

Limited War in India-Pakistan: Revisiting the 24 years of Kargil War

*Dhritiman Mukherjee*¹

*Dr. Tanwir Arshed*²

Abstract

In May 1998, the two most important South Asian states overtly conducted their nuclear tests and thus marked the beginning of an era of nuclearisation in the sub-continent. This overt nuclearisation within the region led to a sense of optimism among scholars and policymakers which almost completely ruled out the possibility of an all-out war between India and Pakistan. However, exactly after a year the Kargil War erupts between India and Pakistan- a war that was fought between two 'nuclear power states' and since then has completely changed the equation and definition of 'warfare' between the two most important and strategically volatile states of South Asia.

The year 2023 marks the 24th anniversary of the Kargil War, and the present paper makes an attempt to apprise the lesson that both India and Pakistan have learnt in the post Kargil War era, with specific reference to the techniques and modus operandi of warfare. Questioning the very definition of 'war' as developed during the Cold War era, this paper will try to look into pertinent issues how warfare between India and Pakistan has undergone a qualitative change in the post-nuclearisation phase. A closer scrutiny of the nature of war that took place in Kargil points to the fact that there exists a space below the nuclear threshold of both India and Pakistan that can be exploited for conducting a 'Limited War'- a theoretical prism that refutes the claim made by nuclear pessimists that any war between new nuclear nations will escalate to a nuclear level. Using qualitative methodology as its framework, based on the secondary literature and insights of

¹ Dhritiman Mukherjee, is a doctoral Scholar, pursuing his PhD from the Department of Political Science, Presidency University, Kolkata

² Dr Tanwir Arshed, is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Presidency University, Kolkata.

interviews of policy analyst and experts the paper wishes to contribute a new debate within the discourse of India-Pakistan Relations.

Keywords: *Limited Warfare; Kargil; India; Pakistan; Nuclearisation; South Asia; Stability-Instability.*

I. Introduction

After the Ussuri River clashes between China and the Soviet Union in 1969, the Kargil war, stands out to be the second instance where two nuclear powers engaged in a direct military confrontation with each other.³ On one hand the war not only dashed all hopes and optimism of stability and status-quo under a nuclear umbrella, instead it also proved the prognosis of the strategic pessimists that possession of nuclear weapons cannot determine the directions of low intensity conflicts that occur at the sub-conventional level.

Although there exists a plethora of literatures on reading and understanding the Indo-Pakistan Relations in the backdrop of Kargil War using the prism of deterrence stability paradox. However very few studies and scholar have tried to interpret on the nature of the 'war' and 'warfare' that shaped the relation between the two neighboring nuclear states of South Asia after 1999. Using the theoretical framework of 'Limited War', this study attempts to map the qualitative change and lesson learnt by India and Pakistan in the post-nuclearisation phase and especially after the Kargil episode. The paper is divided in 4 major sub-sections: the first section intends to conceptualizing the concept of Limited War, section two, of the paper provides a brief discussion of the India-Pakistan relation and the third section deals with Kargil episode and its analysis using the Limited War framework, finally the concluding section makes an unbiased an critical analysis of the basic methodological assumptions and the lessons learnt by India-Pakistan after the 24 years of Kargil War.

³ Lavoy, Peter. (2009). Introduction: the importance of the Kargil conflict. In Peter Lavoy (Ed.), *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1.

II. Origins of Limited War Strategy

As Clausewitz says “war is a continuation of policy by other means”,⁴ where nations before the advent of nuclear weapons, were ready to risk war or even engage in it for a stake they felt was high enough to justify any action that protects and defend the national interest. Advent of nuclear weapons completely changed this equation in the understating of warfare, the destructive potential of nuclear weapons as witnessed during the end of Second World War had transformed the nature and conduct of warfare in a significant manner. Nuclearisation of the world and the risks associated with nuclear escalation compelled one to pause and question whether the interest at stake is worth the potential cost of a calibrated and cautious use of force.⁵ It is here where the idea of Limited Warfare takes its shape in the discourse of realpolitik and global politics. British military historian and strategist Sir Basil Henry Lidell Hart was one of the first advocates of limiting war and its destructive potential in the atomic age commented that “where both sides possess atomic power, total warfare makes nonsense” and any unlimited war “waged with atomic power would make worse than nonsense; it would be mutually suicidal.”⁶

Limited War, as a strategy has its roots in the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. In the 1950s, the ascendancy of weapons of mass destruction and the decline of political use of war as an instrument brought forth a new set of challenge for the United States as it searched for an effective strategy to deal with a nuclear armed Soviet Union. The dilemma that US policymakers grappled with was how to deter the Soviet Union who had challenged the nuclear monopoly of the US by acquiring the retaliatory capacity to target the US homeland.⁷ The US had the option of massive retaliation but its effectiveness in deterring the Soviet challenge came under scrutiny as the threat of all-out war had lost its credibility with the growth of the power of modern

⁴ Strachan, Hew & Andreas Herberg-Rothe. (2007). Introduction. In Hew Strachan & Andreas Herberg-Rothe (Eds.), *Clausewitz In The Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 7.

⁵ Sethi, M. (2009). *Nuclear Strategy: India's March Towards Nuclear Deterrence*. New Delhi: Knowledge World, 293.

⁶ Hart, B.H. Lidell. (1947). *The Revolution in Warfare*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 99.

⁷ Garnett, J. (1975). Limited War. In John Baylis (eds.), *Contemporary Strategy: Theory and Practice*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 115.

weapons.⁸ Even while the strategy of massive retaliation continued to evolve in the mid-1950s, Bernard Brodie and William Kaufmann questioned its utility as a strategy to deal with the Soviet Union. According to Kaufmann, as both the US and the Soviets possessed the ability to destroy each other's power centers through the use of nuclear weapons, the former had to accept the parity of capabilities or risk mutual extinction.⁹ Henry Kissinger, a strong voice in the school of thought that spoke against the strategy of massive retaliation had pointed out its failure in averting the Korean War, the loss of northern Indo-China, the Soviet-Egyptian arms deal or the Suez crisis. He remarked that “a deterrent which one is afraid to implement when challenged ceases to be a deterrent.”¹⁰

It was under these circumstances that the concept of Limited war came into being and was viewed as the best alternative to massive retaliation strategy. As the US was faced with a choice between an all-out war and defeat without war, the option of Limited war provided a middle-path. It was considered to be the most viable medium of using force that carried minimum risk of nuclear escalation. Limited War offered the prospect of bringing military means and policy aims into a much closer relationship which had been the case for many years. As a matter of fact Limited war offered these benefits at a cost far smaller than a modern nuclear conflict would entail.

A. The Core Features of a Limited War

A review of the existing literatures of Limited War that emerged during the Cold War helps us in delineating its core premises in the writings of the following scholars.

Firstly, Robert Endicott Osgood in his book *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* defined Limited War as “one in which the belligerents restrict the purposes for which they fight to concrete, well defined objectives that do not demand the utmost military effort of which the belligerents are capable and that can be accommodated in a negotiated settlement... The battle is confined to a

⁸ Kaufmann, W. (1956). Limited Warfare. In William Kaufmann (eds.), *Military Policy and National Security*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 102-136.

⁹ Kaufmann, Limited Warfare, 107.

¹⁰ Kissinger, H. (1957). *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 134.

geographical area and directed against selected targets- primarily those of direct military importance. It demands of the belligerents only a fractional commitment of their human and physical resources. It permits their economic, social and political patterns of existence to continue without serious disruption.”¹¹ Osgood mentioned that Limited wars are fought for ends that do not demand the complete subordination of the adversary’s will and employs means that are far less than the total military resources of the belligerents. The civilian life and the armed forces of the belligerents remains largely unharmed.¹²

Secondly, Morton Halperin stated that a Limited War is a military encounter between two opposing sides where the “effort of each falls short of the attempt to use all of its power to destroy the other.”¹³

Finally, according to Kissinger in a Limited War, the entire weapons system of the warring sides can be employed but only against specific targets.¹⁴

Based on these definitions one can derive the basic characteristics of a Limited War or draw a war fighting model that differs from the classical conventional war.

1. Limited War between two nuclear-armed nations should be fought for specific political objectives that do not involve the complete annihilation of the adversary.¹⁵ Any unlimited objective that aims at total destruction of the adversary both politically and militarily would escalate a Limited War. In other words, attempts at threatening the existence of the enemy would remove the psychological balance that makes it profitable for both sides to keep the war limited and increase the losing side’s dependence on the resort to the use of nuclear weapons that will ultimately lead to deterrence breakdown.¹⁶

¹¹ Osgood, R. (1957). LIMITED WAR: THE CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN STRATEGY. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1-2.

¹² Osgood, R. (1979). LIMITED WAR REVISITED. BOULDER: Westview Press, 3.

¹³ Halperin, M. (1963). LIMITED WAR IN THE NUCLEAR AGE. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2.

¹⁴ Kissinger, NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND FOREIGN POLICY, 139.

¹⁵ Ibid, 140.

¹⁶ Ibid, 145.

2. It must be understood that Limited War cannot be a means of bringing about radical alteration in the distribution of power or favourable resolution of outstanding disputes. The terms of victory should be short of unconditional surrender of the adversary and give it a chance to negotiate on a reasonable basis.¹⁷ Thus, the objectives should be minimal and should hold the conflict within the desired limits.
3. The objectives of a Limited War should be determined by the political class and the military should have a minimal role in it. It is because the objectives in a Limited War are primarily political and not purely military, the political leadership must assume the responsibility for defining the framework within which the military are to develop their plans and capabilities.¹⁸
4. The whole conduct of Limited War, its strategy, its tactics, its termination must be governed by the nature of a nation's political objectives and not by independent standards of military success and glory.¹⁹ The military will be able to act only after it receives meaningful instructions and parameters. This is in sharp contrast to an all-out war where limits are set by military considerations and also by military capacity.
5. In a Limited War, the sole purpose of the armed forces is to serve the nation's political objective.
6. Apart from limiting the objectives, it is also important to convey to the other side, both explicitly and implicitly, that the side that initiates the conflict does not intend to escalate it into an all-out war. Diplomacy plays a vital role at the beginning and during the course of a Limited War.²⁰
7. A Limited War can be kept limited only when there is a clear understanding on both sides regarding its nature. Going by this logic, Limited War presupposes a cooperative adversary. It is based on a tacit bargain not to exceed certain restraints. The desire to keep the war limited has to come from both sides. The absence of cooperation during actual conflict will increase the chances of it escalating to the nuclear level.

¹⁷ Chandran, S. (2005). LIMITED WAR: REVISITING KARGIL IN THE INDO-PAK CONFLICT. New Delhi: India Research Press, 20.

¹⁸ Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, 141.

¹⁹ Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, 22.

²⁰ Kissinger, H. (1962), THE NECESSITY OF CHOICE: PROSPECTS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY. New York: Anchor Books, 67.

8. Both sides will have to exercise deliberate restraint in the use of military capabilities. Only a portion of the overall/maximum military power that the belligerents are capable of should be employed in a Limited War. The emphasis is on the avoidance of the use of thermonuclear weapons. Even if the entire available weapons system is utilized, it should be geographically confined to a particular area and its impact on civilian life should be minimal. For example, Brodie mentioned that strategic bombing could be done in a discriminate manner so as not to target the cities.²¹

Thus using these parameters as the yardstick to define and understand the nature of a 'limited warfare' under a nuclear umbrella the next section of the paper tries to locate the shifting nature of bilateral relations between India and Pakistan in the post nuclearisation era.

III. History of India-Pakistan Conflict: 1947-1999

Since Partition and Independence, India-Pakistan relations have been marked by a series of wars, armed confrontations short of war, diplomatic and military crises, and periodic firefights along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir.²² Pakistan, conceived of as 'a homeland' for Muslims of British India, was established in two wings, East and West Pakistan, separated by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory. Except a shared religion there was nothing to unite its diverse population composed of Pashtuns, Punjabis, Sindhis, Baloch and Bengalis. Hence, lacking a positive national identity which is unique and distinct from Indian culture, Pakistan defined itself negatively in terms of opposition to India. As Pakistan was established to prevent the 'Hindu Congress' from dominating Indian Muslims, hostility to 'Hindu India' became one of the cornerstones of its national ideology, alongside Islam and the Urdu language. Resistance to 'Hindu India' became the glue that was meant to bind Pakistan together.²³

The dispute of Jammu and Kashmir which has remained unresolved since 1947 is a manifestation of the national-identity driven opposition between India and

²¹ Brodie, B. (1959), *STRATEGY IN THE MISSILE AGE*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 310.

²² Kalyanaraman, S. (2023), *India's Military Strategy: Countering Pakistan's Challenge*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*

Pakistan. To state briefly, the dispute has its roots in the process of British colonial disengagement from the subcontinent. Two classes of states existed in India at the time of independence and partition. One were the states of British India and the other were the princely states. The princely states enjoyed nominal independence for so long they recognized the paramountcy of the British Crown. The subjects of defence, foreign affairs and communication were left to the British to decide upon.²⁴ The last Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten had declared that the princely states were free to join either India or Pakistan based upon their demographic composition and geographic location.

There were almost 565 princely states in India at the eve of independence but Kashmir posed a unique problem as it was a Muslim majority state ruled by a Hindu monarch- Maharaja Hari Singh and was geographically contiguous to both India and Pakistan. When Hari Singh dithered over the decision to accede to either India or Pakistan, the latter took the opportunity to launch a military campaign that aimed to wrest the province from India. Pakistan had sent regular troops along with local tribesmen to incite a revolt against Hari Singh's rule. Just as the rebels aided by Pakistan were about to enter Srinagar, Hari Singh appealed to India for help. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru agreed to help but on the condition that the maharaja had to sign the Instrument of Accession to India. The Maharaja did accede to India and Nehru immediately sent forces to quell the tribal revolt aided and assisted by Pakistan. Thus began the first war between India and Pakistan in 1947.²⁵

The war came to an end with a UN brokered ceasefire on January 1, 1949 with Pakistan keeping one-third of the province and the rest remained with India. Since then the issue has remained a bone of contention between the two neighbours. Kashmir was also the site of the second India-Pakistan war that took place in 1965. Operation Gibraltar (followed by Operation Grand Slam) was launched by Pakistan in August 1965 as yet another attempt to seize the territory of Kashmir from India by the use of force. The war ended in a stalemate after the Soviet Union

²⁴ Ganguly, S. (2016). *Deadly Impasse: Indo-Pakistani Relations at the Dawn of a New Century*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 3.

²⁵ Arshed, Tanwir; '*China Factor in India Pakistan relations: A Review*'; Journal of Politics and Governance; 2014; Volume:3 Issue:04

brokered a ceasefire through the Tashkent Agreement in 1966.²⁶ India's decisive victory against Pakistan came in the 1971 war that resulted in the dismemberment of Pakistan as its eastern wing broke away to form an independent nation known as Bangladesh.

Undoubtedly, the 1971 war had established the superiority of India vis-a vis Pakistan when it came to conventional warfare. Realizing this fact, Pakistan decided to build an indigenous nuclear capability that would compensate for its inferiority in conventional warfare against India. Coupled with its nuclearization program, Pakistan also adopted the strategy of proxy war against India under the supervision of General Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s. Throughout the 1980s, Pakistan was complicit in providing material assistance to the insurgency movements that were taking place in the Indian provinces of Punjab and Kashmir.²⁷ Pakistan's incipient nuclear capability prevented India from undertaking any large scale military operation to curb the growing menace of militancy especially in the Kashmir valley.²⁸ Indian policymakers found itself in a quandary in the 1990s, they grappled to find an answer to Pakistan sponsored militancy in Kashmir. As diplomatic options got exhausted, the only way India could dissuade Pakistan from pursuing the policy of proxy war was to chalk out a military strategy that entailed minimum chances of escalation to the nuclear level.²⁹ The quest for this strategy was on until Kargil happened.

IV. Kargil War

In May 1999, India and Pakistan got engaged in a war in Kargil, a disputed territory along the Line of Control in Kashmir. The war was fought on the heels of the famous Lahore Declaration of February 1999, an outcome of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Lahore almost a year after India and Pakistan conducted their nuclear tests in May, 1998. It produced much optimism regarding the development of a peaceful and stable relationship between India and Pakistan in future. However, in three months it became clear that even when

²⁶ Paul, T.V. (1994). *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 111.

²⁷ Ganguly, *Deadly Impasse*, 8.

²⁸ Pardesi, M. (2009). Nuclear Optimism and the 1990 India-Pakistan Crisis. In Sumit Ganguly & S. Paul Kapur (eds.), *Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Crisis Behaviour and the Bomb*. Oxon: Routledge, 71.

²⁹ Chandran, *Limited war*, 28.

the Lahore process was underway, around 800 well-armed soldiers of Pakistan had crossed the LoC and intruded inside 5-15 kilometers of Indian territory in Kargil.³⁰ The infiltration was spread along a 150 kilometer stretch on the Himalayan ridges facing Dras, Kargil, Batalik and the Mushko valley.

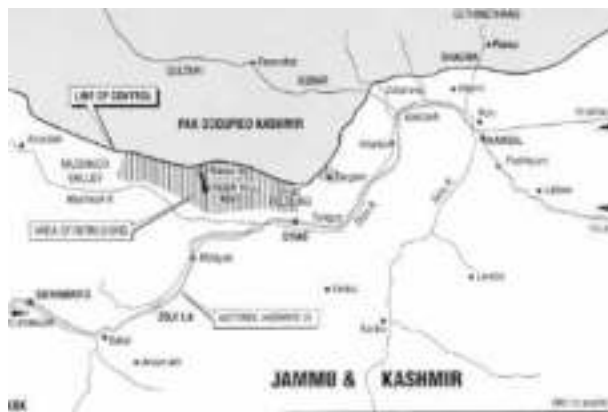


Fig: Karigil: From Surprise to Victory by V.P Mallik; Harper Collins; 2012

Pakistan denied any involvement in the infiltration and described it as a handiwork of local mujahideens. The initial reaction from the Indian side was one of surprise and shock. It took India almost a month to discover the scale of the infiltration and that the infiltrators were actually soldiers of Pakistan's Northern Light Infantry (NLI) who had occupied Indian territory in the garb of mujahideens.³¹ India refused to accept the *fait accompli* and responded with cautious use of force. The war finally came to an end on 4th July, 1999 after Pakistan considered it prudent to pull out its troops from Kargil in the face of mounting casualties and international pressure.

³⁰ Hagerty, D. (2009). The Kargil War: An optimistic assessment. In Sumit Ganguly & S. Paul Kapur (eds.), *Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Crisis Behaviour and the Bomb*. Oxon: Routledge, 101.

³¹ Rana, S and Wirtz, J. (2009). Surprise at the top of the world: India's systemic and intelligence failure. In Peter Lavoy (Ed.), *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 211

However a constructive analysis of the crisis from both sides of the border will help the readers to understand and evaluate the situation in a more methodical manner.

A. The Pakistani Perspectives

The Kargil War had its origins in a history that long predated the nuclear tests of 1998. The area around Dras and Kargil has been contested by India and Pakistan in their first war over Jammu and Kashmir in 1947-1948. The ceasefire line that then divided the state ran roughly west to east, ending beyond Kargil at map grid reference NJ9842. In the 1949 Karachi Agreement, India and Pakistan stated that from point NJ9842, the ceasefire line should continue “thence north to the glaciers”. There appeared to be no need to demarcate the area beyond as it was an uninhabited expanse of high mountains, snowfields and glaciers. Though the ceasefire line was mapped in greater detail by India and Pakistan after the end of 1971 war and renamed as the Line of Control (LoC) it stopped at the same point as before after running for 740 kms from the international border.³²

A struggle for the control of the glaciated area beyond was started off by India in the late 1970s. The biggest of the glaciers there is the Siachen glacier which is 76-km long and lies at a point where territory held by India, Pakistan and China meet. In 1978, India sent a military mountaineering expedition to explore Siachen after it learnt that Pakistan was issuing travel permits to foreign mountaineering expeditions to Siachen. The glacier was shown in international maps as a part of Pakistani territory. India’s expedition to Siachen in 1978 was soon followed by Pakistan as it dispatched its own troops and by 1984 both countries were secretly preparing to send troops to occupy the passes in Saltoro ridge. India was the first to do so by sending soldiers before the winter had lifted.³³ Pakistani military realized that once ground was lost in such high mountains it could not be regained without a major offensive.

After making a number of unsuccessful efforts to evict Indian forces, the military leadership of Pakistan concluded that instead of mounting a major offensive to counter India’s seizure of Siachen which they were unable to do so far, a parallel

³² MacDonald, M. (2017). *Defeat is an Orphan: How Pakistan Lost the Great South Asian War*. Haryana: Penguin, 51.

³³ Ibid.

operation elsewhere along the disputed boundary in Kashmir had the potential of scuttling India's ability to sustain its actions in Siachen. Pakistan's plan was to seize territory at Kargil and gain control of movement along National Highway 1A, so that the major logistical supply route to Siachen got disrupted or damaged. The desire for redemption of Pakistan's Northern Light Infantry (NLI) and Army X Corps, who had been responsible for the defence of Siachen Glacier in 1984 was another reason accounting for Pakistan's offensive in Kargil.³⁴ Hence, for Pakistan, Kargil was a payback for India's decision in 1984 to stake its claim to Siachen glacier.

Furthermore, the Kargil operation was also a way for Pakistan to re-energize the waning anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir during the late 1990s as New Delhi's effective counterinsurgency efforts had led to a decline in the number of anti-State activities in the Valley. Also the Kashmir issue had been off the international radar screen for almost a decade. After India and Pakistan had confronted each other in the Kashmir crisis of 1990, little had transpired to support Pakistan's continuing demand for a "just" settlement of the Kashmir issue. Pakistan's relationship with USA had suffered a dent following the Soviet exit from Afghanistan in 1989 and Washington's invoking of the Pressler Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act in 1990.³⁵ This meant isolation for Pakistan in the global state of affairs. As the decade was nearing its end, leaders in Pakistan felt that there was an increasing need to remind the world that Kashmir was not a settled dispute and the Kargil operation would serve that purpose. The planners of Kargil hoped that the international community would be ready to mediate in the Kashmir dispute once the region could be portrayed as a potential nuclear flashpoint after the 1998 tests. Therefore, apart from seizing territory from India, Pakistan's main motive was to extract international support for its claims over Kashmir and to settle the dispute in terms that were favourable to Islamabad.

Politically, Pakistan hoped to present before New Delhi a qualitatively new and more challenging military threat that would force it to the negotiating table from a position of weakness. Most importantly, Pakistani planners relied heavily on its nuclear deterrent capability, assuming it to be a shield behind which it can conduct

³⁴ Joeck, N. (2009). The Kargil War and Nuclear Deterrence. In Sumit Ganguly & S. Paul Kapur (eds.), *Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Crisis Behaviour and the Bomb*. Oxon: Routledge, 119.

³⁵ Ibid.

limited probe along the Line of Control without calling into action any large-scale retaliatory attack by India. The Pakistani Army also saw Kargil as a way of asserting its supremacy over the civilian authority in Islamabad. Then Army Chief of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf did not take lightly the interference of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the internal affairs of the Army especially the growing bonhomie between Sharif and the commander of ISI Directorate General Khawaja Ziauddin Ahmed.³⁶ Through the Kargil incursion, Musharraf wanted to remind the people in Pakistan and the whole world that the Pakistani Army was the final arbiter of both internal as well as external affairs of the country and it could not be pushed away by a civilian Prime Minister.

B. India Response

Undoubtedly Pakistan's move in Kargil had surprised India but instead of treating the incursion as a *fait accompli*, Indian troops launched a rapid and forceful counter-attack. However, it soon became clear to the senior Indian Army leadership that the Army alone could not accomplish the task of evicting the infiltrators from the occupied areas. The Pakistani troops were placed in strategically advantageous positions in the heights of Kargil as a result of which the Indian forces trying to scale extremely high altitudes became easy targets for Pakistani snipers. After enduring substantial casualties, and overcoming initial hesitation over the use of airpower in fear of uncontrolled escalation, the Cabinet Committee on Security ordered the deployment of Indian Air Force (IAF) assets in Kargil. Thereafter, the IAF ground attack aircraft Mirage-2000, MiG- 21, MiG-23 and MiG-27 began targeting the intruder's positions.³⁷ The political leadership had strictly ordered the Indian operations to be restricted to the Indian side of the LoC.

Though New Delhi remained resolute against crossing the Line of Control, it had kept the options for escalation open as the armed forces were ordered to prepare for the possibility of all-out war if the infiltrators did not pull out. This meant that not only was India prepared to strike hard in Kargil, if required it could open other fronts across the LoC and the International Border. In Mid-June, the Indian navy in the Arabian Sea was asked to stay alert and contain Pakistan's naval assets if

³⁶ Ibid, 120.

³⁷ Chandran, *Limited War*, 59.

the Kargil War escalated.³⁸ Indian mechanized and artillery divisions had advanced to forward positions all along the international boundary in Gujarat, Punjab and Rajasthan. All of India's armed services were on high alert. These moves of India were matched by Pakistan as it made similar preparations for war along the Punjab frontier. There were also reports that Pakistan was readying its missile launch sites at the Tilla Ranges and if the account of American official Bruce Riedel is to be believed then the Pakistanis were preparing their nuclear weapons for possible deployment.³⁹ Reports say that India too activated all three types of nuclear delivery systems and kept some weapons ready to be mated with delivery vehicles at short notice.⁴⁰

V. Understanding Kargil from the Prism of Limited War

Was Kargil a limited War? To answer this question one needed to look at its various dimensions; whether the protagonists had limited objectives, whether the use of force was limited and whether both sides showed deliberate restraint when it came to controlling escalation.

A. Decoding the Objectives and Crisis Behaviour of Pakistan

The objectives that Pakistan sought to achieve by initiating the Kargil War have already been discussed. The primary objective of reviving the militancy in Kashmir and keeping it alive at bilateral and international levels was neither territorial nor military instead it was political. Holding the heights in Kargil was a tactic and not the objective of the plan. The same logic applies to the interdiction of NH- 1A. Pakistani infiltrators had no intention of holding the heights permanently and radically alter the status-quo of LoC.⁴¹ The strategic objectives, tactics and terrain were chosen carefully by the planners of the Kargil infiltration so that the entire conflict could be kept limited without escalating to an all-out war.

³⁸ Baweja, H. (1999). "Slow but steady", *India Today International*, 21.

³⁹ Riedel, B. (2002). *American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House. Policy Paper Series*. Centre for the Advanced Study of India: University of Pennsylvania, 8.

⁴⁰ Chengappa, R. (2000). *Weapons of Peace: The Secret Story of India's Quest to Be a Nuclear Power*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 437.

⁴¹ Chandran, *Limited War*, 77.

Pakistan also showed elements of restraint in its behaviour during the course of the war. Pakistan's strategy of sending regular soldiers in the garb of mujahideens was not something new in Kargil, in fact it has been a pattern in the 1948 and 1965 wars as well. Hence, the possibility of a nuclear escalation cannot account for the policy of subterfuge utilized by Pakistan in Kargil. But the significant difference in Pakistan's Kargil venture and its previous ventures in 1948 and 1965 lies in its decision to not back the failing covert operation in Kargil by sending in official support. In previous cases, when the covert Pakistani operations began to fail, Pakistan stepped up its official support by sending in the army but in Kargil it left its soldiers to fend for themselves against the superior Indian air and land power. Pakistan decided against sending in its airforce.⁴² This decision of Pakistan could have been conditioned by the lack of external support as it was being blamed by most of the major powers, especially the US for the aggression in Kargil. A further escalation could have been a diplomatic blunder for Islamabad. Militarily too, Kargil was a lost cause and any further escalation could have made matters worse. Notwithstanding the effect of these factors on Pakistani decision-making, the fear of nuclear conflagration in the event of an escalation largely contributed in limiting Pakistani actions.

B. Deciphering Indian Response

The sole objective of India once it realized the nature and scope of the Kargil intrusion was to drive away the intruders. The Indian response was measured and the use of force was restricted to the areas where the infiltration occurred. Irrespective of occasional threats, the military operations were not extended to other sectors along the LoC or the international boundary although military logic dictated that it would have been tactically prudent to do so in order to divert Pakistan's attention from Kargil. One of the main reasons why India deliberately chose not to cross the LoC despite pressures from within was to hold the high moral ground so that the international community was convinced that the conflict was initiated by Pakistan and India was only trying to defend its territory. But

⁴² Rajagopalan, R. (2005). *Second Strike: Arguments about Nuclear War in South Asia*. New Delhi: Penguin, 112-113.

apart from that India also did not want the conflict to escalate. Pakistan's nuclear capabilities largely factored in the minds of the Indian decision-makers.⁴³

The way in which India responded to the Pakistani infiltration in Kargil also pointed to a departure from the approach which New Delhi took in previous wars with Pakistan. While in Kargil no strikes were authorized across the border, during the 1965 war when General Ayub Khan's military regime had sent Pakistani regular forces disguised as dissidents into the region believing that India would lack the determination to spread the conflict beyond the disputed territory, his assumptions were proved wrong by the resolve shown by India who despite its weak military position after the 1962 war with China, had extended the conflict beyond the international boundary.⁴⁴ It became clear that conducting *blitzkrieg* operations like India did in the 1971 war and threatening to occupy large swathes of Pakistani territory was no more a possibility in the nuclear backdrop. The presence of nuclear weapons had induced caution and restraint in Indian actions during the Kargil war.

C. Third Party Intervention

A factor specific to the India-Pakistan conflict that prevented Kargil from escalating into an all-out conventional or nuclear war was timely diplomatic intervention by the US. Top ranked US State Department officials like Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and other prominent personalities like commander-in-chief of the US Central Command General Anthony Zinni talked with leaders of both India and Pakistan and urged them to observe restraint.⁴⁵ For the first time in the history of India-Pakistan conflict, the US had identified Pakistan as the aggressor in Kargil. US President Bill Clinton took personal interest in defusing the crisis and it was his meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on July 4 that ultimately paved the way for the withdrawal of infiltrators from Kargil. The original concept of limited war did not include the factor of third party intervention within its gambit because both the US and Soviet were superpowers who had bilateral arrangements in place to defuse crisis situations.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sethi, M, *Nuclear Strategy*, 302

⁴⁵ Hagerty, Devin, *Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia*, 106.

India and Pakistan are not superpowers and they usually lobby for third party support (this applies more to Pakistan) in the course of any conflict.

Almost all the necessary features of a Limited War as described by its theorists were present in the Kargil War along with one added dimension of third party intervention. Both sides had well-defined objectives that were political in nature and did not threaten the existence of either of the two nations, quite remarkably both showed restraint in their actions and confined it to a specific geographic area and despite occasional signalling of nuclear use neither side acted upon it. As is the case with Limited War, the outcome is either limited success or limited defeat, for Pakistan the success lay in reviving the Kashmir issue internationally though it was not in accordance with its wishes and the army coming to power via a military coup in the aftermath of the war. In case of India, the objective of driving away the infiltrators was fulfilled but militancy received a renewed vigour in the valley.

VI. Lessons Learnt

A. The Indian Outlook

Indian reaction and response after the Kargil war may be mapped in the following categories:

Firstly: It was the Kargil War that made India realize that a Limited War along the LoC was not only possible rather the only viable option post nuclearisation of the region. It reinforced the perceptions of the advocates of Limited War in India that space existed under the nuclear umbrella to fight a short and sharp war against Pakistan and eventually win it. This was evudednt from speeches and articulation of diplomats and leaders especially after the Kargil War. The then Defense Minister of India, Mr. George Fernandes; in January 2000 stated that “Nuclear weapons did not make war obsolete. They simply impose another dimension of the way warfare could be conducted. The Kargil War was therefore handled within this perspective with obvious results.”⁴⁶ Jasjit Singh who was another proponent of the Limited War theory mentioned that there was a need to think about how nuclear weapons have impacted the conduct of conventional wars and arrange the force structure accordingly for the future. According to Singh as

⁴⁶ Menon, P. (2018). *The Strategy Trap: India and Pakistan Under the Nuclear Shadow*. New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 168.

nuclearization had rendered 'total war' unthinkable, 'Limited War' must necessarily be central to the military input into decision making.⁴⁷ The impact and lesson form Kargil War so far reaching that even the Chief of Army Staff General V.P. Malik became a leading propagator of the limited war concept in the India-Pakistan conflict. He asserted that nuclear weapons had neither eliminated nor reduced the risk of the outbreak of hostilities and in future there was greater likelihood of limited wars taking place and that too without any warning.

General Malik firmly believed in the possibility of a limited conventional war between India and Pakistan provided both the protagonists climbed the escalation ladder carefully and in a controlled manner.⁴⁸ The Indian viewpoint on Limited War could thus be gauged from these statements, considerable optimism existed on the successful conduct of a limited war against Pakistan. This optimism was based on the premise that strategic stability created by the presence of nuclear weapons allowed India to use force at the tactical conventional level (stability-instability paradox). It also assumed cooperative behaviour from Pakistan who would have little incentive in escalating the war to nuclear level given the massive political, human and economic costs that came with it.

Secondly: The need to reorient India's war fighting strategies vis-a-vis nuclear Pakistan manifested itself in the form of a new doctrine known as Cold Start which is arguably the first of India's limited war doctrine articulated by the Indian Army in 2004. The trigger point for crafting this doctrine came from India's experience in Operation Parakram, the massive military mobilization undertaken by India on the international border and the LoC in Kashmir as a response to the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. India combined both military and diplomatic pressure in what is known as 'coercive diplomacy' with the objective of forcing Pakistan to take action against the terrorist groups operating from its soil. But soon India came to learn about the limitations of such a large scale military mobilization when it came to coercing a nuclear armed adversary. Though the Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf acceded to some of

⁴⁷ Singh, J. (2000). Dynamics of Limited War. *Strategic Analysis*, 24(7), 1205.

⁴⁸ Khan, K. (2012). Limited War Under the Nuclear Umbrella and its Implications for South Asia. *Stimson Center*, 7.

the demands made by India, the overall terrorist infrastructure remained intact in Pakistan. Also, the slow pace of troops mobilization by India allowed the international community to step in and prevail upon India to grant General Musharraf an opportunity to prove his sincerity in curbing cross-border terrorism. Through the Cold Start doctrine India sought to bring speed of action in its military operations that was lacking in Operation Parakram. The fundamental idea of Cold Start was to have a ready, mobile lethal force of eight integrated battle groups capable of mounting an offensive with support from the Air Force.⁴⁹ The basic motive of this doctrine was to cut short the long time taken for preparing the forces and quickly advance into enemy territory for shallow penetration attacks. Effective as it looks on paper, the implementation of the Cold Start doctrine on ground would require accurate planning and considerable doubt exists whether India possess the capability to do so.

Furthermore, the risks involved in operations where integrated battle groups had to enter Pakistani territory were high as such large military formations could easily become the target of enemy forces placed strategically in the border areas. Also Pakistan would never take lightly the prospect of Indian forces crossing the international border to occupy or grab a chunk of its territory. In other words, an Indian attack modelled on the Cold Start Doctrine won't be perceived by Pakistan as a Limited war and the chances of it responding in kind would be high. The question remains that what would be the Indian reaction if their forces are faced with the prospect of a retreat, will they accept it or use added forces to defeat the Pakistani resistance. The second option will obviously lead to a spiral of violence that no side originally intended.

Thirdly: We haven't witnessed any sort of implementation of the Cold Start Doctrine until now not even after the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai that created huge public outcry for a decisive military action against Pakistan. But in recent times India has chosen a low-risk strategy known as 'surgical strikes' in which small formations of Special Forces are entrusted with the task of

⁴⁹ Ladwig, Walter C. (2007/08). A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine. *International Security*, 32 (3), 158-165.

conducting cross-LoC strikes on the terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan Administered Kashmir. These strikes are pre-emptive in nature as it seeks to neutralize the threat of an impending terrorist attack in India. In the recent past, India has employed this proactive strategy against Pakistan on two occasions, one was after the terrorist attack in the Uri army camp in 2016⁵⁰ and the other was in the wake of the Pulwama attack in February 2019 that claimed the lives of 40 CRPF jawans.⁵¹ Both the attacks were traced to be organized by terrorist groups that operated from Pakistan.

While India opted for ground based operations during the Uri surgical strikes, it rolled out a different approach after the Pulwama attack by targeting terrorist camps in Balakot through aerial operations. This was the first time that Indian Air Force had entered Pakistani territory since the 1971 war. It was a demonstration of India's resolve that it was no longer willing to accept terrorist attacks on its military personnel without a counterpunch that raised the costs for Pakistan in sustaining its strategy of cross-border terrorism. For India the strategy of executing such punitive strikes across the border certainly provides a way to respond to terrorist attacks when emotions run high and therefore reduces the reputational costs for the political establishment.

These punitive strikes were very limited in scope and the sole target was terrorist bases. India deliberately chose to avoid targeting any civilian or military asset of Pakistan as that carried the potential of escalating the conflict. Combined with these military actions India also utilized its diplomatic options carefully like it did during Kargil. India was quick to convey its modest intentions to the Western capitals as soon as the strikes were conducted. This helped India garner support for its actions and Pakistan being pulled up for not taking appropriate measures to curb the menace of terrorism emanating from its territory.

Hence, instead of employing force based on the Cold Start doctrine, India thought it prudent to consider using those arms of the military that offered maximum efficiency in executing calibrated military operations and also the flexibility

⁵⁰ 4 hours, choppers and 38 kills: How India Avenged the Uri Attack. *Economic times Online*. Accessed on July 3, 2023.

⁵¹ Khajuria, R. (2019). CRPF Jawans killed in Pulwama Terror Attack were Returning from Leave. *Hindustan Times*.

required to de-escalate at will. For example, the use of air power has more advantages than army operations because the former offers flexibility of disengagement while showing resolve at the same time. Land forces promise little when it comes to controlling escalation because once engaged the army cannot be expected to withdraw unless it achieves victory or a ceasefire is agreed upon.⁵²

B. Pakistani Outlook

Firstly: Pakistan paid heavily for its adventurism in Kargil and the opprobrium it faced from the international community for using force to alter the status-quo made it realize that Kargil like operations won't be viable in future. But at the same time Pakistan did not foreclose the option of successfully calibrating the heat of insurgency in Kashmir and also expanding the violence to other parts of India. Pakistan believed that it was their overt nuclear status that prevented India from escalating military operations in the Kargil War. Hence, in future the scope for organizing proxy war remained open as Indian options of retaliation were constricted owing to Pakistan's low nuclear threshold and ambiguous nuclear redlines. Pakistan has consistently refuted the claim that there exists a space below its nuclear threshold which can be exploited by India to conduct a limited conventional war. They strongly believe that their offensive posture of nuclear first-use discounts any possibility of India conducting a war, in that case even a limited one.

Secondly: In order to make the threat of nuclear escalation look credible, the Pakistanis have gone for what is known as Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) once India started to deliberate upon the Cold Start Doctrine. This involves the building and deployment of low yield battlefield or tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) that would be delivered by short-range missiles like the *Nasr* that against advancing Indian forces on Pakistani soil.⁵³ Deploying TNWs make Pakistan's threat of using nuclear weapons for battlefield purposes look more credible and denies India the option of using its conventional forces against Pakistan. So far India has downplayed the TNW threat by expressing doubt whether Pakistan is actually to going to act upon it and risk a massive/assured nuclear retaliation from India.

⁵² Sethi, M, *Nuclear Strategy*, 310.

⁵³ Ahmed, M. (2016). Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Their Impact on Stability. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

With regard to Pakistan's first strike nuclear policy, it is unlikely that Islamabad will consider using nuclear weapons first until and unless it faces an existential threat from India. Surely, the punitive strikes by India does not threaten Pakistan's territorial integrity in any way and therefore the denial from Pakistan that they ever took place. The fact that Pakistan did not acknowledge or respond to the Uri surgical strikes, gives us the impression that though it is easy to threaten nuclear retaliation it is that much difficult to translate the rhetoric into action.⁵⁴

VII. Conclusion

Kargil was a watershed moment in India-Pakistan conflict, it was symbolic of the transformation that nuclear weapons had necessitated in the conduct of war. It proved to the world that two nuclear armed nations were capable of fighting a conventional war within confined limits that made the fear of nuclear escalation redundant. The sole purpose of India's nuclear weapons was to deter the threat of nuclear coercion or blackmail from its adversaries. Therefore, when it came to deterring low intensity conflicts like the Pakistan sponsored proxy war, India's nuclear weapons had no role to play as such. But at the same time the option of using decisive conventional force against nuclear armed Pakistan also became extinct owing to the threat of escalation to an all-out war. Throughout the 1990s, India had been in search of a military strategy that allowed it to deal with cross-border terrorism in Kashmir without bringing the use of Pakistani nuclear weapons into the equation. In this context, the Kargil War of 1999 convinced Indian politicians and military officials about the utility of 'limited war' as an alternative option to contain the threat of proxy war emanating from Pakistan. Kargil displayed the essential features of a limited war as defined by its theorists in the Cold war period.

Since Kargil, we notice a change in the trajectory of using force by India against Pakistan. In the absence of a large scale military attack that threatened the territorial integrity of Pakistan, New Delhi has now become more inclined towards conducting calibrated strikes inside Pakistani territory with the sole objective of destroying the growing terrorist infrastructure there. India has so far been able to judge the Pakistani nuclear redlines to perfection. On the other hand Pakistan's threat of using TNWs has been confined to the level of rhetoric only.

⁵⁴ Jacob, H. (2018). *Line On Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India-Pakistan Escalation Dynamics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 43.

But does this mean that the option of using limited force is completely free from the dangers of escalation? Even though deliberate nuclear escalation is unlikely owing to the unimaginable political, economic and military costs that it will entail, the threat of inadvertent escalation remains. As Clausewitz had mentioned that any war due to its inherent nature of moving towards the extreme is not free from the possibilities of escalation. Besides, specificities of the India-Pakistan conflict distorts some of the basic assumptions of limited war concept. In the India-Pakistan context, conveying unilateral limitation of political and military objectives to the adversary is a difficult task and failure to do so will lead to misinterpretations by the adversary. If an outcome goes against the military and political interests of Pakistan it cannot be expected to avoid escalating a conflict. Unlike in the Kargil War, it would also not be possible for India to convey the geographical limits of its operations in every conflict, operational contingencies will prove to be a barrier in this case. Moreover, the lack of trust that prevails in India-Pakistan relations due to lack of bilateral diplomacy, can pose problems for communication during a conflict. Limitations stated can be distrusted or ignored.⁵⁵

Though theoretically the scope of political objectives can be kept limited but in a situation of war, it is always the military realities that rule over political objectives and the dilemma of escalation remains. It is possible that inadvertent escalation may result from the sheer momentum of military operations where due to the fog of war, clarity of communications is missing. If large scale operations end up damaging some of Pakistan's nuclear assets or the delivery vehicles then it might contemplate using them before it loses all.⁵⁶ Geographical proximity between India and Pakistan also makes flight time of missile short and offers little scope in terms of warning and reaction. Limited wars might not stay limited if opportunistic field commanders take the initiative. Military success can increase their appetite and lead to an expansion of political objectives which is not mandated by their civilian or military supervisors. In Kargil, Pakistan ended up fighting more than it actually wanted. The operation in Kargil grew bigger than it was planned when the NLI soldiers crossed LoC and set up several posts along the originally identified watersheds without detection.⁵⁷ So the assumption that

⁵⁵ Menon, P, *Strategy Trap*, 171.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 172.

⁵⁷ Jacob, H, *Line on Fire*, 42.

political objectives will always be able to define battlefield behavior needs to be questioned.

In Kargil both countries were ready for escalation despite being aware of each other's nuclear capabilities. The competition in risk taking by both India and Pakistan finally ended with Pakistan backing off but there is no guarantee that this will happen every time in future. The imbalance in civil-military relations in Pakistan complicates the situation. As noticed in Kargil, the military leadership was not in agreement with Sharif's decision of withdrawing troops, what if Musharraf remained adamant on his point of carrying on the fight in Kargil, what would India have done in that case? Third party intervention might have played a stellar role in defusing crises between India and Pakistan so far but it cannot be taken for granted. Intervention won't be automatic and would be conditioned by the circumstances of the confrontation. If Washington or any other external power is late to intervene in a crisis then it won't be able to influence its course substantially. Both during the Uri surgical strike and the Balakot airstrike, the US played the role of a reluctant mediator and entered the crises late.⁵⁸ All these factors combine to create a picture that limited war is not a risk-free strategy even though it may be the best option for India at the moment when it comes to dealing with cross-border terrorism in a nuclearized environment.

⁵⁸ Noor, S. (2021). Pulwama/Balakot and The Evolving Role of Third Parties in India-Pakistan Crises. *South Asian Voices*. Stimson Center.