

POLITICALISATION OF KARGIL

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Even as the Indian Government appears to be genuinely striving to give a befitting reply to Pakistan's misadventure in Kargil by having the aggression vacated at the earliest, and at all costs, certain questions have arisen, which seem to be agitating the minds of the general public. The issue has been further confused by its rapid politicalisation, particularly by the country's opposition parties (barring some exceptions) with a view to deny the BJP and its allies the credit for good handling of the situation, which might boost their election prospects. Every effort is being made by these parties to put the blame for the present situation on the BJP led coalition. This may be politically expedient for the opposition, but by giving an impression to the troops that the cause for which they are fighting is a "created" one, (as some one obviously under the influence of the Congress propaganda put it even as he was condoling the death of a Kargil war hero) its course is fraught with dangerous consequences affecting their motivation and morale. This attitude of the opposition stands out in sharp contrast to that of the Jana Sangh (the forerunners of the BJP), during the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars, when they had stood solidly, and without reservations, behind the Congress. Neither were any questions asked during the wars nor was any threat of taking the Government to task after the war ever held out. The controversies started by interested parties need to be set at rest not so much in the interest of the BJP led government as it is in the interest of the much required whole-hearted national war effort. The main charge against the Government is the failure of its intelligence agencies to detect Pak infiltration onto our side of the Line of Control (LOC) opposite Kargil, which is believed to have been carried out over a fairly long period of time, till they had firmly established themselves on such strategic positions as to necessitate such tremendous effort to have them evicted. While in the absence of full and authentic facts of the case it would not be possible for one to say with authority as to what exactly went wrong and where, it could, perhaps, be said with some surety that gathering intelligence is an expensive affair and with the meagre amounts that we are known to spend on acquisition of intelligence as compared with, say, Pakistan, nothing more could have been expected of them in any case. Even then it should be realised that such failures are not unusual even with the most reputed, (to the extent of being considered legendary), intelligence agencies, and every failure need not always reflect apathy or inefficiency. The fact of the matter is that the acquisition of information about the intentions of another country is not there just for the asking. A grim battle of wits rages between the intelligence agencies of a country trying to gain information and the counter-intelligence agencies of the other that tries to deny such information. Generally the country that holds the initiative with regard to the particular activity about which information is being sought or denied, succeeds. In 1947 the Indian Army held the initiative during its attack on Zoji La, and was able to take its tanks up the Pass, while denying information regarding their movement to the enemy, through effective counter intelligence measures, right till the first shell from these tanks was fired, which made the enemy flee more out of shock than the effect of the fire. In 1965 while Pakistan held the initiative by having started the war, it was able to surprise us by its blitz action through Chhamb, but subsequently when India was able to snatch the initiative, it was able to put Pakistan's war machine out of gear by an advance towards Sialkot and a blitz action in Sindh through Rajasthan. In 1971, Pakistan, by virtue of being the aggressor, again held the initiative initially and could surprise India with its pre-emptive air strike. Some years later we beat

Pakistan in the race for the occupation of some strategic heights on the Siachen glacier. Then only last year we surprised the world intelligence agencies, including the elite CIA, by carrying out the Pokhran Tests without them getting the slightest wind of it. Could we call the failure of the CIA and the other intelligence agencies of the world or the success of our counter-intelligence measures? And now in Kargil the initiative again lay with Pakistan as the aggressor. The point of attack was of their choosing and the achievement of surprise could not have been difficult for it. It was not just the failure of our intelligence but also success of their counter-intelligence. A vast stretch of mountainous country, thinly held by the Indian Army during summer months and left vacant during winters, as per the established practice by both sides for the last 28 peaceful years since the last Indo-Pak war of 1971, helped them in achieving this surprise.

It may interest the readers to know that I was myself holding a post with my company in the Uri Sector in 1960-61, which used to be vacated during winter in keeping with the normal practice of vacating high altitude picquets by both India and Pakistan on their respective sides of the Cease-fire Line, after the second or third snowfall – more out of convenience than any supposed impossibility of holding them.

Another controversy has been started over a most innocuous remark made by the Defence Minister, Mr George Frenandes, in which he expressed his willingness to consider offering safe passage to the intruders for inducing them to withdraw. The opposition went for George's blood as if he had suggested a sell-out. A careful examination of his statement would show that there is nothing materially wrong with what he said. Safe passage is generally offered to the enemy who is completely surrounded with all his escape routes cut and is fighting only because he has no other option and is in such desperate situation that he is prepared to suffer the ignominy of surrender and withdrawal, which the offer of a safe passage actually involves. Apparently such a situation does not exist in Kargil yet, and the implication of the Defence Minister's remark is no more than humiliating and demoralising the enemy. No wonder the intruders reacted so sharply to the suggestion. But if such a situation is brought about by the Indian Army at some stage, where is the harm in making the offer in order to avoid fighting any more than is necessary for achieving our objective – vacation of enemy aggression. Did we not give safe passage to ninety thousand Pakistani troops out of Bangladesh? It may be argued that this was done after the Simla Agreement. But then what is the value of the Simla Agreement today.

Another question that has arisen is with regard to the Government's decision not to cross the LOC. It is generally understood that by restricting the fighting to the point of Pakistan's choosing, India has to fight at a disadvantage. The question is why India should keep fighting at a handicap when, with Pakistan having already violated the LOC, India is well within its right to do the same and open a front of its own choosing, (even if limited to crossing the LOC), to ease Pakistan's pressure on Kargil. Some of the factors that could have influenced the Government of India's decision not to violate the LOC as long as it can be avoided are discussed below: -

- (a) Crossing the LOC by India, even though in self defence, could set off a full scale war with Pakistan, and India could lose all the sympathy and support of the international community that it has gained so far by exercising restraint in this regard.
- (b) The strength of the Indian Armed Forces that would be available for an all out war with Pakistan, after meeting the minimum requirement of counter insurgency operations in Nagaland, Assam and Jammu and Kashmir, and manning of the Sino-Indian border, would not be enough for scoring a decisive victory over Pakistan – making war against it meaningless.

- (c) By opening up other fronts on the LOC or the international border with Pakistan, our war effort at Kargil would be weakened making the achievement of our primary objective of evicting the invader difficult if not impossible.

So far the decision of the Government of India on not violating the LOC is proving fruitful and the present conflict may end without there being any need for such an action but if it does get prolonged, one could take cheer from the fact that the Government has still kept this option open.

One of the lessons learnt from the Kargil conflict is that the strength of our armed forces is not commensurate with the task of national security. Some of those who are today criticising the present government for its “inapt” handling of the situation have more to answer by way of the general neglect of the armed forces over the last half century than the present government for its lapses in this regard over the last thirteen months.