

In spring 1999, details of the “Kargil conflict”—the latest chapter in the long-standing India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir—emerged publicly. For these two largest South Asian states, this conflict represents a watershed, in part because it demonstrated that even the presence of nuclear weapons might not appreciably dampen the India-Pakistan security competition.

The goal of this analysis was to assess both combatants’ perceptions of the Kargil crisis with a view to evaluating the possibilities for future Kargil-like events. Kargil represented a departure from the low intensity combat (LIC) operations that have most recently typified the military dimension of the Kashmir dispute. Whereas these types of operations typically pit insurgents against Indian police and paramilitary forces, Kargil saw both sides engage with regular military forces across a de facto border in the face of Pakistani attempts to seize and hold territory. The lessons both belligerents took from the crisis and their respective judgments of whether their actions were successful could suggest the prospects for future military actions of greater intensity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KARGIL CRISIS

The crisis is significant at several levels for both Pakistan and India. For Pakistan, it reconfirmed LIC as a legitimate tool for attaining political goals, but it probably also caused the Pakistani leadership to conclude that Kargil-like operations are not legitimate in the current international environment. Moreover, Kargil stands as yet another

symbol of the failure of Pakistan's grand strategy and illustrates Islamabad's inability to anticipate the international opprobrium and isolation that ensued from its actions in Kargil. In addition, the crisis posed real concerns about the possibility of the conflict widening to conventional warfare and subsequently escalating to nuclear use.

For India, Kargil confirmed its belief that Pakistan is a reckless, adventurous, and untrustworthy state. Kargil motivated India to reconsider whether to engage Pakistan diplomatically on the Kashmir issue. In addition, the crisis strengthened the widespread perception that India's intelligence infrastructure has endemic deficiencies. It also led India to realize that international attention to Kashmir is not altogether undesirable, particularly when the attention focuses on Pakistani misadventures.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE KARGIL CRISIS

The most important lesson Pakistan took from the crisis was that Kargil-like operations have high political costs, especially for Pakistan's international reputation. That said, the Kargil fiasco does not appear to have extinguished Pakistan's belief that violence, especially as represented by LIC, remains the best policy for pressuring India on Kashmir and other outstanding disputes. While vocal criticisms of the Kargil misadventure are plentiful, there are many stakeholders in Pakistan who view Kargil as some sort of a victory lost. If such beliefs of Kargil—despite being fundamentally false in their details—represent the considered assessments of Pakistan's security managers, future policies could emerge that call for Kargil-like operations. A reemergence of such policies could have disastrous consequences for stability in South Asia.

The most important lesson learned by India was that it must be prepared to counter a wide range of Pakistani threats that may be mounted by what is essentially a reckless but tenacious adversary. India must therefore develop the robust capabilities it needs to thwart surprise and to win even if surprised by Pakistan. Another lesson is that if India is obliged to respond forcefully in future episodes, covert rather than overt action may be preferable.

OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Kargil conflict has shaped Pakistan's and India's conceptions of their future choices. Pakistan has slowly come to appreciate the costs it has endured as a result of Kargil: Pakistan is economically vulnerable, politically unstable, and internationally isolated; and it is widely viewed as a precarious, decaying, and increasingly Islamist state. As a result, many in the political classes have come to recognize that they must decide among themselves what kind of a state they want to become: Jinnah's Pakistan, the Jamaat-e-Islami's Pakistan, or the Lashkar-e-Taiba's Pakistan.

For its part, India is not likely to give Pakistan a chance to flirt with Kargil-like scenarios again. New Delhi will watch the border in Kashmir and elsewhere carefully and redouble its efforts to prevent infiltration of the sort that occurred at Kargil. India understands that the most likely strategy for Pakistan will be increasing its support for insurgency and for terrorist attacks throughout India. New Delhi also appreciates that this strategy is to Pakistan's own disadvantage and further confirms Islamabad as a sponsor of Islamist terrorism. Despite the episodic temptation to bloody the Pakistani nose, India will continue to exhibit restraint.

CONCLUSIONS

"Ugly stability"—the persistence of unconventional conflicts—will probably endure in the region. State-sponsored terrorism will remain an attractive mode of operation in large part because conventional conflicts remain risky.

Pakistan's evaluation of Kargil's consequences is still ambiguous. In some circles, Kargil may be rationalized into an attractive mode of LIC. However, there are those within Pakistan who have increasingly come to question the costs that Pakistan's LIC strategy has imposed upon the state's economic, social, and political development. Nevertheless, Islamabad remains passionately focused on "resolving" Kashmir, and its support for the insurgency is unlikely to dissipate any time soon.

On its side, India remains committed to an internal solution of the Kashmir problem. India's conviction rests on its larger beliefs about the liberal, secular, and multiethnic nature of the Indian Union, but this conviction has unintendedly increased Pakistan's resistance to an internal solution.

Even if operations on the scale of Kargil do not occur, political-military crises in South Asia are likely to surface over the course of the next decade. Until Pakistan pulls out of its current economic morass, institutionalizes a stable set of responsive governing institutions, develops a democratic temper, cements a political identity outside of its opposition to India, and acts upon the realization that Kashmir—no matter how valuable—is still not as valuable as Pakistan, the resentment, grievances, and dissatisfaction currently driving Islamabad's policies will only compel Pakistan to contemplate future Kargil-like operations.