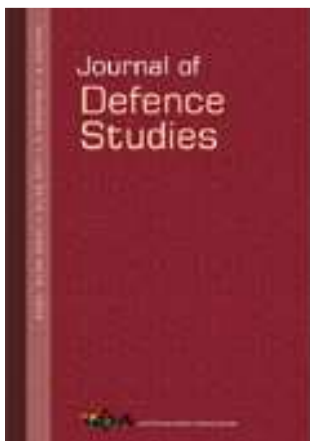


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# Kargil and its Impact on India's National Security

*Alok Deb\**

With the melting of snow and improvement in weather conditions, the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) that separates India and Pakistan has traditionally been a 'hot' place in summers, with multiple ceasefire violations by Pakistan culminating in frequent artillery duels. Over time, and well before the era of instant news, this perception of the LoC had embedded itself in the collective consciousness of the Indian public. Despite loss of life and property in the border areas and continued suffering of the local residents throughout the 1990s, the possibility of an all-out war over Kashmir had veered from the probable to the unlikely, more so after then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's famous bus ride to Lahore in January 1999. Also, given the traditional tranquillity prevailing in the border districts of Kargil and Leh, the possibility of a full-fledged war in Ladakh was considered to be even more remote. All these suppositions came crashing down in the summer of 1999 after discovery of the intrusions in the Dras, Kargil and Batalik sectors, leading to the initiation of full-fledged combat operations by the Indian Armed Forces.

Depending on which side one is on, as also the level at which the interaction is taking place, there are varying views on the effect and outcome of Kargil. While the Pakistani military establishment has yet to carry out public soul-searching over Operation 'Badr' (as the Kargil operation was known), scathing indictments by Pakistanis of the strategy

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adopted almost unilaterally by their military leadership in a covert manner for achieving policy goals in Kashmir through the medium of the intrusions are now available.<sup>1</sup> A key assumption of the Pakistani military that the operation would strangle India's lifeline to Siachen was belied as, even during the thick of fighting, vehicle columns continued to ply on the Srinagar–Leh Highway, albeit at irregular intervals and in lesser numbers.<sup>2</sup> Other assumptions by Pakistan, that India would be hesitant to use air power, Pakistan's budding nuclear capability would be a sufficient deterrent, that international arbiters would force a quick de-escalation in Pakistan's favour, and, finally, that the Pakistani viewpoint on Kashmir would gain prominence, were equally belied. Of course, in marked contrast to the views expressed here are the writings of then Chief of Army Staff (COAS) and later President, General (Gen) Pervez Musharraf, who has stated that the 'Kargil conflict emerged out of a tactical manoeuvre of limited dimensions but had significant strategic effects'<sup>3</sup> and that what he had initially ordered was a 'defensive manoeuvre in the Northern Areas'<sup>4</sup> since 'frequent visits by Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes to the Siachen and Kargil areas during the summer and autumn of 1998 suggested that India was considering more offensive operations.'<sup>5</sup> Despite this rhetoric, for students of the subject, a clear consensus has emerged over the last 20 years that Pakistan achieved next to nothing through this misadventure.<sup>6</sup>

In its prologue, the Kargil Review Committee Report opines that:

[T]his was no mere border war or just another, though fiercer, artillery tattoo that characterises so much of the 740 km long LC and the 110 km Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) along the Salto Ridge in Jammu & Kashmir. It was an extraordinary war, this Fourth War of Kashmir, fought at impossible heights in what will go down as the most inhospitable and unlikely battleground in the history of warfare.<sup>7</sup>

How did the Indian Armed Forces respond to this Pakistani aggression on the ground? Here, too, there is a clear consensus. Given a clear mandate by the government, the respective services overcame initial hiccups of coordination and got down to detailed planning and execution of offensive operations. The Indian Army built up its strength to launch a series of well-planned attacks, including some at the brigade level. Infantry, supported by artillery, physically evicted a well-entrenched enemy, hill feature by hill feature, in a high-altitude terrain with heights averaging in excess of 15,000 feet, pushing them back towards the LoC.

The Indian Air Force, after initial losses, undertook a strategic pause wherein tactics and methodologies of attacking small-sized targets on hilltops were revised. Modifications to equipment, such as tweaking the software for the targeting pods fitted on Mirage aircraft thereby enabling these to be operated at those altitudes, were carried out, and this delivered excellent results later. The Indian Navy launched Operation Talwar by deployment of ships on barrier patrols off the coast of Dwarka to bottle-up Karachi harbour, while elements of the Eastern Fleet were moved to supplement the resources of the Western Fleet.<sup>8</sup> After an initial hiatus, both civil and military logistics infrastructure responded brilliantly, ensuring adequate wherewithal for conducting operations. Thanks to the presence of media, the achievements of the armed forces were telecast live to every household, negating any efforts at propaganda by the adversary. Most importantly, what the Kargil War brought out was the sheer resilience of the Indian soldier, who, once brought into the battle area, quickly adapted to circumstances and through sheer grit and determination, under inspired combat leaders, went on to complete the task. By these achievements, the military was able to reinforce the nation's faith in its armed forces and fulfil the mandate given by the government, thereby enabling it to maintain the stand taken in international forums at the start of the conflict, which included, most importantly, retaining the moral high ground.

What was the outcome of this war? Notwithstanding all that has been written on this earlier, the 20th anniversary of such an event deserves, at the least, a summary. One major achievement was that despite suffering from a range of sanctions imposed by the United States (US), Japan and certain other European nations (less the United Kingdom [UK] and France)<sup>9</sup> after conducting the Shakti series of tests in 1998, international opinion rallied around India, drawn to the justness of its cause. Even Pakistan's all-weather ally, China, remained completely neutral throughout the conflict and had nothing to offer that country other than the advice to negotiate bilaterally.<sup>10</sup> *India had proven itself to be a responsible power, a perception that would go a long way in shaping policy in Western minds in years to come.*

Another achievement was that the US played a major role in defusing the crisis, culminating with President Clinton's no-nonsense talk with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. A fascinating account of the Clinton–Nawaz meeting in Washington, DC on the 4 July 1999, America's Independence Day, gives out in minute detail just how Prime Minister

Sharif was left with no option but to agree to withdrawal of troops from across the LoC.<sup>11</sup> Bruce Riedel, then Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Near East and South Asia Affairs in the National Security Council, concludes that:

The most important strategic result of the Blair House summit was its impact on Indo-U.S. relations. The clarity of the American position on Kargil and its refusal to give Pakistan any reward for its aggression had an immediate and dynamic impact on the relationship. Doors opened in New Delhi to Americans that had been shut for years. The Indian elite—including the military—and the Indian public began to shed long held negative perceptions of the U.S.

The stage was set for the unprecedented back to back summits between President Clinton and Prime Minister Vajpayee in 2000. After a quarter century gap in Presidential visits to India, Clinton's spring visit symbolized a new level of maturity in the relationship between the world's two largest democracies.<sup>12</sup>

The third fallout was the unique phenomenon, witnessed by the world, of aggression committed by one nuclear-armed state upon another, forcing the latter to resort to full-fledged conventional combat operations (though with restrictions on force levels and theatre of operations), all under the nuclear shadow. The Kargil War, followed by the standoff of Operation Parakram in 2001, illustrates:

...contrary to conventional wisdom, that nuclear deterrence does not prevent sub-conventional or conventional conflict between nuclear powers, and may even exacerbate those tensions. This is the stability–instability paradox. Nuclear deterrence allowed Pakistan to consider that it had cover for a potential conventional war, and successfully deterred both sides from escalating the conflict. This reflects a belief in South Asia (unlike that held in the West during the Cold War) that conventional and nuclear conflicts are disconnected and that conventional wars can be waged without direct bearing on the stability of nuclear deterrence.<sup>13</sup>

The war affected the Indian security establishment in a manner little short of seismic. It galvanised the government to look within, identify lapses and implement remedial measures, including creation of new structures. Carried out in a thoroughly professional manner by the caretaker government, the first step in this entire exercise was the setting up of a high-powered review committee comprising of eminent persons

in July 1999 itself, just after the ceasefire. The Kargil Review Committee was noteworthy for several reasons: first, for the sheer range of interactions that it carried out with individuals and various departments of the state connected with the conflict, such as, central and state ministers, a former President, former central ministers, serving and retired bureaucrats, serving and former service chiefs, mid-level and junior officers from the military, members of the intelligence community and concerned media persons. It made four trips to J&K, and also invited inputs from the general public. Second, its report was prepared speedily, less than six months after its constitution, and submitted to the government before the end of December the same year. Third, after scrutiny by the concerned authorities, the report was made available to the general public (with certain portions redacted for security reasons), unlike the Henderson Brooks Report of the 1962 Sino-Indian war which has not been 'officially' declassified till date. Without being overly prescriptive, the Committee opined that 'how exactly the country should proceed to refashion its Security-Intelligence-Development' shield to meet the challenge of the 21st Century is for the Government, Parliament and public opinion to determine.'<sup>14</sup>

The Committee's recommendations turned the spotlight on the imperative for jointness in the Indian Armed Forces. It gave rise to India's first integrated command in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Many other recommendations, from reducing the ages of commanding officers to employment of unarmed aerial vehicles, have been implemented, while others, such as the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), still wait to see the light of day. It is time for the Indian security establishment to set this right, more so in light of the new debate that is ongoing, on 'enhanced jointness vis-à-vis integration', both of which demand a single-point military authority.

Another fallout of the conflict was 'Siachenisation' of the LoC from the east of Kaobal Gali up to the Chorbat La. The war also highlighted the lacunae in the military, starting from the state of equipment and transport, both of which were well short of authorisation, to their vintage. The need for modern equipment, be it frequency-hopping radio sets for combat communication or modern rifles which were robust enough to fire effectively in extreme weather conditions, again came to the fore, forcing the military to look for better solutions. The effectiveness of the much-maligned 155 millimetre (mm) Bofors gun, truly a battle-winning factor, was proved beyond doubt. These were the treasured 'force multipliers'

for commanders, which became indispensable for supporting assaulting troops, reinforcing, overall, the importance of massed fires in combat.

The Kargil War was also India's first televised war. The information campaign during the conflict was well coordinated and successful in projecting India's viewpoint and updating the public at large. It should serve as a good precursor for the government and the military for developing an updated information operations doctrine, should such a document not already be in existence. While conflicts such as Kargil (or other modern-day conventional operations) are infrequent, with the increasing possibility of tomorrow's wars being fought in non-contact and non-kinetic domains, the importance of information operations has grown exponentially. Undoubtedly, much more remains to be done in this regard.

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This issue of the *Journal of Defence Studies* has been put together to obtain a 360-degree perspective of where India is 20 years after Kargil. An attempt has been made to look at various aspects which arose from this operation by obtaining the views of hands-on practitioners, both servicemen and diplomats. A range of issues has, therefore, been covered. These include: India's current external and internal security environment; the evolution of India's national security structure; the evolution of the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) and how successful it has been in fulfilling its mandate; and the nuclear contestation between two South Asian neighbours and how this continues to influence military thinking, leading to innovative options for remaining below the nuclear threshold. Also shared are the perspectives of the respective services, and where they stand today.

The first article by Jayant Prasad comprises of a wide ranging discussion of the national security environment, examining India's long-term foreign policy and security goals as well as its possible strategic behaviour in the future, including possible options for India in the short to medium term. P.S. Raghavan writes on the evolution of India's national security architecture, giving a broad yet informative overview of the status both pre and post Kargil. He also discusses in depth the institutions comprising the security architecture and sets his assessments against an evolving set of events and challenges facing India today. Both Prasad and Raghavan's articles set the wide-ranging changes that Kargil

brought to the business of security in India as well as the creation and progression of related institutions in a wider strategic and diplomatic context.

The next four articles focus entirely on the military aspect of the past 20 years. Satish Dua writes about the evolution of the IDS which was born out of the recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee Report, detailing what the organisation has achieved since inception in various spheres of military security and what remains to be done in terms of achieving its full potential. Vivek Chadha examines the impetus that the Kargil War and other conflicts post-independence have provided to the Indian Army's efforts at transforming itself into a modern military machine, capable of taking on current and future challenges. Kishore Kumar Khara explains how concepts of employment of air power and capabilities have evolved since the Kargil War, resulting 20 years later in an air force which is capable of delivering swift, deep and effective air strikes. Sudarshan Shrikhande writes about the deployment of the navy, leveraging the influence of sea power to create politico diplomatic pressure on Pakistan, thus contributing indirectly to India's victory at Kargil. He further emphasises how India would need to create the environment to effect greater jointness across all domains of warfare.

Finally, Prakash Menon explains the importance of Kargil in the evolution of India as a responsible nuclear power, and how the relevance of India's nuclear doctrine has been reinforced over the last two decades, while guiding the development, growth and deployment of such weapons. Also featured in the issue are reviews of two books pertaining to the Line of Control, the same contested boundary where Kargil took place two decades ago. Shrabana Barua reviews *The Line of Control: Travelling with Indian and Pakistani Armies*, and Nazir Ahmad Mir reviews *Line on Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India–Pakistan Escalation Dynamics*.

Readers will notice that while the issue is a commemorative on the twentieth anniversary of Kargil, it goes beyond a mere discussion of the conflict itself. In each article, Kargil forms the starting point to an informed and engaging discussion of two decades of significant changes to the security situation facing India, and how it has adapted to those changes and built—both conceptually and in practice—a strong apparatus to address security concerns in the future. It is hoped that this issue would find resonance with our readers and benefit not just those familiar with the issues addressed herein but also provide an informed perspective to, and generate interest among, a new generation of readers.



NOTES

1. Nasim Zehra, *From Kargil to the Coup: Events that Shook Pakistan*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2018; also see V.P. Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2010, pp. 344–47.
2. Author's personal observations, for the period from end May 1999 till the ceasefire.
3. Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*, New York: Free Press, 2006, p. 98.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
6. Ashley Tellis, C. Christine Fair, and Jamison Jo Medby, *Limited Conflicts under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001, pp. 8–11.
7. See 'Prologue: Challenge and Response', in *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000, p. 1.
8. Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, n. 1, p. 130.
9. Jayati Ghosh, 'On Sanctions and being Sanctimonious', *Frontline*, Vol. 15, No. 12, 6–19 June 1998, available at <https://frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl1512/15120180.htm>, last accessed 25 July 2019.
10. 'China Tilts toward India on Kargil Conflict', *Stratfor Worldview*, 16 June 1999, available at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/china-tilts-toward-india-kargil-conflict>, last accessed 25 July 2019.
11. Bruce Riedel, 'American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House', Policy Paper Series, Centre for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, 2002.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
13. 'Limited War under the Nuclear Shadow in South Asia', Report of the seminar presenting key findings of the USIP report, held on 19 January 2005 at the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, Article No. 1623.
14. 'Epilogue', in *From Surprise to Reckoning*, n. 7, pp. 227–28.