

Two years on, revisiting Balakot

Air Marshal Harish Masand feels that this is



The Air Situation as depicted by Sameer Joshi showing radar and ELINT data fused together to identify PAF aircraft operating on 27 February 2019

In an interview with Shekhar Gupta sometime back, it was heartening to observe the last air chief, Air Chief Marshal BS ‘Tony’ Dhanoa, stating that (if) “we had shot down four or five of their (meaning Pakistani) aircraft, the behavioural change would have taken place immediately”. This interview was published in February, 2020 ‘Pak’s version a story, a façade’. What was heartening to note was that the Air Force had obviously revisited the entire operation of the strike on the terrorist camp at Balakot on 26 February 2019 and subsequent engagement with the PAF the very next morning when the PAF launched their *Operation Swift Retort* in retaliation to the Balakot strike and so draw appropriate lessons from these for the future.

Without going into any controversies around the Balakot strike itself, it is

undeniable that both these operations were the first of their kind nearly four decades after the 1971 Indo-Pak war, in terms of the IAF having crossed into Pakistani territory with an air-to-air engagement the next morning. It was immediately evident that the IAF had lost an opportunity in the aerial engagement of 27 February 2019 so as to assert its strength and send a clear message to the PAF on ‘domination’ of South Asian skies, the claims of an F-16 for the loss of a MiG-21 notwithstanding.

Such a revisit and the lessons drawn have been timely considering that within a few months of this admission from the former Air Chief, the IAF was to be deployed in strength in Ladakh to counter Chinese aggression. Now, after some ten months of such Chinese intrusion, the IAF remains very much on full alert all along the borders, from the North to the East and

may well have to prove to the nation that it has truly drawn the right lessons from operations of the past. The IAF must assure the nation that the trust reposed on it, as the first responder to security threats to the nation, is not misplaced. Considering the current grave situation along our borders and the threat of a two-front conflict, it is imperative to examine some of the obvious lessons of the past once more without going into tactics and based purely on public domain information available.

Designing the battle-space

The art of war is to design the battle-space – and the battle – in such a manner that the enemy is lured to fight the way we want, where we can impose our superior strategy, technology, training and tactics to defeat him. In that respect, while Balakot 2019 was the perfect way to evoke a response from the