

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is back in power for a second continuous term. With several new faces in the Cabinet of Ministers selected by Prime Minister Modi for his second term in office, it provides an opportunity for the new dispensation to be able to 'do things differently' as India progresses in its march towards self-reliance under the 'Make in India' tag line. The new Defence Minister, Shri Rajnath Singh, has stated that he attaches the "highest priority" to "sufficiently" equip the armed forces to meet any operational requirement. With adequate delegation of financial powers to the three Service Headquarters (HQs), it is hoped that critical voids in operational items would be fulfilled at the earliest.

With all the debate that has taken place post-Pulwama, the dust does not seem to settle down. Armchair strategists are at their best—even four months after the events of February 26/27 analysing with the benefit of hindsight what actually did/did not/ could have happen(ed). Fortunately, the one count on which all—Indian media and 'strategists' alike—seem to have a consonance of views is that of the high level of training of Indian Air Force (IAF) aircrew and fighter controllers; any lax performance by either could have resulted in ugly headlines on 28 Feb. The facts are simple: Balakot was attacked successfully by highly trained Mirage 2000 aircrew flying the mission under most trying conditions—in adverse weather, and at a time (2 am to 6 am) when human biological functions and performance efficiency (circadian rhythms) are at their lowest levels. Unless adequately trained, any demanding activity, e.g. carrying out an extremely important operational mission at such times, is fraught with the danger of 'things going wrong' due to human limitations. Secondly, the performance of our fighter controllers was 'spot-on' in 'scrambling' the MiG-21s to intercept the large force of incoming enemy

aircraft, and thereafter controlling the Su-30s in taking defensive actions vis-à-vis the F-16s that were in a decidedly more advantageous position for launch of their Air-to-Air Missiles (the AMRAAMs) as compared to the Su-30s armed with a combination of the R-77/R-73. What the debate has not really focused on is whether Pakistan had thought through the escalation dynamics if it had actually been successful in claiming a higher number of IAF aircraft; and whether escalation dominance indeed rested with the Pakistan Air Force (PAF)/Pakistan Army in the case of the certain Indian response. Did Pakistan have the 'reserves' for an 'all-out war' with India? Such knee-jerk reactions from the Pakistani side do not bode well for stability in the subcontinent, particularly when it has been demonstrated that an intelligence-led 'non-military preemptive action' targeting terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan is well within the capability of the IAF to execute in the future also. Some serious thinking is indicated here.

The US had decided not to grant any extension to the waivers it had granted to five countries—including India—in November 2018 for continuing to buy oil from Iran. This was seen as a direct attack on Iran's economy; Iran, therefore, claimed that if it were not allowed to sell its oil, it would close down the Strait of Hormuz to other exporters of oil (from the Gulf region) as well. Iran termed the US decision to end sanction waivers on Iranian oil imports as "illegal".

As a result, the West Asian region was on the brink of a point of no return, with Iran firmly defending its sovereignty, particularly in the crucial Strait of Hormuz through which 20 percent of the world's seaborne oil, one-third of the world's liquefied natural gas, and one-third of the world's shipborne trade passes. On an average, 18-20 million barrels of oil (most of it crude) passes through the Strait of Hormuz daily. On June 20, 2019, in response to the shooting down by Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force of an American drone—an RQ-4A Global Hawk High Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) that Iran insists had violated its sovereign air space—US fighter aircraft were airborne for a mission to strike Iranian targets. It is now believed that the mission was asked to stand down barely ten minutes before arriving over

the target area after President Trump realised that the strike by US aircraft could lead to 150 plus civilian deaths; not a fair exchange for the loss of just one (very expensive) Unmanned Air Vehicle (UAV), according to the US president. President Trump has, instead, imposed additional sanctions on Iran in an effort to create greater financial strain on Iran's already fragile economy.

The 60-day deadline set by Iran's president for the other signatories of the nuclear deal to facilitate export of oil by Iran—and thereby revive its economy—is set to expire on July 7, 2019. Iran has also stated that it would breach the limits laid down in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for enrichment of uranium (a maximum of 300 kg) by June 27, 2019, besides increasing uranium enrichment levels (beyond the 3.67 percent laid down limit), in violation of the agreement, "based on the country's needs", unless the other signatories to the nuclear deal find a way to end the sanctions that have been imposed on Iran by the US. The E3 (France, UK and Germany, that are the other signatories to the JCPOA, besides Russia and the US) find that their options would get severely limited if Iran violates the conditions laid down in the nuclear deal. At this moment, they feel that they are being arm-twisted to seek a way around the sanctions. Of course, if Iran does violate the limits laid down, it risks going back under the provisions of Chapter VII of the UN Charter—something it was able to avoid diplomatically in 2015. To all intents and purposes it appears to be little more than 'shadow boxing' that is going on in the region. Who blinks first will soon be evident. The US president, of course, considers this as nuclear blackmail (of the E3) and has made it clear that he would never permit Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

Why is the US carrying out its actions in the Persian Gulf, in the first instance? The US maintains that the drone was on a surveillance mission following the series of attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf region in recent months; the US believes that the 'limpet mines' used for some of the attacks bear a strong resemblance to the ones used by Iran. Iran, of course, denies the charge. The US is committed to protecting the free flow of tankers through the vital Strait of Hormuz despite Iran's threats to close it down. Acting as the world's policeman is not a new role for the US. However, columnists

have increasingly begun questioning this role being played by the US; they would rather have China, which is the world's largest importer of energy from the Gulf region—and also the one that carries out most trade with the countries in the Gulf—pay for the protection of its merchant vessels. They feel that China, with its claimed Blue Water navy, ought to share this burden—something that the US is presently paying for from its own resources of men and material. In effect, China's tankers and commercial shipping are being protected by the US, while China is enjoying 'free lunches'.

From all accounts, it appears that the end game being played in the Persian Gulf is aimed at a regime change in Iran. The region remains a powder keg that could explode any time; it only needs a spark to set it off.

As this goes to the press, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, is in Delhi. Among other items on the agenda during his meetings with the prime minister, external affairs minister and national security adviser, the issue of sanctions waiver for the \$5.2 billion deal for purchase of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia would be discussed.

Happy reading

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. S. S.', with a small mark below it.