

Operation Kargil: The Pakistani Popular Reactions

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The domestic reactions to the Kargil operation in Pakistan have been so varied that one has to be very cautious while attempting any generalisation of the responses. The task is all the more difficult if an Indian is asked to sum it up all at a time when both the countries are caught up in a low intensity conflict in Kargil. From whatever comments one encounters on Pakistani reactions, one finds that the temptation to jump into the conclusion that Pakistanis are an irrational lot seems to cloud any reasoned assessment of the feelings of the Pakistanis across the border. But one would come across a wide cross section of the people in Pakistan who would take the Kargil operation with a pinch of salt. Many of them are even overly vocal about the inherent weaknesses of such foolish misadventures. This article seeks to give an all round picture of the whole gamut of reactions unfolding in Pakistan in the wake of the Kargil crisis.

The factor of passion

It is true that at moments of national crises passion overtakes reason and the quietest of people lose their poise to join the collective hysteria that accompanies such crises. This has been the case with many commentators on both sides of the border. In Pakistan, for example, at the beginning of the Kargil crisis, many regular columnists in the print media were seen to be buying the official proposition unquestioningly that the freedom-fighters or mujahideens were doing a wonderful thing and Pakistani army was just a distant onlooker officially providing them with ‘moral, political and diplomatic’ support. Commentators like Tarique Niazi even went to the extent of calling ‘Kashmir’ the millennium bug for India. He would write that:

“If India is locked into a war with “intruders”, it would only better its claims on truth to let the world take a peek and see for itself. But the “intruders” are just a smokescreen for India’s aggression against the Kashmiris, and a ruse to deligitmate the Kashmir’s war of liberation...The problem of Kashmir has long been crying for solution, only to be heard by the deaf. It is about time India attended to this problem and fixed it. Unless it is fixed, Kashmir will continue to fester as the millennium bug for India.” (Tarique Niazi in *Frontier Post*, 2 June 1999).

Later Tarique Niazi went on to say that Pakistani stand was quite rational for the Indians had also started questioning the wisdom of spending so much on Kashmir and this was the most opportune time to strike a firm blow:

“This rationality in Pakistan’s position has made the majority of Indians re-look at the Kashmir conflict in terms of “justice”, although their immediate motive is economics. In survey after survey, the majority of Indians have come to believe that the cost of keeping Kashmir is higher

than leaving it alone.” (Tarique Niazi, “Kashmir: Peace, security and justice”, *Frontier Post*, 9 June 1999)

Many others went to the extent of saying that Kargil aggression was initiated by India and hailed Nawaz Sharif for acting as the “strong man” of the Asia who stood up to the occasion and was guarding the honour of Pakistan over Kargil. They also held the opinion that Kargil crisis together with the nuclear blackmail that Pakistan has all along attached to Kashmir issue ever since May 1998 nuclear tests would effectively internationalise the Kashmir issue and put India in an uncomfortable position. Any moral underpinning in case of Pakistani provocations was swept aside by referring to the Indian role in the 1971 debacle. Nasim Zehra went on to write:

“Delhi authored military escalation along the LoC has again brought the issue of Kashmir to the centre-stage at the regional and international level. The press and officials from Washington to Moscow and from London to Tehran are conceding the importance of settling the Kashmir dispute. From the back burner of the collective memory of international players it has been brought to the fore...Nawaz Sharif meanwhile ably supported on foreign policy issues by his Information Minister and the Foreign Office has pursued a near faultless India policy. He has mixed peace offers with commitment to this country’s defence and projected nuclear strength with gentleness. He is indeed South Asia’s strong man of peace. No Arafat or Anwar Sadaat, Nawaz Sharif leads a nation which has correctly sized up the aggressor on its eastern front...Even now as Delhi attempts to invoke moral underpinnings to its misplaced outrage against Pakistan for allegedly supporting ‘infiltrators’ it must remind itself of the role it played in 1971 tragedy. Not only did India march into Pakistan as ‘sympathisers’ of the East Pakistanis, the Indian army also politically and military propped up the budding freedom movement in East Pakistan. A fact that the former Indian Chief of Staff Eastern Command, General J.F. Jacob documents in his book ‘Surrender at Dacca’. (Nasim Zehra, *The News International*, 4 June 1999)

There were some other commentators who believed that Pakistan could be behind the Kargil aggression but fully backed the government’s venture saying Pakistan was giving India a taste of its own medicine. Shahid Mahmud for instance wrote:

“The expectation that LoC be treated as an international boundary may yield a short-term peace, but without confronting it for a permanent solution means, another round of hostility between the two countries, sooner or later. Hence, the current escalation, clearly instigated by Pakistan, is aimed at achieving a number of objectives:

- Give Indians the taste of their own medicine, a la their Siachin adventure
- Choke India’s supply line to Siachin, thereby forcing India to come to the negotiating table and sign the accord on the glacial conflict, which she did not after having accepted it verbally
- Remind the world of its overdue attention to the occupation of Kashmir by the Indians.
- Confront India while India’s threat is still manageable- presumably
- Further strengthen the resolve of the freedom fighters in Kashmir, while causing Indian forces to suffer from high casualties and low morale. (Shahid Mahmud, “Kashmiri movement: Not yet time to read the last rites”, *Frontier Post*, 10 June 1999)

In the midst of it all the government was seeking to queer the pitch of the Kargil tune by appealing to the nuclear passions of the Pakistanis by choosing to observe the anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear experiment on 28 May as Youm-e-Takbir day. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif addressed the Pakistanis in an assuring tone:

“The 28th of May last year was history-making in the sense that, in this troubled world, it was rare for the people of a country like Pakistan to feel safe and secure. And that too not by help from foreign friends but through our own technology, our own genius...celebrations apart, let us not forget that today is the first anniversary of a moment; when we exhibited self-reliance in concrete terms. Let this be a guide for the future, and a constant reminder that if we want to occupy a place of respect and regard in the world we have to do it on the strength of our own ability, hard work and self-confidence. That place cannot come to us as a gift from others.”

The Political Response

It goes without saying that sub-continental democracy is more superficial than real and it is regarded more as a legitimiser of power struggles than a positive virtue to be promoted among the masses. As such in many occasions one finds that the opposition opposes the government for opposition's sake. At the height of the Kargil crisis, when reason demanded that they should have discussed the matter and tried to bring an erring government to senses, the opposition was seen to be fighting with the government over sitting arrangements in the Senate and walking out of the floor of the house.

The opposition's response to Kargil crisis was thus expectedly critical and they went on to criticise the government from their own standpoints. Farooq Leghari was seen to be visiting the front line and paying high tributes to the mujahideen. The PPP people were busy chastising the Sharif government for driving the country into wilderness through its faulty Kargil venture. Benazir even called Sharif government the liberal face of the radical fundamentalist forces operating within the country. She also came out with her own proposal of solving Kashmir problem through a soft border policy that would increase communication between the people along both sides of the LOC and then South Asian trade should flourish providing such cross-border communications with a perfect socio-economic ambience. PPP leaders who had advocated the line that army must intervene to save the federal set up in Kashmir in the wake of the crisis in Sindh were seen to be critical of the Army's role this time over Kargil.

And one also marked the radical constituency led by Jamat-i-Islam and the United Jihad Council (an outfit comprising of 15 fundamentalist organisations) advocating a tougher line that made one feel that the encounter around Kargil was just the tip of the iceberg. They were of course playing it cool under the cover of the Pakistani army.

The change in the Pakistani government's posture after Sharif's aborted China trip at the first instance made the Jehadi forces vocal about their commitments to the cause of Kashmir and soon after the Sharif-Clinton joint declaration at Blair house in Washington, the Jihad forces under UJC were in a state of confusion. While UJC took time to react to the pullout decision by government, the constituents had different responses to make.

On July 12, several mujahideen groups and the opposition Jamaat-i-Islami party announced demonstrations in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province and the port city of Karachi against an agreement they perceived as a sell-out of the national interest. The militants' umbrella organisation, the United Jihad Council on 10 July reaffirmed an earlier rejection of the agreement as a sell-out and said the mujahideen would continue to fight India "until the last breath."

"We will not stop our struggle against India and we will not vacate the peaks in Kargil. Any agreement between India and Pakistan may apply to the Pakistani army but not on the mujahideen," Fazlur Rehman Khalil, head of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, was quoted as saying by the media. "The mujahideen are free to take their own decisions and not bound by the agreement. Our battle will continue till the last Indian soldier is in Kashmir," he said.

Many of them thus outrightly rejected the governmental appeal and said that they would continue their fight inspite of it even if they and the rest of the onlookers around the world knew that Pakistani government's decision to pull out its army from the so called mujahideen venture would reduce their strategic value to nullity. Five guerrilla groups were thought to have been active in Kargil—Lashkar-e-Toiba, Hezb-ul-Mujahideen, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Tehrek-e-Jehad and Al-Badr Mujahideen. The Lashkar-e-Toiba chief sounded a warning that the mujahideens were relocating themselves in another strategic position. However, one group, Tehrek-e-Jehad, said that they would heed the government's appeal for 'help'. "We are disengaging Indian forces in the Kargil sector. We have achieved a lot out of it, we inflicted heavy physical and material losses to the Indian troops", said Salim Wani, the group's chief organiser.

Thus the government's decision to put an end to Kargil crisis by pulling out from Kargil was severely criticised by many political outfits. Most of them said that if this was the ultimate thing to happen why did the government starts it after all? They argued that contrary to the governmental contention that Kargil had internationalised the Kashmir issue, it had in fact lowered the image of Pakistan in the eyes of the international community.

Of course one should not take such demonstrations too seriously for everybody is aware of the nuisance capacity of the right wingers in the subcontinent and it would be unfair to generalise a whole populace on the basis of the response of such a passionate fringe.

The Rational Response

If one goes by the comments in the media, the Pakistani media had enough space for the reasoned and dispassionate analyses. Right from the start many commentators doubted the efficacy of such a strategy. They would blame the Pakistani TV, "that weary performer forced to dance to every government's tune," for its propagandist tactics and call its overtures on Kargil "rooted idiocy of a fossilized propaganda machine," which "insults the intelligence of its viewers". They would say that there was a difference between the 'vision of the Armageddon and the unthinking slide into war' and question the wisdom of government in allowing Pakistani people to be "sucked into a war of not their own choosing". They would say that the theory of internationalisation of the

Kashmir issue was absurd for the international community very well knew that “our begging bowl was as strong as our pretensions (over Kashmir)”.

Many others have sought to hint at the possible cleavage between the civilian and military administration in Pakistan. They have rightly been apprehensive of the danger of such operative disjunction between the two most important arms of the Pakistani State. This has been the hypothesis of many in India as well who are amused by the failed-State proposition and take the dissociation for granted and say that Pakistani army is an autonomous institution and the army officials have nothing but contempt for the politicking that goes on at the political level in Pakistan. No less a person than the Indian Defence Minister has on more than one occasions chosen to give a long rope to Sharif administration by advocating this autonomy-of-the-Pak-Army theory. For commentators in Pakistan too such a possibility is being critically analysed and evaluated. It is of course natural for a people having the experience of several army intrusions into the civilian administrative realm to grow such hunches and be concerned about them.

Others have tried to argue that there could have been a possible communication gap between the army and the civilian authorities but the gap was soon overcome and the whole civilian administration soon geared up to defend the interests of Pakistan, if not of Kashmir and Kashmiris, at the international level. The dangerous possibility of the Army bypassing the civilian government and forcing it to toe its line has also been hinted at by many who have regarded it as an instance of the shackles still in place around the civilian administration despite the brute popular majority commanded by the Sharif government.

The dangerous possibility a nuclear encounter also made its mark on the reactions of many commentators. Ghazi Salahuddin even advised the government to practise restraint on the occasion of the Youm-e-Takbeer celebration:

“Both India and Pakistan may have joined the nuclear club but all that they said had been achieved, in their separate justification for this horrifying development, has apparently been negated by the Kargil flare-up. In our case, we ought to feel embarrassed by the celebrations of Youm-e-Takbeer, and not only because of the devastation caused along Sindh’s coastal areas by that cyclone.” (Ghazi Salahuddin, *The News International*, 7 June 1999)

Among others, Moonis Ahmar wrote:

“There is no dearth of people in South Asia in general and India and Pakistan in particular who want to prevent any future war in their region. What is a matter of concern and alarm for saner elements in South Asia is that day by day events along the Indo-Pak borders are going out of control. When the military confidence-building measures reached between the two countries particularly the hot line between Directors General Military Operations and the understanding reached at the Lahore Declaration are pushed to the back burner, no one can exercise restraint. One event after another can further aggravate the situation and ultimately lead to the outbreak of an all out war between India and Pakistan. It is another question if both India and Pakistan can afford such a war. Even the continuation of low-intensity war will afflict heavy damage on the economy and infrastructure of India and Pakistan. The two countries will then resemble Iran and Iraq who fought a war for eight years but achieved nothing.

“Let’s hope that sanity prevails in the minds of Indian and Pakistani policy-makers and the prevailing dangerous situation is de-escalated as a result of a “face-saving formula” for the two sides. But the recent events in Indo-Pak relations provide an opportunity to the two countries to learn lessons and agree on a permanent settlement of the cause(s) of low-intensity war. Merely going for an adventure for domestic reasons is unpardonable. (Moonis Ahmar, “Back to square one?” *The News International Pakistan*, 8 June 1999)

Reacting to Shamsad Ahmad’s statement that Pakistan could use the nuclear option, noted columnist M.H. Askari wrote:

“The dimensions of a possible nuclear conflict in the subcontinent are too horrendous even to contemplate. One is tempted to suggest that only some sort of a death wish would drive two close neighbours such as India and Pakistan into resorting to the use of nuclear weapons to settle their mutual disputes (M.H. Askari, The Kargil crisis, *Dawn*, 2 June 1999)

Frontier Post also wrote in its Editorial that war should be averted at any cost and the process of dialogue should follow. Criticising Pakistani government for its stance that it might use nuclear weapons the editorial would say:

“Pakistan is again working up a nuclear-related euphoria these days, which is a pity. The government is encouraging militarism on a bizarre level. Educated people have tried to drive some sense into the head of an unthinking government by urging it to downplay the country’s nuclear stature. The Prime Minister and his colleagues, on the other hand, are keen to use every occasion and device for consolidating their hold on power.” (Editorials of *Frontier Post*, 28 May 1999 and 2 June 1999)

Columnists like Aziz Siddiqui and Ayaz Amir were busy exposing the government over the Kargil issue all this while. Aziz Siddiqui would write that the government should not hoodwink the people over the Kargil issue because what has “stood internationalised is Kargil and not Kashmir”. He would rather say that without India’s consent it was just impossible to multilateralise (internationalise) the Kashmir issue. He would rather suggest that the road to Indo-Pak peace lies in dialogues and not such armed encounters. He would write:

“Like it or not, what has stood internationalised over the past few weeks is not Kashmir but Kargil. We deceive ourselves if we mistake one for the other, or believe one can be easily made to lead to the other. And the internationalisation that has occurred is no accession of strength to Islamabad. There were stray recent comments pointing to the larger problem, as by the British minister of state, Baroness Simmons or the US senator Tom Harkin. But the emphasis in both the official US position and the G-8 statement was on the ‘intrusion’, the ‘infiltrators’, return to the former positions, and strict abidance by the line of control...No outside intervention is possible, or can be of much use anyhow, if one party to a dispute rejects it- except if the intervention consists in use of effective force. It can avail even less in relation to a country of the size and diplomatic clout of India’s. Not all the United Nations resolutions that the US did not veto could ever make Israel change its mind. The Kashmir issue will be resolved, whenever and in whatever way it is resolved, only by mutual agreement.” (Aziz Siddiqui, “Downhill from Kargil”, *Dawn*, 20 June 1999)

Farhatullah Babbar wrote in *Frontier Post* in similar vein:

“It is time India and Pakistan decided on substantive talks. If they fail to do so bilaterally, a negotiated settlement with outside mediation may well turn out the only way to take the two countries out of the corner in which they have boxed themselves. And it is time saner elements in Pakistan also put pressure for a negotiated settlement not only for peace but also for the sake of stopping the government from misusing it for advancing its narrow domestic political agenda at the cost of national security and even survival.” (*Frontier Post*, 26 June 1999)

Similarly Ayaz Amir would say that the government could only fool the blind and the benighted over Kargil issue. He would pose some pertinent questions too:

“Have we carefully considered the possible consequences of the Kargil operation? Even if there is a minuscule chance of it leading to war, have we taken this into account? Or, on the contrary, are we being sucked into a conflict not of our choosing simply because we have lost control over the situation?” (*Dawn*, 25 June 1999)

Ayaz Amir would observe that the Government’s decision regarding Kargil aggression suggests that “the possession of nuclear weapons does not confer immunity from the taking of stupid decisions” and he would go on to point out the public apathy prevailing over Kargil issue in Pakistan and say:

“This public aloofness is intriguing. Even during the disaster of 1971, when retrieving the last shreds of national pride from the maelstrom of humiliation had become a problem, there was greater popular backing for the war effort. A disaster there was but the nation as a whole (minus the people of East Pakistan of course) was in it together. This time- when through no small expenditure of blood and resources a limited military advantage of some strategic significance has been gained- the nation is apathetic or it is keeping its enthusiasm well concealed. Our soldiers are on their own.” (*Dawn*, 2 July 1999)

Even there were others who would go to the extent of saying that Kashmiris are better off with India and Pakistani government should better try to attend to domestic problems. Hafizur Rahman would argue:

“What then shall we give to the Kashmiris? An effete and corrupt administration, an undependable political system, a distorted democracy, a press fearful of repression, ethnic strife leading to intolerance and bloodshed and a promise of periodic martial law? For long years the Kashmiris got a better deal from the Indians. The latter could have continued there forever if they had more sense and a better understanding of the Kashmiri psyche. Now of course it is too late, but their reaction to Kashmiri independence will be: ‘If we must lose Kashmir, why should we lose it to Pakistan?’” (*Dawn*, 2 June 1999)

Pointing to the financial crisis many commentators observed too that the Kargil encounter would inevitably bleed the nation dry and said that the world outside knew that “our begging bowl was as big as our pretensions (over Kashmir issue)” (Ayaz Amir, *Dawn*, 25 June 1999). They would hint

at the fact that the biggest problem before the Pakistani government was its debt liability because the domestic and external debt was more than 95 per cent of the GDP and its servicing absorbed 71 per cent of net federal government revenues and constituted 47 percent of total government expenditures and in excess of 56 % of its current expenditures. At Rs. 287 billion for the next fiscal year, debt-servicing obligations dwarfed even the budgetary diversion of Rs. 142 billion for the defence establishment in the wake of Kargil. They would request the government to concentrate on this debt crisis instead.

Conclusion:

However, there is wider consensus on Kashmir than on Kargil in Pakistan. Even the columnists who have been out rightly critical of the Kargil misadventure have chosen to take a very a cautious stand on Kashmir. Many of the columnists, who had been sceptical of the Kargil move right from the start, have gone to the extent of posing as champions of the Kashmiri interests by arguing that Nawaz Sharif's climb down was swift and shameful enough to sustain the pressures on India to discuss Kashmir even bilaterally in the days to come. They would say that if the Kargil fiasco was a miscalculation, the Sharif-Clinton joint statement has been a Himalayan blunder; that this has left Pakistan with no room for diplomatic manoeuvre and the international condemnation, Pakistan has suffered during the Kargil encounter, would cripple its efforts at persuading the international audience about its sincerity in solving the so-called 'nuclear' problem of Kashmir. Thus the issue of Kashmir, which has almost become a national obsession, has managed to obfuscate the reasoning of many people too.

Thus it has been quite an attractive bag of mixed reactions. We have seen in democracies in the underdeveloped societies like ours the passionate and the vociferous lead the show and those in power seek to inflame popular passions to divert attentions of the people, who are always regarded as a pliant and docile lot, away from the immediate issues that hint at their weaknesses. Similarly quite, in Pakistan, the people "full of passionate intensity" have led the show but the best and rational lot have tried their best to evolve antidotes to the propaganda fanned and fuelled by the people in power and they have kept their faculties intact in the face of the nationalist hysteria visiting the subcontinent at the moment. Pakistan, as such, is not a place abounding with "jihadi madrasas" and 'blood thirsty mujahideens", it is a typical underdeveloped democracy convulsing under the wave of liberalisation which is visiting the world in the post-cold war days. One hopes that the rational section would soon push the passionate fringe to the background and Pakistan will emerge as a genuine democracy in the years to come.