

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 political, military, 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 leading universities and think tanks, as well as members of the media and civil society.

Kargil Revisited

What was the nature of intrusions which triggered the Kargil War in 1999? What were some of the major contentions, costs, and consequences of the 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,

Mukherjee contended that 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 the Kargil war. Despite an initiative by the Ministry of Defence to write an official history of the war, according to reports in The Indian Express, Army HQ refused to share its operational records. Mukherjee argued that this was a retrograde step and that one can write an official history without compromising current operational secrecy.

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 that there was a lack of communication between the army and the airforce, which hampered operational planning. Though largely in agreement with Menon, Lt. Gen. Puri, however, attributed this to the lack of intelligence, and to some degree, an information asymmetry between the two services. Speaking of the human costs of the war, Puri cited the high number of casualties on both sides, with his division suffering 268 casualties and burying the bodies of around 145 Pakistani soldiers on the Indian side of the Line of Control. 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. Within the army, a committee (called the Lt. Gen. ARK Reddy committee) was constituted which examined the war however it neither had access to air force documents nor interviewed IAF officers. Moreover, this report has not been disseminated within the larger military community. Even today, as admitted by both Menon and Puri, the operational commanders who fought the war have rarely been invited to war colleges, to discuss the broader lessons.

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 complex structure of modern-day government and held it

responsible for a lack of accountability. 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's image which had taken a battering after the 1998 nuclear tests. 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 her personal experience, as part of an accompanying media delegation, which covered the Indian foreign minister, Mr. Jaswant Singh, to China. She began by discussing the importance of this visit, which was the first high level contact between the two countries after the Indian nuclear tests. The main purpose of the visit was to present the Indian position on the Kargil war and thereby indirectly pressure Pakistan by seeking that China remained "neutral" during the crisis. Sinha candidly admitted that, "without China's help and cooperation, certain things wouldn't have been possible."

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

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.

Today, the lessons from Kargil are still to be incorporated on various fronts. A larger question posed by from the outset of the discussion was whether democracies need crises to usher in reforms. This question ultimately captured the essence of the discussion.



(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*



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