

# **The Perils of Prediction**

## **Indian Intelligence and the Kargil Crisis**

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Centre for Land Warfare Studies  
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# The Perils of Prediction

## Indian Intelligence and the Kargil Crisis

*It is better to be vaguely right than exactly wrong.*

— Carveth Read<sup>1</sup>

During the summer of 1999, India and Pakistan fought a 10-week limited war in Kargil, a remote area of Kashmir. Fighting broke out in May, when Indian troops discovered that a number of armed men had crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and entrenched themselves on the Indian side. Over the following weeks, the Indian Army learned that these gunmen were not Islamist guerillas, as it had first assumed, but Pakistani soldiers in mufti. A security crisis erupted, with allegations of 'failure' being thrown at the Indian intelligence agencies.

Initially, critics of the intelligence community believed that it had failed to predict the Pakistani offensive.<sup>2</sup> They assumed that forewarning would have prompted New Delhi to discontinue its then-ongoing rapprochement with Islamabad. However, an official commission of enquiry (set up after the crisis) cast doubt on this view. The enquiry established that the intelligence community had been sceptical about the rapprochement policy and had conveyed as much to the political leadership. The surprise at Kargil did not stem from what happened, but rather, an incorrect forecast of *how* it would happen.

Intelligence analysts had predicted a surge in cross-border infiltration by Pakistani and Afghan 'mercenaries' (a term which has since been replaced with '*jihadists*'). Their assessment implied that, despite the peace talks, bilateral tensions would escalate. It did not anticipate that the Pakistani military itself would attack across the LoC. Such a move was judged to be 'irrational' and was discounted as a possibility by both intelligence analysts and Indian military commanders. Instead, threats from Pakistan were conceptualised in familiar terms, and perceived to unfold in linear progression.<sup>3</sup>

Following the publication of the official enquiry's findings, criticism of the intelligence agencies was recast from strategic to tactical levels. The agencies were now blamed for not correctly identifying the Kargil intruders as being Pakistani soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Their warnings of mercenary infiltration supposedly led the Indian Army to underestimate the seriousness of the intrusion. Yet, this critique did not explain why intelligence analysts should have predicted the same scenario which had previously appeared irrational to their consumers in the military. Instead, all that it did was use hindsight as a basis for evaluating foresight.

This paper challenges the still-dominant view that the Kargil crisis represented an "intelligence failure".<sup>5</sup> It suggests that the Indian intelligence agencies accurately assessed Pakistani intentions prior to the Kargil crisis. Where they went wrong was in predicting the specific form in which these would be enacted. For their part, Indian military officials created an analytical paradigm (or 'model') that reinforced this incorrect prediction. The model assumed that Pakistani risk assessments would be based on an objective reading of politico-military factors. It did not consider the possibility of Pakistani miscalculation. In this regard, the Kargil crisis was similar to other cases of warning failure, such as the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

The paper is divided into seven sections. Section I provides a backgrounder on the location and topography of Kargil. It also describes the political context within which the 1999 crisis took place. Section II describes the Indian intelligence system, and elaborates on the criticism that was directed at it in the aftermath of the Kargil crisis. Section III lists the intelligence warnings produced prior to the crisis, with a view to dissecting their internal logic. Section IV demonstrates how this logic matched that of military commanders, and explores its origins. Section V examines where intelligence predictions went wrong and the consequences these mistakes had. Section VI draws parallels between the Kargil crisis and other instances of warning failure, where the concepts that underlay intelligence analysis were later vindicated by the events. Finally, section VII examines whether the factors that led to surprise at Kargil are still applicable and how the intelligence agencies could remedy these.

## Backgrounder

Kargil is an administrative district in the Indian portion of Kashmir, adjacent to the LoC with Pakistan. It is dominated by steep, barren mountains, whose heights vary between eight and eighteen thousand feet.<sup>6</sup> Indian and Pakistani border posts are situated along the outer ridgeline of these mountains. The posts are poorly served by logistics and are subject to the vagaries of extreme weather during winter. Snowfall and the attendant risk of avalanches make forward patrolling along the LoC risky for both sides. Until 1999, there was an unofficial policy of mutual withdrawal during winter months, when the most isolated outposts would be vacated. They would be reoccupied once the summer thaw set in.

Over 70 percent of the Kargil population is Shia Muslim. This makes the district unique in Indian-administered Kashmir: it is the only Muslim-majority area which has not been affected by separatist violence. Since Kashmiri rebels and their Pakistani patrons are overwhelmingly Sunni, the Shias of Kargil have remained apathetic to them. (Such aloofness stems from sectarian tension, which has been worsening in Pakistan since the 1980s.) The district is sparsely populated, with 81,000 inhabitants spread over approximately 14,000 sq km. It has very little vegetation and no forest cover. Unlike the nearby Kashmir Valley, therefore, Kargil is demographically and topographically unsuited for guerrilla warfare.

Responsibility for local defence rests with the Indian Army's 121 Infantry Brigade, which is headquartered in the district's largest town (also called Kargil). The brigade reports to the 3 Infantry Division, which is based in a larger adjoining area known as Leh. Connecting Leh and Kargil is a road called National Highway 1A. This road is a logistical lifeline for troops deployed in the mountaintops, and is one of only two supply routes that goes on to connect Leh with the rest of India. It runs roughly parallel to the LoC at distances of between six and twelve miles and is, therefore, vulnerable to Pakistani artillery fire.<sup>7</sup>

Since the highway at Kargil is snowed in between September and June every year, uninterrupted use of it is vital to stockpiling of military rations and munitions during summer. The other supply route to Leh, though outside the range of hostile artillery, is longer and is also closed during winter. Accurate and well-timed bombardment of the Kargil-Leh road would paralyse Indian

convoy movements during the stockpiling season and, thus, degrade war-fighting capacity at the local level.

The proximate origins of the Kargil crisis can be traced to the nuclearisation of South Asia in May 1998. India began the process by conducting five nuclear tests; Pakistan swiftly reciprocated. Both countries were subjected to international sanctions. Both, however, grew more self-confident, convinced that their nuclear arsenals would henceforth protect them from external threats. On the Pakistani side, key thinkers came to believe that with foreign governments concerned about the possibility of nuclear war, Islamabad could ratchet up support to the Kashmiri separatist movement. Any risk of Indian military retaliation stood nullified by the likelihood of third-party intervention, should war seem imminent.<sup>8</sup>

In mid-November 1998, four Pakistani Generals, among them the new Army Chief Pervez Musharraf, drew up plans for an incursion into Indian-administered Kashmir, codenamed Operation Badr. The primary objective of the operation was to interdict vehicular movement along the Kargil-Leh road. A secondary aim was to relieve pressure on the Kashmiri separatist rebellion, which had recently suffered significant reversals vis-à-vis the Indian state. In order to sustain operations, many insurgent groups had already been compelled to recruit foreign-born mercenaries on two-year contracts. According to an Indian estimate, by 1998, these mercenaries (most from Pakistan and Afghanistan) accounted for 70 percent of all insurgent movement across the LoC.<sup>9</sup>

Reconnaissance for Operation Badr began in November 1998. Pakistani troops probed Indian defences along the LoC, looking for gaps through which large groups of men could infiltrate.<sup>10</sup> Due to the extremely rugged terrain at Kargil, they found several such gaps. Unmanned aerial vehicles were used to verify the laxity of Indian border security. Actual movement of troops into Indian territory, however, did not begin until at least late February 1999. While it was underway, a significant shift was occurring in Indo-Pakistani relations.

Under pressure from the international community, New Delhi and Islamabad initiated a 'peace process' in early 1999. Secret talks culminated in a much-publicised prime ministerial summit, held on 20 February at Lahore in Pakistan. A tentative roadmap towards resolving bilateral disputes

was developed, and both governments received accolades for attempting to normalise relations. Despite lack of substantive progress, an illusion of cordiality had been introduced into Indo-Pakistani relations. It was only shattered when the Indian forces discovered the intrusion at Kargil, in early May 1999.

By that time, approximately 1,700 Pakistani soldiers had crossed the LoC and occupied seven prominent hilltops overlooking the Kargil-Leh highway.<sup>11</sup> They were supported by four times as many logistical troops, who ferried supplies from base camps in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). The intruders wore civilian clothing, but carried their full complement of military hardware, including assault rifles, machineguns, landmines, mortars and man-portable surface-to-air missiles. They were scattered along 130 defensive positions, located at depths of between three and eight kilometres into Indian territory. Each position was manned by 10 to 20 soldiers.<sup>12</sup> There were also 130 artillery pieces deployed on the Pakistani side of the LoC, ready to provide the intruding forces with covering fire once Indian troops began their anticipated counter-attack.<sup>13</sup>

The Kargil intrusion was a historical discontinuity event in two ways. First, never before had Pakistan launched a military offensive against India without a prior build-up of diplomatic tensions.<sup>14</sup> That it would carry out an offensive even as peace talks were underway appeared unthinkable. Second, never in the ten-year history of the Kashmir insurgency had Pakistani troops crossed the LoC with the intention of occupying territory on the Indian side.<sup>15</sup> Either they skirmished with Indian troops on the LoC itself, or crossed over in mufti to operate as guerrilla fighters in rear areas. Predicting the Kargil intrusion would have required explaining why these two trends in Pakistani strategic behaviour were about to be broken.

Having outlined the geographic and historical setting of the Kargil crisis, this paper shall now describe the charges that were subsequently levelled against the Indian intelligence agencies.

### **Intelligence Failures and Intelligence Gaps**

Discourse on Indian intelligence has long tended to be consumer-driven, which means that it is shaped by the institutional biases of executive agencies such as the police and military. Such biases often fail to differentiate between

strategic and tactical intelligence, presuming instead that all activities loosely labelled 'intelligence' fall under the purview of full-time spy bureaucracies.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, lack of communication from the professional intelligence community, in the form of declassified reports, perpetuates this conceptual misunderstanding.

What results is conflation of 'intelligence failures' with 'intelligence gaps'. Public and political debates assume that lack of any information, no matter how specific, amounts to an intelligence failure.<sup>17</sup> They ignore narrower academic definitions, which are more rigorous and can be tested against historical evidence. One example is the definition coined by Abram Shulsky and Gary Schmitt,

An intelligence failure is essentially a misunderstanding of the situation that leads a government (or its military forces) to take actions that are inappropriate and counter-productive to its own interests. Whether it is subjectively surprised by what happens is less important than the fact that the government or the military is doing or continues to do the wrong thing.<sup>18</sup>

This definition suggests that mere occurrence of an unforeseen event does not automatically qualify as an intelligence failure. Provided decision-makers have been accurately warned about the dangers of the strategic environment within which they have to operate, even a short-term or tactical surprise can do little damage to national security. This is because such surprises are the inevitable result of gaps in intelligence coverage – a hazard faced by intelligence agencies the world over. Even within the most professional and well-resourced intelligence agencies, trade-offs have to be made whenever intelligence resources are allocated to monitor threats. Coverage tends to be optimised to focus on the most likely, as well as the most severe, threats. In the process, a threat scenario that is neither very likely nor very harmful to national security is bound to get lower priority.

Following Kargil, the debate on intelligence performance swiftly took on an accusatory and counter-accusatory character. There were four main agencies relevant to this debate. Foremost was the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW – India's foreign intelligence agency). It was primarily focussed

on monitoring Pakistan and China. Most of its personnel were police officials, with a handful recruited from other government departments. Military representation existed mainly in the form of an analysis cell headed by a two-star General. Roughly 25 percent of the agency's output dealt with military intelligence, the remainder being dedicated to political and economic intelligence.<sup>19</sup>

Next in line was the Intelligence Bureau (IB) – described by some as the oldest intelligence agency in the world. Set up in 1887 to track dissident activity, it evolved into a highly efficient counter-intelligence machine. This agency had the lead role in combating terrorist and insurgent threats to India, irrespective of whether these threats were indigenous or foreign-sponsored. Although theoretically barred from operating overseas, IB operatives posted along India's western borders routinely collected intelligence on Pakistan, owing to Pakistani involvement with several Indian rebel groups.<sup>20</sup>

Third, there was the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), an apex body set up to prepare intelligence estimates. It was attended by representatives of all leading intelligence agencies, including the intelligence directorates of the Indian armed forces. Despite its high position in protocol terms, the JIC had been undermined by turf wars.<sup>21</sup> The committee merged with the Secretariat of the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) in 1998, only to be reconstituted in 2006 as a separate entity. For the sake of simplicity, this paper will treat the 1999 NSCS as synonymous with the JIC.

Lastly, there was Army intelligence. This term collectively encompassed all Indian Army personnel engaged in intelligence work. It included battalion-level intelligence staff, through to the Directorate-General of Military Intelligence (DGMI), which was headquartered in New Delhi. 'Army intelligence' was less an organisation than a system, whereby information flows were streamlined to ensure that time-sensitive data reached local commanders, who needed it most.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the JIC, IB and R&AW, it did not have a discernible hierarchy, but its exclusively military nature marked it out as distinct in the intelligence process.

Between them, R&AW, IB and Army intelligence produced 43 reports during the period June 1998-May 1999, which were later found to have a bearing on Pakistani intentions at Kargil. Another two reports were generated by Indian border guards stationed in the area. Thus, a total of 45

indications (or 'signals') of Operation Badr existed in the Indian intelligence system by May 1999. Of these, 11 reached the JIC. They were hidden among 8,400 other reports ('noise') sent to the committee, which were completely irrelevant to the looming crisis.<sup>23</sup> An analysis of the origins and destinations of the 45 relevant reports is revealing:

- Army intelligence produced 22 reports, none of which were shared with any civilian agencies, including the JIC. Data exchanges were confined to local commanders at the brigade and division level, and only three reports were even passed up the chain of command to DGMI Headquarters in Delhi. Later, the Army justified this practice by arguing that intelligence only needs to flow one-way, in the direction of the end-user.<sup>24</sup>
- R&AW generated 11 reports, of which seven were widely disseminated and four were shared only with the Army. IB produced 10 reports, of which three were distributed widely, five went exclusively to the Army, and two were sent to the Ministry of Defence.
- Only two reports, one each from IB and R&AW, were copied to the Prime Minister. The remainder were disseminated through inter-Service liaison channels. Any information of tactical importance was shared directly with 121 Infantry Brigade.

The official *Kargil Review Committee Report*, published in 2000, makes it clear that Indian intelligence agencies possessed less information than the Army on Pakistani military activities. Whatever information they did have was shared with the Army, at levels deemed appropriate to the nature of the information. The Army, on the other hand, being both a producer and a consumer of intelligence, did not share information with anyone outside its uniformed chain of command.<sup>25</sup> Despite this, many commentators feel that the IB and R&AW bear the bulk of the blame for not sharing information with the JIC.<sup>26</sup>

The *Kargil Review Committee Report* acknowledged that intelligence agencies had predicted heightened Indo-Pakistani tensions in 1999. These tensions were, however, forecast to originate from mercenary infiltration across the LoC, not a localised invasion by Pakistani troops. Building on this point, in 2006, a former Indian Army chief explained that the failure to correctly identify the intruders when they were first detected, slowed the

Indian military response.<sup>27</sup> The Army initially viewed reports of the intrusion without alarm. Only once its casualties began building up did suspicions arise as to the nature of events at Kargil.

Differing implications of the terms *infiltration* and *invasion* lie at the centre of criticism made against intelligence warnings about the Kargil crisis. All commentators agree that the Indian intelligence agencies did not predict a cross-border offensive by regular Pakistani troops, aimed at seizing territory. Where they disagree is on whether the Indian Army can use this to excuse its own laxity in patrolling the LoC, despite warnings of infiltration. Is it reasonable to expect intelligence operatives to deliver a superlative performance when Indian soldiers are themselves complacent about the threat environment?<sup>28</sup> The answer to this question requires examining: just what did the intelligence agencies predict in 1998-99, why did they do so, and what were the consequences of these predictions?

### **Intelligence Estimates Prior to the Crisis**

Before May 1999, Indian intelligence analysts and military commanders were united in believing that Pakistani decision-makers would have to be irrational to provoke a military confrontation. Their assessments stemmed from two different perspectives: R&AW analysts were focussed on the political and economic situation within Pakistan, while military officials held that attacks across unguarded portions of the LoC, including Kargil, would not be logistically sustainable.<sup>29</sup> Any form of cross-border offensive in such areas, including guerrilla warfare, seemed inconceivable due to the rough terrain.

Assessments of the Pakistani military threat were partly influenced by estimates from R&AW, gauging the likelihood of hostilities. These estimates are routinely produced every six months.<sup>30</sup> The first estimate disseminated after the May 1998 nuclear tests noted that Pakistan was going through an economic crisis, which had worsened following the imposition of international sanctions. Dated 06 October 1998, it observed that lack of funds would adversely affect Pakistani war-fighting capabilities. In its next six-monthly report, circulated on 31 March 1999, R&AW concluded that financial constraints would make Pakistani initiation of a war irrational. It predicted that, to escape pressure from hawks within his government, the

Pakistani Prime Minister would escalate support for cross-border infiltration by mercenaries.<sup>31</sup>

The economic factor is central to understanding why intelligence analysts were convinced of the improbability of a military attack. Unlike its much larger Indian counterpart, the Pakistani economy was heavily dependent on foreign aid. Its national debt in 1998-99 was Rs. 2,880 billion, as against a Gross National Product (GNP) of Rs. 2,760 billion.<sup>32</sup> The government had been forced to borrow Rs. 600 million per day (about \$10 million), just to meet expenses.<sup>33</sup> The dollar value of the Pakistani currency had plummeted, leading to a balance of payments crisis. Since most of the equipment used by the Pakistani armed forces was imported, shortage of cash had affected maintenance programmes. This formed part of a trend that pre-dated the nuclear tests; in 1997, the Pakistan Air Force Chief had admitted that his Service lacked the capacity to undertake offensive action in a future war.<sup>34</sup> His forecast was vindicated during the Kargil crisis, when the Air Force refused to provide close air support to Pakistani troops fighting on the Indian side of the LoC.<sup>35</sup>

Seen from this perspective, the R&AW was not wrong when it highlighted the inability of Pakistan to undertake large-scale offensive action. The problem was, Operation Badr was not a large-scale offensive.<sup>36</sup> It was confined to a narrow front, and carried out through the use of troops already deployed in-theatre. The guiding logic behind it was an erroneous belief that India had only two retaliatory options, both of which favoured Pakistan. Either the Indian forces would overreact by invading Pakistan, thus, prompting international intervention, or they would mount a desultory counter-attack, which would be easily thwarted.<sup>37</sup>

The plan and its underlying presumptions were not subjected to critical scrutiny, for fear of compromising secrecy.<sup>38</sup> Instead, it was blithely assumed that international pressure would limit the quantum of firepower that India could deploy. Furthermore, occupation of higher ground was expected to convey a tactical advantage to the Pakistani troops in daylight skirmishes. No one seems to have recognised that at night, the advantage would shift to the Indian troops, who could stealthily advance through low-lying terrain hidden in shadow.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, no one envisaged that India might launch a local counter-attack backed by aircraft and heavy artillery, while retaining the option of escalating hostilities further.<sup>40</sup>

Foreknowledge of the Kargil intrusion would have required that Indian intelligence analysts not only know Pakistani plans, but also the logic behind them.<sup>41</sup> Owing to the lack of an elaborate multi-disciplinary collection system in the region, such details were not available. R&AW had maintained a skeletal presence in Kargil since the 1970s, as a consequence of budget cuts. Most data on Pakistani military activities came from technical surveillance, which was sporadic and patchy at best.<sup>42</sup> This information only told analysts *what* the Pakistanis were doing, not *why* they were doing it. Even so, both R&AW and IB picked up some indications of escalating hostile activity, which prove that they were aware of the changed threat environment following the 1998 nuclear tests.

On 02 June 1998, the IB dispatched a note to the Prime Minister, containing details about Pakistani logistics-building efforts along the LoC, in the area opposite Kargil. It predicted that, having acquired a nuclear umbrella, Pakistan was likely to push mercenaries into Kargil. The note was personally signed by the then-IB chief – in protocol terms, a sign that its contents were extraordinarily sensitive and warranted follow-up action.<sup>43</sup> The only other high-level warning was an R&AW note prepared on 26 February 1999, as the Prime Minister returned from the Indo-Pakistani peace summit at Lahore. It stated that elements within the Pakistan Army leadership were opposed to rapprochement.<sup>44</sup> Such an assessment would have dispelled any illusions that bilateral tensions were likely to subside in the coming months. Seen with the benefit of hindsight, both warnings, while of a general nature, accurately conveyed the instability of the emerging politico-strategic situation.

Over the winter of 1998-99, R&AW and IB predicted an escalation of mercenary infiltration into Indian-administered Kashmir, with a thrust in the direction of Kargil. In its October 1998 threat assessment, R&AW had even warned that the Pakistan Army might launch “a limited swift offensive with possible support of alliance partners” – a reference to mercenaries. Seen against its otherwise sanguine estimate of the risk of war, this statement appeared incongruous and immediately prompted verbal queries from the Indian Army. The next six-monthly threat assessment omitted any reference to a “limited offensive” and depicted the Pakistani threat as consisting only of mercenaries.<sup>45</sup> By eliminating the ambiguity inherent in its earlier estimate,

R&AW projected a binary perception of the Pakistani threat, which was a mistake on its part.

Credible claims have since been made that R&AW was informally pressured to retreat from the alarming projection it had made in October 1998. According to this theory, the agency's warning of a limited offensive did not sit well with prevailing political narratives. Such narratives stated that the nuclearisation of the subcontinent had made India safer, because it would henceforth deter Pakistani aggression.<sup>46</sup> A contrary assessment, arguing that the overt threat of nuclear war had weakened India's conventional military deterrent, would not have been welcome either in the military or political establishments. By omitting to include a limited war scenario in its March 1999 assessment, R&AW might have capitulated to the willful blindness of its consumers.

Thus far, this paper has described the criticisms that were made against the Indian intelligence agencies in the aftermath of the Kargil crisis. It has argued that R&AW was focussed on assessing threats at the grand-strategic level, and did not devote equal attention to lower-order threats which Pakistan had the economic and military means to pose. The next section shall describe how intelligence forecasts about mercenary infiltration matched threat assessments by military commanders at Kargil.

### **Threat Assessments and the 'Afghan Model'**

The headquarters staff of 121 Infantry Brigade and 3 Infantry Division gave tremendous cognisance to the implicit difference between *infiltration* and *invasion*. However, they were more alert to the former threat than the latter. Intelligence warnings about mercenary infiltration were followed up by periodic patrols of likely infiltration routes. These were assessed to be in low-lying terrain, such as ravines and dry river beds.<sup>47</sup> Little effort was made to tighten surveillance on the high ridges near the LoC itself. It was on these ridges that the Pakistani intruders built up their presence.

During early 1999, the intelligence agencies did not notice the absence of a crucial indicator, which was integral to their hypothesis about mercenary infiltration. Unlike elsewhere in Indian-administered Kashmir, Pakistani covert operatives had not engaged in preparatory subversion of the local populace within Kargil.<sup>48</sup> From all the expectations about infiltration, one would also

have expected to uncover efforts to create a supportive infrastructure for the mercenaries in populated areas. However, no evidence of a subversive network was detected in Kargil throughout the period preceding the crisis. The sole exception was a 25-person spy ring in an adjacent area, which was dismantled by Indian counter-intelligence in June 1999.<sup>49</sup>

For their part, military officials were convinced that an incursion into Kargil by the Pakistan Army was a near-impossibility. They believed that it would prove unsustainable in the long term and expected their Pakistani counterparts to recognise that. Although logistics networks on both sides of the LoC were rudimentary, India had a relative advantage. During summer, the Indian road network opened for traffic a month earlier than the Pakistani one, and was also capable of carrying heavier loads.<sup>50</sup> Troops and heavy weapons could be rushed to into the area faster than the Pakistanis could be expected to strengthen any newly-occupied positions. If an offensive was to take place in this area, Indian planners reasoned, it would only make sense if it were initiated by them, not Pakistan.

Thus, in February 1999, a wargame categorically ruled out the possibility of a cross-border incursion by the Pakistani military.<sup>51</sup> The Indian officer who suggested this scenario was ridiculed; an experience similar to that of professional intelligence analysts who predict that the enemy might behave irrationally, only to end up themselves being branded as irrational.<sup>52</sup> Following on from its institutional logic, the Army was quite prepared to believe reports from the intelligence agencies that the primary threat in Kargil was one of mercenary infiltration. Given the terrain and its unsuitability for large-scale conventional warfare, one can reasonably surmise that the Army might have been far more sceptical had intelligence estimates warned of a cross-border attack. Its commanders only saw what they expected to see.

Where did this subjective assessment of Pakistani rationality come from? Why did Indian intelligence analysts and military officials assume that they understood the logic which guided Pakistani decisions? An answer might be found in the analytical model which Indian decision-makers had come to rely on while interpreting Pakistani strategic behaviour.

During the 1990s, a view developed within the Indian military and intelligence communities that Pakistan hoped to re-enact the Soviet-Afghan War in Kashmir.<sup>53</sup> It was widely known that the Pakistani Inter-Services

Intelligence (ISI) had played a key role in organising the Afghan resistance against the Soviet Army. In the words of a former ISI officer, his country had waged a “war of a thousand cuts” against the Soviets and their Afghan allies.<sup>54</sup> Attritional attacks to sap troop morale were combined with sporadic daredevil raids on transportation infrastructure and logistical chokepoints.<sup>55</sup> These tactics, examined collectively, constituted what might loosely be called the ISI’s ‘Afghan model’.

As rebellion broke out in Indian Kashmir during the late 1980s, senior Indian military officials wargamed the likelihood of covert Pakistani intervention.<sup>56</sup> They had before them the ‘Afghan model’, which suggested that Pakistan was prepared to support cross-border insurgencies, so long as it could maintain plausible deniability and escape military retaliation. At the time, Islamabad’s behaviour rigidly conformed to this paradigm: since 1979, Pakistani decision-makers had demonstrated a strong instinct for self-preservation, and desisted from any actions which might provoke a Soviet invasion of their country.<sup>57</sup> This ability to balance opportunism with prudence was assessed as a constant trait of the Pakistani leadership.

From ground-level studies by Army officers emerged “Operation Topac”, a predictive assessment published in July 1989 by the *Indian Defence Review*. “Operation Topac” became a quasi-official interpretative framework used by intelligence analysts to predict Pakistani moves in Kashmir.<sup>58</sup> It hypothesised that the Kashmir rebellion would consist of three phases, all orchestrated by Islamabad. First, there would be a subversive campaign, aimed at radicalising the Kashmiri population and preparing it for revolt. Second, Islamist mercenaries who had fought in the Soviet-Afghan War would be infiltrated into Indian-administered Kashmir. Their job would be to attack military bases and block strategic roads at chokepoints. Given the topography of Kashmir, there were only two such chokepoints, one of which was Kargil. Finally, at an opportune time, the Pakistan Army would cross the LoC in support of the Kashmiri rebellion, but not before the Indian Army was substantially weakened.<sup>59</sup>

“Operation Topac” assumed that the Pakistan Army and ISI would calibrate insurgent violence to avoid provoking military retaliation. This assumption was largely vindicated by events: during the 1990s, the ISI observed a degree of restraint while supporting the Kashmiri rebellion.<sup>60</sup> For instance, it did not

provide the insurgents with surface-to-air missiles, having been warned by R&AW that if an Indian aircraft was shot down, the result would be war.<sup>61</sup> However, like in Afghanistan, the ISI and Pakistan Army were prone to occasional miscalculation, which led to these restraints being loosened in 1999.

Viewed in historical terms, the Kargil intrusion bears a strong similarity to a now-forgotten military fiasco that took place in Afghanistan in spring 1989. With Soviet forces having withdrawn from the country, elements in the Pakistani government demanded that Afghan resistance fighters immediately seize power. Under pressure from the ISI, the insurgents launched a frontal assault upon the large garrison town of Jalalabad, close to the Afghan-Pakistan border. The attack got bogged down in well-prepared defences that were supported by aerial and artillery bombardment. Of 6,000 insurgents who participated in the assault, 3,000 were killed or wounded. The garrison did not fall. Analysing the episode years later, an ISI officer bitterly noted that the Pakistanis had blundered by moving too swiftly from guerrilla tactics to positional warfare.<sup>62</sup> Once the Afghan rebels presented a fixed target for government forces, they were decimated through superior firepower. As the next section shall show, this is analogous to what happened in Kargil a decade later.

### **An Incorrect Prediction, but a Correct Assessment**

The use of denial and deception was an integral component of the Pakistani operational plan at Kargil. It aimed to convince the Indians that the intruding forces were mercenaries. The Pakistani planners hoped that this would slow down the Indian response and also deflect international criticism of Islamabad. Initially, these hopes were well-founded. Indian commanders, relying on signal intercepts, came to the conclusion that the intruders were Pashtu-speaking Afghans.<sup>63</sup> Operating from past experience, they assumed that a show of force would suffice to send the intruders scurrying back across the LoC into Pakistan. (Hitherto, mercenaries in Kashmir had shown no hesitation in escaping from a firefight if offered a way out.)<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, neutral governments decried the escalating tensions along the LoC and avoided naming Pakistan as the aggressor.

On the ground, Indian battalion commanders were ordered, with characteristic bravado, to throw out the intruders. Assaults were mounted in

broad daylight, in the expectation that resistance would be slight. As casualties mounted, however, it became clear that unlike past engagements, this time the 'mercenaries' aimed to hold on to territory. By 25 May 1999, the military situation had reached a stalemate. Aerial reconnaissance confirmed that the intrusion had made deep ingress into Indian territory and that the intruders were receiving full logistical support from Pakistan. Over fifty Indian soldiers had died in suicidal assaults against Pakistani defences, and not a single hilltop had been retaken.<sup>65</sup>

At this juncture, the Indian government broke with past practice and sanctioned the use of air power and heavy artillery against the intruders. It had, thus, far treated the situation in Kargil as a counter-insurgency operation, with limits on the amount of force that could be used.<sup>66</sup> Battalions deployed to fight in Kargil had, therefore, been ordered to leave their support weapons at base camp, before setting off to fight in the mountains.<sup>67</sup> However, as suspicions built up that the intruders were regular Pakistani soldiers, operational restraints began to be loosened. On 26 May, the Indian Air Force commenced bombing missions against the hilltops occupied by the intruders. The same day, the R&AW intercepted a telephone conversation between the Pakistan Army Chief and one of his deputies.<sup>68</sup> The intercept confirmed that the intruders were regular Pakistani troops, who were being portrayed as freelance mercenaries by Islamabad in order to escape international censure.

From 26 May onwards, the counter-attack in Kargil took on the nature of a limited war. This dramatic escalation had not been foreseen by the Pakistani officers who had planned the intrusion. Over the following weeks, a combination of aerial reconnaissance and artillery bombardment turned the military situation in India's favour. Approximately 150 reconnaissance flights by the Air Force produced several thousand photographs of Pakistani defences.<sup>69</sup> Working with these, Indian infantrymen switched from high-visibility to low-visibility tactics, infiltrating past Pakistani defences at night and attacking from the flank. The Army deployed 300 artillery pieces in the combat zone, firing a total of 250,000 shells. Wireless intercepts recorded the desperation which set in among the intruders, with one telling his commanders in Pakistan, "Hell has fallen on us."<sup>70</sup> Urgent requests for resupply and reinforcement were overheard.

The help never came, due to inherent flaws in the Pakistani operational plan. Operation Badr had been envisaged as an infantry battle, because that was where Indian and Pakistani forces were most evenly matched.<sup>71</sup> On other counts, be it air power, naval power or armoured strength, India had a strong advantage. Faced with these factors, the Pakistani planners had convinced themselves that hostilities would be contained. They believed that the Indian Army was heavily committed in counter-insurgency duties and could not spare troops for an attack on Pakistan.<sup>72</sup> They ignored the fact that by insisting that the intruders were freelancers, Islamabad deprived itself of a *locus standi* to overtly intervene on their behalf. India could escalate hostilities locally as much as it pleased, while Pakistan could not reciprocate without admitting its involvement in the intrusion. Furthermore, by committing the intruders to hold on to their territorial gains, the Pakistani high command had in effect, gifted the Indian Army a fixed target against which to concentrate overwhelming firepower.<sup>73</sup> The premature shift from insurgency to positional warfare at Kargil, as at Jalalabad in 1989, had played to the strengths of counter-insurgent forces.

These realities did not stop some Pakistani Generals, both before and during the crisis (and in some cases, even after) from indulging in delusions. One of the planners of Operation Badr asserted in a secret meeting in May 1999 that Pakistani troops would soon march into Indian-administered Kashmir, “to mop up the bodies of hundreds of Indians left hungry, out in the cold.”<sup>74</sup> Others conjured up visions of the ‘*Mujahideen*’ (as Islamist mercenaries were reverentially called in Pakistan), conquering Kashmir.<sup>75</sup> Later, they insisted that had the United States not brokered a Pakistani withdrawal, the Indian garrison in Leh would have surrendered to the Kargil intruders.<sup>76</sup>

From these statements, it appears that years of Islamist propaganda (officially promoted within Pakistan), had partly warped the professionalism of the Pakistani officer corps.<sup>77</sup> According to the well-known Pakistani commentator Shuja Nawaz, over the two decades preceding the Kargil intrusion, several top officers had been blinded by religious fanaticism. Military planning was punctuated with sentiments like “by the Grace of God, we will put 10,000 rounds over there and *Inshallah* the enemy will be routed.”<sup>78</sup> Plans were not subjected to detailed logistical analysis because these officers felt that “you cannot quantify God’s Grace.”<sup>79</sup> Reportedly,

at least two of the Generals who planned Operation Badr were Islamist radicals. If true, this would explain why they were so confident that supply constraints and Indian counter-attacks would not dislodge the intruding forces.

As events turned out, the Kargil crisis not only played to India's strength in heavy firepower, but in political terms, it was spectacularly ill-timed. Coming just months after the Indo-Pakistani peace summit at Lahore, it left Islamabad internationally isolated. Whereas a year previously, India had been criticised for initiating the nuclearisation of South Asia, New Delhi was suddenly being lauded for its restraint in not invading Pakistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, went from enjoying sympathy over its economic plight to being regarded as a nuclear-armed rogue state.<sup>80</sup> As one Indian writer noted, the Kargil crisis accomplished what Indian diplomats had long wanted: to expose Pakistani involvement in the Kashmir rebellion. He commented, "it is not sufficient if Pakistan is a 'rogue' covertly, it must be seen to be one."<sup>81</sup> From this perspective, the Kargil crisis proved beneficial to India.

### **The Challenge of Estimating 'Rationality'**

The Kargil crisis shares one common feature with at least three other cases of warning failure. These are Pearl Harbour, the Cuban missile crisis and the Yom Kippur war. In all these cases, early intelligence estimates were grounded in assumptions that were later found to be flawed. The 'mindset' used by analysts to anticipate hostile action was different from that used by the adversary. However, it closely reflected the mindset of intelligence consumers – leading by default to an analytical failing known as 'mirror-imaging'.<sup>82</sup>

Traditionally, 'mirror-imaging' has been perceived as emanating from a tendency to project one's own belief system onto the adversary.<sup>83</sup> Many intelligence veterans, however, insist that they are aware of the need to avoid it. From the case of Kargil, it appears that mirror-imaging can creep into warning analysis through inputs from intelligence consumers. When strong-minded consumers, such as military officials, develop fixed ideas about how the enemy will behave, intelligence analysts might end up internalising these ideas. The result is that intelligence producers fail to warn of threats which their consumers do not believe exist.

For instance, in 1941, US naval commanders believed that Pearl Harbour was so well-guarded as to be immune from attack. They viewed Japan as a presumptuous midget that dare not launch a strike against American interests. Japan, after all, had one-tenth the industrial capacity of the United States. Its ability to survive a long war was doubtful and its ability to win one, non-existent.<sup>84</sup> Given that the US had shut off Japan's oil supply in July 1941, it seemed reasonable to expect that Tokyo would soon negotiate on American terms, rather than self-destruct.<sup>85</sup> As tensions escalated, the possibility that Japan might attempt to obtain oil by conquering Southeast Asia was factored into intelligence estimates. What was not predicted was that it would begin its campaign by aiming to paralyse the one naval force which could interfere with its plans: the US Pacific Fleet. Japanese officers who planned the attack had a different mindset from their American counterparts. They believed, naively, that after a flurry of retaliatory action, the US would write off its losses and reconcile to Japanese dominance over the eastern Pacific.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, in September 1962, US intelligence analysts estimated that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev would not deploy ballistic missiles in Cuba. Supporting their argument was the fact that the Soviet Union had never deployed such missiles outside its own territory, and so was hardly likely to deploy them in a country just under 145 kilometres from the United States. To do so would seriously undermine US national security and provoke Washington into drastic action: a scenario that Khrushchev was expected to anticipate. Although subsequently proven wrong by events, this estimate at the time, mirrored conventional wisdom within the US government and academia.<sup>87</sup> Only much later did US analysts learn that Khrushchev feared a coup by hardliners in his government more than he feared the likely US reaction, and so felt compelled to engage in brinkmanship over Cuba.<sup>88</sup>

Lastly, prior to the Yom Kippur war, Israeli military intelligence had assessed Arab military threats according a paradigm known simply as 'The Concept' (*Ha-konceptzia*). It contained two assumptions. First, Egypt would not attack Israel unless it first acquired Soviet bombers and surface-to-surface missiles, to neutralise the threat that Israeli airpower posed to Egyptian tanks. Second, Syria would not attack Israel without the active

support of Egypt. Although the second assumption has thus far remained valid, the first ceased to have effect a year before the Yom Kippur war broke out. During the following twelve months, Egyptian decision-makers started to believe that they did not need to attack Israeli airbases with bombers and missiles in order to neutralise enemy airpower. All they needed was a surface-to-air missile shield behind which their armoured columns could advance into Israeli territory.<sup>89</sup> This change in mindset was not detected by Israeli intelligence analysts. The latter continued to believe that unless Arab regimes were certain of decisive military victory, they would not gamble on their own domestic stability by starting a war.<sup>90</sup>

In all the above cases, the adversary's actions defied conventional wisdom as to what would constitute 'rational' behavior. Risk-taking in a low-returns/high-costs context is widely perceived to be an aberration in international politics.<sup>91</sup> Hence, Indian analysts believed in 1999 that the Pakistan Army would not initiate hostilities which it could not control, especially in a remote and desolated area. Their assumptions, even if specifically wrong, were eventually proved vaguely right by events. Although allegations of 'intelligence failure' will continue to be made, a fair evaluation of Kargil would echo the observation of Robert Jervis, "States rarely expect their adversaries to behave foolishly. The Pakistani incursion simply did not make sense; it was therefore sensible of India not to expect it."<sup>92</sup>

Kargil suggests that predictive models which hinge around an inherently subjective estimate of adversary rationality are vulnerable to being discredited by events, sooner or later. On the one hand, the Indians in 1999 made reasonable assumptions that Pakistani strategic behaviour would continue as before, with low-level provocations growing more frequent. These assumptions were grounded in trend analysis and military logic, and appeared to be supported by secret intelligence. On the other hand, the same assumptions also led the Indians to arbitrarily (and wrongly) conclude that the Pakistani military leadership was permanently disinclined to take a gamble and escalate hostilities to qualitatively new levels. In this, Indian intelligence analysts and military commanders were projecting their own behavioural codes onto the adversary and using them as an inferential short-cut for predictive analysis. By focussing on the military balance between India and Pakistan, they overlooked the temptations that

a surprise attack would offer to the side that was manifestly weaker in overall terms.

### **A Decade Later, Little has Changed**

In the years since Kargil, considerable effort has gone into remedying shortfalls in intelligence coverage through enhanced technical surveillance in forward areas. Communications interception is better and the increased use of satellite imagery and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) could well provide a battlefield advantage to the Indian forces in future conflicts.<sup>93</sup> At the national level, efforts have been launched to implement comprehensive intelligence reform. These have only been partially successful, due to the inherent challenges of overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. The Ministry of Finance, for instance, has reportedly been reluctant to release funds for the salaries of additional personnel recruited by the IB. Meanwhile, partisan politics has reduced the effectiveness of liaison between the state police forces and the IB, despite the creation of task forces intended to synergise domestic intelligence operations.<sup>94</sup>

Although it is desirable that the planned upgradation of intelligence collection and liaison arrangements be followed through, another problem does not seem to have been addressed at all. Intelligence analysis and assessment remains an overlooked area. This paper has argued that the central issue in 1999 was not poor information collection or sharing. Rather, it was the inability of analysts to provide a convincing explanation for why Pakistan would behave in a counter-instinctive manner and start a conflict when it was relatively weak. Without an organising paradigm to interpret raw information correctly, whatever data was available was used to fill out a predictive model that ultimately proved misleading. Almost a decade later, the Mumbai terrorist attacks of November 2008 suggested that this analytical blindspot remains relevant to the quality of intelligence warning.

One of the reasons why intelligence agencies can be slow to detect the emergence of new threats is 'discourse failure'. This is a phenomenon which originates outside bureaucracies, in the world of academic and public debate. Basically, when the terms of discussion around an issue are limited by politically correct guidelines of what can or cannot be said, intelligence analysts find themselves unable to warn of outlier threats, i.e. wildcard

scenarios.<sup>95</sup> US intelligence agencies, for instance, avoided referring to terrorism as a religiously-defined problem during the 1990s, for fear that such a conception could be criticised for being racist or Islamophobic.<sup>96</sup> Due to institutional self-censorship, analysts were unable to officially express concern about the possibility of an attack by *ihadists* from Saudi Arabia, a key US ally.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps a similar problem hobbled Indian agencies during 2007-08, in a political climate wherein the emphasis was on normalising relations with Pakistan through 'people-to-people contact'. The hype built up around cultural diplomacy might, in fact, have inadvertently restricted the agencies' freedom of expression, by moulding political discourse in a manner that precluded frank discussion of pessimistic views.

Like Kargil, there were plenty of misleading signs in 2008, indicating a different kind of threat from the one that was actually brewing. The trajectory of *ihadist* violence just prior to the Mumbai attacks pointed towards growing domestic radicalisation, in the form of the Indian Mujahideen. Pakistan was experiencing political turmoil. A theory, thus, appeared within the intelligence establishment that Islamabad was not in full control of terrorist groups and could not be blamed for every attack on Indian soil.<sup>98</sup> Given that Benazir Bhutto had recently been assassinated by unknown elements, this argument could not be dismissed as pure nonsense. What it overlooked, however, was the possibility that Pakistani officials might seek to regain control over *ihadist* groups by facilitating a major offensive against India. From the 2010 interrogation of Lashkar-e-Tayyeba operative David Headley, it is now known that mid-ranking ISI trainers conceptualised the Mumbai attacks as a way of preventing a split in the Lashkar.<sup>99</sup> To prevent elements within the group from turning against the Pakistani state, they encouraged it to attack India. Although this probably seemed a rational decision to them, it nearly provoked a war that could have turned nuclear and wiped Pakistan off the map.

There is no indication that prior to the event, either the R&AW or IB had any inkling of the logic that eventually led the ISI to plan and support the Mumbai attacks. This begs the question: since Kargil, has anything being done to strengthen the rigour of intelligence analysis, so that Pakistani decision-making can be wargamed? Equipment upgrades, though essential in detecting preparations for a conventional or sub-conventional attack, will not by

themselves identify the thought processes behind Pakistani adventurism. For that to happen, thinking patterns within the Indian security and intelligence communities need to be modified slightly.

To start with, multi-level joint training between the analytical components of civilian and military agencies could introduce greater harmony at the interface of strategic and tactical intelligence. For surprises like Kargil and Mumbai to be avoided, it is essential that decision-makers in the military understand the work ethos of the IB and R&AW. Both these agencies serve a range of consumers, with the information needs of the Prime Minister being their highest priority. Producing a briefing note for the political executive will always come before producing a situation report for the Army – that is the nature of the business. Once military commanders realise this, they will be less quick to accuse the agencies of intelligence failure whenever there are knowledge gaps in tactical reporting. It is worth remembering that even during the 1971 war, when the Army praised the R&AW for a brilliant strategic-level performance, there were complaints about the quality of its tactical intelligence.<sup>100</sup>

Another advantage of closer interaction between civilian and military intelligence cadres would be a transformation of their respective work cultures. The IB and R&AW could be militarised to some degree, while the armed forces intelligence directorates could be professionalised. Typically, civilian agencies indoctrinate analysts to believe that their job is “telling truth to power.”<sup>101</sup> The purpose of intelligence, as they see it, is to convey the complexity of the international environment to decision-makers in as nuanced and objective a manner as possible. Towards this end, they avoid making categorical judgments and hedge their bets while providing an assessment. Such conservatism is integral to their work culture; civilian intelligence analysts are not trained, or meant, to make snap decisions. Military analysts, on the other hand, constantly seek to convert ground-level knowledge into a blueprint for operations. What they seek is ‘actionable’ intelligence; something civilian agencies are not institutionally attuned towards. Bringing both types of analysts together in training sessions and simulation exercises might boost intelligence coordination to a greater extent than routine information-sharing forums could.

Combining the two work cultures would also provide the intelligence agencies with a stronger understanding of how military thought processes work. Such understanding is essential while combating a proxy war orchestrated by the Pakistan Army and the ISI. By learning to view the enemy's tactical weaknesses as opportunities for surprise attack and thereby developing an aggressive operational mindset, Indian analysts can potentially second-guess their opponents. Recent history suggests that gung-ho rogue elements within the Pakistani military shall constantly seek opportunities to damage India through unexpected provocation, even at the risk of harming Pakistan itself. If Indian strategic assessments can 'Red-Team' the actions of these rogues through reverse analysis jointly conducted by operations and intelligence staffs, then perhaps more Kargils and Mumbais can be avoided. The alternative would be to simply continue throwing funds at the intelligence agencies and setting up formal coordination bodies, in the hope that they might be able to provide insights into how the enemy thinks.

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