

EDITOR'S NOTE

Who would have imagined that the report to the WHO Country Office in China on December 31, 2019 of a pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan, would emerge as a pandemic in less than three months, engulfing 114 countries with more than 1,18,000 people infected worldwide, and 4,291 people succumbing to the corona virus disease (COVID-19). This was the status on March 11, 2020 when the Director General of WHO officially announced that COVID-19 was being designated as a pandemic. Of course, these numbers have only gone on increasing every day since then.

India reported its first death due to COVID-19 on March 12. With nations worldwide now gearing up to tackle the spread of the disease, let us hope that with the onset of summer, COVID-19 comes under control. But, before that happens, the pandemic has shown us its scary self and is being referred to as the 'Corona War'—a follow up to the Trade War between the US and China. Both countries appear to be blaming the other for the spread of the disease, with conspiracy theories being thrown around by the Chinese media about the outbreak of the deadly disease actually taking place in the US, and not China.

There was barely any time to recap the events of the year that had literally slipped by when news came in on January 3 about the US drone strike that killed General Qassem Soleimani, Iran's most powerful military general, who was the head of IRGC's elite Quds Force. The justification for the late-night strike given by the US President was that "*General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region.*"

While the main task for the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps is to defend the regime against internal and external threats, the Quds Force allegedly also specialises in foreign missions, providing training, funding and weapons to extremist groups, including Iraqi insurgents, Hezbollah, and Hamas.

The Iranian Foreign Minister condemned the killing of the leader of the Quds Force which he claimed was the only force effectively neutralising the *Daesh* (the ISIS), while also holding the US responsible for further escalation, if any. The US President immediately responded to this threat by warning Iran that the US would “*quickly & fully strike back, & perhaps in a disproportionate manner*” if US persons or troops were targetted.

The Iranians, nevertheless, retaliated with pin-point attacks at 01:20 a.m. local time on January 8, 2020 against two Iraqi military bases where the US and coalition forces were stationed. However, there were no reported American casualties, possibly on account of early warning about the missile launches; this led to a de-escalation of an otherwise potentially volatile situation.

At around 0600 hours on the same day (January 8), a Ukrainian airliner, Flight 752, was shot down by an Iranian Air Defence unit soon after the aircraft took off from Tehran airport. All 176 passengers and crew were killed. While staying silent on the accident for a few days, the Iranian military leadership subsequently accepted that the aircraft had been mistaken for an American cruise missile and accidentally shot down and apologies were offered. Talk of collateral damage, albeit in a period of heightened tensions!

As far as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is concerned, the Iranian leadership had warned in January 2020 that the country would no longer abide by the terms and conditions of the nuclear deal. While this step was announced soon after the US attack that killed General Soleimani, it was anyway to come since Tehran had announced the conscious decision of *phased* withdrawal from the JCPOA and the next step was due in January 2020. With this fifth step now having been taken, henceforth, there would

be no limits to the amount of enrichment that Iran would carry out. Since January, Iran is already believed to have tripled its stockpile of enriched uranium, which now stands at more than a thousand kilograms—enough to make a few nuclear weapons. This certainly poses a great risk of nuclear proliferation in West Asia as other nations in the region, e.g. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, etc., have not hidden their compulsion to undertake a nuclear weapons program if Iran does so.

Iran has also vowed that it would carry out further attacks against the US, not necessarily against its military. Some reports suggest that Iran would use its robust cyber capabilities to carry out attacks against US facilities, a small example of which was given on January 4 itself when the website of the Federal Depository Library Program was taken down for 24 hours by Iranian hackers. Cyber-attacks by Iran against critical infrastructures (including energy infrastructure, financial institutions, and transportation systems) in the United States are continuing. Escalation of tensions between the US and Iran is a global concern; and Iran does not presently appear to be in the mood to simmer down, as the death of their most liked General, in their assessment, is yet to be avenged.

Amidst all the tensions in the West Asian region, an event of great significance for the Indian Armed Forces took place in the closing days of 2019—the announcement of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). With the announcement of creation of a Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Ministry of Defence, to be headed by the CDS, the stage was set for a reassessment of the Second Schedule of the Transaction of Business Rules, 1961 for clear division of roles between the newly created CDS—who will be of Cabinet Secretary rank—and the Defence Secretary, avoiding any overlapping of roles.

In order to understand the responsibilities of his new avatar as Secretary, DMA in the MoD, the CDS has got his work cut out in the coming months to fulfil his charter and make a difference that would see, inter alia, greater jointness amongst the three Services. The first task is the creation of the Air Defence Command, to be headed by an IAF officer. The second is the

creation of the Peninsula Command by merging the Eastern and Western Naval Commands. Logistics and Maintenance Command, a Doctrinal and Training Command are other priorities, besides the setting up of the first integrated theatre command within three years; a tall order by any standards, considering the allocations to the armed forces for its modernisation in Union Budget 2020. Although presently a work in progress, at the time of going to press, the CDS appears upbeat about delivering on his charter within his tenure, particularly in view of the ready support assured by the Service Chiefs.

The 11th edition of the Defence Expo was held in Lucknow from February 5-7, 2020, attracting Defence Ministers from 40 countries, 172 defense equipment manufacturers—with over 3,000 delegates—from 70 countries and 857 companies from India. With *'India: The Emerging Defence Manufacturing Hub'* as the underlying theme for the DefExpo 2020, the exposition was aimed at projecting 'Make in India' to the world. It was also an opportunity for the Indian defence industry to showcase its capabilities and promote its export potential. At the DefExpo, proposals worth ₹5 lakh crore were received for investment; work is believed to have already started on projects worth ₹2.5 lakh crore. Employment opportunities for over 3 lakh youth are expected to be generated, with India likely to become a prominent centre of global defence manufacturing in the coming years. With more than 12 lakh visitors, DefExpo laid a strong foundation for the development of the UP Defence Corridor. "The Lucknow Declaration" was signed by the defence ministers and representatives of 50 African countries with the Raksha Mantri, Rajnath Singh. Common security challenges such as terrorism, extremism, piracy and trafficking are underscored in the Declaration. Besides that, the agreement addresses increased cooperation in securing sea lines of communication, preventing maritime crimes, disaster, piracy, and illegal fishing through the sharing of information and other measures. The African nations have mostly been the recipients of India's defence assistance in the past in the form of Training Teams from India that have assisted in the setting up of defence academies in some African countries.

Under this agreement, India will provide Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs), Fast Interceptor Boats, body and vehicle armour, Night Vision Goggles (NVGs), Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), Dornier aircraft, and arms and ammunition to some of the African nations. This would be a significant breakthrough in the export of defence equipment, albeit on a modest scale. The real challenge for the Indian defence industry still remains breaking into the high-end technology areas. With the infusion of greater enthusiasm in the foreign OEMs—who always look at India's potential as a large market—it is felt that such breakthroughs in niche areas would happen, sooner than later, particularly if the Strategic Partnership model takes off in earnest under the aegis of Make in India.

It has been one year since Suicide Terrorism had reared its ugly head in the Kashmir Valley on February 14, leaving 40 CRPF personnel dead; the response by India with the IAF's 'non-military pre-emptive' strike against the Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp at Balakot on February 26 had clearly demonstrated India's resolve to punish Pakistan, undeterred by its projection of nuclear threats. The PAF attempted a response on February 27 in the Nowshera sector where a historic first was achieved when Wg Cdr Abhinandan, flying the MiG-21 Bison, shot down a PAF F-16, although his aircraft was also shot down in the ensuing melee. He ejected, was captured, but returned by Pakistan two days later as a 'goodwill gesture' (as per Pakistan PM, Imran Khan) towards de-escalating tensions between the two neighbours. The response by the PAF underscored the technological edge that the PAF enjoyed vis-à-vis the IAF on that day by virtue of having BVR missiles with ranges greater than those of the BVR missiles with the IAF. The tenacity and exceptional presence of mind of the pilot-fighter controller duo of the IAF ensured there were no losses on the Indian side—except Wg Cdr Abhinandan—despite five AMRAAMs having been fired by the PAF F-16s. Of course, such a situation (of technical asymmetry) should not be permitted to continue for long as it is not known when the IAF might be called in again to deliver a punishing blow.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Best wishes to all readers to stay healthy and alert in the times ahead. The watchword today seems to be PQSD–Personal Quarantine and Social Distancing!

Happy Reading

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Jana' with a stylized flourish at the end.