

Restraint as a Successful Strategy in the 1999 Kargil Conflict

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"We apologize for this temporary democratic interruption. Normal martial law will be resumed shortly."

— Graffiti on a Karachi wall, August 1990

"We should admit that Kargil has been a complete disaster and failure."

— Lt. Gen. (ret.) Kamal Matinuddin, Pakistan Army

"The tailpiece of the Kargil fiasco is difficult to match in the annals of diplomatic humiliation."

— Dawn, a Pakistani newspaper, July 21, 1999

Introduction

In 1999, General Pervez Musharraf, then Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) of the Pakistan Army, orchestrated a major intrusion into an unoccupied but strategically sensitive complex of Kargil along the northern border of India. The Kargil intrusion was an operation of strategic importance conducted by Pakistan to provide a much required momentum to its weakening proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), a state of India. Pakistan had waged an irregular war in J&K for a decade, exploiting religious similarities to incite secessionist activities by actively supporting, financing, and training insurgents, while exporting foreign radicals and so-called jihadist elements across the borders. This latest aggression across the border by the Pakistan Army was another attempt to redeem its prestige after the defeats of 1947–48, 1965, and 1971. The 1998–99 act of intrusion was of even greater significance because it was enacted during a political peace process when the then Indian Prime Minister was visiting Pakistan on invitation. The surprise intrusion, along a stretch of the border that had historically remained peaceful due to terrain difficulties, was a spark in an already charged regional tinderbox.

There was immense public support and political pressure in India for a full-scale war to teach a lesson to the neighbor that had crossed the borders to seize territory by surprise, using tribes from the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) or mujahedeen as a front, led by the Army, for the fourth time. The political leadership in India, however, showed great strategic maturity and restraint to limit the scope of military operations to the area of intrusion in Kargil, at the cost of sacrificing immediate strategic military victory and domestic political gains, in order to carve out long-term national strategic advantages of immense proportions. The Indian leadership preferred to trade the local military advantage for political, diplomatic, and economic gains at the international level. By showing restraint, political dexterity, and going beyond short-term political advantage, the Indian leadership exploited a crisis situation to propel the country onto the world stage as a responsible nation. This paper examines the process of decision-making at the national level in a highly charged environment of patriotic passion, uncertainty, and competing strategic objectives, and draws lessons from the Strategy of Restraint that resolved the Kargil conflict for major powers in the contemporary world.

Strategic Environment and Domestic Context in the Region, 1998–99

Strategic Environment

The 1990s were relatively peaceful globally, dominated by a single superpower amid expanding globalization. The United States, uneasy with its unipolar status, was largely inward-looking; Russia was absorbed in managing the collapse of the Soviet system and had, in the author's words, "no time for the world." China was focused on economic growth and emerging as a responsible power. In Afghanistan, the Taliban had taken control of some 90 percent of the country by the end of 1998 — a pro-Pakistan alliance trained and financed with US backing, which was regarded as a major success for the Pakistan Army and instilled confidence for future adventures.

Regional Dynamics in the Domestic Context

Both India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, effectively turning the subcontinent into a nuclear zone but also isolating both nations diplomatically, technologically, and economically as the world responded with sanctions and embargoes.

Pakistan

Pakistan's establishment was riding high on its perceived success in Afghanistan, which had provided "strategic depth" against India. Yet the country's economy was in poor shape, and the democratic government under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was mired in corruption allegations. Several factors converged: the loss of Pakistan's frontline-state status with the end of the Cold War, confidence born of the Afghan campaign, euphoria following the nuclear tests, and a perception that India's relative isolation created an opportune moment to avenge earlier military defeats.

Major Indicator of Intent

A key warning sign missed by Indian observers was the forced resignation of General Karamat, a moderate COAS opposed to military misadventures, and his replacement by General Pervez Musharraf — a hardline officer with close ties to the Taliban, strongly backed by religious groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami, who superseded two more senior generals.

India

A weak coalition government in India collapsed in April 1999, leaving a caretaker administration in place until elections scheduled for September 1999. India, too, faced international sanctions after its nuclear tests, compounded by a decade-long decline in defense spending (from 3.6% of GDP in 1987 to 2.3% in 1998) and an Army fatigued by prolonged internal security duties. Pakistani officials, including Lt. Gen. Javed Nisar, assessed the Indian Army as incapable of conventional operations — a miscalculation that set the stage for the intrusion plan long contemplated by Pakistani planners, previously rejected by both General Zia-ul-Haq in 1987 and General Karamat in 1998.

A Summary Account of the Kargil Intrusion

Strategic Relevance of Kargil

Kargil sits along an extremely sensitive 168-kilometer stretch of the border, with peaks averaging 17,000 feet, devoid of vegetation and cover. Both sides traditionally vacated these heights during winter due to extreme weather, making the terrain ideal for undetected occupation from the Pakistani side and correspondingly difficult and costly for any attacking force to retake — a textbook defensive position and, in the author's assessment, a masterpiece of planning by Pakistan.

Influence of Demography

The author argues that demography also shaped the choice of Kargil: the population on the Indian side was predominantly Shia Muslim, while the Pakistani side was Baltistani — both groups viewed unfavorably by the Sunni-dominated Pakistani establishment, which reportedly targeted population centers with artillery in this sector unlike elsewhere in J&K.

The Politico-Strategic Intentions of Pakistan in Kargil

- To internationalize Kashmir as a potential nuclear flashpoint requiring urgent third-party intervention;
- To alter the Line of Control (LOC) and disrupt its sanctity by capturing unheld areas in Kargil;
- To achieve a better bargaining position for a possible tradeoff against Indian positions in Siachen;
- To boost militancy in Kashmir by drawing Indian troops away from the counter-insurgency grid, while appealing to the fundamentalist lobby and the Pakistani public.

Operation Badr

The intrusion plan, eventually codenamed Operation Badr, was first presented to General Zia-ul-Haq in 1987 as retaliation for the 1984 Siachen setback, but was vetoed as militarily and diplomatically untenable, and twice rejected by Benazir Bhutto during her tenure as Prime Minister. The plan was refined by Musharraf as Director General of Military Operations in 1993–95, rehearsed in 1997, and perfected in 1998 while he commanded 10 Corps — the formation responsible for executing Operation Badr.

Dateline of the Kargil Conflict

Preparations accelerated after Musharraf became COAS in October 1998; the plan was reportedly approved by Nawaz Sharif around January 1999. Intrusion began around April 1999, was detected by Indian patrols in early May 1999, and the area was fully evicted by 26 July 1999. India suffered 461 killed (including 25 officers) and 683 wounded (including 54 officers); Pakistan lost roughly 700 soldiers and 45 officers.

Major Shock and Strategic Surprise to India

India's own Kargil Review Committee acknowledged that the operation was well planned and achieved considerable surprise. The strategic deception was especially striking because it unfolded even as the two prime ministers were engaged in an active peace process, including the Lahore Declaration signed by Prime Minister Vajpayee in February 1999 — by which time the Kargil plan had already been approved and set in motion.

The Process of Resolution of the Kargil Crisis by India

National Strategic Objectives of India Prior to the Conflict

India's overarching priorities at the time were to stabilize its economy amid globalization, break out of post-nuclear-test diplomatic isolation, assert leadership in regional groupings such as SAARC and the Non-Aligned Movement, and work toward a future permanent seat on the UN Security Council. India had also declared a “no first use” nuclear policy and a self-imposed testing moratorium as part of a broader diplomatic effort.

Dilemmas of the Kargil Crisis and Its Effect on Strategic Objectives

The intrusion posed a direct challenge to India's ambition to be seen as a responsible international actor. Escalating into full-scale war risked being cast as the aggressor and jeopardizing India's broader diplomatic and Security Council ambitions; doing too little risked loss of territory and prestige. Three broad options existed: declare full-scale war and exploit conventional superiority along the international border; limit operations to the LOC in J&K without crossing it; or pursue diplomatic and international mediation. Time pressure was severe, since Kargil-sector operations were only feasible in the June–August window before snowfall returned.

The Players

Multiple constituencies shaped the debate, each with a different reading of the crisis and different preferred remedies, complicating the path to a unified national policy.

The Public

Public anger demanded a decisive, full-scale response to punish the aggressor once and for all, intensified by daily media coverage and mounting casualties.

The Political Arena

Opposition parties pressed for maximal action, and the demand for war was echoed even within the ruling coalition, producing an atmosphere the author compares to the post-9/11 mood in the United States.

Economic Advisors

Advisors judged that India's economy could sustain a war and that such a conflict would bleed Pakistan far more severely — captured in Finance Minister Jaswant Singh's remark that for India the cost would be “a cut in the finger,” while Pakistan would “bleed itself dry.” Others favored a short, limited war to preserve international goodwill.

Foreign Affairs Leaders

Diplomats urged caution and restraint, noting that the ongoing Jaswant–Talbot talks and broader international sentiment were already tilting in India's favor, and recommended pairing military eviction with an information campaign exposing Pakistan's claim that the intrusion was purely a mujahideen operation.

Defense Forces

Despite years of resource constraints and continuous counter-insurgency duty, the military was in high morale and eager for conventional combat. With a roughly 2.5:1 troop advantage and overall equipment superiority, service chiefs favored a broader, full-scale response to exploit India's military edge, while also weighing the economic damage a wider war would inflict on Pakistan. The Army leadership, while accepting political limits, sought to extend operations across the wider LOC sector for greater operational flexibility; the Air Force was eager to test emerging doctrines of air superiority.

The Political Decision by the Cabinet

The Cabinet ultimately chose a restrained but full-scale response — combining all instruments of statecraft while confining operations strictly to the area of intrusion and barring any crossing of the LOC. The strategy was summarized as “contain-evict-deny.” The operation was conducted as a deliberate information campaign, framed as a Just War to build both domestic and international legitimacy, as underscored by Air Chief Marshal Tipnis's statement that the government wanted to ensure there was no

escalation.

The no-LOC-crossing restriction was controversial within military ranks — former COAS General Chowdhary called it “an impractical proposition” — because it forced Indian infantry into extremely costly frontal assaults up exposed slopes under sustained fire for hours at a time, and similarly constrained the Air Force to strike only from Indian airspace, exposing aircraft to man-portable air-defense systems and resulting in the loss of two fighter-bombers and two Mi-17 helicopters in the early days of the campaign.

Process of the Decision by the Cabinet

The Cabinet held extensive consultations with the service chiefs, and senior leaders made repeated visits to the front to assess conditions directly, closely involving corps and division commanders in shaping the strategy. The author identifies seven components underpinning the eventual strategy of restraint: exposing Pakistan's claim that the intrusion was a purely mujahideen effort; confining operations to India's own side of the LOC to preserve the moral high ground; concentrating force in the area of intrusion rather than opening new fronts; concluding the conflict quickly, before the next snowfall; capitalizing on favorable international opinion while it lasted; minimizing casualties; and maintaining unwavering focus on the core objective of eviction.

Direction of Operations

The military was designated to brief the media directly, lending the government's messaging credibility and consistency, while a parallel diplomatic offensive worked to discredit Pakistan's denials before the world. This combined effort isolated Pakistan even from traditional allies — China remained neutral, and President Clinton urged Nawaz Sharif to withdraw his forces from Kargil. By the time the eviction was completed on 26 July 1999, India's core objectives had been met, even as the human cost remained significant; the campaign also demonstrated the professionalism of India's forces, who succeeded at a favorable casualty ratio in one of the most difficult terrains on earth. Pakistan's setback culminated a few months later in the military coup led by General Musharraf against Nawaz Sharif on 12 October 1999.

Conclusion

Lessons from the Process of Resolution of Conflict

The author draws several broader lessons from India's conduct during the crisis. First, leaders must retain control during a crisis rather than being driven by popular passion, since the dynamics of war, once unleashed, are difficult to reverse or limit. Second, restraint is a tool of the powerful, not a mark of weakness — a reflection of confidence and strength rather than a concession made under duress. Third, restraint permits a calibrated, incremental response that draws on the full range of statecraft, since recovery becomes harder as violence escalates. Fourth, senior leadership should be wary of short-term, populist pressure from advisors focused on narrower agendas, and must instead keep sight of long-term national objectives.

Consequences of War in the Contemporary Environment

The author contrasts pre-20th-century warfare, whose consequences were largely confined to combatant states, with the interconnected effects of conflict in a globalized era, where disruptions ripple through oil markets, economies, and societies far from the battlefield.

Effect of Globalization on Conflicts

Citing the rise in oil prices and the broader economic and humanitarian toll of the Iraq war, the author argues that globalization has magnified the unintended consequences of conflict well beyond the states directly involved, with ripple effects that can push vulnerable states toward instability.

Restraint as the Realm of the Responsible

The paper closes by arguing that responsible, powerful nations bear a particular obligation to weigh the broader and long-term consequences of military action, and that a carefully calibrated strategy of restraint — short of total or unlimited war — can achieve national objectives while containing the wider fallout of conflict. The author suggests these lessons from Kargil remain relevant for major powers navigating contemporary conflicts.

Colonel D.P. Pandey was, at the time of writing, an international fellow attending the National War College course at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. An infantry officer, he served in varied terrain and environments and held numerous command and staff appointments over 23 years of service.

Appendix B: Dateline of Events in Resolution of the Kargil Conflict (1999)

May 3 — Indian shepherds sight Pakistani troops on Jubar Heights in the Kargil sector, well inside the LOC.

May 4–10 — Pakistani shelling and military activity increase; an Indian reconnaissance patrol is ambushed well inside Indian territory on May 10.

May 14 — Eight Indians killed in the Kargil town area; infiltration by Pakistani regulars confirmed in the Batalik and Dras sectors.

May 16 — Pakistan publicly denies its troops' presence while its own media claims the capture of several important Indian posts.

May 18 — India's High Commissioner to Pakistan publicly rules out full-scale war.

May 21 — The Indian Air Force is placed on full alert; three brigades are sidestepped by the corps commander to localize the response. Eviction attacks begin; Pakistan alleges India has crossed the LOC and General Musharraf warns of serious consequences.

May 22 — A Kashmiri militant group publicly claims to have captured several hundred square kilometers of territory from Indian forces.

May 26 — India's Cabinet Committee on Security clears air strikes on the Indian side of the LOC; strikes begin the same day.

May 28 — The United States publicly rejects Pakistani claims that India crossed the LOC.

June 6 — Clear evidence of Pakistani regular-army involvement emerges from captured soldiers and documents.

June 11 — Pakistan's ISPR acknowledges its forces are present in the Kargil and Dras sectors.

July 26 — The Indian Army declares completion of eviction operations in Kargil.

October 12 — General Musharraf leads a coup against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

October 17 — General Musharraf assumes power as Chief Executive of Pakistan.

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