



The week after

India must keep up diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to act against terror groups

With India and Pakistan deciding to de-escalate post-Balakot tensions, the focus has moved to the diplomatic sphere. India's strikes on a target deep inside Pakistan were coupled with diplomatic manoeuvres that ensured no country censured India for the move. And in a turnaround for ties with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation after half a century, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was able to put the country's case before the body, while Pakistan stayed out. In recognition of India's justification to act against an imminent terror threat from the Jaish-e-Mohammad, the U.S., the U.K. and France also moved in at record speed to bring another listing request against the group's founder, Masood Azhar, at the UN Security Council's committee for terror designations. There is a reasonable assumption that China will not block it this time as it did during the last three attempts. There were other outcomes that defied the past. Although Islamabad had spoken in the past of its abilities with "tactical nuclear devices", there was no such mobilisation after India's strikes. On the other hand, Pakistan was able to, with its aerial response, also indicate that it was not without non-nuclear options. Finally, indications that the international community was involved in effecting a breakthrough are clear. U.S. President Donald Trump hinted at a breakthrough in talks hours before Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan announced the release of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman.

The government must, however, also assess what it has actually achieved in strategic terms, and the consequences of the "new normal" it has sought to create with Pakistan. Despite the strikes, it is far from clear that the capabilities of the JeM have been degraded to the point where it can no longer carry out attacks in India. New Delhi must also track the JeM's assets and abilities within Jammu and Kashmir, as well as any intelligence and security protocol failures that may have preceded the Pulwama attack. Second, while Pakistan announced it would study the dossier given by New Delhi on Azhar and the JeM, it does not appear to be willing to act against either, and has not taken steps akin to the few it had after the 2001 Parliament attack, the 2008 Mumbai attacks or the 2016 Pathankot attack. Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's comments practically defending the JeM and putting out excuses of "illness" for Azhar make that clear. It is also necessary to realise the limits of calling international attention to India's concerns, to ensure that there are no curbs on what India sees as its strategic autonomy. Finally, the government must have a firmer handle on its messaging after the events of the past week, so that a public reading of its strategic purpose is not lost in the claim vs counterclaim spiral with Pakistan.

Deepening slowdown

Can the RBI's reduction in borrowing costs help check the demand slowdown?

India's economy is arguably slowing, and the latest estimates from the Central Statistics Office disconcertingly point to a deepening slowdown. GDP growth is projected to have eased to 6.6% in the October-December period. With the CSO now forecasting the full-year expansion at 7%, fiscal fourth-quarter growth is implicitly pegged at an even slower 6.5%. At that level, growth would have slowed to a seven-quarter low, giving the incumbent NDA government its slowest pace of annual growth. The data clearly reflect the pain points in the real economy that have been evident for some time now. For one, the farm sector continues to remain in trouble with GVA (gross value added) growth in agriculture, forestry and fishing having slowed sharply to 2.7% in the last quarter, from a 4.2% pace in July-September and 4.6% a year earlier. With rabi sowing showing a shortfall across most crops after a deficient north-east monsoon, and the abiding structural issues that have pushed a multitude of farmers into acute distress nowhere near resolution, it is hard to foresee an early revival in this crucial primary sector. This, in turn, continues to dog demand in the hinterland for manufactured products, from two-wheelers to tractors, and is evident in the consumption spending data. Growth in private final consumption expenditure eased appreciably to 8.4%, from the second quarter's pace of 9.8%.

Manufacturing is another source of concern. The estimates for growth in GVA for the sector put the pace at 6.7%, weaker than the 6.9% posted in the second quarter and a rapid deceleration from the April-June period's 12.4%. The latest Index of Industrial Production (IIP) figures also give little cause for optimism as manufacturing expansion in December slowed to 2.7%, from 8.7% 12 months earlier. RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das had in fact pointedly cited how "high-frequency and survey-based indicators for the manufacturing and services sectors" suggested a slowdown in the pace of activity, to help justify his vote last month for an interest rate cut to bolster growth. That most of the sectors comprising the broader services basket remain becalmed adds to the sense of disquiet. It remains to be seen if the RBI's reduction in borrowing costs helps check the demand slowdown in the fourth quarter, an improvement in investment activity notwithstanding. Gross fixed capital formation, the key metric for investment demand, expanded by a healthy 10.6%, building on the second quarter's 10.2% increase. Still, with military tensions with Pakistan on the boil, a long campaign for the general election ahead, uncertainties looming on the global trade and growth horizons, and little fiscal leeway to tease back momentum through increased spending, the economy appears headed for a period of uncertainty at least till the next government is in place.

Lines being crossed

The reasons behind India's restraint after the 26/11 attacks are still valid today



M.K. NARAYANAN

The February 26 aerial strike by India on a Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) training camp in Balakot, located in Mansehra district of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, came hardly a fortnight after the Pulwama terror attack on a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy on the Srinagar-Jammu highway. The terror attack was carried out by a JeM suicide bomber, who rammed his explosives laden vehicle into the convoy, killing 40 CRPF personnel.

The Pulwama attack on February 14 was the deadliest attack to date on security forces in Kashmir. It was seen as a message to India that "Terror Incorporated" in Pakistan was upping the ante and taking matters to a qualitatively higher level. That it chose to do so when the general election in India is around the corner further made it an act of dare-devilry, almost inviting India to retaliate.

Turning point

The aerial attack featured Mirage-2000 jets (designed to fly at speeds of up to Mach 2.2) fitted with state-of-the-art radar and fly-by-wire flight control systems, carrying precision guided missiles. Sukhoi Su-30MKI jets were standing by, and early warning aircraft – the Israeli Falcon and the indigenously built Netra – were also deployed. The reliance on air power not only induced a new pattern in the India-Pakistan conflict post-1971, but also marks a paradigmatic change in the nature and character of India's battle against Pakistan-based terror.

Two dates, 1971 and 1998, are significant in this context. The first witnessed the dismemberment of Pakistan, accompanied by Pakistan's unremitting hostility towards

India. The second marked the year when India and Pakistan formally announced their emergence as nuclear powers – leading to a kind of stand-off between them. Between 1971 and 1998, the South Asian region witnessed the retreat from Afghanistan of Russian forces, and the simultaneous emergence of the phenomenon known as the 'Afghan Jihad'. The latter would thereafter spawn radicalised Islamist violence across the entire region and even beyond, giving rise to organisations such as al-Qaeda and its acolytes. In Kashmir, it led to a shift in tactics, and the commencement of a more radicalised and militant phase of struggle. Kashmir has never been the same since.

Pakistan was the main beneficiary of this. It gained control of the Taliban, which soon achieved ascendancy in Afghanistan's affairs. Recruits and tactics from the Afghan Jihad helped intensify the struggle in Kashmir and tilt it in favour of Pakistan. Terror, thereafter, became the strategic instrumentality employed to keep India in check. That is, until the February 14 attack on the CRPF convoy in Pulwama.

A big provocation

Pulwama was the ultimate provocation. The suicide bomber detonated between 80 and 90 kg of explosives, which experts have identified as RDX, categorised as a military grade explosive available with the armed forces. Preparation for the attack suggests that it was not a one-off event, and that the planning had commenced much earlier. Preparing a suicide bomber to carry out an attack entails a great deal of psychological training, which is conducted over a considerable length of time (this pattern was seen in the case of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and of suicide bomber Dhanu responsible for Rajiv Gandhi's assassination). Intelligence available suggests that the suicide bomber was assisted, guided and propelled to achieve maximum impact by han-



dlers in Pakistan. The radicalised suicide bomber (Adil Ahmad Dar) was apparently spotted by JeM masterminds in Pakistan many months prior to the attack, and Pakistan controllers continued their 'handholding' almost till the last minute. Pakistan's fingerprints are all over the Pulwama incident.

India's decision to carry the battle beyond the Line of Control and into Pakistan has several implications. At its most basic level, it signifies that in the battle against terror, India is more than willing currently to side-step protocols that dictate conduct among nations not officially at war. No amount of euphuistic chicanery alters this reality.

We live in a highly disruptive world. Nations often find themselves in a state of undeclared war. Tensions and provocations between countries that share borders – among the more prominent being North and South Korea – often remain high. In the present instance, a strong riposte by India was only to be expected, with the debate centring round the degree of restraint to be exercised. Whether an aerial attack on a terror target inside Pakistani territory comes within the ambit of a credible minimum deterrent is, however, debatable.

Employment of air power is per se recognised the world over as an escalatory step. No amount of diplomatic verbiage can obscure this fact. The phrase 'non-military pre-emptive strike' used by the Indian Foreign Secretary and other officials does not in any way change this reality. The nation, hence, needs to brace itself for the conse-

quences that follow such a step. Any hope that international opprobrium on Pakistan for the JeM attack would deter Pakistan from taking a retaliatory step for the attack on Balakot needs to be eschewed.

The reality is that while few would sympathise with Pakistan, well recognised as a country that harbours terrorists of every description, there are much larger issues at stake. There is the matter of maintaining the sanctity of the Westphalian Order, which has helped keep the peace across the world for centuries. This mandates certain rules and procedures as far as the conduct of international relations is concerned. Violation of the territory of another country, whether from land, sea or air, whatever be the degree of provocation, is generally perceived as an act of war. Today, Russia is being pilloried by the West for the former's annexation of Crimea. Russia is also being castigated for interfering in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016. Yet, all countries, including the U.S., have been reluctant to cross the Rubicon and enter into an open confrontation with Russia.

This should, hence, give us reason to pause, and to debate whether the world could construe our action of violating Pakistani airspace, even if it is to carry out an attack on a JeM training centre, as justified or not. There is little doubt that India's policy-makers took the decision to carry out the attack on Balakot – even if it meant violating Pakistani airspace – only after a great deal of deliberation, but it is still a highly debatable step.

Dilemma after 26/11

Understandably, no two situations are identical. Nor are the conditions prevailing the same at any time. In November/December 2008, on the eve of the general election of 2009, India confronted a similar dilemma following the November 2008 terror attack by Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT)

on multiple targets in Mumbai city (picture), in which nearly 170 persons were killed. Extensive discussions were held at that time as to the possible actions that could be taken against Pakistan, and many ideas were considered – including that of similar pre-emptive strikes on terror training camps along the LoC and beyond – and given up.

The reality was – and this still exists – that India did not possess the kind of special forces (with the requisite capabilities) that other countries had, viz. Russia's Spetsnaz, Germany's GSG-9, the U.S.'s SEALs and the U.K.'s SAS and SBS. It was felt at the time that it would not be possible in the circumstances to carry out a pinpointed attack on either the LeT or JeM headquarters. Whether India should violate Pakistan's airspace was also carefully deliberated upon, but wiser counsels at the time felt that this would be perceived as nothing short of war. The failure to take action is being reviled today in certain circles, but it needs to be remembered that some of India's finest years were during the period 2009-2012.

Upholding India's word

It may be said that having already taken the step, there can be no going back. India's leaders, however, need to be reminded that India's restraint in responding to previous terror attacks is the crucial factor giving India credibility as far as keeping commitments are concerned. It is important to recognise in this context that India is committed to 'No First Use' in nuclear matters, and the world has accepted this guarantee purely based on India's moral capital and stature. The question is whether India's word will be treated as inviolable in the future, even as India seeks a seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This is something that we need to ponder over.

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The basics are vital

Making hospitalisation affordable will spell relief, but there is no alternative to strengthening primary health care



SOHAM D. BHADURI

In 2011, a high-level expert group on universal health coverage reckoned that nearly 70% of government health spending should go to primary health care. The National Health Policy (NHP) 2017 also advocated allocating resources of up to two-thirds or more to primary care as it enunciated the goal of achieving "the highest possible level of good health and well-being, through a preventive and promotive health-care orientation". However, if current trends and projections are anything to go by, this goal is likely to remain a pious hope.

Last year, an outlay of ₹1,200 crore was proposed to transform 1.5 lakh sub-health centres into health and wellness centres by 2022, which would provide a wider range of primary care services than existing sub- and primary health centres (PHC). Going by the government's own estimate, in 2017, it would cost ₹16 lakh to convert a sub-health centre into a

health and wellness centre. This year, the outlay is ₹1,600 crore (a 33% increase) clubbed under the National Health Mission (NHM) budget. Assuming that at least the same number (15,000) of new health and wellness centres would be planned for 2019-20, and that at least half the aforementioned amount of ₹16 lakh would be required to run an already approved health and wellness centre, the required sum for the year 2019-20 stands at around ₹3,600 crore. While this is a conservative estimate, the realistic figure could easily exceed ₹4,500 crore. The current outlay is less than half the conservative estimate – not to mention that building health and wellness centres at the given rate (15,000 per year) can fulfil not even half the proposed target of 1.5 lakh health and wellness centres till 2022.

Picture of extremes

The overall situation with the NHM, India's flagship programme in primary health care, continues to be dismal. The NHM's share in the health budget fell from 73% in 2006 to 50% in 2019 in the absence of uniform and substantial increases in health spending by States. The medium-term expenditure projection statement present-



ed by the Ministry of Finance to Parliament in August 2018 projected a 17% increase in allocation for the NHM in 2019-20. However, there has only been only an increase of 3.4% this year. With this, the NHM budget for this year (₹31,745 crore) barely crosses the actual spending on the programme in 2017-18 (₹ 31,510 crore).

On the other hand, the Centre looks fairly committed to increasing access to hospitalisation care, predominantly through private players. This reflects in the 167% increase in allocation this year for the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) – the insurance programme which aims to cover 10 crore poor families for hospitalisation expenses of up to ₹5 lakh per family per annum – and the government's recent steps to incentivise the private sector to open hospitals in Tier II and Tier III cities. The increase in the PMJAY budget is a welcome step – spend-

ing on this colossal insurance programme will need to rise considerably with every passing year so that its commitments can be met. However, the same coming at the expense of other critical areas is ill-advised.

Staff shortage

Today, the condition of our primary health infrastructure is lamentable: there is a shortage of PHCs (22%) and sub-health centres (20%), while only 7% sub-health centres and 12% primary health centres meet Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS) norms. Further, numerous primary-level facilities need complete building reconstruction, as they operate out of rented apartments and thatched accommodations, and lack basic facilities such as toilets, drinking water and electricity. Data by IndiaSpent show that there is a staggering shortage of medical and paramedical staff at all levels of care: 10,907 auxiliary nurse midwives and 3,673 doctors are needed at sub-health and primary health centres, while for community health centres the figure is 18,422 specialists.

While making hospitalisation affordable brings readily noticeable relief, there is no alternative to strengthening primary health care

in the pursuit of an effective and efficient health system. It must be remembered that the achievement of a "distress-free and comprehensive wellness system for all", as enunciated by the Union Finance Minister in this year's Interim Budget speech, hinges on the performance of health and wellness centres as they will be instrumental in reducing the greater burden of out-of-pocket expenditure on health. Their role shall also be critical in the medium and long terms to ensure the success and sustainability of the PMJAY insurance scheme, as a weak primary health-care system will only increase the burden of hospitalisation.

The government needs to remember its promise of 'Health assurance to all' made in its election manifesto in 2014. Apart from an adequate emphasis on primary health care, there is a need to depart from the current trend of erratic and insufficient increases in health spending and make substantial and sustained investments in public health over the next decade. Without this, the ninth dimension ('Healthy India') of "Vision 2030" will remain unfulfilled.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

JeM chief in Pakistan

The statement by Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi that the founder of the terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad, Masood Azhar, is "unwell" is testimony to the fact that the civilian and military leaderships of Pakistan are well aware of the whereabouts of the leaders of various terrorist organisations ("Azhar down with renal failure?", March 3). India should not accept the peace proposal of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan but instead should continue mounting pressure on Islamabad to hand over the JeM chief to India. The people of Pakistan should realise that their leadership is protecting and harbouring terrorists which does more harm than good to their

own country as a whole.

DHRUV VYAS,
Chennai

Double standards

The move by the UN Security Council's 1267 ISIS and al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee to list Hamza bin Laden (the son of Osama bin Laden) under its sanctions list, calling him the "most probable successor" to al-Qaeda's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri just because he has called for followers of al-Qaeda to commit terror attacks, points to the abject double standards of the committee in fighting global terrorism ('World' page, "UNSC blacklists Osama's son", March 3). It is appalling that he has been pre-emptively proscribed by the UN Committee on a mere threat perception

while India's repeated attempts to get the same UN to designate the UN-proscribed Pakistan-based terror group, Jaish-e-Mohammad chief, Masood Azhar, as a 'global terrorist' remains a voice in the wilderness even after Pulwama. Undoubtedly, China's all-weather friendship with Pakistan has once again come in the way. If only China had joined the other permanent members of the UNSC in designating Masood Azhar as an international terrorist, the current crisis could, perhaps, have even been avoided.

NALINI VIJAYARAGHAVAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

On the media

Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's lament that news channels are resorting

to setting the country's agenda instead of reporting is worthy of consideration by news channels that are obsessed with 'breaking news' ("Jaitley takes a swipe at news channels", March 3). Viewers often look at breaking news as nothing more than a nuisance. While overzealous news anchors cry for quick revenge against Pakistan, others go straight for the government's jugular. There are still others who set the agenda of the country's judiciary. The press is the last line of defence in a democracy but reporters must also hold a mirror to events on the ground, rather than turning critics of events. More often, their news items read like editorials.

KANGAYAM R. NARASIMHAN,
Chennai

Mother's role

That a mother is like a workhorse from dawn to dusk, especially in her prime, and who fulfils every need of the family has been captured beautifully in the narrative, "Caring with dignity and empathy" ('Open Page', March 3). I am sure that the article would have made many readers recollect the precious moments spent with their mothers. It is apt to recall the quote about a mother's role: "A mother is she who takes the place of all others. But whose place no one else can take".

K. JAYANTHI,
Chennai

Dance and nature

The 'Magazine' cover story (Page 8, March 3), "Where have my groves gone?" laments the disappearance

of groves (Kavu in Kerala), which indirectly signifies disappearing human values and man's alarming disconnect with nature. Every folk art when sincerely presented or performed is a 'return to nature' experience and Theyyam is no exception. The entire man-nature relationship is one of eternal confluence, convergence and conflicts, and eventually it is nature that prevails.

One wonders why in the modern age, we are grossly unconcerned about the ill-effects of self-made disasters when there are ample lessons in myths and folk tales to avoid such situations.

M.V. RADHAKRISHNAN,
Thiruvur, Kerala

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