



Coming home

The release of the IAF pilot gives India and Pakistan the chance to de-escalate tensions

With Pakistan's decision to release Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, tensions between India and Pakistan may finally wind down. The gesture, which Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan called an offer of peace and goodwill, must be appreciated, although there is evidence to suggest that there was pressure from other countries on Islamabad to make such an announcement to prevent further escalation from India. If Wing Commander Abhinandan's return provides the space for diplomacy to take over, it is because it gives both countries the opportunity to signal a victory of sorts. Islamabad will project itself as having done the decent thing, and New Delhi is likely to claim that its tough stance compelled his return. There have been a number of incidents that took the subcontinent to the brink of a conflict that could have quite easily spiralled out of control — from the Pulwama attack to the Indian air strikes on Balakot, to attempted attacks by Pakistani military aircraft in Jammu and Kashmir, and the IAF pilot's capture. The sense of uncertainty was only made worse by the utterances of public figures and the media on both sides, who tried to score points domestically. In India, within a few weeks the image of a nation in grief determined to fight terrorism appeared to have given way to triumphalism over the Balakot strikes. Pakistan went the same way after it foiled an attack across the Line of Control that saw both sides take down each other's aircraft. Videos of Wing Commander Abhinandan being manhandled by a mob before Pakistani soldiers moved in to protect him did not help. As a result, the focus changed within a few days from India's outrage over the terror strike to two nuclear neighbours poised for conflict.

It is time for New Delhi and Islamabad to use the pause afforded by the relief over the release to decide on the rules of engagement. Pakistan must realise that the time for denial and obfuscation is over. Unless it begins to act on India's and the world community's concerns about Pakistan-based terror safe havens in a time-bound manner, the two nations could be back on the brink of war if there is another trigger. If it does act, it could herald a paradigm shift in India-Pakistan engagement and help fix its own fragile economy. This has a precedent: the period that followed then-Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's 2003 announcement on shutting down terror groups, when Pakistan's military actually showed some results in the matter, was the most productive phase of engagement between the two countries in recent decades. Significantly, it was a time of economic growth and stability too for Pakistan. New Delhi must be ready to show both flexibility and a determined focus on Pakistan's action against terror groups, including the Jaish-e-Mohammad. This is the best way to build constructively on the international consensus built post-Pulwama in India's favour.

The deal-maker

The drama over Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif's moves reflects an ideological tussle

After posting his resignation on Instagram, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was compelled to resume duties when President Hassan Rouhani rejected it. This sudden move by Mr. Zarif, who is widely credited with playing a key role in forging the nuclear deal in 2015, reflects the tensions within the Iranian political establishment. The U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal after Donald Trump became President, and the reintroduction of American sanctions on Iran, have sharpened contradictions between the hardliners and the moderates within the Islamic Republic, an ideological tussle that has endured for a long time. Hardliners opposed to any thaw in relations with the West, and who were always sceptical of the nuclear deal, have found in the current circumstances an opportunity to question and critique the architects of the deal. Mr. Zarif's public resignation was also a kind of a power play. He was missing in the parleys between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his hosts in Tehran recently. Mr. Assad, who is a key West Asian ally for Iran and has received military help from Tehran during the civil war, had also met Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Through his resignation and the public outcry that followed, Mr. Zarif sent a signal to his government that he was no lightweight diplomat and had a significant public standing among Iranians favourably disposed towards the regime.

The re-imposition of sanctions has been a major economic setback for Iran. The country did get some respite after the U.S. granted a temporary waiver for eight countries, including India, which are key trading partners. But with the sanctions, it is reeling under a weakening currency and galloping inflation. The major countries in the European Union — Germany, France and the U.K. — have reiterated that Iran has complied with the regulations of the nuclear deal and have created a new financial "special purpose vehicle" to facilitate trade with Iran despite the U.S. sanctions. The operationalisation of this entity is dependent on Iran abiding by rules framed by the international Financial Action Task Force. Bills that will bring Iranian laws in line with FATF rules are pending in Iran's Expediency Council and Parliament due to a protracted debate between the moderates and the hardliners. Had Mr. Zarif, the main architect and advocate of the deal, exited the government, it would have complicated Iran's continued adherence to the agreement. The conservatives' critique of Mr. Zarif must be seen in this light. President Rouhani's rejection of his resignation also indicates that he can ill-afford to lose an ally at this crucial juncture for Iran and its engagement with the West.

Living on the edge

India and Pakistan need to find a way to keep de-escalating tensions without either losing face



HAPPY MON JACOB

The possibility of the ongoing India-Pakistan military stand-off spiralling out of control cannot be overstated, given the high stakes involved with regard to national reputations, military redlines and, most undeniably, domestic political considerations. The limited air war over the Line of Control (LoC), shooting down of each other's aircraft and, equally importantly, the capture of an Indian fighter pilot by Pakistan have further complicated what was initially believed to be a crisis that might not go beyond round one (the terror attack in Pulwama and the Indian air strikes on Balakot). With Wednesday's limited air war, the two sides completed round two, and it's been anyone's guess what round three may entail. Thursday's late evening joint press briefing by the three services gave no definite indication of de-escalation even though the tone of the conference did not suggest escalation.

Mapping the escalation

In days ahead, if there is no clear de-escalation, we are likely to witness more fire assaults on the LoC with high calibre weapons and stand-off strikes without crossing the border using short-range air-to-surface or surface-to-surface missiles against each other. In so far as this does not involve more pilot captures, deep strikes in each other's territories and extending to the International Boundary sector, it could still potentially remain contained. But, as they

say, miscalculations and mistakes can easily take place in the fog of war whereby the stand-off could move up the next rung of escalation.

Let's take a step back and recapture how we got to two rungs up the escalatory ladder. To begin with, by carrying out a daring air strike deep inside the Pakistani mainland, India crossed the redline, from the Pakistani point of view. It meant clear and present reputational damage for the Imran Khan government as well as the Pakistan military. Their retaliatory strike against India was something they felt compelled to undertake. On the Indian side, coming in the run-up to the general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government couldn't have but responded to a terror attack that took the lives of 40 of its men in uniform. A military response was expected, but choosing to strike inside mainland Pakistan was perhaps not wise.

But then, New Delhi's war planners were also trying to stretch the success of the surgical strikes of 2016 (since Pakistan didn't respond to them) by extending its scope beyond Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), a strategy that may not have panned out as planned.

From a more conceptual point of view, by carrying out a strike against Pakistan in its Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, India wanted to create a new military normal between the two sides, i.e. counter-terror air strikes inside Pakistan would now be a regular feature, something, one could argue, straight out of the American and Israeli counter-terror playbooks. If Pakistan had faked ignorance of an attack in Balakot, which it initially did, or decided not to respond to it, India would have set the new military normal in stone. Moreover, yet another denial from Rawal-



pindi would have run the risk of Pakistan's military threats being rendered hollow and the associated conventional and nuclear bluffs being called, in full public view. Knowing fully well the implications of a non-response, Pakistan therefore opted for, I would say, a minimal air strike across the LoC.

What further complicated matters for the Pakistani war planners was India's use of the phrase 'non-military pre-emptive strike'. While the term 'non-military' was meant to signal to Pakistan that the attack was against the terror camp and not against its military, the 'pre-emptive' part was unacceptable to the Pakistani side, I would imagine. A successful, and unresponded to, Indian pre-emptive strike, once again from the American playbook, would have meant that India could now keep the option of striking anywhere inside Pakistan to take out terror camps which it believes poses a threat to India. Recall that the 2016 surgical strikes were projected as a 'retaliatory strike' than a 'pre-emptive one', unlike the attack on Balakot. That again, would have been a major problem for Pakistan.

In that sense, this week's escalation is the fallout of a misplaced Indian belief that it could change the military normal between the two sides, and the Pakistani refusal to let that happen. To that extent, if

the crisis doesn't escalate any further, Pakistan would have successfully dissuaded India from altering the status quo.

Signalling restraint?

Given the fact that round two of the military engagement so far has been confined to the LoC skies, it is possible to argue that the two countries want to keep the engagement limited with the possibility of some air skirmishes and then perhaps call it quits. If the limited spatial scope of the strikes is indeed intentional, and not just a result of Pakistan limiting its attacks above the LoC, we could potentially look forward to more signalling for de-escalation, in addition to Pakistan's announcement that the captured IAF pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, would be released "as a gesture of peace".

And yet, there are several challenges to this assessment. For one, India did not gain any military advantage over Pakistan in round two, which makes it difficult for New Delhi to claim victory. More so, Pakistan's custody of an Indian pilot has made New Delhi look weak, and the BJP-led government certainly would not want to look weak in the run-up to the general election. Given that the first conventional shot was fired by India (even as the trigger was the terror attack in Pulwama), would it be possible for India to get off the escalation ladder with Pakistan taking the high moral ground with Wing Commander Varthaman's release?

Equally important is the issue of how either side can convey to the other a desire for de-escalation without being seen as blinking first, if indeed there is a desire for de-escalation. At the end of the day, the BJP needs a victory over Pakistan, which the latter will not give without a war of attrition and

the attendant dangers of escalation. India may not want to go down that long-drawn-out path of uncertain outcomes, certain damage and difficulties of spinning narratives of victory and loss in the age of social media and instant communication, and with the Opposition ready to pounce on it.

On a de-escalation plan

For arch-rivals such as India and Pakistan, public commitment on de-escalation is not a charming option given the potential future narratives about humiliation. Third party mediation also looks easier said than practised — Islamabad might not trust Washington as a neutral mediator, Moscow might not have enough interest, and Beijing's good offices will not find any takers in New Delhi. Unless there is some creative way the U.S. can discreetly mediate between the two countries, third party mediation is looking difficult.

The other easier option is to open back-channel negotiations between the two sides. This has precedent in the India-Pakistan context. As a matter of fact, there were quiet back channel negotiations between Islamabad and New Delhi at the height of the Kargil conflict, even as the U.S. was trying to defuse tensions. If indeed the two countries are keen on taking this road, they would need to immediately send their respective back-channel emissaries, preferably to a third country, to hold discreet talks on how to de-escalate. They would need to work out a solution which will be seen as a win-win deal even if in reality it might not be exactly so.

Happy Mon Jacob teaches at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, and is the author of 'Line on Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India-Pakistan Escalation Dynamics'

Nigeria's difficult democratic journey

Abrupt postponement, chaos at polling stations and violence, all contributed to the lowest ever general election turnout



S.Y. QURAIISHI

Nigeria has just had its general election, its sixth since its return to democracy. Incumbent President Muhammad Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) defeated his closest rival, Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), by about four million votes. Despite pre-election promises of accepting the result, Mr. Abubakar has rejected the results, calling the election a "sham" and "militarised" and deciding to question it in court. There were 73 registered candidates in the fray. There are 91 registered political parties.

Election data

With a population of nearly 200 million, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, accounting for 47% of west Africa's population. It comprises more than 300 ethnic groups. The numbers of Muslims and Christians are almost equal though the first seem to be politically dominant. Although 82.3 million voters were registered and their Permanent Voter Cards

(PVCs) made, 11.2 million were not collected, denying over 13% of all registered voters an opportunity to vote. Though the observer missions found the register of voters to be generally robust, I feel the figure of 41% registered voters to be disproportionate to the total population. In India, nearly 62% of the population is registered as voters.

Unlike India, counting is done in the polling stations but the results are collated and declared at collation centres. It took seven days to announce the results of the presidential election while the collation of National Assembly elections is still going on.

A federal republic with a presidential form of government, Nigeria has a bicameral National Assembly comprising the 109-member Senate and 360-member House of Representatives, both elected for four years. The country has 36 states (besides the Federal Capital Territory), each with an elected governor and a legislative assembly.

It is Africa's biggest oil exporter and has the largest natural gas reserves in the continent. Yet it ranks near the bottom of UNDP's Human Development Report, 2017, ranking 157 in 189 countries.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has enormous power and independence and is considered to be neutral



and credible. Each state has a resident electoral commissioner, all appointed through a process of parliamentary ratification. When asked what his most important concerns were, INEC Chairman Mahmood Yakubu had mentioned security, fake news and hate speech, followed by 640 pending court cases and expenditure control.

Gaps in this poll

Despite the experience of two good elections of 2011 and 2015 and assurances given by the INEC, the management of elections was fraught with all kinds of flaws. First, there was the last-minute postponement of the poll by a week, just six hours before its commencement, because of the collapse of logistics. This created extreme anger across the nation apart from causing enormous economic loss (estimated at \$10-25 billion). Then, despite the week's deferment, there were delays not

only in the distribution of materials but also late arrival of polling staff, causing a late opening of polling stations. This in turn led to many procedures not being adhered to. Voting booths were often located too close to polling officials, polling agents and voters waiting to vote, potentially compromising the secrecy of the ballot.

The elections were also marred by sporadic incidents of violence before and on election day, besides destruction of voting materials, ballot-box snatching and bribing of voters. At least 39 people were killed in election-related violence. However, the death toll this time has been lower than in previous national elections.

Abrupt postponement, delays and chaos at polling stations and the violence, all contributed to the lowest ever turnout — 35.6%, down from 44% in 2015. In Lagos, there were only 1.1 million valid votes (just above 5% voted). Further, polling officials, security staff and other essential services personnel were unable to vote and were, therefore, deprived of their vote. There was also widespread failure of smart card readers as polling officials awaited technical assistance or replacements, compounding the problems.

Despite the complaints of 'militarisation', police presence was

generally discreet and helpful to the electoral process. A coalition of more than 70 civic organisations monitored the elections, which enhanced the credibility of the elections.

Connecting with India

Nigeria is of great interest to India, being its biggest trading partner. Over 135 Indian companies have a footprint in Nigeria, including the State Bank of India, New India Assurance and Mecon in the public sector and Bharti Airtel, Tata, Bajaj, Birla, Kirloskar and Mahindra in the private sector. The number of Indians is relatively small — about 50,000. Though we have substantial economic interests, there are no political favourites. But as the world's largest democracy, India has great interest in the success of the largest democracy of Africa. While the election commissions of the two countries have regular interactions and many officials have visited the flagship institution, the India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management, there is need for enhanced engagement.

S.Y. Quraishi is a former Chief Election Commissioner of India and the editor of 'The Great March of Democracy: Seven Decades of India's Elections'. He was a member of the Commonwealth Observer Group

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.

The confrontation

The initial euphoria created over the Balakot airstrikes evaporated in no time with the capture of an Indian pilot by Pakistan (Page 1, "IAF plane shot down, pilot taken captive by Pak. army", February 28).

Though emotions are running high, there will not be any winners if the situation escalates into full-fledged war. Having made its intentions clear with its airstrikes, India should now attempt to make clear to the international community the pressing need for consensus on combating terrorism. So far it appears that world opinion is inclined favourably towards India, which should be capitalised. Despite its bravado, Pakistan may be eager to engage in talks with India. Reviving talks through backdoor channels could help ease the situation. A growing

economy like India's should not put the clock back. Restraint and diplomacy should be the focus.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Civilisational values

I hope opinion writers understand that it is because India is civilised that Pakistan exists (Editorial page, "Think like a civilisation", February 28). But given Pakistan's record of perfidy and being a terror agent, there is virtually no chance of it becoming a civilised nation. It appears to be in the hands of terror agents. Let us not prevent the Indian government from acting against Pakistan so as to save India from the dangerous consequences of Pakistan becoming a permanent hub of terror. Pakistan is not a danger for India alone but it also endangers the entire civilised world. India needs

to act with the support of all like-minded nations.

M.V. GOPALAKRISHNAN,
Chennai

I think the writer has forgotten history. India has always been restrained in its responses and in adopting tactics that are moderate, but it is Pakistan that does not understand that war and violence will not solve any issue. There is no guarantee that even after Pulwama Pakistan will change. One can expect it to adopt the same old tactics: of asking for evidence and denying its involvement following terror. There are times when firm action is needed to correct others.

ARVIND KUMAR CHOUDHARY,
New Delhi

Pacifists would be well-advised to read world history, starting from the 20th century. Pakistan is waging a war of a "thousand cuts" against us, but do we

still turn the other cheek, in the name of peace? The writer talks of civilisational values. But an examination of civilisations will show a history of wars, punctuated by spells of peace. George Washington's quote, "To be prepared for war is one of the most effective means of preserving peace", is worth remembering. No nation wants a war, least of all its soldiers. However, if a nation's territorial integrity or its citizens lives are under threat, retaliation in a manner deemed fit is an option.

RAVINDRA RAMARAO,
Bengaluru

Every sentence is sensible. Taking recourse to jingoism and drum beating will lead us nowhere. India is peace loving and should explore all avenues that will defuse the situation and result in a peaceful dialogue.

MOHAMMED IKRAMULLA,
Hyderabad

Dogs under check

It is heartening that the Chennai Corporation is getting serious about the stray dog situation (Chennai, February 27). My father had a narrow escape while walking home with a bag of food which a pack of starving, vicious stray dogs were after, and continued to go for him even after he threw it at them. He was saved by a bunch of college boys. He was almost 90 at the time, with neither the strength nor energy to run away or defend himself, and it could well have been fatal. In Navi Mumbai, I met a woman whose child had been killed by stray dogs in similar circumstances. I have watched a sea turtle die a slow, painful death,

attacked by dogs. Those of us who were involved in the Ridley turtle nest collection project know how many nests are decimated by dogs on the beach. Smaller animals like blackbuck, and the young of many species, are also targets for stray dogs. Let's face it, it can't be much fun being a street dog, often starving and injured, and being chased away wherever you go. So more power to the Chennai Corporation. Let's do it for the wildlife, children, seniors, and the destitute who sleep on the streets and are often victims of attacks. And for the dogs themselves.

ZAI WHITAKER,
Vadamamelli, ECR, Tamil Nadu

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A Sports page brief — "Man City retains League Cup" (Feb. 26, 2019) — erroneously described Kepa Arrizabalaga as the world's most expensive player. He is actually the most expensive goalkeeper.

The Reader's Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in