

Countering Operation Gibraltar: How India's Battle Plans Outmanoeuvred Pakistan's Infiltration in 1965

Introduction

Sixty years ago, in Aug 1965, South Asia was grappling with a very different kind of battlefield. Pakistan's gamble in Kashmir under Operation Gibraltar was supposed to be quick, deniable, and decisive. Instead, it pulled both nations into open war. Patrols returning with reports of strangers in remote meadows, villagers whispering of men posing as traders but moving like soldier, and Signals units picking up unfamiliar chatter, all pointed something unusual along the ceasefire line. Within days, these scattered signs began to converge into a clear picture: Pakistan had launched a large-scale infiltration, codenamed Operation Gibraltar.

This was no small raid. Entire columns, disguised as civilians, had infiltrated ceasefire line with tasks to cut roads, ambush convoys, and spark unrest that would tie down Indian Armed Forces. Their aim was to create a 'People's War' scenario with a view to justify Pakistan's intervention.

Pakistan's attempt was ambitious but fundamentally unsound. Their bid to destabilise Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) through mass infiltration was an early blueprint of hybrid warfare. Its failure, and India's response through the capture of Haji Pir Pass and securing other sectors, offer lessons in how flawed assumptions can unravel grand plans and how rapid, integrated action can blunt surprises.

Detection and Counter-Infiltration Operations

The infiltration of the Gibraltar Force across the ceasefire line and the international border began on 05 Aug 1965.¹ About 1,500 infiltrators crossed over in small batches.² Patrols in the Uri, Poonch, and Tithwal Sectors found themselves in sudden skirmishes with small armed groups. Signals units intercepted unusual frequencies, later confirmed as Pakistani military networks. It was soon clear that these were not random incidents but part of a coordinated infiltration. Each group was sent along a designated route with specific objectives. The plan failed with their early detection and lack of support from the locals, who gave away their positions.³

By 04 Aug, it was evident this was a coordinated military operation. Recognising the scale of the threat, Army Headquarters (HQ) authorised Western Command to neutralise infiltrators. 15 Corps first moved to choke infiltration routes. Battalions were redeployed from depth to blocking positions. Mountain artillery batteries were shifted to dominate likely approaches and mule trains sustained platoons on exposed ridgelines.⁴ Signals detachments embedded directly with Brigade HQs and ensured that intercepted

enemy transmissions could be turned into actionable intelligence within minutes. The Air Observation Post (AOP) helicopters, despite risk, scouted infiltration camps for strikes.

Having successfully carried out a counter-infiltration campaign, General Harbaksh pushed for three major offensives to seal J&K from further infiltration. The first was capturing three dominating Pakistani posts in the Kargil, thereafter, operations in Kishanganga Tithwal Sector and, finally, the strategic bulge between Uri and Poonch.⁵

Kargil Sector: Recapture of Kargil Heights

In the Kargil Sector, the first step was to recapture three Pakistani posts threatening the Srinagar–Leh Road. India had captured the heights in May 1965 but returned them in Jun under the UN appeal. In August, 17 PUNJAB held the sector, with two companies on picquets and two with Battalion HQ at the helipad.

On 14 Aug, CO 17 PUNJAB was ordered to seize Point 13620 Complex. The battalion regrouped to ensure that the defences remained intact. Major Balwant Singh, commanding D Company, was leading the Task Force. The objectives, i.e., Point 13620, Saddle, and Black Rocks, were to be captured by 0500 hours on 15 Aug.⁶ Three platoons advanced from different directions, climbing through gaps in the minefield created by engineers in the night. The operation commenced as planned and all three objectives were captured by the morning of 15 Aug, without any casualty.

Tithwal Sector

In Tithwal, the ‘Nusrat Force’ proved ineffective despite support from regular Pakistani troops near Mirpur. However, from 13 Aug to 18 Aug, the Pakistanis raided some Indian posts and indulged in intensive firing. In retaliation, on 24 Aug, Indian troops crossed the ceasefire line and occupied three Pakistani posts, and also found a divisional order signed by Major General Akhtar Hussain Malik.⁷

The objective of the limited offensive was to secure a series of tactically important features. On 23 Aug, a joint patrol of 2 RAJPUT and 3/8 GORKHA RIFLES occupied the Ring Contour without opposition, though the enemy shelled the area throughout the night. Next evening, 1 SIKH, supported by 138 Mountain and 17 Field Batteries, attacked the Richhmar Ridge. Major Somesh Kapoor assault routed the enemy. The advance continued and by 2250 hours, Richhmar Ridge was in the hands of Indian troops, capturing arms, ammunition, and rations, later used by Indian troops.⁸

On 25-26 Aug, the Sikhs captured the Pir Sahiba feature after a steep climb and close combat. They secured the area and blocked infiltration routes. In early Sep, they pushed north, taking more heights. On 03-04 Sep, 3/8 GORKHA RIFLES, with artillery, attacked Sunjoi feature. Two enemy counterattacks failed. The Gorkhas then seized the Ring Contour near Mirpur Bridge, which the enemy demolished while withdrawing. By 20-

21 Sep, 4 KUMAON captured Point 9013 after fierce fighting. This gave Indian Armed Forces complete control over the Mirpur Sector up to the Jura Bridge on the Kishanganga River.⁹

Uri–Haji Pir: Closing the Gateway

Haji Pir Pass was the key infiltration route between Pakistan-held territory and the Uri–Poonch axis. As long as it stayed in Pakistan's hands, Gibraltar's columns had free passage. The Indian Army next targeted the Haji Pir Pass. The Pass was dominated by three adjoining features—Bedori, Ledwali Gali, and Sank. Securing these was essential to main advance.

The operation was planned as a major pincer strike with a northern thrust from Uri and a southern push from Poonch–Kahuta with 19 Infantry Division tasked to lead the main effort. 68 Infantry Brigade led the northern advance, codenamed Operation BAKSHI.

Operation BAKSHI began at 2150 hours on 25 Aug. On the right, artillery shelled suspected positions at Point 9591, Sawan Pathri, and Agiwas. 1 PARA advanced towards Sank Ridge. The Pakistanis held fire until the attackers closed to 45 m, then opened, inflicting heavy losses on No. 3 Platoon of the 'A' Company. The attack was called off at 0930 hours due to heavy casualties.

The renewed assault began on the night of 26 Aug. 'B' and 'D' Companies of 1 PARA pressed forward, and by 0430 hours, 'B' Company stormed Pakistani MG posts at Point 9591, forcing the enemy to retreat to Sar. Sank was cleared, but fire from Sar had to be dealt with. 'D' Company seized Sar and advanced to Ledwali Gali, while 'B' Company pushed into Sawan Pathri and Agiwas. By last light, 'C' Company cleared the southern approaches to Sank. On the Bedori axis, however, progress stalled.¹⁰

On 27 Aug, Lieutenant Colonel Prabhjinder Singh tasked Major RS Dayal to take Haji Pir Pass with a small column. Starting at 1530 hours, Major Dayal's force pushed down from Ledwali Gali into the Hyderabad nullah through rain and darkness. They seized two intermediate heights before beginning the final climb.¹¹ At first light on 28 Aug, they reached the old Uri–Punch Road and after a brief rest, they pushed forward. By 0900 hours, only 700 m short, they were stalled by fire. But Major Dayal left one platoon to pin down the enemy while he led two platoons up a western spur in a daylight assault, overrunning light machine guns. The enemy could not stand this daylight assault and withdrew. By 1000 hours, Haji Pir Pass was in Indian hands.¹² In one stroke, Operation Gibraltar's main artery was cut.

Operation FAULAD

While 68 Infantry Brigade was capturing Haji Pir Pass, 93 Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier Zora Singh pushed north to establish a link up for lopping off the Bulge. Between Punch and Kahuta, a chain of hill features dominated the Punch-Haji Pir track.

The approaches to these picquets were defended by medium machine guns, mortars, howitzers, mines, and wire. 93 Infantry Brigade launched Operation FAULAD to achieve the Punch-Haji Pir link-up by capturing these picquets. The main features were Raja and Chand Tekri, both considered virtually impregnable. These picquets were defended by a battalion (less company) dug deep into shell-proof shelters and backed by artillery.

On the night of 05-06 Sep 1965, a simultaneous attack was launched on Raja and Chand Tekri picquets by 2 SIKH and 3 DOGRA, respectively. Intense artillery preceded the attack but did little against the fortified defences. As the approach lay along steep and slippery slopes, the assaulting troops crawled forward. Nearing the objectives, they were caught in a storm of automatic fire. The attack briefly faltered before troops dashed through mines and wire. A grim hand-to-hand battle raged for over two hours before the picquets fell.¹³

With the fall of Raja and Chand Tekri, the back of Gibraltar Force was broken in this Sector. The link-up was completed with the capture of Kahuta on 10 Sep 1965 and, with that, the Indian security forces closed the Bulge and sealed the Haji Pir Sector. Consequently, the enemy resistance east of the Betar Nallah also ceased.

Conclusion

Countering Operation Gibraltar was never a simple infantry contest. Artillery played its part, hammering infiltration routes into death traps. AOP helicopters flew low, spotting hideouts for shelling while drawing enemy fire. Signals detachments intercepted communications and pinned down commanders to the very folds of ground they were hiding in. This integration let brigades move from detection to engagement within hours. By early Sep, infiltration was ceased. Cut off and denied local support, the infiltrators were either eliminated, captured, or forced to retreat.

Operation Gibraltar was meant to be a covert blow, giving Pakistan deniability while undermining India's hold on J&K. Instead, it turned into a lesson in how bad assumptions and weak intelligence trigger failure. India answered this threat with calm but firm moves that involved counter-infiltration grids, thrusts across the ceasefire line, and rapid mobilisation. By the end of it all, Operation Gibraltar collapsed in less than a month. Pakistan's gamble was undone by swift diagnosis and sector-specific tactics. For India, the lesson was clear—if you want the threat gone, you hit the source, and you hit it hard.

Endnotes

¹ SN Prasad, UP Thapliyal, *The Indian-Pakistan War of 1965: A History*, Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, Government of India; 2011

² Farooq Naseem Bajwa, *From Kutch to Tashkent: The Indo-Pakistan War of 1965*, London, England: Hurst

³ Priyanjali Narayan, "When Kashmiris Foiled Pakistan's Villainous Plan to Snatch J&K with Mujahideen", *India Today*, May 09 2025, accessed 15 Aug 2025 <https://www.indiatoday.in/history-of-it/story/kashmiri-foiled-pakistan-plan-scratch-jammu-kashmir-india-mujahideens-1965-war-operation-sindoor-2722234-2025-05-09>

⁴ Captain Amrinder Singh and Lieutenant General Tajinder Shergill, *The Monsoon War: Young Officers Reminisce*, Roli Books, New Delhi:2015

⁵ Lieutenant General Harbaksh Singh, VrC , *War Despatches: Indo-Pak Conflict 1965*, Lancer International, New Delhi:1991

⁶ Singh and Shergill, *The Monsoon War*

⁷ "1965 war infiltration in J&K by Pakistan: Stories of courage and resilience", *Financial Express*, 09 Aug 2023, accessed 16 Aug 2025 <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-1965-war-infiltration-in-jk-by-pakistan-stories-of-courage-and-resilience-3205403/>

⁸ Prasad, Thapliyal, *The Indian-Pakistan War of 1965*

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nitin A Gokhale, "1965 War: The Battle for Haji Pir", *StratNews Global*, 29 Aug 2020, accessed 16 Aug 2025 <https://stratnewsglobal.com/pakistan/1965-war-the-battle-for-haji-pir/>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nilesh Kunwar, "Capture of Hajipir Pass: A Saga of Guts and Glory", *Indian Defence Review*, Sep 2020, accessed 25 Jul 2025 <https://indiandefencereview.com/capture-of-hajipir-pass-a-saga-of-guts-and-glory/>

¹³ Singh, *War Despatches*

Saransh Srivastav is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies (CMHCS), United Service Institution (USI) of India. He holds a master's degree in history from Ambedkar University Delhi. Prior to joining USI, he worked at the Centre for Community Knowledge as a historical researcher on the Delhi City Museum project in collaboration with the Delhi Archives. His work entailed conducting research and producing dissemination material on the thematic of Delhi's industrial past and developing a 'Then and Now' digital map of 'Shahjahanabad'. At USI, his work includes specific research on Wars and Operations carried out by the Indian Military post Independence and developing an archival repository for a joint project on Gallantry Awardees of India between the Ministry of Defence and USI. His research interest lies in political and social history, urban history, preservation and archiving, and heritage studies.

Article uploaded: 29-08-2025

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.