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THE NEEDLE'S EYE India has crossed just one battle line, but many more lie ahead

# Wage War by Other Means



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Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. More precisely, it grows from the air-to-air missiles mounted on an upgraded, but ageing, MiG-21 Bison fighter-interceptor flown by the intrepid Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who took on US-made Pakistani F-16s on February 27.

Around the time Varthaman was repatriated to India by his Pakistani captors, the book, *Mann Ki Baat: A Social Revolution on Radio*, was released in Delhi at a ceremony attended by a bevy of senior officials. A government statement said, "The book also gives a rare and exclusive opportunity to readers to discover several unknown facets of Prime Minister's thinking and beliefs..."

The book contains transcripts of 50 of PM Narendra Modi's monthly 'fire-side chats'. It will sell very well. My bet is that it will be added to school curricula if Modi is re-elected. Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong, a.k.a. The Little Red Book, has sold over a billion copies. During the Cultural Revolution, possession of a copy even worked as a talisman against persecution.

Modi has far more tools than Mao did to propagandize himself. Although

our PM has accused the Opposition of 'blatant politicisation' of the sacrifices made by our security forces, he has left no opportunity slip in attacking his rivals over the Pulwama terrorist attack, its aftermath, and the nation's security since Independence.

The day before the Indian Air Force Mirage 2000s staged a daring pre-dawn air strike at a Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist training camp in Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Modi let fly at the Congress for putting (the Gandhi) family before buying bulletproof vests for soldiers. He was speaking at the inauguration of the National War Memorial. A few hours after the Balakot strike, he delivered a strong speech in Churu, Rajasthan, backdropped by pictures of Pulwama's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) victims.

## All-Air Missile

On March 1 in Kanyakumari, he accused the UPA government of never acting against terrorism. "26/11 happened, India expected action against terrorists but nothing happened. But when Uri happened you saw what our brave soldiers did. Pulwama happened and you saw what our brave air warriors did."

When Opposition parties complained that Modi had not addressed the nation, or held an all-party meeting, and later pressed for Balakot casualty figures, Modi accused them of playing into Pakistan's hands, coming close to labelling them traitorous.

It seems increasingly possible that the Balakot strike did not hit the intended targets. A Reuters report on



Lightening the fuselage?

Wednesday said high-resolution satellite pictures show at least six buildings were standing unharmed on the site of the targeted madrasa on March 4. Official claims of 300 to 350 casualties seem exaggerated. But Balakot demonstrated India's willingness to strike deep in Pakistan, confounding pundits who had warned Islamabad might hit back with its large arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons.

The Pulwama aftermath has been needlessly hyped by all sides, and eclipsed other challenges facing the country, chiefly the sputtering economy. The invective being flung around is unbecoming. It diminishes us and makes us look like raucous teenagers, not a politically mature nation.

Pulwama and Balakot have four lessons:

1 The urgency of finding a political path out of the Kashmir quagmire. Although encounters between militants and security forces continue after Balakot, the situation is not intractable. As Ajai Sahni, executive director of the South Asia Terrorism Portal, notes, in 2018, there was unrest in 40 of Kashmir's 82 tehsils, with the worst five accounting for nearly half of all

fatalities.

2 The government needs to move quickly to beef up both intelligence and paramilitary forces in Kashmir.

3 Abhinandan's derring-do was eerily, and uncomfortably, reminiscent of a similar feat in September 1965 when Squadron Leader Trevor Keelor, flying a diminutive Gnat, shot down a superior Pakistani F-86 Sabre. If anything, the David-and-Goliath situation only underlines the dire need to hammer out a national consensus on reinforcing the IAF.

4 It pays to be strategic. India has come out of the past three weeks occupying the moral high ground. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) invitation to foreign minister Sushma Swaraj over Pakistani objections was the most visible sign of a diplomatic shift in India's favour. Clearly, Pakistan is under pressure from its benefactors, and the stilted steps it has taken this week against the fringes of the JeM and affiliates of the Lashkar-e-Taiba. The US, Britain and France are pushing to place JeM leader Masood Azhar on the UN Security Council list of global terrorists.

## A Verbal Storm

It is true that Modi did not address the nation after Balakot, but he has spoken volubly at his rallies. He sees no need to hold a press conference because a supine media is content to be spoon-fed with the government line when it is not performing war dances. The Opposition needs to focus on issues that the next government will have to grapple with.

It is also true that the government has unleashed a perfect storm of schemes, expenditure and propaganda backed by a humongous multimedia advertising blitz just ahead of the formal announcement of election dates and curbs on 'official' campaigning. But that's how the Code of Conduct cookie crumbles.

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