**Operation swift retort beyond**

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February 27, 2019 will go down in the epoch of Pakistan and its Air Force (PAF) as a Red Letter Day. On this auspicious day, Pakistan retorted swiftly to a failed Indian Air Force (IAF) surgical strike at Balakot and badly bruised Indian ego showing the world what damage a smaller but hard hitting and determined air force can incur against a numerically and technically superior air power.

Two years have passed and much has been said and written on this stellar performance by PAF but recently this scribe had the opportunity to have a one-on-one discussion on the subject with Air Chief Marshal Mujahid Anwar Khan, who led his air force boldly and augustly to deliver the telling blow.

It is to the Air Chief’s credit that in February 2019, only a few days after the February 26 Indian Air Force Operation Bandar (codename for the attack on Balakot) and PAF’s riposte the next morning, a number of former Air Chiefs, veterans and Defence Analysts including this scribe were invited to the Air Headquarters and briefed by the air chief on Operation Swift Retort. It was heartening to note that he attributed the victory to the will of Allah, rigorous training and teamwork of all those who participated.

Readers may recall that on February 14, 2019, in a false flag operation, (a fact inadvertently confessed by Indian extremist TV anchor Arnab Goswami), 40 Indian CPRF personnel were killed at Pulwama. Blaming Pakistan for the alleged attack, India launched a surgical strike on the night of February 26, deploying one dozen Mirage 2000 fighter aircraft— equipped with Israeli SPICE air-to-ground precision guided munitions—targeted an alleged terror training center at Balakot. In their panic and fear of being intercepted by PAF fighters, the Indian pilots dumped their munitions and beat a hasty retreat, causing no damage apart from a few pine trees.

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The next morning, after assessing that IAF had failed to cause any damage, PAF unleashed Operation Swift Retort to send a clear message to India, targeting multiple locations in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) but deliberately dropped their payload off the target sites to avoid any human casualty. When IAF interceptors tried to retaliate, they were trapped and in the melee, two IAF fighter aircraft were shot down by PAF. A MiG-21 and SU-30. The debris of the SU-30 fell in IOK and its pilot was killed. The MiG-21 pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was captured alive but later returned as a gesture of goodwill.

On the same day IAF shot down its own Mi-17 helicopter with SPYDER air defense system killing six Air Force personnel and 1 civilian in a frenzy of confusion. Later, two Indian officers were court martialed for their faux-pas. India claimed that Wing Commander Abhinandan shot down a Pakistani F-16 Fighting Falcon before he was downed and awarded him a gallantry award Vir Chakra for his imaginary kill. Despite insistence, India failed to provide any proof of shooting down an F-16 but US specialists visited Pakistan, carried out an inventory check, finding all PAF F-16s intact while the media was shown the missile pods of Abhinandan’s MiG-21 with not a single missile having been fired.

That is another matter that Narendra Modi fully exploited the February 26/27 events, boasting that Pakistan had been taught a lesson for the alleged Pulwama “terror attack”, 350 Jihadist had been eliminated in Balakot and shot down a state-of-the-art Pakistani F-16. Building on his plethora of lies, Modi scored a decisive victory in the May 2019 polls. He did rue that India would have done better if the latest Rafale fighter aircraft purchased from France had been inducted on time.

In my meeting with ACM Mujahid, when I broached the subject of post Operation Swift Retort and the threat perception vis-à-vis India, he was pragmatic and realistic in his response. When asked about the acquisition of the Rafale in IAF, the Air Chief said that Modi had been lamenting that if India had acquired the Rafale before Operation Bandar, the result would have been different. Indian defence experts should have questioned that with 272 Sukhoi SU-30MKI, a very potent multirole fighter, in its inventory, India had no excuse to show the disarray and lack of qualitative application of airpower which it did.

The Air Chief, however, mentioned that with the type of domestic issues prevailing in India. The international backlash for the August 5, 2019 abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution and illegal annexation of the disputed territories of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh into the Indian Union; the introduction of the draconian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 and National Register of Citizens (NRC) and growing impetus of the Punjab Farmers’ strike may cause Modi to indulge in adventurism against Pakistan to divert international attention.

Commenting on the subject of threat perception, ACM Mujahid stated that India having signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) pact with the United States and Washington DC’s selective use of CAATSA sanctions, exempting India from it have changed the conventional balance. The international community needs to be cognizant of the tilting imbalance of conventionality in the region, which coupled with irrational political behaviour of our eastern neighbour, could lead to conflicts. He opined that judging from the complete lack of coordination and confusion displayed by IAF on February 27, the integration of Rafale and India’s diverse aggressive platforms with its air defence system comprising AWACs, wide array of ground radars and Electronic Warfare podia will take some time.

The Air Chief remains sanguine that Pakistan Air Force has always compensated for the technical and numerical superiority of the adversary through faith in Allah, hard training, adoption of sound strategy and optimum utilization of scarce resources. The nation may sleep tight because PAF is awake!

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