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A year after Pokhran II and Chagai nuclear tests, the Kargil conflict was the first major confrontation between India and Pakistan. India was careful to use the term "war like situation" for Kargil, notwithstanding the fact that a regular conventional warfare with supporting air power took place over a stretch of 150 kms inside the Indian territory. Though three bitter wars have been fought before, the Kargil conflict was qualitatively different and critical in that both countries declared themselves to be nuclear powers and one of them, Pakistan had not given up the "no first use" option in a conflict. The risk of using nuclear weapons therefore was high.

The Kargil conflict was also a test for the United States as the conflict in one sense did not impinge on the national interests of USA. It was strictly a regional crisis between strictly regional polities. (1) Yet USA did intervene to get the Pak intruders out of the Indian side of the LOC (Line of Control). This has larger implications for the USA itself in future conflicts particularly where both sides are or one of them is nuclear armed.

When both India and Pakistan declared themselves as weaponised nuclear powers after the tests in May 1999, there were apprehensions among many analysts abroad that in the absence of proper command and control, a nuclear exchange is likely in future. (2)

Weaponisation essentially, would mean,

* Tested designs, maximising the yield to weight ratios.

- * A Stockpile programme with safety measures to protect nuclear stockpiles, bomb components, supplies of nuclear materials etc.
- * A stewardship programme to maintain confidence in the usability.

- * Reliable delivery systems.

- * A command and control system involving deployment and employment in a crisis on a day to day basis.

- * A viable nuclear doctrine which would include another layer of military doctrine in the event of deployment.

Except for the first one, where India had declared the possession of three "sober" designs and Pakistan having been provided with the know how of a well-tested Chinese design, none of the other provisions was in place at the time of Kargil conflict. As late as April 1999, the Advisory group of the National Security Council had just submitted a detailed proposal on the nuclear doctrine for consideration, to the National Security Adviser, while in Pakistan till March 1999 no command and control were in place (3)

It was thought, at least from the Indian side that the Lahore Declaration of February 1999 would meet the interim need of a nuclear stability despite testing of more advanced missiles by both the countries during this period. The Lahore Declaration specifically provided for

- * Bilateral consultation on security concepts in nuclear and conventional fields aimed at avoidance

- * Advance notification in respect of ballistic missile flights

* Notification in the event of accidental, unauthorised or unexplained incident creating any type of risk factor resulting in a nuclear war

* To continue the moratorium already declared.

In the first week of May, when the intrusion was discovered by Indian patrols, it was still thought to be a minor one and localised. Only by the third week of May, was it realised that Pakistan had confronted India with a "large scale war like situation." The use of air force became inevitable adding another dimension to the conflict.

Looking back, when serious intrusions took place with a mixed force of Pakistan regulars and Mujahideen, India cannot be faulted for coming to the conclusion that Pakistan has betrayed both the spirit and text of the "Lahore Declaration" and this would include certain provisions accepted by both sides to avoid nuclear confrontation.

Unlike India where the nuclear devices are still under complete civilian control, it is the Indian perception that Pakistan army has some control. This added to the confusion created by the much publicised tape conversation of Pervez Mussharaf with his Chief of Staff Aziz giving the initial impression that the Kargil adventure was purely "an army-sponsored one", absolving Nawaz sharif. (Proved to be wrong later). In a crisis situation perceptions matter more than realities and there was serious apprehension, that the Pakistan army may use the nuclear option.

For many years now, there has been an ongoing debate, firstly on the nuclear deterrence stability between proliferation optimists and pessimists and secondly on the command and control mechanism.(4) While theoretical scenarios were projected with possible consequences, the Kargil conflict became the first case to test the theories. It is perhaps too early to ascertain the sequence of events, the reasons and the perceptions of the decision makers on both sides, but certain broad assessments can be made.

Is war between possessors of nuclear weapons unlikely?

If a fundamental tenet of proliferation optimism is that a war between possessors is deterred, then the Kargil conflict proved otherwise. When both India and Pakistan had emerged as nuclear powers and tentative steps had been taken to avoid an accidental or otherwise of a nuclear exchange, the Kargil conflict showed that such a presumption cannot be made with certainty. While India had declared a no first use policy, Pakistan even while the operations were going on, maintained that in view of asymmetry of conventional forces, they cannot accept a "no first use" policy. And as long as Pakistan refuses to agree to a "no first use", nuclear stability cannot be taken for granted.

If in spite of asymmetry in conventional forces, Pakistan had ventured into a conflict with the potential for a full scale war, Indian fears of the possibility of Pakistan using nuclear bombs at the time of "use or lose" situation were justified. Pakistan is aware that the asymmetry is not only in conventional forces but also for a long time to come, in nuclear capability. Geographic proximity, population centres being close to the Indian border, lack of strategic depth, absence of space at present to disperse the delivery systems are points which were not in favour of Pakistan. Yet Pakistan chose to initiate a major confrontation even before the ink on the Lahore Declaration was dry.

Is stability of nuclear deterrence assured, once a country has a second strike capability?

Another tenet of the optimist school is that the stability of a country is well assured once a tested and structured second strike capability are in place. India is way ahead of Pakistan in nuclear capability and its vastness of space assures it of a retaliatory capacity in a larger measure. Indian analysts have been talking of "recessed deterrence" against both Pakistan and China. While it is not yet certain whether recessed deterrence will be a viable proposition against China, in case of Pakistan it was thought that asymmetry in both conventional and nuclear capability would deter any aggressive confrontation.

One important aspect of deterrence is that the deterrer makes it known, its ability and willingness to retaliate with nuclear weapons in case of attack. In the case of Kargil conflict, India made it clear in the beginning that the LOC will not be violated for a diversionary attack to relieve pressure in Kargil and that the conflict will be localised. This was nuclear deterrence in reverse. The aggressor is told that there will be no escalation resulting in nuclear exchange!

In the latest issue of Non Proliferation Review, written before the Kargil conflict, Mario E. Carranza (5) mentions a hypothetical situation of misconception, when Pakistan uses tactical nuclear weapons first in the belief that the Indian leadership will "conservatively decide" that war termination is better than a regional holocaust. If on the other hand India does retaliate, an escalatory situation that minimum nuclear deterrence was supposed to prevent, would arise. Fortunately in the case of Kargil restrained Indian response to the extent of accepting more casualties than expanding the war to a wider area prevented any misconception. But it would be foolish to argue that the Indian leadership would always act in a restrained manner in all situations for all times to come

.

Command and Control:

We have discussed in the beginning that despite declarations from both the countries that the command and control system is in place, we have statements from Pakistan that the system is "flawless"(6). While we could at best presume that accidental use of nuclear devices may not arise, it does not take care of a situation where one of the two parties decides to use the nuclear option. From the Indian point of view, where the army as in Pakistan has a major role in the development of nuclear programmes, in a confrontation initiated and implemented by the army, the deliberate use of a tactical nuclear device by Pakistan could not have been ruled out.

Lessons:

It is too early to make an assessment on the lessons of the Kargil conflict. But certain preliminary statements can be made.

India:

- * Acquisition of nuclear capability had restricted Indian options in dealing with a local conflict with potential to spread.

- * Nuclear instability will continue so long as the adversary in possession of nuclear devices does not accept a "no first use" policy.

- * Possession of nuclear weapons has brought in an added responsibility. It will be near to impossible to keep any conflict purely bilateral, when the adversary has also a nuclear capability.

Pakistan:

- * Possession of nuclear weapons restricts equally its options in dealing with a conflict.

- * Having not realised its responsibility as a nuclear power, its attempt to internationalise the Kashmir dispute with its adventure in Kargil has only resulted in accepting the "sanctity" of the LOC and that the LOC cannot be changed by violent means. The

mainstream international perception, thanks to Kargil, is veering round to the view that the Line of Control cannot be altered unilaterally when both sides are nuclear capable.

* Nuclear blackmail will not work. On the other hand it had brought Pakistan diplomatic isolation from all major countries.

What next?

Those Analysts who have suggested regional denuclearization in South Asia are out of step with the ground realities in South Asia. Others who argue that a solution to the Kashmir imbroglio would avert a nuclear war between Pakistan and India are equally out of step. The Kashmir issue is but a symptom and both countries carry a lot of historical baggage of animosity. It may take more than a generation to overcome this hostility. In the meantime both countries will have to take firm steps towards nuclear stability. Rather than denying the know how for charting the road map towards nuclear deterrence the US could help in building one. For both countries there has to be more transparent interaction at all levels on information on what each country has and what it is capable of so that misconceptions do not arise. The Lahore Declaration was a good beginning. It has been derailed by Pakistan because of the Kargil conflict. It has to be put on track once again. When and not why, is the question.

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7.8.99

Notes:

1. See Colin S. Gray, "Deterrence and Regional Conflict: Hopes, Fallacies, and Fixes", *Comparative Strategy*, 1998. The author has convincingly argued that the future of conflict is likely to be rather less "regional" than the supposed experts or governments think.
2. Peter D. Feaver, "Command and Control in Emerging Nuclear Nations," *International Security* 17 (Winter 1992/93), p.160
3. Saddique Kunju of Ministry of Foreign Affairs "The News" of March 3, 1999
4. The list of points of optimistic and pessimistic schools are too many to be recounted here. Only those that are relevant to Kargil conflict are being discussed

5. Mario E.Carranza, "An Impossible Game: Stable Nuclear Deterrence after the Indian and Pakistani Tests", *The Non Proliferation Review*, Spring/Summer, 1999.

6. The News, October 4, 1998., "Pakistan has flawless control for nuclear arms: Qadeer".

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