

Pushing boundaries

The air strikes have delivered a clear, robust message; the follow-up must be restrained

he Indian Air Force's strike on a Jaish-e-Mohammad terror training camp in Pakistan's Balakot delivers a robust but calibrated message. The latter is manifest in New Delhi's diplomatic utterances. While the strikes followed the Pulwama attack by a couple of weeks, Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale referred to the action as a "non-military pre-emptive strike". The phrase indicates the action was based on an assessment of an imminent threat, and had ensured that Pakistan's military personnel and infrastructure were not targeted, and civilian casualties were actively avoided. In effect, New Delhi's line is that the operation was an intelligence-driven counter-terror strike rather than escalatory military aggression. The government said all other options had been exhausted in making Islamabad keep its commitments since 2004 on curbing the activities of groups like the JeM. There is no denying that the decision to send Mirage jets across the Line of Control (LoC) to fire missiles 70 km inside Pakistan represents a major shift. During the Kargil war in 1999, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had drawn a red line over the IAF crossing the LoC, to avoid international recrimination. This strike was carried out in Pakistani territory, not in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, the theatre for retaliatory action in the past. It is still to be determined how far the JeM has been set back, but the strikes mark a new chapter with New Delhi's willingness to push the war against terror into Pakistan territory. The government has judged, perhaps correctly, that global opinion has shifted and there is little tolerance today for terror groups that continue to find shelter on Pakistan soil. Significantly, with the exception of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, there has been no global criticism of India's statement on the strikes, and most have just counselled restraint to both countries.

In Pakistan, Prime Minister Imran Khan has called for a joint session of Parliament and for its diplomats to raise the matter at international fora. He has convened a meeting of the National Command Authority that oversees Pakistan's nuclear policy. However, Pakistan's options are limited. It could continue to deny that the Indian strike caused any damage on the ground, and obviate the need for retaliatory strikes; or it could escalate the situation with a military response. It could also make a break from its past, and begin to shut down the terror camps on its soil, which would win friends internationally and ensure peace in the region. The Modi government would do well to continue the restrained approach it has adopted after the latest operation, and avoid the triumphalism that clouded the 'surgical strikes' of September 2016. With a response to Pulwama duly executed, it must reach out to residents of I&K who have borne the brunt of the jingoism unleashed after Pulwama. In the long term, building strong counterterror defences, partnering with its own citizens to gather intelligence, and creating deterrents will be key.

Decolonising Chagos

Britain must honour the ICJ opinion on returning the islands to Mauritius

The stunning opinion of the International Court of Justice in The Hague, that Britain's continued administration of the Chagos archipelago is unlawful, is a landmark in the effort to decolonise the Indian Ocean and return the islands to Mauritius. Britain's reaction, however, was predictable and disappointing. It said the ICJ's is an advisory opinion it will examine, and stressed the security significance of the islands. Since the late-1960s, the U.S. has maintained a military base on one of them, Diego Garcia. In 2016, Britain extended the lease to the U.S. till 2036 even as it said it would return the islands to Mauritius when no longer needed for defence purposes. Mauritius has made it clear that it does not intend to jeopardise the future of the military base. The agreement to allow Britain to administer the Chagos islands came in 1965, three years before Mauritius gained independence. Mauritius says Britain had made it a pre-condition for independence. This was endorsed by the ICJ, which noted that given the imbalance between the two, the agreement did not amount to "freely expressed and genuine will". It is a damning assessment of colonial legacies and the attempt by former colonial powers to justify or ignore the indefensible on the basis of 'agreements'.

Britain has tried to block Mauritius's claim to the islands at every stage, first by attempting to defeat a UN General Assembly vote in 2017 calling on the ICJ to deliver its opinion. When it lost this, London questioned the court's jurisdiction and Mauritius's version of how the deal had been thrashed out. However, Mauritius has had many countries on its side, including India. In written and oral submissions before the court, India has insisted that historical facts were not with Britain's interpretation and that its continued administration of the islands meant the process of decolonisation had not been completed. In an ideal world, Britain would be compelled to hand the islands to Mauritius. However, as the opinion against the construction of the separation wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory in 2003 demonstrates, ICJ advisories are not always acted on. At the very least, Britain should show it respects the court's view and Mauritius's sovereignty, and make significant concessions - starting with matters ranging from fishing rights to compensation for the Chagossians, who have suffered through all of this. The ICJ 'opinion' draws the line on what is expected from Britain for it to be a global nation in tune with the new world order. It announces that the world has moved on from passive acceptance of the injustices of empire.

The new order in West Asia

How Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey are competing for influence



STANLY JOHNY

Then protests erupted on Arab streets in late 2010 and in 2011, felling deeply entrenched dictators such as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, it was certain that the changes in government would alter the regional dynamics as well. Many thought the old order rooted in "stability" (read: the decades-long unperturbed rule of single families or dictators) would be swept away by emerging democracies. Eight years later, it is evident that the Arab world has changed, but not in the way many had predicted. The structures of the old Arab world have been either destroyed or shaken, but without fundamentally altering the domestic politics in Arab countries.

The backdrop of history

There have been multiple power centres in the Arab region, at least since the second half of the 19th century when the Ottoman Sultans shifted their focus from the East to the West. The waning influence of the Ottomans in the Arab region created a vacuum which was filled by emerging regional leaders such as Muhammad Ali of Egypt, the Hashemites in central Arabia and the Mediterranean region, and the Al-Saud family in the Arabian peninsula. In post-war West Asia, Egypt remained the most influential Arab country. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan maintained its influence

in the Mediterranean region, while Saudi Arabia was confined to the Arabian peninsula. When Egypt and Jordan were in relative decline, particularly after the 1967 war with Israel, Iraq rose under the leadership of the Baathists. Saddam Hussein, who became Iraq's President in 1979, was eager to don the mantle of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the former Egyptian leader who called for pan Arabism. Hussein launched a war with revolutionary Iran in 1980 on behalf of most Arab countries. Though there were deep divisions between these countries, one point of convergence was "stability". Neither the monarchs nor the dictators in the Arab world wanted any threats to their grip on power.

This order started to age much before the Arab protests. Hussein broke a taboo of non-aggression between Arab countries when he invaded Kuwait in 1990. And the 2003 American invasion of Iraq toppled him and buried his regime. The Arab protests expedited the changes that were already under way. Egypt went through a long period of instability starting 2011. First, a revolution brought down Mr. Mubarak and took the Muslim Brotherhood to power. And then a counter-revolution by military leader Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took the country back to square one. In the process, Egypt was beaten badly: the government lost moral authority; its regional standing weakened; and with economic problems mounting, a desperate Mr. Sisi went to the Gulf monarchs for help.

The reign of the Saudis

Saudi Arabia was generous in helping the Sisi regime. The Saudis were initially shocked by the fall of Mr. Mubarak, a trusted ally, and

the rise to power of the Brothers, Islamist republicans and sworn enemies of the Kingdom. Both the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates wanted to get rid of Egypt's elected government of President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brother. They backed the 2013 counterrevolution and helped Mr. Sisi tighten his grip on power with aid. In the event, what we have now is a weaker Egypt ruled by a military dictator who's increasingly dependent on the Saudi-UAE axis.

In the Arab world, Saudi Arabia doesn't face a real challenge to its leadership now. The Saudis have been eager to take this leadership position. They organised a massive Arab summit in May 2017 in Riyadh which was also attended by U.S. President Donald Trump. The U.S. and the Arab nations also announced plans to create a Middle East Strategic Alliance, also referred to as the Arab NATO, which is a transnational Arab security entity under Saudi leadership. The common enemy of this bloc is Saudi Arabia's main geopolitical and ideological rival in the region,

Riyadh has been aggressive in taking on Iran in recent years, be it the anti-Iran campaign it is spearheading globally (in the U.S., Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Sal-

man compared the Iranian regime to Hitler's Nazi rule), the increasingly high military spend, or the desire to take on Iran's proxies (interference in Lebanon's politics or the war on Yemen). Within the Arab world, Saudi Arabia has made it clear that it will not allow alternative power centres to rise, and never from its backyard. The decision to blockade Qatar, the tiny Gulf country that has disagreements with Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, could be seen against this backdrop. Besides Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Egypt had also joined the blockade, showing how dependent Cairo is on the Gulf axis. There are no doubts here: Saudi Arabia wants a united Arab front under its leadership that will contain Iran and maximise the Kingdom's interests in West Asia and North Africa.

Multipolar region

In relative terms, Riyadh has consolidated its position among the Arab countries. But its quest to become a major regional power faces serious challenges. The problem begins with its own inexperience. Saudi Arabia has never been an effective executioner of big ideas. All these years it lay low, either behind other regional powers or under the wings of the U.S. Now, as it has started taking a leadership position, its policies have gone awry. The Qatar blockade is not reaching anywhere and the war in Yemen has been catastrophic. Besides, the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate has been a public relations disaster.

Second, Iran is hardly a pushover. Ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranians have lived under threats and with a huge sense of insecurity, which prompted them to create networks of influence across the region. Despite forging strong alliances and having a far stronger economy, Saudi Arabia has been unable to contain Iran's influence. And it may not be able to do so in the future either, unless the Americans are ready for another major war in the region.

Third, there is a third pole in today's West Asia: Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey. Turkey's 'Arab Spring' bet may not have paid off as the political Islamist parties, which are aligned to the ruling Justice and Development Party, failed to consolidate power in the rebellion-hit countries, except Tunisia. However, Turkey, which retreated from West Asia in the second half of the 19th century, is now shifting it focus back from Europe to the region. It is a major defence and economic partner of Qatar, and has a strong presence in Syria through its proxies. Turkey also used the Khashoggi murder to turn up heat on Saudi Arabia internationally. While Turkey is not aligned with Iran either, it has shown willingness to cooperate with the Iranians on matters of mutual interest - such as the Kurdistan issue and the Syrian conflict while its ties with Saudi Arabia have steadily deteriorated.

West Asia's Muslim landscape is now multipolar: Saudi Arabia, as the leader of the Arab world, is trying to expand its influence across the region; Iran is continuing to resist what it sees as attempts to scuttle its natural rise; and Turkey is returning to a shaken region to re-establish its lost glory. This multi-directional competition, if not confrontation, will shape West Asian geopolitics in the coming

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Smart farming in a warm world

Investment and policy reform are needed on priority to help farmers cope with climate change



FEROZE VARUN GANDHI

ver the last decade, many of villages Bundelkhand's have faced significant depopulation. Famous of late for farmer protests, the region, which occupies parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, has been adversely impacted by climate change. It was once blessed with over 800-900 mm rainfall annually, but over the last seven years, it has seen this halved, with rainy days reported to be down to just 24 on average in the monsoon period. With rains patchy, crop failures become common. There is hardly any greenery in many villages, making it difficult for farmers to even maintain cattle. Adaptation is hard, with farmers varying and mixing crops across seasons, along with heavy investments in borewells, tractors and threshers. While the national media may wonder about hailstones in Noida, such weather has been destroying crop in recent years, with the arhar crop failing completely in 2015. Farmers are increasingly abandoning their lands and heading to nearby towns to find work as labourers.

India is fortunate to have the monsoon, but it is also uniquely vulnerable to rising temperatures, with the country ranked 14th on the Global Climate Risk Index 2019. The country has over 120 million hectares suffering from some form of degradation. This has consequences, especially for marginal farmers. According to one estimate, they may face a 24-58% decline in household income and 12-33% rise in household poverty through exacerbated droughts. With rain-fed agriculture practised in over 67% of our total crop area, weather variability can lead to heavy costs, especially for coarse grains (which are mostly grown in rain-fed areas). A predicted 70% decline in summer rains by 2050 would devastate Indian agriculture. Within 80 years, our kharif season could face a significant rise in average temperatures (0.7-3.3°C) with rainfall concomitantly impacted, and potentially leading to a 22% decline in wheat yield in the rabi season, while rice yield could decline by 15%.

Some solutions

There are simple solutions to mitigate this. Promotion of conservation farming and dryland agriculture, with each village provided with timely rainfall forecasts, along with weather-based forewarnings regarding crop pests and epidemics in various seasons, is necessary. Our agricultural re-

search programmes need to refocus on dryland research, with

adoption of drought-tolerant breeds that could reduce production risks by up to 50%. A mandate to change planting dates, particularly for wheat, should be considered, which could reduce climate change induced damage by 60-75%, by one estimate. There needs to be an increase in insurance coverage and supply of credit. Insurance coverage should be expanded to cover all crops, while interest rates need to be subsidised. through government support and an expanded Rural Insurance Development Fund. The recently announced basic income policy by the government is a welcome step as well.

A push for actual on-ground implementation of compensatory afforestation is required. India is estimated to have lost over 26 million hectares of forest land and 20 million hectares of grasslands/ shrublands between 1880 and

2013. Even now, urbanisation means that India consumes about 135 hectares of forest land a day. Meanwhile, insufficient coordination between the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and the State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) has led to institutional apathy towards alarming air pollution levels in the metros. India hosts over 172 globally threatened species, primarily in reserve forests where they have little meaningful protection against wildlife crime and forest protection, given limited budgets for anti-poaching. Many State CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority) hardly meet, while State-level forest departments routinely lack suitable record keeping, particularly on assessment and realisation of dues on compensatory afforestation activities catchment area treatment.

Refreshing the IFS

The Indian Forest Service would also benefit from restructuring, in order to make it equivalent to the police and the army, albeit in the environmental domain. State-ofthe-art training to its personnel must be provided, and specialisation should be encouraged in wildlife, tourism and protection for new recruits. Deputations from other services will no longer do; this needs to remain a specialised service. Wildlife heritage towns

should be given more attention cities like Sawai Madhopur, Bharatpur, Chikmagalur and Jabalpur, which are adjacent to national + parks and sanctuaries, need to be converted into green smart cities with upgraded waste recycling processes. The Van Dhan Yojana, as adopted by the State government in Rajasthan, can be scaled up towards building a green mission to save our non-protected forests (outside the existing national parks and sanctuaries). Wildlife tourism must also be encouraged, particularly through public-private partnerships, to help increase conserved areas while making a difference to backward districts.

The impact of climate change will affect India's food security, while reducing fodder supplies for our livestock. Prudent investments and policy reform can help make India resilient to climate change. Any adaptation to ongoing climate change will require that climate justice. This is not a blame game – this can be induced by expansion of joint research and development partnerships (like the U.S.-China Clean Energy Research Center), pairing India's emerging smart cities with green cities in the West. India needs to decarbonise, there is no doubt about that. But the West needs to pay its bills too.

Feroze Varun Gandhi is a Member of Parliament, representing the Sultanpur constituency for the BJP

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.

War memorial

The Modi government deserves credit for opening a war memorial ("Modi opens war memorial, hits out at Congress on Rafale", Feb. 26). This is a wonderful tribute to all the soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for the nation. However, it is disappointing that the Prime Minister used such a sombre occasion to attack his political rivals. The defence forces are above politics and they should not be dragged into political slugfests.

VIDHYA B. RAGUNATH,

IAF strikes

The Indian Air Force strikes are timely and welcome ("IAF strikes on JeM camp in Balakot; Country is in safe hands, says PM Modi",

Feb. 26, online). India is no sitting duck. This attack. reminiscent of the surgical strikes of 2016, shows the Modi government's zero tolerance for terrorism. The message is loud and clear: violence and diplomacy cannot go hand in hand. This also comes as a timely reminder to the Pakistani establishment to shun state-sponsored terrorism. It is heartening that the entire Opposition has supported the strikes. B. SURESH KUMAR,

It is great that the operation was a success and there were no casualties on the Indian side. The intelligence wing deserves praise for furnishing the necessary inputs to ensure a successful strike of this nature. Now, India has to

take all the precautionary steps to face a counterattack from Pakistan. S.V. VENKATAKRISHNAN,

With the general election round the corner, we need greater security, not only along the border but throughout the country. For this to happen, political parties need to exercise restraint. They should not make statements that give the impression that we are a divided nation. V. SUBRAMANIAN,

The surgical strikes of 2016 did not result in any let-up in militancy in Kashmir, and the situation in the State only continued to deteriorate. After Tuesday's strikes one can only hope that the situation won't go

out of control if Pakistan strikes back. The NDA's so-called muscular policy towards tackling militancy in Kashmir has resulted in an increase in deaths of security forces and in crossborder intrusions. It is high time the Modi government changes its Kashmir policy. India must do what it can to win the hearts and minds of Kashmiris. M.P. MURALIDHARAN,

Derogatory remark West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's remark is derogatory and unbecoming for someone of her stature ("PM knew about attack, says Mamata", Feb. 26). Politics seems to be at its ugliest in West Bengal. N. VISVESWARAN,

enough reading material to last through the week. G. JAYARAMAN,

Bengaluru

supplement, which gives

A new Magazine

I am a senior citizen who

Hindu for more than seven

decades. I thank you for the

has been reading *The*

refreshed Magazine

Menstruation talk It's great that the Academy Awards have recognised a sensitive subject in India and awarded a documentary film on the same ("Period. It's time to carry an Oscar", Feb. 26). While we must credit Guneet Monga and others involved in the film for a well-made documentary on a taboo topic, credit must also go to the makers of the Akshay Kumar-starrer Pad *Man*. It helps when actors

promote such causes. I.P. REDDY.

The government should show this documentary in regional languages in rural and urban schools throughout the country and create awareness on menstruation and hygiene. At this time, we should laud the Telangana government which provides health and hygiene kits to girls to deter them from dropping out of school. The rest of the States can take a leaf out of Telangana's book. What we must also talk about now is the importance of proper toilets for schoolgirls, which are absent in many places. P.S.V. PRASAD BABU,

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