



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Case for Restraint in India

Why the Conventional Wisdom is Wrong

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After last week's terrorist attack on an Indian military base in Uri, Kashmir, which resulted in the deaths of 18 soldiers, a debate over how to respond has ripped through India's strategic community. For the time being, the Indian Prime Minister appears to have signaled a restrained course, but additional measures could be considered and the debate will surely continue. Three points of conventional wisdom have already begun to crystallize. All of them seem to tilt India towards military action.

The first point is that the Narendra Modi government will pay a high political cost if it chooses not to pursue military action. The second is that India's credibility and prestige will be damaged if it does not make good on previous threats to retaliate. The third is a diagnosis that the root of India's vulnerability

is its lack of options to punish terrorist organizations and Pakistan, which the Indian government accuses of sponsoring the attack.

In fact, all three arguments are erroneous, exaggerated, or incomplete. If the Modi government opts for a military response, it will be neglecting the wisdom of past Indian Prime Ministers, who recognized the costs of a risky, destabilizing crisis dwarf the scant political, reputational, and coercive effects.

POLITICAL PRESSURE

First, conventional wisdom exaggerates the political costs of opting for a non-military response. Several analysts have promoted a narrative of intense social, political, and electoral pressures compelling the Modi government to take some sort of military action to back up commitments he made on the campaign trail two years ago. An editorial in the *Times of India* even described a political and security establishment “baying for blood.” Most of these arguments also note the pressure emanating from social media, which only 16 percent of Indians use, or cite unscientific online polls. However, there is scant empirical evidence that Modi would suffer domestic political fallout if he refused to respond militarily.

Even if Indians are angry today, they won't necessarily be when they go to the polls. Within a week of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, a majority of Indians surveyed expressed fear, anger, a desire for tough measures and a belief that the ruling Congress Party was “soft on terror.” A plurality believed that BJP leaders were better equipped to handle terrorism and pledged to vote for them in general elections.

Nevertheless, by May 2009, the incumbent Congress-led coalition won a landslide victory for a second term.

Modi also avoided military responses when facing two similar tests in 2015-16—and with no obvious costs in public opinion. Terrorist violence in Kashmir is somewhat routine, but attacks in mainland India are seen as more provocative. That's why the terrorist attacks in Gurdaspur, Punjab in July 2015 and in Pathankot, Punjab in January 2016 both raised expectations of an Indian military response. In both cases, though, the Modi government backed down from talk of battle and opted for diplomatic responses.

One would have expected any costs to Modi to have registered in public opinion polling. The Pew Global Attitudes project happened to survey attitudes in India just a few months before the Gurdaspur incident and a few months after the Pathankot incident. In fact, the Pew data did not register any such a shift.

In 2016, 61 percent of the Indian public continued to approve of Modi's handling of terrorism even after the Pathankot attacks. Although that number is slightly down from 65 percent in 2015, the difference was just barely outside the margin of error ($\pm 3.2\%$) and tracked with variations in approval on a host of domestic policy issues. Attitudes towards Modi's handling of relations with Pakistan also remained statistically unchanged between 2015 and 2016. Further, although the BJP did lose the high stakes Bihar state election in November 2015, the defeat was largely a product of local retail politics, not national security.

In other words, Modi did not suffer political costs for refusing to take kinetic action in response to terrorist attacks. Although a majority of the Indian public has maintained an unfavorable opinion of Pakistan, most (56 percent in 2016, up from 53 percent in 2013) continue to favor outreach and talks between India and Pakistan to mitigate tensions. In short, instead of costing Modi public support, opting for diplomacy might help him.

GLOBAL STANDING

A second point of conventional wisdom is that the failure to take military action will damage India's credibility and invite further attacks. Although there is broad recognition that India lacks the requisite military capabilities to inflict punishment without courting significant escalation risks, those concerned with India's credibility argue that it should take action, regardless of military efficacy, in order to demonstrate resolve. This claim suggests that if India does not fight today, its response will be read as appeasement, and state or non-state actors will doubt its future resolve and strike again.



The debate is ongoing, but some of the international relations literature challenges the claim that military actions are required to bolster credibility. Research by Dartmouth Professor Daryl Press suggests that even in textbook World War II cases of “appeasement,” perceptions of credibility are

actually formed on the basis of present calculations of actual capabilities and stakes in a crisis, rather than on past behavior. By this logic, it makes sense that Pakistan has not attempted another Kargil-like incursion; Pakistan knows that India possesses a tremendous advantage in material capabilities and a strong stake in retaining its hold on Indian-administered Kashmir. This contradicts the idea that it would necessarily perceive restraint from India as a sign of weakness.

Furthermore, if India were to take military action to demonstrate its resolve, and its actions failed to achieve the stated objectives or proved militarily ineffective, it could actually do more harm to future Indian credibility by lowering the estimation of Indian capabilities. On the one hand, scholars have raised serious questions about India's military options and their potential effectiveness. On the other, if India leveraged its restraint to acquire new, advanced capabilities from military supplies like the United States, it could bolster its future credibility.

A related concern is that no direct action will adversely affect India's global standing. But India's former national security advisor, for one, argues the opposite—that demonstrating restraint in 2008 “added to India's prestige.” For example, in a time of restraint, India's favorability rating in the United States has risen from 47 percent in 2000 to 75 percent today, which places India among the ranks of long-term U.S. partners such as Israel, Japan, and the United Kingdom. India's global prestige is difficult to quantify but here too, it appears to have grown during a period of strategic restraint. Among the ten largest world economies, average positive views of India (tracked by annual BBC/Globescan surveys) also increased between 2006-2014. In short, polls suggest that India has gained from being perceived as a responsible stakeholder.

PUNISHMENT

A third point of conventional wisdom about the response to the Uri attack is that India has become vulnerable solely because of its inability to coerce through punishment. As the debate about India's options to deter future attacks by non-state actors rages, India has yet to seriously confront a problem of equal or greater importance: its lack of denial capabilities, that is its ability to militarily prevent a target from successfully achieving its objectives with offensive strikes. Significant international security research suggests that punishment typically does not compel changes in target behavior; in contrast, denial of a target's military objectives has had more success. During the Vietnam War, for example, punitive bombing operations to coerce changes in Hanoi's behavior repeatedly failed, but when an air campaign interdicted supply lines and successfully denied military operations, it persuaded Hanoi to come to the bargaining table.

Unfortunately, India has fixated more on punitive measures in reaction to terrorist attacks, as opposed to the prevention and interdiction of such attacks. A number of observers have pointed to security flaws, procedural lapses, intelligence shortfalls, a lack of fortification, and potential insider collusion that could have facilitated the terrorist attack at Uri. A recent probe of the January attack on the Pathankot Air Force Station further reveals vulnerabilities in the base's physical defenses, surveillance, organizational procedures, and command and control. Still others have highlighted the absence of policing and intelligence modernization that leaves India exposed to future attacks. These are all crucial deficiencies in denial capabilities.

Although India does not have good options for coercion, it does have the resources to invest in interdiction and denial. Just as successful, high profile attacks can raise a terrorist organization's prestige, foiled attacks and captured militants can undermine recruitment and degrade an

organization. If India concentrated its efforts into an effective denial capacity of hardened defenses, better equipment, quicker reaction forces, institutional coordination, intelligence collection and analysis, and technologies for disruption of terrorist infiltration, it could do more to reduce the probability of success of terrorist activities.

India would also enhance its denial capabilities if it began to rethink its approach to Kashmir. The spike in popular unrest there in recent months may have had some effect on the army's preparation for cross-border attacks. Many scholars and practitioners have argued that a counterinsurgency strategy of population control not only requires denial of physical space but also the denial of public support for insurgents. Redirecting this support to the government requires legitimacy, which can sometimes be achieved through political and economic concessions.

Such concessions—including those suggested by India's former head of external intelligence like dialogue with separatists, drawdowns in Army deployments, acceptance of a special political status, and significant economic development—would require a course correction from India's policy towards Kashmir varying between indifference and repression. Prospects for improved internal security and a stable political outcome will also be improved by maintaining a diplomatic engagement process with Pakistan. If India wants to become effective at deterrence through denial, it will need to invest in both physical and organizational changes, as well as political engagements needed to deny space, support, and legitimacy to international and local militants.

PEACE AND STABILITY

In the wake of the Uri attack, the understandable anger and frustration of Indian policymakers and strategies is building momentum for major military action. But the arguments for such action are highly debatable, if not incorrect. A major militarized response might satisfy a desire for revenge, but it is not clear that it would serve the Indian government's political, credibility, prestige, or coercive interests.

The 2009 elections and recent polling data suggest that Indian prime ministers have thus far suffered no real political costs for opting against military actions in retribution for major attacks. Further, the country could actually weaken its credibility if it embarked on a militarily disastrous adventure that exposes gaps in capabilities. Finally, although India has fulminated over its lack options to punish its enemies, it has invested little in the comparatively easier approach of denying its enemies their goals.

With new considerations of costs and benefits, Indian strategists might turn their conversations toward security through meaningful capabilities and political engagements and away from risky, punitive gambits.

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