

BALAKOT STRIKES: DECEPTION AND REALITY THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIA

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“Developments in information technology and globalized media mean that the most powerful military in the history of the world can lose a war, not on the battlefield of dust and blood, but on the battlefield of world opinion.”

Timothy Garton Ash, British historian and author

Abstract

A state’s behaviour towards another state depends on the information it receives. If information becomes disinformation, the results could be devastating. Pakistan and India have been at loggerheads since independence. Any disinformation or even wrong perception can lead the two countries to war. In this fragile relationship, it is very easy to fan war jingoism in both states. This paper aims to cover the flow of fake news in both states following the Pulwama attack in February 2019. Mainly three spells of fake news dispersal are analysed in this paper. News regarding Balakot strikes, use of F-16 aircraft by Pakistan, and a round of LOC violations. The paper discusses how both states reacted to these instances of widely spread fake news. The paper argues that the two states came to the verge of a war owing to the fake news, which was perpetrated by Prime Minister Modi to gain popularity and win elections that were scheduled to be held in April 2019.

Keywords: Fake news, Pulwama Attack, Balakot Strikes, India-Pakistan Conflict

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Introduction

Disinformation has been used as an instrument for defaming an adversary for several years through the course of history. Pakistan and India, in this regard, share an uncomfortable history that is chequered with mistrust even after over seventy years of independence. The current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi is pursuing policies of hatred towards Pakistan to win support from the local junta. It has been actively engaged in making coordinated efforts to create a certain narrative on Pakistan and has done so by adopting strategies to undermine Pakistan's credibility as a stable country. On 14 February 2019, for instance, a vehicle carrying Indian paramilitary security personnel in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) was attacked by a suicide bomber, killing 46 people.¹ India not only blamed Pakistan for the attack but also audaciously launched an airstrike alongside threatening to isolate it internationally.²

The Government of Pakistan on the other hand acted with restraint and responsibility. Instead of outrightly denying the claim, the government of Pakistan demanded that the Indian government provide credible evidence for its accusation.³ Imran Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, took a bold stance and offered to act upon 'actionable evidence' in case the Indian government could produce one for the alleged occurrence.⁴ The Indian government failed to provide any evidence whatsoever despite its claims of having 'incontrovertible evidence' about Pakistan's involvement.⁵

Similarly, the Pulwama attack provided an opportunity for the Indian government to instigate the sentiments of the Indian population against Pakistan. Modi emerged as a populist leader on the political scene of India who optimally used the sentiments of the local population to gain domestic political mileage. To avenge the attack on Indian paramilitary forces, the Indian government, right after the Pulwama attack, played a very dangerous move. On 26 February 2019,

at midnight, 12 Indian Mirage aircraft entered Pakistani territory and attacked a ground target near the town of Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province before they were pushed back by Pakistan Air Force.

The Foreign Minister of Pakistan called the Indian incursion, an act of 'grave aggression' by India. The Pakistani government did not act hastily, however, and allowed the Indian jets to turn back unharmed. The following day, Pakistan retaliated by 'shooting down two Indian jets and capturing one Indian pilot.' Right after the incident, the Foreign Office of Pakistan gave an official statement declaring that the sole purpose of such befitting response was "to demonstrate our right, will and capability for self-defence. We have no intention of escalation but are fully prepared to do so if forced into that paradigm. That is why we undertook the action with clear warning and in broad daylight."⁶

This incident led to a series of false claims by the Indian government. India claimed that its jets had destroyed a Jaish-e-Muhammad madrassa in Pakistan and killed 300 militants. This claim was denied by Pakistan as soon as it was made. Later, this claim was hurled by the international media as well. Another round of fake news emerged in the Indian media on the use of F-16 by Pakistan in the retaliation phase. Pakistan denied using F-16, while Indian media kept on disseminating it. The third round of fake news was related to LOC violations. LOC violations continued even after the de-escalation of tensions between the two countries. This paper gathers and analyses the information shared on electronic media in the post-Pulwama scenario.

Balakot Strikes in Pakistan

On 26 February 2019, *The Hindu*, a leading English language daily in India, proudly reported that twelve days after the Pulwama attack, the Indian Air Force bombed Jaish-e-Mohammad's biggest terror-training camp in Pakistan's Balakot.⁷ According to the report,

"200-325 militants had moved to Balakot from LoC sites after Pulwama attack. 12 Mirage-2000 fighter jets were used in the operation, which unleashed five one-tonne bombs on the camp, based 70 km inside the Line of Control (LoC), in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa."⁸ The Indian media also claimed that Pakistan moved the militants to Balakot, as it expected that India would not consider the area for attack.

This blatant Indian claim of the killing of 200-325 militants was rejected by Pakistan immediately. Pakistan very wisely invited international media to the site to show them first-hand the damage the Indian planes had inflicted on the forest. The Director-General of Pakistani military's Inter-Service Public Relations (ISPR), Major General Asif Ghafoor, led a group of foreign journalists, which also included journalists from India, to Balakot to verify Indian claims of killing 300 madrassa students. The print media of India was not alone in spreading the fake news, it was also supported by the Government of India. The complete statement by the Indian Foreign Secretary regarding the Balakot strikes shows an utter display of deception by the Indian government.

Following is the full statement of Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale:

On 14 February 2019, a suicide terror attack was conducted by a Pak-based terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammad, leading to the martyrdom of 40 brave jawans of the CRPF. JEM has been active in Pakistan for the last two decades, and is led by Masood Azhar with its headquarters in Bahawalpur. This organization, which is proscribed by the UN, has been responsible of a series of terrorist attacks including on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 and the Pathankot airbase in January 2016.

Information regarding the location of training camps in Pakistan and PoJK has been provided to Pakistan

from time to time. Pakistan, however, denies their existence. The existence of such massive training facilities capable of training hundreds of jihadis could not have functioned without the knowledge of Pakistan authorities. India has been repeatedly urging Pakistan to take action against the JeM to prevent jihadis from being trained and armed inside Pakistan. Pakistan has taken no concrete actions to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism on its soil. Credible intelligence was received that JeM was attempting another suicide terror attack in various parts of the country, and the fidayeen jihadis were being trained for this purpose. In the face of imminent danger, a preemptive strike became absolutely necessary.

In an intelligence led operation in the early hours of today, India struck the biggest training camp of JeM in Balakot. In this operation, a very large number of JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadis who were being trained for fidayeen action were eliminated. this facility at Balakot was headed by Maulana Yousuf Azhar (Alias Ustad Ghouri), the brother-in-law of Masood Azhar, Chief of JeM.

The Government of India is firmly and resolutely committed to taking all necessary measures to fight the menace of terrorism. Hence this non-military preemptive action was specifically targeted at the JeM camp. The selection of the target was also conditioned by our desire to avoid civilian casualties. The facility is located in thick forest on a hilltop far away from any civilian presence. As the strike has taken place only a short while ago, we are awaiting further details.

The Government of Pakistan had made a solemn commitment in January 2004 not to allow its soil or territory under its control to be used for terrorism against India. We expect that Pakistan lives up to its public commitment and takes follow up actions to dismantle all JeM and other camps and hold the terrorists accountable for the actions.⁹

Subsequently, however, when people began asking questions about the bodies of the killed militants, the Indian government refused to answer. A Pakistani newspaper, *Express Tribune* reported that India “conceded for the first time that there were no casualties in the Balakot strike.”¹⁰ On the Indian side, the Union Minister, Surinder Singh Ahluwalia reiterated that the air strikes by India were just a warning and that neither Prime Minister Narendra Modi nor any government spokesperson had given any figure on the casualties of air strikes.¹¹ He also accepted that it was “the Indian media and social media, where the unconfirmed figures of terrorists killed were being calculated.”¹² Samaa TV of Pakistan reported the damage on the Pakistani side by sending its representative to the site of the attack. They reported that Indian jets had destroyed 15 pine trees in its surgical strike and not a terrorist camp.¹³

Later, a high-level meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan was held on 26 February 2019 in Pakistan in which the Indian claims of targeting an alleged terrorist camp near Balakot were rejected.¹⁴ “A handout released after the NSC meeting stated that the forum strongly rejected Indian claims of targeting an alleged terrorist camp near Balakot and the claim of heavy casualties.”¹⁵ The handout also condemned the irresponsible behaviour of the Indian government by stating, “Once again Indian government has resorted to a self-serving, reckless and fictitious claim, the handout added. This action has been done for domestic consumption given the election environment, putting regional peace and stability at grave risk.”¹⁶

The *Dawn* news team in Pakistan also visited the location, where it asked the villagers about the airstrikes and reported that villagers near Balakot had not witnessed any casualty or even an injury to someone. Instead, the team found out that the “villagers in Jabba were woken up by successive explosions in the morning when Indian

aircraft reportedly dropped bombs on a hill overlooking their small hamlet, thirty kilometres to the north-east of Balakot.”¹⁷ After getting fact-based reports by the Pakistani media, the international media also got sceptical of the Indian claims.

Doubts on Indian Claims

Soon after contentious reports of the event, questions premised on ascertaining the reality and truth behind Indian claims quickly began circling the media circles. “A Satellite imagery, acquired by Planet Labs Inc. on the morning of February 27 and accessed by Australian Strategic Policy Institute, further endorsed doubts on the Indian claim.”¹⁸ According to an expert on satellite data, Nathan Ruser, “No evidence of damage to the facility or nearby areas is visible in the images. Local media has visited the site and published photographs of multiple small craters in the vicinity, but they haven’t been granted access to the facility that was reportedly targeted. Satellite imagery, presented and analyzed, provides no apparent evidence of more extensive damage and on the face of it does not validate Indian claims regarding the effect of the strikes.”¹⁹

A report by *Reuters* also refuted the claims made by the Indian media that its air force had hit a Jaish-e-Muhammad Madrassa.²⁰ “High-resolution satellite images reviewed by *Reuters* show that a religious school run by Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) in north-eastern Pakistan appears to be still standing days after India claimed its warplanes had hit the Islamist group’s training camp on the site and killed a large number of militants. The images produced by Planet Labs Inc, a San Francisco-based private satellite operator, show at least six buildings on the madrasa site on March 4, six days after the airstrike.”²¹ In the report, interviews of the villagers were also included, stating that they could not find any dead bodies in the area.

The Indian government refused to share proof of militant deaths in Pakistan.²² Nor did it accept that its forces missed the target and that there was no casualty on the Pakistani side. In the twenty-first

century, India tried to fool the entire world by making false claims. The images released by a private American earth imaging company based in San Francisco, named Planet Labs, can show "details as small as 72 cm (28 inches) and offer a clearer look at the structures the Indian government said it attacked... The image is virtually unchanged from an April 2018 satellite photo of the facility. There are no discernible holes in the roofs of buildings, no signs of scorching, blown-out walls, displaced trees around the madrasa or other signs of an aerial attack."²³

Subsequently, *Reuters* sent an email to the foreign and defence ministers of India to ask whether the Indian government still stood by its claims in the presence of satellite images. The Indian foreign and defence ministries did not reply to the emailed questions.²⁴ Other than *Reuters*, the international media also rebutted the Indian claims based on satellite imagery.²⁵ Interestingly, another amusing lie was created by the Indian media to justify the false claim of killing militants. The Indian media reported that dead bodies were shifted from Balakot after the IAF strike.²⁶

Retaliation by Pakistan

On the very next day of Indian strikes, while chasing Indian air planes, Pakistani fighter jets shot one of the Indian planes. An Indian pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was captured by Pakistan in the process. This development led to another round of fake news both in India and Pakistan.

Earlier, it was reported that two Indian pilots were held by Pakistan. This fake news was refuted by the Pakistani army. Hundreds of stories spread about the injured pilots on social media. According to fact-checker websites, social media became a "hotbed of unverified news."²⁷ Partik Sinha, the co-founder of one such fact-checking website, Alt News, said that they had "received requests to verify news about the Pakistan India stand off and the claims made by both sides from journalists and people on social media."²⁸

Sinha, in his account of the event also revealed that a Facebook group supporting the Indian Home Minister Amit Shah had posted images of the alleged destruction caused inside Pakistan by the Indian air strike. "Three photos posted on the group page showed debris from a destroyed building and bodies and have been shared hundreds of times."²⁹ However, Alt News found that "the pictures were from a 2005 earthquake in Kashmir."³⁰

Similarly, in Pakistan, a video of a second captured Indian pilot was widely circulated. "Fact-checking website Boom noted that the clip was from an air show in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru, where two planes crashed on February 19."³¹ The challenges associated with disinformation are not restricted to a certain dimension. Instead, irresponsible information sharing and its wrongful dissemination can prove to be lethal in some situations. In 2015, one Muhammad Akhlaq was mercilessly killed by a mob in Bisra village near New Delhi because, as rumour had it, he had stored cow meat in his fridge. This is just one example of fake information leading to mob lynching in India.

After the revelation of the truth about false Indian claims of destroying a madrassah and killing 300 militants, it became difficult for the Indian government to justify its claims.

The Difficulty for the Indian Government in Justifying the Fake Claims

Senior Congress party leader Kapil Sibal asked for proof of the Indian Air Force's strike destroying the biggest camp of Jaish-e-Mohammad in Pakistan and accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of politicizing 'terror'. "Modi ji must answer as the international media like *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, London-based *Jane Information group*, *Daily Telegraph*, *the Guardian* and *Reuters*, are reporting that there is no proof of militant losses at Balakot in Pakistan," Sibal said.³²

Congress's chief spokesperson Randeep Surjewala also asked the prime minister to clear the doubt as one of his ministers was

denying TV news that 300 terrorists were killed in the air strike on 26 February. He wrote on Twitter, "Modi ji, your central minister is denying TV news that prime minister Modi has never confirmed the killing of 300 terrorists in IAF air strikes in Pakistan. Is it true. If not, the prime minister should tell the truth to the country."³³

Punjab minister and Congress leader Navjot Singh Sidhu said, "300 terrorists dead, Yes or No? What was the purpose then? Were you uprooting terrorists or trees? Was it an election gimmick? Deceit possesses our land in guise of fighting a foreign enemy. Stop politicizing the Army, it is as sacred as the State," he said, adding "Oonchi Dukaan, Pheeka Pakwan (big talk, no delivery)."³⁴

Congress leader and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath asked the government to reveal images of the operation carried out by the IAF in Balakot.³⁵ Congress leader and Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot asked the PM to tell the country how many terrorists had been killed. He wrote on Twitter, "The claims are of 350 terrorists. BJP president Amit Shah is saying that 250 terrorists got killed – from where did he receive this information? A minister of Modi government (SS Ahluwalia) stated that the aim of the strike was to send a message and not taking lives... What is the fact, Modi should clarify?"³⁶

West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee reiterated that she stood by India's armed forces but wished to seek proof and a clarification about the damage done and the number of casualties in Balakot. "I am ready to face any consequence for raising these questions but I will continue asking them," she said.³⁷ Irritated in the face of repeated questions regarding the incident, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, lashed out at the opposition and said "Will you (people) do anything that appeases Pakistan or makes Pakistan clap."³⁸

The government representatives also failed to answer questions posed by journalists about hitting a Jaish-e-Muhammad camp in

Pakistan. Foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale left a press briefing and refused to answer the media questions about Balakot strikes.

The government of India has still not clarified its position on making the dubious claim of killing 300 militants in Pakistan. As most of the rural population of India does not have access to international media and mostly relies on domestic electronic media, which flaunts the claims made by the Indian government, the fake news and misinformation disseminated concerning the Balakot strike deeply influenced the voting patterns during the Indian elections. Interestingly, the Indian government did not stop here. It went on to make another false claim that Pakistan resorted to the use of advanced F-16 fighter jets in retaliation to the Indian incursion.

The F-16 Controversy

Indian Media accused Pakistan of using F-16 in the aerial dogfight against India. This claim was levelled to sabotage Pakistan's relations with the US. The sale of F-16 to Pakistan was curtailed by the US in the aftermath of Pakistan's nuclear explosion in 1998. It was resumed following 9/11 on the condition that they would only be used in counter-terrorism operations, i.e., to assist with the US global war on terror.³⁹ Therefore, the Indian government projected to the Indian media that some parts of the Pakistan Air Force's (PAF) F-16, downed by the IAF, had been recovered.⁴⁰ However, Pakistan rejected the claims and, unlike India, also clarified its position. Later, Major General Asif Ghafoor, the then DG ISPR, iterated in a press conference that JF-17s were used in the operations instead of F-16s.⁴¹ CNN also endorsed the fact that it was a "JF-17 fighter jet that brought down an Indian warplane in Azad Jammu and Kashmir."⁴²

A *New York Times* journalist Maria Abi-Habib also posted a set of tweets saying that "Pakistan may not have violated its F-16 sales agreement with the US even if it used the American-made fighter jets to shoot down Indian aircraft last week."⁴³ She tweeted, "The US says if Pakistan used an F-16 to shoot down an Indian MiG, it may not have

violated sale agreement."⁴⁴ "They say if India entered Pakistani airspace for a second day, and Pakistan used the jet defensively, the contract wasn't violated. But, if Pakistan used an F-16 to attack India first, only then deal was violated."⁴⁵

A Chinese analyst, Jin Yinan from the elite National Defence University (NDU) of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) also attributed the Indian claims as baseless. His take on the events that unfolded following the Indian strikes states;

The Indian side tried to find reasons for its loss, saying that Pakistan had dispatched its most advanced F-16 fighters, which was denied. Pakistan's saying is more reliable for three reasons". "First, the sales of F-16 fighters had been cut off by the US, so Pakistan now has only less than 20 such aircraft left, not to mention how many of which could still perform a flight mission. Second, Pakistan had signed an 'agreement' with the US, which banned the use of F-16 fighters in offensive operations. This time, Indian warplanes flew into the Pakistani airspace and attacked ground targets first, and then Pakistan sent aircraft into India's airspace for retaliation. From this perspective, it was a retaliatory, offensive operation conducted by Pakistan, in which the F-16 was inapplicable according to the aforesaid agreement." Indian Air Force is well aware of the capabilities of the US-made jets including firepower and radar frequencies. Third, the Indian military had already obtained basic data about the F-16 jets. The U.S. planned to export the F-21 - an upgraded version of the F-16 - to India, so it had informed the Indian side of all performance parameters about the aircraft. For this reason, India is familiar with the combating performances of the F-16, including its fire-control and searching radar frequency. Given all this, Pakistan was unlikely to use its F-16 fighters in the air battle because there was a small chance to win even if it sent out the aircraft.⁴⁶

Other than the aerial fight, much was happening on the Indian side of the LoC in the backdrop of the Pulwama attack.

The Unending Volatility along the LOC

Violations of the ceasefire agreement of 2003 in case of heightened Indo-Pak tensions has become a recurring pattern. In the post-Pulwama standoff too, the LOC became another domain of fighting between India and Pakistan. The table below shows the LOC skirmishes between India and Pakistan since 26 February 2019.

Table 1

Variations in Reporting about LOC Violations
in Indian and Pakistani Media

Date	India Side	Pakistan Side	LOC/I B/WB	Source
16 March 2019	Mankote sector in Poonch		LoC	https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/heavy-exchange-of-fire-on-line-of-control-in-poonch-district/744147.html
15 March 2019	Nowshera sector		LoC	https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/army-porter-injured-in-pak-firing/743990.html
13 March 2019	Khari Karmara area of Gulpur sector.		LoC	https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/pir-panjal/india-pakistan-trade-fire-along-loc-in-poonch-district-of-jammu-and-kashmir/316049.html
11 March 2019		Chakothei sector of Jhelum Valley	LoC	https://www.dawn.com/news/1469000

10 March 2019	Poonch district(Krishna Ghati), Balnoi and Mankote (both in Mendhar sector)		LoC	https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/pak-resorts-to-heavy-shelling-in-poonch-targets-army-posts-villages/740957.html
10 March 2019		Pandu, Chakothi and Khilana sectors of Jhelum Valley district	LoC	https://www.dawn.com/news/1468806/man-killed-4-wounded-in-ajk-as-indian-firing-across-loc-resumes
9 March 2019	Sunderbani sector of Rajouri		LoC	https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/pakistan-army-violates-truce/740643.html
8 March 2019	Qasba and Kirni areas of Poonch		LoC	https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/pir-panjal/cop-injured-in-loc-firing/315593.html
6 March 2019	Nowshera, Suderbani and Mendhar KG areas		LoC	https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/pir-panjal/-cross-border-shelling-continues-in-loc-areas/315353.html
6 March 2019		Bhimber district	LoC	https://www.dawn.com/news/1468091
5 March 2019		Hot Spring sector	LoC	https://www.dawn.com/news/1467794/indian-firing-targeted-at-civilian-population-across-loc-leaves-one-injured-ispr

5 March 2019	Kalal (Nowshera) and Minka Mahadev (Sunderbani) areas in Rajouri district, and in Degwar and Mankot areas in Poonch district		LoC	https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/soldier-injured-in-rajouri-ceasefire-violation/738715.html
4 March 2019	Akhnoor sector and Poonch sector		LoC	https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jk-pakistan-troops-violate-ceasefire-in-akhnoor-sector-indian-army-retaliates-5609602/
3 March 2019		Neza Pir, Pandu, Khanjar Munawar, Battal and Baghsar sectors	LoC	https://www.dawn.com/news/1467607
2 March 2019	Nowshera of Rajouri		LoC	https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pakistan-again-violates-ceasefire-along-loc-in-j-ks-rajouri/articleshow/68231100.cms
2 March 2019		Neza Pir, Pandu, Khanjar Munawar, Battal and Baghsar sectors	LoC	https://www.dawn.com/news/1467607

1 March 2019	Mendhar, Krishna Ghati, Nowsherasectors of Rajouri and Poonch's Balakote and Gawahalan, Chokas, Kiker and Kathi posts in Uri		LoC	https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/pak-violates-ceasefire-along-loc-in-mendhar-balakote-krishna-ghati-sectors20190301200800/#.XHn9WawH9fk.twitter
1 March 2019		Kotli District	LoC	https://www.dawn.com/news/1467008
28 February 2019	Krishna Ghati sector of Poonch		LoC	https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/pir-panjal/jammu-and-kashmir-heavy-firing-across-loc-in-poonch/314596.html
26 February 2019	Krishna Gati, Balakote, Khari Karmara, Mankote, Tarkundi in Poonch district, Kalal, Baba Khori, Kalsian, Laam and Jhangar areas in Rajouri and Pallanwala and Laleali in Jammu.		LoC	https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/heavy-shelling-firing-along-line-of-control-as-pakistan-violates-ceasefire-1999706
26 February 2019		Kotli, Bhimber and Poonch districts	LoC	https://www.dawn.com/news/1466171/4-ajk-civilians-dead-11-wounded-in-indiscriminate-indian-shelling-across-loc

Source: http://indopakconflictmonitor.org/yearwise_cfv.php?year=2019

As shown in the table above, the first violation was initiated by India on 26 February, as per the *Dawn* newspaper of Pakistan. However, the same incident was differently reported on the Indian side. The *Hindustan Times* claimed that Pakistani troops opened fire

along the LOC.⁴⁷ On 28 February, the Indian media once again claimed that Pakistan violated the LOC. On the contrary, Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* reported that Pakistan had to evacuate the villages in the Khilana sector in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, owing to indiscriminate firing of Indian forces.⁴⁸

Similarly, all the news items reported above shared a different story. India and Pakistan continue to violate the ceasefire along the line of control since 2003. The news of violations, though reported by both India and Pakistan, carry varying contents. Hence, no media outlet can verify whether the violations were committed or not because of the lack of access. In the post-Pulwama episode, there were numerous news reports on the LOC violations in both the Indian and Pakistani media. But it is uncertain that which country initiated firing operations.

Indian state policy is based on deception. Kautilya, the purported founding father of the Indian foreign policy also relied on the use of deception in statecraft.⁴⁹ Kautilya elucidates three primary categories of *yuddha* or warfare, namely, *prakashayuddha* (open warfare), *kootayuddha* (concealed warfare), and *tushnimityuddha* (silent warfare). Any one of these individually, or a combination of these three categories of warfare becomes part of a state's policy once it decides to go for *vigraha* (war/hostility) or *yana* (march) against another state.⁵⁰

Since independence, Pakistan and India have had irritations in their relationship mainly due to episodic conflicts and skirmishes over the LoC. Above in view, Balakot strikes were not only aimed at belittling Pakistan's military might in the eyes of the international community but also at deceiving the Indian nation by the wrongful projection of India's military might. Modi deceived his nation by orchestrating Balakot strikes against Pakistan to gain votes in the April 2019 Indian elections.

A senior-level member of the BJP unknowingly confessed about the dangerous election stunt of Modi during a speech. Karnataka BJP chief BS Yeddyurappa stated:

Just now we got news that a Pakistani jet which tried to enter our border has been chased back. Pakistan has been taught a lesson, after 40 years PM Modi has done it. PM said we'd reply to every drop of blood of our soldiers and he has shown that today. Youth are celebrating; all this will help us in winning more than 22 Lok Sabha seats (in Karnataka).⁵¹

Prime Minister Modi turned no stone unturned in trying to win the elections. Christophe Jaffrelot, an expert on Hindu nationalism wrote:

The Narendra Modi government has sought to use this crisis for political purposes, in the context of the current election campaign, at the risk of undermining national unity. Unlike previous Indian prime ministers who had to deal with a comparable situation (from the 1965 and 1971 wars to the 1999 conflict and the 2008 attacks), Modi did not bring together the political parties to inform them of the situation. Instead, he accused the Congress of underequipping the Army when it was in power and of demoralising the armed forces by requesting information on ongoing operations.⁵²

Arundhati Roy, a human rights activist in India also criticised Modi, calling him reckless on his media stunt to amuse the local junta that endangered the security of the entire region.⁵³ She said, "For the Prime Minister of this country to press its formidable air force into performing dangerous theatrics is deeply disrespectful."⁵⁴

Conclusion

Indo-Pak relations have been in a downward whirl since Prime Minister Modi assumed power, except for a few positive gestures like

the stopover of Modi in Lahore and invitation to former Pakistani Prime Minister to the swearing-in ceremony. Nevertheless, the worst card played by Modi is the latest standoff with Pakistan precipitated by the Indian airstrikes after Pulwama and the following interplay of fake claims. The use of fake claims by Modi's media partners to lure the masses was a sheer display of dishonesty on the part of a state's leader.

Karnataka BJP chief BS Yeddyurappa surprisingly confessed that Modi's strike on Pakistan could help BJP to get 22 seats out of the total 28 in the Lok Sabha elections in the state elections. Despite the Pakistani Prime Minister's mature stance on the tense situation, Modi, while addressing BJP workers, said that India would fight as one against the enemy, without naming Pakistan. This statement depicted that all he cares for is his victory in elections.

Compulsion, ignorance, or ill-intention leads to war. In the case of Balakot strikes, it seems that the ill-intention was at play. Modi created a warlike environment in the sub-continent for winning elections in India, putting the safety of all South Asian countries at risk. It may also be noted that Prime Minister Modi was facing criticism on the dubious Rafael deal at that time as well. In such an atmosphere, he desperately needed a catalyst for 'reframing' public opinion in his favour.

Modi went the extra mile in being irresponsible as a state leader by 'lying' about the IAF strikes. His government claimed that the Indian Air Force killed around 300 Jaish-e-Mohammad recruits in Pakistan. Pakistan denied the claims and the international media also cast doubts over the Indian claims. Senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh also pressed upon clarification of the claims of the Indian government. However, Prime Minister Modi's government remained silent.

A politician who prefers a party's interest over national interest would endanger the security of his country to gain any political benefit. The instability of a leader creates instability in the country.

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