

➤ EDITOR'S NOTE

An Indian Army Brigade Camp in Uri [Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)] that was attacked by four Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorists in the early morning hours of September 18, 2016, left seventeen soldiers dead (two more succumbed to injuries later). All four JeM terrorists were killed in the fighting that ensued. This was the biggest terrorist attack on an army facility in 26 years. The Indian Army retaliated, and on September 29, 2016, 'Special Forces' of the Indian Army crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and carried out surgical strikes against terrorists who had gathered at several launch pads, waiting to cross over to the Indian side to carry out attacks against the Indian security forces. The Indian Army neutralised these terrorists (estimates vary from 38 to 60 terrorists killed) as well as their support elements with clinical precision, and returned unscathed. The surgical strike carried out by the Indian Army posed a dilemma for Pakistan; if it were to protest against the strike carried out by the Indian forces, it would be acknowledging that it was indeed involved in abetting terror from its territory. This was blasphemy for Pakistan as it had to maintain a stance for the international community that it was a responsible nation that was itself a victim of terror; so how could it abet terrorism! The best course of action for the Pakistanis at that time, therefore, was to deny that the strike had ever occurred. In the bargain, they also failed to acknowledge the death of two of their soldiers during the surgical strike by the Indian Army. Plausible deniability of the role of the Pakistan Army in training/ supporting militant cadres (as in this case) or during the Kargil conflict in 1999 (where it refused to take back the dead bodies of its Northern Light Infantry soldiers, passing them off as militants) had become the hallmark of the Pakistan Army. Not honouring its dead showed the level to which the Pakistan Army was willing to stoop in pursuit of plausible deniability.

The events that occurred in the Kashmir Valley during the first quarter of 2019 have ushered in a new form of terrorism that was 'waiting to happen'. On February 14, 2019, a local Kashmiri youth, Adil Ahmad Dar, deliberately rammed his explosives-laden car into a bus carrying 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel at Pulwama (near Awantipore in J&K). The bus was completely destroyed. There were no survivors. This was the deadliest attack carried out so far against security personnel. The JeM claimed responsibility for the attack. Suicide terrorism had reared its ugly head in the Valley.

The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) met the next day. There were strong expectations from the Prime Minister (PM) for exemplary punishment to be meted out to Pakistan not only for abetting terrorism from its soil, but also for giving leaders of terror organisations like the JeM and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) freedom to continue their nefarious activities in Pakistan. The PM announced that he would give the armed forces full freedom to plan a reprisal in the best manner possible.

Based on intelligence inputs—both Technical and HUMINT—terror training camps of the JeM were identified. Reports indicated that a large number of terrorists (including some likely to be *fidayeen jihadis*) had arrived at one such facility. The place was identified as Jabba Top near Balakot, which lay in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) region of Pakistan. Balakot lies approximately 40 km from the LoC and is more than 10 km beyond the International Boundary (IB). This place had been under the surveillance of the Indian security agencies for long and was marked as an active training facility of the JeM.

Therefore, the Indian Air Force (IAF) was tasked to carry out a preemptive strike to neutralise the terrorist cadres undergoing training at Jabba Top. The location of the facility ensured that there would be minimal collateral damage as the facility was far from populated areas.

Target to weapon matching carried out by the IAF indicated that the weapon selection should be such that provides for high accuracy, should penetrate the roof and, with a certain time delay, explode inside the various buildings to cause maximum attrition to the terrorist cadres gathered at the Jabba Top facility. It was, therefore, decided to use the Rafael (Israel) supplied SPICE-2000 (Smart, Precise Impact and Cost-Effective) glide bomb kit that can be strapped on to a 'dumb' 2,000-pound bomb to make it highly

accurate and 'smart'. The SPICE-2000 permits the user to target high value targets like command and control centres, hardened aircraft shelters, deeply buried bunkers, etc. It is believed to be able to penetrate up to three metres of reinforced concrete before its time delay fuse operates to cause maximum damage to the 'contents within', i.e. the operations rooms, aircraft shelters, or sleeping quarters—dormitories—for personnel, etc. With a stand-off range varying between 60-100 km (depending on the weight of the bomb used), the SPICE glide bomb kit navigates to the target using a combination of Global Positioning System (GPS), advanced scene matching and correlation algorithms, and electro-optic/infra-red sensors for the final stages of the attack. This allows the weapon to achieve accuracies with a Circular Error Probable (CEP) of less than three metres—equivalent to hitting a pin-head, especially after travelling more than 60,000-100,000 metres.

The air strike was carried out by the IAF during the early morning hours of February 26. All the aircraft returned safely. Post-strike damage assessment revealed that all the targets were engaged successfully; the mission was a complete success.

Once again, the Pakistani establishment was in a quandary as it was faced with two questions: the first was, should it acknowledge that the strike did take place at all; and the second was, if the strike did take place, was it effective? Not acknowledging the first was out of the question, especially after the Director General Inter-Services Public Relation's (DG ISPR's) tweet on February 26, 2019, which mentioned that IAF aircraft had intruded into the Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJ&K) sector (Muzaffarabad) and had released bombs that fell near Balakot. Of course, true to form, he praised the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) for a "timely and effective response" due to which the IAF aircraft "released payload in haste". To the second question, he stated that there was no damage, nor any casualties. Once again, the dilemma faced by the Pakistani establishment of plausible deniability is clearly visible in all their pronouncements. If they were to acknowledge that militant cadres did indeed get killed during the IAF's strike, it would shred their narrative of "Pakistan does not train terrorist cadres on its soil" to bits. Therefore, fearing adverse publicity and their lies being exposed, mediapersons were not permitted

to venture anywhere close to the facility at Jabba Top (near Balakot) that was the target engaged by the IAF. Till the time of this writing, Pakistan has maintained a stoic silence on any casualties at Jabba Top and has not permitted the media to visit the facility.

By attacking the JeM training facility inside Pakistan's KPK region, India busted the myth that a preemptive strike by the IAF against terrorist training camps in Pakistan's sovereign territory would invite nuclear retaliation by the adversary. Most significantly, the strike at Balakot indicated a shift in India's 'defensive' mind-set; this was the first time ever that the IAF, having been given a free hand to plan its operation, carried out what was described by the Indian foreign secretary as an intelligence-led, **"non-military preemptive action"**. Why was it termed so? It was aimed at preempting further attacks on India by the various terrorist and *fidayeen jihadi* cadres (of the JeM) who had gathered at the facility, *inter alia* for celebrating the success of the Pulwama attack earlier in the month, for training, and for 'planning' future attacks against the Indian state. Based on credible intelligence that these cadres were being trained for further attacks—including suicide attacks—in different parts of India, action was required to be taken to eliminate the threat. The preemptive strike by the IAF, therefore, was in self-defence in view of the imminent danger posed to the Indian nation. No military facility had been targeted, hence, the term 'non-military'. The facility had been under surveillance of the Indian National Technical Research Organisation—the NTRO—since long. Once it was confirmed from all sources that indeed there was a viable target at Balakot, the IAF was given the 'go-ahead'. Planning by the IAF—that is believed to have been carried out since long—was given the final touches and aircraft were launched for the mission.

Post the strike, the confusion that arose amongst the Pakistani leadership—both political and military—during the hurriedly arranged emergency meeting of the Cabinet, was writ large, as was visible in the body language displayed by all who attended the meeting. The decision to respond was taken, and accordingly, a large force of up to 24 aircraft ingressed towards the Indian positions in the Rajouri-Poonch sector the next morning (on February 27).

There has been adequate debate since February 27 on what actually transpired during the dogfight that resulted in the first-ever shooting down of an F-16 by a MiG-21 (flown by Wg Cdr Abhinandan). His aircraft was also shot down in the bargain. He ejected over POJ&K territory and was captured by the Pakistan Army. He was returned to India on March 1.

The interesting aspect about this 'encounter' between a large force of PAF aircraft comprising 24 aircraft that included F-16s, Mirage-III/V, and JF-17 [supported by an Erieye Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft], and two Su-30s, two Mirage-2000s and six MiG-21 Bison aircraft of the IAF [supported by ground radar and the Phalcon Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS)], was that the PAF used the F-16s in an offensive role against the IAF, including by launching as many as five Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAMs) against the Su-30 MKIs/ MiG-21 Bison (one of which apparently claimed Wg Cdr Abhinandan's aircraft). The effective range of the AMRAAM (AIM-120C-5) possessed by Pakistan is greater than any Beyond Visual Range (BVR) air-to-air missile presently on our inventory. The Su-30s were, nevertheless, able to evade the incoming AMRAAMs that had been launched against them. This was largely due to the excellent training standards that the IAF has ensured over the years for dealing with just such a situation which is termed Large Force Engagement (LFE). The fighter controller-pilot team trains together routinely to cater for exactly such encounters and understands the nuances of the game, viz. when to go on the offensive and when to remain defensive. Any mistake by any member can be fatal. In the extant case, the pilot(s)-controller(s) team(s) need to be complemented for their actions.

The use of the F-16 and the AMRAAM by Pakistan is presently being examined by the US government to decide if there was any violation of US law in terms of their usage against India.

Another point that needs consideration is whether Pakistan had weighed the options of shooting down more IAF aircraft in the resulting melee? Would the Indian leadership have kept quiet if the IAF had lost one too many aircraft? Would India have enlarged the conflict to an all-out war, particularly at a time when the general elections are round the corner? Was the Pakistani state willing to run the gauntlet, based purely on media reports

that India had inadequate reserves for fighting a prolonged war? What about Pakistan's own war reserves, not to mention the state of its economy? These questions should possibly be best left unanswered as the frightening truth of it all would leave the Pakistani state realising that it should not bite more than it can chew! A sense of relief is, possibly, writ large on the face of the leadership in Pakistan as it analyses the events that unfolded on February 26 and 27, 2019, with the benefit of hindsight.

It is also possible that the PAF was smarting from the shame of not being able to 'detect' the ingress of the US Navy's Special Forces (SEAL Team Six) that had penetrated the Pakistani airspace on May 2, 2011, and neutralised Osama Bin Laden (Operation Neptune Spear) in Abbotabad—almost 200 km from the Afghanistan border to the west. After the Pulwama attack, fearing retaliation from the Indian side, it was expected that the air defences of Pakistan would be on high alert. Were they expecting the IAF to carry out a strike? What would provide the IAF a 'worthwhile target'? Would the IAF risk carrying out an attack inside Pakistani sovereign territory? Not a chance! This was possibly the answer at various scenarios that would have been war-gamed on the likely response from India. Targets in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) region were fair game and cadres would certainly have been moved to the 'interior' to keep them safe. That their air defences failed—once again—to engage the ingressing large force that carried out a successful attack at Jabba Top, transgressing the LoC by tens of kilometres, without being engaged, is possibly the reason why the forlorn look was all too visible during the emergency meeting of the Pakistan Cabinet on February 26, 2019. And, finally, in as much as not hesitating to get at the trainers, handlers and terrorists who enjoy sanctuary on Pakistani soil, the rules of the game have been changed by India for a long time to come.

And, of course, Mission *Shakti* was a grand success on March 27.

Happy reading!

