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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Monkey Cage

Did India shoot down a Pakistani F-16 in February? This just became a big deal.

There are broader implications for India — and the United States

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Analysis by Sameer Lalwani and Emily Tallo

With voting underway in India's general election, February's Kashmir conflict is likely to weigh on the minds of voters, especially given last week's social media uproar over the reported downing of a Pakistani F-16 fighter jet during the crisis.

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The IAF responded last week by releasing “irrefutable” evidence — including electronic signatures and radio transcripts — that Pakistan lost a fighter jet during the February aerial combat. A number of U.S. and Indian defense analysts called the evidence circumstantial. Indian media reported that a U.S. Defense Department spokesman said he was unaware of any investigation. The Pentagon, like the State Department, has yet to issue a public statement on the F-16 count, but there have been no counter-leaks contradicting the Foreign Policy report.

What happened in the India-Pakistan crisis?

The informational conflict is the latest outcome of February's India-Pakistan crisis, which threatened to escalate to all-out war. After a Feb. 14 terrorist attack attributed to Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad killed 40 paramilitaries in Indian-administered Kashmir, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi faced powerful domestic political incentives to follow through on his promise for vengeance against Pakistan.

Research by one of us and Hannah Haegeland suggests that the onset of international crisis stems from leaders “selecting into a crisis” because of political contexts and calculations — rather than being compelled by material conditions. Cross-border terrorist attacks targeting women and children have not triggered crises, but in this case, the proximity to the Indian national election seemed to demand retribution.

On Feb. 26, the IAF launched airstrikes against what it said were terrorist camps in Pakistan. Pakistan retaliated with fighter planes dropping their payloads in Kashmir and, in an ensuing air battle, shot down an Indian MiG-21 warplane and captured its pilot.

India claims the MiG-21 pilot shot down a more advanced Pakistan F-16 fighter aircraft before his own aircraft was downed — but Pakistan's civilian and military leadership vehemently denied this.

Why does it matter to India?

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) used the Kashmir crisis to project Modi as a strong leader against Pakistan — capitalizing on this opportunity ahead of India's general election, which takes place from April 11 to May 19. Recent surveys suggest Modi and his party have profited from heightened nationalist sentiment with a modest but visible bump in popularity.

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Additionally, reporting indicates that during the Feb. 27 air battle, friendly fire from an air-defense missile brought down an Indian military helicopter, killing six military personnel.

If the IAF did not, in fact, shoot down a Pakistani F-16, voters might conclude that India carried out airstrikes and has nothing to show for them but lost a pilot, a warplane, a helicopter and six other military personnel.

Any news that may tarnish perceptions of Indian military superiority over Pakistan isn't good news for a government that pledged to improve India's hard-power capabilities and punish Pakistan for its alleged support of terrorism. The research suggests material advantages — planes, weapons — are no guarantee of military effectiveness. This will no doubt raise questions both inside and outside of India about the IAF's conventional advantage if it is unable to punish a weaker adversary to reestablish deterrence. This could encourage Pakistan to behave more aggressively in a future India-Pakistan crisis. Both countries are nuclear powers, so any conflicts between the two raise deeper concerns about the risks of escalation and a mushroom cloud over the subcontinent.

Will there be fallout for the Indian military? Its competence and professionalism could also be called into question if it turns out military leaders knowingly defended an inaccurate position — particularly a partisan one that bolstered the BJP's electoral narrative.

What does this controversy mean for the United States?

The United States also has high stakes in the F-16 controversy because of its interest in India as a rising power in Asia. Washington would no doubt have preferred to see India acquit itself well in the recent India-Pakistan conflict. National security adviser John Bolton tacitly gave a green light for India's February retaliatory airstrikes.

Analysts think India might play a heavyweight role in the Asian balance of power if it were able to “de-hyphenate” from its western rival and “raise its gaze from Pakistan.” This might happen if the India-Pakistan conventional military asymmetry were sufficiently stark such that “Pakistan wouldn't even dare retaliate,” as the Indian analyst Shekhar Gupta suggests.

The U.S. “Indo-Pacific Strategy” envisions India balancing against China while playing the role of a regional “net security provider” in a region that is critical to U.S. economic and strategic interests. U.S. policymakers fear that the more successful Pakistan is at trading punches with India, a more distracted India is less likely to concentrate on projecting and protecting U.S. interests in the region.

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meager defense budgets, Modi’s defense indigenization campaign and dysfunctional civil-military relations as reasons for the gap between Indian military intentions and capabilities.

These criticisms include deficits in India’s air power, ammunition and “jointness” — the capability of services within the Indian military to cooperate. If the Indian government emerges sobered by the latest conflict, it might be able to surmount bureaucratic hurdles and organizational routines that constrain military adaptation, an important ingredient to seriously balancing China.

The “battle of perceptions” played heavily into the February crisis and has once again surfaced — threatening to throw a wrench into Indian and American interests alike.

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