



# An Analysis of the Kargil Conflict 1999

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*'The purpose of deterrence is to deter'*

In May 1998 India tested its nuclear weapons, and Pakistan, despite the half-hearted attempts of the international community to prevent it, soon followed suit. Many analysts viewed this development as dangerous. Almost an equally large number felt that it was for the best, however, since this brought deterrence fully into place. It was not long before the latter were rudely shocked out of their assessment. In February 1999, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Indian Prime Minister, visited Pakistan as part of the much touted 'bus diplomacy', on the invitation of his counterpart, Mr Nawaz Sharif. Vajpayee was greeted with great pomp and show, unaware that Kargil had been (or was being) occupied.

In early May 1999, the Indian army learnt that intruders had occupied the heights close to the Dras region in Kashmir. A patrol of ten soldiers sent to investigate was wiped out. Over the next few days the Indian army, without yet reporting to their political leadership (as any other army would do), proceeded to first attempt the eviction of the intruders and, on failing to do so, assess the extent of their intrusion. At some point they went to the political leadership to inform them of the intrusion. The event led to a military takeover in Pakistan and sent shock waves round the world. And according to some analysts, it almost led to a nuclear war. It is still too early to assess the final outcome of the event. For Vajpayee, this was a particularly un-propitious moment in time - he was heading an interim

government, coming up for re-election in a few months, and, following a courageous trip to Lahore, in the teeth of opposition from all his colleagues.

Let me state at the outset that, while I have considerable knowledge of the course of events (pieced together from private discussions with friends and colleagues in positions of authority, who played a role), I have neither the official Pakistani version nor, quite obviously, any input from the Indian side. There is, therefore, some conjecture in what follows. Only the actual actors will be able to judge the accuracy of this conjecture. That said, this analysis is based on my (not inconsiderable) personal knowledge of: the terrain around Kargil; the character of the principal actors in the Pakistan army; the decision making process in the Pakistan army (in which I served in numerous command and staff assignments); and the collective character of the Pakistan army (on which basis I also judge the Indian army, being essentially no different).

## **Background**

When the British finally decided to leave India in 1947, the 'Princely States' were given the freedom to decide their own fate. They could join either of the two new states created by partition, India and Pakistan, or opt for independence. Junagarh, a predominantly Hindu state, with a Muslim ruler, opted for Pakistan, but was forcibly occupied by India on the principle that the population was predominantly Hindu. Hyderabad chose independence, but was again forced into the Indian Union. The territories that



Kargil

formed the state of Jammu and Kashmir were governed by a Sikh ruler, who kept delaying his decision until 1948, when finally some tribal lashkars (a loosely grouped force) decided to intervene on behalf of their Muslim brethren. He then announced his accession to India over the radio, and Indian troops were air lifted into Kashmir (reinforcing those already there), ostensibly to defend the Maharaja (Prince). Interestingly, India claims that the Maharajah also signed the document of accession, although no one has ever seen the document.

Indian troops moved into the valley of Srinagar and managed to evict the lashkars, where they established what was later to be called the Line of Control (LOC). Despite lobbying by India, the United Nations unanimously passed a resolution in favour of self-determination for the people of Kashmir. Jawaharal Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister, accepted the resolution and promised to abide by it, but later reneged. Kashmir became 'disputed territory', divided into Indian Held Kashmir (IHK) and Azad (free) Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K, or AK), as the Pakistanis came to refer to them.

Pakistan and India have fought three wars. Of these, two were fought over Kashmir, in 1948 and 1965, when Pakistan attempted to liberate the people of Kashmir. The 1971 war was imposed by India, to liberate East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Kashmir has been the site of numerous mini-wars between the two countries, which have constantly sought to take advantage of the other's perceived vulnerabilities. Since India occupied the vacant heights

at Siachin glacier in 1984, there has been an annual exchange at what is the highest battleground in the world. Pakistan too, has seized every opportunity to gain an advantage. Kargil was, in fact, on the Pakistani side of the LOC until 1971, when the Indians evicted Pakistani troops in a surprise attack.

### The Terrain

The terrain around Kargil is amongst the most beautiful in the world. It is also amongst the most difficult to conduct military operations in. The Kargil mini-war was fought over an area extending from Dras to Kargil and Batalik, an area spanning about a hundred kilometers in length. Craggy peaks abound the region range in height from 13000 feet to 18000 feet, with the floor of the valleys at around 7000 feet. Each crest line is followed by another, with ravines in between, and there are frequent depressions (even along the crest line of one continuous feature), which could range from a few hundred feet in depth to a few thousand. Therefore, infantry attacks, unless backed by surprise, are an exceedingly costly venture. What is more, they are almost certainly doomed to failure.<sup>1</sup> The extremely harsh and inhospitable nature of the terrain was the reason for the Indian troops taking a 'calculated risk', leaving it unoccupied during winters, and returning at the advent of spring.

What are referred to as 'roads' in this mountainous terrain are usually tracks, which nevertheless can accommodate heavy traffic, including military vehicles. The tracks invariably run along valleys, in

this case from Dras to Kargil fairly close to the heights. At Dras, the road curves right under the predominant heights, making the entire Main Supply Route (MSR) feeding the surrounding area (including Siachin) vulnerable to interdiction, even with small arms. Most valleys in the region range in span from a few hundred metres to a couple of thousand. At Dras the valley is at its widest, ranging between five to seven thousand metres, which enables it to house a small cantonment. It is from this cantonment that, at the advent of spring, troops return to occupy the heights they have vacated in winters.

### Preliminaries

Sometime around mid-November 1998, Lt Gen Mahmud, then commanding 10 Corps, sought an appointment with the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Gen Pervez Musharraf, through the Chief of General Staff (CGS), Lt Gen Aziz. When he went to see him, he was accompanied by the General Officer Commanding (GOC), Frontier Constabulary of the Northern Areas (FCNA), Major General (now Lt Gen) Javed Hassan. They sought permission to execute a plan, which had previously been shelved, to occupy terrain in the Dras-Kargil sector, vacated by the Indians every winter. The rationale was that it would provide a fillip to the Kashmiri freedom movement. The plan was approved in principle, with instructions to commence preparations. Knowledge of this plan was to be confined to the four people present, for the time being.

It is useful to interrupt the sequence of events here, in order to draw a brief

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pen-picture of each of these four characters, as I know them. Doing so will provide a better understanding of the Pakistani adventure in Kargil, in which these characters played a prime role. Obviously, these will be incomplete, focusing essentially on the traits relevant to the events at Kargil. Equally obvious is the fact that the assessment of their characters is mine and, only as accurate as my knowledge of them, and my ability to assess another human being.

*Gen Pervez Musharaf:* A sharp and intelligent artillery officer, he commanded infantry formations from brigade upwards, and held a large variety of staff and instructional appointments. A bold commander, who takes pride in being decisive, quick to take decisions and, therefore, a good commander of troops and keen to assume responsibility.

*Lt Gen Mahmud Ahmed:* Again an artillery officer, with a wide variety of experience. He is sharp, intelligent and arrogant. So arrogant, in fact, that towards the end of his career it became overwhelming. A strong, forceful, decisive and highly ambitious individual, he was secular until he 'discovered' the force of Islam late in life. As a consequence, perhaps, he became dangerous in the way that anyone will become if they believe they are 'incapable of doing wrong'.

*Lt Gen Muhammed Aziz:* More than anyone else, he has been painted the villain, and the 'fundo' (someone prepared to misinterpret religion in its puritanical form so as to justify acts of violence), which he is not. Deeply religious, but very balanced, he was born

Kashmiri, and has served in some of the most rugged reaches of it at various stages of his career. He is strongly patriotic and deeply committed to the cause of Kashmir, but not to the extent that it might jeopardize Pakistan. He is intelligent, sharp, very balanced, progressive and dynamic.

*Major General Javed Hassan:* A highly intelligent and well-read officer, he is more of an academic than a commander, and bears that reputation. He, therefore, was the only one with a point to prove.

While preparations for executing the plan began in November/December 1999, the subject was casually broached with Prime Minister Sharif at some point in December. He was presented with the same argument that the freedom struggle in Kashmir needed a fillip, which could be provided by an incursion into these (temporarily unoccupied) territories. Sharif, being the type of person he is, accepted the statement at face value. The military leadership had not presented a complete analysis of the scale of the operation or its possible outcome, nor had they set out its political aim and how it would be achieved.

At this stage the rest of the army was unaware of plans for the operation (as indeed were the Chief of Air Staff [CAS] and the Chief of Naval Staff [CNS] too), and preparations proceeded in secret. The operation was, in my view, not intended to reach the scale that it finally did. In all likelihood, it grew in scale as the troops crept forward to find more unoccupied heights, until finally they were overlooking the valley. In the

process, they had ended up occupying an area of about 130 square kilometres over a front of over 100 kilometers, and a depth ranging between seven to fifteen kilometres. They were occupying 132 posts of various sizes. Whereas the total number of troops occupying these posts never exceeded 1000 (from all ranks), four times this number provided the logistical backup to undertake the operation. While the occupants were essentially soldiers of the Northern Light Infantry (NLI), there were some local *Mujahideen* assisting as labour to carry logistical requirements.

It was at this stage, in March 1999, that the leadership of the army was apprised of the operation and the Military Operations (MO) Directorate in GHQ was tasked to evolve a strategic operational plan, which would have a military aim to fulfill a political objective. Given the fact that they were developing a plan to justify an operation already underway, the response was no less than brilliant. Given the total ratio of forces of India and Pakistan, which was about 2.25:1,<sup>2</sup> the MO concluded that the initial Indian reaction would be to rush in more troops to IHK, further eroding their offensive capabilities against Pakistan. As a consequence, they concluded that India would not undertake an all-out offensive against Pakistan, since by doing so it would run the risk of ending in a stalemate, which would be viewed as a victory for Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> It is for this reason that I maintain the view, which is held by no other analyst (to my knowledge) of this episode, that war, let alone nuclear war, was never a possibility.

The political aim underpinning the operation was 'to seek a just and permanent solution to the Kashmir issue in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir'. However, the military aim that preceded the political aim was 'to create a military threat that could be viewed as capable of leading to a military solution, so as to force India to the negotiating table from a position of weakness'.<sup>4</sup> The operational plan envisaged India amassing troops at the LOC to deal with the threat at Kargil, resulting in a vacuum in their rear areas. By July, the *Mujahideen* would step up their activities in the rear areas, threatening the Indian lines of communication at pre-designated targets, which would help isolate pockets, forcing the Indian troops to react to them. This would create an opportunity for the forces at Kargil to push forward and pose an additional threat. India would, as a consequence, be forced to the negotiating table. While it is useless to speculate on whether it could in fact have succeeded, theoretically the plan was faultless, and the initial execution, tactically brilliant. The only flaw was that it had not catered for the 'environment'.<sup>5</sup> Quite clearly, it was an aberration to the environment, and the international reaction soon left little doubt of that.

Soon thereafter, the first formal briefing of the entire operation was made for the benefit of the prime minister in April, in the presence of the other services. Since the CNS was on a visit abroad, the navy's reaction was voiced cautiously, but the CAS was openly critical and skeptical of the

conclusion that India would not opt for an all-out war. He also voiced the view that in the event of war, the air force would not be able to provide the support that the army might seek.

### The Battle

By the third week of May, the Indian leadership began to have some idea of the extent of the penetration. They tempered their initial boastful claims of ousting the intruders in a matter of days, to weeks, then to months, and finally they expressed a hope that they might be able to evict them before the onset of winter, but were not sure of achieving even that. Meantime, in Pakistan, the decision had been taken to deny that the intrusion had been perpetrated by military troops, and instead put the blame on the *Mujahideen*. In the period up to the third week of May, the Indian army made numerous unsuccessful forays into the region and suffered heavy losses. At about this time, the Indians decided to escalate the war vertically, by using air power. They also decided to bring in their 400 odd 'Bofors guns'.<sup>6</sup> In fact only about 170 were introduced, but these were destined to play a decisive role.

The inclusion of air power was not very successful. Within a few days, on 28 May, two MIGs were shot down by Pakistan. The following day Pakistan shot down two helicopters. The Indians' lack of success had nothing to do with effort, but rather the nature of terrain, which ensured that bombing had little chance of working unless it was laser-guided - the only kind that *could* be accurate in this terrain. Since this terrain also made

it impossible for the Indians to put troops on the ground, they tried using helicopters, which forced them to expose themselves.

Early in June the Bofors guns began to arrive. Since Dras was the locality where Indians were most vulnerable, they decided to start there. Deployment was possible because the great depth of the valley provided the necessary space. While only forty or so guns could be deployed here, they were sufficient. Under cover of fire, elements of 2 Rajputana Rifles captured what the Indians called 'Tololing top', (Point 45907), the most dominating height directly overlooking Dras, on 12 June. An adjacent post was captured on 13 June, and Tiger Hills (Point 5140), another dominating height, fell on 20 June. Without in any way undermining the courage and determination of the Indian soldier, the deployment of the Bofors could not but result in the capture of these peaks (see Figure 1). But they could not effect the same military outcome in other places, merely due to the nature of the terrain, and the lack of space and depth to deploy the Bofors.

### The Aftermath

Nawaz Sharif, who had been gloating over the drubbing that the Indians were getting, began to feel uncomfortable. In all fairness to him, the military leadership had failed to apprise him of the politico-diplomatic fallout and he characteristically made no effort to analyze this aspect. The international pressure was becoming unbearable and, when the posts at Dras fell, he began looking for an escape route, not

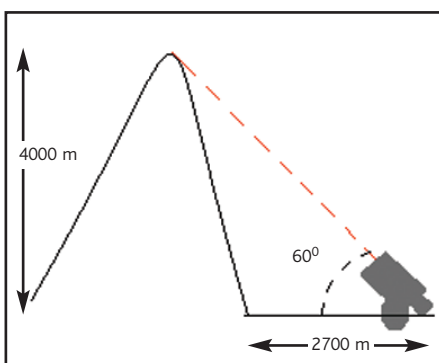


Figure 1 A gun deployed at a distance of 2700 metres from a mountain 4000m high will fire at an angle of 60° but will ricochet off the top. With a distance of 4000 metres it gets an angle of 45° and will be able to engage the top, and anything further will enable the gun to engage lower heights and move upward ahead of attacking troops, providing 'covering fire' for infantry attacks. Without covering fire an attack in this terrain is bound to fail.

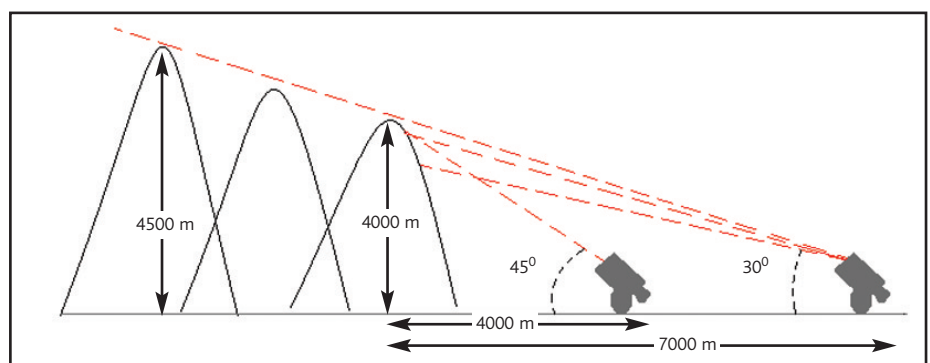


Figure 2 also shows why heights in depth, even if greater than the ones in front, are impossible to engage. This was the significance of the depth of the valley at Dras.

appreciating the military causes of battle, which the army made no effort to explain. Sharif was very worried about the reaction of the military leadership, realizing that a withdrawal might result in his untimely ouster. He responded by dispatching his brother, Shahbaz Sharif to Washington, where he succeeded in getting the US administration to issue a warning that it would regard a military coup in Pakistan as unacceptable. Not only did this serve to warn the military leadership of the prime minister's fears, it also shed some light on the possible course he might pursue later. The Indian leadership had been offering Sharif an 'out' – a statement by him that the Pakistani army had undertaken the operation without political sanction. Had Sharif accepted this offer in time, he might have survived (even though it would have made him look foolish). He

lacked the political acumen, however. When he finally accepted the offer - after being forced from power - he found few believers.

During the last briefing in late June, the COAS, General Musharaf, told Sharif that, while the military did not believe that India would succeed in ousting Pakistani troops from the posts they were holding,<sup>8</sup> the army would pull back if the government so desired. After some frantic telephone calls by Sharif to US President Clinton, in which he conveyed his desperation at the course of events, he went to Washington. He met Clinton on 4 July, and armed with guarantees of his support, returned to announce the withdrawal of the 'freedom fighters' occupying Kargil.

Sharif was still apprehensive, however, and also uncertain of his ability to survive his decision to pull back. Had

he been otherwise, things might have continued more or less as normal, and the Pakistani people may still be saddled with him. Instead, he began to call upon the COAS to proceed against the principal actors in this episode and get rid of them. He also convinced Mr Niaz Naik<sup>9</sup> to give an interview to the BBC stating that India and Pakistan had been working towards a peaceful solution of Kashmir, which was hijacked by Kargil. Musharaf resisted, believing that if heads were to roll, his would be the first. Sharif's plot to get rid of him was unsuccessful, and the rest is history. Sharif was deposed and Musharaf assumed the mantle of leadership.

As indicated above, Pakistan's first error of judgment was to undertake the operation at a juncture when the entire international community was bound to condemn it. Not only was the 'Lahore

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process' being viewed with hope, India had returned to the limelight in the US's eyes and Vajpayee was just establishing himself in power. Kargil had the capacity for creating political chaos in India, which was the last thing the world wanted. If it had succeeded, the Advanis and George Fernandes' would have been India's future. This, in my judgment, would have meant disaster for everyone, including Pakistan. If Kargil had taken place a year earlier, the reaction might have been less adverse.

As if this were not enough, Pakistan decided, for some inexplicable reason, to disclaim responsibility for the incursion. Not only did this cause considerable politico-diplomatic embarrassment to Pakistan, it also made other truthful assertions suspect. American intelligence had already confirmed a military presence there. Tapes obtained in Pakistan of a conversation between the COAS and the CGS during a trip to China added further confirmation. To top it off, Pakistan was giving away gallantry awards (including the highest military award in Pakistan) to soldiers who, we averred, were not fighting a war!

Nonetheless, having suffered the condemnation and the embarrassment of being caught in a blatant falsehood, if the planning of the complete operation was as meticulous as I understand it to have been, the leadership might have been better to allow it to run its course. The operation was, beyond any doubt, brilliantly planned. If the military leadership was convinced (and some of them managed to convince me) of the

possibilities of its success, it might have been better to see it to its logical conclusion.

The military takeover was 'written on the walls of Kargil'. Even if Sharif had succeeded in his endeavours to oust Musharaf, he could not have lasted. No political government could survive the sacking of two army chiefs in one term<sup>10</sup> in Pakistan - an unfortunate reality. It now appears that Pakistan will return to some sort of 'controlled democracy' (whatever that means), with Musharaf as the ultimate, untrammelled 'check and balance' to a puppet government, for a minimum of five years. His steps so far are appreciably in the right direction, but whether absolute power will corrupt absolutely, only time will tell. Even if it turns out for the best, the idea of democratic dictatorship is unpleasant. Yes, Kargil is an ongoing process, with the ultimate outcome still awaited. ■

### FOOTNOTES

1. *The size of the feature dictates the number of soldiers it can accommodate: usually between four to twelve per post. The size of the approach to the top dictates the number of soldiers that can approach it abreast, typically between eight to twenty. Consequently, the battle is heavily weighted in favour of the defender.*
2. *It is generally accepted that the required ratio for a force launching an offensive to have chances of success is 3:1. However, in mountainous terrain the required ratio may be many times more. If the present total military capabilities (including quality, quantity, numbers, etc.) - were measured, I would support the estimate that MO came up with in 1999. However, this relationship is not permanent, and, given their proposed military spending, will undergo a drastic change in favour of India in a year or two.*

3. *While the general view was that nuclear deterrence was the cause of Indian restraint, I tend to agree with the conclusions of MO. It is my view that India toyed with the idea of an all-out war in late May/early June, but the military leadership could not guarantee the defeat of Pakistan. Consequently, it was decided to confine the battle to this small chunk of territory.*
4. *My input on the subject is from a number of highly placed sources, on the condition of anonymity, during and immediately after the episode. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the words, but can vouch for the essence of the two statements.*
5. *At the National Defence College, while teaching operational planning, the first factor to be considered is 'environment'. The word refers to the national and international dimensions, on the basis of which one can decide whether the political aim could be acceptably achieved, and if so, to develop a military plan that could succeed within the given environment.*
6. *Swedish made field howitzers, light and portable enough to be inducted into area.*
7. *Point heights indicate the height of the feature in metres.*
8. *The army had continued to assert that no posts had fallen to the Indians, which reaffirms the contention that no effort was made to explain such a loss, or why it could not recur. However, in this case, it appears that Sharif found the Indian claims more credible than the Pakistan army's denials.*
9. *An ex-foreign secretary of Pakistan involved in 'track two' diplomacy with India.*
10. *In October 1998, Sharif sought and obtained the resignation of Gen Jehangir Karamat, then COAS, over a disagreement, when he publicly recommended the formation of a National Security Council.*