

Kargil 1999 – A Perspective

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It was a few months ago that a friend drew my attention towards an article titled “Putting Our Children in Line of Fire” by Lieutenant General Shahid Aziz (Retd), a Pakistan army officer and a former Corps Commander.¹ The opening paragraph of this reads, *“Kargil, like every other meaningless war that we have fought, brings home lessons we continue to refuse to learn. Instead, we proudly call it our history written in the blood of our children. Indeed, our children penning down our misdeeds with their blood! Medals for some, few songs, a cross road renamed, and of course annual remembrance day and a memorial for those who sacrificed their tomorrow for our today; thus preparing more war fodder for our continuing misadventures. Since nothing went wrong, so there is nothing to learn. We shall do it again. We decide. You die. We sing.”* A very scathing condemnation indeed; which set me thinking about the whole Kargil episode once again with an urge to put together the basic facts and details about that confrontation and views of some knowledgeable persons in the aftermath of these happenings; more of these from the other side.

Unfortunately, the importance of Gilgit and, in fact, of the entire Northern Areas was not appreciated by our leaders in power right from the day India became Independent. In stark contrast most of the strategic region of Northern Areas consisting of huge land mass of J&K territory, more than seventy thousand square kilometers of territory, was illegally occupied by Pakistan during the 1947-1948 Indo-Pak war. The successive governments of Pakistan have not only ruled this area directly by the central authority with a deliberate policy of suppression, deprivation as well as absence of civil rights and constitutional status; but also a large population of Afghan and Pakhtoon settlers has been encouraged and inducted into this region with an effort to dilute the Shia demographic profile of the region.

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For some reason the policy framers of India did not appear to have sufficiently realised the importance of Northern Areas from the national security point of view and practically made no efforts to wrest back Skardu and Gilgit from Pakistan during the 1947-48 conflict. In fact even Leh and Kargil were saved from Pakistani occupation, literally by skin of the teeth.² Thus at the time of the UN brokered cease-fire coming into effect from 01 Jan 1949, the existing position on ground remained unchanged in the Ladakh region. Subsequently also this area continued to be neglected and this resulted in major gaps in India's knowledge of Northern Areas and our intelligence agencies had difficulty in collecting credible human intelligence in this important sector.

The 1971 War with Pakistan, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, did not change the position on ground much, except that in Kargil Sector the Indian troops succeeded in capturing some of the important enemy posts overlooking Kargil town, removing the threat to Srinagar-Leh highway as also to the town itself which could be under direct observation from these posts. The most important gain for India was the capture of a mountain-top known as Point 13620, being height in feet of the feature. This fortunately denied direct observation to Pakistani troops, which otherwise could have proved very dangerous and costly to the Indian side as the hostile events started unfolding in the late nineties. However, notwithstanding its comprehensive defeat in 1971, Pakistan made yet another sinister attempt to destabilise things in J&K less than two decades later. The Pak inspired and aided militancy erupted during the middle of 1988 and gathered momentum slowly, assuming full blown proportions during the beginning of 1990, putting huge strain on the Indian Security Forces and inflicting untold miseries on the people of the State. From January 1990 to end September 1998, 43305 incidents of violence had taken place resulting in the death of 11307 civilians, 10429 militants and 1962 security forces personnel.³

Effective and forceful exertions of the security forces coupled with rising alienation of the local population with the militants, brought a turnaround in the situation which resulted first in the conduct of Parliament elections in May 1996, followed by Assembly elections in September the same year which brought back into power the popular government in the State. This gave a serious setback to Pakistani plans and delivered a grievous blow to the militancy

apparatus. This also marked the significant induction of foreign militants in J&K, their numbers and role was to progressively increase in the years to come. Thus, even after the mayhem created and sustained efforts of the past one decade, Pakistan had not achieved anything other than hurting and alienating people of the State. It was in this backdrop, and in sheer desperation that Pakistan seems to have focussed her attention towards Kargil. It embarked upon a desperate act and a reckless gamble. Lieutenant General Shahid Aziz has graphically and expressively described this venture as, *"An unsound military plan based on invalid assumptions, launched with little preparations and in total disregard to the regional and international environment, was bound to fail."*⁴

It must also be remembered that no part of the predominantly Shia population of Kargil district supported the game plan of Pakistan, nor Pakistan ever succeeded in clandestinely making inroads into Kargil. The people there have steadfastly remained uncooperative with the ISI and its militant organisations. If anything, the colonial type of rule imposed by it on the people of Northern Areas alienated the Kargil population even more. The pattern of Pak troops' infiltration across the Line of Control (LC) in this sector and occupation of some positions clearly indicate that they entered our area in such a manner so as to deliberately avoid any contact with the local population.

In most of the accounts pertaining to this period, one finds that not much has been written about travails of the local population as well as the problems faced by the civil administration and their exertions during this difficult and trying period. It is generally believed that the problems for the people and administration of Kargil started with the unprovoked military adventure of Pakistan in May 1999. But the difficulties there actually began almost two years earlier. It was on 13 Apr 1997 that Pakistanis shelled Kargil town for two hours creating large scale fear and scare amongst the local population. Then after a gap of six months the nuisance was repeated on 28 Sep. But the next day, things really became desperate when within a span of two hours, between two and four p.m., almost 60 shells landed in the town resulting in the death of 10 persons and inflicting injuries on 13 others. This practically turned Kargil into a ghost town, seriously disrupted the functioning of civil administration and put an unbearable burden on the already overloaded medical services. The seriously injured patients were

managed and operated upon with the active assistance of the army doctors and by sharing their facilities. This shelling continued intermittently through the whole of 1998 targeting the Kargil town and parts of the Srinagar - Leh national highway in the Drass sector. Some segments of this road around Drass were visible to the enemy and it brought down accurate artillery fire on the vehicles moving there, thus seriously disrupting the winter stocking and regular maintenance of the Indian Army in the entire Ladakh Sector.

During the winter months, corresponding roughly with the period between Nov 1998 and Feb 1999 there was respite from the Pakistani shelling. This period the district administration utilised to tie up loose ends and further shore up its preparedness to meet unforeseen situations. Even though at this stage nobody could predict the exact nature of Pakistani mischief as it later unfolded, but one thing was certain that the dreaded shelling would be resumed with nauseating regularity during the summer of 1999. By Mar that year the Deputy Commissioner's office was shifted from its regular location at Baroo, about two kilometres South of Kargil, to the Suru View Hotel in Kargil town. This served twin purposes. It was now much closer to the population of the district headquarters and was also at a safer place, being located in the shadow portion of the town, as viewed from the Pakistani side. Assured of safety every one could work there in peace. However, this arrangement was not to last long.

Towards the end of Apr the regularity and intensity of Pakistani shelling increased to a menacing level making the Deputy Commissioner to think about moving his headquarters to a totally safe and yet not very far location from the town. About ten kilometres South of Kargil, down the Suru valley, a 50 MW Hydel project was under initial stages of construction at Chutuk village and some office as well as residential units had been completed by the project management. He now decided to shift the important components of the district administration, including his office, to Chutuk. And that is where the entire set up remained till the situation fully stabilised. He also ordered moving of the civil hospital from the centre of Kargil town to the TB hospital premises at Titichumik, couple of kilometres to the South. Thus as the things began hotting up in Drass and Batalik Sectors as well as in Kargil town during the month of May, important components of the district administration, including medical facilities, had been very sensibly,

and with appreciable foresight, shifted to much safer locations from where these could function unmolested and without much disturbance.

It is now evident that Pak Army regulars, along with some elements of Lashkar-e-Toiba and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen were responsible for crossing the LC and occupying important heights as well as areas of tactical importance right from Mushkoh Valley in Drass to Chorbit La in Batalik and beyond to Turtuk in the North. The exact timing of this ingress and preparation of defences in each location is still not precisely determined; one can safely premise that this was managed during the autumn of 1998 and the spring of 1999. The infiltration appears to have taken place in two phases. The first and the deliberate one must have commenced sometime during the summer of 1998 and culminated in preparation of regular defences, stocking and arrangements for occupation of these new posts during long and harsh winter. In the next phase, the intruders either took possession of some of the Indian positions unheld during the winter before these could be reoccupied by our troops as per established routine, or moved forward and laterally from the prepared defences to enlarge the arc of infiltration. Even by the beginning of May 1999, when our forces on the ground became aware of the broad contours of Pak designs and the situation was pretty serious and grim, from the Indian point of view, the extent of Pakistani ingress had not been fully realised. By the middle of May, the army was discovering fresh Pakistani held positions on an alarmingly regular basis spanning the entire Kargil Sector.

Over the years many accounts, especially from the Indian side have been published which give a fairly accurate account of the force levels employed and the conduct of military operations. In this context, a special mention can be made of the book *"Kargil : Turning the Tide"* authored by Lieutenant General Mohinder Puri, PVSM, UYSM (Retd) who was commanding 8 Mountain Division and gives a first-hand account of the war. The Pak manpower in this sector appeared to be about eleven battalions comprising elements of Regular Army, Northern Light Infantry units, SSG troops and militants of different outfits. The Indian Army also reportedly deployed 300 artillery pieces, including 100 Bofor guns. The Air Force logged 550 strike missions, 150 reconnaissance missions and 500 escort missions. In addition 2185 helicopter

sorties were also put into operations. The cost of the conflict in monetary terms for India has been projected as 1100 crores. In terms of manpower, the most precious national resource, Indian losses were 527 all ranks killed and 1363 wounded. Pakistani casualties were estimated to be 1042 killed (Indian estimate); Pakistani official figure being 453 killed.⁵

Apprehending the escalation of this crisis into a major conflict, the American efforts to defuse the tension between India and Pakistan and disengage the two armies started on 15 Jun when President Clinton urged Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to withdraw Pakistan forces from the Indian territory. This was the beginning of the Indian diplomatic ascendancy which resulted in intense diplomatic activity over the next few weeks. The American pressure, widespread condemnation from the world community including China, coupled with Indian forces increasingly gaining an upper hand on ground, forced the Pakistani Army to start withdrawing its elements from middle of July and fully vacate the Indian territory before the end of the month. “Operation Vijay” was declared a success by the Indian Prime Minister. On a different plane, the most important assets were identified by a war-veteran of this area as, “Kargil proved that both young officers and the Bofors were a winning factor”.⁶

Notwithstanding the advantage of initial surprise gained by the other side, it does go to the credit of Indian Army that after the details of infiltration became apparent and seriousness of the incursions evident, it reacted swiftly and decisively, without taking any more chances. According to an estimate almost five additional brigades were moved into the area of conflict, almost post-haste, along with sufficient artillery components. The logistics for such a large scale movement and maintenance thereafter were also managed competently.

The induction of such large body of troops into Kargil, within a short time, necessitated shifting of a number of units, as well as formation Headquarters, from the Valley. These were successfully engaged in the counter-insurgency (CI) operations, being highly experienced and effective entities, against the militants. Even though some additional units of BSF and CRPF were provided in lieu, but these were much less in numbers as well as effectiveness. Thus Pak moves in Kargil did seriously and adversely impact the security

forces' drive against the militants. This gave the ultras time to regroup and rework their strategy leading to a marked increase in the level of violence over the next few years. In fact from 1990 onwards till 2015, as per records maintained by the J&K Police, the security forces casualties exceeded four hundred annually only during the four years from 1999 to 2002. The maximum spurt in the escalated levels of militant activities became evident during the year 2001, which recorded 4536 incidents of violence in which 1098 civilians died, 2020 militants were killed and also 613 security forces' personnel laid down their lives. The CI grid, so effectively established earlier by the forces, became strong and potent once again only in 2003. The CI measures were also significantly bolstered by the erection of Border Fence all along the LC in 2003-04. The fact, however, remains that the thinning of the CI grid on ground and loosening of the grip of the security forces deployed in the Valley was a direct result of the Pakistani intrusion in Kargil and it took considerable time and effort to regain the earlier levels of effectiveness.

During the months of May to Sep that year, the Kargil Operations gave rise to comments and analysis ranging from considerable admiration for the heroic performance of the Indian forces, in the face of very heavy odds, to the failure of the commanders and the units in not being able to track the enemy ingress well in time and take immediate counter measures. Overall handling of the problem and emerging scenarios, both at the military as well as the political levels also came under criticism. The expert commentators ranged from senior retired army officers to noted journalists and experts on security related matters. One expert opinion succinctly described the Pakistani game plan as, *"Pakistan relied primarily on troops from the Northern Light Infantry because soldiers from this regiment are mostly young local men from the mountainous regions of Skardu, POK, Baltistan, Gilgit and the North West Frontier Province. They are fully acclimatised to military activities at high altitudes. They were ordered to shed their uniform, put on salwar kameez, grow beards and wear skull caps. Most of the military operations were carried out by regular Pakistani officers and soldiers.... The Force Commander Northern Areas (FCNA) and the higher command of the 10 Corps of the Pakistan Army provided command and control and backup for the military operation"*.⁷ Noted defence analyst K Subrahmanyam reflected on

the more effective management of national security issues as, *“Kargil proves that national security cannot be handled as a part time vocation. It requires full time attention of a National Security Adviser and a fully and adequately manned National Security Council Secretariat and well-coordinated procedures to ensure that there are no lapses in intelligence assessment, policy formulation and purposeful direction in matters relating to country’s security. That calls for a total revamping of our national security set up, which has to be undertaken after the elections”*.⁸ It was due to the voices raised by veterans like him that the famous Kargil Review Committee was constituted and later parts of its Report also made public.

It would also be useful to glance at and have a bird’s eye view of the comments and views of experts on the other side that could come in the public domain. The first important reaction in the Pak media appeared immediately after the cessation of hostilities. It was a severe indictment of the system and makes interesting reading, as *“The finest institution in this land, the bedrock of our existence, is now directly under attack because an initiative was not fully thought out as to possible consequences. More than a hundred officers and men of this magnificent army have paid a terrible price in blood for this negligence. On the other hand, though belated, we have begun to recognise the sacrifice and valour of the Northern Light Infantry (NLI). This was a must., because of mishandling the Indians have turned their military disaster on the ground into a victory in the media”*.⁹ It is obvious that after this damning piece appeared in the media, further public criticism was stifled by the combined efforts of the Government and the Army. The 4th, 5th, 6th, 11th and 12th battalions of NLI that took part in the operations had suffered a large number of casualties. When the bodies of dead soldiers started reaching home, it led to a wave of unrest and some public demonstrations in the Northern Areas. After little over two months on 12 Oct, in a high drama of fast moving events, the democratically elected Government headed by Nawaz Sharif was deposed and once again the military rule imposed in Pakistan by the Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf. This development further put a strong lid on any potential criticism of the Kargil fiasco.

However, one year after the Kargil episode, in Jun 2000 a series of write-ups appeared in the Pakistan print media. Some of

them made scathing criticism of the handling of Kargil operations and also asked for a comprehensive inquiry into various aspects of the debacle, including role of the army there. Few representative samples are reproduced. *"The Kargil story begins in the Sep of 1998. Brigadier Surinder Singh of 121 Infantry Brigade had ordered, as has been the usual routine, his troops to descend from the heights of Kargil. Every winter, half a dozen battalions of Indian troops come down leaving behind some ten dozen well-stocked posts. The terrain is extraordinarily rugged and when snow sets in patrolling the 220-kilometer stretch is next to impossible. On the other side of the LC, it was going to be a busy winter. The force commander (Northern Areas), headquartered in Gilgit, commanding Pakistan's NLI, along with his superior the commander of 10 Corps in Rawalpindi, had set their eyes on unheld Indian posts around eight kilometres across the LC. In Oct 1998, by the time the withdrawal of Indian troops was complete, there was a change in command at the Pakistan Army. General Jehangir Karamat had to go and Lieutenant General Pervez Musharraf, Commander 2 Corps headquartered in Multan, took over as the new Chief of the Army Staff.... General Musharraf visited the Northern Areas twice during the winter of 1998-99.... In Feb 1999, oblivious of what was going on at the top of the world, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee launched his 'bus diplomacy'. By the time Vajpayee arrived in Lahore, the initial logistical support and preliminary formulation of the 'Kargil Operation' must have been in place. People in the know must have included the COAS, commander 10 Corps, the Force Commander Northern Areas and DG ISI..... Pakistan's aim behind Kargil was to 'internationalise the Kashmir issue'. It backfired both internationally and domestically. The entire civilised world took it as an act of 'aggression'. Even China told Pakistan to back off. Within the Pakistan Army it proved to be highly divisive. Young army officers felt deeply betrayed".¹⁰ On the same day demand for an inquiry was made in Dawn as, "There has almost been a universal demand for an inquiry commission to investigate the Kargil venture and this should be accepted. We have had too many convulsive happenings in our history left unexplained, most notably the fall of East Pakistan and the Ojhri Camp disaster. A beginning should be made".¹¹*

On 21 Jun, Dr Iffat S Malik lamented in an article in the News, *"From a Pakistani perspective the most humiliating aspect*

of Kargil conflict was the ignominious manner in which it ended..... There can be little doubt that India came out of the Kargil conflict in a much stronger position than Pakistan. New Delhi was successful in arousing international sympathy for its stance that it was the victim of Pakistani aggression and further that it had been betrayed by Islamabad, an accusation made in the context of the Lahore process..... As one looks back at Kargil one year down the line, the manifold mistakes that were made then are glaringly obvious. Unfortunately, realising where one went wrong does not alter what happened or the negative consequences that stem from it. Pakistan and the Kashmiris are still paying the price for Kargil”.

However, the most detailed, authentic and damning comments appeared in the monthly Herald.¹² The write-up also carried two box items titled, ‘Kargil – A Strategic History’ and ‘Minister Visits Hundur?’ Both of these complement the main narrative which needs to be quoted at some length. Here are few excerpts. *“There are over 500 flags flying across the entire Northern Areas, home to the Pakistan Army’s high- altitude warriors. The tombs are of the heroes of Kargil who fought valiantly in a war that seems to have many losers but no winners. Behind each of these tombs lies tales of struggle and valour, of neglect and disavowal, and of betrayal and unfaithfulness. But a year down the line these tales still remain untold..... By Feb 1999, the area was rich with its own version of events that were unfolding in Kargil. True to their tradition of glorifying soldiers, the people of the area were loathe to accept the Government’s claim that the militants had infiltrated deep into Indian territory. For the residents of Ghizer, Hunza and Baltistan, the districts which supply the bulk of NLI’s manpower, it was only NLI soldiers who were involved in these heroic deeds..... The area was rife with rumours that there may soon be serious skirmishes in the Drass-Kargil sector. But there was no information on what was actually happening on the frozen heights. The uncertainty gave way to panic in early Jun last year when bodies of soldiers started arriving at the villages more frequently..... Over the next month, 105 bodies passed along the jeep track that leads up to Yasin, Punial and Ghizer valleys in the central Northern Areas. Similar traffic appeared in the valleys of Hunza, Nagar, Gilgit and Baltistan.*

Residents of the area claim that the NLI soldiers who accompanied the bodies took care to move them at night to avoid publicity. As a rule, only one soldier accompanied the body. Shakoor

Jan's body, for instance, was brought by two soldiers in a private jeep which also carried the body of Sepoy Ibrahim. Both Ibrahim and Shakoor Jan were in track suits..... In both cases there were no military honours at the funeral, no hoisting of the national flag and no gun salutes. The soldiers who brought the body did not even offer a simple salute..... The miseries of locals were compounded by the stories of starvation and shortage of ammunition at the frontline that emerged around this time..... According to circles close to the top military authorities in the Northern Areas, by mid Jun 1999 almost the entire strength of 6 NLI on the Kargil front had been wiped out, while 12 NLI had also suffered heavy casualties. Though the Indians took more casualties than the NLI, they were able to clear the heights commanding the Srinagar-Leh highway by 26 Jun, thereby taking the sting out of Kargil operation.... According to another veteran of the Kargil war, the NLI high command had made a specific promise of establishing supply lines to positions on the heights. But it was not fulfilled..... Many residents also allege inaction on the part of commanding authorities of the NLI, claiming that an SOS was sent to the GHQ for reinforcements only after the troops in the forward positions had suffered a fatal set-back. Even then, the hurriedly called regiments from the Punjab could offer no help because they were not acclimatised..... On 26 Jun, the anger of the people spilled into the streets of Hunza where activists of the Karakoram National Movement (KNM) held a peace march between Karimabad and Aliabad and openly raised slogans against the manner in which the Kargil operation was being handled. At least a dozen leaders of the march were later arrested on sedition charges and kept in Gilgit jail for three months”.

The above mentioned article comprehensively describes and records the feelings of disappointment and frustration of the NLI troops and the people of Northern Areas during the critical six months of 1999. This is something which hardly came to the notice of Indian population or reached rest of the world. Also elsewhere in the same publication, monthly Herald of Jul 2000, Idrees Bakhtiar mentioned, *“Mr Nawaz Sharif's claims notwithstanding, the Government insists that all the key players during the Kargil affair were kept fully informed of all developments.... However, independent observers feel that there is still a lot about the Kargil affair that has not come out in the open.... While India has already*

conducted a detailed post-mortem of the event and made its findings public, albeit with appropriate security deletions, it seems that this crucial chapter in Pakistan's history will continue to remain shrouded in controversy".

And enveloped in secrecy and unanswered questions the whole Kargil affair has remained in Pakistan over the last seventeen years. No inquiry was ever ordered by the Pakistan Government and not even an in-house exercise carried out by the Army there to absorb and benefit from the lessons learnt from this messy and totally avoidable conflict. This was so because the persons in authority there, particularly the all powerful army high command, were never interested in the truth coming out and relevant facts becoming public. To quote Lieutenant General Shahid Aziz (Retd) again, in this context, *"Whatever little I know, took a while to emerge, since General Musharraf had put a tight lid on Kargil. Three years later, a study commenced by GHQ to identify issues of concern at the lowest levels of command, was forcefully stopped by him. 'What is your intent?' he asked."*³

In all the problems that have been created for India by Pakistan, the Pakistan Army has been a common denominator. It has also been a constant factor in the power equation in Pakistan, even when the Country is governed by the civilians. The Army there not only manipulates the levers of power, it has arrogated to itself the controlling role in all defence and external affair matters. No deviant behaviour is tolerated and levers of the state power are craftily manoeuvred to achieve the desired ends. On the other hand, as a society, government and the nation we have never displayed firm resolve in our dealings with Pakistan. Whenever India was forced to take up arms against this adversary, we have not shown willingness to fight to the finish and also displayed a lack of ruthlessness. India was always hesitant to enlarge the arc of conflict with Pakistan and has ever been magnanimous in its victory.

The story of our performance in managing the external affairs competently and taking meaningful diplomatic initiatives, at least in respect of Pakistan, has not been encouraging since then. There is an urgent need to undertake critical analysis in this respect. What the Country needs are foresighted statesmen at the helm of affairs, ably assisted by talented diplomats and military commanders

who are not only professionally competent but also have a clear vision and then capacity to take long term view of the issues involved, piercing through the fog of past events and current happenings. We need to build a capacity for long term strategic view and carry it through using all instruments of state power. Kargil affair caused India a lot of anguish. It also stirred her soul. But it did not become a watershed or a defining moment in the course of our history since Independence. Let the sacrifices of those who laid down their lives on those high mountains during that period, as also the ones who have died for the Nation since then, not go waste. Too much blood may have been spilled already.

Endnotes

¹ The Nation, Jan 6, 2013. This article is also available in the Blog of Gen Aziz at: "gen-azizshahid.blogspot.com".

² Bloeria SS, Battles of Zojila – 1948, Har Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1996.p-174.

³ As per the details compiled by the J&K Police.

⁴ Op. cit.1.

⁵ www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kargil_War#Casuaties. Accessed on 24 May 2016.

⁶ Brig Sukhdev Singh(Retd), VrC, MC, who commanded 1 Patiala during its historic battles in Zojila in 1948, in a letter to the author dated Oct 15, 1999.

⁷ JN Dixit in Indian Express dated Jul 22, 1999.

⁸ Times of India, dated Jul 26, 1999.

⁹ Ikram Sehgal, in The Nation, Jul 31, 1999; as reported in The Times of India dated Aug 1, 1999.

¹⁰ Farrukh Saleem in an article in NEWS dated Jun 18, 2000.

¹¹ Lahori in Dawn dated Jun 18, 2000.

¹² M Ilyas Khan in an article titled *Life After Kargil* in Jul 2000 issue of monthly Herald.

¹³ Op. cit. 1