



Q&A

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# Deadly Kashmir Suicide Bombing Ratchets up India-Pakistan Tensions

*A 14 February suicide attack by Pakistan-based militants was their bloodiest strike in Indian-administered Kashmir in over three decades. In this Q&A, our Asia Program Director Laurel Miller warns that even a limited Indian retaliatory strike could spark a sharp escalation in conflict between the nuclear-armed neighbours.*

## **What happened in the Pulwama attack and how has India responded?**

A 14 February suicide car bombing claimed by the Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed killed more than 45 security personnel in Indian-administered Kashmir's Pulwama district, some 30 km from the state capital Srinagar. The attack, which targeted a convoy of the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), was the deadliest terror incident in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) for over three decades. Vowing revenge and accusing Pakistan of complicity, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has warned Islamabad that support for jihadist proxies will no longer be tolerated. Threatening to isolate Pakistan diplomatically, Modi has called on the international community to take united, concrete action against terrorism and those who spread it. New Delhi has recalled its high commissioner (ambassador) from Islamabad and withdrawn Pakistan's Most Favored Nation trading status. Islamabad also withdrew its top diplomat from New Delhi, accusing India of making allegations without investigations and denying any role in the attack.

As an already-tense relationship worsens, so too do the risks of conflict between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. With Indian general elections approaching this spring and emotions

running high, the BJP government is likely to give its security forces an even freer hand than usual in squashing dissent in Muslim-majority, Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The resultant alienation could lead more Kashmiri youth to join the ranks of militant groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed.

## **Is Pakistan culpable for the Pulwama attack?**

Rejecting Indian allegations of culpability, Islamabad claims that it has banned Jaish-e-Mohammed, which is led by Masood Azhar and is included in the UN Security Council Resolution 1267 sanctions list. Alongside Lashkar-e-Tayyaba/Jamaat-ud-Dawa, it is one of the most important anti-India Pakistan-based jihadist groups. Pakistan formally banned Jaish-e-Mohammed in 2002 following a December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, but the group re-emerged under a changed name. Although Pakistan has taken actions against Jaish individuals responsible for internal attacks, such as on military ruler Pervez Musharraf in December 2003, the al-Qaeda linked organisation continues to operate freely – recruiting, fundraising (including through madrasa networks and charity fronts), and planning and conducting attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir. The permissive

environment Pakistan has created for Jaish activities directed toward India can legitimately be seen as deliberate policy, regardless of whether specific attacks can be proved to be linked to Pakistani decision-making.

### **Was Kashmiri homegrown militancy responsible for the Pulwama attack?**

The 14 February suicide attacker, Jaish-e-Mohammed's Adil Ahmad Dar (also known as Waqas Commando), was a young man from a village close to the attack site who had joined the group last year. His father claimed he had joined Jaish after Indian troops beat and humiliated him. India's militarised response to growing local alienation and disaffection in J&K has resulted in an exponential rise in home-grown militancy and local support for the militants. The July 2016 killing of Burhan Muzaffar Wani, a young charismatic Hizbul Mujahideen militant, accelerated these developments.

Rampant rights abuses amid a climate of impunity, highlighted in the June 2018 UN report on Kashmir, and draconian laws such as the Armed Services Special Powers Act serve as recruiting tools for both Kashmiri separatist groups and Pakistani jihadist outfits like Jaish-e-Mohammed. Clearing operations by Indian security forces such as "Operation All Out", launched in mid-2017, led to 2018 becoming the bloodiest year in J&K in a decade. Around 500 people were killed in Kashmir's conflict-related violence, including militants, civilians and security personnel. Although more than half of those killed were militants, many non-combatants were also killed, injured or disappeared in military operations, resulting in more support by local communities for the militant cause.

### **How will the Pulwama attack shape New Delhi's policy toward Indian-administered Kashmir?**

Domestic outrage at the killing of more than 40 security personnel by the Kashmiri suicide bomber with admitted links to a Pakistan-based jihadist group has further vitiated already tense relations between Hindus and Muslims

in India. In J&K's Hindu-majority Jammu and elsewhere, particularly in northern Indian states, Kashmiri Muslims have been harassed and attacked. Although failing to rein in such sectarian violence could further increase support for the militants in the J&K's Muslim-majority areas, as elections approach the BJP will want to appease the sentiments of its hardline constituency that wants to avenge the Pulwama dead.

While security sweeps and arrests of scores of alleged militant sympathisers are further exacerbating tensions within J&K, there are few political avenues to assuage Kashmiri dissent. New Delhi has exercised direct rule in J&K since the governor dissolved the state assembly in November 2018. Although Kashmiri separatists want either independence or merger with Pakistan, even moderates are alienated by the gradual erosion of Article 370 of the Indian constitution, which provides for a special status of greater political autonomy for J&K and the abolition of which the BJP has strongly supported. This lack of autonomy and political freedoms, combined with the heavy-handed security response, will likely lead to more violence and unrest in J&K, which in turn will likely result in more efforts by New Delhi to forcibly suppress Kashmiri dissent.

### **Will Pakistan rethink support for anti-India jihadist proxies?**

A Pakistani rethink on the longstanding policy of backing jihadist proxies, including Jaish, depends on a shift in its powerful military establishment's internal and external cost-benefit analysis, which as yet appears more tactical than strategic. Since 2016, following attacks on the Pathankot military base in Indian Punjab and security personnel near J&K's Uri town – which India attributed to Jaish – India has refused to revive its bilateral dialogue with Islamabad unless Pakistan takes decisive action against all such jihadist groups. Following the Pathankot and Uri attacks, India claimed to have launched surgical strikes on terrorist targets across the Line of Control dividing Indian and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Though

Pakistan denies that such strikes took place, there are almost weekly violations of the 2003 ceasefire line by Pakistani and Indian troops, claiming scores of lives of civilians and security personnel each year.

“We will give a befitting reply; our neighbour will not be allowed to destabilise us”, said Prime Minister Modi, giving his security forces “permission to take decisions about the timing, place and nature of their response”. While offering to cooperate with New Delhi in investigating the Pulwama attack, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan warned that his country would have no choice but to “retaliate immediately” if India attacked.

Concerned about heightened tensions, the U.S. has urged Pakistan to act decisively against all terrorist groups “operating on its soil”. However, Pakistan’s strategic location and the role it

could play in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table could lead the U.S. to lower its pressure. Islamabad’s closest ally, China, which has thus far blocked Indian efforts in the UN Security Council to designate Jaish leader Azhar a “global terrorist”, is also concerned about the outbreak of armed conflict between India and Pakistan. However, it is unlikely to pressure Islamabad given Beijing’s unwillingness to damage its relationship with Pakistan.

If New Delhi were to opt for even a limited military strike across the Line of Control or the international border with Pakistan, that would increase the risk of conflict spiraling rapidly between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.