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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Back from the brink India and Pakistan must engage in talks

WITH the return of the Indian pilot so soon after his capture—a gesture by Pakistan that was prudent, timely and diplomatic, and for which the Pakistani PM deserves credit—the heightened state of tension between the two countries has begun to de-escalate, for the time being at least.

We firmly believe that the leaderships in New Delhi and Islamabad are fully aware that an outbreak of a large-scale war between the two countries would be counterproductive and would help only aggravate the situation rather than solve the outstanding issues. And that is the reason that both chose to climb down from their high horse.

Now that the immediate spectre of war has been averted, we earnestly hope that the two longstanding antagonists would stop using the current situation for political dividends at home, and instead engage in serious dialogues to resolve the underlying issues which have generated the heat and festered a problem that has resisted resolution for the last 72 years.

Pakistan must stop sheltering terrorists inside its territory. Indirect war may be a cheaper alternative for a country, an inexpensive expedient to bring to bear pressure on an adversary, but it can boomerang badly. Pakistan should follow up seriously with its peace gesture by starting to take tangible measures to tackle terrorism, and India should take PM Imran Khan at his word that Pakistan is willing to work with its neighbour to confront the menace of terrorism. India on its part needs to address the Kashmir situation to the satisfaction of the people of Kashmir. Undeniably, India's policy over the years has, in part, engendered the violence that Kashmir is witnessing. And that is what must be addressed immediately.

No conflict in the region between the two nuclear-armed countries can be quarantined within their respective territories, and that is why, for South Asia, the stake in peace is so very high.

Free Old Dhaka from fire hazards

Draw up a comprehensive plan
for old town

THE terrifying Chawkbazar fire that cut short the lives of around 70 people was a disaster waiting to happen. According to investigations, the presence of an inordinate quantity of flammable materials—mainly chemicals and plastic—resulted in the spread and severity of the fire. Nine years ago, a similar fire in Nimtoli, Old Dhaka claimed the lives of 124 individuals. These were the most horrendous incidents that received a lot of news coverage because of the high number of casualties. But Old Dhaka is not new to fire incidents. As many as 468 fire incidents took place last year in Old Dhaka's Lalbagh, Hazaribagh, Sadarghat and Siddique Bazar where there are 500 chemical warehouses and factories. Yet, despite such a terrible track record of fires, nothing has been done to reduce the risks.

Most importantly, the owners of these chemical and plastic warehouses and factories are not ready to accept the obvious risk that the existence of such large quantities of flammable materials inside a congested residential area poses. The fire service department's recommendations to relocate chemical stores and shops from the residential areas to a safer place have gone unheeded. The fire service survey also found that poor building structures, narrow roads, negligible fire safety measures and the lack of natural sources of water make it even more challenging for firefighters to control the flames.

It is high time that the community of Old Dhaka—that includes both residents and owners of chemicals and other flammable products—work with the fire service to make their neighbourhoods free from fire hazards. Old Dhaka has many really old buildings that need to be preserved and repaired both for safety purposes and as heritage sites. Conservation and proper maintenance of these buildings must be taken up by the government. A comprehensive plan for Old Dhaka must also be designed to ensure that catastrophes like the Chawkbazar and Nimtoli fires never happen again.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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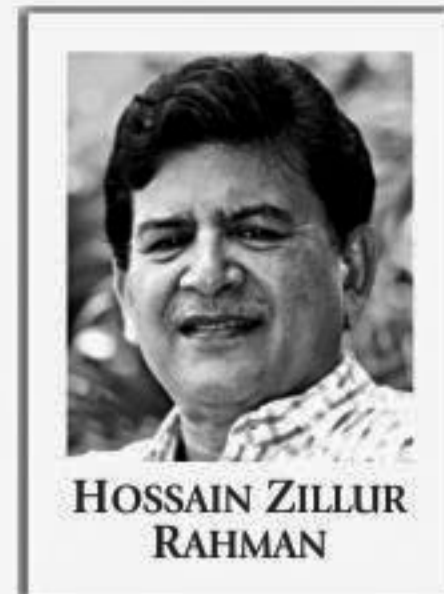
Preventing another Chawkbazar tragedy

The crackdown against illegal chemical and plastic factories and warehouses has finally begun, which is a laudable move by the government. Comprising the taskforce are 14 government agencies which initiated the drive by cutting the utility lines of illegal factories and warehouses.

But these kinds of taskforces after any incident in the country have proved to yield limited influence. They begin by taking action with the speed of light but eventually falter, as we saw earlier during the Nimtoli incident back in 2010. We, the general people, are also to blame for these kinds of tragic incidents as we seem to forget about them in just a matter of days.

To completely prevent these tragedies from happening, the government agencies must take unified action on many fronts—cutting the utility lines only won't result in any significant change. Strong action like forcing these warehouses and factories out of the residential zone and sealing those which do not have environmental clearances should be taken. Greedy building owners who rent out space to these warehouses/factories for profit should also be penalised. And last but not least, awareness about these issues should be raised through sustained campaigns and media channels.

Ullash Sen, by email



HOSSAIN ZILLUR
RAHMAN

IN its 48th year, Bangladesh faces a new existential question to ponder. What now passes as "normal"? 2019 ushered in not just a change of

calendar but a wholly novel political reality. A "participatory" national election that by most accounts, sans the "official" ones, was anything but fair, transparent or credible. A political challenger mostly absent due in equal parts to unrelenting state repression and its own utter lack of strategy. An electorate wanting to partake in the democratic process but psychologically hesitant and stopping shy of protest against rampant electoral malfeasance overseen by the brute combination of the ruling party, officialdom, law enforcement and partisan media.

A yawning gap has appeared between private conversations and the "official" narrative on what transpired on pre-election night and election day and the whole saga has begun to border on magic realism where "what was wasn't" and "what wasn't was".

There is a "new normal" afoot in Bangladesh defined by the uneasy co-existence of two types of "realities". On the one hand, there is a credibility collapse of the election process and a concomitant moral crisis surrounding the right to rule. Three official electoral statistics of the December 30 election underscore the credibility crisis. Firstly, an 80 percent voter turnout figure against visibly thin voter presence. Secondly, an improbable margin of victories with the ruling party "getting" 91 percent of the vote share in 110 constituencies. And thirdly, an unexplainable "collapse" of the opposition vote bank from about a third of the electorate to less than a tenth.

The regime may have been extraordinarily "efficient" in managing the election aftermath but the severity of the credibility crisis surrounding the electoral process and outcome has only gotten deeper as personal and eyewitness accounts proliferate in quiet and unquiet whispers across the land. The belief which has gained ground is that the ruling group is bent on denying an atmosphere of competitive elections. Not surprisingly, voter enthusiasm and voter interest have thus reached a nadir with empty ghost booths becoming the signature image for the just-concluded Dhaka North election.

Yet, it is also the case that people at large have chosen to grieve and despair

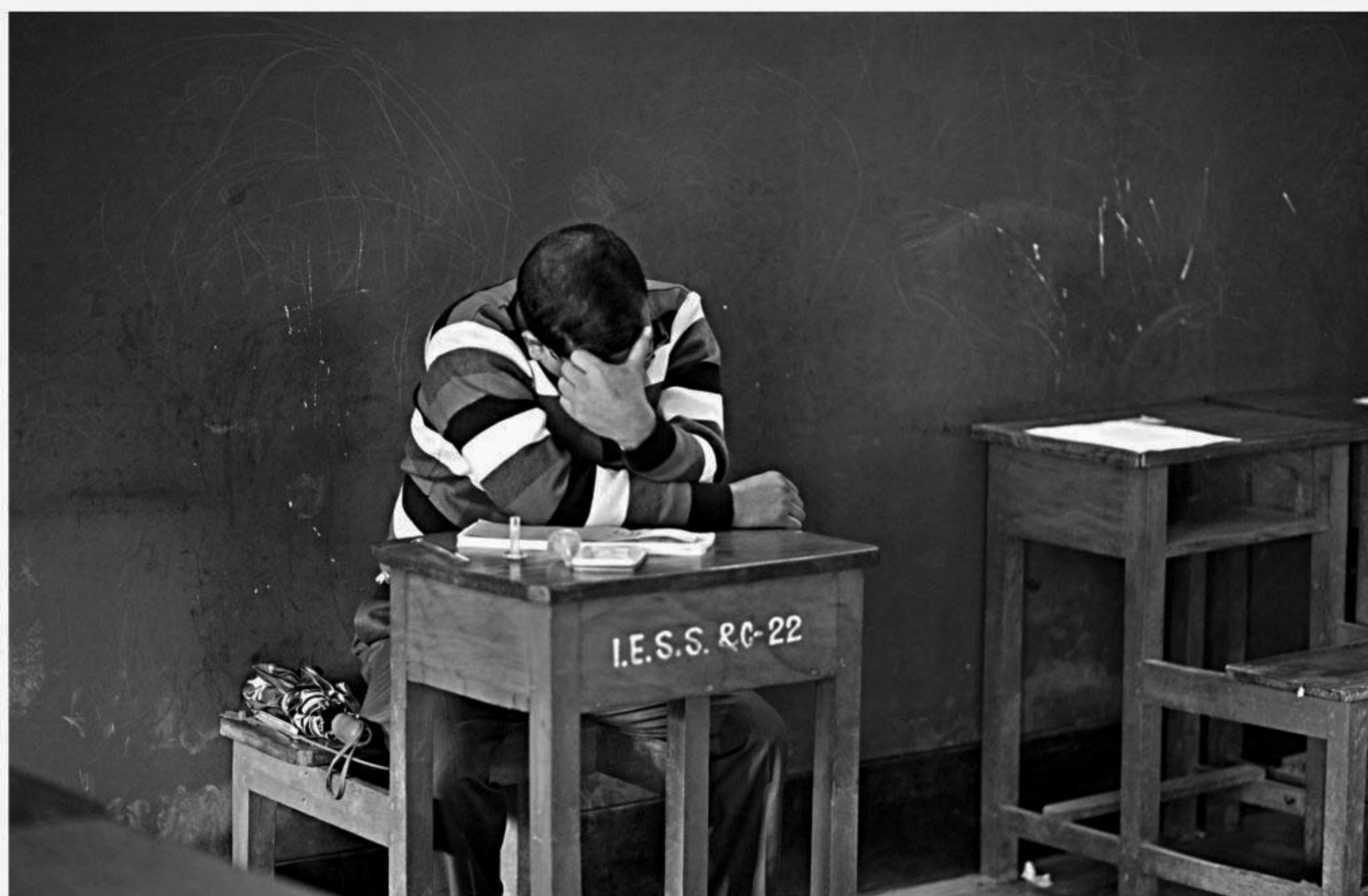
in private rather than engage in protest and publicly vent their anger at the systematic loss of their sense of being citizens with rights. A country defined by the bravery of its birth is now being defined by an extraordinary sense of powerlessness pervading the citizenry at large. The weakening of political contestation has not merely been a democratic loss but has spawned a "new normal" of political governance built on four pillars: marginalisation of those at the grassroots, political encroachment on social space, economic governance run on crony principles and entrenched corruption, and relentless empowerment

there is both relative political calm and pronounced uncertainty about the future: a case of "uncertainty despite stability". The stubborn stagnation of the rate of private investment in Bangladesh is testament to an atmosphere of "uncertainty despite stability".

Huntington in his seminal work examined the phenomenon of "political decay" as opposed to political development. A critical insight emerging from such an analysis is that it is less the form of government and more the degree and quality of politics and governance, i.e. legitimacy, opportunities for contestations, rationalisation of authority, state capacity, robust spaces for

governance and development. A society cannot jettison both democracy and governance and expect inclusive and sustainable development.

Is this the "new normal" Bangladesh is now faced with? Where arbitrariness and lumpen assertions of power are sapping the quality of our institutions across the board? Where all political capital is concentrated in preserving the "new normal" with little left over for the needs for reform that are crying out to be addressed? Where the middle-income dream has been reduced to the narrowest of growth statistics rather than the foundational aspirations of quality, inclusion and dignity?



Many election officers and polling agents were seen sitting idle during the Dhaka North City Corporation by-polls on February 28, amidst a visibly thin turnout of voters.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

of the security establishment over civic rights. The sense of powerlessness is a direct outcome of this "new normal" of political governance. The regime has dramatically raised the cost of protesting with unprecedented partisan misuse of legal procedures as evident in the proliferation of *gayebi* cases. Justified moral outrage has increasingly come to be balanced against the political calculation of the costs of raising a voice of protest. The outcome more often than not is silence and self-censorship.

Another manifestation of this "new normal" is a paradoxical situation where

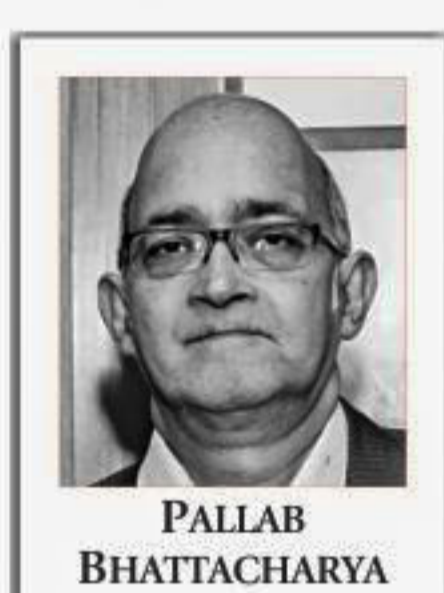
public discourse, minimising system disruptions around transitions in power that distinguish politically developed societies from politically decaying ones. Sooner or later, political decay impacts economic outcomes, particularly inclusive and sustainable outcomes. Experience shows that there are both well-performing and poorly-performing democracies just as there are well-performing and poorly-performing authoritarian states. The apologist discourse of democracy-versus-development thus entirely misses the point. The discourse nearer to the reality is the tripartite one of democracy,

The "new normal" offers no easy way out for those despairing at the pervasive sense of powerlessness. For the moment, the mood appears to be one of impotent anger, withdrawal and pursuit of private agendas. But it would be a mistake to assume that the will to resist injustices and restore an inclusive dream of quality and dignity has fallen by the wayside. Nothing has come easy in our journey. New answers and new ways forward have to be forged. As before, it will require perseverance and determination. And faith in ourselves.

Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman is executive chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre.

INDIA-PAKISTAN DE-ESCALATION

Only possible through the dismantling of the terror apparatus



PALLAB
BHATTACHARYA

THE homecoming of Indian Air Force Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman from two days of captivity in Pakistan on Friday is considered by some as the first

sign of de-escalation of the hostilities and the visible resultant tensions between India and Pakistan in the last few days. On February 26, Indian warplanes struck terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed's biggest training camp in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the Pakistan Air Force planes hit back the very next day attempting unsuccessfully to target Indian military installations in Jammu and Kashmir.

For the first time since the India-Pakistan war of 1971, fighter jets of the two countries engaged in an air combat during which Abhinandan, flying a Russia-made MiG-21, shot down a US F-16 aircraft of Pakistan before his own plane took a hit forcing him to eject and land up in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

The February 26 "non-military pre-emptive strike" by the IAF needs to be seen in the perspective of the fight against terror 12 days after a Jaish suicide bomber blew up a bus carrying Indian paramilitary men, killing 40 people in Pulwama. By contrast, Pakistan tried to assault Indian military assets, an action which India described as an "act of aggression". War clouds loomed large after the PAF plane's intrusion into Indian airspace. Three senior officers of the Indian military, at a rare joint media appearance, announced on the night of February 27 that India has set the stage for a full-spectrum response involving the army, the air force and the navy to deal with "further provocations" from Pakistan. The military also said the operations against terror camps would continue.

Pakistan came under intense diplomatic pressure from the five veto-



People celebrate before the release of the Indian Air Force pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, in a street in Ahmedabad, India, March 1, 2019.

PHOTO: AMIT DAVE/REUTERS

wielding countries of the UN Security Council—the US, the UK, France, Russia and China—and two of Pakistan's closest allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, not to precipitate the situation. Adding to the heat on Pakistan was India's steadfast refusal to allow the former's bid to use the captured IAF wing commander as a bargaining tool. All this prompted Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan to announce the release of Abhinandan. Khan tried to take the high moral ground by terming the decision to free the Indian pilot as a "gesture of peace." India rebuffed it by linking the move to Pakistan's obligation under the Geneva Conventions. To say the least, India was unimpressed by the "gesture of peace" and produced evidence in public that a part of the wreckage of the F-16 which Abhinandan shot down during the dog-fight made it clear that Pakistan had used an Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM) against India on that day. This is the missile the US supplied to Pakistan for use against the Taliban.

New Delhi was determined not to allow Islamabad to use Abhinandan as a

gambit. India had learnt its lessons from what had happened after the December 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane, which was forced to land in Kandahar, Afghanistan, when the then Atal Bihari Vajpayee government had freed four top Pakistani terrorists, including Jaish founder Masood Azhar, in return for the safety of more than 150 passengers of the Indian Airlines plane.

In a diplomatic démarche to the acting Pakistani High Commissioner in New Delhi, the Indian government made it clear to Pakistan that there would be no negotiation to secure the release of Abhinandan and insisted on his unconditional, safe return. In the hours ahead of Khan's announcement of Abhinandan's release, India had put its combat military units at the highest preparation stage. The media conference of the three senior officers of the Indian army, air force and navy only served to amplify India's tough line already conveyed through diplomatic channels.

Pakistan found itself pushed into a corner as countries that wield considerable power around the world

leaned on its leadership for restraint. What decisively swung the matter in India's favour is American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement that characterised India's airstrike in Balakot—as part of New Delhi's counter-terror actions. All this contributed to diplomatic blowback due to terrorism in Pakistan. The flurry of diplomatic efforts by the US, France, the UK and Saudi Arabia also saw their leaders calling up the Indian and Pakistani leaderships and the Saudi ambassador meeting with them in Islamabad and New Delhi.

It is for India to decide whether it can climb down the escalation ladder and, at the same time, reserve the right to take punitive military action in case of an offensive by Pakistan's military. For Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, it may be difficult to soften its hard line, especially in view of coming parliamentary elections. India has made its point by launching the airstrikes on the Jaish terror camp deep inside Pakistan and established that Pakistan's Air Force was left a mute spectator. The contrast could not be starker: while the Indian action was aimed at a terror camp, Pakistan was targeting the Indian army.

The war clouds over India and Pakistan may have thinned a little but they are far from dispersing. De-escalation of tensions can be meaningful only if its key element—dismantling of the terror apparatus in Pakistan—is addressed. Otherwise, it will not take long to be back to square one again. It is not going to be easy, either for India or the international community, to make Pakistan stop giving a safe haven to terror groups which have for long troubled its neighbours India, Iran and Afghanistan, or to convince the Pakistani military that such a strategy may have reached the point of diminishing returns. It is time for Pakistan to ask: what and how have its national interests been served by giving shelter to terror groups and their leaders like Masood Azhar?

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.