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# Kargil War: The Final Battle

**Mohinder Puri**

## **Introduction**

Ten years have passed, more or less to the date, when the country was surprised by the Pakistan Army's intrusion in the Kargil sector, which set the stage for the fifty-day war. I had the honour and good fortune to command 8 Mountain Division, which had been moved from the Valley to the Dras-Mushkoh sectors to restore the status of the Line of Control (LoC). A number of issues, some important and some mundane, have been tickling my mind. I intend to put these down more comprehensively in my book, on which I am presently working. However, for the reader's interest, I have included some of them in this article for your reading pleasure.

## **Fighting the Last War**

During and after the war, there was criticism in some quarters that the Kargil War was not fought like a modern war but was fought more or less on the lines of the earlier wars. The critics frequently used the cliché that while generals prepare for the next war, they normally fight the last war. The reader must appreciate the environment in which we were fighting this war. The inhospitality of the terrain and the inclement weather were major factors which restricted and dictated our tactics and, consequently, the employment of troops. The initial advantage was with the enemy who had occupied tactical heights from where he could effectively dominate our movements by observation and fire. We had to evolve a method to evict him from these heights in the earliest time-frame and definitely before the

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onset of winter. Any delay in recapturing the area would have had a disastrous effect on our future deployment. Had we failed, he would have had a full season, albeit the winter period, to consolidate his gains and thus, claim the captured areas and redraw the LoC. Time and resources were both at a premium. On June 1, 1999, when I assumed command of the Dras-Mushkoh sector, I appreciated that my operations must get over by mid August. This would give me adequate time till early November when the road closes, to deploy my division in this area as well as logistically build them up for the long winter ahead, where at many places the temperature falls far below sub-zero.

In terms of resources, we were short of critical equipment which was made up as the operations progressed. However, I would like to highlight the innovativeness of my staff, which used their ingenuity in making up the critical shortages of support weapons, ammunition and equipment by pooling in the resources of battalions that were not going immediately into battle. The assault battalions were, thus, not short of critical items when they were launched for their attack.

The next issue which had relevance on our attack plans was the use of the air force. I am not going into the reasons why the air force was not employed in an earlier time-frame as enough has been mentioned and written on this aspect. I will confine myself to the employment of this force in extreme high altitude areas and its effect on our ground operations. In the initial stages of the war, the air force, like us, were neither acclimatised nor properly equipped to respond to the tactical requirements on the ground, with the result that the effect on the target of a number of their sorties was negligible. In fact, in an interesting incident, a commanding officer of a battalion, while in the assembly area for his first attack, passed a message to stop the air from engaging targets as their rounds were falling in close proximity of his battalion. We had to hurriedly pass the message to discontinue any further engagement. This is not to deride the impact of the air on our operations but merely to highlight that despite best efforts by our pilots, the results for a variety of reasons, like inhospitable terrain, adverse weather conditions, lack of training in operating at these heights, paucity or inadequacy of the right ordnance, were not visible. Moreover, the ideal approach for engaging the targets was from south to north, and since we were not permitted to cross the LoC, the air space available to the air force was considerably restricted, with the result that the air attacks, by and large, were from west to east which reduced the effect on the target. If I recall correctly, we gave the air force the Pakistan Administrative Base as a target. This was well concealed in a bowl close to the

LoC. Locating the target was difficult and even after the air force acquired the laser guided bombs in this area; they were unsuccessful in neutralising the target. However, the psychological impact of employment of the air force was immense. For us, it was a morale booster and for the enemy, a feeling of frustration.

In war, the potential of firepower as a battle winning factor cannot be relegated to an inessential commodity. While the air force had their constraints, our artillery also faced some inherent problems till the allocation of the Bofors regiments to my division. We had no gun locating radars which the enemy had and was using to great advantage. The counter-bombardment, in most cases, from his artillery was prompt, accurate and as time went by, highly predictable. Our 105mm IFG and 120mm mortars, with limited range, lethality and accuracy, were poor cousins in the battlefield. However, our equipment profile shortcomings were more than made up by our innovativeness in the employment of the Bofors and the grit and determination of the gunners. Engagement of targets, as with the air force, so with the artillery, was a major problem. The enemy had deployed himself tactically by cleverly using the reverse slopes for his administrative areas. We had no precision guided weapons to engage the enemy on the reverse slopes and, thus, effective engagement was only feasible when the enemy came on the forward slopes to man his defences. In the initial stages of the operations, we had tried to move the field gun for the direct firing role in the Dras sector, but were unsuccessful, mainly because of the limited range of the gun, and the difficulty in negotiating the steep gradients. The alternative which proved of immense help was the employment of the Bofors in the direct firing mode. In fact, the men developed great confidence in the gun, and there were occasions when we brought the fire extremely close in support of the assaulting troops.

The professional soldier, I am sure, will be able to visualise the constraints under which, we were fighting the war. We did not have the luxury of creating shock and awe in the enemy defences, and we could not, therefore, walk onto the objective with minimum casualties and resistance. The imperatives of terrain dictated the battles to be predominantly infantry oriented, with, of course, the support of the artillery and other arms and Services. We had to evolve a methodology to tackle each objective. In the mountains, the approaches are limited and one has to follow the spurs and ridgelines to reach the objective. We could not manoeuvre to his rear due to his pattern of deployment, and later as the operations progressed, our inability to cross the LoC became a restricting factor. In almost all cases, our attacks were multi directional and only when the terrain precluded launching of attacks from more than one direction did

we resort to a single approach attack. To the best of my memory, we may have launched an odd attack from one direction; but the bulk of the attacks were multi-directional. The attacks without exception were hard slogging matches, and it is to the credit of the infantry that despite heavy casualties, they succeeded in overcoming the odds to bring victory to the nation. In retrospect, I remain convinced that our methods to overcome the enemy opposition were

perhaps the best under the circumstances. In all modesty, I think, we rewrote the tenets of fighting in extreme high altitudes. We, unfortunately, took a heavy toll of casualties, but this was expected and was predicted. The terrain forced us to address each objective in the manner in which we did.

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### **Whose War Was It?**

Soon after the war, some critics raised the issue as to who actually won the war: was it the senior commanders or the junior officers? This is not to take away the credit from our junior leaders, particularly our junior officers who did a commendable job as is evident from the outcome of the war and the casualties suffered by these brave officers. There is no second opinion on this and it is my conviction that we perhaps have the best stock of young officers of any modern army. The sacrifices made by these officers and their contribution to our victory are incomparable and need to be recorded in our history in golden letters. Our middle rung officers who include the commanding officers (COs) in almost all cases, led from the front and where some displayed hesitation, they were taken to task. The COs were the ones who shared the privations of war with their command. I am not for once mentioning this to disclaim their contribution to our victory in the war but merely to put the record straight so that posterity and critics understand the functioning of the junior and higher leaderships of the army.

A junior officer, on joining his unit, is made to go through the paces of soldiering with his men. Whatever be the standard of training he receives in his pre-commissioning period, it is only when he is in his unit that he picks up the nuances of command of men. He literally rubs shoulders with them and understands his command like the back of his hand. He trains, lives, plays and in operational areas, eats with the men; always maintaining the age-old adage – being friendly but not familiar with the men. Young officers are best recognised and respected by their men for their physical fitness and raw courage, besides

their other qualities. It is they who lead their sub-units into battle and not the generals. It is they who capture real estate in the form of clearly defined objectives in war, and as a result, are suitably rewarded for their courage and bravery. The success or failure of an operation finally lies in how well the plan is executed on the ground, and victory or defeat is accordingly measured by the degree of courage or otherwise displayed by units and formations. In war, it must, therefore, be remembered that the best conceived plans can fail if poorly executed at the grass- root level. So the worth of a junior leader cannot be wished away as unimportant and the credit must go to him for deservedly giving us the victory.

While the task of the junior officer is clearly defined, the higher commanders have a more onerous duty to perform, with the most important to my mind being preparing their command for war. At whatever level a commander may operate, his main obligation lies in training his command and provisioning them with the wherewithal to win a war as and when it is thrust upon a nation. They are the ones who plan the operations, at both the strategic and tactical levels, from the beginning to the end and, therefore, must have the foresight to visualise the situation right till the terminal stage of the conflict. They must plan and cater to contingencies so that the enemy's weaknesses are fully exploited and own troops are never unbalanced. Higher commanders have to manage the environment and depending on the level at which they are operating, give the required military advice to the political masters. My experience in the army had taught me that higher commanders must have the ability to accept responsibility and not shy away from it. As a consequence, they must be able to withstand the pressures of war and not allow these pressures to percolate to the rank and file. I must confess in all honesty that my commanders up in the chain of command gave me a task and left its operational execution to me. Their unqualified support was very much there in provisioning my troops with the war materials necessary to undertake these operations.

At times, there were pressures which in the circumstances were understandable, but these were not to the extent of unbalancing me or my command nor did they lead to any hasty or irrational decision on my part. The Chief of Army Staff (COAS) or the army commander or the corps commander never interfered in the conduct of my operations and during their numerous visits, were extremely supportive of my plans. Therefore, while the romantic part of the war which deals with courage, bravery, deeds in the battlefield in direct eyeball-to-eyeball contact with the enemy, is totally attributable to the young

officers and their leaders, the planning and ultimate outcome of the war in the field rests squarely on the shoulders of the higher leadership. The higher commander in the field, besides giving his approval or suggestions on a plan, has to also ensure that resources commensurate to the task are allocated to units and formations before they are launched into battle. He has to coordinate the events on the entire battlefield and make doubly sure that his subordinate commanders and men have the fire in them to bring victory. In one of my interactions with student officers in a school of instruction, I was asked as to whose war was it, and I replied that while we must give credit for our success in the Kargil War to the young officers or the middle rung leaders, I am convinced about where the blame would have rested in case of a defeat.

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### **Pakistan's Strategy**

A lot has been written on Pakistan's attempts to foment trouble in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) at various stages of its history and the war in Kargil was another such attempt. The aim which was very obvious and apparent was to internationalise the J&K issue. Pakistan was well aware that near normalcy had returned in the Valley, and perhaps it was time to open a new front to continue with the thrust to internationalise the issue. Militarily, it planned to occupy heights well within our side, so as to convert the line of intrusion into a de facto LoC. Sartaj Aziz, the Pakistani foreign minister had repeatedly been commenting about the "ambiguous" nature of the LoC. Politically, poor strategic calculus was displayed by Pakistan, essentially on three major counts. Firstly, the operations were launched without any consideration in its timing in relation to the Lahore Summit. While politically, the Lahore Summit as a consequence of the visit of the Indian prime minister saw a thaw in the relations between the two nations, albeit shortlived, militarily, the planning and execution of the operation was in full swing and was to cause a major embarrassment to India a few months later. It is, indeed, difficult for us who are fortunately in a democratic environment to comprehend the possibility of a national issue like the Kargil operations not being discussed with the executive head of the country. Whether Gen Musharraf

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discussed or briefed his prime minister on the details of the operation which was perhaps underway during the visit of the Indian prime minister, will continue to be remain shrouded in mystery, at least in the foreseeable future. The former Pakistan Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, while in exile in Saudi Arabia, had confessed that he had been merely informed of some military action being contemplated in Kargil, but was not kept in the picture of the details of the operational plans; an allegation which has repeatedly been denied by Gen Musharraf. An analysis of the

timing of the operation indicates that indeed the war in Kargil had been planned and was being executed while Prime Minister Vajpayee was attending the historical Lahore Summit.

I think the second miscalculation made by Pakistan in selection of the timing of the attack was in doubting the Indian government's capability of a military response. Pakistan continued to tell us and the world that only militants were operating and no regular troops had been employed. It is evident that the Pakistani military leadership had not appreciated the retaliation from India, particularly since a lame duck government was in power which was assessed to be unable to display the political will in taking major retaliatory measures. The fact that India did retaliate with its armed forces resulted in Pakistan coming out finally runners up in a war which in the first place it should not have ventured into.

The third miscalculation was based on Pakistan's traditional relationship with China. Pakistan perhaps appreciated that initiation of trouble on the J&K borders would get unqualified support from China. It may be recalled that in 1965 and 1971, Pakistan had based its war plans on some form of tacit support from China. However, in both these conflicts, except for cosmetic moral support in terms of statements made by China, there was no attempt to physically intervene in the conflict. Similarly, in Kargil, from Pakistan's point of view, China's response and support was inadequate and like earlier conflicts, there was no military intervention. China, since the last two decades, has been pursuing its economic goals with foresight, vigour and determination and I feel that for the next two to three decades, it will continue to strive for economic and military dominance. Till it achieves its goal of acceptance as a superpower, it is unlikely to flex its muscles and is more likely to display diplomatic maturity in handling sensitive issues. A

call to arms may perhaps be the last option which it would like to exercise in the foreseeable future.

### **Crossing the LoC**

There may have been political compulsions for India not to permit the military to cross the LoC. In the first place, the sanctity of the LoC was violated by Pakistan which, for political reasons we did not exploit, and as events later proved, it worked to our advantage in gaining some brownie points from the international community, particularly the US, for displaying utmost restraint in the face of grave provocation. While the reasons for not crossing the LoC may have made political sense, militarily it did not suit our tactical plans and put us under unwarranted pressure. Wars, if thrust upon a country, must be fought on the enemy's territory; unfortunately, in military terms, we failed to achieve our objective.

It may be recalled that the Pakistan Army had occupied tactical heights on our side of the LoC, with the deepest penetration being about 7-8 km, which incidentally also dominated the national highway by observation. From these localities, the enemy could bring down effective fire on us and in the initial stages of the conflict, could successfully interdict the highway at Dras and Kaksar. There were a number of times, both during day as well as at night, when my motorcade was fired upon from these enemy intrusions. The enemy's fire had caused severe damage to our makeshift transit camp at Dras. Later, with the induction of HQ 56 and 192 Mountain Brigade in Dras, the HQ was under constant fire. Fortunately for us, the HQ was well dug down which prevented any severe damage. With this pattern of deployment, our initial assaults were tactically restricted. We had to launch operations from the flanks as the terrain and the enemy's deployment precluded any assault from the rear. However, as the operations progressed, the opportunity to address the objectives from the rear by crossing the LoC was very feasible, but our unambiguous terms of reference did not permit us to cross the LoC.

While the army's operations were adversely affected by our not crossing the LoC, the impact of this decision on the conduct of the operations of the air

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force had more serious and wider implications. As mentioned earlier, the lay of the terrain was such that for a successful air strike, the aircraft had to approach the objective in a south to north direction; this would have resulted in crossing the LoC. The air attacks performed had to be launched in a west to east direction which provided limited air space and restricted manoeuvrability. The end result of this was our difficulty in accurately engaging targets and a considerable loss of effectiveness of the air strikes.

I think the main reason for our policy of not crossing the LoC was to demonstrate our ability to exercise restraint and, in the process, show ourselves as a mature democratic power that held the high values of maintaining peace at all costs, despite the provocation. Politically, we gained from adopting this policy and were adequately praised for displaying maturity in handling this issue. However, we also willy nilly accepted the LoC as the *de facto* international border. While this may strengthen our case for lasting peace in J&K, it weakens our case for claiming the entire J&K as an integral part of the country.

There was also a feeling that allowing the forces to cross the LoC would escalate the situation and with both countries possessing nuclear weapons, the results could have been disastrous. It is my firm conviction, adequately reinforced over the years after the Kargil War that we should have called Pakistan's bluff. We were poised and balanced in terms of our offensive capability in J&K and could have handled any response to Pakistan's misadventure with the firmness it deserved. On the western border as well, we were ready to take on Pakistan after our mobilisation. As a result of our actions, I believe that the war would not have crossed the nuclear threshold and would have remained localised to the Kargil sector. The final decision in a functioning democracy, in any case, lies with the political leadership and I am sure inputs from the Service chiefs must have been taken in consideration of this option.

## **Ceasefire Declaration**

The ceasefire was declared, although militarily our task of throwing back the intruders across the LoC had not been fully completed. The announcement was expected as enough indicators were available, pointing towards cessation of hostilities between the warring states? Did the ceasefire declaration come at the right time or could it have been delayed. There are pros and cons as to why the government took the decision to declare the ceasefire, particularly at a time when our tail was up and we were in a militarily advantageous position. There must have been very good reasons for the government to take this decision and since

I am not privy to the thought process which went in to negotiate the ceasefire, my view is purely from the battlefield and the impact which it had on all of us. Some argue that the declaration of the ceasefire was inevitable. While there is no issue regarding the declaration of the ceasefire, the timing of the announcement is questionable. By the time the ceasefire was declared, we had the enemy on the run, but by accepting it, we offered them an easy route to withdraw to their country.

As expected, the enemy did not respect the terms of the ceasefire and planted anti-personnel mines along their route of withdrawal: a route along which we had to move to clear the area up to the LoC. In the process, we suffered a large number of casualties which perhaps could have been avoided. One of the positives of the ceasefire was that we saved on a number of casualties which we would have inevitably suffered if the war had been prolonged. While every commander ensures that his plans are executed with minimum casualties, this should not be a prerequisite for cessation of hostilities. The over-riding factor for a ceasefire should be dictated by answering a simple question of whether we have attained our politico-military aims or not. In the Kargil War, while we came out victorious, we allowed Pakistan an honourable escape route.

The above are some of the issues which come to mind as an aftermath of the Kargil War. There are other issues as well as lessons learnt. Some of these have been implemented in our schools of instruction as well in our training policies. I am sure as we mature as a nation and as an army, we will fine-tune our responses to our security threats.