
Role of the Pakistan Air Force During the Kargil Conflict

M Kaiser Tufail

Pakistani writings on the Kargil conflict have been few and, those that have come out, largely irrelevant and, in a few cases, clearly sponsored. The role of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has been discussed off and on, but mostly disparagingly, particularly in some uninformed quarters. Here is an airman's perspective, focussing on the Indian Air Force's (IAF's) air operations and the PAF's position.

Operational Planning in the PAF

Since an important portion of this write-up pertains to the PAF's appreciation of the situation and the decision-making loop during the Kargil conflict, we will start with a brief primer on the PAF's hierarchy and how operational matters are handled at Air Headquarters.

The policy-making elements at Air Headquarters consist of four-tiers of staff officers. The topmost tier is made up of the Deputy Chiefs of the Air Staff (DCAS) who are the Principal Staff Officers (PSOs) of their respective branches and are nominally headed by the Vice Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS). They (along with Air Officers Commanding — AOC — the senior representatives from field formations) are members of the Air Board, the PAF's 'corporate' decision-making body which is chaired by the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS). The next tier is made up of Assistant Chiefs of the Air Staff (ACAS) who head various sub-branches and, along with the third-tier directors, assist the PSOs in policy-making; they are not on the Air Board, but can be called for hearings and presentations in the Board

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meetings, as required. A fourth tier of deputy directors does most of the sundry staff work in this policy-making hierarchy.

The Operations & Plans branch is the key player in any war, conflict or contingency and is responsible for threat assessment and formulation of a suitable response. During peace-time, war plans are drawn up by the Plans sub-branch and are then war-gamed in operational exercises run by the sister Operations sub-branch. Operational training is accordingly restructured and administered by the latter, based on the lessons of various exercises. This essentially is the gist of the PAF's operational preparedness methodology, the efficiency of which is amply reflected in its readiness and telling response in various wars and skirmishes in the past.

In early 1999, Air Chief Marshal Parvaiz Mehdi Qureshi was at the helm of the PAF. An officer with an imposing personality, he had won the Sword of Honour at the Academy. During the 1971 Indo-Pak War, as a young flight lieutenant, he was on a close support mission in erstwhile East Pakistan when his Sabre was shot down and he was taken prisoner of war (POW). He determinedly resumed his fighter pilot's career after repatriation and rose to command the PAF's premier Sargodha base. He was later appointed as the AOC, Southern Air Command, an appointment that affords considerable interaction amongst the three Services, especially in operational exercises. He also held the vitally important post of DCAS (Ops) as well as VCAS before taking over as CAS.

The post of DCAS (Ops) was held by the late Air Marshal Zahid Anis. A well-qualified fighter pilot, he had a distinguished career in the PAF, having held some of the most sought-after appointments. These included command of No 38 Tactical Wing (F-16s), the elite Combat Commanders' School and PAF Base, Sargodha. He was the AOC, Southern Air Command before his appointment as the head of the Operations branch at Air Headquarters. He had done his Air War Course at the PAF's Air War College, another War Course at the French War College as well as the prestigious course at the Royal College of Defence Studies in the UK.

The ACAS (Ops) was Air Cdre Abid Rao, who had recently completed command of PAF Base, Mianwali. He had earlier done his War Course from the French War College. The ACAS (Plans) was the late Air Cdre Saleem Nawaz, a brilliant officer who had made his mark at the Staff College at Bracknell, UK, and during the War Course at the National Defence College, Islamabad. There is no gainsaying the fact that the PAF's hierarchy was highly qualified and that each one of the players in the Operations branch had the requisite command and staff

experience. The two top men had also fought in the 1971 Indo-Pak War, albeit as junior officers.

First Rumbblings

As Director of Operations (in the rank of Gp Capt), my first opportunity to interact with the Army's Director of Military Operations (DMO) was over a phone call, some time in March 1999. Brig Nadeem Ahmed called with great courtesy and requested some information that he needed for a paper exercise, as he told me. He wanted to know when the PAF had last carried out a deployment at Skardu, how many aircraft were deployed, etc. Rather impressed with the army's interest in PAF matters, I passed on the requisite details. The next day, Brig Nadeem called again, but this time, his questions were more probing and he wanted some classified information, including fuel storage capacity at Skardu, fighter sortie-generation capacity, radar coverage, etc. He insisted that he was preparing a briefing and wanted to get his facts and figures right, to present to his bosses. We got on a secure line and I passed on the required information. Although he made it sound like routine contingency planning, I sensed that something unusual was brewing. In the event, I thought it prudent to inform the DCAS (Ops). Just to be sure, he checked up with his counterpart, the Director General Military Operations (DGMO), Maj Gen Tauqir Zia, who said the same thing as his DMO and, assured that it was just part of routine contingency planning.

After hearing Gp Capt Tariq's report, Air Marshal Zahid again got in touch with Maj Gen Tauqir and, in a roundabout way, told him that if the army's ongoing "review of contingency plans" required the PAF to be factored in, an Operations & Plans team would be available for discussion. Nothing was heard from General Headquarters (GHQ) till May 12, when Air Marshal Zahid was told to send a team for a briefing at HQ 10 Corps with regard to the "Kashmir Contingency".

Air Cdre Abid Rao, Air Cdre Saleem Nawaz and myself were directed by the DCAS (Ops) to attend a briefing on the "latest situation in Kashmir" at HQ 10 Corps. We were welcomed by the Chief of Staff (COS) of the corps, who led us to the briefing room. Shortly thereafter, the Corps Commander, Lt Gen Mehmud Ahmad entered, cutting an impressive figure clad in a bush-coat and his trademark camouflage scarf. After exchanging pleasantries, the COS started with the map orientation briefing. Thereafter, Lt Gen Mehmud took over and broke the news that a limited operation had started two days earlier. It was nothing more than a "protective manoeuvre", he explained, and was meant to foreclose any further mischief by the enemy, who had been a nuisance in the

Neelam Valley, specially on the road on our side of the Line of Control (LoC). He then elaborated that a few vacant Indian posts had been occupied on peaks across the LoC, overlooking the Dras-Kargil Road. These would, in effect, serve the purpose of airborne observation posts (AOPs) meant for directing artillery fire with accuracy. Artillery firepower would be provided by a couple of field guns that had been helilifted to the heights, piecemeal, and reassembled over the previous few months when the Indians had been off-guard during the winter extremes. The target was a vulnerable section of the Dras-Kargil Road, whose blocking would virtually cut off the crucial life-line which carried the bulk of supplies needed for daily consumption as well as annual winter-stocking in the Leh-Siachen sector. He was very hopeful that this stratagem could choke off the Indians in the vital sector for up to a month, after which the monsoons would prevent vehicular movement (due to landslides) and, also suspend all airlift by the IAF. "Come October, we shall walk in to Siachen – to mop up the dead bodies of hundreds of Indians left hungry, out in the cold," he succinctly summed up what appeared to be a new dimension to the Siachen dispute. It also seemed to serve, at least for the time being, the secondary aim of alleviating Indian military pressure on Pakistani lines of communications in the Neelam Valley that the corps commander had alluded to in his opening remarks. (The oft-heard strategic aim of "providing a fillip to the insurgency in Kashmir" was never mentioned.)

When Lt Gen Mehmud asked for questions at the end of the rather crisp and to-the-point briefing, Air Cdre Saleem Nawaz opened up by inquiring about the type of air support that might be needed for the operation. Lt Gen Mehmud assured us that air support was not envisaged and that his forces could take care of enemy aircraft, if they intervened. "I have Stingers on every peak," he announced. Air Cdre Saleem tried to point out the limited envelope of these types of missiles and said that nothing stopped the IAF from attacking the posts and artillery pieces from high altitude. To this, Lt Gen Mehmud's reply was that his troops were well camouflaged and concealed and, that IAF pilots would not be able to pick out the posts from the air. As the discussion became more animated, I asked the corps commander if he was sure the Indians would not use their artillery to vacate our incursion, given the criticality of the situation from their standpoint. He replied that the Dras-Kargil stretch did not allow for positioning of the hundreds of guns that would be required, due to lack of depth; in any case, it would be suicidal for the Indians to denude artillery firepower from any other sector as defensive balance had to be maintained.

He gave the example of the Kathua-Jammu sector where the Indians had a compulsion to keep the bulk of their modern Bofors guns due to the vital road link's vulnerability to our offensive elements.

It seemed from the corps commander's smug appreciation of the situation that the Indians had been tightly straitjacketed in the Dras-Kargil sector and had no option but to submit to our operational design. More significantly, an alternate action like a strategic riposte by the Indians in another sector had been rendered out of question, given the nuclear environment. Whether resort to an exterior manoeuvre (diplomatic offensive) by the beleaguered Indians had crossed the planners' minds, was not discernable in the corps commander's elucidation.

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Perhaps it was the incredulousness of the whole thing that led Air Cdre Abid Rao to famously quip, "After this operation, it's going to be either a Court Martial or Martial Law!" as we walked out of the briefing room. Back at Air Headquarters, we briefed the DCAS (Ops) about what had transpired at the 10 Corps briefing. His surprise at the developments, as well as his concern about the possibility of events spiralling out of control, could not remain concealed behind his otherwise unflappable demeanour. We all were also piqued at being left out of the army's planning, though we were given to believe that it was a "limited tactical action" in which the PAF would not be required – an issue that none of us agreed with. Presented with a *fait accompli*, we decided not to lose any more time and, while the DCAS (Ops) went to brief the CAS about the situation, we set about gearing up for a hectic routine. The operations room was quickly updated with the latest large-scale maps and air recce photos of the area; communications links with concerned agencies were also revamped in a short time. Deployment orders were issued and, within the next 48 hours, the bulk of combat elements were *in-situ* at their war locations.

IAF – By Fits and Starts

The IAF deployments in Kashmir, for what came to be known as "Operation

Safedsagar”, commenced on May 15, with the bulk of operational assets positioned by May 18. One hundred and fifty combat aircraft were deployed as follows:

Srinagar	-	34 (MiG-21, MiG23, MiG-27)
Awantipur	-	28 (MiG-21, MiG29, Jaguar)
Udhampur	-	12 (MiG-21)
Pathankot	-	30 (MiG-21, MiG-23)
Adampur	-	46 (Mir-2000, MiG-29, Jaguar)

One-third of the aircraft were modern, “high-threat” fighters equipped with beyond visual range (BVR) air-to-air missiles. During the preparatory stage, air defence alert status (5 minutes to scramble from ground) was maintained while Mirage-2000s and Jaguars carried out photo-reconnaissance along the LoC and ageing Canberras carried out electronic intelligence (ELINT) to ferret out locations of PAF air defence sensors. Last minute honing of strafing and rocketing skills was carried out by pilots at an air-to-ground firing range near Leh.

Operations by the IAF started in earnest on May 26, a full 16 days after commencement of Pakistani infiltration across the LoC. The salient feature of this initial phase was strafing and rocketing of the intruders’ positions by MiG-21, MiG-23BN and MiG-27. All operations (except air defence) came to a sudden standstill on May 28, after two IAF fighters and a helicopter were lost – a MiG-21 and a Mi-17—to the Pakistan Army’s surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), while a MiG-27 went down due to engine trouble caused by gun gas ingestion during high altitude strafing. (Incidentally, the pilot of the MiG-27, Flt Lt Nachiketa, who ejected and was apprehended, had a tête-à-tête with this author during an interesting ‘interrogation’ session.)

The results achieved by the IAF in the first two days were dismal. Serious restraints seem to have been imposed on the freedom of action of IAF fighters in what was basically a search-and-destroy mission. Lt Gen Mehmud’s rant about a “Stinger on every peak” seemed true. It was obvious that the IAF had underestimated the SAM threat. The mood in Pakistan Army circles was that of undiluted elation, and the PAF was expected to sit it out while sharing the khakis’ glee.

The IAF immediately went into a reappraisal mode and came out with GPS-assisted high altitude bombing by MiG-21, MiG-23BN and MiG-27 as a makeshift solution. In the meantime, quick modification on the Mirage-2000 for day/night laser bombing kits (Litening pods) was initiated with the help of the Israelis.

Conventional bombing that started incessantly after a two-day operational hiatus, was aimed at harassment and denial of respite to the infiltrators, with consequent adverse effects on morale. The results of this part of the campaign were largely insignificant, mainly because the target coordinates were not known accurately; the nature of the terrain, too, precluded precision. A few cases of fratricide by the IAF led it to be even more cautious.

By June 16, the IAF was able to open up the laser-guided bombing campaign with the help of Jaguars and Mirage-2000s. Daily photo-recce along the LoC by Jaguars escorted by Mirage-2000s, which had continued from the beginning of operations, proved crucial to both the aerial

bombing campaign as well as the Indian artillery, helping the latter in accurately shelling Pakistani positions in the Dras-Kargil and Gultari sectors. While the photo-recce missions typically did not involve deliberate border violations, there was a total of 37 “technical violations” (which emanate as a consequence of kinks and bends in the geographical boundaries). Typically, these averaged to a depth of five nautical miles, except on one occasion when the IAF fighters apparently cocked-a-snoot at the PAF and came in 13 miles deep.

The Mirage-2000s scored at least five successful laser-guided bomb hits on forward dumping sites and posts. During the last days of operations which ended on July 12, it was clear that delivery accuracy had improved considerably. Even though night bombing accuracy was suspect, round-the-clock attacks had made retention of posts untenable for the Pakistani infiltrators. Photo-recce of Pakistani artillery gun positions also made them vulnerable to Indian artillery. The IAF flew a total of 550 strike missions against infiltrator positions, including bunkers and supply depots. The coordinates of these locations were mostly picked up from about 150 reconnaissance and communications intelligence missions. In addition, 500 missions were flown for air defence and for escorting strike and recce missions.

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PAF in a Bind

From the very beginning of the Kargil operations, the PAF was entrapped by a circumstantial absurdity: it was faced with the ludicrous predicament of having to provide air support to infiltrators already disowned by the Pakistan Army leadership! In any case, it took some effort to impress on the latter that crossing the LoC by fighters laden with bombs was not, by any stretch of the imagination, akin to lobbing a few artillery shells to settle scores. There was no doubt in the

minds of PAF Air Staff that the first cross-border attack (whether across the LoC or the international border) would invite an immediate response from the IAF, possibly in the shape of a retaliatory strike against the home base of the intruding fighters, thus, starting the first round. The PAF's intervention meant all-out war: this unmistakable conclusion was conveyed to the Prime Minister, Mr Nawaz Sharif, by the air chief in no equivocal terms.

Short of starting an all-out war, the PAF looked at some saner options that could put some wind in the sails after doldrums had been hit. The Air Officer, Commanding, Air Marshal Najib Akhtar of Air Defence Command was coopted by the Air Staff to sift the possibilities. Audacious and innovative in equal parts, Air Marshal Najib had excellent knowledge about our own and the enemy's air defence ground environment (ADGE). He had conceived and overseen the unprecedented heli-lift of a low-looking radar to a 14,000-ft mountain top on the forbidding Deosai Plateau. The highly risky operation became possible with the help of some courageous flying by army aviation pilots. With good low level radars cover now available up to the LoC, Air Marshal Najib along with the Air Staff, focussed on fighter sweep (a mission flown to destroy patrolling enemy fighters) as a possible option.

To prevent the mission from being seen as an escalatory step in the already charged atmosphere, the PAF had to lure Indian fighters into its own territory, i.e. Azad Kashmir or the Northern Areas. That done, a number of issues had to be tackled. What if the enemy aircraft were hit in our territory but fell across,

providing a pretext to India as a doubly aggrieved party? What if one of our own aircraft fell, no matter if the exchange was one-to-one (or better)? Finally, even if we were able to pull off a surprise, would it not be a one-off incident, with the IAF wisening up in quick time? The over-arching consideration was the BVR missile capability of IAF fighters which impinged unfavourably on the mission success probability. The conclusion was that a replication of the famous four-Vampire rout of September 1, 1965, by two Sabres might not be possible. The idea of a fighter sweep thus fizzled out as quickly as it came up for discussion.

While the PAF looked at some offensive options, it had a more pressing defensive issue at hand. The IAF's minor border violations during reconnaissance missions were not of grave consequence in so far as no bombing had taken place in our territory; however, the fact that these missions helped the enemy refine its air and artillery targeting, was, to say the least, disconcerting. There were constant reports of our troops on the Line of Control (LoC) disturbed to see (or hear) IAF fighters operating with apparent impunity. GHQ took the matter up with Air Headquarters and it was resolved that combat air patrols (CAPs) would be flown by the F-16s operating out of Minhas (Kamra) and Sargodha. This arrangement resulted in less on-station time but was safer than operating out of vulnerable Skardu, which had inadequate early warning in the mountainous terrain; its status as a turn-around facility was, however, considered acceptable for its location. A flight of F-7s was, nonetheless, deployed primarily for point defence of the important garrison town of Skardu as well as the air base.

F-16 CAPs could not have been flown all day long as spares support was limited under the prevailing US sanctions. Random CAPs were resorted to, with a noticeable drop in border violations only as long as the F-16s were on station. There were a few cases of F-16s and Mirage-2000s locking their adversaries with the on-board radars but caution usually prevailed and no close encounters took place. After one week of CAPs, the F-16 maintenance personnel indicated that war

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reserve spares were being eaten into and that the activity had to be “rationalised”, a euphemism for discontinuing it altogether. That an impending war occupied the Air Staff’s minds was evident in the decision by the DCAS (Ops) for F-16 CAPs to be discontinued, unless IAF activity became unbearably provocative or threatening.

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In sum, the PAF found it expedient not to worry too much about minor border violations and instead, conserve resources for the larger conflagration that was looming. All the same, it gave the enemy no pretext for retaliation in the face of any provocation, though this latter stance irked some quarters in the army that were desperate to ‘equal the match’. Might it strike some that the PAF’s restraint in warding off a major conflagration may have been its paramount contribution to the Kargil conflict?

Aftermath

It has emerged that the principal protagonists of the Kargil adventure were the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen Pervez Musharraf, Commander 10 Corps Lt Gen Mehmud Ahmed and Commander Force Command Northern Areas (FCNA): Maj Gen Javed Hasan. The trio, in previous ranks and appointments, had been associated with planning during paper exercises on how to wrest control of lost territory in Siachen. The plans were not acceptable to the then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, to whom the options had been put up for review more than once. She was well-versed in international affairs and all too intelligent to be taken in by the chicanery. It fell to the wisdom of her successor, Mr Nawaz Sharif, to approve the army trio’s self-serving presentation.

In an effort to keep the plan secret, which was thought to be the key to its successful initiation, the army trio took no one into confidence, neither its

operational commanders nor the heads of the other Services. This, regrettably, resulted in a closed-loop thought process which engendered a string of oversights and failures:

- Failure to grasp the wider military and diplomatic ramifications of a limited tactical operation that had the potential of creating strategic effects.
- Failure to correctly visualise the response of a powerful enemy to what was, in effect, a major blow in a disputed sector.
- Failure to spell out the specific aim to field commanders, who acted on their own to needlessly 'capture' territory and expand the scope of the operation to unmanageable levels.
- Failure to appreciate the inability of the army officers to evaluate the capabilities and limitations of an air force.
- Failure to coordinate contingency plans at the tri-Services level.

The flaws in the Kargil plan that led to these failures were almost palpable and, could not have escaped even a layman's attention during a cursory examination. The question arises as to why all the planners got blinded to the obvious? Could it be that some of the subordinates had the sight but not the nerve in the face of a powerful superior? In hierarchical organisations, there is precious little room for dissent, but in autocratic ones like the military, it takes more than a spine to disagree, for there are very few commanders who are large enough to allow such liberties. It is out of fear of annoying the superior – which also carries with it manifold penalties and loss of promotion and perks – that the majority decides to go along with the wind.

In a country where democratic traditions have never been deep-rooted, it is no big exposé to point out that the military is steeped in an authoritarian, rather than a consensual approach. To my mind, there is an urgent need to inculcate a more liberal culture that accommodates different points of view—a more lateral approach, so to speak. Disagreement during planning should be systemically

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tolerated and, not taken as a personal affront. Unfortunately, many in higher ranks seem to think that rank alone confers wisdom and anyone displaying signs of intelligence at an earlier stage is, somehow, an alien in their 'star-spangled' universe.

Kargil, I suspect, like the 1965 and 1971 Wars, was a case of not having enough dissenters ('devil's advocates', if you will) during planning, because everyone wanted to agree with the boss. That single reason, I think, was the root cause of most of the failures that were apparent right from the beginning. If this point is understood well, remedial measures towards tolerance and liberalism can follow as a matter of course. Such an organisational milieu, based on honest appraisal and fearless appeal, would be conducive to sound and sensible planning. It would also go a long way in precluding Kargil-like disasters.

Tailpiece

Come change-over time of the CAS in 2001, President Musharraf struck at the PAF's top leadership in what can only be described as an implacable action: he passed over all five air marshals and appointed the sixth-in-line who was practically an air vice marshal till a few weeks before. While disregarding of seniority in the appointment of Service chiefs has historically been endemic in the country, the practice has been seen as breeding nepotism and partiality, besides leaving a trail of conjecture and gossip in the ranks. Given Air Chief Marshal Mehdi's rather straight-faced and forthright dealings with a somewhat junior Gen Musharraf, particularly during the Kargil conflict, there is good reason to believe that the latter decided to appoint a not-very-senior air chief whom he could order around like one of his corps commanders. (As it turned out, Air Chief Marshal Mus'haf was as solid as his predecessor and gave no quarter when it came to the PAF's interests.) Whatever the reason of bypassing seniority, it was unfortunate that the PAF's precious corporate experience was thrown out so crassly and several careers destroyed. Lives and honour lost in Kargil is another matter.

(*Courtesy:* http://kaiser_aeronaut.blogspot.com/2009/01/kargil-conflict-and-pakistan-air-force.html)