

Defending the indefensible

Minister's comments on encounter deaths stretch our credulity

THE minister for home would have us believe that the crossfire deaths that have occurred in the government's pursuit to combat the menace of drugs and narcotics are not due to crossfire but occurred when the law enforcing agencies fired in self-defence only, in pursuit of the drug dealers. That we find hard to accept.

Firstly, we would like to submit that the term "crossfire" is a misnomer here as much as it is in the cases of other such deaths; the term "deaths" in encounter is perhaps more apposite. Secondly, the explanation offered by the minister is not entirely tenable given the circumstances of the deaths of the alleged drug dealers. Many of the victims of the "defensive fire" were alleged to have been picked up, some from their homes, and later found shot. Thirdly, if it is action in self-defence, it would not be wrong to presume that the dead drug dealers were in possession of weapons which they used to fire at the police. But so far, we have not seen the police produce much evidence of that. It is worth mentioning that since May 2018 when the drive commenced till the end of January this year, at least 286 alleged drug peddlers have been killed in similar encounters with the security agencies.

Surely, the armed agencies of the state have the right to use their weapons in self-defence, but the circumstances should be credible. The accounts dished out to the media and the public from time to time, explaining away the crossfire or encounter deaths, tax one's credulity. It may not be out of place to mention that there are many countries that are dealing with the drug problem, but none that adheres to the rule of law uses such methods to tackle the problem.

Regrettably, not only does such a policy fail to address the root causes of the issue or help provide a long-term solution, it denudes the government's credibility and slurs its image internationally too.

Inaction in the face of rising mosquito population

The two city corporations must be held accountable

THE inaction of the Dhaka North and South City Corporations in the face of an increasing mosquito population in the city's capital is deplorable. In order to effectively control the mosquito problem, precautionary steps typically have to be taken before the Culex mosquito breeding season—October to March. Yet, the two bodies that are primarily responsible for controlling the mosquito population have done nothing but sanction the occasional spraying of insecticides around city households and a few drains and water bodies. As a result, 569 bighas of water bodies under Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) and 2,276 bighas under Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) still need to be urgently cleaned, according to city corporation officials.

The Department of Health's data shows that 10,148 people were diagnosed with dengue in 2018, and that 26 people had reportedly died from the disease. This year, between January and late February, 42 people were again infected with the disease. The fact that the two city corporations have failed so badly to take any precautionary measures, in spite of the number of people who have suffered from mosquito-borne diseases in one form or another, reflects abject apathy towards the suffering of the people.

Unfortunately, the scenario we have now come across is one that we are all too familiar with. Every year, we hear city corporation officials make lofty promises about how they will address the mosquito problem, only to see this same exact result repeat itself. We call on the authorities to ensure that this cycle of incompetence is brought to an end by holding those responsible to account and making an example of them. Meanwhile, all steps must be taken to address the rise in mosquito population before it is once again too late.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We want a free, fair Ducsu election

We are very happy that the Ducsu election is going to be held today after 28 years. The last election to Ducsu was held in 1991. According to section 9(Ga) of the electoral code of conduct of Ducsu, no candidate or person can intimidate or use force on any rival candidate or voter and bar them from casting votes. Also, section 15(Kha) says that anyone violating the code of conduct may face a fine of a maximum of Tk 10,000, cancellation of candidature, expulsion from the university or punishment as per relevant laws of the university or the state. The university authorities must ensure that the code of conduct is not violated by anyone on Election Day and that the students can vote freely. We want to see smiles on the faces of the approximately 43,000 student-voters.

Intaz Ali, Bangabandhu Hall, University of Dhaka

Keep it up, Nobel

Mainul Ahsan Nobel from Bangladesh is participating in the famed Indian musical show Sa Re Ga Ma Pa. His performance is quite unique. A gifted performer, he can effortlessly sing all kinds of songs. Hope he will be able to enthrall his audience always. I wish him all the best.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

Why it matters to this region and the rest of the world



worldview, triggered by the rising significance of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). The IPS is a novel geostrategic (relating to the strategy required in dealing with geopolitical problems) construct in which strategic space is looked at in maritime terms, in the context of the confluence of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as a single geostrategic space.

The term "Indo-Pacific" first appeared in modern strategic thinking as recently as 2007. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe referred to the confluence of the two oceans as "the dynamic coupling of the seas of freedom and prosperity." It first appeared in official strategic discourse in Australia's "Defence White Paper 2013" and, thereafter, became entrenched as a prominent frame of strategic thinking when the US officially adopted the phraseology "Indo-Pacific" in its policy narratives under the Trump administration, describing the Indo-Pacific as a priority region in its National Security Strategy in 2017.

From its inception as an abstract geospatial concept, the IPS has come to be underpinned by particular norms and a distinct strategic vision. In broad normative terms, the IPS aims to establish and maintain a new international and economic maritime order. The strategy is thus intended to be a security, economic and rule-based system through strategic investment and economic cooperation.

The strategy is premised on the US commitment to the overarching principle of the rule of law and seeks to ground the peace and security of the Indo-Pacific region on the value system that defines the Western structure of the international order. As the self-proclaimed custodian of the Western politico-moral regime, the US has devised the IPS specifically to ensure

that maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific is conducted according to its diktats. Furthermore, it transcends all national borders in the oceans to allow open lines of communication and airways, freedom of navigation, open logistics, open investments, private enterprises and open markets.

As the progenitor and vanguard of the IPS, the US is certainly at the forefront of the efforts to propel the strategy forward. This new strategic paradigm is being co-designed by Australia, India and Japan, partners of the US in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Although a charter for the Quad is yet to be formulated, its principal components are

the IPS can offer regional trade a colossal boost, enable extensive regional connectivity, generate private sector-led growth and infrastructure-based development, and undergird all this economic and strategic bounty with internationally respected values.

There is also vast untapped potential for regional connectivity. Both the foreign and security policies of states in the region require maritime cooperation. Efforts are already underway in the form of cooperation in natural disaster management. A principal driving force in the implementation of the strategy is intended to be private economic investment and development, as distinct

democracy and development as mutually compatible, and indeed, mutually dependent, goals.

The IPS faces several serious challenges. Despite the currency the IPS has gained, the ambiguity that shrouded its intention and objectives since inception continues to persist. There is to date no single coherent policy document from the Quad stating in precise terms what the IPS is. Therefore, there are critical concerns regarding the uncertain geographical scope of the strategy and the ambiguous content of the concept. This translates into the lack of an actionable articulation in the form of a policy plan, implementation framework, resources and budgeting.

The question of the strategy's inclusivity is highly controversial, posing yet another impediment towards advancing its implementation. A dominant perception of the IPS is that it aims to rein in China's advance. The divergent interests of the members of the Quad are another focal point of contention. Chinese prosperity is an important source of sustenance for the Australian and Indian economies—both of which rely heavily on exports of raw materials to China. In addition, Japanese exports to China exceed those to the US and this economic dependence is likely to intensify given Japan's ageing and dwindling population. Hence, as the Quad members' strategic commitments are undercut by their economic interests, this poses a serious predicament for the future of the IPS.

Finally, there are serious concerns for smaller states in the region regarding whether they ultimately have to align along one of the two axes of the Quad and China. In the words of Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, these states would "not want to end up with rival blocs forming" to constrain China's ascent. The strain this will likely place on regional relations will be inimical for all. The IPS is still in its nascency and a definitive pronouncement on its probable lifecycle in regional geopolitics would be premature. However, looking to the future, the strategy possesses immense potential, provided it is inclusive and can benefit all states in the Indo-Pacific.

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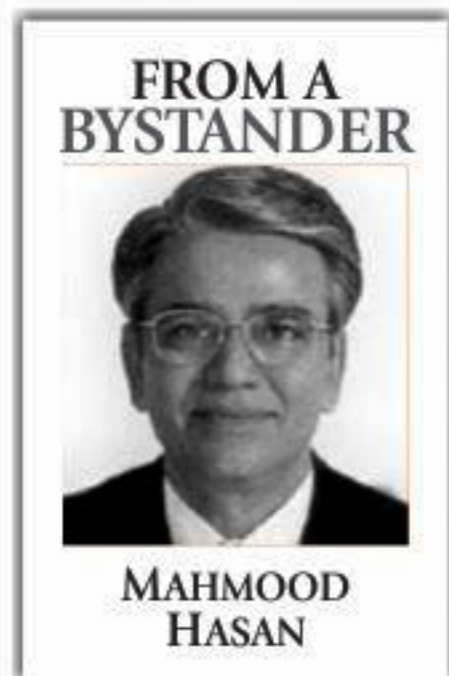
likely to be the fortification of the regional rule-based system, freedom of navigation, the establishment of a liberal regime for trading, and pledging reciprocal security assurances.

However, it is not all smooth sailing for the IPS. China views the strategy as a ploy to rein in its expansion and is responding likewise. Despite the magnitude of the American hard and soft power presence in the region, the ascent of China affects the interests of every potential US security partner. Against this backdrop of multipolar regional geopolitics, the prospects promised by the IPS can be appraised against the obstacles that beset its path. If actualised,

from the "strategic pivot" that was sought by the Obama administration. While the US has committed to invest USD 113 million, the chief source for infrastructure financing is to be the private sector.

The model of regional connectivity advanced by the IPS centralises the development of infrastructure. The erstwhile dominance of Western politico-morality is seriously imperilled by alternative strategic visions. The IPS provides the much-needed reaffirmation of the fundamental norms on which the international order stands, realigning the moral and political compass of states in the Indo-Pacific to pursue liberal

Kashmir conflict: Still no end in sight



created by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), claimed responsibility for the attack. The developments that followed the incident are well-known.

India launched airstrikes on Balakot inside Pakistan-held Kashmir (PhK) on February 26. India claimed that the airstrikes killed 300 terrorists belonging to JeM. India also claimed that its jets shot down a Pakistani F-16 fighter jet. Pakistan shot down one Indian jet and arrested its pilot. Pakistan then returned the pilot to India on March 1. Pakistan also made some outlandish claims. It said no one was killed by the Indian airstrike. It also claimed that there were no JeM bases in PhK.

The airstrikes by India and Pakistan actually bore the risk of flaring up a full-scale war between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. While world leaders urged both Delhi and Islamabad to exercise restraint, people in neighbouring countries were deeply worried that things may go out of hands of the leaders of India and Pakistan.

The Pulwama incident and subsequent airstrikes have left many questions unanswered. Almost every Indian media outlet skirted the main issue of emergence of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). They failed to ask the questions: What explains the rise of insurgent groups in J&K? What do these terrorist organisations want?

The media in both India and Pakistan reeked of chauvinistic hyperbole. Naturally, no one in either country wanted to be seen as unpatriotic. Jingoistic demonstrations were held in both India and Pakistan. In the process, fake news and provocative propaganda emerged and have been doing the rounds in the electronic, print and social media in both countries. The Indian Lok Sabha elections are scheduled for May 2019, which explains why, for some, this fake news has become a convenient publicity tool for Narendra Modi's BJP to gain popularity. Pakistan's newly-elected PM Imran Khan also succumbed to this

false propaganda to deflect world criticism. He released the Indian pilot ostensibly to show his country's moral high ground.

Watching and reading about these narratives make it extremely difficult to get to the truth. Neither the government in Pakistan nor in India has come out and given a truthful account of the airstrikes. The opposition parties in India have come down hard on Modi—demanding that he prove all the claims his government has made about the airstrikes on Pakistan.

Jammu and Kashmir is the most militarised state of India and frequent border skirmishes along the Line of Control (LoC) are routine occurrences. Pulwama was not an isolated incident.

the people of the state. The growing distrust between the people and the central government has resulted in gross violation of human rights in the state, which has been documented by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The political process in the state has stalled as the PDP-BJP coalition state government headed by Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti collapsed in June 2018. The state is currently under President's Rule. The persistent denial of basic rights of the Muslim-majority population of the state has fomented anti-Indian sentiments. This is where the roots of terrorism lie. Pakistan has conveniently exploited this situation and has been aiding and abetting terrorism in the troubled state through different militant outfits.

What is significant is that there is no attempt by Delhi to meet the political demands of the people of the state or any effort to negotiate a peace deal with Pakistan. Delhi's persistent position has been that J&K is an "internal affair" and thus there can be no discussion with any country regarding the situation in the state.

However, it is clear that there is no military solution to this 72-year-old problem. Delhi's main diplomatic endeavour has been to isolate Pakistan—accusing the latter of breeding terrorism.

For its part, Pakistan has recently arrested dozens of banned JeM activists but it needs to take firm action against the militant outfit to prevent being indicted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).



Indian army in Kashmir.

PHOTO: AFP

JeM has been responsible for several deadly attacks in the past: the attack on an Indian airbase in Pathankot in January 2016; the deadly raid on Uri army base in September 2016; the attack on an Indian army camp in Sunjuwan in February 2018. The list is long. Each of these attacks spurred India to launch military operations across the LoC and attack militant bases inside PhK. Some of these operations were designated as "surgical strikes". These confrontations have repeatedly drawn the two countries very close to a full-fledged war.

But, at the end of the day, one has to trace the root causes of these terrorist activities in that state. The political setup and security situation in Jammu and Kashmir do not reflect the aspirations of

According to various reports, there are at least eight terror organisations operating in J&K. All these outfits are directly or indirectly supported by Pakistan, Taliban and al-Qaeda. Arms, ammunition and explosives are smuggled through the LoC from across PhK.

According to Indian army sources, about 450 terrorists are currently operating in the state. Some of these terrorists have infiltrated from PhK but most are local radicalised youth. The objective of all these organisations is either total independence from India or full autonomy under the Indian constitution. Not a week passes without some kind of military confrontation with terrorists leading to deaths of soldiers, terrorists and civilians.

Fortunately, neither India nor Pakistan has broken off diplomatic relations—and this means that there is an opportunity for both countries to engage in negotiation for a resolution to the complex J&K problem.

If the current standoff between India and Pakistan continues, Pulwama will not be the last source of tension between India and Pakistan, rest assured (last week, we saw yet another attack in Indian-administered J&K which killed at least two people and injured more than 30 people). Continued terrorist attacks in J&K will definitely ratchet up further the jingoistic sentiments in both countries that can lead to disastrous consequences.

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