COVID-19: Australia cancels premier multilateral air combat training exercise

Pitch Black 2020 - an opportunity for IAF to interact with forces from across the globe

- Australia has informed India that their premier multilateral air combat training exercise Pitch Black 2020 scheduled from July 27 to August 14 has been cancelled due to the COVID-19 situation, defence sources said.

- This was conveyed by Air Marshal Meg Hupfeld, Chief of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), in a letter to Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria, in mid-April.

- "The RAAF Chief informed of his decision to cancel the exercise this year due to the current and anticipated impacts of the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19," a defence source told The Hindu. He also noted that while the IAF was not participating with aircraft, Ex Pitch Black 2020 would have provided an opportunity for engagement between our personnel, the source said.

- The exercise is also an opportunity to interact with forces from across the globe, a second defence source said. The next edition of Pitch Black is scheduled in 2022.

- In the last edition of Pitch Black in 2018, the IAF for the first time deployed fighter aircraft which it had said would “provide a unique opportunity for exchange of knowledge and experience with these nations in a dynamic warfare environment”. The contingent consisted of 145 personnel, four Su-
30MKI fighters, one C-130 and one C-17 transport aircraft which went to Australia via Indonesia and during the transit had constructive engagements with Indonesian and Malaysian Air Forces as well.

• The defence and strategic engagement with Australia has steadily gone up in recent years especially on the bilateral front with naval cooperation at the forefront. The bilateral naval exercise AUSINDEX early last year saw participation of the largest Australian contingent ever to India with over 1,000 personnel.

• The Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) has been long pending and is expected to be concluded soon as well as a broader maritime cooperation agreement including the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) to elevate the existing strategic partnership.

• Last week, Australian High Commissioner-designate Barry O’Farrell made a pitch for trilateral cooperation among India, Australia and Indonesia to “identify new ways that our three countries can collaborate to be the best possible custodians of the Indian Ocean”.

• The defence cooperation between India and Australia is underpinned on the Memorandum on Defence Cooperation 2006, the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation 2009 and the bilateral Framework for Security Cooperation 2014.

Executive with its three ‘Ms’ of money, men and material is better-suited to deal with COVID-19 crisis: CJI

S.A. Bobde clarifies virtual courts are not closed courts and videoconferencing is not incamera hearings.

• Chief Justice of India S. A. Bobde told The Hindu in a phone interview that the three ‘Ms’ — money, men and material — are with the Executive, which is the most suitable organ of governance to deal with the problems arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. The CJI clarified that hearing of cases through videoconferencing are not incamera hearings and virtual courts are not closed courts.

The Supreme Court has acted with certain restraint during the lockdown days

• Imagine if this was an earthquake or floods or whatever... This is really a situation when the Executive gets into action. The usual three ‘Ms’ are ‘men, material and money’. It is very difficult for the court to assume charge and say ‘this is what the priority should be’ and ‘this is what it should be like’. The Executive is better suited to decide on the ‘whats’, ‘hows’ and ‘whens’ of deploying money, material and men.
• Of course, the courts ensure that rule of law does not suffer and people’s lives and properties do not suffer. But courts cannot deal with the situation on the ground. What do courts normally do? Courts declare rights, which are given effect to by the Executive. This is not a situation where declaration of rights has much priority or as much importance as in other times.

• So, it comes down to the question of which organ of governance is best suited for the situation. Other than looking at the validity of administrative and executive action and protecting, say, the right to life, the courts have little to do.

The virus has changed the way cases are heard, from open court system to videoconferencing

• Videoconferencing does not mean courts are closed. Virtual courts are not in-camera courts. When the video links are given, there are people who can see what is happening on the screen from where the lawyers address the court. We are not prohibiting that. It is not a binary situation.

• The distinction made between videoconferencing and open court system is not accurate. A better description would be virtual courts and ‘courts in congregation’.

• There is no absence of openness in the present videoconferencing proceedings. Things are not being decided without anybody coming to know. Litigants can watch the proceedings. Lawyers are present. The other side is there. The court is there. Court staff is there. Live reporting by the media is happening. Even people who are waiting for their cases to be called out are watching.

• Yes, maybe the number of people who could attend like in a court in congregation is reduced. That is because a social distancing norm is in place as it is being done all over the country.

What has changed in the justice administration system after the lockdown

• The fact of the matter is there is much less pressure on the courts as very few actions are being taken in the country which normally generate litigation. The courts are not executing decrees, landlords are not throwing tenants out, there is no employeremployee trouble. Yes, there was total disarray in the labour field... But what I am saying is, normally problems come from recovery, execution, tenants and landlords, administration action... The police are not as active in law and order area as it was earlier. I suppose criminals are less active in their areas, I suppose, I don’t know... So, generally, events that generate litigation are few and far between. To that extent, pressure is also less on the courts and filing of cases is not what it was.

The court is going through a unique experience during the time of the COVID-19 lockdown which has crossed 30 days

• The whole country is going through it and bearing it stoically. One has to be stoic in such a situation. The courts are doing their best to cope with the situation, in particular, they are selecting and
prioritising matters they must hear. Courts are continuing to hear cases despite constraints through videoconferencing.

Will the functioning of the court return to normal after May 3

• Too hazardous to say anything now. WHO projection for Maharashtra is a huge number. We don’t know what is going to happen in Delhi. We are watching the situation closely and reviewing it once or twice a week. I am doing it. There is a committee set up by the judges to meet with the members of the Bar and take a decision.

Rollback the distrust, remember the core values

Societal relations are fragile and need constant nursing; social peace is a pre-requisite for progress

• Sanity, said a line in an old movie, exists in every contract. It is so in every social compact that precedes the establishment of any society or social grouping. One is reminded of it by recent reports of expressions of hostility and downright hatred by a section of our people against another. Are these expressive of atavistic impulses of yore or generated by more recent trends seeking social hegemony premised on an imaginary past?

Foundational values

• The basic values of India’s Constitution assert the principles of justice, equality and fraternity and are reiterated by all sections of social and political leadership. Yet, those who profess to be their followers tend to forget them time and again.

• We have in recent weeks witnessed social debates and contestations, normal in a democracy, derail into aggressive assertions that typecast fellow citizens as enemies or undesirable creatures. The trend even finds its reflection in pronouncements of public figures and officials. Both have been prone to forget that even if a citizen is charged with an offence against the law or found to be guilty of it by the due process of law, he or she does not cease to be a citizen and stands deprived of rights and duties of citizenship. The conclusion is inescapable that the sole purpose of such typecasting is to find an excuse for an administrative failure and instead cast a slur, stigmatise and socially degrade a group of fellow citizens.

• The trend is so pervasive that it finds expression in sections of our citizens living in foreign lands; it is so aggressive that it offends local sentiments and norms of behaviour; so alarming that it has invited reaction from otherwise friendly local hosts and compelled our authorities, belatedly, to state the official position at the highest level.

• This ailment of the mind is being reflected in the discharge of normal duties by officials at different levels and is alarming enough to induce a group of 100 of our most eminent former civil servants to
appeal, recently, to State Chief Ministers “to instruct all public functionaries to be particularly vigilant
to prevent social boycott of any community in the State and to ensure that all the entitlements
including medical and hospital care, rations and financial assistance are available equally to all those
in need”.

Why is this happening? What have we forgotten or disowned?

• The plurality of our society and its diversity is an existential reality. The imperative of coexistence
and tolerance has been accepted down the ages. Sages and society leaders have reiterated it time
and again. We need only to recall Swami Vivekananda’s advocacy of religious pluralism, to his vision
of India “being the junction of two great systems — Hinduism and Islam — having a Vedantic brain
and Islamic body”.

Approach worth reiterating

• This same approach in a more practical sense was reflected in the Inter-communal
Unity Appeal made in October 1923 by a group of Indians led by Lala Lajpat Rai, Mufti Kifayatullah,
Swami Shraddhanand, Maulana Azad, Kasturba Gandhi and 95 others. All sections of our public need
to be reminded of its pragmatic approach:

• “If any individual or group of individuals belonging to any community commits an act of violence
against, or attacks the person, property or honour of women or places of worship (mandir, mosque,
church or gurdwara, etc) of his neighbour or townsman or helps those who indulge in such misdeeds,
he is, from the religious point of view, guilty of a great sin; and that it is the duty of co-religionists of
such offenders to stand up and resist such miscreants and to protect those who are so attacked.”

• Why can we not show the mirror in this shape to our professedly religion-minded public and urge it
to follow in word and deed? The present approach of distrust is disquieting, resulting in resentment,
and injection of suspicion and viciousness in social relations. It impacts adversely on the promotion
of fraternity. Is it serving any purpose, either of fighting the pandemic or of expediting the process of
proceeding against those who may have transgressed the law? Alternatively, is it serving a political
purpose?
• History tells us that human relationships are fragile and need constant nursing; the same holds for
societal relations. We have in our own times witnessed the fragmentation, even destruction, of
societies elsewhere. Social peace is thus a prerequisite for progress and development. Let sanity
prevail. Let this be our motto.

At the edge of a new nuclear arms race

The U.S.’s moves to resume nuclear testing, also signalling the demise of the ill-fated CTBT, could be
the first signs
• In mid-April, a report issued by the United States State Department on “Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments (Compliance Report)” raised concerns that China might be conducting nuclear tests with low yields at its Lop Nur test site, in violation of its Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) undertakings.

• The U.S. report also claims that Russia has conducted nuclear weapons experiments that produced a nuclear yield and were inconsistent with ‘zero yield’ understanding underlying the CTBT, though it was uncertain about how many such experiments had been conducted.

• Russia and China have rejected the U.S.’s claims, but with growing rivalry among major powers the report is a likely harbinger of a new nuclear arms race which would also mark the demise of the CTBT that came into being in 1996 but has failed to enter into force even after a quarter century.

What does CTBT ban mean?

• For decades, a ban on nuclear testing was seen as the necessary first step towards curbing the nuclear arms race but Cold War politics made it impossible. A Partial Test Ban Treaty was concluded in 1963 banning underwater and atmospheric tests but this only drove testing underground. By the time the CTBT negotiations began in Geneva in 1994, global politics had changed. The Cold War had ended and the nuclear arms race was over. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the USSR, had broken up and its principal testing site, Semipalatinsk, was in Kazakhstan (Russia still had access to Novaya Zemlya near the Arctic circle). In 1991, Russia declared a unilateral moratorium on testing, followed by the U.S. in 1992. By this time, the U.S. had conducted 1,054 tests and Russia, 715.

• Negotiations were often contentious. France and China continued testing, claiming that they had conducted far fewer tests and needed to validate new designs since the CTBT did not imply an end to nuclear deterrence. France and the U.S. even toyed with the idea of a CTBT that would permit testing at a low threshold, below 500 tonnes of TNT equivalent. This was one-thirtieth of the “Little Boy”, the bomb the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 — its explosive yield was estimated to be the equivalent of 15,000 tonnes of TNT. Civil society and the non-nuclear weapon states reacted negatively to such an idea and it was dropped. Some countries proposed that the best way to verify a comprehensive test ban would be to permanently shut down all test sites, an idea that was unwelcome to the nuclear weapon states.

• Eventually, the U.S. came up with the idea of defining the “comprehensive test ban” as a “zero yield” test ban that would prohibit supercritical hydro-nuclear tests but not subcritical hydrodynamic nuclear tests. Once the United Kingdom and France came on board, the U.S. was able to prevail upon Russia and China to accept this understanding. After all, this was the moment of the U.S.’s unipolar supremacy. At home, the Clinton administration in the U.S. satisfied the hawks by announcing a science-based nuclear Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program, a generously funded project to keep the nuclear laboratories in business and the Pentagon happy. Accordingly, the CTBT prohibits all parties from carrying out “any nuclear weapon test explosion or any other nuclear explosion”; these terms are neither defined nor elaborated.
Why it lacks authority

•Another controversy arose regarding the entry-into-force provisions (Article 14) of the treaty. After India’s proposals for anchoring the CTBT in a disarmament framework did not find acceptance, in June 1996, India announced its decision to withdraw from the negotiations. Unhappy at this turn, the U.K., China and Pakistan took the lead in revising the entry-into-force provisions. The new provisions listed 44 countries by name whose ratification was necessary for the treaty to enter into force and included India. India protested that this attempt at arm-twisting violated a country’s sovereign right to decide if it wanted to join a treaty but was ignored. The CTBT was adopted by a majority vote and opened for signature.

•Of the 44 listed countries, to date only 36 have ratified the treaty. China, Egypt, Iran, Israel and the U.S. have signed but not ratified. China maintains that it will only ratify it after the U.S. does so but the Republican dominated Senate had rejected it in 1999. In addition, North Korea, India and Pakistan are the three who have not signed. All three have also undertaken tests after 1996; India and Pakistan in May 1998 and North Korea six times between 2006 and 2017. The CTBT has therefore not entered into force and lacks legal authority.

•Nevertheless, an international organisation to verify the CTBT was established in Vienna with a staff of about 230 persons and an annual budget of $130 million. Ironically, the U.S. is the largest contributor with a share of $17 million. The Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO) runs an elaborate verification system built around a network of over 325 seismic, radionuclide, infrasound and hydroacoustic (underwater) monitoring stations. The CTBTO has refrained from backing the U.S.’s allegations.

Competition is back

•The key change from the 1990s is that the U.S.’s unipolar moment is over and strategic competition among major powers is back. The U.S. now identifies Russia and China as ‘rivals’. Its Nuclear Posture Review asserts that the U.S. faces new nuclear threats because both Russia and China are increasing their reliance on nuclear weapons. The U.S., therefore, has to expand the role of its nuclear weapons and have a more usable and diversified nuclear arsenal. The Trump administration has embarked on a 30-year modernisation plan with a price tag of $1.2 trillion, which could go up over the years. Readiness levels at the Nevada test site that has been silent since 1992 are being enhanced to permit resumption of testing at six months notice.

•Russia and China have been concerned about the U.S.’s growing technological lead particularly in missile defence and conventional global precision-strike capabilities. Russia has responded by exploring hypersonic delivery systems and theatre systems while China has embarked on a modernisation programme to enhance the survivability of its arsenal which is considerably smaller. In addition, both countries are also investing heavily in offensive cyber capabilities.
The new U.S. report stops short of accusing China for a violation but refers to “a high level of activity at the Lop Nur test site throughout 2019” and concludes that together with its lack of transparency, China provokes concerns about its intent to observe the zero-yield moratorium on testing.

The U.S. claims that Russian experiments have generated nuclear yield but is unable to indicate how many such experiments were conducted in 2019. It suggests that Russia could be testing in a manner that releases nuclear energy from an explosive canister, generating suspicions about its compliance.

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) limits U.S. and Russian arsenals but will expire in 2021 and U.S. President Donald Trump has already indicated that he does not plan to extend it. Instead, the Trump administration would like to bring China into some kind of nuclear arms control talks, something China has avoided by pointing to the fact that the U.S. and Russia still account for over 90% of global nuclear arsenals.

Current context

Both China and Russia have dismissed the U.S.’s allegations, pointing to the Trump administration’s backtracking from other negotiated agreements such as the Iran nuclear deal or the U.S.-Russia Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Tensions with China are already high with trade and technology disputes, militarisation in the South China Sea and most recently, with the novel coronavirus pandemic. The U.S. could also be preparing the ground for resuming testing at Nevada.

The Cold War rivalry was already visible when the nuclear arms race began in the 1950s. New rivalries have already emerged. Resumption of nuclear testing may signal the demise of the ill-fated CTBT, marking the beginnings of a new nuclear arms race.

Protecting the poor from becoming poorer

Governments need to take a long-term view of mitigating the health and economic effects of COVID-19

Globally, governments are faced with hard choices in controlling the spread of COVID-19. Prioritising public health through social distancing and population lockdowns comes at a huge economic cost. While there is still considerable uncertainty about how badly India will be affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, there is no uncertainty that the population lockdown will force significant and widespread deprivations on people at the lower end of the income distribution. Within a short time after the population lockdown was imposed in India, the slowdown in economic activity has resulted in the loss of livelihood among the economically vulnerable. Seen another way, economically vulnerable groups are being forced to sacrifice disproportionately more for the better health of society. COVID-19 and its control measures will affect the health, human capital and income of vulnerable populations in multiple ways over the short and long term. To mitigate these deprivations, it is necessary for government safety net programmes to provide broad-based long-term support focused on specific vulnerable populations.
Short- and long-term effects

• The morbidity and mortality rates are disproportionately higher in countries, and among people, at the lower end of the income distribution. The Spanish flu in 1918 left about 50 to 100 million people dead worldwide. Poor countries like India bore the brunt of the pandemic. India lost 18 million lives, or 6% of the population, the highest anywhere. In contrast, the U.S., where the flu might have originated, experienced 675,000 deaths. Similar social inequities are seen in the current COVID-19 pandemic — note, for instance, the disproportionately higher mortality rates among minority groups in the U.S. These inequities are not surprising: economically vulnerable people have poor nutrition which lowers immunity; they live in crowded spaces making it easier for a disease to spread; and they have inadequate access to safe water, sanitation, and quality health care. Deaths and illness due to COVID-19 will directly cause economic losses. The death of an earning family member is a huge financial loss anywhere, but particularly so for those living on the margins of the economy. Those unable to work, particularly those in the informal economy, due to COVID-19-related illness will experience substantial income losses. Studies on productivity losses due to other infectious diseases have reported that the poorest households lose as much as half their income.

• Epidemics continue to affect survivors long after they are over. Studies on populations exposed to tropical diseases and poor nutrition in-utero or during early childhood have found that the effects of the disease continue into later years of life by affecting cognitive ability, educational achievement, and income as adults. A study on the long-term effects of the Spanish flu, “Is the 1918 Influenza Pandemic Over? Long-Term Effects of In Utero Influenza Exposure in the Post-1940 U.S. Population”, by Douglas Almond, reported that children born to infected mothers were 15% less likely to graduate from high school, the wages of men were 5%-9% lower because of infection, and the disability rate 20% higher compared to birth cohorts not affected by the flu. Importantly, these effects were greater in socially vulnerable populations. There is no reason why COVID-19 will not have such long-term intergenerational effects on economically vulnerable populations. As such, relief programmes need to have a long-time horizon.

• Population lockdowns and the associated loss of economic activity has affected employment and livelihoods on a massive scale globally. India has the largest number of people under lockdown anywhere. By all accounts this lockdown has had a significant effect on the movement of people, job losses and incomes. For example, a CMIE survey indicates that 44% of households currently report a loss in income, up from around 10% in early March. A recent telephonic survey carried out by the National Council of Applied Economic Research in Delhi found that 84% of respondents reported loss of income, and nearly 30% experienced shortages of food, fuel and medicines. These outcomes were concentrated among the poorer households and in rural areas.

• Historically, economic downturns are associated with loss of livelihoods, decreases in dietary intake, poorer dietary quality and poorer health care consumption. The effect of the lockdown on pregnant women and children is particularly important. Studies have shown that women’s nutrition or access to health services like tetanus immunisation during pregnancy can have long-term effects on the future educational achievement of children. Poor nutrition during pregnancy or in early childhood has been associated with increased infant and child mortality. The closing of schools due to the lockdown
has deprived many children of their only nutritious meal through school-feeding programmes. Moreover, children who experienced poor nutrition in-utero or during their early years find that their cognitive levels, educational achievement, and adult incomes are impacted.

Extending safety nets

• The Central government and several State governments have announced a range of important measures to address the economic hardship faced by vulnerable households. They promise to provide free or subsidised food to low-wage households, and direct cash transfers to vulnerable groups such as senior citizens, farmers, rural workers, construction workers and widows. The effectiveness of these safety nets will depend on the adequacy of the relief package, how well they reach the neediest groups, and efficiencies in the delivery system. It is important to note that these are one-off measures intended only for a short period of time. However, the economic and health deprivation caused by COVID-19 will have long-term effects.

• More challenging is addressing the long-term health and economic effects of COVID-19. It will require extending current relief measures for a longer duration, to a few years. To prevent human capital deprivation in the future, both long- and short-term relief measures will need to target specific populations like pregnant women and young children. Recent government actions in this direction are helpful but they are focused on the short term. As such, governments need to take a long-term view of mitigating the many economic and human capital effects of COVID-19 and its control measures.