

Indian Navy's Crucial Role in Operation Talwar: Securing the Seas During the Kargil Conflict

Introduction

On 23 May 1999, in a meeting between Chief of the Army Staff General Ved Prakash Malik, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), and Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Sushil Kumar, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, NM (Retd), the two chiefs agreed to take a joint service planning approach to operations in Kargil for the larger benefit of optimal utilisation of all assets. The war accordingly was to be fought in an integrated manner with detailed coordination between the three arms of the forces, which had a force-multiplying effect. General Ved Malik, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), writes in his book *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, “The Indian Navy had issued instructions for an alert before the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meeting and had deployed Indian Naval Ship (INS) Taragiri on a barrier patrol off the coast of Dwarka (in Gujarat)”. Immediately after the meeting, the Navy added two Information Warfare Dornier aircraft and also deployed INS Veer and INS Nirghat near Okha (also in Gujarat). The CCS meeting in the Operations Room took place on 25 May 2023. On 26 May 1999, the Indian air strikes began in Kargil.^[1] Once the Air Force and the Navy entered the fray, the Indian Army’s firm resolve to evict the intruders became very clear to Pakistan.

Operation Talwar was launched by the Indian Navy by deploying ships on barrier patrols off the coast of Dwarka to bottle up Karachi harbour, while elements of the Eastern Fleet were moved to supplement the resources of the Western Fleet.^[2]

In a crucial move aimed at ensuring offshore security from clandestine underwater attacks and integrating efforts of all maritime stakeholders, the Western Naval Command (WNC) sailed ships from Mumbai on 22 May 1999. By 25 May, the entire Western Fleet had sailed from Mumbai to the north of the Arabian Sea as a precautionary deployment to increase surveillance and adopt a deterrent posture. By 27 May, the Navy had deployed a guided missile destroyer off Saurashtra and positioned additional Dornier aircraft at Daman to augment surveillance.^[3]

Praveer Purohit, in his article ‘Kargil Vijay Diwas: How Indian Navy’s Operation Talwar squeezed Pakistan out of the Arabian Sea’ in the Indian Express, writes that Operation Talwar involved protective activities such as bolstering our coastal defence and jointly conducting maritime patrols along with agencies such as the Coast Guard, Customs, and police. Warfighting assets such as ships, submarines, and aircraft were fully armed and deployed. It wasn’t that the naval operations and activities were limited to the maritime domain. According to Admiral Sushil Kumar, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, NM (Retd), the Navy’s squadron of specially equipped Electronic Warfare (EW) aircraft operated extensively along the Line of Control in support of land operations. Specialist hydrographic survey teams of the Indian Navy were conjoined with the army’s artillery batteries to pinpoint gun locations.^[4] INS Hansa was actively involved with its naval air elements during the Kargil War.

By early June, combat-ready ships and units of the Eastern Fleet joined the Western Fleet. Although the Western Naval Fleet was adequate to deal with the Pakistan Navy and the force ratio was seven-to-one in India's favour, the Eastern Naval Fleet was diverted to the west and placed under the overall command of the Commander-in-Chief Western Command to deal with any maritime threat by Pakistan to India's strategic offshore assets.^[5]

By sending ships of the Eastern Naval Command (ENC) to join the fleet of the WNC in the Northern Arabian Sea, the Indian Navy blockaded Pakistani ports, primarily Karachi, cutting off supply routes and began aggressive patrols and threatened to cut Pakistan's sea trade. This exploited Pakistan's dependence on sea-based oil and trade flows. Major General Ashok K. Mehta (Retd) writes that in operational terms, the Eastern Naval Fleet was deployed to cover Pakistani shipping lanes from the Gulf to its ports. The Pakistan Navy flew its maritime aircraft, and once the scale and span of deployment sank in, it went into a defensive mode, warning its vessels to steer clear of the Indian Navy.^[6]

The sending of ships of the ENC to join the fleet of the WNC also enabled it to extend the range of deployment. Naval staff carried out an analysis of Pakistan's oil vulnerability and plans to interdict Pakistani tankers. The naval projection of 'Reach and Mobility' had an immediate impact: Pakistan naval ships started escorting tankers bringing oil from the Persian Gulf. By the second week of June, the Joint Western and Eastern Fleets commenced exercises to check the Navy's readiness for an all-out conflict. According to Vice Admiral GM Hiranandani, PVSM, AVSM, NM (retd), the Pakistan Navy dispersed its ships away from Karachi to its ports on the Makran Coast - Ormara, Pasni, Gwadar, and Jiwani.^[7]

Two weeks later, after Pakistan announced the deployment of missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads threatening India with nuclear strikes, Indian missile-armed ships responded by moving closer to Pakistan's coast. The message conveyed to Pakistan was not to escalate in Kargil or extend it to the sea. The Pakistan Navy, however, went to full alert, and launched additional surveillance sorties along its coast, all the while remaining clear of Indian naval ships and aircraft. Karachi Port was placed on full alert.

On 30 Jun, India's Amphibious Brigade started moving westwards from Port Blair to Goa. The presence of Indian naval ships played on the Pakistan Navy's apprehension of oil supplies from the Gulf being disrupted. Sensitive about the vulnerability of these oil supplies and aware that a naval engagement might expose its fuel storage in Karachi harbour and also its sea lanes to naval attack, the Pakistan Navy prudently escorted its oil tankers along the Makran Coast.^[8] The Indian Naval ships, however, did nothing to escalate tensions. In the ensuing operations, Indian naval ships arrested a North Korean ship that was carrying missile components to Pakistan.^[9]

Soon the Pakistani intruders were evicted from their bunkers, and by 04 Jul 1999, the Pakistani authority declared unconditional withdrawal. On 14 Jul 1999, Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee declared Operation Talwar a success.^[10]

In a skilful display of its prowess, the Indian Navy played a vital role in giving India the strategic upper hand in the conflict. The Pakistan Navy reacted by cautioning its units to keep well clear of Indian Naval ships.^[11] The Indian Navy thereafter remained fully alert, oscillating from an 'Offensive' to an 'Offensive-Defence' posture. The Kargil Review Committee report mentions that the Indian Navy also resorted to psychological operations by deploying units along the Makran Coast, which further put the Pakistan Navy on the defensive by making it escort Pakistani oil tankers between Karachi and the Gulf. Thus, while the Indian Navy's endeavour was in consonance with the national effort to prevent escalation of the Kargil Conflict, a high level of deterrence was maintained at sea by keeping the maritime front under close watch.

Commodore Srikant Kesnur & Commander Digvijaysinh Sodha rightly mention that Operation Talwar was a demonstration of the intent and capability of the Indian Navy.^[12] All elements of

the naval force were pressed into action to, first, ascertain the positions of the Pakistan Navy assets and, second, to ensure that India's high-value assets in the sea, Bombay High, as well as in the coastal areas, especially in Gujarat, were well protected.^[13] The idea was to provide no opportunity for Pakistan to claim success and to ensure that if Pakistan dared to think of expanding the battle from the limited Kargil sector, the navy would open another front in the south. The operation saw the largest deployment ever of combat ships in the Arabian Sea. India also increasingly engaged its naval aviation, submarines, amphibious units, and Coast Guard assets, conducting intensive operations such as EW exercises, sending a clear message of readiness and capability. Moreover, when Pakistani authorities began mentioning the possibility of nuclear escalation, India responded by positioning ships nearer to the Pakistani coastline, clearly signalling its refusal to succumb to nuclear threats.^[14]

It was not that the Indian Navy warships were unsusceptible to threats from the Pakistan Navy. Indian warships were vulnerable with no Anti-Missile Defence against the Pakistan Navy's deadly Harpoon Exocet sea-skimming missiles. It was a serious vulnerability, but the Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Sushil Kumar and the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, WNC, Vice Admiral Madhavendra Singh had taken stock of the situation.

The Indian Navy's experience during Operation Vijay (Kargil Operations) bears testimony to the utility of strong maritime forces in dissuasion and control of escalation. As Admiral Sushil Kumar stated, "The overwhelming superiority of our navy had a sobering effect on Pakistan". The Indian Navy's posture in the north of the Arabian Sea contributed significantly to the early achievement of India's operational goals and, more importantly, to limiting the scope of the conflict.^[15]

Endnotes

[1] Malik V P General, Kargil: From Surprise to Victory, 2006, accessed on 04 July 2024

[2] Praveer Purohit, Kargil Vijay Diwas: How Indian Navy's Operation Talwar squeezed Pakistan out of the Arabian Sea, Indian Express, 27 July 2023, accessed on 016 July 2024

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[3] Hiranandani, Vice Admiral GM. Transition to Guardianship: The Indian Navy 1991–2000. Lancer Publishers LLC, 2009, accessed on 14 July 2024

[4] Praveer Purohit, Kargil Vijay Diwas: How Indian Navy's Operation Talwar squeezed Pakistan out of the Arabian Sea, Indian Express, 27 July 2023, accessed on 16 July 2024

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[5] Hiranandani, Vice Admiral GM. Transition to Guardianship: The Indian Navy 1991–2000. Lancer Publishers LLC, 2009, accessed on 14 July 2024

[6] Ibid

[7] Cmde Srikant Kesnur & Cdr Digvijaysinh Sodha, Operation Talwar: How the Indian Navy silently contributed to Kargil win, 4 Dec 2019, accessed on 19 July 2024
<https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/041219/operation-talwar-how-the-navy-silently-contributed-to-kargil-win.html>

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<https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-how-the-indian-navy-silently-contributed-to-kargil-win-2971579>

[9] Cmde Srikant Kesnur & Cdr Digvijaysinh Sodha, Operation Talwar: How the Indian Navy silently contributed to Kargil win, The Asian Age, 4 Dec 2019, accessed on 19 July 2024
<https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/041219/operation-talwar-how-the-navy-silently-contributed-to-kargil-win.html>

[10] Ibid

[11] Praveer Purohit, Kargil Vijay Diwas: How Indian Navy's Operation Talwar squeezed Pakistan out of the Arabian Sea, Indian Express, 27 July 2023, accessed on 16 July 2024
<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/kargil-vijay-diwas-indian-navy-operation-talwar-pakistan-arabian-sea-8861420/>

[12] ibid

[13] Cmde Srikant Kesnur & Cdr Digvijaysinh Sodha, Operation Talwar: How the Indian Navy silently contributed to Kargil win, The Asian Age. 4 Dec 2019, accessed on 19 July 2024
<https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/041219/operation-talwar-how-the-navy-silently-contributed-to-kargil-win.html>

[14] Ibid

[15] Ibid

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