

## **KARGIL CONFLICT AND PAK-INDIA RELATIONS DURING 1999**

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### **Abstract**

*In this research paper an attempt has been made to evaluate the Kargil conflict, its causes and corresponding consequences for Pak-India relations especially within one year of their nuclear tests. It is essential to trace the main factors which pushed both neighbors to a potential conflict which would have turned into a regular war, had the United States of America (USA) not arbitrated the truce. The study is also important in view of the fact that political leadership of Pakistan and India had inked a bilateral accord a few months back at the historic city of Lahore. It was significant that the Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had travelled in bus to Lahore for the peace talks with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif making history of bus diplomacy. The Kargil conflict indeed worked as a spoiler to the peace making between the two neighbors. The conflict came as a surprise to analysts, leadership and people of both countries and the international powers interested in the region. Similarly, it reflected the vulnerability of relations between India and Pakistan. The failure of Summit diplomacy was indeed a challenge. The Kargil episode indicated that the resolve and commitment of leaders for peace could not be predicted and may end up with unending uncertainties for a lasting peace in the south Asia. It is assumed that Indo-Pak rivalry if continued on the*

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*cold war pattern, the socio-economic development of both countries may be hampered. The analysis of Kargil conflict may help understand the place of political and military leadership in reorientation of Pakistan foreign policy. This paper is an attempt to assess as well, the response of domestic, regional and international stakeholders towards this conflict.*

**Key words:** *Kargil, Conflict, Sub-continent, Nuclearization, Lahore accord, Bus diplomacy.*

### **Introduction**

The Pak-India relations have a history of antagonism since partition of United India into two dominions on the basis of faith. The renowned expert on South Asia Lawrence Ziring described Pakistan from the Indian point of view “Untimely ripped from womb of Mother India”. (Ziring 1993). Apart from this historical legacy of religious animosity, both countries fought three regular wars in 1948, 1965 and 1971. The rivalry between both neighbors took more intense form when both states went nuclear in 1998 (Kamal Matinuddin 2002). In order to come out of the international isolation due to nuclear tests, the leaderships on both sides of border made a peace endeavor in February 1999. The Prime minister of India AB Vajpayee undertook bus journey to Lahore where he and PM of Pakistan Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif signed an accord remembered as “Lahore declaration” (Dawn Feb 22, 1999). The signing of the Lahore declaration and visit of Indian Prime minister to Minar-i-Pakistan monument was of historic significance. An Indian official reportedly told the Washington Post that “the visit to Minar-i-Pakistan monument symbolized Indian’s acceptance of its neighbor’s existence” (Dawn Feb 22, 1999). The pleasantries exchange at Lahore proved short lived as an invisible development took place beyond the line of control in Indian held territory near the Kargil. The Kargil is a village of 12000 Shiite populations near high Fotulla pass in Indian held Kashmir on Himalayas. The population did not support Pakistan and Kashmiri uprising during partition of India (News Week 1999). The offensive launched by Kashmiri Mujahidin allegedly backed by Pakistan in Kargil sector in May 1999 proved indeed the demise of Lahore declaration (Kamal Matinuddin 2002). The fighting began reportedly on May 6<sup>th</sup> when Indian troops encountered Mujahidin in Drass-Kargil

sector which divides the northern state of Kashmir between Pakistan and India. It lasted for about two months to stop leaving behind hundreds of casualties on both sides (News Week 1999).

Kashmiri Mujahidin, allegedly “with support of troops of Pakistan’s Northern Light Infantry (NLI)” took the control of high mountains in Valley of Mushkoh, Batalik, Dras, Kargil and Ladakh sectors. The aim of militants was to cut off the Indian movement on the High way between Leh and Srinagar, and also to ambush the Indian troops going to Siachen glacier. It seemed a well thought out plan to divert the attention of international community towards Kashmiri freedom struggle (Behera, 2007). An imminent danger of conflict selecting into an all-out war between hostile neighbors caused concern of international powers. Both countries were called to respect the line of control and reach at an amicable solution of ongoing conflict. However the calls for truce were not well taken by Pakistan Military establishment and opposition (Kamal Matinuddin 2002). The repercussions of the Kargil war could not be gauged at the outset of the spring attack by Mujahidin. The battle reflected the fact that nuclear capabilities of hostile neighbors may not forbid conventional war over Kashmir (Johson, 2015). The conflict was apparently heading towards a total war since the Indian leader Lal Krishan Adwani warned to occupy Azad Kashmir militarily (Mazari, 2003). On the other the neighboring friend China was not in support of Pakistan’s military advancement in Kashmir region. The Pakistani Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Musharaf was clearly suggested by Chinese leadership during his visit in last week of May 1999, to avoid any adventure in Kargil fight with India and immediate withdrawal of troops to peace time positions (Siddique-ul-Farooque. 2006). It was a discouraging gesture from her all weathered friend People’s Republic of China (Mazari, 2003). The outcome was embarrassing for Pakistan on diplomatic front as Pakistani support to Mujahidin operation in Indian held Kashmir was widely taken as disastrous. Sensing Pakistan’s isolation and clouds of war looming over the sub-continent nervous Pakistan’s Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif decided to get rid of the crisis diplomatically. He used his Saudi connections to seek the assistance from international powers specially US (Behera, 2007). And the role of Blair House summit was also identical to bring normalcy in South Asia (Swami, 2005). As a result Pakistan withdrew from disputed region under an agreement reached between President Clinton and

Nawaz Sharif (Mazari, 2003). The unilateral de-escalation of Pakistani troops brought the pre Kargil status quo in subcontinent.

**Figure 1:** The map showing the geographical location of village Kargil where the conflict broke out between both neighboring countries Pakistan and India.



Source: Marcus P. Acosta June 2003

### **Nuclearization, Peace Efforts and Controversies**

In adherence to their traditional cold war period security perceptions Pakistan responded to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian nuclear test of its history, with detonating her nuclear devices in May 1998. Interestingly, Indian Prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Mian Nawaz Sharif who had emerged as “Bomb-heroes” were soon compelled under tremendous international pressure to abandon the policy of the arms race in volatile region of South Asia. One of the noted Pakistan foreign policy analyst enlisted “the economic and political pressure from the United States, its allies and the multilateral lending agencies among the main reasons for Mr. Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif to improve the thorny relationship of their respective states” (Shah, 1999).

On February 21, 1999; Mr. Sharif and Mr. Vajpayee signed the Lahore Declaration, which was considered “another milestone on the road of Indo-Pak relations” (Dawn Feb 22, 1999). The Lahore declarations had a unique significance, for it was being signed in a post nuclear euphoria. The leaders as if were having N-bombs” in their jackets were now offering olive branch to each other, hardly eight months later. That is why, Gerald Segal, the director of studies

at the International Institute for Strategic studies in London had to say; “we were supposed to see a catastrophic slide into conflict because India and Pakistan are neighbors with territorial disputes they would find themselves with conventional war rapidly going nuclear. In reality the opposite seems to have happened” (News Week, 1999). “After 50 years of managed rivalry, these two countries know how far they can go and how cool they need to keep their most powerful heads”, he further wrote with reference to the Lahore Declaration signing “during a constructive summit” (News Week, 1999).

By visiting the Minar-i-Pakistan at Lahore Mr. Vajpayee made the history of first ever-Indian Prime minister after partition, to have publicly demonstrated Indian recognition of Pakistan’s existence (Dawn Feb 22, 1999). While recording his views in visitor’s book, the Indian leader expressed his “country’s deep desire for lasting peace and friendship” and asserted that “a stable, secure and prosperous Pakistan is in India’s interest. Let no one in Pakistan be in doubt about this”. With reference to some of his team members who opposed his visit to the Minar, Mr. Vajpayee said that he told them “Pakistan didn’t need my stamp. It had a stamp of its own ... “you can change your friends but not your neighbors and your geography” ‘he added.

Similarly Mian Nawaz Sharif became the first Punjab- based Prime Minister of post-nuclear Pakistani history who took a bold initiative to have signed a peace accord with India. At Lahore both leaders agreed that they would concentrate their efforts on an early resolution of all issues including the issue of Kashmir through bilateral talks in the spirit of Simla Accord, a landmark agreement signed by Premiers Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

In the back drop of Lahore Peace Accord, the Kargil operation was observed as an “against the wind” development. Pakistan and India who carry the legacy of painful partition are always prone to mistrust of each other. According to a leading South Asian expert Lawrence Ziring describing the Indian perception of Pakistan terms it as a “a Trojan horse with the potential power to undermine and eventually dominate the whole subcontinent (Lawrence Ziring 1993). Moreover, this legacy includes also the unfinished agenda of Kashmir. India has always claimed that Kashmir was its integral part; therefore, she has rejected the UN resolution based plebiscite in Kashmir to decide the fate of the Kashmiri people in accordance with the principles of right of nations to the self-determination. The

Kargil point, due to its strategic position on Srinagar-Leh highway on Indian side which also leads to the Siachen glaciers came under the attack of Kashmiri militants early May, 1999. It triggered the conflict consequently disturbing the peace time relations between Pakistan and India for more than thirty years. It was indeed within four months of signing the historic Lahore-Declaration in February 1999, when Indo-Pakistan relations took an unpredictable turn with the beginning of Kargil-conflict. Heightened tension arising out of intense cross-border firing and heavy casualties on both sides of line of control (LOC) raised the apprehensions that the two neo-nuclear neighbors were at the brink of an all-out war (Gerald Segal 1999). This situation was an ultimate outcome of onslaught by Kashmiri militants who captured the strategic Kargil-heights falling within Indian held territory (Cheema, 2013). The intrusion began early 1999 secretly which was later revealed to Indians in May, 1999, much to their surprise. Kashmiri militants, who had allegedly crossed to Indian side of Line of Control, took the control of the summer bunkers of Indian Army. They penetrated into Indian held territory for about 15 kilometers. The militants or Mujahidin ambushed Indian troops which were returning to their fortified positions on high altitude mountains of Himalayas. The Indians admitted that militants were well organized, well prepared and well equipped for an attack. However, Indians were not aware of large scale strategic advancement or what the Indians called it “invasion” had taken place. The Kargil conflict took the heavy toll of both sides. Post-Kargil official admission of the loss of lives of combatants is disturbing besides the adventurous nature of operation and time selection and risks involved in such operation to invite the wrath of more powerful neighbor. Indian and Pakistani sides have their own versions of losses. According to India 464 Pakistani militants and 725 Pakistani regular soldiers were killed and 474 Indian officers and men were killed and 1109 wounded (Johnson, 2005). Whereas the Pakistani retired General and an author puts Indian toll at more than 1000 army soldiers. (Kamal Matinuddin 2002).

In Pakistan controversy over Kargil conflict acquired national significance when deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif accused military ruler General Parvez Musharaf, who was the Chief of Army Staff in formers’ tenure, of “sabotaging the Lahore peace process by initiating Kargil operation without his prior permission and knowledge” ([www.in.rediff.com](http://www.in.rediff.com)). However, General Parvez Musharaf denied

it and explained that he had informed Prime Minister 15 days prior to the operation.

In spite of controversies and accusations mentioned above there is much for learning in Kargil conflict. The civil-military relations and role of domestic factors to determine foreign policy direction of Pakistan are of vital nature to understand. Since conflict erupted soon after peace efforts undertaken by leadership of both countries raised fingers over the authority and credibility of political leadership in foreign policy domain. It would not be exaggeration if it is regarded a failure of summit diplomacy and that civilian leadership in Pakistan lacks its control over military leader's mind and might. In this regard former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's disclosure is also significant in which she admitted that there was no political control of nuclear program. In her interview she said in spite of her desire, the visit to nuclear facility was stalled, (News Week October 25, 1999).

Although Pakistan denied its involvement in the infiltration but it was not digested by both the Indians and the international powers

The peace making between India and Pakistan has been a subject of controversy in domestic politics of both neighboring countries since inception. Above all the fixed foreign policy perceptions rooted in the partition-philosophy and bloc system-limitations have been the major obstacles in establishing a meaningful relationship between two neighbors. These have been reflected on the one hand in the Indian stubbornness over Kashmir by claiming that later was her integral part. Whereas on Pakistan side it had been stressed from time to time that Kashmir is the main bone of contention between her and India. The role of the political leadership of both countries may always be seen in this narrow sphere of already defined guiding principles of Foreign Policy. In Pakistan where democratic dispensation has been derailed, the autocratic military rulers took country twice to an all-out war with India. The foreign and security policymaking process in Pakistan lacks the effective participatory role by truly involving parliament and other public opinion making fora and various segments of the society who differ with the traditional and conservative mind set regarding Pakistan's foreign and security policies. Ironically mild departure from the hawkish pattern of thinking and showing flexibility towards policies of the cold war era is regarded as betrayal with the founding principles of country.

Therefore, any peace initiative aimed at friendly relations between India and Pakistan has found a limited scope to be materialized. The involvement of region's intelligence agencies in domestic and foreign affairs has been discussed by renowned scholars with reference to handicapped political leadership on the affairs of bilateral relations (Tahir-Kheli 1998). It was claimed that Pakistan Army had reservations regarding the Lahore peace process. "The largest uncertainty surrounds the role of Pakistan armed forces. Was their support for insurgents a calculated snub to a prime minister more committed to decent Indo-Pakistani relations than many of his predecessors? Some foolish parts of the Pakistani political and military system may think they can embarrass Sharif and win next elections" viewed an international analyst while deliberating on the Kargil-fight (News Week May 10, 1999).

It was indeed United States' diplomatic intervention that worked and averted the danger of war looming over Indo-Pak subcontinent. At the Washington summit between President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in early July 1999, Pakistan announced unilateral disengagement from Drass-Kargil sector (Cheema, 2013).

With Pakistan's unconditional withdrawal of its forces, a possible devastating conflict over Kargil between both neighboring countries prima-facie ended up. Since 12th October army coup in Pakistan, the border situation, despite unilateral de-escalation of Pakistani troops from international borders remained tense for long.

Given the situation, the consequent damage to Indo-Pakistan relations seemed to be irreparable. The political gimmicks and exploitation of public sentiments on crucial foreign and security issues may therefore prove hardly helpful to resolve long standing conflicts (News week, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

The occurrence of Kargil Conflict in post-nuclearisation of sub-continent was in fact an unexpected development. Much to the surprise of Political leadership of Pakistan and India which inked Lahore peace declaration a few months earlier, Kargil was an anti-climax episode. It has been assumed in this study with reference to different views expressed by former Prime Ministers and renowned scholars on the subject that hawkish elements in Pakistan's security establishment



triggered the conflict in the volatile area of Line of Control which divides Pakistani Azad Kashmir and Indian held Jammu and Kashmir valleys. The adventurous nature of the advancement of Kashmiri insurgents supported by Pakistan's Northern Light Infantry, generated heat on both sides of borders causing a war like situation. However, on the initiative of Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom and above all United States helped to defuse the aggravating conflict. The study unveils the lack of trust and confidence between both states due to legacy of partition. The power of hawkish elements to influence foreign policy directions has been noted by distinguished authors on foreign policy and Indo-Pak subcontinent. The domestic stake holders in Pakistan particularly Army Leadership seemed to have had reservations on Pak-India peacemaking early 1999. It is further concluded that political leadership in Pakistan wielded little freedom to decide on India-centric foreign policy initiatives. Last but not least that lasting peace in subcontinent depended on resolution of the long pending issue of Kashmir. Therefore Indo-Pak relations may continue to fluctuate under domestic strains. . It is therefore important to trace the factors that have had in the past and will continue to disrupt the peace initiatives meant for improving Pak-India relations at the critical juncture of their history.

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