

Nawaz Sharif and Kargil

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, currently politically marginalised, periodically flags the Kargil issue. His three main contentions are: one that the Kargil operation was planned and executed by the army under the COAS General Parvez Musharraf's leadership without his knowledge; two that the operation was a major fiasco and three those responsible for Kargil deserve to be penalised. He calls, therefore, for the setting up of a Kargil Commission to look into these issues. Nawaz Sharif's recent call has been prompted by the biographies written by the former US President Bill Clinton and the former CENTCOM chief General Zinni. On July 17, displaying Clinton's biography, as evidence of Nawaz Sharif's innocence and an indictment of General Musharraf over Kargil, PML leader Raja Zafar-ul-Haq called for appointing a judicial commission to review the Kargil operation. The PPP leadership also supported the PML call. MMA, meanwhile, defended the Kargil operation.

The manner in which the Kargil operation ended on July 4, 1999, highlighted severe flaws with Pakistan's decision-making, policy-formulation and policy implementation processes. Pakistan essentially signed a retreat document in Washington. Although Kargil yet again established that the unresolved Kashmir dispute would mean the continuing strategic instability in South Asia, two sets of questions flowed from it. One, the nature of the government's decision-making, policy formulation and policy implementation processes. Two, the military, diplomatic and political strengths and weaknesses of the operation and of its outcome.

The reasons that former Prime Minister gives for setting up a Kargil Commission have mostly to do with issues around policy formulation and implementation. Only he personalises the matter. In his current political state he is an angry man. His target is his major political opponent, his COAS of Kargil days General Musharraf. While the tradition of setting up inquiry commissions to clinically examine matters of national importance is almost non-existent, there are certain facts that need to be recalled. The author's discussions about Kargil, as Kargil was unfolding, with the Prime Minister, Chief Minister Punjab, the Army Chief and the Shamsad-Fatimi Foreign Office team also helped to collect specific on-the-spot facts on Kargil.

Nawaz Sharif's first allegation that the Operation was conducted without his knowledge is refuted by the briefing he got from the military before, and after, the Kargil operation became public. Before the operation between January and March, the Prime Minister was briefed about the operation in three meetings. In January the army briefed Nawaz Sharif about the Indian troops movement along the LoC in Skardu on January 29, 1999, on February 5 at Kel, on March 12 at the GHQ and finally on May 17 at the ISI headquarters. There can be questions about how much the Prime Minister was told and how much he comprehended about the operation, yet the ultimate responsibility for asking probing questions, for giving the go-ahead and for bringing his diplomatic team to deal with the diplomatic dimension of the operation did rest on Nawaz Sharif. In fact, during the end of June it was in a DCC meeting during a military briefing when the tense Prime Minister turned to the



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army chief and said, "you should have told me earlier." Musharraf pulled out his notebook and repeated the dates and contents of around seven briefings he had given him since the beginning of January.

After the operation became public between the end of May and June, the Prime Minister was given five briefings on the military's assessment of the operation. Mid June onwards, after the scale of the operation unfolded, the massive Indian military-diplomatic retaliations began unfolding. Washington got engaged and the in-house criticism of the operation began, too. The US involvements and the in-house criticism, civil-military divide questions; Nawaz Sharif, who had earlier fired COAS Jehangir Karamat, had become politically confident in his dealing with the army chief; maybe not in his ability to thoroughly question and comprehend the nature of the Kargil operation. As the country's chief executive, Nawaz Sharif could not take the plea: 'I did not understand.'

Nawaz Sharif's second allegation was that the operation was a fiasco. The fact is that initially the Prime Minister had also believed, like the Army, that diplomatic advantage could be derived from the Kargil operation. He had also, therefore, approved the Misra-Naik back channel diplomacy in which he and his foreign office team were personally involved. He had hoped, that a *quid pro quo* to Pakistani or "freedom fighters" withdrawal from across the LoC would be a commitment from India regarding the settlement of the Kashmir dispute within a 12 to 18 month time period. In his conversations with Vajpayee during Kargil, and in the message he sent through Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz, Nawaz Sharif had had emphasised the need to resolve Kashmir.

Nawaz Sharif also defended the operation in all his exchanges and in his letters to President Clinton and had urged him to view the operation within the broader Kashmir context. In his meeting with Zinni, he had said "US should take a broader view of the problem. Kargil is only one aspect of the larger problem of J&K which must be addressed in its totality in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people."

Throughout Kargil, the Washington angle acquired special significance, especially against the backdrop of Pakistan's weak and fractured decision-making apparatus. The Clinton-Nawaz exchanges and the Zinni trip created further divisions and distrust between Nawaz Sharif's fragmented decision-making. His own person was greatly affected by his June 24 meeting with Zinni. After the visit, during a Islamabad-Lahore flight with the Prime Minister in his special plane, Nawaz Sharif explained to the author how "India would initiate electronic warfare, jam all our military installations and how all that could lead to a nuclear war." He feared that the Kargil operation could spiral into a bigger and dangerous war. The scale of Indian military retaliation and the international response to Kargil had surprised the Pakistanis.

Nawaz's foreign office team, his kitchen cabinet and the DCC increasingly worked at a tangent. Its final manifestation was the Prime Minister's sudden dash to Washington in the early hours of July 4. On July 2, the army chief gave a detailed military briefing to the DCC. Musharraf's conclusion was that India would never take the war beyond Kargil, and Pakistan could hold its positions. He maintained it was finally up to the political leadership to take political and diplomatic advantage of this military situation. Earlier, during the Zinni trip, despite Zinni's repeated advise Musharraf had made no commitment to withdraw from Kargil, a fact that Zinni acknowledged during the October 2003 discussion with the author.

The DCC ended inconclusively to reconvene on the afternoon of July 5. The decision on Kargil was to be taken then. Instead at 10pm the Foreign Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office team received instructions from Lahore to prepare for the Washington departure. The kitchen cabinet had decided to seek honourable exit from Kargil via the Washington route. Musharraf was instructed to arrive at the airport from Bourbon, where he was on a weekend break. Shahbaz Sharif's suggestion that his brother take Musharraf with him was shot down by Chaudary Nisar. "If he goes with you, the Americans will take him more seriously than you," he had told the Prime Minister.

The political and diplomatic dimensions of the operation were missing, until the operation acquired scale and publicity. The Foreign Office, the front-line for articulating and projecting policy issues at the global level was completely kept in the dark until May 17. Pakistani diplomats were at a loss end. The Cabinet, too, met once through the crisis. The dangerous gaps in Pakistan's personalised decision-making apparatus, because of incompetence and civil-military distrust, were once again exposed during Kargil.

Nawaz Sharif's third contention that those responsible for Kargil deserve to be penalised. This is an afterthought. It was after Kargil that the Army Chief was given the additional charge of the Chairman Joint Chief of Staff Committee. Rumours of Musharraf being 'kicked upstairs' or being removed ended. Subsequently Nawaz Sharif, with Shahbaz Sharif's intervention, removed Corps Commander Quetta Lt General Tariq Parvez. The Army Chief asked for his removal "for talking loosely" and for violating army discipline while holding meetings with the civilian leadership. The Prime Minister's brother, earlier, in a post-July 4 discussion with the author in the Prime Minister House said that "there were issues about the scale of the Kargil operation, that was discussed between the Prime Minister and the Army Chief and now it's all settled."

For Pakistan the most critical lesson from Kargil was the need for institutionalised decision-making. The need for secrecy notwithstanding is incumbent upon governments to always ensure institutional coordination in policy matters with domestic, interstate and international implications. Without institutional coordination led by the country's chief executive linear, fragmented and counter-productive approaches to vital national issues can be adopted, as was demonstrated during the Kargil operation. The former Prime Minister misses these crucial points. Through the ghosts of Kargil, he fights his political battle with General Parvez Musharraf.