

IDSA

Issue Brief

URI, SURGICAL STRIKES AND INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS

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S*ummary*

The Uri attack was a carefully planned terrorist attack that saw Pakistani handlers exploiting a fleeting opportunity to inflict maximum casualties on Indian troops. Coming as the attack did in the wake of the cumulative build-up of terrorist attacks and infiltration attempts, the Indian government resolved to act to send a message to Pakistan. That message assumed the form of calibrated surgical strikes against terrorist launching pads across the Line of Control and a diplomatic campaign to isolate Pakistan within South Asia, both of which were premised on the wide-ranging international condemnation of the Uri attack.

The Uri Terrorist Attack

On September 18, 2016, four terrorists belonging to the Pakistani jihadi group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) struck at an Indian Army camp in Uri. The camp housed more than the usual number of troops, given the changeover between two infantry battalions. This had resulted in the creation of additional temporary accommodation in the form of tents. Unlike in the past, this was seen as an obvious vulnerability by the Pakistani terrorist handlers who decided to exploit this fleeting opportunity.

It can be argued that the terrorists were lucky and came across troops housed in tents when they struck the camp at Uri. This is, however, unlikely for three main reasons. First, terrorists are not known to carry incendiary ammunition as part of their regular arsenal, as is evident from terror strikes in the past. Further, the use of such specialised incendiary ammunition requires terrorists to carry under barrel grenade launchers. In the Uri attack, these launchers were carried by each of the four terrorists, which further reinforces the fact that it was indeed a carefully orchestrated attack. Second, terrorist groups do not have the intelligence and logistics wherewithal to detect, monitor and plan such a carefully calibrated strike, with a definitive focus on exploiting a fleeting opportunity. The terrorists who struck at the Uri camp did just that. Third, beyond the specific details related to the incident, it has been established over a period of time that the JeM has been funded, guided, trained and controlled by the Pakistan Army. Therefore, the circumstantial evidence presented by the attack only reinforces this premise.

Backdrop to the Surgical Strikes

The resultant impact of the Uri incident, which led to the death of 19 army soldiers, was not the only provocation that hardened the government's resolve to move beyond standard reactions. The Army's action against terrorist launch pads was also linked to the cumulative build-up of terrorist attacks that had been emanating from across the Line of Control (LoC). This was reinforced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who indicated that those responsible for the Uri attack would not go unpunished. Therefore, a robust and determined response was expected sooner rather than later. It was a matter of time before a strong message was delivered, through surgical, yet demonstrative, means.

The military options available for counter terror strikes has been analysed threadbare over the years. When viewed along the escalatory ladder, these included shallow strikes across the LoC against terrorist launch pads, precision long range missile strikes against terror

camps, deep Special Forces strikes against terrorist camps, surgical strikes to eliminate terrorist leaders, and neutralisation of Pakistan Army positions along the LoC directly involved in the launch of terrorists into India. The innovation in executing the counter punch was, therefore, more likely to come in terms of the time and place of its delivery.

India's reaction to the Uri terrorist attack is a distinct departure from the strategic and tactical approaches it had adopted in the past. The government decided to undertake a shallow surgical strike along the LoC. This clearly implied that the Army intended to target terrorist launch pads, which are typically located between 500 metres and a couple of kilometres along the LoC inside Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). The decision reinforced the government's restraint and mature response, which had characterised past Indian responses as well. Second, by limiting the strike to terrorist launch pads, India maintained the requisite balance between resolve to punish the perpetrators of terrorism and keeping a low military threshold as would be expected from a reasonable state. Third, on completion of the strike, the Director General Military Operations of the Indian Army informed his counterpart in Pakistan of the same and simultaneously indicated termination of the mission, thereby, ensuring that no ambiguity existed regarding the scope and scale of the operation. Fourth, a large number of friendly foreign countries as well as the media were informed about the operation. This saw the government and the army take ownership of the operation and its intended consequences. Fifth, the government called for cooperation from the Pakistan to fulfil its international obligations to fight terrorism, as has been promised by Islamabad on more than one occasion.

The Special Forces Operation

These decisions formed the strategic backdrop to the tactical strike that was undertaken by the Army. On receipt of a go ahead from the highest level within the government, a large number of central resources were made available to the Army and were seamlessly integrated to achieve cohesion in orchestration. From receiving satellite imagery to corroboration of inputs through human intelligence and a drone feed of events, the sequence of events followed clockwork precision in execution. Despite such support, the operation was a challenge given the decision to strike simultaneously at multiple targets spread across different divisional and corps boundaries. This implied that the loss of surprise or a premature launch at one location could well have led to serious life threatening consequences at the others. However, the plan went ahead as envisaged and unfolded over the early hours of darkness of September 28, 2016.

The Special Forces contingent involved in the operation was sub-divided into smaller sub-groups and brought to the vicinity of the LoC where the holding units of the Indian Army are positioned. They were launched after last light through gaps in own minefields, which dot the area ahead of Indian defences. Having crossed the minefields, which remain a constant threat to life given their being washed laterally due to heavy rains and slides over a period of time, the sub-groups continued to close in on the targets along the LoC. The target areas were being monitored for any dramatic build up in contrast to intelligence that had earlier been fed. At the designated hour, the strikes were launched on the unsuspecting terrorists who were preparing to infiltrate across the LoC for the next strike, supported by fire to pin them down. The strike succeeded completely in eliminating the terrorists, achieving the intended impact within a short timeframe as planned. Having succeeded in their mission, the sub-groups extricated as swiftly as they had closed in with the target area and returned to their base locations just before day break.

The operation left in its wake a trail of terrorists and their support elements who had clinically been eliminated. This was announced the same day during a joint press conference of the spokespersons of the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Army. The element of surprise that the operation witnessed was also seen in the follow up sequence of events. The strategic plan executed through a tactical strike achieved many firsts and substantial gains that need to be reinforced.

Impact and Implications of the Surgical Strikes

This was the first operation conducted by the Army across a wide frontage of well over 100 kilometres at multiple terrorist targets along the LoC. Second, by taking ownership of the strike, India snatched the initiative from Pakistan, which had continued its provocations through terrorist attacks at regular intervals. Third, the Army raised the cost of using terrorism as an instrument of state policy by a couple of notches. Fourth, the Pakistani narrative about the absence of India-targeting terrorists on its soil stood exposed for the world to see. Fifth, the strikes proved to be an important element for maintaining the morale of the people of India and the armed forces. Sixth, the strike reinforced the credibility of the government and displayed its resolve, even as justified restraint and maturity was on display. Finally, India called into question the Pakistani belief that it would not react to terrorist provocations because of the fear of escalation. Along with this, the army also crossed the *laxman rekha* that had for long constrained its ability to hit terrorists in their own backyard.

Pakistan's Response to the Surgical Strikes

Following the surgical strikes carried out by the Indian Army across the Line of Control (LoC) on the night of 28/29 September 2016, the Pakistan establishment was in denial mode once again. It has accused India of “fabrication of truth” and explained the death of two soldiers and injury to nine others as resulting from cross-border firing between troops deployed on either side of the LoC. However, in a move unusual for cross-border firing, which is fairly routine, the Indian High Commissioner was summoned to the Pakistan Foreign Office and issued a demarche. In the initial statement carried by *The Nation* on behalf of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, it was stated that the PM “condemned the military action undertaken by the Indian Army along the Line of Control.” However, the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) categorically stated that no surgical strikes were carried out across the LoC.

When looking at the clear articulation of the event by the Director General Military Operations (DGMO) of the Indian Army, the political leadership, and briefing of envoys of 25 countries by Foreign Secretary in New Delhi on 29 September, it becomes clear that an operation was indeed carried out. Subsequent press reports also suggested that two members of the strike force from the Special Forces units of the Indian Army have also received injuries during the operation. The question that arises is the reason for Pakistan's denial of the operation ever having taken place. The benign explanation is that Pakistan does not wish to escalate tensions at this particular moment when regional and global opinion is against the promotion of terrorism by states anywhere in the world. The other explanations could be:

- (a) Pakistan wants to deny the existence of terrorist launch pads in the territory presently under its control and wants to avoid accountability on this account.
- (b) Pakistan wants to avoid a linkage between India's targeting of terrorists and the casualties its troops suffered in the vicinity of the terrorist launch pads.
- (c) The Pakistan Army does not want to be seen in a poor light vis-à-vis India, particularly after its loss of face in not being able to detect the US strike at Abbottabad (Operation Neptune Spear) in which Osama bin Laden was killed.
- (d) Denial also becomes necessary to prevent questions about the Pakistan Army's level of alertness and preparedness and consequently greater public pressure to undertake retaliatory action at the earliest even if that turns out to be a misadventure.

World opinion has definitely turned against Pakistan and there is more than enough evidence to link the Pakistan Army with terrorist groups. The Pakistan Army, therefore, has a difficult choice of either denying the presence of terrorist launch pads in the portion of Jammu and Kashmir under its occupation close to the LoC or having to undertake a retaliatory action for which it may not be prepared presently.

All told the Pakistan government and Army obviously know the facts. Therefore, two main reasons to downplay the operations are: (a) avoid admitting association with terrorists, and (b) avoid public pressure to retaliate.

But soon enough the Pakistan public would know the facts when jihadi tanzeems start holding functions to honour the jihadis who have been killed in the Indian surgical strike. It is then that Pakistani public will hold the Army responsible for such incidents.

International Responses to Uri and India's Surgical Strikes

India's diplomatic offensive launched post the Uri-attacks provided the broader context in which its decision to carry out the surgical strike needs to be seen. The thrust to 'name and shame' Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism emanating from its soil was carried out systematically, at the national, regional and global level across all fora. Indian diplomatic representations in the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly in response to Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's efforts to internationalise the Kashmir issue called out Pakistan on its "long-standing policy of sponsoring terrorism, the consequences of which have spread well beyond our region."¹ In a statement intended to provoke, the Indian response also stated that "The land of Taxila, one of the greatest learning centres of ancient times is now host to the Ivy League of terrorism. It attracts aspirants and apprentices from all over the world."² This was followed up by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj who, in an evocative speech at the UN General Assembly, called for the isolation of Pakistan and added that "in our midst, there are nations that still speak the language of terrorism, that nurture it, peddle it, and export it. To shelter terrorists has become their calling card. We must identify these nations and hold them to account. These nations, in which UN declared terrorists roam freely, lead processions and deliver their

¹ India's Right of Reply during the General Debate of the 71st session UN General Assembly on September 21, 2016, URL: http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27422/Indias_Right_of_Reply_during_the_General_Debate_of_the_71st_session_UN_General_Assembly_on_September_21_2016, accessed on October 3, 2016.

² Ibid.

poisonous sermons of hate with impunity, are as culpable as the very terrorists they harbour. Such countries should have no place in the comity of nations.”³

India was then quick to rally international support from the US, UK, and France, which condemned the Uri attack, and also highlighted Pakistan’s atrocities in Balochistan, which led the European Union to respond with a threat of punitive economic sanctions if Islamabad did not come clean on human rights violations.⁴ In conversations with her Indian counterpart Ajit Doval after the ‘cross-border attacks’, US National Security Advisor Susan Rice reportedly said that, “the US expects that Pakistan take effective action to combat and delegitimise United Nations-designated terrorist individuals and entities, including Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Muhammad, and their affiliates”.⁵ Media reports suggested that the US and UK even tried to prod Pakistani Prime Minister Sharif to condemn the Uri attack during his meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry and British Prime Minister Theresa May at the side-lines of the UN General Assembly.⁶

Countries such as Germany, Japan, and South Korea also issued statements condemning the incident and expressed support for India’s stand on countering terrorism globally.⁷ Japan, in a statement condoning the incident, said: “The government of Japan strongly condemns the terrorist attack on the Indian base in Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, and extends its sincere condolences...Japan condemns terrorism in all forms regardless of its purposes and strongly reiterates that no act of terrorism can be justified.”⁸ Germany also

³ English Rendition Of External Affairs Minister’s address at the 71st UNGA, New York (September 26, 2016), URL: http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27435/English_Rendition_Of_External_Affairs_Ministers_address_at_the_71st_UNGA_New_York_September_26_2016, accessed on October 3, 2016.

⁴ “Stop Baloch atrocities or face sanctions: EU to Pakistan,” *The Times of India*, September 23, 2016, URL: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/Stop-Baloch-atrocities-or-face-sanctions-European-Union-to-Pakistan/articleshow/54484297.cms>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

⁵ Lalit K Jha, “Want Pak to combat, delegitimise terror entities: US,” *PTI*, September 29, 2016, URL: http://www.ptinews.com/news/7920689_Want-Pak-to-combat-delegitimise-terror-entities--US.html, accessed on October 3, 2016.

⁶ “Nawaz Sharif refused to condemn Uri attack despite US, UK prodding,” *Economic Times*, October 2, 2016, URL: http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/54640491.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cpps, accessed on October 3, 2016.

⁷ “Germany, Japan condemn Uri attack, express solidarity with India,” *firstpost.com*, September 20, 2016, URL: <http://www.firstpost.com/world/germany-japan-condemn-uri-attack-express-solidarity-with-india-3012588.html>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

⁸ *Ibid.*

stands “firmly on the side of India in the fight against terrorism,” according to an official statement.⁹

Key West Asian countries and members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also issued statements condemning the Uri terrorist attack. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar all issued statements on the attack. Post Uri, the Saudi Arabian Foreign Ministry stated: “The foreign ministry expressed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's strong condemnation and denunciation of the terrorist attack that targeted an Indian military base in the Uri area of north Kashmir, killing and wounding dozens.”¹⁰ The UAE’s “Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation renewed the country’s firm stand against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and expressed... solidarity with the Republic of India and support to all actions it may take to confront and eradicate terrorism.”¹¹ News media also reported that the “UAE and Bahrain have, in their statements, even supported any action by India to confront, eradicate and fight terrorism — at a time when Delhi is discussing a range of military, diplomatic, political and economic options to retaliate against Pakistan.”¹² Statements from these OIC members are significant since they have traditionally supported Pakistan’s stand on Kashmir and the OIC itself was doing so with respect to the recent unrest in the Valley. The “OIC Secretary General Iyad Ameen Madani [had] expressed concern over the situation in Kashmir and called for an immediate cessation of atrocities by India, urging the Indian government for peaceful settlement of the dispute ‘in accordance with wishes of Kashmiri people and the UNSC resolutions’.”¹³

In the immediate aftermath of the surgical strike, the US reiterated its support for India’s fight in combating terrorism and sought to clarify the need for de-escalation of hostilities

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Charu Sudan Kasturi, “Caution and clamour on Uri response: Prod for pressure, not hasty hitback,” *The Telegraph*, September 20, 2016, URL: http://www.telegraphindia.com/1160921/jsp/nation/story_109374.jsp#.V_H4Ooh97cs, accessed on October 2, 2016.

¹¹ “Saudi Arabia, UAE condemn Uri terrorist attack,” *ummid.com*, September 19, 2016, URL: <http://ummid.com/news/2016/September/19.09.2016/saudi-arabia-uae-condemn-uri-attack.html>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

¹² Shubhajit Roy, “OIC members join chorus against Uri attack,” *The Indian Express*, September 21, 2016 (updated), URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/organisation-of-islamic-cooperation-against-uri-attack-terrorism-3041265/>, accessed on October 2, 2016.

¹³ “Organisation of Islamic Cooperation backs Pak, asks India to cease atrocities in Kashmir,” *The Indian Express*, September 21, 2016 (updated), URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/organisation-of-islamic-cooperation-backs-pak-asks-india-to-cessate-atrocities-in-kashmir-3040409/>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

by both sides.¹⁴ Meanwhile, media reports suggested that China's reaction to the strikes came two days after Pakistan dispatched two special envoys on Kashmir to Beijing to drum up support for its position. "As shared neighbour and friend to both India and Pakistan, we are concerned about continuous confrontation and tensions between India and Pakistan," foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang was quoted as saying. He added, "we call on all relevant parties to exercise restraint and refrain from actions that would escalate tension."¹⁵ However, on the side-lines, the news of China blocking a tributary of the Brahmaputra river in Tibet at a time when India's reported decision to suspend talks with Pakistan under the Indus Water Treaty in response to the Uri attacks did not go unnoticed.¹⁶ Co-incidentally, China also continued with its decision to extend its technical "hold" on a UN resolution to ban the Jaish-e-Mohammed leader Masood Azhar. The resolution to ban him was co-sponsored by the US, UK, France and India, with 14 other countries acquiescing. China was the only one to block it with a technical hold.¹⁷

Russia came out strongly in support of Indian action saying Moscow stood for "decisive struggle against terrorism in all its manifestations." The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson added, in a statement, that "we expect that the Government of Pakistan should take effective steps in order to stop the activities of terrorist groups in the territory of the country."¹⁸ In another explicit statement of support, given to a news network, the Russian Ambassador in New Delhi, Alexander Kadakin, said, "the greatest human rights violations take place when terrorists attack military installations and attack peaceful civilians in India. We welcome the surgical strike. Every country has right to defend itself."¹⁹

¹⁴ "US seeks de-escalation of tensions, calls Uri attack 'horrific'," *Indo Asian News Service*, September 30, 2016, URL: <https://in.news.yahoo.com/us-seeks-escalation-tensions-calls-uri-attack-horrific-125604399.html>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

¹⁵ Sutirtho Patranobis, "China concerned about tension, asks India, Pakistan to be restrained," *Hindustan Times*, September 30, 2016, URL: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-concerned-about-tension-asks-india-pakistan-to-be-restrained/story-Qx2uaLRMDMZyXjfYKnivl.html>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

¹⁶ Atul Aneja, "China blocks tributary of Brahmaputra to build dam," *The Hindu*, October 1, 2016, URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-blocks-tributary-of-brahmaputra-in-tibet-to-build-dam/article9171963.ece>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

¹⁷ "China extends its technical hold on Masood Azhar's terror listing at UN," *The Times of India*, October 1, 2016, URL: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/China-extends-its-technical-hold-on-Masood-Azhars-terror-listing-at-UN/articleshow/54629572.cms>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

¹⁸ "Russia condemns Uri attack, confirms its support to India's counter-terrorism efforts," *firstpost.com*, September 19, 2016, URL: <http://www.firstpost.com/world/russia-condemns-uri-attack-confirms-its-support-to-indias-counter-terrorism-efforts-3011486.html>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

¹⁹ "Russia Backs Surgical Strikes, Asks Pakistan to Stop Terror Activities," Russian Ambassador Alexander M Kadakin's interview to CNN-News18, 03 October 2016, URL: <http://rusembindia.com/russia-india-dialogue->

Within South Asia, India found support from all its other neighbours. After its decision to boycott the SAARC summit which was due to be held in Pakistan in November, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka all pulled out citing “concerns on terrorism” and the lack of a “conducive atmosphere” for the forum.²⁰ In fact, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s government came out in explicit support of India’s operations saying in a statement that “India has got all legal, internationally accepted right to make a response to any attack on her sovereignty and her soil.”²¹ The Afghan Ambassador to India, Shaida Mohammed Abdali, supported India’s response, saying that “it is time to take bold action.”²² While official statements from the Maldives government condemned international terrorism in generic terms, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) led by former President Mohamed Nasheed lauded India’s mature response and demanded that “Pakistan (must) combat and delegitimise terror groups in the region.”²³

Keeping up the momentum on the diplomatic offensive, India’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Syed Akbaruddin, said that while Pakistan had reached out to the UN Chief and the 15-nation Council over the issues of the surgical strike and Kashmir, its call for intervention by the world body has not found any resonance as there was no further discussion on the matter.²⁴ India had seized the initiative first, by briefing top envoys of 25 countries including the US, China, Russia, the UK and France on the ‘context of the strike’ after the Indian Army had concluded its operations.²⁵

en/press-on-bilateral-relations/102-pressonbilateralrelation/8089-russia-backs-surgical-strikes-asks-pakistan-to-stop-terror-activities, accessed on October 4, 2016.

²⁰ “SAARC Members Must Ensure Territory Not Used For Terror: Nepal,” *ndtv.com*, October 2, 2016, URL: <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/saarc-members-must-ensure-territory-not-used-for-terror-nepal-1469268>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

²¹ “Bangladesh backs India’s surgical strikes across LoC,” *www.livemint.com*, September 29 2016, URL: <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/Ac6hLYJF3vns4gQTmCTrvK/India-has-right-to-respond-to-attack-on-sovereignty-Banglad.html>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

²² “Time To Take Bold Action: Afghanistan Backs India On Surgical Strikes,” *NDTV.com*, September 30, 2016, URL: <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/time-to-take-bold-action-afghanistan-backs-india-on-surgical-strikes-1468463>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

²³ “Maldives seeks SAARC meet at an early date,” *The Hindu*, October 1, 2016, URL: http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-seeks-saarc-meet-at-an-early-date/article9174529.ece?utm_source=InternalRef&utm_medium=relatedNews&utm_campaign=RelatedNews%20I, accessed on October 3, 2016.

²⁴ “Pakistan not getting support in UN on surgical strikes issue: Akbaruddin,” *The Hindu*, October 1, 2016, URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-not-getting-support-at-un-over-surgical-strikes-akbaruddin/article9172142.ece>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

²⁵ “Surgical strikes: India briefs envoys of 25 countries including the US, China, Russia, the UK and France,” *The Indian Express*, September 29, 2016, URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/india-briefs-envoys-of-25-countries-including-the-us-china-russia-the-uk-and-france-3056691/>, accessed on October 3, 2016.

Successful Strategic Communication and Unity of Response

The operation stood out particularly for the clarity with which information about the surgical strike was presented in the public domain. The narrative was precise, had clarity of purpose, and showed the unity of response in the military, political and diplomatic wings of the government. The messaging was clear: this was a limited strike to pre-empt terrorists from entering India, the target were terrorists and not the Pakistan Army, India had acted within its rights and the Indian Army was in constant touch with its Pakistani counterpart to ensure that there was no ratcheting up of tensions. The combined press briefing conducted by the Director General of Military Operations and the Spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs left no ambiguity about the limited scope of the operation and its demonstrative nature, and built upon the official narrative that had shored in international diplomatic capital post the Uri attacks. The Indian establishment had clearly taken lessons post the Myanmar operation and projected a unity of response across the various wings of the government.

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