airstrike, stating that the Indian Air Force conducted them in retaliation to the Pulwama attack. The strikes were subsequently claimed to be "non-military" and "preemptive" in nature; targeting a Jaish-e-Mohammed facility within Pakistan as part of its "Operation Bandar". The airstrike was the first time since the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 that attacking warplanes had crossed the Line of Control.

Indian media claimed to have confirmed from official sources that twelve Mirage 2000 jets were involved in the operation. After releasing the bombs, the jets returned into Indian airspace unharmed and the Indian media claimed that whilst Pakistan scrambled its F-16 jets, they could not engage the Indian planes. Retired PAF Air Marshall Masood Akhtar opined that the air forces of both countries may have been instructed not to attack each other to avoid further escalation of conflict.

The Targets

There has been ambiguity among the sources as to what the exact target was,[65] and about whether the madrasa – Taleem ul-Quran[66] run by Masood Azhar's brother-in-law, Muhammad Yusuf Azhar (involved in the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814), was an active JeM camp or not. According to a diplomatic cable leaked in 2011, a 2004 United States Department of Defense interrogation report stated that Balakot had "a training camp that offers both basic and advanced terrorist training on explosives and artillery." In contrast, military analysts asserted that whilst the area used to host militant camps, they dispersed after the 2005 Pakistan earthquake to avoid detection by the international aid groups providing relief in the area. Indian intelligence sources claim that the camp was located in a hilltop forest, 20 km (12 mi) from Balakot, and that it was a resort-style facility, with space and room for 500–700 militants, including a swimming pool, cooks

and cleaners

Independent Urdu noted that the madrasa had held JeM events promoting jihad as recently as 2018, which were advertised in its magazines, including speeches about Syed Ahmad Barelvi by JeM leader Abdul Rauf Azhar. The local people varied as to the purpose of the facility. In the immediate aftermath of the strikes, whilst some claimed of it being an active JeM training camp, others asserted it to have been a mere school for the local children and that such militant camps used to exist far earlier.

Damages

Neutral sources have asserted that the munitions dropped by Indian warplanes appeared to have only hit several trees and caused no other damage nor any human casualties. Villagers from the area spoke of four bombs striking a nearby forest and field around 3 am; other than minor bruises and cuts incurred by a local man, and a few cracks in the walls of his home, both caused by shockwaves from the explosions, no damage was reported to humans or buildings. Al Jazeera visited the site two days after the strikes and noted "splintered pine trees and rocks" which were strewn across the four blast craters. The local hospital officials and residents asserted that they did not come across any casualty or wounded people. The reporters located the facility, a school run by Jaish-e-Mohammed, at around a kilometre to the east of one of the bomb craters, atop a steep ridge but were unable to access it.

Satellite data assessments

European Space Imaging also provided high-resolution image of the site where the strike took place. The satellite imagery was from 27 February 2019, a day after the strike took place. The image showed that buildings were unharmed and there was no sign of casualties at the site. Managing director Adrian Zevenbergen, claimed that "there were no signs of scorching, no large distinguishable holes in the buildings and no signs of stress to the surrounding vegetation".

Aftermath

The IAF put air defence systems on alert along the international border and Line of Control to respond to any possible retaliation by the Pakistan Air Force. Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi summoned an emergency meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan to discuss the security situation and asserted that Pakistan reserved the right to retaliate. The prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, convened an emergency meeting to review the situation. At the end of this meeting, the National Security Council (NSC) released a statement denying the Indian claims of the destruction of any terrorist camp and described the attack as "uncalled for" whilst adding that retaliation would be forthcoming after a joint parliamentary session. He also stated that Pakistan will take international media to the area of strikes but were delayed due to adverse weather conditions. ANI claimed to have released photos of the alleged JeM camp and weapons cache sourced from intelligence sources.

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Conclusion of the Balakot Airstrike The Balakot

airstrike marked a major escalation in India-Pakistan relations and was unprecedented in many ways

Strategic Shift The airstrike was the first time since 1971 that India crossed the Line of Control (LoC) to strike inside Pakistani territory. It signaled a new Indian doctrine of pre-emptive strikes against terrorist infrastructure, even at the risk of military escalation.

Tactical Ambiguity India claimed it had destroyed a major Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) training camp and killed a large number of terrorists. Pakistan denied any casualties or damage, and independent satellite imagery cast doubt on the Indian claims. The actual tactical success of the strike remains disputed and unverified.

Escalation & Air Combat Pakistan retaliated on February 27, 2019, leading to air combat between the two countries. An Indian MiG-21 was shot down, and the pilot was captured and later returned by Pakistan—defusing the immediate crisis.

International Reactions The airstrike and subsequent escalation raised global concerns about conflict between two nuclear-armed states. The international community urged both sides to exercise restraint.

Information Warfare The episode highlighted the role of media, misinformation, and national narratives in shaping public perception of military actions. Both countries launched competing narratives to frame the event as a victory.

Political Impact In India, the government used the strike to project a strong national security posture, which became a key theme in the 2019 general elections. In Pakistan, the government portrayed its response as measured yet strong, claiming military and moral high ground.

Final Conclusion The Balakot airstrike was a symbolic and strategic move by India aimed at deterring cross-border terrorism, but its tactical success remains uncertain. It redefined the rules of engagement in South Asia but also highlighted the fragility of peace between two nuclear-armed rivals. The event reinforced the need for effective diplomacy, intelligence, and crisis management in the region.