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Issue Brief

Kargil Revisited: 25 Years of Kargil Conflict

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S*ummary*

Going forward, policies such as atmanirbharta will surely enhance the capabilities of the Indian armed forces. Priorities like armed forces' integration and jointness must also encompass other agencies that are part of the national security architecture, leading to an integral national response.

Introduction

Twenty-five years is not a very long time in the life of a nation. Yet, looking back at the 1999 Kargil conflict seems like a generational shift in several ways. While the focus of attention often tends to remain on what more needs to be done, as it should be, however, occasionally, it is revelatory to assess the distance covered over a quarter century as well as to acknowledge the achievements and seek direction for further reforms.

Several factors influence the ability of a country to take on national security challenges, including weapon systems that support military manoeuvres and the ability to ramp up production when the chips are down backed by economic and domestic industrial strength. The period since Kargil 1999 reflects the changing realities that have showcased the manner in which the country thinks, prepares and fights its wars.

The Journey Thus Far

India's defence exports and production were narrowly associated with state-run entities in the form of public sector undertakings and Ordnance Factories. During the year 2001–2002, Ordnance Factories exported items worth Rs 35.3 crore.¹ Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) exports amounted to Rs 114.05 crore by 31 December 2002, against a target of Rs 232.63 crores. This was largely limited to ammunition and spares. The defence production of Ordnance Factories and PSUs during 2000–2001 was Rs 13,188.58 crores.²

In comparison, during 2023–2024, India's domestic defence production reached Rs 1.27 lakh crore (approx. US\$ 15.1 billion). Of this, PSUs were responsible for 79.2 per cent of defence manufacturing. This also helped increase India's defence exports to surpass Rs 21,000 crores (approx. US\$ 3.1 billion), encompassing an increasing variety of weapon systems and military hardware.³

During the 1999 conflict, the mainstay of the Indian Air Force was the MIGs and Mirage fighter aircraft. Today, it is the Light Combat Aircraft (LCAs) and the Rafale. The Swedish Bofors proved their value even as the 100-gun concept was implemented. A better version of the same, the Dhanush, has since been inducted with an order for 114 guns likely to be completed by 2026.⁴ IIT Madras and Munitions

¹ [“Annual Report 2002-2003”](#), Ministry of Defence, Government of India, p. 45.

² Ibid., p. 41.

³ [“A New Era of Self-Reliance: India's Defence Sector Reaches a Unique Production Milestone”](#), *mygov.in*, 23 July 2024.

⁴ Dinakar Peri, [“Army to Induct 18 Dhanush Artillery Guns This Year”](#), *The Hindu*, 2 June 2017; [“Army Likely to Complete Inducting 114 Dhanush Guns by 2026”](#), *The Hindu*, 17 September 2023.

India Limited are working on a homegrown smart ammunition system to enhance the firepower and accuracy of the Dhanush gun. This could bring the circular error probable to within 10 meters.⁵ When this capability is seen in the context of the Kargil conflict, the importance of precision strikes against targets in super-high altitudes becomes relevant.

India also commissioned its first indigenous aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant, designed by the Warship Design Bureau and built at the Cochin Shipyard in 2022. This was a joint effort of the public sector undertaking and several private defence manufacturers, reinforcing the growing capabilities of the private sector in defence.⁶

One of the key lessons of the Kargil conflict was the inability of the armed forces to mount a joint military effort in response to the intrusion. The Kargil Review Committee of 1999 and the Group of Ministers thereafter, reinforced the same. Based on the recommendations of these reports, Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) and Defence Intelligence Agency were created. The office of the Chief of Defence Staff was created on 31 December 2019, paving the way for closer integration of the armed forces with the Ministry of Defence.⁷

The progressive changes became all the more evident in contrast with Pakistan’s economic trajectory. In 1999, India’s GDP in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms was US\$ 2.08 trillion; in 2023, it had already become US\$ 14.54 trillion. In contrast, Pakistan’s GDP in 2023 was US\$ 1.49 trillion.⁸ The contrast between the per capita GDP in PPP terms is even starker. In 1999, India stood at US\$ 2,001.9 while Pakistan was at US\$ 2,489.2, almost a fifth ahead of its neighbour. By 2023, India had moved to US\$ 10,175.8 compared with Pakistan’s US\$ 6,212.

The Road Ahead

The achievements of the last 25 years reflect more than a subtle shift in India’s defence preparedness. However, the momentum of transformation that has been achieved can only accelerate with the achievement of the proverbial ‘tipping point’ of change. The scope of this evaluation will limit the assessment of ongoing initiatives to five areas of focus—India’s strategic approach; integration and jointness; *Atmanirbharta*; combat personnel policies; and judicious force application.

⁵ Sidharth MP, “[IIT-M and Munitions India to Develop Smart Ammo for 155mm Artillery Guns](#)”, *WION*, 5 February 2024.

⁶ “[The Glorious History of India’s Aircraft Carriers](#)”, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 6 September 2022.

⁷ “[Chief of Defence Staff in the Rank of Four Star General](#)”, Press Information Bureau, Cabinet, 24 December 2019.

⁸ “[GDP, PPP \(current international \\$\)-India, Pakistan](#)”, World Bank.

India's Strategic Approach

Kargil helped concretise India's strategic approach towards external challenges. An evaluation of India's response to earlier threats suggests a policy of strategic restraint and strategic resolve. In 1965, merely three years after the debacle of 1962, there was little hesitation on India's part in unleashing a counter-offensive across the international border after Pakistan's military misadventure. This resolve was yet again evident in 1971 when Pakistan was cut to size after millions of East Pakistani Bangla refugees flooded India. Pakistan declared war on 3 December and within a short span of 14 days it was defeated with over 90,000 soldiers surrendering to the Indian Armed Forces and becoming prisoners of war.

The Kargil conflict was the longest military engagement between the two countries. Though limited in its geographical extent, the intensity of duals was as fierce as ever. Given the hazardous terrain required to be negotiated by the Indian soldiers, the conflict presented one of the most challenging situations encountered in the history of modern warfare. India's strategic restraint was evident through the decision to avoid violating the Line of Control (LoC). This required maturity, sagacity and farsightedness. The decision also forced major powers to buttonhole the aggressor nation without the previous hyphenation of the dispute. Even China was forced to take a balanced perspective of the situation.⁹ It eventually facilitated the isolation of Pakistan and after the initial military defeats on the battlefield, led to an embarrassing withdrawal without as much as a face-saving formula—something Nawaz Sharif was keen to extract from President Bill Clinton.

Emphasising the need for a declaratory policy, the Kargil Review Committee Report suggested the need for a response mechanism to violations of the LoC and terrorism from across the borders. It stated:

The proper response would be a declaratory policy that deliberate infringement of the sanctity of the LoC and wanton acts of cross-border terrorism in furtherance of proxy-war will meet with prompt retaliation in a manner, time and place of India's choosing.¹⁰

This policy was effectively put into practice in 2016 and 2019 when Pakistan resorted to sensational strikes against a military camp and convoy in Kashmir.¹¹ Both incidents led to counter-strikes by India. In the first instance, a Special Forces operation struck a terrorist camp along the LoC and in the second, an air strike hit

⁹ See Vivek Chadha, [Kargil: Past Perfect, Future Uncertain?](#), Knowledge World, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 70–71.

¹⁰ *Kargil Review Committee Report*, Para 14.33, p. 226.

¹¹ On 18 September 2016, four Pakistani Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorists struck a brigade headquarters at Uri causing 19 fatal casualties. The Pulwama suicide attack on 14 February by a Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorist on a CRPF convoy led to the death of 40 security personnel.

a terrorist camp at Balakot. In keeping with the policy of zero tolerance for terror, the Indian response was calibrated and measured to dissuade future terrorist strikes. Yet, it displayed strategic restraint and strategic resolve by limiting it to a single strike, sending a clear message to Pakistan on India’s red lines.¹²

Integration and Jointness

The Kargil Review Committee Report was critical of apex-level national security structures. It said:

An objective assessment of the last 52 years will show that the country is lucky to have scraped through various national security threats without too much damage, except in 1962. The country can no longer afford such ad hoc functioning.¹³

Accordingly, the Committee recommended the reorganisation of the entire apex-level national security structures, including the interface between the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The Group of Ministers constituted immediately after the submission of the Kargil Review Committee Report made far-reaching recommendations to enhance the integration of the armed forces and foster greater jointness. It noted that the Chiefs of Staff Committee had failed to fulfil its designated mandate. Consequently, the report suggested the need for ‘single-point military advice to the government’, ‘administer strategic forces’, ‘enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process through intra and inter-service prioritisation’ and ‘ensure the required “Jointness” in the armed forces’.¹⁴

The report led to the creation of a Strategic Forces Command, Joint Andaman and Nicobar Command and the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff. More recently, integrated headquarters for space, cyber and Special Forces agencies were established in 2019.¹⁵ However, two key areas, i.e., the creation of a CDS and integration of the services with the MoD, remained pending. This was finally achieved on 31 December 2019 when the government appointed the first CDS and created the Department of Military Affairs (DMA).¹⁶

¹² [“Transcript of Joint Briefing by MEA and MoD \(September 29, 2016\)”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 29 September 2016; [“Statement by Foreign Secretary on 26 February 2019 on the Strike on JeM Training Camp at Balakote”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 26 February 2019.

¹³ *Kargil Review Committee Report*, Para 14.20, p. 221.

¹⁴ [“Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security”](#), Government of India, 2001, pp. 100–101.

¹⁵ Rajat Pandit, [“Agencies Take Shape for Special Operations, Space and Cyber War”](#), *The Times of India*, 15 May 2019.

¹⁶ Dinakar Peri, [“Outgoing Army Chief Bipin Rawat Appointed as India’s First Chief of Defence Staff”](#), *The Hindu*, 31 December 2019.

Since 1999, there has been steady progress in further enhancing the dual process of integrating the structures of the armed forces and synergising their functioning through joint planning, training, operations and capability development initiatives. Simultaneously, procedures are being amended to improve joint functioning within the armed forces. The recently introduced Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control & Discipline) Act 2024 will help streamline the joint functioning of present and future integrated establishments.¹⁷ These steps will facilitate creating theatre and functional commands to achieve enhanced integration.

Atmanirbharta

Kargil saw a sudden and unexpected demand for weapon systems, ammunition and spares. It has been noted that ‘In the entire Kargil War, approximately 243,000 rounds of Artillery ammunition were fired in a span of less than 90 days...with almost one shell being fired every minute for 17 long days...’¹⁸ Facing a shortage for Bofors guns, India was forced to ‘buy shells at \$1000 (Rs 42,000) a piece from a South African firm on an emergency basis’.¹⁹

In contrast, India is now close to achieving indigenisation of ammunition production, with reports noting that the requirement of ammunition imports has been cut down to less than 10 per cent.²⁰ The improvement in the production of ammunition has not only seen the public sector improve capacities, but the introduction of the private sector in this domain has made a significant difference. As a result, India is now in a position to export ammunition, as in the case of the recent supplies to Armenia.²¹ In future, when required, enhanced capacity also allows for significantly ramping up production to meet increased demand—akin to the challenge being faced by Ukraine and Russia during the ongoing war.²²

Measures have been initiated to procure more from the domestic industry, including through positive lists. For 2024–2025 budget, ‘MoD has earmarked 75 per cent of modernisation budget amounting to Rs 105,518.43 crore for procurement through

¹⁷ [“India Strengthens Joint Military Command with New Inter-Services Law”](#), *India Sentinels*, 10 May 2024.

¹⁸ [“Seminar Report: 20 Years After Kargil Conflict”](#), Centre for Land Warfare Studies, 13 July 2019, p. 26.

¹⁹ Ramesh Vinayak, [“Kargil War: Decade of Cost-cutting, Dilly-dallying on Purchases Haunt Armed Forces”](#), *India Today*, 21 June 1999.

²⁰ [“Indian Army Ammo Imports Down Significantly Due to Indigenisation: Official”](#), *Business Standard*, 17 May 2024.

²¹ Yeghia Tashjian, [“The Geopolitical Implications of India’s Arms Sale to Armenia”](#), *The Armenian Weekly*, 9 August 2023.

²² See Jack Watling, [“The Peril of Ukraine’s Ammo Shortage”](#), *Time*, 19 February 2024; [“Russia Lacks Ammunition Production Needed for Ukraine War, Western Officials Say”](#), *Reuters*, 21 February 2024.

domestic industries during this FY (financial year)’.²³ The role of the private sector in indigenous defence production is one of the highlights of the *atmanirbharta* journey, with the private sector companies contributing more than 20 per cent to the total defence production of Rs 74,739 crore in FY24.²⁴

The corporatisation of the Ordnance Board was yet another initiative to bring in modern practices and procedures to make ordnance factories competitive. Accordingly, the erstwhile factories were converted into seven public-sector undertakings.²⁵

Another major highlight relates to the impact of start-ups on defence research and innovation. The creation of platforms like Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) has provided an opportunity to bridge the gap between the needs of the armed forces and innovative initiatives that can provide the requisite solutions. Similarly, the DRDO has been made the nodal agency to execute the Technology Development Fund (TDF). This initiative provides grants in aid to defence industries, especially focussing on medium and small enterprises, start-ups, academic and scientific institutions to design and develop military technologies.²⁶ These examples amplify the government’s emphasis on *atmanirbharta* in general and the defence industry in particular.

Combat Personnel Policies

The Kargil Review Committee Report reinforced the challenges of an ageing army and the need for a youthful profile for officers and soldiers. It noted that the ‘Army must be young and fit at all times’. It recommended reducing the colour service of soldiers from 17 to 7 or 10 years and thereafter releasing them to the paramilitary forces. Inherent in this recommendation was the need to keep the army young, retain soldiers for a duration wherein their services could be effectively utilised and finally, a lateral induction into paramilitary forces. This implied the need to reduce the average age of soldiers along with an assured career progression to ensure effectiveness and motivation. Both these parameters remain imperative for the successful implementation of manpower rationalisation initiatives.

In addition to soldiers, the army also noted the need to reduce the age profile of officers, who were required to lead the troops under challenging conditions like those experienced at Kargil. A need was also felt to improve the career mobility of the officer

²³ [“Rs 6.22 lakh crore Allocated to MoD, Highest Among Ministries, in Regular Union Budget 2024-25; 4.79% Higher than FY 2023-24”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 23 July 2024.

²⁴ [“Private Sector’s Share in Defence Production Reaches Highest in Eight Years”](#), *The Economic Times*, 4 April 2024.

²⁵ [“Corporatisation of Ordnance Factory Board: PM Dedicates 7 Defence Firms to the Nation”](#), *The Hindu Business Line*, 15 October 2021.

²⁶ [“Technology Development Fund”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 8 December 2023.

cadre given the steep pyramidal structure of the armed forces. Consequently, a decision was taken to improve the career prospects of officers and simultaneously lower their age profile.²⁷

Over the years, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence too has taken up the issue of suitable age for both officers and men. As early as 1992–1993 during the Tenth Lok Sabha discussions, concerns regarding an increase in the average age of the army were highlighted. The then Vice Chief of Army Staff stated as follows:

In the case of 'commanding officer, today the situation is that the commanding officer i.e. full Colonel, the average age is about 46. And this has caused us concern. In fact, this factor became manifest in the performance of individual units in Sri Lanka, which was basically infantry operation requiring very good standards of physical fitness. As a result of analysis carried out we have found that wherever there was a younger age group in a unit, it did better than the other.²⁸

This challenge was addressed to a large extent through the implementation of the AV Singh Committee recommendations. In addition to meeting the aspirations of the officer cadre of the armed forces, the government also met the requirements of lowering the average age of officers. In this regard, the government intended to achieve the following reduction in age profile for each corresponding rank in the army.

Rank	Existing Ages in Years (Approx)	Proposed Ages in Years (Approx)
Lieutenant	22	22
Captain	26	24
Major	32	28
Lt Colonel	38–39	34–35
Colonel	41–42	36–37
Brigadier	50–51	44–45
Major General	54–55	51–52
Lt General	56–57	55–56

Source: “[Standing Committee on Defence \(2008-2009\)](#)”, Fourteenth Lok Sabha, Ministry of Defence, Para 5.10, p. 57.

²⁷ [“Cabinet Approves Phase-II of AV Singh Committee Report Promotional Avenues in Higher Ranks in Services Open Up”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 3 October 2008.

²⁸ [“Nineteenth Report on Ministry of Defence—Defence Force Levels, Manpower, Management and Policy”](#), Estimates Committee 1992–93, 10th Lok Sabha, Para 2.90, p. 60.

The armed forces have also witnessed a substantive change in combat personnel policies with the enhanced recruitment of women. Sainik Schools and the National Defence Academy have commenced the entry of women. Women are being granted commissions in 12 arms and services of the Army. They are considered for the select rank of Colonel. Women are being inducted in all arms except for Submarines in the Navy. Recruitment in the Air Force is gender-neutral, with induction in all branches and streams.²⁹

Judicious Force Application

The war-fighting credentials of the armed forces are enviable. These are corroborated by decades of combat experience under challenging conditions. The Kargil conflict represents the finest hour of this attribute. Late Naresh Chandra, India’s former Ambassador to the United States of America, informed this author of the remarks made by a US General praising the combat capabilities of the Indian soldiers:

Mr Ambassador, what I have heard and read about the operation. I don’t mind admitting that my marine officer will not do what your boys have done, which is a terrific confession.³⁰

Kargil is undoubtedly an insurmountable challenge that was accomplished through the grit and determination of the soldiers and the men who led them. However, victory did come at a heavy cost. The lessons of the past 25 years emphasise that a soldier must be trained and be ready to defend the interests of the nation irrespective of the costs involved. However, it must remain the endeavour of leaders to achieve national objectives through the most effective and efficient means available. Three examples will be cited to reinforce the potential for judicious force application.

Air Chief Marshal S. Krishnaswamy narrates an incident during his tenure from 2001 to 2004, a couple of years after the Kargil conflict. The then Chief of Army Staff messaged him of ‘an adversary having sneaked up a mountain in our territory and occupied a part of it’. In contrast with the events of 1999, which witnessed differences between the two services on force application, both Chiefs met the Defence Minister. A successful air strike was orchestrated on the target within a couple of days. Krishnaswamy writes that eight aircraft were employed for the strike and the mission went ahead as planned, thereby avoiding the possible employment of ground forces.³¹

Secondly, the Indian Army has been operating to counter terrorism for decades. One of the most common operations conducted by the army was the cordon and search.

²⁹ [“Women in Defence Forces”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 4 August 2023.

³⁰ As narrated by Ambassador Naresh Chandra to the author on 22 May 2017. First quoted in [Kargil: Past Perfect, Future Uncertain?](#), no. 9, p. ix.

³¹ S. Krishnaswamy, [“Why Theatre Commands is an Unnecessary Idea”](#), *The Indian Express*, 16 August 2018.

It involved encircling a large population centre like a village just before first light and thereafter following up by doing a house-by-house search for terrorists hiding in the area. This was often based on generic intelligence. Over the years it was realised that this rarely bore positive results and simultaneously led to alienation of the people inconvenienced by such manoeuvres. This tactical option was gradually replaced by a greater emphasis on intelligence-based clinical operations based on human and technical inputs from the area. This led to very specific areas being isolated for seeking the surrender or neutralisation of terrorists, limiting the adverse impact or possibility of collateral damage to neighbouring areas.

Finally, Pakistan was following a calibrated policy of bleeding India through terrorism. This was undertaken by keeping the threshold of incidents at a level that would not force severe retaliation. However, in 2016, the Indian approach to repeated provocations was reversed. In response to a terror strike at Uri, a cross-LoC strike was launched against terrorist camps. The key differentiating factor this time around was the decision to make the strike declaratory and reinforce the intention to hit Pakistan where it hurt the most. India drew its red line with the terrorist strike, something that was subsequently reinforced in 2019 after the Pulwama terror incident.

For once, Pakistan, which was used to a reactive India, while retaining the initiative, was on the backfoot. India, with its decision to hit at a time, place and manner of its choosing across the LoC, has forced Pakistan to rethink its policy. This approach was supplemented by using India's growing influence to highlight Pakistan's policy of state sponsorship of terrorism bilaterally and at international fora. In essence, it has made Pakistan retain its policy of state terrorism, though at a prohibitive cost. Its castigation for failing to implement counter-terrorism guidelines at the Financial Action Task Force has become a case in point which saw Pakistan on the Grey List for four years until October 2022.

Conclusion

In February 1999, even as Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee travelled to Lahore by bus, the LoC violation was already underway, having begun by December 1998.³² The intrusion which was the brainchild of a conniving quartet from the Pakistan Army, was aimed to cause a stir. Yet, it ended in an abject failure.³³ The outcome of the Kargil conflict reflected the respective strategic trajectory of the two neighbours.

³² Ashfaq Hussain, *Witness to Blunder: Kargil Story Unfolds*, Bookwise (India) Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2013, p. 69.

³³ The four army officers included the Chief of Army Staff, General Parvez Musharraf, Chief of General Staff, Lt Gen Aziz Khan, the 10 Corps Commander, Lt Gen Mahmud Ahmad and the General Officer Commanding FCNA, Maj Gen Javed Hassan.

For Pakistan, it was a last-ditch attempt to challenge the status quo. In contrast, for India, it ended up becoming an opportunity to shut the door one final time on the nagging hyphenated relationship that had beleaguered it for decades.

Since the 1999 Kargil conflict, there has been a progressive change for the better as regards the country's defence and security approaches. Going forward, policies such as 'atmanirbharta' will surely enhance the capabilities of the Indian armed forces. Priorities like armed forces' integration and jointness must also encompass other agencies that are part of the national security architecture, leading to an integral national response.

The decision to undertake an honest introspection after the Kargil conflict and the follow-up reforms reinforced the importance of objective assessment of actions, debate on national security subjects, deliberation on dealing with threats and building capacities. The continued emphasis on similar measures will ensure that India does not pay the costs imposed by a Kargil-like national security challenge. The policy of strategic restraint and strategic resolve must continue to guide India's approach to external and internal threats.

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