THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

MAN IS THE ONLY ANIMAL THAT LAUGHS AND HAS A STATE LEGISLATURE.

— SAMUEL BUTLER

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

GOOD NEWS BUT

With relief, a nation waits for Wing Commander Abhinandan. But Pakistan will need to do a lot more

PRIME MINISTER IMRAN Khan's announcement in Parliament, that Pakistan had decided to release Wing Commander Abhinandan, captured when he landed in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir after ejecting from his MiG-21 Bison that had taken a hit from Pakistan Air Force planes, has lifted a cloud of anxiety. Pakistan has acted in accordance with the spirit of the Geneva Conventions, to which it is a signatory. India and Pakistan have an informal understanding for returning security personnel who have crossed over into each other's territory. In this instance, however, given the context of the heightened tensions and war-like atmosphere in which it is taking place, the IAF pilot's release is even more welcome.

Khan said the decision was made as a "peace gesture" toward India. Certainly, it should mark the beginning of the de-escalation process between the two neighbours, after India's paradigm-changing aerial strike in Balakot, and the demonstration by Pakistan the very next day that it would not hesitate to rush to the brink. As nuclear powers, both countries know well the risks inherent in escalation — the language used by both sides has mirrored that in varying degree. India called its strike a "pre-emptive", "non-military" operation aimed at a terror training camp. Pakistan could have chosen not to retaliate, but when it did, it said it targeted "non-military" targets to demonstrate its "right, will and capability for self defence". Now, Pakistan's decision to release the IAF pilot is a timely opportunity to turn the page on the last two days and begin the process of finding a way forward. US President Donald Trump's statement earlier that "decent news" would come in from India and Pakistan shows what happens in the region doesn't stay in the region — it is a worry for the world.

The storm has, hopefully, passed. But the issues that brought the two countries to this edge remain. Unless these are addressed, it will be difficult to strike normalcy. Pakistan has contested India's assertion that its jets hit a Jaish-e-Mohammad training camp in Balakot. But it cannot deny that the JeM and its leadership are present in Pakistan, and that the organisation runs seminaries and training camps that churn out jihadi cadres, with the stated goal of carrying out terrorist attacks in Kashmir and in India. So does the Lashkar-e-Taiba. If Imran Khan genuinely believes that terrorism has hurt Pakistan, he should pay attention to this "infrastructure of terrorism", as the world now describes it. His reiteration of the offer to talk with PM Narendra Modi would be seen to be meaningful if he and the Pakistan Army show that they can switch off support to these terrorist groups. Until then, building trust between the two countries will remain a tough task that can be derailed by the next provocation.

FOREST RIGHTS, WRONGS

SC does well to stay its order evicting forest-dwellers. States must ensure due process is followed in implementing FRA

ON THURSDAY, THE Supreme Court put on hold its recent order asking states to evict forest-dwellers whose claims on land had been rejected under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. The court's decision to review its verdict of February 13, which would have displaced more than a million people from their homes in the forests, is welcome. The stay order comes in response to a review petition filed by the Centre and the Gujarat government. Showing a welcome inclination to address the concerns of activists, wildlife scientists and representatives of political parties, the SC acknowledged the need to ask whether due processes were followed by gram sabhas and state authorities before the claims for forest rights were rejected. It will now take up the matter on July 10.

In several instances in the past three years — including the triple talaq and privacy cases — the apex court has interpreted the law creatively to meet the objectives of social justice and uphold constitutional rights. The FRA, too, calls out for similar jurisprudence. The Act recognises that tribal and other traditional forest-dwelling communities would be hard put to provide documentary evidence for their claims. Rule 13 of the Act, therefore, stipulates that the gram sabhas should "consider more than one evidence in determining forest rights". The rule sanctions a wide range of evidence, including "statements by village elders", "community rights" and "physical attributes such as houses, huts and permanent improvements made to land such as levelling, bunds and check dams". A Gujarat High Court verdict of 2013 confirmed the FRA's inclusive principle. "The primary duty of the Court, while interpreting the provisions of the Act, is to adopt a constructive approach... One should not overlook or ignore the hard fact that the claim petitions are filed by persons who. would hardly possess any convincing and cogent evidence to the satisfaction of the authorities," the court pointed out.

A 2014 report of a high-level committee on socio-economic, health and educational status of tribal communities in India — the Virginius Xaxa Committee, constituted by the UPA government — noted that gram sabhas were "rejecting claims of forest-dwellers without assigning reasons". "The rejections are not being communicated to the claimants, and their right to appeal is not being explained to them nor its exercise facilitated," the report pointed out. Such criticisms of the FRA's implementation do not seem to have informed the SC's February 13 verdict. Its latest ruling, however, is a welcome corrective. State governments must now take the cue and ensure that due processes are followed in deciding — or rejecting — FRA claims.

SERIOUSLY, MR PRESIDENT

A comedian is the surprise frontrunner in elections in Ukraine. He is not the only joker to get a shot at office

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKIY IS running for the presidency of Ukraine, the very office which he held in *Servant of the People*, a popular TV serial in his country. His party is also named Servant of the People, and he has pulled ahead of both the incumbent and the leader of the Opposition. On TV, he plays an accidental prime minister, a teacher who is catapulted to office after a video of him letting rip against the establishment goes viral. In real life, he has purposively positioned himself as a new face, exactly what his constituency, fed up with traditional politicians, is looking for.

But Zelenskiy is a pioneer only in the sense that he is a comedian who made his name playing a president, and is now within reach of the very same presidency. Many other funnymen (and women) have made serious bids for public office. In 2007 Hideo Higashikokubaru, the man behind the comedy game show *Takeshi's Castle*, ran for governor of Miyazaki prefecture, and won. In the US Will Rogers, the Cherokee cowboy who became a film star and the nation's most popular comedian, was named honorary mayor of Beverly Hills (without an election) in the 1920s, and was later nominated for Oklahoma governor. And in Iceland, Jón Gnarr ran a hilarious campaign for mayor of Reykjavik, and won office.

Laughter in the corridors of power, which have traditionally echoed only with the footfalls of serious men and women, is not at all out of place. Most of what passes for politics these days is black humour and, in a state like Ukraine, it's particularly dark. The war on the eastern border isn't a done thing, and recently, the Russians sealed off Crimea with a 60 km fence. A president who makes people laugh could raise the national happiness index.

An opening in Qatar

OIC invitation to India is an opportunity to expand relationships in the Muslim world

C RAJA MOHAN

ON THE FACE of it, India getting an invite to address the gathering of the foreign ministers from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation may not look like a big deal. Sceptics have long argued that the OIC has the distinction of competing with the Non Aligned Movement and the League of Arab Nations for the unflattering tag of the world's most ineffective international organisation. Yet, there is no question that External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's participation at the meeting in Abu Dhabi is a significant discontinuity in India's engagement with the Muslim world. It also caps one of the least understood but most successful endeavours of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy — its recasting India's relations with the Middle East.

To be sure, analysts around the world have noted Modi's felicity to be befriend apparent adversaries — Saudi Arabia and Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, Egypt and Turkey as well as Israel and Palestine. Observers are also impressed by Modi's success in bringing the special relationship with Israel out of the closet. But the real breakthrough under Modi is the transformation of India's engagement with the conservative Arab monarchies, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia. These two Muslim states have long been Pakistan's closest international partners. Islamabad has flaunted ties to the UAE and Saudi Arabia as reflecting its special religious connect to the Middle East.

Although India's expanding political ties with the UAE and the House of Saud go back a number of years, they have acquired a special strategic character under Modi. The increasingly productive nature of this engagement comes from an unprecedented level of personal political comfort between Modi and the key leaders of the Arab world. It is also rooted in the shared interest between India and the Arab conservatives in blunting the edge of religious extremism and terrorism.

In the past, the conservative Arab monarchies were happy to turn a blind eye to the dangers of encouraging political Islam and condoning the Pakistan army's support for terror and religious extremism in South Asia. Today, no governments are more threatened by forces of religious destabilisation than the Arab monarchies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Sharing that threat with them are traditional republics like Egypt. This has created a new framework for India's engagement with the Muslim world and the Middle East. Equally important has been the region's growing economic and energy interdependence with India, which is emerging as the world's third-largest economy and one of the biggest hydrocarbon importers and labour exporters. As the region's geopolitics enters a turbulent period, the potential for India as a military partner is also coming into view. That India has one of the world's largest Muslim populations, of course, is the immediate explanation of the surprising invite for Swaraj to address the OIC.

> The invitation to Swaraj, coming 50 years after Pakistan compelled the OIC to disinvite India from the founding session, marks the emerging possibilities for India to break out this unfortunate legacy. A non-ideological and interest-based relationship suits both India and the conservative Islamic states in the Middle East. Moving towards this new framework has allowed both sides to stop being defensive about engaging with each other.

But one swallow does not a summer make. The invitation from the UAE is a specific one — to address the OIC foreign ministers conclave that it is hosting. India's observer status at the OIC does not appear to be round the corner. Swaraj's participation in the Abu Dhabi ministerial, therefore, must be viewed as a diplomatic opening for a sustained and long-term political engagement of the Islamic world as a collective.

Delhi has no reason to believe that Pakistan will stop shooting at India from the shoulders of the OIC. Having blocked India at the OIC for so long, the Pakistani establishment must be expected to redouble the effort to poison India's ties with the OIC. It will not miss any opportunity to use the OIC to criticise India's Kashmir policy.

Delhi should, however, should avoid taking these statements literally. Like in the NAM, all delegations come with paragraphs of their own to be inserted into the final statement of the OIC gatherings. As the laundry list gets compiled, criticisms against non-members get easily passed.

Few member states have the time and energy to argue with Islamabad over the merits of the formulations on India that it brings to the OIC table. Media reports in the last few days suggest that things are beginning to change. Some of Delhi's friends are trying to block some of Pakistan's anti-India excesses at the OIC. Like NAM again, the OIC is a toothless tiger when it comes to dealing with squabbles among member states. Since everyone has a veto on what is said, nothing serious can be said, let alone done, about the many serious disputes between the member states that are now shaping the Middle East.

If Third Worldism in the case of NAM and pan-Arabism in the case of the League did not bind them into a cohesive force, Islamic identity was never going to be too strong a glue for the OIC. Like the NAM and the Arab League, OIC has always struggled to overcome the multiple political contradictions within it. While the OIC raises concerns about Muslim minorities in non-member states, it could never take up the problems that Shia or Sunni minorities face in countries across the Middle East.

Why then has Delhi been so jumpy about Pakistan's long-standing play at the OIC? The story goes back nearly two-and-a-half centuries. As Britain consolidated its territorial control over the Subcontinent, London's European rivals were repeatedly tempted by the idea of fomenting revolt by the dispossessed Muslim rulers and masses against the East India Company and later the Raj. As France, Russia (both Czarist and Leninist) and Germany tried this out, Calcutta and Delhi were on permanent guard against the potential threat from outsiders meddling in the Subcontinent's Muslim question. The problem endured after Partition and Independence, as Pakistan claimed the right to speak for Indian Muslims and sought to severely constrain India's engagement with the Islamic world.

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India has good reason to be pleased that Pakistan can no longer veto India's engagement with critical states of the Middle East. For the emerging forces of political moderation and social modernisation in the Middle East, India is a more attractive partner than Pakistan. But here is a paradox: In embracing OIC, an overtly religion-based organisation, Delhi reduces the salience of faith in India's strategy towards the Islamic world.

The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

A LAW FOR THE CBI

It must have statutory powers over central employees to avoid hurdles, controversy

S M KHAN

THE CENTRAL BUREAU of Investigation (CBI) is often in the news for its own doings, or due to the doings of others and sometimes because of the intent of the accused to evade the law. The CBI, legally known as Delhi Special Police Establishment, cannot function in a state unless the matter is referred to it by a high court or the Supreme Court or by the consent of the state government concerned. Even the central government employees posted in states are not within its jurisdiction as per anti-corruption and other laws.

There was always a demand for an all-India legislation to give the CBI statutory powers over central government employees posted anywhere in the country. But no such legislation has been passed. State governments have resisted such a law on the plea that a central agency would take away the powers of policing vested in them. The ruling party in a state, sometimes genuinely and many times on flimsy grounds, has denied permission to the CBI to investigate matters. Recently, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, and earlier Karnataka, Nagaland and Sikkim had withdrawn consent to the CBI to operate.

While witnessing the recent turmoil in Kolkata, when the CBI team tried to enter the residence of the Kolkata police commissioner, either to interrogate him or to intimidate him, I recall a similar incident which happened at a much higher level in Patna. A CBI team had tried to enter the residence of the then chief minister, Lalu Prasad, following a non-bailable warrant issued by a Patna court. I was privy to the drama that night between Patna and the Delhi CBI headquarters.

> There was always a demand for an all-India legislation to give the CBI statutory powers over central government employees posted anywhere in the country. State governments have resisted such a law on the plea that a central agency would take away their powers of policing.

The then joint director, U N Biswas, wanted to arrest Lalu Prasad and produce him in court the next day. However, the CBI director was of the view that the arrest should be averted as the CM had offered to surrender before the CBI special court the next morning. But Biswas wanted to arrest him and he had the backing of the judges of Patna High Court as investigations of fodder scam cases were monitored by the high court and the judges had allowed him to report directly to the court without reporting to the director of the CBI. Despite the denial of permission by the director, the CBI team went to arrest Lalu Prasad at his residence where the latter had already posted about 2,000 policemen to prevent the CBI from arresting him. The CBI team was not allowed to enter the premises by the Bihar police. Biswas, who later became a minister in the Trinamool Congress government in West Bengal, was not in a mood to relent. For the first time in independent India, a CBI official went to the then corps commander, Patna and asked for an army unit to arrest a CM. Luckily, the corps commander did not oblige and contacted the army chief in Delhi, who in turn contacted the then CBI Director R C Sharma. The army chief directed the corps commander not to give any army support to the CBI and a constitutional crisis was averted. Lalu Prasad resigned the next day and surrendered before the court.

There have been other instances when the CBI faced off with other law enforcement agencies like the Intelligence Bureau (IB), Income Tax Authorities (ITA), Directorate of Enforcement and police forces of different states. These were also due to the CBI lacking legal powers to operate on an all-India basis. Such instances do not sit well with a system where rule of law is paramount. There is an urgent need to giving statutory backing to the CBI on an all India basis with a constitutional amendment, with the consent of at least half of the state legislatures. Otherwise, such conflict will recur and eventually give rise to unnecessary controversies.

The writer is former CBI spokesperson and former press secretary to the President of India and is presently the dean/director of Hamdard Institute of Legal Studies and Research, New Delhi

MARCH 1, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIAN EXPRESS

Petrol, cooking gas, kerosene to cost more

Excise duty on cigarettes, soaps, toothpastes increased

Income-tax surcharge raised

China realising mistakes on Kashmir: Desai

Budget proposals at a glance

Budget turns its back on urban society

Big battle around Lang Sen

'An act of fiscal irresponsibility'

Immediate action by UN unlikely

CHINA RELENTS

CHINA HAS "BEGUN to realise" its mistakes on the Kashmir issue, Prime Minister Morarji Desai stated in the Lok Sabha today. "But it will take time" (for the Chinese to change their stand), Desai added when replying to the debate on the President's address. He spoke in the Lok Sabha as well as the Rajya Sabha where motions of thanks in the President's address were adopted without any amendments. Defending the visit of the external affairs minister to China, Desai said it was made clear to China that the problem of "land taken from us" had to be solved "to our satisfaction." There could be no compromise on it.

TAXES IN BUDGET

THE DEPUTY PRIME minister and finance minister, Charan Singh today announced stiff duties and imposts on a wide range of consumer goods. A host of items from the lowly *bidi* and household washing soap to cosmetics, cars and luxury hotels came in for new taxes as the first "kisan" finance minister gave shape to his professed objective of "ruthlessly curbing luxury expenditure and adoption of a more austere life style". Presenting his first budget to a packed Lok Sabha today, Singh started outlining his tax proposals by announcing a five per cent increase in the surcharge on all categories of personal income-tax. "This is a small sacrifice I am asking," he said, and went on to detail a long list of sacrifices, the total burden of which would cripple the middle class and cause a general spurt in prices.

REACTIONS TO BUDGET

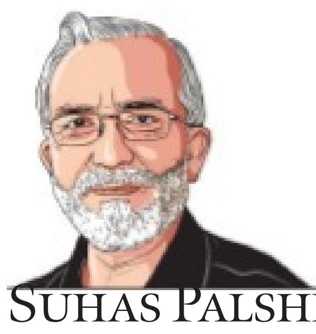
THE VARIED REACTION of the MPs to the budget covered a wide spectrum — from "a bold effort" to "a pickpocket budget" and "a 100 per cent anti-people budget". C M Stephen, leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha, described it as an "inflationary budget". He said that to have a deficit of Rs 1,400 crore after collecting Rs 600 crore as tax revenue was "an act of absolute fiscal irresponsibility".

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

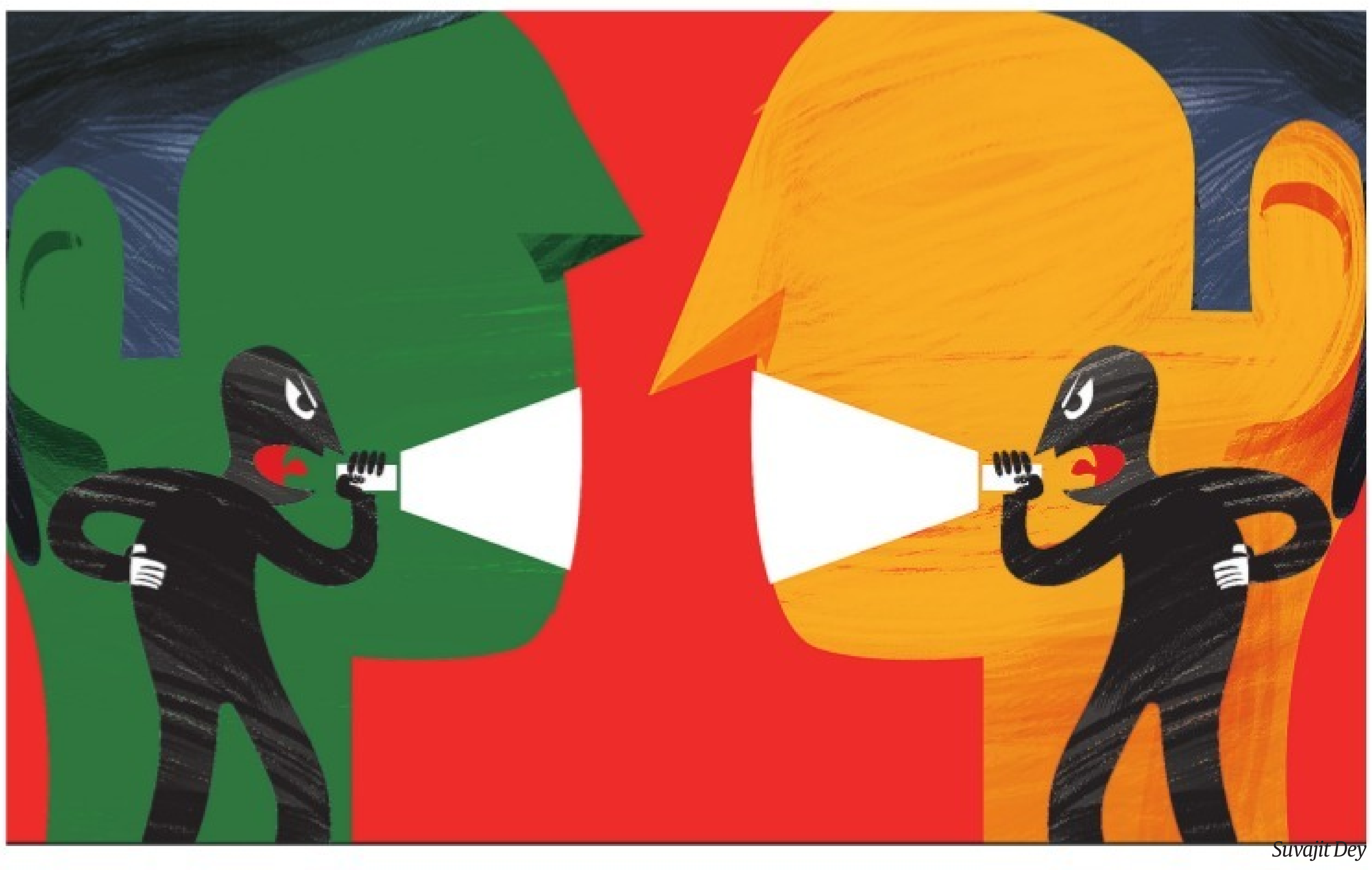
"The scope for an accidental proxy war (between India and Pakistan) breaking out is apparent. But the stakes being so high, there is probably more chance that the superpowers will restrain rather than egg on their regional clients."
—THE INDEPENDENT

Good, Bad, Ugly

Moments like Pulwama hold up a mirror to the government, media and nation



SUHAS PALSHIKAR



Suvajit Dey

DIPLOMATS HAVE TO be wordsmiths. So, when the foreign secretary of India used the phrases "non-military" "preemptive strikes", they were, though clever, hardly surprising. Yet, there was something good about it.

Besides the clever phraseology, the air strikes and official statement by the government implied a twin assertion. First, that India would want to be seen as strongly responding to Pulwama going beyond the traditional restraint for which the Indian establishment is known. In terms of domestic politics, the dividend derived from such an assertion is quite obvious. At the same time, and beyond domestic politics, this assertion also sought to intimate to the international community a possible shift if Pakistan cannot be reined in by diplomatic measures.

But the official statement also sought to define the expected boundaries of this shift — that India does not want the situation to escalate into a military confrontation which, in any case, was a pre-destined miscalculation known to the MEA establishment. Any episode such as Pulwama could never turn into anything except tragic and hurtful. Whether to turn this also into a journey through a dark tunnel was the only moot question. With Balakot, India chose to opt for that journey. Immediately after the air strike, it appeared that in spite of the darkness the journey may involve, the flickering light of diplomacy (towards the world outside) and statesmanship (towards attempts to convert the moment into uncontrollable jingoism) may save the day.

The immediate aftermath of Pulwama and the airstrikes had yet another silver lining. In spite of the innuendoes from official circles about "security failures" by previous governments, the Opposition chose to respond much more responsibly than was expected, given its bitter relationship with the government. So much so, that serious questions about Pulwama, too, were brushed under the carpet.

Opposition parties correctly assessed that instead of creating a nationalist backlash, such issues may be deferred for purposes of both national interest and political prudence. Similarly, the official position and Opposition response right after the airstrikes were subdued. It could be said that both responses were mainly dictated by compulsions of the circumstances. The government's response was circumscribed by the possible international fallout while the response by the Opposition was subdued by fear of political calculations. It looked like the journey through the dark tunnel could be quickly over. So far so good.

But the restraint shown by most Opposition parties was not reflected — even less reciprocated — in the reactions from circles "close to the establishment". While the GoI response for international consumption had all the trappings of cunning and self-restraint, the ruling party and its friends were unable to resist the temptation to use the dark tunnel to their partisan and ideological advantage.

The prime minister, who has often failed to distinguish between the responsibilities of statecraft and the compulsions of political partisanship, kept using the context of Pulwama to suggest how his party and government (alone) were saviours of the pride of the country. His speech at the launch of the sainik smarak left a bad taste in the mouth. No wonder, the chief of the mother-organisation of his party was crass enough to say that the air strikes signified a fitting "shraddh" for the martyred soldiers of Pulwama (IE, February 27). He forgot that the art of leadership is in bringing out the best in your followers rather than expressing the worst of their prejudices.

If this wasn't bad enough, the credit for representing the ugliest in this uncertain journey would surely go to the media. Ever since the Mumbai terror attacks, the overdrive of the media has been a topic of concern and discussion. In the latest episode, the media not only went overboard in its competition for eyeballs, it also engaged in a fierce competition over nationalist claims.

It is one thing for a government to choose to retaliate but quite another when the media hypnotises itself into the role of cheerleader for war games. Pulwama and the subsequent air strike by India were bound to generate considerable popular excitement and aggressive nationalism. But that inevitable outcome has been capitalised upon by the media and in the process, social media represented the most irritable and excitable sections eager to go to war with Pakistan. While the electronic media was raging, what with imagined picturisations of the air strike, the print media did not want to be left behind and in many cases, headlines declared a blow to Pakistan and worse.

Predictably, within a short time from this unfolding of the good, bad and ugly, real complications have begun to present themselves. A nation drowned in the din of self-declared victory would be unable to sanely grapple with those complications. While the degeneration of the media into a tool to whip up sentiment and shape public anxiety is bad in itself, within hours of the Balakot air strike, the abdication of responsibility by the media has aggravated this challenge.

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On the morning after Balakot, we got into eulogising the sophistication behind the words "non-military preemptive" action. That was fine as a statement, but not enough either to influence the global community or to deter Pakistan from further action. In fact, India might have given Pakistan's military establishment a perfect excuse. Since India claimed that it had attacked, it left the adversary with no option but to be seen as doing something in "defence" — so the irresponsible character of the state of Pakistan gets shrouded in its victimhood and its action masquerades as self-defence. Once that has happened, the 24 hour glory of India's retaliation pales in the backdrop of clouds of a war.

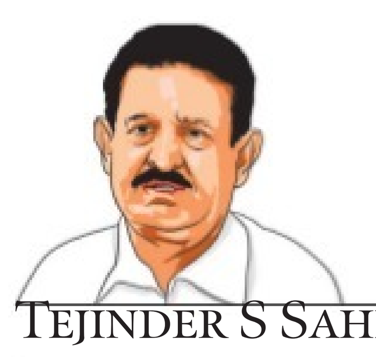
Moments like Pulwama are indeed a test of tenacity — of governments and of the nation. It is not easy for any government not to retaliate instantly, because public opinion requires it and such action is needed also to earn the attention of the world. However, the complex question is how to act and the more complex issue is how to present that act. To warn the terrorist groups and their patrons, an action has to be lethal. But at the same time, such action needs to be kept low-key so that only the sufferer realises its effects. So, the question is not whether a government should have taken this or that action. The question is whether the brave soldier deserves to suffer for the publicity that the government may seek out of such action.

Unfortunately, Pulwama happened at a time when we have a government that lives off publicity and it happened at a time when the government was running short of publicity. Unfortunately, it also happened at a time when as a nation, we are more eager for exemplary rather than efficient retaliation. When tokenism rules, substantive policy, whether in the realm of security or elsewhere, is bound to be elusive.

The write taught political science and is based at Pune

Wider and deeper

India's strategic calculus to eliminate Pakistan-sponsored terror must be multi-dimensional



TEJINDER S SAHRAWAT

THE DEVASTATING ATTACK on the CRPF convoy on February 14 at Pulwama has caused outrage in the country. The Jaish-e-Mohammad, Masood Azhar's terrorist outfit located in Pakistan, has owned up to the attack. Our diplomatic endeavours have ensured that the attack has been condemned in capitals across the world, including in Riyadh and Ankara, which routinely support Pakistan in its rants on Kashmir at the conferences of the Organisation of Islamic Countries. US National Security Adviser John Bolton stated that the US supports India's right to self defence. India undertook an anti-terrorist air operation, destroying terrorist bases in Pakistan. This will have some salutary effect on Pakistan, but will it eliminate the terrorism emanating from the country?

In the strategic calculus of the Pakistan army, maintaining a controlled degree of hostility vis-a-vis India is essential. A hostile relationship with India enables the Pakistan army to maintain its primacy in that country. In addition, there is the desire for vengeance against India, which Pakistan blames for its dismemberment in 1971. The army has created an ecosystem in which terrorist groups can exist safely. These groups provide a cheaper option to an economically-weak Pakistan to bleed India. With the likely withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the Pakistan deep state considers itself well poised to divert the products of its terrorist factories to India. Without a well-thought out strategy, we will be reacting to one terrorist attack after another. Such a strategy will need to be multi-dimensional.

The first element of our strategy must be to demonstrate to the Pakistan army that India can cause it excruciating pain if the ISI continues to sponsor terrorism against India. This requires creating a military capability which can cause significant damage at short notice. We do have conventional military superiority over Pakistan. However, the lack of political resolve and our inability to fight a two-front war has emboldened Pakistan. It is essential that our defence budget be enhanced over the next few years to build up a sufficient capability to act as a devastating deterrent. Alongside, we need to reorganise our military to be able to operate at short notice. Essential reforms are needed in the higher defence organisational structure to ensure efficiency and professionalism. These reforms must not be marred by political short-sightedness and bureaucratic self-interest.

The second element of the policy is coercive diplomacy, which has been steered well by our political leadership and foreign office. We have been able to successfully project Pakistan as the epicentre of terrorism. This lowers Pakistan's image in the comity of nations, minimising foreign investment and economically weakening the country. Some deft diplomacy has also ensured that Pakistani workers find it difficult in foreign lands, including in Gulf countries, which adversely affects remittances. The cacophony demanding the total isolation of a country of the size and population of Pakistan is not a realistic expectation.

The third and the most important element must be our acceptance of the fact that a sizeable population in the Kashmir Valley has been alienated. This sustains militancy in Kashmir and allows Pakistan to fish in troubled waters. This alienation needs to be addressed through a political process. A perception of broken promises to Kashmir, of intolerance, persecution and victimisation of a religious minority in other parts of the country, causes distrust between the population of the Valley and the government. To maintain their indispensability, political parties in J&K are ever ready to exploit such sentiments.

One lesson from the elimination of militancy from Punjab is that as long as dissonance over perceived or real grievances continued between Delhi and Punjab, Pakistan managed to keep the militancy alive in the state. For militancy to flourish, local support is the oxygen which provides logistics and intelligence to militants. Once the dissonance between Punjab and Delhi was eliminated by positive political action, the militancy dried up. Similarly to eliminate militancy from Kashmir, it is most essential to eliminate dissonance between Delhi and the Valley. All options should be open to find a political solution within the territorial and constitutional framework of the Indian Union.

After every major terrorist attack, it is freely opined by prime-time TV warriors and anchors that Pakistan has declared war against India. There is a clamour for an immediate military response .We need to realise that the cross-border deployment of armed forces must be taken after a lot of deliberation and thought. It is not possible to employ the military might of a country in cross-border operations every time there is a terrorist incident lest one gets into a shooting war. There are other instruments available to a state which can be applied effectively and economically to achieve the desired results while fighting terrorism emanating from a rogue state. Carrying out co-coordinated covert operations to fight a Pakistan-sponsored proxy war should be an important facet of our security policy. In democracies, covert trans-border operations are primarily in the domain of the civil external intelligence agency, which besides collection of foreign intelligence are also mandated to carry out subversion and sabotage in target areas.

Lastly, we need the political resolve, as has been shown by the Narendra Modi government, for making the tough choice of military action against Pakistan when necessary. TV media needs to realise that in a military operation, there will be reverses or perceived reverses for short periods. This can not be a ground for wailing and weakening national resolve.

The writer is a retired Lieutenant General of the Indian army and former director general, Defence Intelligence Agency

The best way to vote

On EVMs, we may be asking the wrong questions

SUBHASHIS BANERJEE AND SUBODH SHARMA

WHETHER OR NOT to use EVMs (electronic voting machines) for elections in India has been a raging debate of late. There have been claims of hacking of EVMs and counter-claims of impossibility, steadfast assurances about their safety from election commissioners and technocrats, open challenges through ECI (Election Commission of India)-sponsored "hackathons", and even live television shows by masked hackers alleging conspiracies.

Public arguments on computer security in India have often been outrageous. On the one hand there have been fatalistic claims that all computer systems can be hacked and that it is just a matter of time before they will be. There indeed are computer systems that are provably secure, but sometimes such guarantees are difficult even for many well-designed ones. The question of whether they can be hacked or not is often "undecidable", even in a technical sense, and is hence futile.

On the other hand, the fact that a system has not yet been hacked has sometimes been claimed as a proof of its infallibility. That a system has not been hacked provides no guarantee that it cannot be. Ultimately, the onus of establishing trust, either formally through verifiable proofs, or even informally using best practices and due-diligence, must always lie with the designers. It is difficult to appreciate how difficult the EVM design problem is till one considers the generic requirements outlined below.

Correctness demands that all votes are accurately counted and there are no false or duplicate votes. Secrecy demands that it should be impossible to determine who an individual voted for, provided the voting is not completely lopsided for any candidate or any social or political groups. Anonymity — indistinguishability from a specified number of other voters — follows from secrecy. Secrecy and anonymity are necessary conditions for coercion-free voting, though the converse is not true. Sufficient conditions for coercion-free voting will require methods and processes beyond an EVM.

Verifiability demands that it should be possible to prove to every voter individually that their vote has been accounted for correctly in the aggregate without revealing, or even determining, the vote. Verifiability also implies non-repudiability — that is, if a voter falsely claims to have voted differently from what she actually did, it should be possible to prove that the claim is false without determining who she voted for. Note that whereas verifiability requires that the EVM must record both the vote and (some function of) the identity of the voter, secrecy requires that the EVM should not allow the inference of the mapping between the two.

Identity verification must be certified by the polling officer and can either be offline or online, and must have its own guarantees. Reliability has different requirements. Un-hackability demands that the EVM should be tamper-proof, through any direct or even side-channel attacks. Fault tolerance demands that the system should be resilient to network and component failures. In particular, there should never be any data loss. Consistency demands that the design and implementation of all EVMs must be identical, and provably so at all stages of the election.

Finally, auditability and self-certifiability demand that it should be possible to verify the above invariant conditions at all stages of voting, including before the start, at any time during voting, and after the voting ends. The EVM should be able to self-certify and provide proofs of all the above invariants at any stage.

Some of these may appear to be dependent or even contradictory at the first glance, but careful reflection should convince the reader that they are, in fact, not. Designing a provably-correct EVM satisfying all the above properties is as yet an unsolved problem of computer science. Rebecca Mercuri, a computer scientist and the original proponent of a VVPAT based design, claimed that the verification of a design for an EVM such as above will be an intractable problem. It may well be so, though that does not suggest that rigorous verification of suitable design abstractions cannot be worked out.

The crucial question, then, is to precisely evaluate to what extent does the ECI's EVM satisfy the above properties and how does it compare with manual paper based ballot? For example, merely tallying the EVM count with the manual VVPAT count, without guaranteeing that there is no spurious voting, does not establish correctness, even with statistical sampling. VVPATs, or even secure strongrooms, do not guarantee against pre-designed adversarial, side-channel or Trojan attacks.

This is not to say that the ECI's EVM is necessarily a worse option than manual ballot which does not even guarantee correctness and, at best, only approximately satisfies secrecy, anonymity and fault-tolerance. Manual ballot, however, has the advantage of not taking away agency from the poll officials, whose understanding of the poll process enables them to improvise on the spot to try and ensure correctness. In contrast, the obscurity of an EVM makes its correctness analysis absolutely crucial.

Public posturing by the ECI, based on pronouncements by a hand-picked set of experts, does not engender confidence. For informed risk assessment it is imperative that the complete design, analysis and the hardware synthesis specifications be made public at the earliest so that the EVM may be subjected to rigorous scrutiny by the general public, institutions, political party representatives and experts. Security by obfuscation belongs to the time of Julius Caesar and is unacceptable in the modern age.

The writers are faculty at the School of Computer Science and Engineering IIT Delhi and are also associated with its School of Public Policy

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ABOUT THE FARMER

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Little, late' (IE, February 28). If the Centre was serious about the welfare of farmers, it should have come out with the PM-Kisan scheme much earlier. By announcing this scheme at a time when the Lok Sabha elections are due, the government is hoping to reap political mileage from the plight of farmers. The lack of time will be hurdle in its implementation.

Anish Esteves, *Mumbai*

WAR AND PEACE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The day after' (IE, February 28). The editorial is right in stating that our "TV warriors" should exercise some restraint. It is very easy to shout and raise slogans in TV studios. It is shocking that war strategies are being discussed on television. Let army generals take decisions about the prevailing situation. One cannot be a patriotic by mere lip service.

Hitesh Parmar, *Rajkot*

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The day after' (IE, February 28). The government has thus far made it clear that it does not view talks with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan as an option. But with an IAF pilot in Pakistan's captivity, the Hobson's choice for India is to engage with the Pakistan PM. The strategy should be rational and in the national interest. It should not be calibrated with the elections in mind. It is in the interests of both countries that the tension is nipped in the bud before it gets out of hand.

Deepak Singhal, *Noida*

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

FLAWED DEMOCRACY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Slipping on democracy'(IE, February 26). There is lack of substantive democracy in India as there is a decline in civil liberties. Though the conduct of elections reflects the strength of democratic institutions, the undermining of autonomous institution like the CBI, RBI and the NSSO, besides vigilantism, reflects poorly on India's democracy. Moreover, the first past the post system needs to be reviewed. Substantive democracy could be brought with greater participation, restoring autonomy of institutions and accepting dissent and criticism.

H Upadhyay *via e-mail*

@ieExplained
#ExpressExplained

If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to **explained@expressindia.com**

TELLING NUMBERS

Computer Science, Chemistry power India in QS Rankings

IN THE latest World QS rankings, Indian universities have excelled in Computer Science, followed by Chemistry and Physics & Astronomy. The Computer Science departments of 17 Indian institutes have been ranked among the world top 200 in 2019, with those of IIT Bombay and IIT Delhi featuring in the top 100. Chemistry too has 17 Indian entries, with IISc Bangalore and IIT Bombay's departments in the 101-150 rank bracket. Physics & Astronomy departments are ranked 16 times, with IIT Bombay's department once again ranking among 101-150.

With 89 Indian departments ranking among the global top 200 for their subject, it is 22 more than in 2018. Three Indian universities have at least one department among the top 50 in the world for their subject. These three are the University of Delhi (37th for Development Studies), IIT Bombay (38th for Mineral and Mining Engineering) and IIT Kharagpur (47th for Mineral and Mining Engineering). Ten Indian universities are ranked for Mathematics. Of the 17 Indian universities ranked for Computer Science & Information Systems, 9 have improved their rank, 3 remain stable, and 5 are new entries. No university has experienced a drop in rank. India's eight IITs and IIScs are ranked 104 times, with 33 improvements in rank and only 7 drops in rank.

INDIA IN QS WORLD RANKINGS 2019, BY SUBJECT

Subject	Ranked universities	Leaders (global rank)
Computer Science	17	IIT Bombay, IIT Delhi (51-100)
Chemistry	17	IISc Bangalore, IIT Bombay (101-150)
Physics & Astronomy	16	IIT Bombay (101-150)
Business & Management Studies	14	IIM Bangalore (51-100)
Engineering (Electrical & Electronic)	14	IIT Bombay, IIT Delhi, IIT Madras (51-100)
Engineering (Mechanical)	13	IIT Bombay, IIT Delhi, IIT Madras (51-100)
Economics & Econometrics	11	University of Delhi (101-150)
Biological Sciences	11	Indian Institute of Science Bangalore (201-250)
Engineering (Chemical)	10	IISc Bangalore & IIT Bombay (51-100)
Mathematics	10	IIT Bombay & IIT Delhi (101-150)

FACT CHECK, GROUND REALITY

HOW THE MOON GOT 'SUNBURNS': A RESULT OF SHEER MAGNETISM

THE MOON has visible 'sunburns', or distinctive patterns of swirls on its surface. NASA has now analysed data to show that these are a result of interactions between the Sun's damaging radiation with pockets of lunar magnetic field.

Every object, planet or person travelling through space has to contend with the Sun's damaging radiation. Research using data from NASA's ARTEMIS mission suggests how the solar wind and the Moon's crustal magnetic fields work together to give the Moon a distinctive pattern of darker and lighter swirls.

The Reiner Gamma lunar swirl, imaged by NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter. *NASA*

The Sun releases a continuous outflow of particles and radiation called the solar wind. Because the solar wind is magnetised, Earth's natural magnetic field deflects the solar wind particles so that only a small fraction of them reach the planet's atmosphere. But the Moon has no global magnetic field; magnetised rocks near the lunar surface do create small, localised spots of magnetic field. "The magnetic fields in some regions are locally acting as this magnetic sunscreen," NASA quoted researcher Andrew Poppe (University of California, Berkeley) as saying. Under these miniature magnetic umbrellas, the material that makes up the Moon's surface, called regolith, is shielded from the Sun's particles. As those particles flow toward the Moon, they are deflected to the areas just around the magnetic bubbles, where chemical reactions with the regolith darken the surface. This creates the distinctive swirls of darker and lighter material.

Source: NASA

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SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

Global diplomacy in India-Pak

Trump claims US helped ease tensions. How have US, others intervened from behind the scenes in the past?

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 28

Was there behind-the-scenes diplomacy to de-escalate matters between India and Pakistan?

US President Donald Trump has claimed such involvement. He announced Thursday that the US was engaged in trying to help reduce tensions between India and Pakistan. "We have been involved in trying to help them (India and Pakistan) stop and we have some reasonably decent news," Trump told reporters during a media briefing after his second summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Vietnam. He gave no details of precisely what role the US played. And Indian officials dismissed that the Trump administration was playing any role behind the scenes.

On the same evening that Trump made his prediction, after two days of strikes and counter-strikes, came Pakistan's decision to release Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, captured in PoK, opening a path to de-escalation.

The details of the behind-the-scenes diplomacy will become clearer only in the coming days, but there has been a long history of US engagement to defuse crises between the two neighbours, especially in the years after both countries went nuclear in 1998.

How does this square with the Indian position that it will solve all its problems with Pakistan bilaterally?

India has always insisted there is no room for a third party in its bilateral "issues" with Pakistan. It has resisted Pakistan's attempts at internationalising the Kashmir problem, and mostly succeeded in making it clear to the world that it will not brook mediation over this.

But after 9/11, which ushered in a UNSC-backed international architecture against terrorism, India has looked increasingly to the global community for help with Pakistan on one issue: an end to the terrorist groups that flourish on Pakistani territory, to put pressure on the Pakistan Army and political leadership to desist from permitting anti-India terrorist activity on its territory, and to censure it when such attacks take place. In this, India has counted on its own growing economic and strategic clout.

The nuclearisation of India and Pakistan, and the 17-year-long US involvement against AfPak-based terrorism, has also drawn different US administrations, and other western countries, into the ever dysfunctional India-Pakistan relationship, but from the point of view of their own interests in the region.

PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee with Army personnel during the Kargil conflict. *Express Archive*

China's growing interest in South Asia, its "deeper than the sea, higher than the mountains" relationship with Pakistan, and Delhi's influence with the OIC powers such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have added new dimensions to India-Pakistan crises and diplomatic efforts to resolve them.

In what ways has the US intervened in previous India-Pakistan crises?

Most notably, it was US intervention that brought the 1999 Kargil crisis to an end. The Vajpayee government had been in touch with the Clinton administration to get the Sharif government to call off the intrusion in Kargil even as it fought Pakistani forces. Security expert Bruce Reidel has written about how Nawaz Sharif arrived on July 3 in Washington seeking Bill Clinton's help for a face-saving ceasefire with India that would include a settlement on Kashmir. Others have written that it was then Pakistan Army chief General Pervez Musharraf who prodded Sharif to ask the US for help to end his misadventure. Ultimately, Sharif had no choice but to agree to an unconditional withdrawal of Pakistani forces from Kargil back to the Line of Control. Clinton reaffirmed the US commitment to the bilateral Lahore Declaration signed earlier that year as the best way forward for India and Pakistan to resolve Kashmir and other issues.

In 2002, the US dissuaded Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee from military retaliation against Pakistan after the December 2001 Jaish-e-Mohammed attack on Parliament. India had already mobilised over 500,000 troops to the border, and deployed missiles and other weaponry. Pakistan too had mobilised its army. Apprehensive that a confrontation would take Pakistan's attention off Afghanistan and trigger a nuclear war, and distract from the fight against Taliban and al-Qaeda, the Bush administration rushed in to counsel restraint. Secretary of State Colin Powell, US Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill, and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage engaged in frantic diplomacy with the Vajpayee government.

Under US pressure, Musharraf, who had by then taken power in a coup, made a national address on January 12, 2002, in which he described the attack on Indian Parliament as a "terrorist" attack, equated it with 9/11, and announced a ban on Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish. Five months later, in May 2002, when terrorists killed 35 people in the Kaluchak Army camp in Jammu, India once again readied to strike. On Armitage's word that Musharraf was sincere about reining in jihadi groups, Vajpayee was eventually persuaded to call off a military response.

What was the role of the US after the 26/11 Mumbai attack?

Amid international shock, as India considered its options, the US worked the phones again to both countries, and asked the Manmohan Singh government to exercise restraint. In one episode, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had to travel to Delhi and Islamabad to counsel calm after a hoax caller pretending to be India's then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee called Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari and threatened to attack Pakistan. The hoax call was later found to have been made by Omar Shaikh, the mastermind of the Daniel Pearl killing, from prison in Karachi.

Pakistani politician Khurshid Mohammed Kasuri, who was not in government at the time, has written about how Senator John McCain, who visited Pakistan on his way back from India, met him in Lahore and indicated to him that India was considering an airstrike against the Muridke headquarters of Lashkar. Pakistan had by then already started moving troops to its eastern order, once again making the US nervous about the Pakistan Army's continuing focus on US enemies within Pakistan's borders and in Afghanistan. But the US also worked to get Lashkar and its leader Hafiz Saeed designated under UNSC 1267, sending out tough messages.

If, as Trump says, the US is involved in back-channel diplomacy in the present crisis, how can it unfold from here?

At this time, the US is negotiating an exit from Afghanistan through a peace deal with the Taliban. Pakistan is heavily involved in this — the Taliban are an ISI proxy, though in recent years there has been some factionalism. The last thing the Trump administration wants is an India-Pakistan conflagration. The latest escalation also comes at a time when there are few experienced South Asia veterans in the Trump administration. Reflecting that, there seemed to be hardly any interest in Washington in how the situation was unfolding in India and Pakistan post Pulwama, which is why this time there was no consistent diplomatic effort to prevent escalation, after the call between the Indian and US National Security Advisers. Only South Asia experts in Washington's many think-tanks appeared concerned and they said as much. The alarm bells started to ring only after India struck terror camps inside Pakistan Tuesday. How engaged the US has been in trying to defuse this crisis will become known only gradually.

There are other actors too. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has increased China's stakes in peace in the region. India and Pakistan have both taken their respective cases to the world in the last two days, including to China and OIC, another influential player. It is quite possible that both have engaged in back-channel diplomacy to defuse the situation.

El Niño rising: will it affect Indian monsoon?

AMITABH SINHA
PUNE, FEBRUARY 28

THE NATIONAL Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the United States recently announced the development of a weak El Niño in the equatorial Pacific Ocean that was expected to continue for a few months at least. The status of El Niño at this time of the year is usually the first indication of the kind of rainfall that is to be expected during the monsoon season later in the year.

El Niño is a phenomenon in which surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean see an unusual rise. Over the years, it has been found to have a strong bearing on monsoon rainfall in India. While warmer temperatures are known to suppress monsoon rainfall, the opposite phenomenon of La Niña has been found to be helpful in bringing good rainfall.

The outlook

In its announcement on February 14, NOAA said weak El Niño conditions had already built up in January and were likely to continue (with 55% probability) until the spring season in the northern hemisphere (mid-March to mid-June). It said that the probability of El Niño persisting into the summer was "50 per cent or less". The Australian Bureau of Meteorology, meanwhile, said in a February 19 bulletin that the development of El Niño could continue until at least July.

More relevant to the Indian monsoon, the warming in the Niño 3.4 region of the Pacific Ocean, the region whose sea surface temperature is seen as be the best marker for the impact on India's rainfall, has been forecast to remain in excess of 0.5°C above normal.

The likely impact

Dr Arindam Chakraborty of the Centre for Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences at IISc Bangalore said data for the last 100 years showed that if the SST in Niño 3.4 was over 0.5°C above normal in the four-month monsoon season, rainfall over India gets affected.

"If El Niño 3.4 is greater than 0.5, it is likely to decrease rainfall. But we need to wait for a better prediction at this point because prediction through the northern spring season has higher degree of uncertainty," he said. He also pointed to other evidence to suggest that the impact on the Indian monsoon might not be very large. "Even if we get El Niño in the monsoon months, its impact, statistically speaking, is not as high as when it is preceded by a La Niña in the winter. In this winter, sea surface temperatures were above normal, almost close to El Niño," he said.

However, Raghu Murtugudde of University of Maryland, College Park, said there was a possibility that the El Niño could strengthen beyond spring. "I have myself announced on some groups that I expect the El Niño to grow into the summer which could mean that we may have a drought (in India). Some weather events like winds over the western tropical Pacific can finally determine whether El Niño will grow beyond spring," he said.

More frequent

El Niño events repeat themselves in a two- to seven-year cycle, with a strong El Niño expected every 10-15 years. However, since 2000, five El Niño events have already happened, and this year could witness a sixth one.

New scientific research is pointing to increased frequency of extreme El Niños due to climate change. A paper published in *Nature Climate Change* in July 2017 had suggested that such extreme events could happen twice as often as today if the average annual global temperatures reached 1.5°C above pre-industrial times.

Murtuggude, however, said that the increasing frequency could be because of other reasons as well.

"This cannot yet be claimed to be in response to global warming with great confidence. It is related with the fact that trade winds got stronger and the eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean has remained colder since 1998. That makes El Niño more active. The stronger trade winds are not easily explained by global warming. So the story is much more complicated," he said.

A new zone for Andhra Pradesh: what could change for the Railways, state

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 28

RAILWAY MINISTER Piyush Goyal on Wednesday announced a new Railway zone based in Visakhapatnam, fulfilling a demand from Andhra Pradesh politicians pending since the creation of Telangana nearly five years ago.

Was a new Railway zone promised to Andhra at the time of bifurcation?

The TDP (and of late, even the BJP's Andhra Pradesh unit) has been demanding this ever since Hyderabad and Secunderabad — headquarters of South Central Railway — went to Telangana. It has been argued that getting a zonal Railway headquarters is important for pride, and that The Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, had "promised" this.

The Thirteenth Schedule of the Act says under the head 'Infrastructure' that the "Indian Railways shall, within six months from the appointed day, examine establishing a new railway zone in the successor State of Andhra Pradesh and take an expeditious decision thereon".

Does the Indian Railways have a state-specific character?

The Indian Railways was envisaged as a modern organisation with a pan-India presence and character. Currently, the Railways have 17 zonal headquarters in 14 cities: Kolkata, Patna, Gorakhpur, Allahabad, Delhi, Secunderabad, Chennai, Hubballi, Mumbai, Jaipur, Bilaspur, Jabalpur, Guwahati, and Bhubaneswar. They are not necessarily in state capitals, nor is every state "represented" on the list. Two zones — Central and Western — are headquartered in Mumbai; Kolkata has Eastern and South Eastern, apart from the Kolkata Metro. In its replies to Parliament, the Railway Ministry in most cases presents facts and figures zone-wise, rather than state-wise. It says zones and divisions (a zone is divided into divisions) are created based on administrative and operational needs.

How did the zones of the Indian Railways come into existence?

Following independence, India worked to consolidate 42 big and small railways owned by the princely states and other entities into a single network. In 1947, the country's total rail network was 54,380 km, and included networks as small as Sangli (8 km) or as big as Nizam State Railway (2,125 km).

In 1951-52, six zonal railways were created to "amalgamate the smaller independent lines into contiguous areas of self-sufficient zones having economic unity and natural flow of traffic", said an internal report of the Railways that examined whether a new zone for Andhra Pradesh was feasible. The intention was to bring down overheads, eliminate duplication of work, "unnecessary correspondences", and inter-railway adjustments, and ensure more expeditious disposal of business. The internal assessment report was submitted to the Ministry last year.

How is the Indian Railways network administered?

Each zonal railway is a self-governed unit with a jurisdiction and boundary. A train passes through multiple zones (and divisions) on its journey, crossing from one administrative entity to another at 'interchange' points where it is "handed over" to the next zone. Each zone is responsible for the smooth operation and punctuality of a train while it is in its jurisdiction.

Boundaries that do not add to the efficiency of the Railways are avoidable, officials say. The final product offered by the Indian Railways is, after all, a train that cuts across regional and geographical boundaries on its journey, says the internal assessment report. An increase in the number of jurisdictions without a clear need is akin to erecting more checkposts or barriers on a road when the smooth flow of traffic is the key requirement, officials say. "A new barrier will slow down train operations to a considerable extent..., affect the mobility, commercial viability, and result in wastage of precious capacity, rolling stock and manpower," the assessment says.

What specific challenges could the creation of the new zone pose?

Waltair (Visakhapatnam) division, which loads around 60 million tonnes of freight every year (which is quite high for a division), will become a zonal headquarters. A part of Waltair division will be merged with the adjacent Vijayawada division, and another part will become the new Rayagada division. This break-up of East Coast Railway (which has Waltair division) will create operational bottlenecks, reduce flexibility in the loading and unloading of freight, and could hit the revenue generation capability of the zone, critics of the move argue.

South Central Railway, which will be reorganised for the new zone, will be disrupted as well. "Due to its critical size, ports, industries and mineral hubs are well served by its internal cycles. Any realignment of the present zonal system will have a detrimental effect," says the assessment.

Rayagada in Odisha, where the only significant railway installation currently is a yard, will have to be turned into a divisional headquarters of the new zone, as per the government's decision. This will mean both capital expenditure and recurring expenditure. Creating a zonal headquarters in Waltair, too, will involve costs.

But will the move help Andhra?

In general, a new Railway zone does little for a state or its people. Groups C and D vacancies are filled through Railway Recruitment Board exams; there are already 21 such boards for 17 zonal Railways, and the exams are open to any qualifying Indian citizen. Each zonal headquarters has a Railway Recruitment Cell to fill Group D jobs, but the same rules apply there, too. Amaravati, the new capital of Andhra Pradesh, is in the Vijayawada-Guntur division, and is already well connected to the rest of India by five lines. Projects for rail-connectivity infrastructure in the area have already been sanctioned, and a new zone does not help much.

Floodgates could now be opened for more state-specific zones and divisions. Demands for at least 52 new divisions and 26 new zones have already been made. Odisha MPs have in the past objected to the realignment of Bhubaneswar-based East Coast Railway, of which Waltair is the premium division. Some Odisha leaders have told the Railways that if Visakhapatnam is taken away from ECoR, the state should be compensated with new divisions like Rourkela, Jharsuguda, and Jajpur-Keonjhar.

ting rip against the establishment goes viral. In real life, he has purposively positioned himself as a new face, exactly what his constituency, fed up with traditional politicians, is looking for.

But Zelensky is a pioneer only in the sense that he is a comedian who made his name playing a president, and is now within reach of the very same presidency. Many other funny men (and women) have made serious bids for public office. In 2007 Hideo Higashikokubaru, the man behind the comedy game show *Takeshi's Castle*, ran for governor of Miyazaki prefecture and won. In the US Will Rogers the Cherokee cowboy who became a film star and the nation's most popular comedian [illegible] honorary mayor of Beverly Hills (without an election) in the 1920s, and was later nominated for Oklahoma governor. And in Iceland, Jon Gnarr ran a hilarious campaign for mayor of Reykjavik and won office.

Laughter in the corridors of power, which have traditionally echoed only with the footfalls of serious men and women, is not at all out of place. Most of what passes for politics these days is black humour and, in a state like Ukraine, it's particularly dark. The war on the eastern border isn't a done thing and recently the Russians sealed off Crimea with a 60 km fence. A president who makes people laugh could raise the national happiness index.