
Kargil 1999: Limited War, Unlimited Consequences

Rahul K Bhonsle

Introduction

In the 60 years of conventional conflict in the Indian subcontinent, operations in Kargil 1999 or Operation Vijay marked a turning point in the evolution of Indian war-fighting. For a war which lasted for less than 60 days from contact to severance between opponents, this may seem an overstatement. Yet the overall context, reactions and consequences attributable to the Kargil conflict would substantiate this proposition. Kargil also marked the turning point in Indo-US relations. India came to be regarded as a responsible nuclear actor in the international arena leading to the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership, culminating in the Indo-US Nuclear Deal and 123 Agreement.

The localised limited war, as the operation is being referred to by some, was the first fought under the nuclear overhang in the traditional Cold War paradigm of deterrence and within the sub-text of the stability-instability paradox. Kargil also marked a significant shift in conventional doctrinal thinking in the Indian military, which was subsequently refined after the experience of Operation Parakram, to the Cold Start.¹ An examination of this transformation and its impact in the conventional warfare discourse in the years ahead needs consideration. Kargil, thus, provides an important benchmark to flag a number of issues in perspective. This paper posits that while operations in Kargil in 1999 were restricted in scope, their consequences have been far-reaching. The paper would cover the issues, including setting the trend in security sector reforms; implications of the Line of Control (LoC) as the international border; transformations in Kashmir from militancy to proxy war; LoC formalisation

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and Indian war-fighting strategy; Kargil, Parakram and Cold Start Doctrine; and Kargil and nuclearisation.

Setting the Trend in Security Sector Reforms

One of the first impacts post Kargil was a review of the national security structure and responses. While such appraisals have been carried out earlier, for the first time, these were openly discussed thereby denoting a new trend of transparency not just in the security sector but the overall functioning of the Government in India. Kargil, thus, set the tone for 21st century security sector reforms in the country. It was the first time that a committee was set up and its findings were placed before the general public. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) Report brought to light many grave deficiencies in India's security management system, particularly in the areas of intelligence, border and defence management which were subsequently addressed by a Group of Ministers (GoM) to suggest institutional measures to overcome the drawbacks observed.

The impetus that the KRC and GoM provided to security sector reforms has set an important benchmark. This also led to recognition of national security as a complex dynamic which needs to be addressed institutionally. Many changes have, thus, been brought about over a period in security management. These organisational measures have facilitated overall reorganisation of defence structures, streamlining multiple facets of internal and external security though these may not have manifested in the manner it was originally intended. Since much has been said and written about the reforms in security undertaken post the KRC, apart from benchmarking it as an outcome of the Kargil conflict, this is not being dwelt upon any further.

Line of Control as International Border

An important outcome of the Kargil conflict was reaffirming the sanctity of the LoC as a *de facto* international border, thereby defining the geography of the conflict with Pakistan in the future. While the Shimla Agreement and the Lahore Declaration had established the commitment of the governments on both sides to do so, surprisingly the military in Pakistan seemed to believe that the LoC was alterable, albeit by an intrusion by the so-called, "Mujahideen".

India had the option of questioning the status quo once this violation took place. This was an operationally desirable alternative providing space for manoeuvre by the Indian forces to evict the intrusion. However, this option was

voluntarily abdicated. As Chief of the Army Staff, Gen Ved Malik writes in *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, during the Kargil operations, the term of reference for not crossing the LoC was given in a Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meeting and was one of the principal riders placed by then External Affairs Minister Mr. Jaswant Singh and reiterated by the National Security Adviser, Mr. Brajesh Mishra.²

This decision can be surmised to have been taken keeping in view the diplomatic and nuclear factors and consequent possibility of major power intervention.³ The limitations on crossing the LoC to an extent were dictated by an understanding that Pakistan would not concede a major defeat and would retaliate with nuclear weapons.⁴ The military accepted this decision without much discussion given the sound premise on which it was based. For the international community, India's decision not to cross the LoC also separated the victim, India, from the aggressor, Pakistan.⁵ While this was the imminent advantage that accrued, in the long term it deemed to convert the LoC into a *de facto* international border.⁶ It is not clear, however, if the intent of the Indian leadership in not permitting transgression of the LoC was to attain this objective or was for other reasons, as indicated above.

Clearly, this unofficial status of the LoC as the international border has dictated the course of Indo-Pakistan relations and possibly even resulted in a *détente* in the days ahead. As Dr S Chandrasekharan of the South Asia Analysis Group states, Kargil established the inviolability of the LoC thus, "The mainstream international perception, thanks to Kargil, is veering round to the view that the Line of Control cannot be altered unilaterally when both sides are nuclear capable."⁷ The Kasuri interview and the Track II negotiations between Ambassador Satinder Lambah and former Pakistan President Musharraf's close confidante, Tariq Aziz, as indicated by G Parthasarthy in the *The Times of India* highlight that a virtual understanding on the sanctity of the LoC had been reached with former President Musharraf.^{8,9} Musharraf seemed to suggest the same in his address at the *India Today* Seminar on March 7.¹⁰ It may not be far-fetched to believe that Kargil set the ball rolling for such an agreement. Though in the time-

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frame that this came about, other factors such as rejection of Pakistan's strategy of proxy war by the people of Jammu and Kashmir seemed to have played an important role.

Kashmir: Militancy to Proxy War

In the domain of counter-insurgency, post Kargil, Pakistan increased the scale and level of proxy war in Kashmir. It is believed that on January 7, 2000, Gen Musharraf gave a directive to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to intensify terrorist activity in Jammu and Kashmir through the activities of the Lashkar-e-Taiyyaba and the Harkat-ul- Mujahideen.¹¹ Thus, intensity of terrorist operations increased across the board and engulfed the Jammu region to cover Poonch, Rajauri and Doda, extending to Udhampur. Another substantive shift was that of suicide attacks, with the first happening in July 1999 on a Border Security Force camp in Bandipore.¹² On November 5, this came much closer to the centre of gravity of the army's operations in Kashmir, Headquarters 15 Corps in the high security zone of Badami Bagh Cantonment. The public relations officer, Major Purshottam fell a victim along with four others.¹³ This phase of suicide attacks continued through to 2002 with the most significant one occurring on December 13, 2001, on the Indian Parliament. This led to Operation Parakram, deployment of troops across the LoC and the international boundary for almost a year.

There were other indications of increase of intensity of terrorist operations by Pakistan such as increase in incidents of infiltration in Kashmir from 1,611 in 2000 to 1,812, in 2001 and 1,604 in 2002 which started tapering to 770 in 2003.¹⁴ Similarly, in the Jammu region, the number of terrorists increased from a low of 690 to a high of 1,300 in 2001.¹⁵ The induction of more Pakistan-based terrorists of the Lashkar-e-Taiyyaba, Jaish-e-Mohammad *et al* was the third facet which denoted to the Indian leadership the overall dimensions of militancy which had transformed from a politico-military campaign based on indigenous fighters to proxy war waged by Pakistani citizens wielding the gun.

However, the Indian reaction stymied the Pakistani intent by an effective counter- proxy war strategy with a comprehensive policy of sustained anti-militancy operations, intelligence build-up, economic development and rehabilitation of the Kashmiri pandits.¹⁶ The results were evident in November-December 2008 with the people opting for elections despite vituperative propaganda by the separatists.

LoC Formalisation and Indian War-Fighting Strategy

The traditional sequence of Indo-Pakistan wars has been two-phased: gradual escalation in the LoC sector in Jammu and Kashmir from infiltration and skirmishing on the tripwire to conventional operations followed by manoeuvres astride the international border. This phasing arose from a perception of the LoC as an alterable, ill defined cartographic alignment with a holders-keepers syndrome. Post Kargil, the entire Indo-Pakistan geographical barrier: international border, LoC and Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) came to be regarded as one continuum for operations. Evolution of the Cold Start Doctrine which specifically presages battle groups operating in Punjab and Rajasthan in case

of a conventional operation to respond to a terrorist strike, seems to bear out this surmise.¹⁷ Operational, tactical as well as logistics problems of conduct of operations in the mountains no doubt had an impact on this decision, but the implicit belief of a graduated response across the LoC to be escalated on the international border has been reversed, with firming in of the LoC as not just the *de facto* but the *ipso facto* international border after Kargil.

However, a corresponding operational dividend is not evident in the No War, No Peace posture on the LoC. Deploying 8 Mountain Division which has the unique motto of “Forever in Operations” in Kargil led to depriving the army of a mobile offensive formation trained for operations in the mountains. Fearing just such a scenario, the Kargil Review Committee had warned that eyeball-to-eyeball deployment should not be adopted, calling it a “trap of Siachenisation of the Kargil heights and similar unheld gaps.” Instead, it advocated, “a declaratory policy that deliberate infringement of the sanctity of the LoC and cross-border terrorism will meet with retaliation in a manner, time and place of India’s choosing”.

The issue was very clearly beyond the purview of the military for loss of territory *ab initio* and a “declaratory policy” would necessitate political approval. Any transformation in response by the army necessitated considerable debates

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in security circles which had not taken place, thus, leading to adoption of the most acceptable course. The overall defensive mindset could have also led to such a response. While in areas of Jammu and Kashmir, the necessity to control infiltration is also one of the primary reasons for such a deployment, in Ladakh and Kargil, there is no requirement of deploying regular troops, given that the LoC is now an internationally acceptable “border”.

Two factors seem to have influenced deployment on the LoC/ AGPL: the experience during Kargil and in the Siachen Glacier, of heavy casualties in recapturing heights lost to the enemy and lack of cartographic clarity. The Indian Army is loath to give up posts such as Bana on the Siachen Glacier, with the justified fear that once abandoned, it would be virtually impossible to reclaim the same in case it was occupied by Pakistan. Similarly, as the cartographic alignment was somewhat disputed, particularly with reference to certain dominant points on the LoC such as Point 5353 and Point 5070 in the Dras sector and similar features in other areas, deployment of troops was the safe option exercised by commanders in the front line.

The performance of 8 Mountain Division during Operation Parakram seemed to substantiate the prevailing wisdom of defensive deployment. The extensive domination of the LoC by this formation had led, as per a report by Sanjay Ahirwal of the news channel NDTV, to dismissal of the entire Pakistani chain of command, including the brigade commander, and the divisional commander of the Northern Areas for their general failures and particularly the loss of Point 5070 in the Dras sector.¹⁸ That their counterpart on the Indian side, Lt Gen Deepak Summanwar was awarded the Uttam Yudh Seva Medal is an acknowledgement of the total Indian dominance of this area. As Ahirwal states in his report for the Indian military, “Operation Parakram was seen to have shown off India’s resolve to have an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with Pakistan. It also helped achieve some political and military objectives”.¹⁹

Let us examine the alternative. Instead of deployment of troops on the ground for extended periods, the Kargil Review Committee had recommended development of intelligence through satellite imagery and high altitude unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), with arrangements to disseminate information so generated to make it widely available for imposing caution on Pakistan for a misadventure. Thus, the need to occupy the heights, a large number of which were over 5,000 metres, requiring specially acclimatised and equipped troops for extended periods, was to be avoided.

Kargil and firming of the LoC, thus, provided the Indian side an adequate capability for responding with minimal deployment of forces. While the vulnerability of the road linking Srinagar and Leh in close proximity of the LoC was one of the premises on which Pakistan had conducted the intrusion in Kargil, establishment of sanctity of the LoC negated this premise. While the possibility of using this as a route for infiltration continued, this was restricted to the window of summers extending from May to October.

This provided the Indian forces an opportunity to reshape their operational doctrine in the area and, as suggested by the Kargil Review Committee, avoid "Siachenisation". By laying a tripwire of surveillance, early warning devices and selected physical deployment of troops, retaining mobile reserves ready for offensive operations at the bases, any possibility of ingress by Pakistan could have been avoided. That this was within the realms of tactical possibility was demonstrated by lessons derived from infantry operations in Kargil. Given the integrated air and land fire support means, particularly direct firing 155mm artillery guns, well trained and motivated units such as 2 RAJRIF, 13 JAKRIF and 8 GRENADIERS amongst others, demonstrated the efficacy of eviction of the enemy from heights approximating 5,000 metres.

A key indicator of capability of infantry in the mountains is recycling of troops carried out for attacks on more than one objective. Thus, 2 RAJRIF and 18 GRENADIERS participated in operations in Tololing and soon after in Tiger Hill. Captain Vikram Batra of 13 JAKRIF was awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously for leading attacks on Point 5140 in Tololing and Ledge in Point 4875 complex, indicating the tactical feasibility of assaulting these features.

There was a golden opportunity for reviewing the operational doctrine in the area from a defensive one to that of offensive defence which would have been less taxing on the troops. Underlying, of course, is an assumption that temporary loss of territory is acceptable. This solution may, however, not be applicable to the Siachen Glacier at present, given that the AGPL has not been delineated and accepted by both sides.

Kargil, Parakram and Cold Start Doctrine

The doctrinal aversion in the Indian military has been a bane of the past. In an interview with Praveen Swami, the Chief of the Army Staff, Gen Padmanabhan during Operation Parakram lamented that lack of an appropriate military doctrine and definition of war objectives undermined the overall impact of the long stand-off with Pakistan.²⁰ The dichotomy in the doctrine was evident, as the

general reiterates, that while some in Delhi wanted the army to strike terrorist camps immediately after the December 13 attacks, he preferred to muster enough forces to ensure that Pakistani forces were comprehensively defeated thus, "If you really want to punish someone for something very terrible he has done, you smash him. You destroy his weapons and capture his territory." The limited strikes would have been, as per Gen Padmanabhan, "totally futile."²¹ A prominent drawback faced to attain this aim was location of offensive formations in depth areas with 1 Corps based in Mathura, 2 Corps in Ambala and 21 Corps in Bhopal. The defensive formations which were located close to the international border/LoC had limited capability to strike. Thus, starting a war in January 2002 would not have attained the desired objectives.

The general, reputed for being a cerebral chief stated, "You could certainly question why we are so dependent on our strike formations and why my holding corps don't have the capability to do the same tasks from a Cold Start? This is something I have worked on while in office. Perhaps, in time, it will be our military doctrine."²² Today, this has been translated into the much talked about Cold Start doctrine, thereby creating a limited offensive capability in the holding or pivot corps.

The use of defensive formations for a limited offensive role was also seen for the first time in Kargil, a concept which has been applied in Cold Start. 8 Mountain Division and reserve brigades such as the 79 Mountain Brigade were employed for the offensive, rather than 6 Mountain Division. The former was considered to be more appropriately placed, acclimatised for combat and suitable to strike than a formation which had a primary offensive role in the mountains. Given the problem of a short window of opportunity, employing forward deployed pivot formations for offensives which could later be converted into launch pads for strike formations may have been the underlying intent which could be derived from such a move apart from other local factors.²³ When applied in the context of the Cold Start Doctrine, employment of pivot formations may also provide an "operational LoC", the culmination point of offensive operations by the pivot corps. By imposing a time delay in launch of the strike corps, adequate opportunity for deterrence can come into play and avoid a nuclear engagement can be created.

But there is some criticism of the Cold Start doctrine. Given the nuclear context, the aim should be to upset the decision cycle of the enemy as demonstrated by the campaigns in the Gulf War by the United States in 1991 as well as during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.²⁴ While these campaigns may

not be exactly against the backdrop of a nuclear weapon, the threat of a chemical and/or biological attack existed, thereby enhancing the criticality in time. However, by keeping the Iraqi command and control in disarray, Saddam Hussein was denied the ability to deploy his forces to advantage. Such a capability would no doubt require a high degree of information superiority over the enemy which is thought to be difficult to attain in the Indo-Pakistan context, thereby leading to a much slower and pondering decision-making cycle based on territorial and counter-force gains as envisaged in the Cold Start Doctrine.²⁵ Yet if the Indian armed forces focus on information dominance in the future, it may not be difficult to attain.

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Kargil demonstrated to the Indian military leadership that Pakistan will continue to manipulate violence without leading to an escalatory conventional and/nuclear war.²⁶ Doctrinally too, the stability-instability paradox denoted that there was ample scope for Pakistan to wage a multi-dimensional proxy war.²⁷ Thus, drawing a holistic doctrine which caters for all levels of war to counter Pakistan's, "aberrant and errant behaviour"²⁸ was important. For a doctrine shy army, Kargil once again proved to be a turning point. The evolution of the Indian Army Doctrine 2004, Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations in 2006 and subsequently the Cold Start Doctrine are all trends in this direction.

Kargil and Nuclearisation

That the nuclear umbrella was a key factor in Musharraf's adoption of this operation is evident from the fact that this was rejected by the late Gen Zia-ul Haq and Benazir Bhutto when proposed to them as head of the Pakistan government. The nuclear tests changed the situation, thereby leading to Musharraf giving a go-ahead to the army.²⁹ Thus, Kargil outlined to both sides the nuances of conflict in the subcontinental context with nuclearisation.

The first lesson to emerge was that nuclear weapons do not deter a limited conventional conflict or salami slicing operations, as was intended by Pakistan. So also, sub-conventional operations such as proxy wars, cross-border militancy and terrorism are also not constrained.³⁰ Post Kargil and then Operation Parakram, the window of conflict was further narrowed to terrorism, and post Mumbai 26/11, it may have been constrained as far as Pakistan is concerned to

that of terrorist acts conducted by indigenous terrorist groups such as the Indian Mujahideen and not an intentional product of export of asymmetric power of the state from Islamabad.

For nuclear proliferation optimists, the Kargil War signified a considerably setback for it exploded the myth that possession of nuclear weapons deters a war between the possessors. Pakistan, with a declared first use policy, had indulged in a war, though localised, without possibly thinking through the possibilities of escalation, perhaps taking advantage of India's "no first use" policy. The Kargil conflict, thus, displaced the accepted nuclear theory presumably based on the logic of the nuclear tests in 1998 that Pakistan would not be overcome by the paranoia felt by the perceived conventional asymmetry and would opt for stability.³¹ This understanding was implicit in the Lahore Declaration of February 1999, yet failed the test in Kargil just a few months later. Pakistan used the threat of nuclear weapons for aggression rather than stability, resulting in manifestation of the classic contours of the stability–instability paradox.³² The defensive responses by India to these sub-optimal responses, with a high level of threshold of tolerance, also provided Pakistan with greater options for pursuing asymmetric war against the country.

Another facet of nuclearisation is that even a localised conflict or as is seen from Mumbai 26/11, a massed terror attack, can lead to international intervention.³³ For Pakistan, the offensive indulgence in Kargil led to being branded as an unreliable nuclear weaponised actor, a blot that it is finding it difficult to remove with the addition of the A Q Khan factor.³⁴

Kargil also brought out that while there is understanding of the stability–instability paradox, there is an incomplete comprehension of application of the same in the subcontinent. In the classic Cold War context, the United States and the then Soviet Union engaged within the context of this paradox in a number of crises, proxy and surrogate wars, without a direct conflict. As Michael Krepon denotes, "The stability/instability paradox was embedded in the enormity of the stakes involved in crossing the nuclear threshold".³⁵ No lessons were apparently learnt by the Indian establishment. Under the rubric of the stability–instability paradox, stability at the macro level is achieved through nuclear weapons and instability lies at the lower level, within the overall theory of nuclear deterrence.³⁶ It is evident that a thorough study and analysis of various dimensions of this phenomenon in the Indo-Pakistan context needs to be undertaken by India to face the continuing challenges of proxy war extended by Pakistan to the hinterland.

Kargil also defined the nature and extent of the window of nuclear as well as international diplomatic opportunity that was available for conduct of conventional operations. While the concerns of nuclear war in the subcontinent were evident in the various responses by the Indian leadership, the pressure that would come from the international community became evident only post-Kargil. Furthermore, Operation Parakram brought out that the window for conventional engagement before these pressures comes into play was highly restricted. When related to the long time required for mobilisation of the strike formations from their peace-time locations, the evolution of the Cold Start Doctrine was natural.³⁷

The Pakistani propensity to announce the intent to use nuclear weapons that has been evident from the time of the Kargil conflict was also seen during the most recent Mumbai strikes when the Pakistani military and political leadership did not hesitate in claiming it was a nuclear weapon state and, thus, could not be messed up with. Similarly, in Kargil, this threat was held out in the very beginning of the localised limited war.³⁸ Subsequent use of phrases such as, “one rung escalation ladder” has only added to the perception that Pakistan will use nuclear weapons much more readily than India seems to believe. While in recent years, the most oft quoted interview of Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai wherein he speaks of a series of thresholds, space, military, and so on, seems to denote a shift in Pakistani thinking, given the brinkmanship practised by both countries, it is unlikely to result in any change in perceptions in the days ahead.³⁹

Control of escalation is the essence of success in the subcontinental context where two nuclear powered adversaries are also economically not well endowed to withstand a high technology war. Thus, conventional and nuclear war avoidance seems to be predominant strategy being followed by both sides. Kargil 1999 provided a model of limited escalation by indicating the limits of aggression on the part of the Indian armed forces which had a well defined “red line”, the Line of Control. The Cold Start has to define these red lines across the international

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boundary in as general terms as possible without compromising the overall plan to give the desired degree of confidence to Pakistan that operations would be kept below the nuclear threshold at all times. Balancing this with the aim of operations may also be challenging. However, unless these or similar measures are taken, by using shock action and disrupting the decision cycle of the enemy, there is a scope for precipitating employment of nuclear weapons, fearing the worst.^{40,41} These are real-time issues with significant consequences which need to be debated.

The post-Kargil debates, thus, need to be enlarged to include the impact of nuclear weapons on limited wars localised in nature, as

well as subconventional conflict. This discourse will provide options to India for deterrence against proxy wars as well.

Conclusion

Kargil 1999 was more than a localised limited war with short-term consequences. Pakistan's aim in Kargil was quite clearly to force the Indians to operate from a position of weakness by cutting off the strategic links to Leh.⁴² The Pakistani leadership failed to appreciate the nuances of engaging in a conventional conflict under a nuclear umbrella. To that extent, Kargil was not a limited war. Another connotation of limited wars is that of these being limited by objectives. Were the Pakistani objectives in Kargil limited? The span of the objectives could range from the minimal, that of cutting off Leh to internationalising the Kashmir issue and coercing India to compromise by putting it in an unfavourable bargaining position. Thus, purely from the point of view of political objectives, these can hardly be regarded as limited as they were aimed at changing the territorial, and *ipso facto* the entire dialogue between the two countries.

As has been attempted to bring out in this paper, it also saw commencement of an extended dialogue on conflict scenarios in the Indo-Pakistan context which continues to this day. If Kargil established the futility of cross-LoC operations, hopefully other adventures such as Mumbai 26/11 may convince the Pakistani military the futility of such of "undeniable" acts of violence. Then President Musharraf learnt his lessons, starting with Kargil and Parakram, combined

with the salutary effect of control of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian Army, Trans-LoC engagements and extended deployment possibly led to convincing him to hold a composite dialogue with the Indian government, leading to the proposed détente. Today, it appears that we would have to reinvent the wheel to start the next round, post Mumbai 26/11.

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