

Former CAS, Air Chief Marshal NAK Browne on the

Fifty Shades of Balakot

(Photo: Angad Singh)

The tragic loss of 40 CRPF lives on 14 February in the Pulwama suicide bombing attack engineered by the JeM, presented a unique but justifiable cause in shaping India's kinetic response which was delivered 12 days later, on a half-moon night. The IAF's pre-emptive precision strikes on JeM training camp at Balakot in Khyber-Pakhtunwa marked a perceptible strategic shift in addressing some, if not all, terrorist-related issues emanating from across the borders, nurtured and supported by the Pak deep state. It is not the case that similar response and policy options were not available earlier; but perhaps they were not employed based on certain existential capabilities, constraints of the regional and international environment, challenges of escalatory dynamics and so on. As a consequence, during the intervening years we not only tip-toed around the elephant in the room but in the process emboldened the Pak military-jihadi establishment in truly believing that the LoC/IB was psychologically impregnable in minds of the Indian security establishment. This, despite our self-imposed moratorium of not crossing the LoC during Kargil and strictly enforced by the IAF through the Rules of Engagement (ROE).

Compelling evidence notwithstanding, the Pak establishment continued to adopt the 'revolving door concept' with safe sanctuaries not only in PoK but in the hinterland as well. Balakot was one such jihadi training hub infested with hundreds of such radical elements when the IAF struck on 26 February. While Pakistan, as expected, continues to be in a state of denial-- and understandably so--the shock effect combined with the strategic surprise has had a salutary effect on few agencies both within and abroad-- still searching for palpable evidence.

The fine print though will indicate that the Mirage 2000 core strike force comprised only six aircraft with a number of other aircraft embedded as support elements including AEW, AWACS and Flight Refueling aircraft. The entire operation was tactically choreographed in time and space in the hours of darkness to deliver strategic outcomes on what constituted as the 'jihadi centres of gravity' residing in Pak. And this was made possible only through effects based targeting for creating strategic effects with precision weapons delivered from substantial stand-off ranges.

While the Government has clarified on more than one occasion that these were non-

military targets and the elements at Balakot were indeed being trained for terrorist activities, it is fair to assume that these could be broadly classified as 'jihadi leadership targeting system'. The targeteers therefore had planned to select a weapon system whose accuracy would enable a strike within a few feet of the target(s) which would then create the first and second - order effects to eliminate a broad cross section of these elements, instead of merely destroying the buildings resulting in collateral damage. It has been widely reported that the Israeli Spice 2000 (980kg) was selected as the weapon of choice (contracted by the IAF in April 2012 as part of a broader plan to widen the template for response options). While the post-strike debates on casualty details etc., appear raucous and somewhat unnecessary, it is clear however, that there were five direct weapon hits on the three building structures. It is assessed that the possibility of anyone walking out of those buildings unharmed appears highly remote.

It may be recalled that for the past several years IAF leadership has been alluding to the aspect of full spectrum capability for credible deterrence alongside doctrinal and technological developments. That some of these were tested at night for the first time in