

KARGIL OPERATION 1999

The **Kargil War**, also known as the **Kargil conflict** was an armed conflict between India and Pakistan that took place between May and July 1999 in the Kargil district of Kashmir and elsewhere along the Line of Control (LOC). In India, the conflict is also referred to as **Operation Vijay** which was the name of the Indian operation to clear the Kargil sector. The war is the most recent example of high-altitude warfare in mountainous terrain, and as such posed significant logistical problems for the combating sides. The cause of the war was the infiltration of Pakistani soldiers disguised as Kashmiri militants into positions on the Indian side of the LOC which serves as the border between the two states. During the initial stages of the war, Pakistan blamed the fighting entirely on independent Kashmiri insurgents, but documents left behind by casualties and later statements by Pakistan's Prime Minister and Chief of Army Staff showed involvement of Pakistani paramilitary forces led by General Ashraf Rashid. The Indian Army, later supported by the Indian Air Force, recaptured a majority of the positions on the Indian side of the LOC infiltrated by the Pakistani troops and militants. Facing international diplomatic opposition, the Pakistani forces withdrew from the remaining Indian positions along the LOC.

There were three major phases to the Kargil War. First, Pakistan infiltrated forces into the Indian-controlled section of Kashmir and occupied strategic locations enabling it to bring NH1 within range of its artillery fire. The next stage consisted of India discovering the infiltration and mobilising forces to respond to it. The final stage involved major battles by Indian and Pakistani forces resulting in India recapturing most of the territories held by Pakistani forces and the subsequent withdrawal of Pakistani forces back across the LOC after international pressure.

Occupation by Pakistan

During February 1999, the Pakistan Army sent forces to occupy some posts on the Indian side of the LOC. Troops from the elite Special Services Group as well as four to seven battalions of the Northern Light Infantry (a paramilitary regiment not part of the regular Pakistani army at that time) covertly and overtly set up bases on 132 vantage points of the Indian-controlled region. According to some reports, these Pakistani

forces were backed by Kashmiri guerrillas and Afghan mercenaries. According to General Ved Malik, the bulk of the infiltration occurred in April.

Pakistani intrusions took place in the heights of the lower Mushkoh Valley, along the Marpo La ridgeline in Dras, in Kaksar near Kargil, in the Batalik sector east of the Indus River, on the heights above of the Chorbat La sector where the LOC turns North and in the Turtuk sector south of the Siachen area.

India discovers infiltration and mobilises

Initially, these incursions were not detected for a number of reasons: Indian patrols were not sent into some of the areas infiltrated by the Pakistani forces and heavy artillery fire by Pakistan in some areas provided cover for the infiltrators. But by the second week of May, the ambushing of an Indian patrol team led by Capt Saurabh Kalia, who acted on a tip-off by a local shepherd in the Batalik sector, led to the exposure of the infiltration. Initially, with little knowledge of the nature or extent of the infiltration, the Indian troops in the area assumed that the infiltrators were jihadis and claimed that they would evict them within a few days. Subsequent discovery of infiltration elsewhere along the LOC, and the difference in tactics employed by the infiltrators, caused the Indian army to realise that the plan of attack was on a much bigger scale. The total area seized by the ingress is generally accepted to be between 130 and 200 km² (50 and 80 sq mi).

The Government of India responded with *Operation Vijay*, a mobilisation of 200,000 Indian troops. However, because of the nature of the terrain, division and corps operations could not be mounted; subsequent fighting was conducted mostly at the brigade or battalion level. In effect, two divisions of the Indian Army, numbering 20,000, plus several thousand from the Paramilitary forces of India and the air force were deployed in the conflict zone. The total number of Indian soldiers that were involved in the military operation on the Kargil-Drass sector was thus close to 30,000. The number of infiltrators, including those providing logistical backup, has been put at approximately 5,000 at the height of the conflict. This figure includes troops from Pakistan-administered Kashmir who provided additional artillery support.

The Indian Air Force launched Operation Safed Sagar in support of the mobilisation of Indian land forces on 26 May. The Indian Govt cleared limited use of Air Power only on 25 May, for fear of undesirable escalation, with the fiat that IAF fighter jets were not to cross the LOC

under any circumstance. This was the first time any air war was fought at such high altitudes globally, with targets between 6–18,000' AMSL. The rarified air at these altitudes affected ballistic trajectories of air to ground weapons, such as rockets, dumb and laser guided bombs. There was no opposition at all by the Pakistani Air Force, leaving the IAF free to carry out its attacks with impunity. The total air dominance of the IAF gave the aircrew enough time to modify aiming indices and firing techniques, increasing its effectiveness during the high altitude war. Poor weather conditions and range limitations intermittently affected bomb loads and the number of airstrips that could be used, except for the Mirage 2000 fleet, which commenced operations on 30 May.

Naval action

The Indian Navy also prepared to blockade the Pakistani ports (primarily the Karachi port) to cut off supply routes under *Operation Talwar*. The Indian Navy's western and eastern fleets joined in the North Arabian Sea and began aggressive patrols and threatened to cut Pakistan's sea trade. This exploited Pakistan's dependence on sea-based oil and trade flows. Later, then–Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif disclosed that Pakistan was left with just six days of fuel to sustain itself if a full-scale war had broken out.

India attacks Pakistani positions

The terrain of Kashmir is mountainous and at high altitudes; even the best roads, such as National Highway 1 (India) (NH1) from Srinagar to Leh, are only two lanes. The rough terrain and narrow roads slowed down traffic, and the high altitude, which affected the ability of aircraft to carry loads, made control of NH 1 (the actual stretch of the highway which was under Pakistani fire) a priority for India. From their 130+ covertly occupied observation posts, the Pakistani forces had a clear line-of-sight to lay down indirect artillery fire on NH 1, inflicting heavy casualties on the Indians. This was a serious problem for the Indian Army as the highway was the main logistical and supply route. The Pakistani shelling of the arterial road posed the threat of Leh being cut off, though an alternative (and longer) road to Leh existed via Himachal Pradesh, the Leh–Manali Highway.

The infiltrators, apart from being equipped with small arms and grenade launchers, were also armed with mortars, artillery and anti-aircraft guns. Many posts were also heavily mined, with India later stating to have recovered more than 8,000 anti-personnel mines according to an ICBL report. Pakistan's reconnaissance was done through unmanned aerial vehicles and AN/TPQ-36 Firefinder

radars supplied by the US. The initial Indian attacks were aimed at controlling the hills overlooking NH 1, with high priority being given to the stretches of the highway near the town of Kargil. The majority of posts along the LOC were adjacent to the highway, and therefore the recapture of nearly every infiltrated post increased both the territorial gains and the security of the highway. The protection of this route and the recapture of the forward posts were thus ongoing objectives throughout the war.

The Indian Army's first priority was to recapture peaks that were in the immediate vicinity of NH 1. This resulted in Indian troops first targeting the Tiger Hill and Tololing complex in Dras, which dominated the Srinagar-Leh route. This was soon followed by the Batalik-Turtok sub-sector which provided access to Siachen Glacier. Some of the peaks that were of vital strategic importance to the Pakistani defensive troops were Point 4590 and Point 5353. While 4590 was the nearest point that had a view of NH 1, point 5353 was the highest feature in the Dras sector, allowing the Pakistani troops to observe NH 1. The recapture of Point 4590 by Indian troops on 14 June was significant, notwithstanding the fact that it resulted in the Indian Army suffering the most casualties in a single battle during the conflict. Although most of the posts in the vicinity of the highway were cleared by mid-June, some parts of the highway near Drass witnessed sporadic shelling until the end of the war.

Once India regained control of the hills overlooking NH 1, the Indian Army turned to driving the invading force back across the LOC. The Battle of Tololing, amongst other assaults, slowly tilted the combat in India's favour. The Pakistani troops at Tololing were aided by Pakistani fighters from Kashmir. Some of the posts put up a stiff resistance, including Tiger Hill (Point 5140) that fell only later in the war. Indian troops found well-entrenched Pakistani soldiers at Tiger Hill, and both sides suffered heavy casualties. After a final assault on the peak in which ten Pakistani soldiers and five Indian soldiers were killed, Tiger Hill finally fell. A few of the assaults occurred atop hitherto unheard of peaks—most of them unnamed with only Point numbers to differentiate them—which witnessed fierce hand to hand combat.

As the operation was fully underway, about 250 artillery guns were brought in to clear the infiltrators in the posts that were in the line-of-sight. The Bofors FH-77B field howitzer played a vital role, with Indian gunners making maximum use of the terrain. However, its success was limited elsewhere due to the lack of space and depth to deploy it.

The Indian Air Force was tasked to act jointly with ground troops on 25 May. The code name assigned to their role was Operation Safed Sagar. It was in this type of terrain that aerial attacks were used, initially with limited effectiveness. On 27 May 1999, the IAF lost a MiG-27 strike aircraft piloted by Flt. Lt. Nachiketa, which it attributed to an engine failure, and a MiG-21 fighter piloted by Sqn Ldr Ajay Ahuja which was shot down by the Pakistani army, both over Batalik sector.; initially Pakistan said it shot down both jets after they crossed into its territory. According to reports, Ahuja had bailed out of his stricken plane safely but was apparently killed by his captors as his body was returned riddled with bullet wounds. One Indian Mi-8 helicopter was also lost due to Stinger SAMs. French made Mirage 2000H of the IAF were tasked to drop laser-guided bombs to destroy well-entrenched positions of the Pakistani forces and flew its first sortie on 30 May. The effects of the pinpoint non-stop bombing by the Mirage-2000, by day and by night, became evident with almost immediate effect.

In many vital points, neither artillery nor air power could dislodge the outposts manned by the Pakistani soldiers, who were out of visible range. The Indian Army mounted some direct frontal ground assaults which were slow and took a heavy toll given the steep ascent that had to be made on peaks as high as 5,500 metres (18,000 ft). Since any daylight attack would be suicidal, all the advances had to be made under the cover of darkness, escalating the risk of freezing. Accounting for the wind chill factor, the temperatures were often as low as -15 to -11 °C (5 to 12 °F) near the mountain tops. Based on military tactics, much of the costly frontal assaults by the Indians could have been avoided if the Indian Military had chosen to blockade the supply route of the opposing force, creating a siege. Such a move would have involved the Indian troops crossing the LOC as well as initiating aerial attacks on Pakistani soil, however, a manoeuvre India was not willing to exercise due to the likely expansion of the theatre of war and reduced international support for its cause.

Two months into the conflict, Indian troops had slowly retaken most of the ridges that were encroached upon by the infiltrators; according to the official count, an estimated 75–80% of the intruded area and nearly all the high ground were back under Indian control.

Withdrawal and final battles

Following the outbreak of armed fighting, Pakistan sought American help in de-escalating the conflict. Bruce Riedel, who was then an aide to President Bill Clinton, reported that US intelligence had imaged Pakistani movements of nuclear weapons to forward deployments

for fear of the Kargil hostilities escalating into a wider conflict. However, President Clinton refused to intervene until Pakistan had removed all forces from the Indian side of the LOC. Following the Washington accord of 4 July 1999, when Sharif agreed to withdraw Pakistani troops, most of the fighting came to a gradual halt, but some Pakistani forces remained in positions on the Indian side of the LOC. In addition, the United Jihad Council (an umbrella for extremist groups) rejected Pakistan's plan for a climb-down, instead deciding to fight on.

The Indian army launched its final attacks in the last week of July in co-ordination with relentless attacks by the IAF, both by day and night, in their totally successful Operation Safed Sagar; as soon as the Drass subsector had been cleared of Pakistani forces, the fighting ceased on 26 July. The day has since been marked as *Kargil Vijay Diwas* (Kargil Victory Day) in India. By the end of the war, Pakistan had to withdraw under international pressure and due to pressure from continued fighting at battle front and left India in control of all territory south and east of the LOC, as was established in July 1972 as per the Simla Agreement.