

Peace or an Interlude?

Till the K-question is resolved, future Kargils cannot be ruled out



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Five years after the 1999 Kargil War, it is pertinent to recall the motivations of Pakistan and their relevance to the present tentative peace initiatives. Pakistan's aggression in Kargil was a culmination of various options exercised by it to wrest Jammu and Kashmir from India. It was rooted in its failure to acquire Jammu and Kashmir, particularly during the period 1989 to 1999. The political elite in Pakistan felt that Kashmir's becoming part of Pakistan is the unfinished agenda of Partition; that the people of Jammu and Kashmir have the right to self-determination; that the government of India is violating human rights of Muslims in J&K and lastly, since 1998 when both countries became nuclear weapons power, Kashmir could be a flashpoint leading to nuclear holocaust.

Since these arguments did not bring Pakistan the necessary international support, the government decided to raise the threshold of violent subversion to a direct military intrusion. The rationale of this intrusion was based on Pakistan's political assessments which have come to light since the end of the Kargil conflict.

The Pakistani assessment was that the credibility of chief minister Dr Farooq Abdullah in Jammu and Kashmir was very low. Pakistan believed that the Indian Army and security forces were involved in many disparate counter terrorist activities and hence would not be able to resist a coordinated large-scale military onslaught in an unexpected area by the Pakistani forces. The Vajpayee government had lost the No Confidence Motion in the Lok Sabha in March 1999. Apart from being a coalition government, it was also only a caretaker government which was expected to be busy conducting General Elections in the country. Pakistani assessment, therefore, was that the Vajpayee government would not have sufficient credibility to take firm decisions against military aggression.

Most importantly, Pakistan's assessment was that the Indian Army would not be able to resist and push back Pakistani forces once they had entrenched themselves on the strategic heights in the Kargil sector. This assessment was based not only on Pakistani Intelligence reports but also repeated reports in the Indian media about our army being short of officers and equipment and its

morale being low during the 1990s. Added to this was the confidence that Pakistan could resort to nuclear weapons if the Indian military resistance in Kargil become unmanageable. The then Director General of ISI, Lt. Gen. Javed Nasir gave the assessment that the Indian army was incapable of undertaking conventional operations at present. So how can one talk of enlarging the conventional conflict.

While these were the assessments which led to the Pakistani military intrusion, what was the geo-strategic background and what were the political motivations which led to the conflict? What was the military motivation? What was the extent of direct governmental participation in the aggression? What are the lessons that India should learn from the Kargil experience? Should Pakistan be trusted to return to the negotiating table? Should the dialogue be continued? Given the apparent intention of Pakistan to continue its proxy war against India, how should India deal with this threat? How should India assess the international reaction to the Kargil crisis? What are the lines on which India-Pakistan relations are likely to develop?

Before one proceeds to examine these points, it would be pertinent to describe the geo-strategic and demographic characteristics of Kargil and the factual and legal basis of the LoC that divides Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir from the state of J&K.

Kargil is a region of undoubted signification for the security of the Valley, Ladakh and our military positions on the Siachen Glacier. The area southwest of Kargil straddles the approaches towards Siachen, Ladakh and the Kashmir valley. The area lies within Indian territory east of the LoC and Siachen and Salto heights that are beyond the northernmost points up to which the Line of Control has been formally demarcated and delineated. If Pakistan could capture the Kargil area (stretching across 140 kilometres of mountain ranges) it could interdict the highway from the Valley to Ladakh and cut off India's approach to both Leh and Siachen. The Kargil sector of the LoC (covering the Mushkoh valley, Drass, Kaksar, Chhain-kund, Shingo Batalik and Chorbat La) because of the terrain, was not manned in detail and around the year. There were gaps between brigades providing security to the Siachen region

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and brigades responsible for security of Kargil and Gurez. It was also felt that the composition of the Buddhist-Shia population of the area would be a natural prevention against any extensive Pakistani military intrusion.

Regular Pakistani forces came across the LoC all along the 140km stretch, penetrating into Indian territory to the depth of 10 to 12 kilometres between March and May 1999. When challenged by India, Pakistan argued that it had not crossed into Indian territory, that the LoC in this sector was not clearly demarcated or delineated. It would be sufficient to keep the following facts in mind.

- The LoC is rooted in the ceasefire lines drawn up after the 1948 and 1965 wars with Pakistan.
- The present LoC was drawn on the basis of the stipulations of the Simla Agreements of July 1972.
- The Line was drawn on the basis of mutual consent between the senior army commanders of India and Pakistan. The delineation of the Line has been shown on nine maps with detailed grid references in the appropriate scale. These have been countersigned by the military representatives of Pakistan. A matter of deliberate significance is that this Line was not a cease-fire line, but a LoC, not a Line of 'Actual' Control which might have implied that it was a temporary arrangement. This was definitely not the intention. The agreement was on a permanent line.

The Line of control was respected by both sides for 27 years from 1972 to 1999. What then were Pakistani motivations in violating it? The macro-level political motivations were manifold: First, the restoration of an elected government in J&K and the gradual return of political stability and economic normality resulted in J&K fading away as an area of crisis for the international community. Compounding this situation was an incremental success achieved by Indian security forces in neutralising terrorist activities. The

efforts of Pakistan in 1989 to destabilise and separate J&K from India came to a naught. Some efforts had to be made to refocus international attention on the Kashmir issues within the framework of Pakistan objectives.

Second, the strategic planners of Pakistan believed that the international community was becoming supportive of a settlement of the J&K issue on the basis of some kind of LoC agreement. So it was decided to change the delineation of the LoC to a more advantageous position in favour of Pakistan. Shifting the LoC eastwards would enable Pakistan to continue its efforts to capture J&K from a stronger position. Third, if the shift of the LoC could be consolidated on the Kargil sector, it would also have weakened India's strategic capacity to safeguard Leh and the Valley. The expectation was that the Chinese would not have minded Pakistan acquiring a more advantageous geo-strategic position on the southern and south-eastern flanks of the Karakoram Highway. If the military conflict was taken to the threshold of a tangible nuclear confrontation, the international community would have intervened to pressurise India to compromise on Kashmir in a manner desired by Pakistan. To sum up, Pakistan's overall plans and detailed military objectives were assessed as follows by the Government of India:

- (1) The plan was to have been kept top secret, which would involve the least number of people and avoid any activity opposite Kargil which might indicate Pakistani intentions.
- (2) Only an 'in principle' concurrence without specifics was to be obtained from the Pakistani Prime Minister.
- (3) A cover plan must exist to obfuscate the aggression and defuse any escalation in early time-frame.
- (4) The operation should help in internationalising the Kashmir issue, on which global attention had been flagging for some time.

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With these terms of reference in mind, the Pakistan Army evolved a plan which was kept confined to the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Chief of General Staff (CGS), Director General of Military Operations (DGMO), GOC 10 Corps and GOC Force Commander Northern Areas (FCNA) who was made overall in charge of operations in Kargil sector. Even the Corps Commanders were not kept in the picture. This has been completely substantiated by the taped telephone conversation between Pakistan COAS and CGS.

To cut a long story short, the Indian armed forces, though delayed in their response fought a determined battle against Pakistani forces located in position which were strategically advantageous to them, defeated and pushed them back. Nearly 500 officers and other ranks of the Indian Army were killed. More than a thousand armed forces personnel were wounded. The largest number of casualties was among officers of the Indian Army who led their men from the front. It is primarily India's successful military response which caused the US and other world powers to put pressure on the then Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to pull back his troops beyond the Line of Control.

Two conclusions, which one can draw about Pakistani motivations, are: Acquisition of Jammu and Kashmir is an unalterable objective, but Pakistan can wait to achieve this objective. What is more important is to keep the Indian Army bleeding in Kashmir just as Afghan Mujahiddin supported by Pakistan kept the Soviet Army bleeding, and ultimately led to their withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Secondly, even if the Kashmir issue is resolved, there can be no normalisation between India and Pakistan because Pakistan's own position in South Asia depends on preventing India from emerging as a major Asian power. The basic lessons derived from the Kargil conflict which are still relevant are as following:

a) Pakistan is not likely to agree to any practical solution of the J&K issue on the basis of ground realities and reasonableness in the foreseeable future. It will continue its political campaign and overt military and terrorist operations against India, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir.

b) Bilateral dialogue at the official and even at the highest political level with Pakistan should not be undertaken with any excessive expectation, nor should these be predicated on the sincerity of Pakistan. Pakistan participates in these dialogues only as a stratagem to keep the Kashmir issue alive, to indulge in diplomacy and publicity.

c) Pakistan's unalterable objective is to capture Jammu and Kashmir. The substance of its policy is related to this objective.

d) Pakistan will continue to foment military tension on the LoC and will indulge in intrusion to capture territory in Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan will also engineer violence and terrorism in other parts of India in support of its proxy war in Kashmir. India

should remain politically sensitive to these prospects at the policy level and should maintain continuous military alertness vis-à-vis Pakistan along the Line of Control, as well as the international border. India will have to locate troops and security forces to the maximum extent possible on the LoC round the year.

e) India should undertake a thorough overhauling of its intelligence gathering and assessment, institutions and procedures both in functional and organisational terms. The interface between the intelligence Agencies, the National Security Council and its adjuncts and the Cabinet committee on Security Affairs has to be organised so that it does not face the surprise as well confusion in command control it faced during the initial period of the Kargil conflict.

f) Firmness in dealing with Pakistan at the operational level, combined with restraint gets India international support.

g) The support India got on the Kargil conflict from the international community was Kargil specific. There is no such support for India's overall stand on the Kashmir issue. The international community is keen that India and Pakistan quickly resolve this issue which, in their judgment, has the seeds of a nuclear confrontation.

h) India must also acknowledge that a solution to the Kashmir dispute has the imperative requirement of being responsive to the desire of its citizens in Jammu and Kashmir.

i) International support for India's general concerns about its territorial integrity, etc., will depend on our appearing to be responsible and talking to Pakistan on Jammu and Kashmir. A static stance by India will result in Pakistan regaining international support.

j) It is equally true that the international community does not support Pakistan's total claim on Jammu and Kashmir.

k) Important powers are now inclined to a settlement of Kashmir dispute on some kind of LoC settlement plus a package deal for autonomy for the people of Jammu and Kashmir with the added proviso for normal and free interaction between people living in (India) J&K and people living in Pakistan-held territories. While India should

be willing to resume dialogue with Pakistan, we must be clear in our mind that coming to a solution would be a gradual process spread over a decade or two. We must not let down our guard in any manner till then.

l) A very important lesson to be kept in mind is the development of a US-China strategic consultation mechanism to deal with stability and security in a 'nuclearly weaponised' South Asian region. President Bill Clinton and President Jiang Zemin were in more or less continuous contact during the Kargil War. The US and Chinese policy on Kargil were coordinated at the highest level. India should be alert about the strategic implications of this development. Two super powers having a converging approach on the security environment can impact India's freedom of options. ●

