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Pakistan's Compulsions for the Kargil Misadventure

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Pakistan's military move into the Kargil sector exploited the element of surprise in warfare and proved to be a repetition of its earlier strategy against India. During the 1947-48 and 1965 Indo-Pakistani conflicts over Kashmir, Pakistan Army planners had employed unconventional warfare in the initial phases of the war prior to the "hot" war stage. In the first two conflicts, political relations had deteriorated between the two sides prior to the outbreak of hostilities and, to that extent, the onset of war may not have been such a surprise. However, this time round the major difference was that despite the cordial state of political relations between the two sides, Pakistan simultaneously initiated military moves against India.

Clearly, the Kargil intrusions highlight a shift in Pakistan's strategy from a low intensity conflict operation (LICO), which was dependent on the infiltration of mercenaries into Indian territory, to mounting an attack by infiltration undertaken by professional military personnel masquerading as Mujahideen. In a sense, this was similar to their strategy in Afghanistan wherein Pakistani military personnel projected themselves as Taliban and achieved a military victory. The Pakistani intrusions were possible because the intruded areas were never held by either side owing to the adverse climatic conditions and the excessive force levels required to do so.

Following Pakistan's withdrawal from the Line of Control (LoC) and the hostilities winding down in Kargil, Drass and Batalik, the rationale for the recent brinkmanship emerges with more clarity. What were Islamabad's considerations for military posturing with India? Pakistan's policy formulation towards India is based on two components: the traditional sense of insecurity and the dynamics of domestic politics. Unlike traditional fears which are constant, the dynamics of domestic politics are volatile.

Aim

This paper aims to examine the rationale for Pakistan's military decision to cross the LoC on the basis of the long and short-term aspects. While a long-term consideration revolves around the basic insecurity of a smaller state, the short-term imperative involves domestic politics and the need to divert the people's attention towards external issues. This gives rise to a political dimension for the military operation and, therefore, the assumption that there was a shared agenda between the political and military leadership for the Kargil misadventure. Moreover, Pakistan's insecurity syndrome which is linked to the size of the country and its armed forces also

determines the nature of warfare best suited against a bigger neighbour. To understand these issues, the article analyses Pakistan's strategic stature, smaller nation syndrome, asymmetry of power, domestic politics, the role of political Islam, and unconventional warfare.

Strategic Stature

Pakistan's lack of strategic stature, comprising territorial depth, economy, military and population vis-à-vis India is the root cause of this insecurity. This deep-seated insecurity manifests from time to time through tensions along the border between the two sides and has almost become a semi-permanent feature of Indo-Pakistan relations. Likewise, the exigencies of Pakistan's domestic politics also condition Islamabad's relations with New Delhi. While Pakistan's profile or national characteristics have generally remained the same for the past five decades, its newly acquired nuclear weapon capability has altered the existing politico-military equations with India. To that extent, nuclear capability has induced a sense of strength and thereby security sufficient enough for a smaller state to provoke a bigger neighbour by occupying border territory. Pakistan's strategy during the pre-nuclear phase, for ten years from July 1988 to May 1998, was confined to waging a proxy war or LICO, with the government taking care to distance itself from the terrorist activities conducted on Indian soil. However, after going overtly nuclear on May 28, 1998, Pakistan's next major national security decision was to mount an attack by infiltration against India.

Smaller Nation Syndrome

Pakistan's persistent efforts to alter the balance of power in the subcontinent and achieve parity with India were partially successful due to its participation in US-sponsored alliances during the Cold War years. Smaller nations perceive threats to their survival as independent entities from bigger neighbours in the international system. In addition to the question of size, political instability, economic dependence on big powers, besides linguistic and ethnic diversities complicate their problems. It would, therefore, be relevant to enumerate the threats that smaller nations envisage to their security from bigger neighbours. These include: (a) outright incorporation of a state into another one; (b) turning a small nation into a colony or satellite; (c) imposition of an unpopular regime; (d) subversion; (e) undue influence over a small nation's external policy; (f) undue influence over a small nation's internal policy. ¹

The Pakistani state since independence has constantly raised the bogey of an Indian threat and its political leaders continuously promote a fear psychosis of war among the people. Their media also portrays a negative image of a militarised India with hostile intentions against Pakistan. This exaggerated theme dominates the entire outlook and thinking of the Pakistanis, owing to the Indian landmass of 1,269,640 square miles, with a population which is four times that of Pakistan. ² As a result of such propaganda, a sense of vulnerability tends to characterise the Pakistani mindset towards India. The line of thinking is that their country is easily accessible through road, rail, sea or air and it would be well nigh impossible to defend themselves with a physical barrier against such a potential Indian threat. In such a situation, the shield of religion serves as a useful protection and the cry of Islam-in-danger was raised and likely to prove more effective by virtue of being a natural barrier. It was likely to be more effective than a physical barrier. ³

Asymmetry of power

A Pakistani commentator holds the view that in the post-Cold War period, there is an imbalance of power and resources in the subcontinent which was managed successfully during the Cold War era. 4- To quote, "The basic agenda for Pakistan must centre on safeguarding the security and survival, keeping in view, the emergence to power and influence of extremist forces in India." The view further states that Islamabad in the 1990s finds the strategic environment unfavourable for its national security interests which include:

1. the Islamophobia of the Western world which is associated with preventing nuclear proliferation and the US-imposed country-specific embargoes on Pakistan.
2. Conflictual interests between the Western world and Islamic states over the control and exploitation of oil resources in Muslim countries.
3. The continuity of the close India-Russia relationship, rather than a better balance in Moscow's ties with the South Asian subcontinent.
4. The problems in the Pakistan-Iran relationship arising from their divergence of perception over Afghanistan
5. The rapprochement in India-China relations wherein China would like to promote peace in the region with a view to enable its own economic development.
6. Poor state of the Pakistani economy owing to short-sighted policies, mismanagement and absence of financial discipline which has blunted national progress in technology and industry, thereby enabling India to develop a technological edge.

A fallout of the asymmetry of power is that these two subcontinental neighbours are in a perceived arms race with each other, of the US- former USSR variety. In the 1990s, the two countries have acquired arms to cope with their external threats. India considers Pakistan a short-term military threat but envisages a strategic threat from China. In the process, India equips its arsenal in tune with this thinking but Islamabad views these military hardware acquisitions differently. 5-

A case in point is the Indian purchase of eight Russian designed Sukhoi 30 heavy fighter aircraft which were acquired in response to the Chinese purchase of Su 27 manufacturing facilities from Russia in the mid-1990s. For Pakistan, however, the whole and sole problem is India. And, therefore, its recent naval purchase of three French designed Agosta submarines are in all likelihood to counter Indian maritime power. This logic is applicable to the Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapon tests and the Prithvi and Agni and Ghauri and Ghaznavi missile programmes, respectively. Especially the Indian Pokhran and Pakistani Chagai nuclear tests are a classic case of this security dilemma in Indo-Pakistan ties. To that extent, these arms acquisitions which appear to be an arms race are not the case owing to a lack of reciprocity. This is because the Indian armament policy has to factor in the capability of Chinese weapons systems/platforms.

For Pakistan, Indian arms acquisitions create insecurity and in turn their military planners attempt to match the neighbour's weapon capabilities. As a result, such purchases of military hardware on the subcontinent *prima facie* would give the impression of an arms race. Eventually, these military hardware purchases, owing to sensational media reportage on both sides of the subcontinent, coupled with jingoistic statements by political leaders, add to the existing insecurity and mistrust in the two countries.

Domestic Politics

This mistrust is exploited by political leaders to project a threat from the other side only to divert the attention of the people from domestic problems. Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, on July 10, 1999, in a Star Television interview, accused Prime Minister Sharif of being party to the Kargil intrusions only to deflect public focus onto an external issue and away from his misrule. This statement cannot be dismissed lightly and needs to be understood in the context of the country's politics.

Prime Minister Sharif commenced his campaign against democracy with a constitutional crisis involving the president, the judiciary and the elected government over the elevation of some judges to the Supreme Court in 1997. Such a situation arose due to differences between the chief justice and the prime minister. In the process, the president resigned from office and thereafter brother judges deposed the chief justice. The entire exercise enabled Sharif to strengthen his position in the political power structure. After Sharif successfully neutralised the judiciary, he sought to Islamise the Constitution with the exclusive objective of emerging as the single power centre in the country. Finally, he started to lash out at the Press by attacks and arrests against high profile editors who were busy exposing his misdeeds and corruption over the past year. The Press had been critical of Sharif over various issues which include: the Karachi problem, the post nuclear test economic crisis, the Kalabagh Dam project, the army chief's removal from office and the 15th Constitutional Amendment to impose Islamic rule and governor's rule in Sindh. In the process, Sharif had a conflictual relationship with the fourth estate since he assumed office in February 1997 and he turned the tables on the Press corps by implementing the "black" Press laws towards the end of 1998. He thereby succeeded in muzzling the media in its attempt to play a watchdog in the democracy. However, the media being a very visible pillar of democracy, proved to be problematic for Sharif and perhaps resulted in a loss of political credibility.

The prime minister also consolidated his relationship with the military by appointing an army chief of his choice, General Pervez Musharaff, following General Jehangir Karamat's resignation, thereby ensuring harmonious relations with the military establishment. Benazir Bhutto in the same television interview stated that Prime Minister Sharif was the political face of Islamic militancy but sought to project himself as a moderate to the US leadership. The fact that Pakistani commentators believe that Sharif was a "creation of the Army and ISI" during the Zia regime only validates this utterance.

Role of Political Islam

During the late President Zia-ul Haq's regime, the fundamentalist Tablighi Jamaat, an offshoot of the Jamaat-e-Islami, developed close linkages with the Pakistan Army leadership. Another factor which strengthened Islamisation of the Pakistan Army was its collaborative relationship with the Afghan Mujahideen during the 1980s against Soviet military occupation in South-West Asia. Former Chief of Army Staff General Mirza Aslam Beg has recorded in his paper: [6](#)

The Afghanistan war of liberation experience provides the strength for the Kashmiri freedom fighter in the wider dimension of the conflict and should peace come to war ravaged Afghanistan, the Mujahideen would like to pay back their gratitude they owe to their Kashmiri brothers for joining them in their struggle against the Soviet aggressor.

Prior to this, the Pakistan Army has taken its pan-Islamic role very seriously and their personnel have even fought in the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars. [7-](#) Similarly, it may be relevant to state that Pakistan joined the UN forces in Somalia and Bosnia only because Muslim causes were involved there. This goes to show the degree of import that Islam has in the Pakistan Army. For instance, Pakistani troops are regularly given religious tests

based on the Islamic tenets which are intended to raise their level of indoctrination. The military promotes such religious exercises because it strengthens their identity and ideology which is based on religion. ⁸

The nexus has been well established between the Islamic fundamentalist groups like the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen which was supported by the Jamaat-e-Islami. The support was inclusive of money, weaponry and training assistance. Such assistance was in addition to the help from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The ISI established the Janbaz Mujahideen force to train Kashmiri militants in subversion in Pakistan occupied Kashmir.

In 1985, the ISI had instituted comprehensive terrorist training facilities for the Afghan Mujahideen in Pakistan. Some of these Mujahideen were indoctrinated that Islam was in danger in India, and then diverted to fight a guerilla war in Kashmir. At the same time, Pakistan and other Islamic republics pumped money into Kashmir to strengthen Islamic institutions like traditional schools for religious learning, and in the process, emphasise the role of Islam among the people there. Thereafter, with the rise of Islamic ideology in Kashmir, the bond between the Kashmiri insurgents, their supporters and Islamabad grew stronger.

The close working relationship between the Pakistan Army and the Mujahideen on the snowy Kargil heights only bears out the Islamic militant links of the armed forces. The fact that the army chief and the ISI chief are both prime ministerial appointees clearly indicates that Sharif was well aware of the clandestine operations in Kargil. To that extent, the policy to launch an intrusion was a shared agenda between Sharif and the army leadership and, therefore, the prime minister cannot distance himself from the Mujahideen or their activities.

Unconventional Warfare

A nation's military strategy is shaped on the basis of its strategic stature and a small nation which attempts to confront a bigger one, does so accordingly. In the Pakistani context, various factors including economic capabilities, education levels, technological strengths, strategic depth, foreign policy orientations, among others, determine military strategy. Mismanaged economic policies lead to inadequate spending on human developmental activities like primary education which reduces and would be vulnerable to aerial attack. Lastly, the foreign policy orientations, in terms of Pakistan's relations with the US and China, coupled with increasing interaction between their militaries, tend to influence professional outlooks and doctrines.

It would, therefore, be necessary to briefly explain the linkages among the economy, technology, territory and evolution of military strategy. Consider Pakistan's negligible development of indigenously designed weapon systems and thereby the reliance on hardware imported from foreign sources. During the late 1980s, the Pakistan Ordnance Factories were unable to productionise its main battle tank Al Khalid which snowballed into a controversy over an attempt to project the Chinese designed tank as one of indigenous design. Similarly R&D in military aeronautics too remains under-developed and hence neither licensed manufacture of aircraft, through transfer of technology, nor their indigenous development would be feasible. In such a hypothetical situation, therefore, an emphasis on armoured warfare would not be a meaningful doctrine as tanks would need to be imported which in turn would affect the level of foreign exchange reserves. Thus, owing to inadequate indigenous design or production capabilities in the country, military hardware assets like aircraft, tanks, or warships are all extremely precious possessions. For instance, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) chief had stated in 1997 that the PAF was unable to maintain an effective operational preparedness against India. ⁹ As a result, such hardware would be optimally used as defensive weapons rather than offensive ones. In the India-Pakistan context, Pakistan as the smaller of the two states, has historically relied on an unconventional warfare strategy against India which is a low-technology option and not very expensive except for perhaps involving the use of helicopters as a means of transportation.

The imbalance of power has traditionally prompted the Pakistan Army to emphasise the role of unconventional warfare or special operations involving the use of both irregular forces like guerillas and regular forces like commandos. The Pakistan Army's close relationship with the US military since 1952 resulted in the creation of a special forces or commando unit designated "Special Services Group" (SSG) in 1959. ¹⁰⁻ Also the Pakistan Army's connection with the Chinese Army was instrumental in its adoption of a people's war doctrine as applicable to the Kashmir context. Hence, the Pakistan Army has amalgamated the US and Chinese military strategies of special operations and people's war respectively to execute its recent "attack by infiltration" in Kargil against India.

In 1965, the Pakistan Army used the SSG of commandos to sabotage Indian Air Force bases at Pathankot, Adampur and Halwara. While the main body of commandos were parachuted into Punjab, a good number were dropped into other Indian states. For instance, it is reported that Pakistani commandos were also parachuted into various places which include: one company of commandos between 90-120 men are supposed to have landed 90 km from Delhi, a few were para-dropped near Gwalior, and small groups were located in a few districts of West Bengal and Assam. The commandos were generally tasked with targetting military and civilian installations like airfields, petroleum storage facilities, communication centres, ammunition depots, power houses, bridges and even industrial units. ¹¹⁻

The then Chief of Army Staff General Musa, in his book *My Version: India-Pakistan War 1965* refers to the use of SSG commandos and explains the reasons for their ineffectiveness during the 1965 operations. ¹²⁻ Firstly, their targets, especially the IAF bases at Halwara and Adampur, were too deep in Indian territory for the commandos to exfiltrate or exit safely to home territory. Secondly, the lack of proper army-air force coordination resulted in the commandos being para-dropped only a couple of hours before daybreak which did not give them adequate time to perform their missions and find their way back. He states that of the 180 commandos who were parachuted into enemy territory, only one officer and 10 men succeeded in returning safely to base.

The author, however, states that while the commandos may not have made a direct military impact, they were able to divert an Indian Army brigade group from participating in a major offensive in the Sialkot sector. ¹³⁻ The Indian troops were tasked to search and locate the Pakistani commandos and were successful to that extent. The other spin-off he claims from the commando action was to generate a fear psychosis among the Indian people, he adds. An Indian writer estimates that almost 800-900 commandos were parachuted into Indian territory. ¹⁴⁻ Probably General Musa's figure of 180 commandos only pertains to the group assigned to sabotage the IAF air bases and not the overall figure.

Concluding Observations

In India-Pakistan relations, the asymmetry of power is an inherent feature which fuels insecurity and results in tensions along the border from time to time. In such a situation, a smaller and, therefore, weaker state, is likely to attempt to correct the imbalance of power through force of arms at an appropriate time. Accordingly, Pakistan Army brass hats at the Rawalpindi-based General Headquarters (GHQ) believed that this was the most opportune moment to strike the enemy as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government was politically weakened and would, therefore, be incapable of taking hard decisions. For instance, India had never used airpower to strike the Pakistani intruders till now but the political decision to do so for the first time in such a situation helped to achieve military victory. The IAF was spectacularly successful in the aerial bombardment of the Pakistani supply dumps in the Muntho Dhaho sector which had the twin benefits of physically affecting their logistics, besides demoralising the enemy forces. ¹⁵⁻

Pakistan's intrusions into Kargil, could, therefore, be perceived as an act of desperation since the insurgency in Kashmir may not have been progressing according to their plans. At a macro-level, the Pakistani military initiative could be attributed to three objectives : military, political and diplomatic. And Islamabad's Kashmir-centric national security and foreign policy makes the Kashmir issue a common theme for these three objectives.

For Pakistani military planners, the compelling reason to initiate hostilities against India was aimed at cutting off the logistics route— the National Highway 1 Alpha to the Siachen Glacier—in order to eventually capture the area from India. The other objectives were to alter the status of the LoC and provide a stimulus to the weakening insurgency in Jammu & Kashmir. The Pakistanis possibly did not expect Indian troops to recapture the occupied area as they were at an immense advantage due to their position on the heights. Moreover, the intruders had entrenched themselves so strongly into well-built bunkers that dislodging them would prove costly in terms of heavy casualties. The Pakistani planners, given these advantages, coupled with the element of surprise to begin with, had envisaged their military presence on Indian territory to remain unhindered till the onset of the approaching winter. Thereafter, under adverse climatic conditions their military objective would stand a greater chance of success against the Indian defending force. To that extent, the Pakistani planners had formulated an innovative military operation which faltered due to an unanticipated and hard-hitting Indian response.

For Islamabad apparently the Kargil intrusions served as a means to distract the people from the gross misgovernance at home and buy more time to survive in power. The national economy was already in shambles with the debt repayment burden being a major issue, and proved to be a serious problem for the government. This was further compounded by its decision to freeze foreign currency accounts in the post-nuclear test phase in May 1998 which only added to the unpopularity of the government, besides several other acts of omission and commission. Probably in the light of this background, for the political leadership, the intrusions into Kargil served the purpose of internal cohesion through external aggression.

Pakistan, as a nuclear weapon state locked in a conventional conflict with India, also a nuclear weapon state, would only heighten the fears of a nuclear flashpoint on the subcontinent and serve to internationalise the Kashmir issue. Such a situation would expectedly draw US attention to the problem which Pakistan thought could be made to work to its advantage provided the military situation was shaping favourably. This could be interpreted as the diplomatic objective for the Pakistani move into Kargil.

The Pakistani gameplan as it unfolded, during May and June 1999 appears to have had a limited agenda without earning any wider strategic gains. Evidently, the army leadership alone, without consulting the Foreign Office, appears to have planned the attack by infiltration for reasons of ensuring operational secrecy as is evident from Islamabad's diplomatic debacle. Perhaps the GHQ at Rawalpindi planned the military move in isolation without factoring in the potential for a negative diplomatic fallout.

Endnotes

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Note 1: P.S. Jayaramu, *India's National Security and Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: ABC Publishers, 1987) p. 8; also see Jasjit Singh, "Insecurity of Developing Nations, Especially Small States", *Strategic Analysis*, September 1987, pp. 559-669. [Back](#).

Note 2: Ratna Tikoo, *India-Pakistan Relations: Politics of Divergence and Convergence* (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1987) p. 18. [Back](#).

Note 3: Aslam Siddiqi, *Pakistan Seeks Security* (Lahore, 1960) pp. 16-71, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 18. [Back](#).

Note 4: Dr Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti, "Coping with Imbalance in South Asia", *Dawn*, October 25, 1998, cited in P0T (Pakistan), November 8, 1998, pp. 2659-60. [Back](#).

Note 5: For a more detailed discussion on this theme, see G.C. Raju Thomas, "The Growth of Indian Military Power :From Sufficient Defence to Nuclear Deterrence" in Ross Babbage and Sandy Gordon eds., *India's Strategic Future* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992) pp. 35-38; Pakistani Foreign Minister Assef Ahmad Ali soon after the Indian Prithvi missile was tested said, " The Indians are pushing us into a missile race. They are pushing us into an arms race and this is indeed very unfortunate", *Strategic Digest*, August 1996, p. 1359. [Back](#).

Note 6: General (retd) Mirza Aslam Beg, "Defence Planning in the Era of Strategic Uncertainty", paper for the seminar on Asian Security in the 21st Century, held by the IDSA, New Delhi, January 27-28, 1999, p. 25. [Back](#).

Note 7: Army Liaison Cell (Army Headquarters) publication, "Islamisation of Pakistan's Military", p. 2. [Back](#).

Note 8: *Ibid.*, p. 2; also see "Army and Islam: An Appraisal", *Strategic Digest*, October 1996, pp. 1507-1512. [Back](#).

Note 9: In the mid-1990s, two PAF chiefs have gone on record about the PAF's increasing inferiority compared to the IAF. Initially, Air Chief Marshal Abbas Khattak said that the PAF is losing its combat edge over India. To quote, "That qualitative edge which we had before 1992 is eroding", *Strategic Digest*, September 1997 (Defence and Disarmament Review), p. 1502. Subsequently, Air Chief Marshal Pervaiz Mehdi Quereshi expressed worry over Indian air power capabilities. He said, " If this widening technological disparity between India and Pakistan is not plugged or narrowed down within the next 36 to 48 months, it would pose a direct threat to national security." He added, "India had as many as 232 hi-tech aircraft as opposed to the 32 F-16 fighter aircraft of the PAF", *Strategic Digest*, March 1998 (Defence and Disarmament Review), pp. 513-514. [Back](#).

Note 10: Jasjit Singh, "The Army in the Power Structure of Pakistan", *Strategic Analysis*, October 1995, pp. 875-876. [Back](#).

Note 11: H.R. Gupta, *India-Pakistan War 1965* (Delhi: Hariyana Prakasan, 1967) pp. 296-305. [Back](#).

Note 12: General (retd) H.J. Musa, *My Uersion: India-Pakistan War 1965* (Lahore: Wajidalis, 1983) pp. 78-79. [Back](#).

Note 13: *Ibid.* [Back](#).

Note 14: n. 11, p. 304. [Back](#).

Note 15: R. Prasannan, "An Attack: It is Unlike Any Other Air War", (cover story), *The Week*, June 13, 1999, pp. 36-37. [Back](#).