

# 20 years after Kargil: Military operations, perceptions, and decision-making

July 2019

- Brookings India hosted its second “Back to the Future” panel discussion, marking the 20th anniversary of the Kargil War, to explore the military, political, and diplomatic challenges of the war and the lessons it holds for India’s future strategy. The series involves inviting former decision-makers to revisit a historic episode in India’s foreign and security relations to draw lessons and improve future policies.
- The expert panel included **Gen. V.P. Malik**, Chief of Army Staff, Indian Army (1997-2000); **Lt. Gen. Mohinder Puri**, Major General, GOC, 8 Mountain Division (1999); **Air Marshal Narayan Menon**, Air Officer Commanding (AOC), Jammu and Kashmir; **Shakti Sinha**, Private Secretary to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1996-1999) and **Indrani Bagchi**, Diplomatic Correspondent, The Economic Times (1999).
- The session was moderated by **Dr. Anit Mukherjee**, Non-Resident Fellow, Brookings India.
- The event was open to the public and on-the-record. In attendance were officials from various ministries, from the Indian Armed Forces, foreign diplomats, academics from India’s leading universities and think tanks, as well as members of the media and civil society.

## Kargil Revisited

What was the nature of intrusions at Kargil? What were some of the major contentions, costs, and consequences of the Kargil War? Twenty years later, where do we stand today? Moderator Anit Mukherjee not only addressed these questions by providing a general outline of the war, but also evoked certain issues of contemporary relevance to set the stage for the ensuing discussion.

Mukherjee’s presentation highlighted the significance of the Kargil Review Committee Report, which ultimately led to the most significant post-Independence transformation of the Indian military. However, over the last decade or so, there have been renewed calls for the next generation of defence reforms, aimed at enhancing both effectiveness and efficiency. So far, such

calls have gone largely unanswered, posing the larger question of whether democracies necessarily need crises to usher in change.

Mukherjee also brought up the need to teach the present generation of officers the main lessons that emerged from the war. On this count, he argued that the military needs to be more forthcoming and transparent in declassifying documents pertaining to Kargil. Despite an initiative by the Ministry of Defence to write an official history of the war, according to reports in *The Indian Express*, such a history still does not exist. Too often, this has been justified by the argument that the army has apprehensions in disclosing information which could be of current operational value.

## Operational and Strategic Dimensions of Kargil

The first panel consisted of Air Marshal Narayan Menon and Lt. Gen. Mohinder Puri and focused on the operational side of the war. Air Marshal Menon highlighted the critical role and responsibilities of AOC, J&K during the crisis, including control of six airfields, liaising with the Indian Army, air-maintenance of various areas, and supplying items to forward lines. Speaking of ‘jointness’ in India’s military, Menon acknowledged the presence of a communication vacuum that could have otherwise been exploited by the military to gain tactical advantages. Though largely in agreement with Menon, Lt. Gen. Puri, however, attributed this vacuum to the lack of intelligence, and to some degree, denial within the army. Speaking of the human costs of the war, Puri cited the high number of casualties on both sides, with his division enduring 268 casualties and burying the bodies of around 145 Pakistani soldiers on Indian soil. He narrated how the Indian Army accorded respect to the bodies of the fallen Pakistani soldiers, even airlifting religious clerics to perform their last rites. It is worth noting that while the air force has

conducted seminars on the subject, it did not attempt an official history of the war. Likewise, within the army, even though the General ARK Reddy Committee prepared a report on Kargil, it neither consulted nor interviewed IAF officers nor was the report disseminated to the probations. Even today, operational commanders are not invited to war colleges even after leaving the services, to talk about Kargil.

The strategic panel consisted of Gen. V.P. Malik, Shakti Sinha, and Indrani Bagchi and focused on the diplomatic and political aspects of the war.

Both Gen. Malik and Sinha raised the issue of suboptimal intelligence due to ambiguity and uncertainty over the intruders’ identity. Addressing the complexities of the civil-military relationship, Sinha brought attention to the multi-layered structure of modern-day government and held it responsible for the growing sense of unaccountability. There was an overwhelming consensus across the panel that the decision to

not cross the Line of Control (LoC), though operationally disadvantageous, was a strategic and political success in rehabilitating India internationally. According to the participants, the restraint observed in 1999 and in the subsequent years (for instance, in dealing with Pakistan after the

26/11 Mumbai terror attacks) created the space and justification for action taken during Uri and Balakot, respectively. Gen. Malik emphasised that military strategy was and still is shaped keeping in mind the larger political objectives.

## India’s Image Abroad: Changing International Perceptions

The discussion acknowledged the hostile international environment surrounding India during the Kargil crisis. There was consensus across the panel that acting with restraint not only helped garner international support in India’s favour, but was also crucial for de-hyphenating the U.S. approach towards India and Pakistan and subsequent rapprochement in Indo-U.S. relations. As one of the panellists pointed out, this was reflected in then U.S. president Bill Clinton’s visit to the subcontinent in March 2000.

Indrani Bagchi recounted the importance of her visit to China as part of the media delegation that travelled with India’s then

foreign minister. The visit, which was the first Indian state visit to China after the nuclear tests, attempted to tilt China in India’s favour during the crisis, or atleast seek its neutrality. Sinha candidly admitted that, “without China’s help and cooperation, certain things wouldn’t have been possible.”

The participants noted that while twenty years ago, Kargil hindered the Lahore Peace Process, it has had significant implications for the India-Pakistan relationship ever since. It created an aura of mistrust and diluted the numerous efforts by Pakistan’s civilian leadership to reconfigure relations with India.

## The Kargil War Coverage: The Media’s (Mis)Management?

Bagchi shed light on the media-military engagement during the war. It was noted that Kargil was among the first international conflicts that the Indian media covered in the post-liberalisation era. In retrospect, it provided reporters and regular media personnel a rare opportunity to interact with the top brass. Bagchi highlighted the need for the services and government to hand out detailed SOPs for journalists covering conflicts and wars.

Bagchi also traced the evolving nature of media reporting on national security issues and noted that the ‘quasi-entertainment’ nature of television media today can have a bearing on national security. Journalists have often been criticised for their reportage and coverage during crises such as Kargil, 26/11, Pulwama terror

attacks, and Balakot air strikes, with criticism focusing on how some of the coverage could prove advantageous to Pakistan and detrimental to India’s security. Bagchi partially accepted this but strongly emphasised that the media has never been given guidelines by the services on acceptable and unacceptable reportage. The key takeaway was the need to devise such guidelines and norms for national security crises. Gen. Malik offered a two-fold counter to this, explaining that instead of the services, it is the additional secretary in the Ministry of Defence who is accountable for the media’s conduct and thus, responsible for providing guidelines and anecdotal references of breach of conduct by media personnel on various occasions during Kargil.



(From L to R) Dr. Anit Mukherjee, Non-Resident Fellow, Brookings India; Air Marshal Narayan Menon, Air Officer Commanding (AOC), Jammu and Kashmir; Indrani Bagchi, Diplomatic Correspondent, *The Economic Times* (1999); Gen. V.P. Malik, Chief of Army Staff, Indian Army (1997-2000); Shakti Sinha, Private Secretary to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1996-1999); Lt. Gen. Mohinder Puri, Major General, GOC, 8 Mountain Division (1999).

*This event summary was prepared by  
Bhumika Sharma and Nidhi Varma  
Intern & Research Assistant, Foreign Policy.  
Email: nvarma@brookingsindia.org*



@BrookingsIndia



Brookings.India



Brookings India



www.brookings.in