

**From Copenhagen to Uri and across the Line of Control:
India's "Surgical Strikes" as a Case of Securitisation in Two Acts**

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Abstract

This article sets out to critique India's security discourse surrounding the "surgical strikes" of September 2016, using the theoretical framework provided by securitisation. It aims to answer two central questions: First, can securitisation theory provide fresh empirical insights on India's conflict with Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir that have been overlooked by more traditional approaches to security studies? Secondly, in what way can this case further our understanding of securitisation and thus contribute to the development of the theory? In this article, I have argued that, much like a two-act play, India's securitisation of the Pakistani threat occurred in two distinct (speech) acts. The first illocutionary move preceded the extraordinary measure of Indian troops crossing the Line of Control separating Indian- and Pakistani-administered Jammu and Kashmir. The second speech act followed this action and occurred when the Indian state uttered the words "surgical strikes." This defies securitisation theory's chronological structure, which posits that the speech act always precedes the implementation of an exceptional measure. Secondly, I suggest that the Copenhagen School's emphasis on the subjective nature of security and on the normative preferability of de-securitisation offers valuable insights on the empirical stalemate that is the Kashmir conflict.

Keywords. Securitisation, de-securitisation, Copenhagen School, non-Western, South Asia, India, Pakistan, Kashmir

Introduction

Following a September 2016 militant attack on an army base in the town of Uri in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Indian officials made a series of statements that directly and implicitly blamed groups operating out of Pakistan, as well as the Pakistani state itself (Ahmad, Phillips, and Berlinger 2016; *Nation* 2016; *Times of India* 2016). Later the same month, India's director general of military operations (DGMO), Lt. Gen. Ranbir Singh, announced to the press that "the Indian Army [had] conducted surgical strikes" in Pakistani-administered J&K "[b]ased on receiving specific and credible inputs that some terrorist teams had positioned themselves at launch pads along [the] Line of Control to carry out infiltration and conduct terrorist strikes." Ranbir Singh declared that the operation had caused "significant casualties . . . to the terrorists and those providing support to them" (*Indian Express* 2016b).

This article sets out to critique India's security discourse surrounding the "surgical strikes," using the theoretical framework provided by securitisation. It aims to answer two central questions: First, can securitisation theory provide fresh empirical insights on India's conflict with Pakistan over J&K that have been overlooked by more traditional approaches to security studies? Secondly, in what way can this case further our understanding of securitisation and thus contribute to the development of the theory?

In this article, I have argued that, much like a two-act play, India's securitisation of the Pakistani threat occurred in two distinct (speech) acts. The first illocutionary move preceded the extraordinary measure of Indian troops crossing the Line of Control (LOC) separating Indian- and Pakistani-administered J&K, which the two countries agreed not to breach in the Simla Agreement of 1972 (Indian Ministry of External Affairs 1972). The second speech act followed this action and occurred when the Indian state uttered the words "surgical strikes." This defies securitisation theory's chronological structure, which posits that the speech act always precedes the implementation of an exceptional measure. It is remarkable that these two distinct speech acts were used to justify a *single* extraordinary action of crossing the LOC to conduct "surgical strikes." There is little reason to believe this is a phenomenon that is limited to non-Western contexts, and in that sense the article does not claim to contribute to this special issue's theoretical agenda of widening the theory to better explain phenomena in the non-West. However, it does claim to have uncovered an interesting case of securitisation that does not fit the theory's linear pattern, through its application of the theory to an empirical case in the non-Western world. In this sense, the article widens securitisation theory by arguing for the possibility of a double speech act that both precedes and follows the extraordinary action—whether in the West or non-West.

Secondly, I suggest that the Copenhagen School's emphasis on the subjective nature of security and on the normative preferability of de-securitisation offers important insights on the empirical stalemate that is the Kashmir conflict.

Securitisation theory reveals the subjective nature of India's perception that Pakistan's claim to J&K is an existential threat to India's survival as a state and a nation. In praxeological terms, de-securitisation shows Indian policymakers that they could choose not to securitise the issue and to deal with it through political means instead. The insight about security being subjective is not limited to the securitisation approach; it is, rather, a more general understanding of security within critical security studies. However, securitisation theory takes this point further by arguing that if an issue can be *securitised* through discourse, it can, equally, be *de-securitised* through a shift in discourse. There is a general dearth of critical studies of security in South Asia—analyses of security dynamics in the region tend to be informed by realist approaches. This article contributes to the literature on South Asian security by applying a critical approach such as securitisation to the longstanding India-Pakistan conflict, and more specifically, by highlighting the value of securitisation theory's emphasis on *de-securitisation* for policymaking on the Indian subcontinent.

The remainder of this article is organised into five sections. The first section outlines the contours of securitisation theory and the challenges scholars have encountered in attempting to apply the theory to cases outside the Western world. In the second section, I critically analyse the statements Indian government representatives made in the aftermath of the Uri attack, demonstrating how these speech acts represented securitising moves that sought to construct a threat emanating from Pakistan. The third section considers the Indian operation in Pakistani-administered J&K, and reflects on whether the widespread use of the ambiguous term

“surgical strikes” constituted a second speech act. In the fourth section, I argue that the Copenhagen School’s normative preference for de-securitisation offers valuable empirical insights on the seemingly intractable conflict over J&K. Finally, a concluding section pulls together the key findings of the article.

Securitisation Theory, Democratic Bias, and the World’s Largest Democracy

Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, 1) justify their development of the concept of securitisation based on the widening of security studies by critical scholars to include non-military threats. Although they are in basic agreement with this widening move, they postulate that there are “intellectual and political dangers in simply tacking the word *security* onto an ever wider range of issues.”

To address this problem, Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, 23-24) reconceptualise “security” as “the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics.” They posit that for something to count as a security issue, it has “to be staged as [an] existential threat[] to a referent object by a securitizing actor who thereby generates endorsement of emergency measures beyond rules that would otherwise bind” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 5). This process is what the Copenhagen School refers to as securitisation.

Thus, securitisation theory contains six key concepts:

the securitizing actor (i.e. the agent who presents an issue as a threat through a securitizing move), the referent subject (i.e. the entity that is threatening), the referent object (i.e. the entity that is threatened), the audience (the agreement of which is necessary to confer an intersubjective status to the threat), the

context and the adoption of distinctive policies (“exceptional” or not) (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016, 495).

Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, 22-23) put forward five sectors in which securitisation may take place. These include the military, the political, the economic, the societal and the environmental. They suggest that in the international context, “security is about survival,” and securitisation occurs “when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object (traditionally, but not necessarily, the state, incorporating government, territory, and society)” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 21). Thus, at the international level of analysis, securitisation “means to present an issue as urgent and existential, as so important that it should not be exposed to the normal haggling of politics but should be dealt with decisively by top leaders prior to other issues” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 29).

Several scholars have argued that securitisation theory contains a European bias (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016, 507; Vuori 2008, 65-66). Wilkinson (2007, 5), for instance, contends that the theory assumes “that European understandings of society and the state are universal.” Greenwood and Wæver (2013, 485-500) expand the concern about Eurocentrism to one of West-centrism; they apply the theory to Egypt in the context of the Arab Spring and find that the theory assumes a basic level of stability for there to be such a thing as normal politics. In Egypt during the Arab Spring, the whole situation was exceptional, leaving no room for normal politics. This, for Greenwood and Wæver (2013, 501), suggested a Western bias in the theory,

because, in their words, “Western societies no longer confront (nor de facto run their politics on real expectations of) this kind of ultra-political moment.”

Similarly, Holbraad and Pederson (2012, 193) take exception to securitisation theory’s distinction between “ordinary and special politics,” which, they argue, assumes a rule-based order and reveals the theory’s liberal ontological underpinnings. Holbraad and Pederson (2012, 168-94) clarify that their point is not that securitisation theory “applies best to liberal democracies (although this may be the case), but that it involves certain political ontological premises associated with liberalist thought,” which is problematic when studying non-Western contexts where the form of governance is non-liberal, such as their case study of Cuba.

Vuori’s (2008, 69) perspective contrasts with that of Holbraad and Pederson (2012), in that he points out “that all societies have ‘rules,’ [which] are products of historical and social contingencies.” He also differs from Holbraad and Pederson in his clear articulation of the democratic bias within securitisation theory, arguing that scholars have understood securitisation to be a way “of moving certain issues beyond the democratic process of government” (Vuori 2008, 66). Vuori’s (2008, 66-68) point is that securitisation *does* take place in non-democratic settings, because all governments—democratic or non-democratic—require some amount of political legitimacy to survive.

The question of securitisation theory’s success in explaining events in non-democratic contexts is also addressed by Wilkinson (2007, 20), who postulates that there may be limits to free speech in such contexts, “especially for non-state actors,”

which renders securitisation theory's linear construction and emphasis on the speech act problematic. Wilkinson (2007, 12) highlights the possibility that securitisation may take place through mediums other than speech, such as "words, images and actions."

In addition, she suggests that,

Contrary to the linear dynamic described by securitization, starting with a securitizing actor who then constructs a referent object and threat narrative to be accepted or rejected, the process may in practice start at any point, with the component parts developing simultaneously and contributing to each other's construction (Wilkinson 2007, 20).

For Wilkinson (2007, 22), in fact, "'sufficient action' may replace or supplement the speech-act as the driving logic in the process of securitization."

In the context of these conversations about securitisation theory's European—and, more broadly, Western—assumptions, and whether the theory can unproblematically explain events in non-Western, non-liberal and non-democratic countries, India presents an interesting case. As shown above, scholars who have questioned the Western assumptions of securitisation theory have tended to focus on what happens when the theory is applied to non-democratic or non-liberal settings in the non-West. India, however, constitutes a case of a non-Western democratic state. According to Mishra (2012, 33), India is a non-liberal democracy, while Mitra (2013, 227) proposes that India has combined "western liberal democratic forms and non-western cultures." Thus, India provides an intriguing case for studying securitisation. In the next section, I will employ securitisation theory to explore how political and military actors in India securitised the threat emanating from Pakistan in the aftermath of the September 2016 attack in Uri.

Act One: The Uri Attack

As noted above, the process of securitisation requires six elements: a securitising actor, a referent subject, a referent object, an audience, a context, and the legitimisation of “emergency measures or other steps that would not have been possible had the discourse not taken the form of existential threats, point of no return, and necessity” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 25). When the securitising actor frames the referent subject as an existential threat, this constitutes a *securitising move*. However, for this securitising move to turn into a successful securitisation, it needs to be accepted by the audience (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 25).

In the military sector, the most common referent object is the state and, more implicitly, the nation (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 36). When the state is the referent object, the securitising actor is often also the state speaking “through its authorized representatives” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 42). In this section I will show how the Indian state, through government officials, sought to frame Pakistan and Pakistan-based militants—the referent subject—as an existential threat to the Indian state and nation by appealing to an audience consisting of the citizens of India. I do so by referring to official statements made after the attack in Uri, relying on the Indian news media, the Twitter accounts of government officials, and an Indian defence journal as primary sources. Following Jackson (2005, 7), I use bold typeface to emphasise significant words in the discourse of the Indian state. Additionally, I discuss how the securitising move took place in the context of a surge in violent unrest against Indian rule in the Kashmir valley, as well as exploring the role of the national

audience in accepting the securitising move. The emergency measures that were legitimised through this process of securitisation are dealt with in the subsequent section.

Analysing the Indian Discourse on Uri

The attack on the military base in Uri took place on the morning of 18 September; nineteen soldiers and all four militants were killed (*Al Jazeera* 2016; Safi 2016; *Scroll.in* 2016b). The same day, President Pranab Mukherjee tweeted, “India will not be cowed down by such attacks, **we will thwart the evil designs of terrorists and their backers**” (Twitter post, September 18, 2016 [3:55 a.m.], accessed May 22, 2017, <https://twitter.com/RashtrapatiBhvn/status/777461121137582080>). Prime Minister Narendra Modi also took to Twitter to “strongly condemn the cowardly terror attack in Uri” and “assure the **nation that those behind this despicable attack will not go unpunished**” (Twitter post, September 18, 2016 [1:01 a.m.], accessed May 22, 2017, <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/777417302912430080?lang=en>).

Rajnath Singh, the minister for home affairs, tweeted: “**Pakistan is a terrorist state** and it should be identified and isolated as such” (Twitter post, September 18, 2016 [1:54 a.m.], accessed May 22, 2017, <https://twitter.com/rajnathsingh/status/777430703726211072?lang=en>). In a subsequent tweet, he added, “I am deeply disappointed with **Pakistan’s continued and direct support to terrorism and terrorist groups**” (Twitter post, September 18, 2016 [1:56 a.m.], accessed May 22, 2017,

<https://twitter.com/rajnathsingh/status/777431140474818562?lang=en>). Meanwhile, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley promised that the “[p]erpetrators of Uri terror attack **shall be punished**” (Twitter post, September 18, 2016 [5:45 a.m.], accessed May 22, 2017, <https://twitter.com/arunjaitley/status/777488820195332096>). Media reports also quoted Jaitley as declaring, “It is clear that **our neighbour is using terror** to create menace in our country” (*Scroll.in* 2016c).

Also on 18 September, Ranbir Singh told the media that “[i]nitial reports indicate[d] that the slain terrorists belong[ed] to **Jaish-e-Mohammed** tanzeem,” adding that “the terrorists had some items with **Pakistani markings**.” He said he had “spoken to Pakistan DGMO and conveyed our serious concerns” (*Indian Defence Review* 2016).

Then, on 26 September, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj used her speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as an opportunity “to ask— **who is behind this and who benefits from it?** Terrorists do not own banks or weapons factories, so let us ask the real question: **who finances these terrorists, who arms them and provides sanctuaries?**” More directly, Swaraj declared:

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 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.

To alleviate any doubts as to which nation she was referring to, Swaraj went on to complain that Pakistan had responded to India’s friendly overtures with “Pathankot,

Bahadur Ali, and Uri,” and spoke about “**Pakistan’s complicity in cross-border terror**” aimed at “obtain[ing] the territory it covets . . . Jammu and Kashmir” (*Indian Express* 2016c).

Thus, representatives of the executive and military branches of the Indian government used a combination of speech and words to frame Pakistan-based militant groups and, by extension, the Pakistani state as a threat to the Indian state. The securitising actor was, thus, the Indian state, speaking through its authorised representatives. Mukherjee’s assertion that “**India** w[ould] not be cowed down by such attacks,” and Jaitley’s reference to the “menace in **our country**” suggest that the Indian state was also the referent object. Mukherjee referred to “the evil designs of **terrorists**,” and Ranbir Singh to “**Jaish-e-Mohammed** tanzeem,” indicating that the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM) militant group was being framed as the referent subject. However, the discourse extended the referent subject to the Pakistani state, as is evident in Mukherjee’s tweet about “terrorists and **their backers**,” Rajnath Singh’s comments about “**Pakistan** [being] a **terrorist state**” and “**Pakistan’s** continued and direct support to terrorism and terrorist groups,” Jaitley’s remark about “**our neighbour**,” and Ranbir Singh’s mention of “**Pakistani** markings.” Swaraj’s rhetoric at the UNGA more systematically constructed Pakistan as the referent subject, as demonstrated by her utterances about “**nations** that still speak the language of terrorism, that nurture it, peddle it, and export it,” “**nations** in which UN declared terrorists roam freely, lead processions and deliver their poisonous sermons of hate with impunity,” and “**Pakistan’s** complicity in cross-border terror.”

Swaraj also drew a link between the attack in Uri and the dispute between Pakistan and India over J&K. Her statements about J&K allude to the violence in the Indian-administered Kashmir valley amidst which the 18 September militant attack took place. Amnesty International (2016) wrote on 12 September that at least seventy-eight people had been killed in Indian-administered J&K in violent protests since the security forces on 8 July killed Burhan Wani of the Hizbul Mujahideen militant separatist group. The human-rights organisation observed that the “[s]ecurity forces [we]re using arbitrary and excessive force in response to protests in Jammu and Kashmir, violating international standards and worsening the human rights crisis in the state.”

As Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, 29) note, securitisation “is always a political choice.” By choosing to securitise the Uri attack in the manner in which they did, Indian state representatives swept the Kashmiri context within which the incident occurred under the carpet. Furthermore, by making the mental leap from blaming the JEM to blaming Pakistan, the Indian state officials denied agency to Kashmir-focused militant groups, which, according to Stern (2003, 108), have access to other sources of funding, and “are no longer beholden to a single sponsor[, which] has emboldened them to the degree that they are prepared publicly to threaten Pakistan’s leadership.”

(De)constructing an Existential Threat

While the previous subsection established that the Indian state as a securitising actor constructed a threat to itself emanating from Pakistan and militant groups

operating from its territory, it is not clear that an *existential* threat was being portrayed. To comprehend the existential nature of the perceived threat, it is necessary to dig a little deeper, and to refer to Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde's (1998, 36) assertion that "[f]or a state, survival is about sovereignty, and for a nation it is about identity."

By assuming that it was another state, and not a non-state actor, that was the "real" perpetrator of the attack, the incident was framed as a violation of India's sovereignty over Indian-administered J&K. Furthermore, as Bose (2003, 9) explains, the Indian nationalist discourse considers Kashmir to be "India's *atoot ang* (integral part)," which signals that holding on to Kashmir has become a part of India's national identity. At her UNGA speech, Swaraj repeated the Indian refrain "that Jammu and Kashmir is an **integral part** of India and will always remain so" (*Indian Express* 2016c). Additionally, Snedden (2013, 221) points out that the Kashmir dispute is partly about "competing and irreconcilable ideas of nationhood, respectively based around the predominance of secularism or religion." His argument demonstrates why it is so important for India to maintain control of the Muslim-majority Kashmir region of J&K, which is where disgruntlement over the status quo is centred. Keeping Kashmir has something to do with India's identity as a secular state, and its ideological competition with the two-nation theory that is Pakistan's foundational doctrine, which insists that Muslims and Hindus comprise distinct nations (Ganguly 2015).

In this way, the subtext of the Indian narrative following the Uri assault was that India's sovereignty and identity were being threatened. This implied threat to the survival of the Indian state and nation in their current form was understood by the

intended audience of the Indian state's speech act: the Indian people. It is to this audience that the next subsection turns.

The Role of the Audience

Although Swaraj addressed her UNGA speech to the member states of the United Nations, that is, to the international society of states, the primary audience for India's speech act was the citizens of India. This adheres to a common pattern observed by Vuori (2008, 72), who notes that in most of the literature on securitisation, it is "the citizens of a state" who are considered the audience for a securitising move.

The framework of securitisation theory predicates successful securitisation upon audience acceptance (Balzacq 2005, 173; Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016, 499; Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 25; Côté 2016, 542; Vuori 2008, 70). In this sense, securitisation is conceived of as an inter-subjective process negotiated between the securitising actor and the audience (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016, 499; Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 26; Côté 2016, 541). However, several authors have discerned a tension between the Copenhagen School's conceptualisation of securitisation on the one hand as a speech act, or a self-referential practice by the securitising actor, and on the other hand as an inter-subjective process involving both the securitising actor and the audience (Balzacq 2005, 177; Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016, 501; Côté 2016, 542). It has been argued that although the Copenhagen School claims that the audience is essential to securitisation, the concept of the audience has been underdeveloped, the audience has effectively been ignored in the

securitisation framework, and the theory consequently leans towards an understanding of securitisation as a self-referential practice in which the illocutionary act is sufficient to produce securitisation (Balzacq 2005, 177; Côté 2016, 542).

The identification of this problem leads to a distinction between active and passive audiences. Côté (2016, 551) argues that while the theoretical literature on securitisation characterises “the audience as a passive receiver of security arguments,” in fact, “audiences are active participants in securitization processes with the potential to undertake independent actions that can produce tangible security effects.” Vuori (2008, 70) introduces the idea of “active passivity” on the part of the audience, suggesting that while elections are one way of determining the audience’s support for a securitising move, a lack of support can be demonstrated through protests, riots, revolts, coups, or non-participation. Audience inaction, on the other hand, indicates its acceptance of a securitisation. Balzacq (2005, 185) suggests that formal audience legitimation can be obtained through a vote in the national parliament or the United Nations Security Council, for example—although this contradicts the notion that securitisation conveys an urgency that allows “the normal bargaining processes of” politics to be transcended (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 4).

In the case of the Indian state’s securitisation of the threat from Pakistan, no parliamentary vote was held, but at the same time, there were no signs of dissent from the populace, even after the army announced its “surgical strikes.” Balzacq (2005, 186) points to the importance of “collective memory and the *Zeitgeist* condition” in determining “how a given community perceives and symbolizes urgency,” while

Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, 60) contend that “the existence of a bitter history and memories of previous wars facilitate the process of securitization.” Seen in this light, the bitter history of the India-Pakistan relationship and the emotional charge of the issue for the Indian public is likely to have supported the audience’s acquiescence in the state’s securitisation of the Uri attack. Indeed, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept state-level elections held in February-March 2017 in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, in the lead-up to which BJP politicians flaunted the “surgical strikes” (*Firstpost* 2016; *Hindu* 2016a; Shukla 2016; Vivek 2017). This provides an indication of the Indian state’s success in obtaining the national audience’s acceptance of its securitising move, despite the difficulty of measuring audience legitimisation.

Act Two: The Surgical Strikes

Following the Indian state’s speech acts of 18-26 September, which occurred in the context of the 18 September Uri attack and the general volatility of the Kashmir valley since July, the Indian DGMO announced on 29 September that,

Based on receiving specific and credible inputs that some terrorist teams had positioned themselves at **launch pads** along Line of Control to carryout infiltration and conduct **terrorist strikes** inside Jammu and Kashmir and in various **metros in other states**, the Indian Army conducted **surgical strikes** at several of these launch pads to pre-empt **infiltration by terrorists** (*Indian Express* 2016b).

In this section, I argue that this reference to terrorist “launch pads,” imminent “terrorist strikes” and the Indian army’s “surgical strikes” constituted a second speech act that *followed* the extraordinary action of Indian troops crossing the LOC. First,

though, it is important to establish what is normal in the context of India, Pakistan and the LOC.

Pending the resolution of the dispute over J&K, the LOC, which runs through the state, serves as the de-facto border between Pakistan and India in J&K. Exchanges of fire between Pakistani and Indian soldiers stationed along the LOC occur regularly, and can be considered normal in this context. India also routinely accuses Pakistan of permitting militants to infiltrate into Indian-administered territory via the LOC. However, it is not normal for the national army of either side to breach the LOC, which both sides agreed to respect in the 1972 Simla Agreement, and a violation of which effectively constitutes an act of war (Indian Ministry of External Affairs 1972). Hence, the Indian army's claim of having conducted "surgical strikes" across the LOC, inside Pakistani-administered J&K, qualifies as an extraordinary measure that deviates from the normal politics of the subcontinent.

Ranbir Singh's statement on the "surgical strikes" announced that the Indian army had "recovered various stores including GPS and items that clearly indicate their origins in **Pakistan**." The DGMO also stated that "captured terrorists hailing from **Pakistan** or Pakistan Occupied Kashmir have confessed to their training and arming in **Pakistan or territory under its control**" (*Indian Express* 2016b), although the Indian National Investigative Agency (NIA) eventually in February 2017 dropped charges against two schoolchildren from Pakistani-administered J&K who were arrested on 21 September on suspicion of having acted as guides for the four militants. The NIA concluded that the children had run away from home after arguing with

their parents about schoolwork and accidentally crossed the LOC, although the authorities had previously said that the children had confessed to working for the JEM. The confession was brought into question when the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET) claimed responsibility for the attack, and the NIA decided that it was, indeed, the LET, and not the JEM, that was the perpetrator (*Scroll.in* 2016a; Swami 2017).

The second speech act, then, involved the same securitising actor—the Indian state speaking through its representative—and referent subject—Pakistan. The mention of a threat not only to “Jammu and Kashmir,” but also to “various metros in other states,” suggested that the referent object encompassed *all* the states of India, or the totality of the Indian state. That Ranbir Singh’s statement was addressed to the Indian press indicates that the audience, too, was still the Indian people.

This second speech act was notable for two reasons. First, it *followed* the action, whereas securitisation theory assumes a linear progression from speech act to action. Secondly, the use of the phrase “surgical strikes” produced a special kind of speech act, as I will show below.

“What *is* a Surgical Strike?”

In a fascinating article about the US administration’s securitisation of Iraq in 2002-03 through the assertion that the Iraqi regime possessed “weapons of mass destruction,” Oren and Solomon (2015, 313) “seek to reinvigorate” the illocutionary aspect of securitisation theory by arguing that “the utterances of securitising actors [consist] not in arguments so much as in repetitive spouting of ambiguous phrases (WMD, rogue states, ethnic cleansing).” Oren and Solomon (2015, 313) “further

propose that audience acceptance consists not in persuasion so much as in joining the securitising actors in a ritualised chanting of the securitising phrase.”

The ambiguity of the phrase “surgical strikes” was highlighted by the response of Pakistan’s Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) to the Indian claim. In a press release on 29 September, the ISPR declared:

There has been no surgical strike by India, instead there had been cross LOC fire initiated and conducted by India which is existential phenomenon. . . . The notion of surgical strike linked to alleged terrorist bases is an illusion being deliberately generated by Indian to create false effects. This quest by Indian establishment to create media hype by rebranding cross border fire as surgical strike is fabrication of truth (Inter Services Public Relations 2016).

Meanwhile, Indian and Pakistani news outlets mulled over the meaning of the term (*Aaj Tak* 2016; Guruswamy 2016; *InKhabar* 2016; Rehman 2016; Roy 2016), revealing it to be what Oren and Solomon (2015, 322) refer to as “a securitising phrase (with ultimately contestable meaning).” Oren and Solomon (2015, 332) point out that many Americans had no idea what a weapon of mass destruction was before 2002 and “had barely heard the term.” Additionally, even a concerted effort to pin down its meaning would prove to be a challenge. As Oren and Solomon (2015, 324) put it, “Audience members cannot quite check the accuracy of the securitising phrases they hear because . . . these phrases are typically ambiguous (what exactly is a ‘rogue state’? a ‘weapon of mass destruction’? and new to most people (how many people were familiar with ‘ethnic cleansing’ before it became a stock phrase in the 1990s?)”

Despite its ambiguity, Guruswamy (2016) observed that “the term ‘surgical strikes’ has dominated prime-time debates, social media chatter and dinner-table

conversations.” Unwittingly, Guruswamy was echoing Oren and Solomon (2015, 324), who posit that

[s]ecuritisation succeeds when the “mantras” repeated by securitising actors in speeches and news releases jump to the pages of the print media, skip into the wording of frequently-asked and widely-reported opinion poll questions, reverberate through talk shows, news broadcasts, and other electronic media programming, echo throughout the blogosphere, and, increasingly in recent years, flood the social media. Mediated by these media forms, the securitising phrase infiltrates and even infects everyday talk, including, for example, dinner party conversations, chatter around water coolers, and discussions in school and college classrooms.

The fact that India is a multilingual country where a multitude of languages are spoken could have potentially impeded the securitising effect of the English phrase “surgical strikes.” However, it is common for Indians to speak more than one language and to creatively combine languages in everyday parlance, and a scan through Hindi news sources suggests that the local-language news media adopted the English terminology of the “surgical strikes” (*Aaj Tak* 2016; *InKhabar* 2016; Ranjan 2017).

Thus, to paraphrase Oren and Solomon (2015, 316), the collective incantation of the phrase “surgical strikes” by the Indian administration, media and public as a ritualistic choral chant served to securitise the Pakistani state *after* the exceptional measure of breaching the LOC had taken place. The Indian army’s depiction of terrorists at their “launch pads” on the verge of crossing over into Indian territory constructed a threat that retroactively justified the “surgical strikes,” even as the Pakistani state denied they had ever taken place. This leads to the question—*did they*

really take place? The next subsection attempts to solve what Hussain (2017) refers to as the “[m]ystery of the ‘surgical strike.’”

The “Mystery of the ‘Surgical Strike’”

Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, 25) opine that securitisation does not require the implementation of an emergency measure—the legitimisation of such measures or other exceptional steps through discourse is sufficient. Even so, this article’s argument that the Indian state’s securitisation of Pakistan occurred in two steps—a speech act before as well as after the exceptional action—is based on the assumption that such an action actually occurred. Pakistan’s official denial of the surgical strikes, however, raises a doubt as to what really happened. This subsection is an attempt at solving the mystery, even if it is impossible to conclusively establish what occurred on the morning of 29 September.

I refer to three key news reports. The first is an *India Today* article that claims “exclusive details of the inside story behind the surgical strikes.” The article reports that twenty-five Indian commandos crossed the LOC in Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopters and dropped into “enemy territory.” The commandos reportedly crawled three kilometres into Pakistani-administered J&K, heading for seven terrorist “launch pads” in the “Bhimbar, Kel, Tattapani and Leepa areas.” The article goes on to describe how the Indian soldiers “completely destroyed” three of their targets, killing “at least 50 terrorists” as well as two Pakistani soldiers (Negi 2016).

In the second article, a *New York Times* journalist recounts how the Pakistani military flew a group of reporters into Bhimber district in Pakistani-administered J&K to verify whether any “surgical strikes” had taken place. The *New York Times* reporter spoke to a villager called Malik Rustom from Mandhole village, near which one of the militant bases the Indian army claims to have targeted is supposed to have been located. Rustom reportedly said that the Indian troops had not left their posts and crossed the LOC, while “[a] group of villagers standing nearby nodded in agreement” (Masood 2016).

The third report is by Ilyas Khan (2016), a *BBC* reporter who visited the LOC and spoke to local people and police officers in Pakistani-administered J&K. Ilyas Khan’s investigation suggested that what had occurred was a ground assault that targeted posts of the Pakistani military, with Indian soldiers crossing about a kilometre into Pakistani-administered territory. Although no commandos were airdropped, Indian troops reportedly destroyed a Pakistani army post in the Madarpur-Titrinot area of Poonch. They also blew up an army post and mosque near Mundakali village in the Leepa valley, as well as two more military bases further up the mountains. In addition, Ilyas Khan was told that the Indians had entered the Dudhnial area in the Neelum valley. While two Pakistani soldiers were killed, Ilyas Khan was unable to find much evidence of militant bases having been hit. He found that militant camps in Bhimber, Leepa and Neelum appeared intact, although “one or two damaged structures” in Dudhnial might possibly have been militant bases that were struck on 29 September.

These divergent accounts suggest that, as Ilyas Khan (2016) puts it, “There is no conclusive evidence to prove either side’s claims—the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle.” However, Ilyas Khan’s account seems the most convincing, not least because Negi’s (2016) “inside story” is likely to have been obtained from sources within the Indian establishment, while Masood (2016) appears to have been flown into Bhimber in a Pakistani military helicopter, which suggests he may have been exposed to a selective rendering of the story. Ilyas Khan’s account also seems to tread the middle ground between Negi and Masood’s versions.

Desecuritising the India-Pakistan Conflict over Kashmir

For Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, 4-29), de-securitisation—“the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere”—is the ideal in the long run. Securitisation theory, with its understanding that security is subjectively determined by actors, and that securitising an issue or accepting a securitisation is a political choice, opens up the possibility for such a transformation from securitisation to normal politics (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 29-31).

In the case of the India-Pakistan conflict over J&K, a shift from security politics to normal politics would involve engaging in a political dialogue over the issue with the aim of resolving it through “the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 4). The Pakistani foreign secretary in August 2016 invited his Indian counterpart to talks on J&K, to which Indian Foreign

Secretary S. Jaishankar responded that J&K was “an integral part of India where Pakistan has no locus standi,” but that India was open to discussing “aspects related to cross-border terrorism [that] are central to the current situation in J&K” (Haidar and Bhattacharjee 2016; *Hindu* 2016b; *Indian Express* 2016c).

In April 2017, in the context of continuing violent protests in the Kashmir valley since the July 2016 killing of Wani, Kashmiri politician Farooq Abdullah told an Indian journalist:

The situation is quite bad, and don't tell me Pakistan is not a party to this problem. Whether you like it or not, you have to talk to Pakistan. If you want to beat the threat of the terrorists, then you better start talking now. . . . You are losing Kashmir. You better wake up, and start thinking on not a military solution, but a political way (Udayakumar 2017).

Later the same month, the Indian Supreme Court advised the central government to engage in a dialogue with the Kashmiri demonstrators; the administration replied that it “would come to the negotiation table only if the legally recognised stakeholders participate in the dialogue and not with the separatist elements who rake up the issue of accession or Azadi in Kashmir” (*Indian Express* 2017; Mahapatra 2017; *NDTV* 2017).

As discussed in a previous section, Pakistan's claim to J&K is perceived by India as an existential threat to its sovereignty as a state and its identity as a nation. However, if an “issue becomes a security issue[]not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat,” then policymakers have the choice of presenting the issue differently, and thereby transforming the situation (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 24). If India were to negotiate a settlement of the Kashmir conflict through talks with Pakistan and

Kashmiris,¹ even if this involves losing some territory, it would probably *enhance* India's sense of security by radically defusing tensions in the subcontinent.

Despite the seemingly obvious advantages of actively pursuing peace, the key actors in the conflict continue to neurotically reproduce patterns of destructive behaviour. This substantiates Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde's (1998, 70) claim that historical, geographical and political factors can combine to create a mutually reinforcing pattern of securitisation that is difficult to dislodge.

Browning and Joenniemi (2017) link the challenge posed by entrenched cases of securitisation to the concepts of self, identity and ontological security. They explain that most of the literature on ontological security assumes that international actors "prefer stability and certitude to change, [and] are therefore liable to reassert established patterns of behaviour, routines and identities, rather than embrace change precisely because of the perceived need and value of maintaining stable self-concepts" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 31-32). Thus, states may prefer that a conflictual relationship continue, "because the enduring conflict reaffirms a sense of certainty about the identity of both oneself and the other" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 34).

While this explanation seems to encapsulate the unending Pakistan-India conflict, Browning and Joenniemi (2017, 35) are clear that an actor needs to be able to sometimes deal with change and to adapt its identity, rather than neurotically holding

¹ As Snedden (2013, 220) points out, the Kashmir valley is the only region of J&K where dissatisfaction with the status quo of being administered by India runs deep. In contrast, Jammu and Ladakh appear content to be a part of India, while Poonch and Gilgit-Baltistan appear satisfied with being with Pakistan.

on to a conflictual but stable situation. The literature Browning and Joenniemi (2017, 37) critique suggests that with long-running conflicts (such as Kashmir), the possibility of arriving at a rational resolution becomes diluted by the fact that the conflict has “come to frame the identities of the parties,” while “[r]esolution would . . . require identity transformation.” For conflict resolution, what is needed is “flexibility, a willingness to rethink both the identity of the self and the other,” which causes anxiety “about whether identities can remain stable, and therefore about what the future world will look like, what our identity will be in the absence of the enemy, what will we do, will we any longer be who we think we are.”

However, these arguments are problematic for Browning and Joenniemi (2017, 38) because they naturalise securitisation. Like Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), Browning and Joenniemi (2017, 38) insist that there are always options other than securitisation. They suggest that securitisation can cause as much anxiety as de-securitisation, because the initial process of securitisation marks a shift “from a former situation when identity was not securitized and was more open.” Securitisation “entails a movement of rigidifying, closing down and bordering,” while “desecuritizations may actually suggest the existence of a self possessing the reflexive ability to step back, employ alternative channels of articulation and opt for some other identity—abilities . . . that are actually precisely at the heart of ontological security” (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 39).

In South Asian philosophical terms, Indian Sufi sheikh Hazrat Azad Rasool (2002, 35) points to the potential for positively transforming the self when he writes,

“When one has transformed the lower self (*an-nafs an-ammārah*), the beauty one perceives and the love one feels is comprehensive, energizing, and spiritually fulfilling.” Singers such as Pakistan’s Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1989 and 1992) and Abida Parveen and Rahat Fateh Ali Khan (2014), have beautifully rendered Indian Sufi poet Amir Khusro’s “Chaap Tilak,” which celebrates the joyous possibilities in surrendering one’s identity. These examples demonstrate that the intellectual foundations for the conceptualisation of a self who possesses the ability to consciously choose a different identity already exist in the shared philosophical, cultural and spiritual traditions of India and Pakistan.

Conclusion

This article makes two main contributions. On the theoretical side, it has shown that securitisation can sometimes occur through not one, but two speech acts. This was demonstrated by arguing that the Indian state securitised its traditional enemy, Pakistan, through a securitising discourse that preceded the implementation of the extraordinary measure of Indian soldiers crossing the LOC. This was then followed by a second speech act that both described and justified the exceptional action by once again constructing an existential threat.

At the empirical level of analysis, I have argued that if India’s perception of an existential threat emanating from Pakistan’s claim to J&K is understood as subjective, then Indian policymakers have the political choice of opting to pursue a path of de-securitisation. I have suggested that moving the issue from the realm of security to the

political negotiating table would enhance rather than detract from India's (and Pakistan's) sense of security.

In addition to these two central claims, the article makes several observations that contribute to the literature on securitisation as well as the Pakistan-India conflict over Kashmir. First, it notes that Indian officials used a combination of speech and words (in the form of Twitter posts) to convey their securitising narrative to their audience, supporting Wilkinson's (2007) point about the Copenhagen School's overemphasis on speech. Secondly, it draws on Oren and Solomon (2015) to show that the words "surgical strikes," through their vagueness, themselves constituted a speech act that involved the securitising actor and audience joining in the ritualistic chanting of the ambiguous phrase. By applying Oren and Solomon's idea to a multilingual context, the article demonstrates that catchy phrases can be effectively deployed by securitising actors even in linguistically diverse non-Western contexts. Thirdly, the article suggests that the resistance of the Kashmir conflict to resolution is a result of the identities of the Indian and Pakistani states becoming dependent upon their conflictual relationship. Even so, I have argued, Browning and Joenniemi (2017) are right to highlight the potential actors possess to flexibly adapt their identities, and this is not a new idea for Indians and Pakistanis, as I have revealed through my references to Sufi literature from the subcontinent.

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