

GLOBAL

India's and Pakistan's Lies Thwarted a War—For Now

Lying about facts to de-escalate tension in Kashmir is a playbook they've both used before.

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Family members and friends of Indian soldiers killed in the Kargil conflict gather on the conflict's first anniversary, in 2000. (KAMAL KISHORE / REUTERS)

In May 1999, New Delhi discovered that Pakistani intruders had seized Himalayan posts in Kargil, part of Indian-controlled Kashmir. Initially, the Indian government believed that these infiltrators were scruffy mujahideen when in fact they were paramilitary soldiers, officered by Pakistan's army. Curiously, India publicly maintained the fiction that they were militants well after their identity was discovered. Counterintuitively, the falsehood facilitated a de-escalation of a conflict that had already become a limited war.

Nearly 20 years later, Pakistan has again initiated a crisis in Kashmir that has brought the nuclear-armed states to the brink of war. Once again, the two countries have rolled out a series of partial truths, and, in the case of Pakistan, outright lies. Indeed, while the facts of the matter are up for debate, it is clear that at least one casualty of this conflict has been empirically verifiable truth.

As in Kargil, these untruths have provided a much-needed off-ramp for dampening tensions and, in the short term, the international community has welcomed any path to crisis mitigation.

[Read: The nuclear game theory of the India-Pakistan crisis]

In the long run, though, this normalization of fiction-weaving by India and Pakistan will likely have pernicious effects, not just on both countries' domestic politics, but on future crises as well.

Why did New Delhi in 1999 publicly sustain the humiliating narrative that militants had taken control of its territory even when Indian forces were taking heavy losses and had to use air power to dislodge what the world believed was a ragtag bunch of fighters?

First, it was an easy cover to maintain, because Pakistan never clarified who the fighters were. Second, India was due to hold a general election within months, and the fate of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was uncertain. The previous year, Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, had begun a peace process, and political strategists in New Delhi worried that Vajpayee would look foolish if his Pakistani partners were anything but committed. Equally important, infiltration by mujahideen surely generated less public outrage in India than if people had learned earlier that part of Pakistan's armed forces had deliberately snatched Indian-administered territory.

When the international community finally intervened to compel Pakistan to restore the sanctity of the line of control (LOC), the two countries' de facto border, the United States and others also were content to permit Sharif in particular to keep up the story, providing Pakistan with an honorable exit, rather than force him to publicly humiliate his army chief, who was the mastermind of the crisis.

Here is what we know for certain about the most recent crisis in South Asia. After the February 14 suicide attack by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a Pakistan-based militant group, against an Indian paramilitary convoy that killed at least 40 soldiers, the leadership in New Delhi had to respond forcefully. The country had already responded to lesser outrages and, as with Kargil, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, also of the BJP, faces an election within months.

[Read: Ending the India-Pakistan crisis requires a courageous Narendra Modi]

India claims that in the early hours of February 26, a dozen fighter jets flew into Pakistan's airspace to attack a training facility associated with JeM in the town of Balakot. Those jets returned unscathed. Indian media, citing figures leaked by the government, claimed the base was destroyed and some 300 terrorists, who were allegedly training for imminent attacks in India, were killed.

Pakistan's military immediately disputed this account and asserted that Pakistani aircraft scrambled and expelled the Indian jets, which were forced to prematurely drop their payloads onto random forests. Pakistani officials also denied the existence of evidence tying JeM to the February 14 attack, even though JeM had taken responsibility for it. Despite claiming that the Indian jets caused no damage, Pakistan vowed a fitting response.

Pakistan then dispatched its own aircraft to hit purportedly "non-military targets" in Indian territory. This time, India claimed that it intercepted the Pakistani aircraft, after which a dogfight ensued. Pakistan said it shot down two Indian planes, and that both pilots were in Pakistani custody. Islamabad then revised its position, saying it shot down one plane and captured its pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who was returned, after gratuitous drama, on March 1.

India, for its part, claimed that Varthaman, prior to being hit, shot down an F-16, which crashed on Pakistan's side of the line of control. Indian media claimed that this pilot was lynched when Pakistanis mistook him for an Indian pilot. Regardless, Varthaman's return provided an opportunity to begin de-escalating the crisis.

Journalists have questioned much of this story.

Multiple analysts using commercial-satellite images have found little evidence of widespread damage to the Balakot facility, and there is no evidence of mass casualties, nor are there signs of the downed F-16 or its allegedly lynched pilot. Some Indian media accounts even assert that New Delhi did not send 12 jets across the LOC, and that in fact they fired weapons from India's side of the line.

[Joshua T. White: The other nuclear threat]

Neither India nor Pakistan has been forthcoming with evidence to back up its key claims, and Pakistan, predictably, has made it very difficult for anyone to independently assess the damage at Balakot. Pakistan also has an incentive to cover up its use of American-made F-16s to attack India as doing so would

likely violate the end-use agreements of the purchase. The internet, meanwhile, has been flooded with vintage photos of the Balakot site that variously confirm the preferred accounts of both sides. Some social-media users have even posted images from a popular video game, insisting they prove India's claims. In India, the ruling party and its followers discredit any citizens asking for evidence as "anti-nationals," while denouncing foreigners who question the official narrative as Pakistani apologists.

Given the high stakes, why are both sides obfuscating the objective truths involved?

From New Delhi's point of view, Indians can rejoice that their air force rammed through Pakistani airspace to drop bombs on a terrorist training camp, obliterating it and its trainees. They can also celebrate that their war hero, Varthaman, felled a Pakistani jet.

From Pakistan's side, it can claim that its jets chased off Indian fighter planes at Balakot, and then rallied into Indian territory while downing an Indian pilot. Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan, titillated the international media with his ostensible statesmanship and Islamabad received numerous accolades for returning the pilot, despite the fact that doing so was required by international law. The world seemed to have forgotten that South Asia was embroiled in tension because of Pakistani use of terrorism in the first place.

Deception, in both this situation and Kargil, provided an important way for both India and Pakistan to step back from crisis. But is this a good thing?

At present, the two are nursing convenient delusions to differing degrees. But the truth matters.

Pakistanis believe that their air force protected them, while also denying that their country continues to cultivate terrorists as tools of foreign policy. If India did not do as it claims, the gains of the latest misadventure exceed the costs, which have been extraordinarily minimal. This suggests that future use of terrorist proxies killing more Indians might happen sooner than later. Alternatively, if India did in fact do as it says, then there is no problem. Islamabad knows what New Delhi can do, and that might be an important regulator in future Pakistani calculus.

But with the available evidence, one should be cautious. If the Indian government is fostering an inaccurate account of its military strength, its

citizenry will have unreasonable expectations of future punitive measures. Civilian governments might feel compelled to engage in miscalculations of their own to satisfy the demands of a public with outsize beliefs about its military's capabilities. This could have enormous consequences. In short, if India's account is fundamentally braggadocious, a dangerous equilibrium will be established.

Let's hope that in both countries, as the political stakes of honesty recede, the truth comes out.

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