

In the Aftermath of a 'Jihad'

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The Kargil denouement has put the government just where its opponents long wanted it, and they are making the most of the opportunity. More materially, many of its ardent partisans are livid too. They are crying betrayal.

The affair had been kept close to the chest from beginning to end, much as this government's want is. Friend and foe alike remained pretty much in the dark for all these two months. Only now a need is being felt to take them into confidence. The common people of the country too are to be thus favoured: the prime minister is due to come on the telly with all the customary pomp and circumstances and argue why this is not the debacle the critics are saying it is.

The belated candour is however unlikely to make people any wiser or better assured. Nothing may be said that the government apologists had not been saying before. All the crucial questions on the other hand may still remain unanswered. And there may just possible be no way to blame any part of this one on the former government.

Propaganda Overdrive!

The demonstrative public reaction we see is not much unlike those in the earlier conflicts, and for much the same reasons. The government on such occasions goes on a propaganda overdrive, claiming how the enemy was on the run. When the smoke clears the reality comes as stunner. It is contrary to all the build-up. Humiliation at India's hand is hard to bear in any circumstances; it is the worst sin a government (or a cricket team) can commit. It shocks the people even more when they had been made to expect the opposite.

Armed sallies are judged in the whole, not in parts. Most of all they are judged in the outcome. In parts, Kargil might indeed have been something of a triumph as claimed. Occupying the strategic heights, commanding a vital highway in Indian control, taking heavy toll of the attacking men and armour were apparently on the plus side. But how long was the operation logistically sustainable, what scale of response it would bring from India, what reactions it would cause worldwide, and what diplomatic and other pressures it would trigger against a heavily dependent Pakistan—clearly such questions weren't taken sufficiently into account beforehand. Or the outcome wouldn't have been such a surprise.

But that is in the past. What does it add up to now?

It is hard to see that the defiant refusal of the Mujahideen groups to climb down can be much more than a sort of whistling in the dark, a bid to acquire some dignity in retreat. Any indefinite continuance of their operation will require maintenance of a supply line of men and material which

may not be easy without the cooperation of the Pakistan army. And any such cooperation may not now be without a cost. It will certainly not be in accord with the agreement reached in Washington.

How has the army itself come out of this? And where does it stand now? That is of course sensitive ground and it is difficult to speculate on it. But there are clearly honest doubts on that score too.

The opposition political parties for their part might have found a public cause and certain retired generals an occasion for a demonstration of their devout passion in this abrupt call to about-turn in Kargil. But it is doubtful if they will create much of a storm for all their pains. They carry no greater conviction on Kashmir themselves. They offer no credible nostrums to rally people to their side of the barricade, except in the present initial bursts.

Possible Backlash

A certain backlash may however develop if they are joined by the militant groups claiming credit for Kargil. Denied the opportunity for the present of a holy war ('Ghazwa-i-Hind'), the latter may turn their guns elsewhere, metaphorically speaking. They may feel the need to find interim targets to keep their fierce militancy in repair. Whether they too will be a passing irritant, or worse, may depend on how they are handled.

Impact on Indo-Pak relations

Perhaps the most consequential impact will be on the pre-Kargil potential of relations with India. The air has been rife in that country with the hate of the mid-60s and early 70s. The 'enemy' looms ugly and lurid in the speeches and media propaganda. Indian's access to the other view has remained barred. Sporting relations are demanded to be snapped. Film artistes have been weighing in to show off their own well-heeled fervour. Cameras have started rolling on studio floors to turn out a new crop of feature films to fan popular hate.

Among the body bags brought down from Kargil, thus, none has weighted heavier than the one that carried the Lahore spirit of a few months ago- and none apparently was easier to dispose of. The mutual allegations between Islamabad and New Delhi of violence against members of their diplomatic mission, and the ping-pong of expulsions are also one fall-out of Kargil. Sacking of PIA offices, calls to ends the cross-border bus service and expel Pakistani business concerns in India, and the daily anti-Pakistan public demonstrations are others. It will obviously be time before there is a change in their level of distrust, their new hostility, the sense of betrayal they claim to feel. The Washington statement calls for a return to the Lahore process. But that process was underpinned by intangibles. Those may not be easy to resurrect.

Can there be other ways to persuade India towards a reasonable approach to Kashmir?

More Kargils may not do that. First, the Indians are certain to take whatever steps they can to make a repetition of that situation more difficult. (They may even try and get some assistance in satellite surveillance). Secondly, if one action fails to prove persuasive, there should be little reason to believe that others of that kind will turn out much better.

There is then the expectation of international pressure coming into play. That rests solely on the assumption that the world recoils at the thought of an outbreak of a major conflict in the region, since it now has the potential of becoming nuclear. That is a fair assumption.

But there are narrow limits to the mustering of international pressure on a country of the size and importance of India; even narrower limits to India are being amenable to such an exercise. New Delhi will certainly be very unlikely to be responsive to any moves it suspects of being a nuclear blackmail. It was not without reason that Mr. Clinton could only promise Mr. Nawaz Sharif a wholly non-committal quid pro quo of 'encouraging' India and Pakistan to 'intensify' a bilateral quest for a resolution of their disputes.

How effective is the Nuclear Deterrent?

Can the two countries' being nuclear-armed be a persuasion by itself towards their adopting a more realistic approach to their disputes? Nuclear capability is new here. Its capacity to influence events tends to be exaggerated. In spite of its capacity for devastation- and because of that – it is virtually a non-weapon, except in the hands of a loony. It can achieve nobody's purpose, unless the purpose is just to wreak havoc on the other side and a worse havoc on oneself.

In this subcontinent the only silent good it may arguably do, now that it is there, is just to sit there and act as a warning to India with its preponderance of size and conventional weaponry – warning against its ever thinking of driving Pakistan into a corner. But even that measure of deterrence may become lost should the Indians ever feel that it is becoming a handle for endless needling of them as in Kargil.

That really leaves only one opportunity for Pakistan, which is somehow to create a demonstration effect that accommodation and good relations with it are in India's own best practical interest. That can happen only if Pakistan sets about concentrating almost exclusively on becoming a strong and stable political and economic entity in the region. This will set up a compulsion that a succession of Kargils or an accumulation of nuclear warheads may not. It will create a compulsion to befriend and cooperate rather than to confront and defeat. It will also of course greatly reinforce Pakistan's standing in the eyes of the Kashmiris.

This is no doubt a longer-term process. But certainly not as long-term as the fifty years we have spent trying to resolve Kashmir, and making it even worse confounded with each try. It is also, after all, elementary common sense to discard the methods that have not worked, and which on all sound judgement look unlikely to work, and look for other ways.

If a realization of that kind becomes a part of the wages of this 'jihad', the episode might not have been in vain.

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