

Musharraf and the Price of Kargil

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Nasim Zehra
From Kargil to the Coup: Events that Shook Pakistan
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Almost two decades after the Kargil war, Nasim Zehra's book provides a reconstruction of events leading to the war and Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's ouster in 1999, which followed the Pakistan army's withdrawal from the battlefield. With a decade having passed since Musharraf stepped down as the President of Pakistan, the author was able to rely on greater primary sources, especially interviews from senior military officials, key bureaucrats and diplomats of that time as more officials were willing to speak freely on Kargil. In addition, greater publically available journalistic and academic literature contributed to her rigorous account.

Zehra identifies the roots of Kargil conflict in what she sees as New Delhi's violation of the Simla Agreement when the Indian Army, she claims, began 'tweaking the LoC' --beginning with Chhorbat in 1972 and culminating into Operation Meghdoot in 1984. After India took control of Siachen, a plan had been suggested to General Zia ul Haq, which he initially rejected. However, later Zia asked the Planning Directorate under the General Headquarters (GHQ) to work on a plan to respond to the Siachen dispute. The

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plan was discussed at the Joint Services Headquarters level but was dropped later. Nevertheless, the then DG ISI Akhtar Abdur Rehman did highlight the possibility of infiltrating the Mujahideen in Kargil. In 1996, the plan was once again proposed to General Jahangir Karamat, but did not gather steam as many inconsistencies were flagged.

Two significant events, namely the nuclear tests of May 1998 and the elevation of Pervez Musharraf as the army chief, provided the much needed

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impetus for Pakistan to embrace the plan to enter Kargil. Strategically, a limited incursion into Kargil and interdicting the strategic National Highway 1A, it was believed, would not only 'avenge Siachen', but also blackmail India into restarting negotiations on Kashmir, since it was believed India would not respond conventionally to a nuclear Pakistan. In

addition, the Kashmiri militancy had lost its earlier ferocity and diplomatic dialogue between the civilian establishment and Indian leadership was proceeding well, which generated a fear that army might lose its monopoly over the Kashmir policy.

These factors, and belief of using Kargil as a bargaining chip, she says, led to the military action by General Musharraf, whose views found resonance with the three other like-minded senior officers who helped execute the task with utmost secrecy. Lieutenant General Aziz Khan was appointed the Chief of General Staff, Lieutenant General Mahmud Ahmed was appointed Commander 10 Corps (which commands the Gilgit Force Command Northern Areas and the sensitive 111 Brigade responsible for security of Islamabad and Rawalpindi) and Major General Javed Hasan was retained as the Force Commander Northern Areas. Musharraf, aided by these key officials executed the Kargil operation. Surprisingly, even the ISI chief was not informed of the exact details about the operation.

The military intrusion came at a time when India-Pakistan-relationship seemed to be on a positive trajectory, with Prime Minister Vajpayee having travelled to Lahore by bus followed by the signing of the Lahore Declaration in February 1999. The Pakistan Army had, in fact, already launched Operation Koh-e- Paima by October 1998, whereby some 140 posts were occupied in the Kargil-Drass region. By May 1999, the Indian armed forces began attacking the Pakistani positions. Zehra presents an extensive account of how the civil-military relationship unfolded during the Kargil crisis, especially from the perspective of extent to which Nawaz Sharif was kept in loop by the army. It becomes clear that although the Prime Minister was not informed about the magnitude of the incursion during the first briefing to him in Skardu in January 1999; by May he was on board with General Musharraf after being told about a 'Mujahedeen infiltration' into Ladakh. There was still no mention of troops infiltrating up to 10 Kilometers into the Indian side of the Line of Control, yet the projected success of the so called Mujahedeen in pressurising India into negotiations got the Prime Minister aligned with Musharraf's plan. As Zehra highlights, Sharif's acceptance of the army's version of events notwithstanding, the Kargil planners did not take permission from him.

She claims that after the war began in late May, Indian forces suffered damage in the initial phase. But their response with the overwhelming use of artillery and airpower - which weakened the Pakistan Army's supply lines to the captured posts - began to change the terms of engagement. Even diplomatically, she argues, India successfully persuaded the American leadership and the wider international community to view Kargil as an issue delinked from the larger Kashmir dispute as against Pakistan's case of equating the Kargil intrusion with the Kashmir dispute. The most important takeaway from Washington, according to Zehra, was Kargil being the stepping stone for deepening the Indo-US strategic ties. On its part, Washington overplayed the nuclear threat issue, which enabled it to play its role as an effective mediator.

Meanwhile, contradictory statements from Pakistan's Foreign Office, the civilian and military leaders attributing the incursion either to the army or

the Mujahedeen exposed the lies. The resultant diplomatic crisis not only left Nawaz under pressure to rescue Pakistan, but also weakened the Pakistani position that withdrawal had to be immediately accompanied by talks on Kashmir.

The author has elaborately brought out the backchannel discussions between Pakistan's former foreign secretary Niaz Naik and RK Mishra, where it was agreed that Nawaz Sharif would land in India after returning from China visit in late June. But New Delhi rejected this at the last minute, presumably under strong opposition from a section of the establishment. Meanwhile, the 'Kargil clique' had to come to terms with the heavy retaliation from the Indian side, accompanied by growing internal criticism from some army commanders as well the soldiers of the Northern Light Infantry which suffered huge losses. The Army, facing both internal and external pressure was looking for an honorable exit, and found recourse in Sharif's US visit to meet Bill Clinton on 4th July. The text of the Washington agreement, which called upon Pakistan (and not India) to take steps to restore the LoC (and without linking it with the Kashmir dispute) sealed Sharif's fate, who was accused by the opposition and some senior journalists, as having sold out the nation's foreign policy to India. Reluctant to own his failure, Musharraf and the Kargil clique escaped scrutiny as the perception across Pakistan grew that it was Sharif's US visit that forced Pakistan to retreat from what it believed to be a war it was winning.

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The other irritant in the deteriorating civil-military ties emerged due to the simmering discontent within the army ranks, to quell which the government was asked to be part of an award ceremony honoring the war heroes. This was in sharp contrast against the consistent stand of the civilian leaders and the Foreign Office, whose official stance was that it was the Mujahedeen and not the army that had intruded into Indian territory. In the

diplomatic domain, visits by Shahbaz Sharif and the DG ISI (who by then was rumored to be Musharraf's replacement) to the US, and the subsequent statement from State Department warning the Pakistan Army against using any extra-constitutional pressure on civilians raised rumours of Musharraf's ouster.

The post-Kargil civil-military divide was as wide as ever after Nawaz Sharif administration, confident of the newfound backing from Washington, ventured into policy issues that were strictly under the military's domain. The

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civilian leadership looked for ways to aid the Americans capture Osama Bin Laden, reached out to the Northern Alliance, and was working "on the mechanics of National Security Committee"; without having the army top command on board. The world was witness to the coup when Nawaz went public with Musharraf's

removal and appointed the DG ISI Lieutenant General Ziauddin as the army Chief.

Overall, the author has provided an in-depth account, reconstructing the run up to the Kargil war on a minute by minute basis, along with a description of the evolving diplomatic situation in the backdrop. She is among the few Pakistani voices to have directly attributed the planning and execution of the Kargil misadventure to the army, discarding the Mujahedeen narrative. Even the discontent within the army, especially among the NLI ranks and the critical statements by then Quetta Corps Commander, have been brought out.

Nevertheless, the book has been written from the perspective of a Pakistani nationalist, by and large holding India indirectly responsible for Kargil. While the book begins by highlighting Indian role in changing the status quo along the LoC, especially with the Siachen dispute, Zehra seems to be oblivious of that fact that the Indian interpretation of the LoC beyond point NJ 9842 up to Siachen follows the ridge line along the Salto ridge, that makes

Siachen part of the Indian territory. Pakistan sponsored climbing expeditions to Siachen in the pre-Meghdoot period did not automatically translate into ownership of the glacier, which she wrongfully claimed.

For her, the criticism of Musharraf is limited to his misuse of authority and the faulty planning of the Operation Koh-e-Paima by treating it as army's private venture. But somewhere down the line, the motivation lay in the attempt to 'avenge' Siachen and fast-track a favourable resolution of the Kashmir dispute. She is also critical of the Indian claims of a military victory (which she terms as "half-truths"). She attributes the military loss to Pakistan's fast-tracked troop withdrawal under international diplomatic pressure. While accepting the damage caused by the Indian offensive, she holds the view that the attacks had failed to evict the troops beyond the frontline positions. This is not entirely borne out by the facts as the Indian military was on the offensive and Pakistan also had much to fear from India potentially expanding the scope of the war.

In conclusion, the book is a significant contribution to the scholarship; but for Zehra too, Kargil very much remains part of the Kashmir problem and she ends up holding the Indians and Americans responsible to a good extent. Nevertheless, Musharraf's blunders have been aptly highlighted, and place him in the league of generals who were responsible Operation Gibraltar in 1965 and the debacle in 1971. Time and again introspective opportunities like those provided by Hamoodur Rahman Commission, or *History of Indo-Pak War 1965* by Lieutenant General Mahmood Ahmed (Musharraf's handpicked choice as 10 Corps Commander) reflecting army's blunders have been forgotten in the quest to seek parity with India.