


Some reflections on the Kargil Anniversary: Why Kargil Happened

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The Kargil Review Committee concluded that India failed to visualize the sort of audacious operation that Pakistan launched in 1999. Conversely, in hindsight we can state that Pakistan failed to predict how India would handle the situation militarily and politically. The result was a defeat as well as a loss of face and credibility for Pakistan. This paper aims to stimulate thinking why two antagonists who have a common history of the development of strategic thought, went so wrong in anticipating the actions of each other.

The development of Indian and Pakistani strategic thinking has its roots in organizational and operational experiences. Organizational synthesis can be traced back to 1858 when, post the 1857 uprising, the Crown took over direct administration of India from the East India Company. This also meant that the three independent Presidency armies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay started having a common military culture. The second step in organizational evolution was in 1895 when the first "Indian Army" was formed which was distinct but co-existed with the three armies of the Bengal, Madras and Bombay Presidencies. Lastly, the Kitchener reforms of 1903 merged the four armies into one army with common training and operational protocols.

The two Anglo-Sikh Wars, the three Afghan Wars and the two World Wars provided an operational culture to the British Indian Army which persists to a large degree today. During this period British military culture permeated into the DNA of those who would form the Indian and Pakistani Armed Forces. Post partition this was the culture which the two armies inherited and continued with till the 1971 war.

Military thinking till the 1971 war was rooted in British culture based on rational-actor paradigms. However, in launching the Kargil Operation, in our perception, the Pakistanis did not act rationally. A rational military plan would take into account an obvious weakness in the plan - logistics. It was an Indian conviction that a Kargil-like operation was logistically unsustainable. One can conclude that India and Pakistan have their own way to interpret, analyse and conduct war and react to strategic situations, and hence Kargil happened. In other words Indian and Pakistani strategists no longer mirror each other's thinking. The reasons for this schism are enumerated below which give some clarity to the issue - 'Why Kargil happened'.

- **Perceived Feeling of Victimhood.** When Pakistan came into being and the various facets of the economy were divided between the dominions of India and Pakistan, they were perceived to be unfairly divided. Contrary to the common perception in Pakistan, all the assets were fairly divided - mostly in ratios of 2:1 or 3:1 depending on various factors. This was done in the period 1947 to 1960. The last division being the Indus Waters Treaty. The continuing success of the treaty is a vindication of its fairness. However, some facets of the division could not be even due to geography. The three most economically vibrant regions, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, and politically the most important city, Delhi all fell within India. The latter has perpetuated the feeling in Pakistan of having been dealt with unfairly which engenders a feeling of victimhood. Countries, like individuals who suffer from the 'Victim' syndrome, tend to be aggressive.
- **Kashmir.** Gaining Kashmir is an obsession with Pakistan as it had made Kashmir integral to its name and identity. The obsession results in skewed decision-making where realistic planning falls victim to an unrealistic dream. This happened not only in 1999, but also in 1947-48 and 1965. In the later instances the anticipated uprising by the people of Kashmir on which the plans for war had been based did not take place.
- **Defeat in the 1971 war.** For Pakistan the psychological scars of the 1971 defeat are as deep as the scars that India carries of its 1962 defeat by China. However, India has endeavoured to engage with China which is proved by the quantum of trade we have with it. While maintaining status quo on the boundary issue we have greatly improved our relations. Pakistan on the other hand reinforces its anti status quo stand as status quo rules out the abiding desire of its military to extract revenge as well as redeem itself. Persistence of

psychological scars colours strategic thinking.

- **Islamisation.** Gen Zia-ul-Haq who was the military dictator of Pakistan from 1977 to 1988 exposed the Pakistani military thought to religious interpretation. This brought in a perception of supremacy and radicalisation on account of a divine covenant to protect and spread Islam. SK Malik's book 'The Quranic Concept of War' received Zia-ul-Haq's patronage. It talked about war not taking place between states but between Muslims and non-Muslims. When such thoughts creep in, the casualty is professional military thinking.
- **Revisionism.** Pakistan is anti status quo. The rhetoric of being a victim is used to perpetuate hatred by the ruling elites as a means to hold on to power. The same is used to perpetuate the Indo-Pak enmity. As Christine Fair states in her book 'Fighting to the End : The Pakistan Army's Way of War', "the Pakistan Army [...] will prefer to challenge the territorial status quo and India's rise under virtually all circumstances".
- **Exposure to the US Sphere of Military Influence.** Right from the beginning Pakistan followed a concept of alignment. In the early 1950's it was a member of the CENTO and SEATO regional grouping formed by the United States to hem in Russia. Later, after the 1962 war, following the adage that your enemy's enemy is your friend, it aligned itself with China. However, it did not break its bond with the USA. It served as a conduit for Nixon's talks with China as a frontline state in the American proxy war against the USSR in Afghanistan and as a reluctant ally in the US war against Al Qaida. This history of military cooperation has resulted in a great Americanisation of the Pakistani military mind. The numbers of Pakistani military officers attending training programmes in the USA has always been far more than from India. An example of Americanisation of the Pakistani military is the manner that Pakistan tackles insurgency in its own country, with the unrestrained use of firepower. On the other hand, close defence relations with the erstwhile USSR led to India's military thinking becoming 'Sovietised' but with an indigenous character. This was because of India's policy of non-alignment, which along with the barrier of language, ensured that the army to army contact was not as intimate.

Kargil was a seminal event in our history. It was the first time that the sacrifices, hardships, nobility of spirit and pain of war were brought vividly into the national consciousness in real time through television media. Names of features like Tiger Hill and Tololing etc and martyrs like Vikram Batra, Clifford Nongrum, Amol and Saurabh Kalia and many more have become a part of our national consciousness. A number of lessons were learnt in the operational sphere to shore up the bulwark of our defences. The lesson that this article seeks to explore is to bring in realization that, to keep our borders secure, we need to continuously keep abreast with and understand the Pakistani strategic and military psyche.

- *Views expressed are personal.*
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