Indian decision makers face a strategic conundrum: how to deter and/or respond to future terrorism emanating from Pakistan. The dilemmas are manifold: punitive action may assuage the desire of an angry public for revenge, but too heavy a response may motivate actors in Pakistan to escalate attacks in India; while a weak riposte is unlikely to convince Pakistan’s civilian and military leaders to alter their long-standing embrace of conflict against India by proxy. Both the Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the Manmohan Singh governments faced this conundrum in January 2002 and November 2008, respectively, following the attacks by Pakistan-based militants in Delhi and Mumbai. Both chose to exercise restraint rather than strike back.

The groups that conducted the Delhi and Mumbai terror attacks in those years continue to operate in Pakistan. It is reasonable to assume that the Narendra Modi government, like its predecessors, will face a major attack on Indian soil attributed to such groups. Modi’s self-styled reputation as a tough man and strong leader—borne out by his decision to disproportionately retaliate to Pakistani shelling across the Line of Control in Kashmir in fall 2014—increases the perception that, this time, the Indian government will choose a military response.
By now, Prime Minister Modi should have been briefed on the military options, if there is another major terrorist attack on India attributed to militants operating in Pakistan. The Indian Army chief will have described a ground campaign, perhaps characterized by a sharp armored and infantry thrust into Pakistani Punjab, intended to punish the Pakistan military and hold territory as leverage until Pakistan verifiably prosecutes Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and like groups. The Naval chief would offer a maritime exclusion of Pakistan’s major port at Karachi to pressure Pakistan’s economy. And the Air chief presumably briefed limited air strikes against terrorist-linked facilities and perhaps also Pakistani military or intelligence targets believed to support terrorist operations. These are, essentially, the available punitive options involving military force.1

Which might Modi select? The odds-on favorite among defense analysts in Delhi is air power. For instance, retired Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur stated that as a matter of doctrine, air power will maintain “prima donna” status in India because of its “reach, flexibility, fire-power, and quick response capability in the complete spectrum of conflict.”

The attraction of limited air strikes is understandable, particularly compared to a ground option. While Indian and Pakistani decision makers traditionally have seen air warfare to be escalatory—at least as compared to the familiar shelling and mortar exchange across the Line of Control—the emergence of nuclear weapons in both countries’ arsenals has made Indian political leaders increasingly wary of the escalatory risks of sending the Army into Pakistan. This is one reason why Vajpayee’s BJP-led government chose not to unleash the 500,000-strong force that it amassed along the International Border in early 2002, following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi. When confronted with a choice of all or nothing, they decided to exercise caution.

Today, Indian military analysts also increasingly recognize the risks of even limited ground operations, notwithstanding initial excitement over the more finely calibrated plans proffered by proponents of the so-called “Cold Start” doctrine, similar to the ground option described above, with Indian forces limiting the depth of their thrusts so as not to cross Pakistan’s nuclear red lines.3 Yet, even a limited response that puts Indian boots on Pakistani soil could quickly escalate to major operations that would result in more casualties than would have been suffered in the initial terrorist attack. And, the more Indian forces were succeeding on Pakistani territory, the greater the incentive Pakistani leaders would feel to use nuclear weapons to repulse them.

Doubts about Army-centric plans to retaliate to another Mumbai-like attack lead analysts to search for alternatives they find less risky. Air-borne strikes are appearing more attractive: they are seemingly less escalatory than ground operations, more targeted than a naval blockade, and sufficiently punitive and
visible to satisfy Indian leaders’ political needs. In his illuminating, albeit sanguine, book, Limited Wars in South Asia, Indian Major General (ret.) G. D. Bakshi reflects this new enthusiasm:

Responding with air power first would enable India to carefully calibrate its responses to terrorist attacks and ensure escalation dominance...Just and proportionate air strikes...would serve as a shot across the bow that would place the onus of further escalation on the enemy...Their high level of optical visibility serves to dramatically and emphatically highlight that such terrorist attacks are not acceptable any more. At the same time, air power does not hold ground or capture territory. To that extent, its initial use may be less of an existential threat to the Pakistanis than a full-fledged ground assault that captures and holds territory.4

Limited punitive air strikes also would put India into a league with the United States and Israel as “hard,” militarily-capable democracies determined to combat terrorism and to punish states that do not fulfill their obligations to curtail terrorists’ operations. This has appeal to strategists and politicians in today’s India—in interviews and writing, Indian strategists frequently invoke Israel as a model in military and homeland security domains.5

Yet, India does not possess offensive capabilities remotely comparable with those of the United States and Israel. And Pakistan possesses air defense capabilities far greater than those confronted by U.S. and Israeli pilots and drone operators. Beyond these substantial differences in capabilities, the U.S. and Israeli experiences show that punitive air strikes often have not solved the problems they were meant to address. In Iraq in the 1990s, Afghanistan in the 1990s as well as the ongoing war, and Lebanon and Gaza in 2006, 2008, 2009, and 2014, air strikes degraded adversaries’ capabilities and won immediate political support for the governments that authorized them, but they did not produce durable strategic gains.6

Moreover, the U.S. and Israeli experiences indicate that air power does not obviate the need for ensuing ground operations. Indian (and Pakistani) military strategists understand this. Ground forces must be readied both to deter the opponent’s escalation and also because air strikes alone may prove insufficient to compel the adversary to demobilize, if not dismantle, terrorist organizations. For these reasons, then, one should evaluate air strike options first as a stand-alone concept of military operations, and second as a stage in a war that could escalate—by plan or due to action-reaction processes—to major land warfare.

In this article, we puzzle through the dilemmas involving Indian use of limited air power against Pakistan. We evaluate the potential benefits and risks of selecting certain targets in different parts of Pakistan in light of India’s strategic objective to motivate Pakistani leaders to cease allowing proxy militants to attack India. We then analyze the escalation potential involved in target selection and the need for ground mobilization to back up an air power option.
Finally, we discuss the capabilities that India currently has, and would need, to prosecute effective airstrikes against Pakistan. Our assessment is that India is several years, and perhaps longer, from having an effective option for stand-off strikes. Even then, the escalatory effects of anything more than politically symbolic strikes could be counterproductive to Indian strategic interests.

**Kashmir or Heartland?**

In selecting kinetic options to punish Pakistan and motivate its leaders to demobilize anti-India terrorist groups, Indian decision makers would begin by determining the location and category of targets to strike in Pakistan. Sorting through the logic of targeting choices reveals the complexity of executing a retaliatory strike in a way that furthers India’s strategic objectives.

A threshold question would be whether air strikes should be conducted against targets in Kashmir, which has been the scene of regular cross-border violence between the two antagonists, or in the Pakistani heartland of Punjab and Sindh. It is notable that both Indian and Pakistani defense officials and experts consider attacks on non-state targets in Kashmir as inherently less provocative. As a BJP foreign policy advisor put it in a confidential April 2014 interview, “India must react if there is another Mumbai-like attack. The only option is to do some sort of surgical strike in POK [Pakistan-occupied Kashmir]. This is territory that is legally disputed, that both sides acknowledge is disputed.” By focusing action in Kashmir, India would demonstrate that “terrorism is not cost free and that our military’s hands have been untied,” while putting the burden of further escalation onto Pakistani leaders. If Pakistan then retaliated by expanding the conflict beyond Kashmir, India would then be seen as justified in mounting wider operations in Pakistan.

The differences between attacks in Kashmir and in the heartland point to strategic dilemmas for Indian decision makers. Attacking targets in Kashmir with air power, and not merely artillery as is normally done, would be somewhat escalatory. Yet it also would signal a measure of restraint, as compared with attacking targets in Pakistan’s two eastern provinces. Striking targets in Pakistani Kashmir would convey an Indian interest in meting out visible punishment against Pakistan, which could satisfy Indian public opinion and political imperatives for the government. Indian leaders also would consciously signal a greater willingness to risk escalation than was evident after the terror attacks on New Delhi in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008. But confining the targets of Indian strikes in this way could unintentionally lead Pakistani decision makers...
to feel that the price they were paying for the instigating terror attack was not so
great as to require a change in Pakistani support of anti-India terrorist groups.
After all, Punjab and Sindh would have been spared.

Indian air attacks on the Pakistani heartland would be much more punitive
and provocative. Such attacks could reinforce the compellence message Indian
leaders would wish Pakistan to receive. This could motivate Pakistani decision
makers to act more decisively against terrorist groups, as India wants. In
attacking terrorist-related targets in the Pakistani heartland, Indian leaders
could reasonably feel and argue that they were responding symmetrically and
proportionately to terrorist attacks against India’s heartland. On the other hand,
attacking the heartland could cause Islamabad to fight back more intensively to
defy New Delhi and signal that Pakistan cannot be coerced.

Attacking targets in Punjab or Sindh also raises another troubling asymmetry.
The government in New Delhi would unambiguously authorize the Indian
strikes, unlike the initial terrorist attack imputed to Pakistan. If India (or other
governments’ intelligence agencies) did not have unmistakable proof that the
leaders of Pakistan authorized the initial terrorist attack, an asymmetry in
responsibility could be perceived. Pakistani leaders and society could feel that
their homeland was being attacked unjustifiably—an act of aggression rather
than of retaliation in self-defense. This would create strong motivation for
Pakistan to respond militarily, opening the way to cycles of escalation. In a war
that escalated on this basis, regional and international attention would shift
from the original act of terrorism perpetrated on India to the mutual
responsibility of Pakistan and India for the ensuing destruction and carnage.
Such a shift would be a net loss for India.

Of course, if India could demonstrate clearly to Pakistanis and the world that
the original terrorist attack was the responsibility of Pakistani authorities, the
legitimacy of Indian counter-strikes on terrorist-related targets in Pakistan
would be difficult to deny. Then the question would be effectiveness and what
ensued next. Striking targets in the heartland of Pakistan would show India’s
willingness to take risks to compel Pakistani leaders to dismantle terrorist
organizations and infrastructure, but it could also impel Pakistani military
leaders to demonstrate their own resolve and capabilities to deny India any
claim of victory. Otherwise, the standing of whomever in Pakistan was held
responsible for the situation—be they military or civilian leaders—would be
jeopardized in the inevitable domestic recriminations that would ensue.

**Camps, Leaders, or State Targets?**

Beyond the strategic logic and escalatory dynamics entailed in choosing where
to conduct air strikes, different categories of targets present varying potential
beneﬁts and risks at the operational level. The least escalatory option would be
to target terrorist camps and other infrastructure in Kashmir. Attacking terrorist
targets would be symmetric and proportionate to the instigating act of terror
against India. Indeed, such operations would be more discriminating than the
presumed terrorist attack on India, which could reaffirm India’s higher political-
moral standing. Yet as noted above, few Indians or Pakistanis believe that
attacking terrorist targets in Kashmir would cause Pakistani ofﬁcials to change
their policies or mobilize Pakistani civil society to press for such change.

There are operational challenges and risks, too. Terrorists and their
installations can move easily. It is difﬁcult to know in real time whether
suspected camps are occupied. If a targeted site were empty, or women and
children were harmed, Pakistani authorities would project the resultant images
on television and other media to make India look dastardly, inept, or both. If
aircraft were used to conduct such strikes, there is a risk that Pakistani air or
ground defenses could interdict them, creating the spectacle of wrecked aircraft
and dead or captured pilots. All of this could diminish the political support
within India that the government would have intended the attack to produce.

Interviews with Indian interlocutors with extensive government experience
highlighted these challenges: “We might have acquired precision munitions, but
the data we have on the camps and infrastructure is not so accurate,” said one
former intelligence ofﬁcer. A BJP foreign policy advisor added, “The terrorist
infrastructure in POK may be ramshackle. These may be camps that could easily
be rebuilt, so it’s true, we could hit them one day and they could reappear soon
after. Also, there is a risk that strikes could kill civilians and create a propaganda
bonanza for Pakistan and the terrorists.”

A second category of potential targets would be the Pakistani military and
intelligence infrastructure in Kashmir, which India might select if it believed
such installations to be associated with infiltration of militants into India.
While few international observers would ﬁnd such targeting to be unjustiﬁed if
there were clear evidence of Pakistani state complicity in the preceding terrorist
attack on India, the Pakistani military leadership likely would take a different
view. International pressure, if applied sharply and immediately on Rawalpindi,
could complicate Pakistani decisions to respond militarily against India.
However, Indian leaders could not count on such pressure being adeptly
mobilized in time, nor could they be conﬁdent that international pressures
would restrain Pakistani leaders.

The anti-India militants who prepare for and conduct operations from
Pakistan’s side of Kashmir are merely foot soldiers. Leaders of groups such as
LeT, and of the Pakistani security establishment who support them, are based in
Punjab and Sindh. These leaders and the infrastructure that surrounds them
would represent a more strategically important target of Indian retaliatory
strikes. This third category of potential targets could include the 200-acre LeT complex at Markaz-e-Taiba, near Muridke, about 30 kilometers from Lahore.

The attractiveness of targeting well-known headquarters of groups such as LeT is obvious at one level—at least both to Indians and Pakistanis. These headquarters are symbolically important even if they are not necessarily where terrorist organizations plan and orchestrate operations against India. Indeed, immediately after a high-profile terrorist attack on India, the leaders and operatives of the groups allegedly responsible would take the precaution of staying away from well-known facilities, such as the campus in Muridke. Still, attacking such locations could give India the satisfaction of visibly holding the sponsoring organization accountable. Indian officials could proclaim that Pakistani authorities’ failure to uphold their international obligations under UN Security Council Resolution 1373 (to actively combat terrorists operating in and from their territory) left India no choice but to strike in self-defense.

Yet, the LeT campus at Muridke also reportedly contains a madrassa, hospital, market, residences, and farms, making it very likely that a strike would also kill non-combatants. It is improbable that the LeT keeps large stores of arms or other instruments of violence there, making it harder for India after the attack to demonstrate this was a legitimate target. And Muridke is just 30 km from Lahore; millions of non-militant Pakistanis probably would feel that India was striking “too close to home.” Indian leaders could hope that striking on the outskirts of Lahore would motivate Pakistani citizens to press the decision makers in Rawalpindi and Islamabad to curtail the violent operations of groups like LeT. By bringing the costs of Pakistan’s subconventional conflict to the heartland, India could hope to give Pakistanis a stake in telling their own government “enough is enough.” Israeli officials offer a similar purpose behind the massive bombardment of Gaza—to turn non-combatant residents against Hamas. Yet, as has been the case in Gaza at least to some extent and so too in Pakistan, attacks near Lahore could rally Pakistanis against India.

A former top-level officer of the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI, put it this way when asked what would happen if India struck the LeT headquarters:

They talk of hitting Muridke. It’s in the middle of a town! We know their capabilities. If a strike hits the outskirts of Lahore, in central Punjab, it would be a severe escalatory step. We’ll strike back. We could hit camps where they work with the Baloch. Our argument would be the same as Indians argue. We don’t want it to be escalatory, but it must be commensurate to what they did. If they kill 20, we can’t just drop bombs in a field. We would claim we imposed more casualties than they did. It may be true or not, but the media will report it. An attack on Muridke will also lead to a mobilization on both sides. We would move troops to the border, as they will. We will move from the Eastern border—forget the war on terror. Fighting India would become the priority.
Such comments may be self-serving and blustery, but it would be reckless to
discount them entirely.

A fourth category of targets for precision strikes could be leaders of a group
(or groups) that conducted the next major terrorist attack on India. Targeting
individual terrorist leaders is operationally much more demanding than
attacking headquarters and other facilities used by their organizations. In
attacking known facilities, India could hope to kill group leaders, but such
attacks could serve purposes of punishment, deterrence, and compellence
whether or not leaders were killed in the process. The value of going after
specific leaders depends on the retaliator’s theory of how the target’s death
would affect the future. For example, would killing the leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, motivate the surviving members of the
organization to desist from further attacks on India? Would it motivate the
Pakistani security establishment to do more to prevent the organization from
conducting further attacks? Would killing an individual terrorist leader (or
leaders) significantly degrade the organization’s capacity to mount anti-India
operations, and if so, for how long? How would Indian assassination of
prominent jihadi leaders affect broader Pakistani political dynamics? Would it
facilitate broader public support for government efforts to combat militant
groups within Pakistan, or the reverse?

The answers to these questions are not obvious. The United States has
systematically targeted leaders of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and
Yemen. Israel famously has conducted long assassination campaigns against
leaders of Hamas’s military wing. Pakistan itself recently has targeted leaders of
the Pakistani Taliban. The impulse to do so is intuitively sensible. Among other
things, killing known terrorist leaders may at least somewhat satisfy the desire
for vengeful justice within the polities that these leaders’ organizations have
terrorized. This in turn may provide irresistible political benefits for the leaders
of the retaliating governments, who otherwise could be accused by opponents of
“not doing enough.”

The challenge in evaluating the effects of targeted assassinations is even
greater when a potential target plays multiple roles within their organization
and society. A bomb-builder or operational planner is clearly a belligerent.
Members and followers of their group, as well as of international society, expect
that such people may be targeted as de facto combatants. But the wisdom of
targeting a person such as Hafiz Saeed is less clear, for he is seen in Pakistan as a
spiritual and political leader of a broader movement that promotes political
change and social welfare (at least for its followers) in addition to jihad on
behalf of Kashmiri Muslims.

While few reasonable people could doubt that his organization, LeT, has
perpetrated attacks on non-combatants in India, Saeed’s broader role in
Pakistan makes him appear to be more than a combatant. Jamaat ud Dawa—or JuD, the political arm of LeT that Saeed heads—has functioned as a charity, providing free schools and hospitals as well as relief to those affected by natural disasters in the region. The U.S. State Department’s decision to sanction the group in the summer of 2014 was met with defiance by the Pakistani government. JuD released an official statement afterward announcing that State Department sanctions “always helps us get more support in Pakistan.” Additionally, the JuD clearly liaises with Pakistan’s ruling PML-N party, which governs Punjab province, and politicians from mainstream political parties have shared the stage with Saeed at JuD rallies. Thus, people would view the killing of Saeed in a different light than, say, killing a terrorist commando at a camp where he is preparing followers for missions in India.

Indians might get deeper satisfaction from removing a figure of Saeed’s stature, but strategically, the result could make it more difficult for Pakistani authorities to compel LeT followers to desist from further attacks on India. It is thus wise for Indian leaders to ask whether an Indian attack on LeT infrastructure or targeted against its leadership in Punjab would reinforce the ISI’s restraint of the organization or, instead, motivate both the LeT and the ISI to retaliate. A long-time Indian intelligence specialist on Pakistan offered a plausible answer: “Taking out Hafiz Saeed would be bigger to the Pakistanis than when the United States took out Osama bin Laden. It would be a big blow to the Pakistan Army if he were killed. So they would be motivated to strike back.”

None of the scholars who study the subject argue that killing leaders of organizations that conduct terrorism solves the strategic challenges of counterterrorism. At best, targeted killing is sometimes an effective tactic that can in limited ways contribute to a larger strategy. If assassinating terrorist leaders were strategically decisive, though, Israel presumably would not have felt the need to keep doing it for five decades. The U.S. drone and special operations assassinations in Afghanistan would not have gone on for thirteen years with no end in sight. This is not to say that sparing the lives of leaders of groups that practice terrorism would yield better results. But the gains of targeted killings clearly are insufficient to accomplish strategic objectives.

The more telling explanation for Israeli and U.S. continued reliance on targeted killing is that this tactic acquires a momentum of its own, and political leaders see more short-term benefits in persisting with it than in questioning long-term implications and sustainability. At least they are doing something. Voters appreciate this. And it is easier for leaders of terrorized states to authorize targeted killings than to explain why they would eschew them.
Use of fighter-bombers or missiles across the Line of Control in Kashmir would represent the most daring projection of Indian military power into Pakistani territory since the 1971 war. Attacking the Pakistani heartland, of course, would represent bolder action still. During the Kargil Conflict in 1999, the Vajpayee government ordered the Indian Air Force not to cross the LoC in conducting operations. This injunction, along with the Pakistan Air Force’s non-involvement in the planning and conduct of the Kargil incursion, helped enable the Indian Air Force to contribute importantly to India’s victory without creating escalatory pressures. In a scenario where the Indian Air Force’s objective would be to strike targets in Pakistan, the risks of escalation would be greater, as would be the signal of India’s forceful resolve.

Operationally, the IAF would need to contend successfully with Pakistani air defenses if strikes were to be delivered by Indian aircraft operating in Pakistani airspace. Pakistan’s air defenses, reportedly, have been significantly upgraded after the Osama bin Laden raid revealed considerable gaps. Some Indian analysts have signaled concerns about the lack of stealthy aircraft that could penetrate such defenses. Without stealth capability, standard procedures would call for India initially to conduct missile or bomb attacks on air defense installations and other capabilities to open corridors for follow-on attacks on the primary targets. If and when India possessed cyber or other non-kinetic means to disable Pakistani air defenses, the scope and scale of kinetic action required to conduct air strikes on targets in Pakistan could be reduced. This could in turn reduce the escalatory risks of such attacks. Yet, cyber threats against Pakistan’s command-and-control systems would cause Pakistan’s military to take countervailing precautions which could increase risks of intentional or inadvertent escalation. For example, they could plan to launch conventionally-armed missile attacks on Indian military air bases and other fixed targets in the event that Pakistani air defenses were shut down or corrupted.

In any case, the air defense assets, including air bases and intercepting fighter planes, would be “owned” and operated by the Pakistani military, not terrorist groups. Some Pakistani Air Force planes and pilots presumably would survive initial Indian attacks and stay in the air to repel Indian attackers. Thus, although India’s primary targets would be terrorist-related, the Pakistani military also would be attacked directly. This, again, has clear implications for escalation.
Instead of using aircraft to strike Pakistan, India could opt to use ground-launched ballistic or cruise missiles to strike terrorist targets, similar to the U.S. attack on al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in 1998 using Tomahawk cruise missiles. Missile attacks would not require engaging Pakistani air defenses, which could reduce the risks of casualties on both sides. India’s ballistic missile arsenal is showing signs of slow improvement, and the 290-km BrahMos cruise missile—co-developed with Russia—has undergone numerous operational tests and is reportedly in service.²⁰

Yet, Indian use of cruise or ballistic missiles would establish a new precedent in Indo-Pakistani conflict. Given the number and types of missiles Pakistan possesses and is developing for production, Indian leaders presumably would want to take great care before lowering the threshold for the use of these weapons. Moreover, India would want some confidence that Pakistani officials would not perceive that incoming missiles from India carried nuclear weapons. Otherwise, India could invite Pakistani nuclear counter-strikes. In all scenarios of limited, precise counter-strikes, Indian decision makers would have to prepare for Pakistani responses. India would have to mobilize elements of its Army and other services to deter and/or blunt reprisals by Pakistani forces. This mobilization would add time between the initial terrorist attack on India and even limited, punitive Indian air strikes on Pakistan. India’s mobilization also would warn Pakistan, attenuating the element of surprise.

“We have war-gamed this,” a recently retired high-level Pakistani military strategist explained in a late-2013 interview. “Air strikes are an option India has in response to something like Mumbai. But it cannot be separated. Indian air strikes will be answered by Pakistan. And there will be ground forces to back it up. So, the risk of escalation is there. You can separate air strikes from a ground war by three or four days but not longer.” This retired general grinned dismissively: “It’s different for the [United States]. When you go striking other countries, it is one-sided. The other side does not have an air force. There is an air vacuum. But not here.”²¹

A former Director General of the ISI responded similarly when asked why India should not find it more practical to use air power to respond to another attack like the one on Mumbai in 2008. “India is not Israel,” he said, “and we are not the Palestinians. It’s not so one-sided. If India conducts air strikes on Pakistan, there will be serious escalation. Even after an LeT strike, if India used air strikes to hit an LeT camp, people here would react passionately. They would
say India is acting like the [United States], like with Salala. Pakistan would have to retaliate.”

Predictably, Indian advocates of air power downplay the risks of escalation. “It’s time to move away from ‘don’t use air power because it is escalatory,’” exclaimed a recently retired high-ranking air force officer. He said India could minimize collateral damage with air power. With the correct and up-to-the-minute intelligence, India could strike at the right time. Unfortunately, this former officer intoned “our political system will not allow this. There is a phobia that air power is escalatory. This should have changed after Kargil. Nuclear deterrence is very stabilized. The only way to address subconventional aggression is with air power.”

This optimistic view may or may not be warranted. However, as with Gen. Bakshi’s assertion that air strikes would “ensure escalation dominance,” the issue requires careful analysis. In contests between roughly balanced armed forces backed by approximately matched nuclear arsenals, few sober analysts would say that escalation dominance can be “ensured.” In a contest between states that do not possess weapons of mass destruction, the state with effective advantages in ground, air, and sea power can enjoy some confidence that it can win at whatever level of violence the adversary is willing to fight. But between states with a power asymmetry, nuclear weapons change the dynamic because the weaker side still can inflict enough damage on the stronger to render victory meaningless.

To understand this, imagine if Hamas possessed a nuclear arsenal that could survive Israeli air and ground assaults. Would Israel’s calculations change? If Iraq in 2003 had a survivable nuclear arsenal that could hit U.S. cities, would the U.S. Congress and allied states have supported the invasion of Iraq? The point is not that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons in response to limited Indian air strikes on Pakistan following a major terrorist attack in India. Rather, it is that Pakistan could be emboldened to draw India into an escalation spiral that would create risks far in excess of the damage done by the initial act of terrorism. India could increase the intensity and scope of conventional conflict to prevail over Pakistan’s conventional maneuvers, but at some point, Indian battlefield victories could drive Pakistan to use nuclear weapons to compel India to stop, or else force India to risk mutual nuclear devastation.

Recognizing these possibilities, decision makers should be expected to ask not only for best-case scenarios of moves and counter-moves that could ensue from planned strikes, but also for plausible less-than-best-case scenarios. And they
should specify the broader strategic objectives they want military plans to achieve. One former high-ranking Indian official, who participated in decision making during military crises and the Kargil conflict, laughed in a 2014 interview when presented with the notion that air strikes on terrorist infrastructure in Kashmir could teach Pakistan a lesson with little risk. “So, I take out five camps; do it perfectly. Then he takes out the Srinagar airfield, saying to the world that India started it. Then what do we do?” A retired Indian Air Marshal offered a similar reflection. “I used to be a hawk,” this veteran said, “but from a mature point of view, escalation dominance is only a theoretical proposition. It is an illusion. Can you control intensity of conflict, ratchet up and down? Remember, this would be in a contested airspace.”

Part of the analytic challenge here is the inherent difficulty of predicting how an adversary will interpret one’s military action. Indian decision makers may believe certain reprisals are restrained, but Pakistani leaders could actually perceive them very differently, as acts of war. The differences in perception reflect what experimental psychologists and neuro-scientists call “prediction errors.” Nicholas D. Wright summarizes the problematic dynamic that can ensue: “When we make an action, we largely know when, where and how we will make the action. But the adversary does not have such insider knowledge. So, to the adversary the action is more unexpected, has a larger associated prediction error and so has a stronger psychological impact than we understand ourselves. As this occurs with the actions of both sides, it can lead to a spiral of inadvertent escalation.” In an ideal world, Indian decision makers—undertaking what they intend to be limited, precise reprisal strikes on Pakistan—would correctly judge that Pakistani leaders would perceive an attack just as India intended it to be perceived: limited, justified, and meant to end the conflict. But, given the uncertain psychological processes involved, and the history of Indo-Pakistani relations and conflicts, caution is called for.

Indeed, the earlier discussed problem of uncertainty regarding Pakistani authorities’ responsibility for potential major acts of terrorism against India exacerbates the challenge of managing an action-reaction process. If Pakistani leaders did not authorize an initial attack on India, and evidence was not clear and timely that their agents had helped prepare and facilitate that attack, Indian military retaliation, regardless of the target, could be perceived as an act of aggression. This would compound the prediction error problem, with attendant implications for escalation.
Air Strikes as Precursor to Ground Operations

Limited, precise air-borne strikes could be a relatively attractive option for an Indian military response to a major terrorist attack attributed to Pakistan. To be sure, as discussed earlier, this option would be more operationally and strategically problematic than is widely appreciated. And as we discuss further below, India currently lacks some of the key technical and human intelligence-gathering capabilities needed to identify and destroy precisely with confidence the sorts of targets it would want. India also lacks delivery systems that could reliably operate in contested airspace with the versatility and pinpoint accuracy that would be desired. Still, punitive airstrikes could have an appeal even if only to produce vivid pictorial images of Indian kinetic strength being visited upon Pakistani targets.

However, Indian strategists and decision makers would be mistaken not to work through how limited air strikes could merely act as the first phase of a wider, longer war that would involve ground and naval forces, too. The transition from air strikes to major ground warfare could come about for at least three reasons. First, Indian decision makers could conceive of air strikes as the first phase of a major air-land offensive into Pakistan, or at least Pakistani leaders might believe so. Second, notwithstanding Indian intentions merely to punish Pakistan with limited air strikes, Pakistan could respond more forcefully than India expected, thereby requiring India to counter-escalate with major ground operations. Third, India’s limited air strikes, wherever and whatever their targets, could fail to compel Pakistani authorities to act against anti-India terrorist groups, leading Indian officials to conclude they must raise the compellence pressure by introducing ground forces.

Indian and Pakistani officials and experts understand that significant ground forces would be mobilized by both sides in the event of Indian air strikes on Pakistan. This would occur whether or not the leaders of either state would at the time actually plan to engage in ground warfare beyond the sorts of artillery exchanges which they ritualistically undertake across the Line of Control. In Gen. Bakshi’s words, even limited air strikes “must be accompanied by a partial or complete mobilization of the armed forces to cater for [sic] any Pakistani response.” From India’s perspective, then, the question would be how to plan to successfully manage possible escalation from air strikes into major combined-arms conflict, while retaining some clear idea about the means and potential decision points for terminating the conflict.
The strategic and operational value of highly synergistic air and land forces is indisputable. What is disputed, including by Indian Air Force and Army officers as well as knowledgeable defense analysts, is India’s current readiness to conduct effective synergistic operations. The problems extend from the lack of interoperable communications systems and air defenses to unreconciled doctrinal preferences and actual combat experience. Much of India’s air arsenal entails incompatible systems procured from multiple sources with varying degrees of quality. Military exercises are no substitute for actual combat practice with sub-optimal systems. Even at the level of exercises, the Indian Army and Air Force have not inspired each other’s confidence in their capacity to conduct effective combined operations in realistic warfare conditions.

Thus, in envisioning a “limited war” against Pakistan, Gen. Bakshi and others not only underestimate the transitional challenges from limited strikes to combined-arms warfare, but also insist that the latter “would only be necessary if Pakistan wishes to fight one to defend its non-state actors, who have routinely been wreaking havoc in India.” This misstates the issue in several ways. If and when India struck targets beyond individuals and facilities directly related to terrorist organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Pakistani leaders would be defending themselves, their territory, their institutions, and their people. Such would clearly be the case if limited air strikes transitioned into combined ground and air operations in Pakistan. The more profound misstatement of the issue derives from the fact, unrecognized by many Indian commentators, that India seeks to motivate Pakistani authorities not merely to cease defending “its non-state actors.” India’s objective is for Pakistani security agencies to take active measures to detain and disband these actors and deny them the capacity to attack India.

If precise, air-borne Indian strikes could destroy enough anti-Indian terrorists and their supporting infrastructure to render them impotent or sufficiently demoralized to give up their violent struggle, then this option would be strategically attractive. But if strikes could not obtain this result, or in the process also destroyed non-terrorist targets in ways that caused Pakistan to escalate and thereby widen the war, then it is difficult to have confidence that the tidily idealistic scenarios of the sorts offered by proponents of precision air power would come to pass. India could imagine achieving a splendid military victory like the United States did in Iraq, but still not accomplish its strategic purposes vis-à-vis Pakistan.

The foregoing analysis suggests that if India were to undertake punitive limited air strikes, it should take pains to prevent escalation to major ground warfare. Whether and how this could be done while still compelling Pakistani authorities to demobilize anti-India terror groups remains a daunting challenge.
whose solution has not yet been presented in compelling ways by Indian or outside analysts.

Assessing Capabilities

The discussion has proceeded so far largely along deductive lines, without introducing issues related to current and projected Indian capabilities to target and conduct precision air strikes. For any of the scenarios considered, India would need a suite of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and air-borne weaponry. Here we briefly describe, based on open sources, the availability of such capabilities today and over the next ten years. This analysis can be nowhere near as detailed as that which would fully inform Indian officials or even what independent analysts could provide if they were tasked to do so. Indeed, the Naresh Chandra Task Force on National Security in 2012 urged that the government require preparation of an annual classified report on military readiness to be provided to the Cabinet Committee on Security, precisely to inject more realism into national security policymaking and to improve force planning and acquisition. Clear-eyed assessments of current and forthcoming capabilities to conduct limited, precise air strikes on targets that would be prioritized under a counter-terrorism strategy should be conducted before Indian officials and media trumpet them as viable means to change Pakistan’s behavior.

Conducting precise strikes on terrorist-related targets requires extensive, reliable, and timely “24/7” intelligence. If individuals are the target, then one needs accurate intelligence to identify, locate, and track them, recognizing that they will often move. If facilities—camps, depots, command buildings, or apartments—are the target, they need identifying and monitoring in order to ascertain who and what is within them. Hitting empty or misidentified facilities or ones with women and children in them can backfire in multiple ways.

The acquisition of such intelligence can come from multiple sources. These include communications signals; imagery and other information provided by satellites or UAVs; and human intelligence, which can be especially vital in avoiding mistakes and collateral damage in targeting individuals. For all its vaunted technology, Israel’s capacity to target individual enemies has depended heavily on extensive arrays of human sources. Similarly, U.S. targeting of individuals in Iraq and Afghanistan also has depended frequently on human sources and extremely sophisticated signals-intelligence fused with rapid-action forces.

Much of India’s capacity in these types of intelligence is publicly unknowable. However, interviews and experience suggest that there is vast room for improvement. A recently retired high-ranking Indian Air Force officer
acknowledged this after speaking longingly of Israel’s capabilities. “To be effective, your intelligence has to be top flight. ISR has to be much better. How long will it take until we can do this? We still have a long way to go to get to the point where we can react quickly with precision. We are not in a position to react quickly now. You need constant intelligence with high accuracy, which we don’t have.” India needs eight modern satellites for ISR, this man added, and now only has four. The acquisition process, he complained, “is exceedingly slow.” The Mumbai attacks and other more recent events suggest that India does possess significant capabilities to intercept cellphone and radio communications from Pakistan. In the area of human intelligence in Pakistan, recently retired Indian officials intimated in interviews a serious inadequacy.

India’s operational UAV inventory, and the capabilities of platforms with on-board detection systems, is also difficult to assess from open sources. India has procured the Israeli Heron system, which is an earlier-generation surveillance drone that on paper features a 350-km range and 52-hour endurance. India has several other surveillance and tactical UAV programs under development, and may procure a more advanced system (the Harop) from Israel, according to some reports. It appears, however, that these programs are unlikely to bear fruit at least for another five years and probably more. In any case, using UAVs for intelligence gathering in Pakistan would have to contend with Pakistani air defenses.

Perhaps the most significant challenge India faces in mounting air strikes in Pakistan is in what one might term “information fusion.” For time-sensitive intelligence to prove useful, communications systems and procedures must be available to move it in a timely manner from platforms to analysts to decision makers to operators of weapons who would strike a chosen target. Airborne information-control platforms are essential for this task. India’s Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) has been developing an indigenous airborne early-warning and control system, which it has mounted on an Embraer-145 jet, but this system is not yet in service with the IAF. India reportedly has also purchased two modules of the Israeli-made Phalcon early-warning and control system, which is mounted on the larger but slower Ilyushin IL-76 aircraft. Thus, for the time being, India appears to lack adequate capabilities in this area, particularly if the task involved precision targeting which requires real-time intelligence.

Retired Air Commodore Jasjit Singh assessed in 2011 that “since the retirement of the MiG-25, the IAF does not possess strategic intelligence.
capability and RISTA (reconnaissance, intelligence, surveillance, and target acquisition) system for employment of precision-guided munitions. This will partly be taken care of with AESA [Active Electronically-Scanned Array] radar of combat aircraft [being developed by DRDO] and suitable weapon suit duly integrated to the aircraft. But IAF badly needs integral air intelligence capabilities possibly from near earth satellites and high-altitude long endurance UAVs.”

Unlike ISR, much more is known about the status of India’s kinetic capabilities, for these tend to be written about more frequently and authoritatively by Indian analysts. A survey of this literature indicates that India currently maintains several squadrons of fighter and attack aircraft—the most capable being the MiG-29, Su-30, and Mirage 2000—which it is seeking to improve through a number of major procurement programs. But Indian efforts to transition the IAF to more modern systems have been painful, and reliability remains a serious challenge. For example, the entire Sukhoi fleet was grounded, for the third time, for nearly a month in the fall of 2014. According to one critical Indian analyst, the “combat aircraft fleet is substantially depleted, its transport fleet is inadequate to meet strategic airlift requirements and the helicopter force is barely capable of achieving all its tasks. The IAF needs more Flight Refueling Aircraft (FRA) and airborne early warning systems to cover all contingencies. The basic trainer aircraft fleet is grounded and advanced training is severely hampered by the absence of a modern trainer aircraft in sufficient numbers. The airfield infrastructure needs to be modernized to operate new acquisitions.”

It is apparently a similar story regarding precision-guided munitions and other ordnance that India might use in a strike on Pakistan. India has numerous Russian-origin air-delivered weapons, some with stand-off capability and dual guidance systems for beyond-visual range targeting. DRDO is also reportedly developing laser-guided bombs and other precision-guided munitions, but the organization’s disappointing track record suggests that actually useable capabilities are not on the near horizon. Interoperability with India’s varied squadrons of fighter aircraft, some of which are in the midst of upgrade programs, is an apparent problem.

In the next decade, on paper at least, India will upgrade its fighter capabilities through procurement of a new medium, multi-role combat aircraft, the French-supplied Rafale. If this purchase actually is completed, and the planes are delivered, they may resolve some of the reliability problems plaguing current weapons platforms. Yet, unless and until India addresses the numerous interoperability challenges of its air platforms and delivery systems, it seems likely the country will not possess the kind of penetration capabilities that would facilitate successful strikes in Pakistan. In the words of one Indian analyst,
“Like Kargil, the Indian Air Force will be able to carry out limited precision strikes from heavily protected airspace, but will not be able to do so from inside Pakistani air space owing to heightened vulnerability and susceptibility to being intercepted...Should the current trajectory persist...the IAF will not be in a position to be a fully functioning force by 2030...Consequently, India appears, not at least until 2030, to be able to conduct the kind of warfare it seeks to carry out—emulating Western offensives, coercion, or dissuasion that are largely air-based.”

It is worth noting that the Indian Air Force has not fought a full-scale war since 1971, and that hardly had the information management and force integration challenges inherent in 21st-century warfare. Two generations of technological change have since occurred in fighter-bomber aircraft. But beyond the limited and largely uncontested experience in Kargil, Indian air forces have had little practice with modern systems in conducting operations like those that would be prescribed in a land-air war with Pakistan.

In the Kargil conflict, as detailed by the RAND Corporation’s Benjamin Lambeth and numerous Indian accounts, the Indian Army and Air Force experienced a “near-total lack of transparency and open communications.”

Operationally, on May 27, 1999, two days after the air force was ordered into action, engine failure downed a Mig-21 and a Pakistani surface-to-air missile shot down a Mig-27. Pakistan captured the pilot of the first plane; the second pilot was killed. A day later, a Pakistani Stinger missile struck down a Mi-17 helicopter. The Indian Air Force quickly adapted and ended up playing a vital role in helping to win the conflict, but Kargil revealed numerous problems that many observers believe still have not been adequately redressed.

Conclusion: Not There Yet

In a world where the United States and Israel are the models of forceful trans-border military action to strike terrorists and related infrastructure, it is natural that Indian analysts and officials long to emulate them. India faces terrorist threats emanating from Pakistan that are at least as severe as those faced by the United States and Israel. Yet—however one evaluates the long-term strategic benefits and costs of U.S. air-borne attacks on terrorists in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and other places, and of Israeli air campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon—India for the foreseeable future lacks the various capabilities deployed by Israel and the United States. As importantly, India confronts in

India for the foreseeable future lacks the various capabilities deployed by Israel and the United States.
Pakistan an adversary that has nuclear weapons and other capabilities that complicate India’s options in ways that U.S. and Israeli adversaries do not limit theirs. Yet India’s armed forces and intelligence agencies as well as other responsible organs of the state necessarily will continue to search for ways to apply military instruments and tactics to the challenge of blunting and punishing potential terrorists as well as motivating Pakistani authorities to do the same. Precise, air-borne strikes are, broadly, a serious option.

This article has explored some of the considerations that would inform the development of capabilities and plans and decision making about whether, when, and how to exercise this form of kinetic power. Our analysis, which we offer for debate and improvement by Indians and others, suggests that the surface attraction of limited, precise air-borne strikes is offset significantly, if not equally, by risks and inadequacies. Many of the experienced Indians whom we interviewed recognize these points. Beyond the relatively easy-to-obtain objective of visibly inflicting damage on targets in Pakistan, which could have important domestic political value, the attainment of larger strategic goals through such strikes would be unlikely.

This conclusion, if it withstands open-minded analysis in India, does not mean that India lacks ways to punish Pakistan and motivate it to demobilize groups that threaten to perpetrate terrorism in India. Rather, it suggests that more symmetrical and covert operations would yield a better ratio of risk to effectiveness for India. There are many ways to make Pakistani military leaders conclude that the cohesion, security, and progress of their own country will be further jeopardized if they fail to act vigorously to prevent terrorism against India. Limited, precision air strikes are not India’s best option now or for the foreseeable future.

More symmetrical and covert operations could yield better results for India.

Notes

1. According to interviews with Indian experts, India does not now have the capability to combine special operations in Pakistan with precision air support, which could offer an even more calibrated response than the three options described here.
6. Regarding the 2006 Lebanon war, for instance, see Yogil Henkin, “And What If We Did Not Deter Hizbollah?” Military and Strategic Affairs 6, no. 3 (December 2014), pp. 123–149.
7. Author interview with anonymous source in New Delhi, April 23, 2014.
8. Author interview with anonymous sources in New Delhi, April 23–24, 2014.
12. Author interview with anonymous source in Rawalpindi, October 22, 2013.
15. Author interview with anonymous source in New Delhi, April 24, 2014.
16. The scholarly literature on the strategic effects of killing leadership figures suggests that the results are mixed at best. As one recent review of the leading studies of this subject concludes, there is no basis yet “for making general pronouncements on whether

17. It remains uncertain whether this order represented a strategic judgment about minimizing escalation or was a consequence of two Indian MiG aircraft being downed in the first two days of Air Force action in Kargil.


21. Author interview with anonymous source in Rawalpindi, October 25, 2013.


23. Author interview with anonymous source in New Delhi, April 24, 2014.


25. Author interview with anonymous source in Gurgaon, April 23, 2014.

26. Author interview with anonymous source in New Delhi, November 12, 2014.


28. A key conclusion of the Naval Postgraduate School’s South Asian crisis stability simulation was that actions considered limited by one side have a significant potential to escalate. No matter how limited India perceives its response to be, Pakistan may perceive Indian actions as “disproportionate and maximal” given India’s perceived significant military advantage. And, even if India were able to effectively signal the limited nature of its attack, it is unlikely that Pakistan would trust these claims. Khan and French, “South Asian Stability Workshop: A Crisis Simulation Exercise,” pg. 15.


33. Author interviews with anonymous sources in New Delhi, April 24 and 26, 2014.


35. Regarding a DRDO UAV development program, one assessment finds that “given the DRDO’s history of delays, a realistic estimate would be to assume that it will enter into service only by 2019-2020”: “The Rise of Drones,” Force, September 2014, http://www.forceindia.net/TheRiseofDrones.aspx.


40. DRDO chief Avinash Chander was fired in January 2015 after two reports slamming the agency were released by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) and Parliament’s Standing Committee on Defence. The agency was found to have a poor track record of bringing projects to completion and also for keeping in mind the requirements of the end user. For example, of the 43 major projects initiated by DRDO as part of its 11th five year plan, not one has reached completion. Dilip Kumar Mekala, “Off Target,” Force, February 2015, http://www.forceindia.net/OffTarget_Feb2015.aspx. See also “ER-PGM (Enhanced Range Precision-Guided Munition),” Jane’s Weapons: Air-Launched, IHS Jane’s, accessed January 16 2015.


42. Benjamin Lambeth, Airpower at 18,000’: The Indian Air Force in the Kargil War (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 2. Indeed, the Chief of the Indian Air Force at the time, Air Chief Marshal A. Y. Tipnis recounted “a total lack of army-air force joint staff work.” For his part, a former vice chief of the Army reportedly “lambasted” Tipnis for refusing to authorize air power in support of the Northern Army Command over concerns that this could result in escalation. Lambeth, pp. 12-13.