



All for josh After the IAF strikes in Pakistan, crowds assembled, taken by the newly assertive national mood. Here, students from a college in Hyderabad cheer the military action **KVS GIRI**

STATES OF MATTER

Muscle memory

Hashtag #NewIndia has become the new signature of military machismo and PM Modi its prophet even as the reality of violence against Kashmiris is pushed to the background



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

The terrorist attack in Kashmir's Pulwama district on February 14, which killed over 40 Indian security personnel and grievously injured many more, came with the instant promise of imparting a khaki tinge to the upcoming national general election. Anger boiled over in its immediate wake, only partially spending itself against Pakistan. Ample amounts were left over and directed against adversaries of the ruling party, past and present, not to mention the people of Kashmir.

The martial tone surfaced at the inauguration of a national war memorial in New Delhi's India Gate hexagon on February 25. This fulfilled Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vow from the 2014 campaign, remedying what he called out as an egregious lapse in failing to honour the soldiers who had fought and fallen in the cause of the nation.

At the inauguration of the war memorial, part of a new nationalist iconography suffused with martial symbols, the prime minister had little use for the common propriety of acknowledging the wide political consensus in matters of national security. While repeating his customary litany of blame for the situation in Kashmir, the prime minister introduced a new motif, accusing the Congress of a sinister plot to delay the acquisition of fighter jets by the Indian Air Force (IAF).

The next day, IAF jets struck across the border, destroying an alleged terrorist training camp in Pakistan and inflicting significant casualties on the armed group that carried out the Pulwama attack. Aside from a terse statement by foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale, there was little information from official sources. Ambiguities were erased and information gaps filled in by an eager media, every outlet claiming special access to news sources that matter, feeding the celebratory mood.

As news anchors made their triumphal announcements, crowds assembled on the streets in what seemed a spontaneous referen-

dum voting Modi into a second term. The hashtag #NewIndia gathered irresistible momentum on social media, as the signature of the new mood of military machismo. Modi himself, as the prophet of the newly assertive national mood, appeared on a campaign platform in Rajasthan soon afterwards to proclaim — against a backdrop depicting the security personnel killed in Pulwama — that the nation was in safe hands since he would bear true allegiance to his 2014 vows. No affront to the nation's dignity would pass.

By any assessment, the consequences of the Modi government's hard line approach on Kashmir have been quite the opposite of its claims. The number of violent encounters involving loss of life, according to data compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, has increased steeply since 2014, as have casualties among both civilians and security forces. Intelligence reports indicate that recruitments into militant ranks have multiplied.

Intemperate speech in the aftermath of Pulwama and threats of physical violence in various parts of the country against citizens of Kashmiri origin widened the chasm between majoritarian sentiment in India and a people it has proclaimed captive to its whims. That feverish overreaction aligned perfectly with the terrorists' objectives in underlining that India's claims to Kashmir are about coveting the land without the people.

While that gulf grows, older means of containment are slipping out of grasp. Cross-border raids by special commando units were at one time a way of keeping adventurism from the other side in check. One such operation in September 2016, undertaken in retaliation for a lethal attack on an Indian army establishment in Uri, acquired the appellation of a "surgical strike". In an earlier enactment of today's

theatre, observers who questioned the wisdom of publicising a covert military operation for political mileage, were denounced as enemies of the nation whose rightful place would be in Pakistan. And just months ahead of this year's Lok Sabha election, Bollywood released a film memorialising that episode, no distinct from a long sequence of similar actions except in being fodder for a partisan campaign.

Another of the jewels from India's covert operations repertoire was given away when, at an all-party meeting in August 2016 to discuss a cycle of violence in Kashmir, Modi announced that the time had arrived for Pakistan to answer for "atrocities committed against the people of Balochistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir".

This was no part of a strategic calculation, merely the expression of a politician's conceit. At the prime minister's customary Independence Day address from Delhi's Lal Qila a few days later, Modi paid elaborate homage to the "people of Balochistan, Gilgit (and) Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir" who had extended their thanks to him for advocating their cause.

India's cross-border air-strike applied a brief quietus to a growing controversy over the Rafale fighter jets deal. It crowned an effort that began soon after the Pulwama atrocity, when the ruling party's formidable social media army began a determined pushback against the tide of revelations indicating possible malfeasance in the acquisition of the jets from France. It probably will not survive Pakistan's retaliatory strike and combat action in which one IAF officer was taken prisoner of war.

While that gulf grows, older means of containment are slipping out of grasp