



## **KARGIL WAR REINTERPRETED: NEOREALISM, STRATEGIC RIVALRY, AND REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

**K. Sukumar Reddy**

*Research Scholar (Ph.D), Department of Political Science and Public Administration,  
Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Ananthapuramu.*

### **Abstract**

*The Kargil War is widely characterized as a “limited war” conducted under the shadow of nuclear deterrence in South Asia. This article reinterprets the conflict through a neorealist framework, situating it within enduring patterns of strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan in the context of the 21st-century security environment. It argues that Pakistan’s decision to initiate the conflict reflected a rational though ultimately flawed assessment of the regional balance of power, shaped by expectations of constrained escalation due to mutual nuclear capabilities. At the same time, India’s calibrated military and diplomatic response illustrates the logic of restraint embedded within nuclearized rivalries.*

*The study addresses key questions: Why was India strategically surprised despite existing intelligence signals? What factors contributed to the observable restraint on both sides during active hostilities? To what extent did nuclear deterrence shape operational choices and escalation thresholds? And, critically, does the concept of “limited war” remain viable in a nuclearized South Asian context marked by evolving doctrines, technological advancements, and shifting geopolitical alignments?*

*Drawing on neorealist theory, the article contends that the Kargil conflict exemplifies the persistence of power politics under conditions of structural anarchy, while also revealing the constraints imposed by nuclear deterrence. It further engages with the “stability–instability paradox,” arguing that Kargil represents a nuanced case where lower-level conflict was enabled, yet tightly controlled, by the presence of nuclear weapons. In the contemporary era characterized by intensified border tensions, modernization of military capabilities, and changing global power dynamics the lessons of Kargil remain highly relevant for understanding crisis behavior, escalation management, and regional security in South Asia.*

**Keywords:** *Kargil War, Neorealism, Strategic Rivalry, India–Pakistan Relations, Limited War Theory, Nuclear Deterrence, Security Dilemma, Stability Instability Paradox, Nuclearized Conflict, South Asian Regional Security.*

### **Introduction**

The Kargil War represents a critical episode in South Asian security, often interpreted as a “limited war” fought under the constraints of nuclear deterrence. Reinterpreting this conflict through a neorealist lens provides deeper insights into the dynamics of power politics, strategic rivalry, and regional security in the 21st century. Within the broader trajectory of India–Pakistan relations, the Kargil episode illustrates how enduring structural rivalries and security dilemmas continue to shape state behavior despite the presence of nuclear weapons.

Following the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, Pakistan confronted significant strategic limitations in achieving its objectives in Kashmir through conventional warfare. In response, a shift toward asymmetric strategies became evident by the late 1980s, particularly through the adoption of low-intensity conflict and proxy engagement. This phase marked an escalation in cross-border militancy



and indirect confrontation, reflecting an attempt to alter the status quo without triggering full-scale war. By the end of the 1990s, this prolonged strategy culminated in the Kargil intrusion of 1999, representing a calculated yet risky escalation within a nuclearized environment.

The Kargil conflict unfolded between May and July 1999 along the Line of Control (LoC) in the Jammu and Kashmir region. It involved the infiltration of Pakistani forces and irregular fighters into strategically significant high-altitude positions on the Indian side, with the objective of gaining tactical advantage and internationalizing the Kashmir issue. However, India's swift military mobilization and calibrated response, combined with diplomatic pressure at the global level, led to the eventual withdrawal of Pakistani forces. The conflict remained geographically limited but strategically significant, highlighting the constraints and possibilities of warfare under nuclear deterrence.

From a neorealist perspective, the Kargil War underscores the persistence of strategic competition under conditions of anarchy, where states prioritize survival and relative gains. Pakistan's actions can be interpreted as an attempt to exploit perceived asymmetries and gaps in deterrence, while India's response reflects the logic of maintaining territorial integrity and regional dominance without escalating into a full-scale war. The episode also brings into focus the "stability–instability paradox," wherein nuclear weapons may deter large-scale wars but simultaneously create space for limited conflicts.

In the contemporary context, characterized by evolving military doctrines, technological advancements, and shifting geopolitical alignments, the relevance of Kargil remains significant. The conflict offers important lessons on crisis management, escalation control, and the limits of deterrence in South Asia. By situating the Kargil War within the framework of neorealism and strategic rivalry, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of regional security dynamics and the continuing challenges of maintaining stability in a nuclearized environment.

### **Indian Army Operations**

The Kargil War marked a decisive phase in the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan, where military operations reflected both tactical innovation and the constraints of limited war under nuclear conditions. Indian forces detected intrusions along the Line of Control (LoC) in early May 1999, prompting a carefully calibrated military response. Within a neorealist framework, India's actions can be understood as an effort to restore territorial integrity while avoiding escalation into a full-scale war. Operation Vijay, launched in late May 1999, involved the systematic mobilization of infantry, artillery, and air support to reclaim strategically significant high-altitude positions occupied by Pakistani forces.

The operational strategy relied heavily on coordinated infantry assaults supported by sustained artillery firepower, demonstrating the centrality of conventional capabilities even in a nuclearized environment. Key victories, such as the recapture of Tololing, Tiger Hill, and Point 4875, were achieved through intense combat in extremely challenging terrain, often exceeding altitudes of 16,000 feet. The extensive use of artillery and precision strikes weakened enemy defenses and enabled infantry advances, highlighting the importance of firepower in overcoming fortified positions. Simultaneously, the Indian Air Force, through Operation Safed Sagar, provided crucial aerial support, adapting its tactics to the complexities of high-altitude warfare and evolving battlefield conditions.

From a contemporary political science perspective, these operations illustrate how states manage escalation within the limits imposed by nuclear deterrence and international scrutiny. India's measured



yet decisive response reinforced deterrence credibility while maintaining strategic restraint, thereby avoiding horizontal or vertical escalation. The Kargil operations thus exemplify the neorealist logic of power balancing and controlled conflict, where military force is employed to achieve limited objectives without destabilizing the broader regional order. In the 21st-century context, these lessons remain highly relevant for understanding crisis management, military adaptation, and the enduring nature of strategic competition in South Asia.

### **Naval Operations**

During the Kargil War, the maritime dimension emerged as a critical yet often understated component of India's overall strategy. While ground and air operations dominated the conflict zone, the Indian Navy undertook a parallel effort to shape the broader strategic environment. From a neorealist perspective, naval mobilization was aimed not merely at combat engagement but at signaling power, ensuring maritime security, and deterring escalation. By placing its fleet on high alert in late May 1999, India sought to safeguard its sea lines of communication while simultaneously exerting pressure on Pakistan to limit the scope of the conflict.

A key element of this strategy was the deployment of naval forces into the North Arabian Sea under what became known as Operation Talwar. This involved the coordinated movement of both Eastern and Western Fleets, effectively positioning Indian naval assets close to Pakistan's vital maritime routes. The objective was twofold: to prepare for a potential blockade of Pakistani ports and to disrupt its energy and trade lifelines in the event of escalation. The forward deployment compelled Pakistan to divert significant resources toward protecting its maritime interests, including the security of oil supplies from the Gulf region. This strategic maneuver demonstrated how sea power could be leveraged to influence outcomes without direct engagement, aligning with the logic of limited war under nuclear deterrence.

In the contemporary context, these naval operations underscore the importance of multi-domain strategy in regional security calculations. India's calibrated use of maritime power during Kargil reflects a broader neorealist emphasis on balancing capabilities and signaling resolve while avoiding full-scale war. The episode highlights how control over critical maritime spaces can enhance coercive diplomacy and crisis management. For 21st-century South Asia marked by evolving naval capabilities, growing energy dependencies, and intensified strategic competition the lessons of Kargil's naval dimension remain highly relevant for understanding deterrence, escalation control, and the expanding role of sea power in regional security dynamics.

### **Air Force Operations**

The role of the Indian Air Force during the Kargil War marked a critical shift in the conduct of limited warfare under nuclear conditions. Initiated under Operation Safed Sagar in May 1999, air power was employed to support ground operations by targeting fortified positions, supply routes, and logistical networks of Pakistani forces along the Line of Control (LoC). From a neorealist perspective, the calibrated use of air power reflected India's strategic objective of restoring territorial control while maintaining escalation restraint. Notably, strict political directives ensured that air operations did not cross the LoC, thereby preventing horizontal escalation and preserving international legitimacy.

Operationally, the use of high-altitude air strikes posed significant challenges, including reduced aircraft performance, target visibility issues, and the threat of surface-to-air missiles. Despite these constraints, the Indian Air Force adapted its tactics by employing precision-guided munitions and modifying attack patterns to suit mountainous terrain. The integration of air and ground operations



enhanced the effectiveness of military strategy, enabling the gradual neutralization of enemy positions and facilitating the advance of infantry forces.

In the contemporary context, air operations during Kargil highlight the growing importance of technological capability, joint warfare, and precision engagement in modern conflicts. The experience underscored the need for advanced surveillance, real-time intelligence, and coordinated command structures. Within the framework of strategic rivalry in South Asia, the role of air power in Kargil demonstrates how states can employ controlled force to achieve limited objectives while managing escalation risks in a nuclearized environment.

### **Pakistan's Strategic Approach : Kargil Conflict**

Pakistan's approach during the Kargil War can be understood as a calculated attempt to reshape the strategic environment in Jammu and Kashmir while operating below the threshold of full-scale war. Within a neorealist framework, the strategy reflected an effort to exploit perceived asymmetries in power and deterrence by initiating a limited, covert military operation along the Line of Control (LoC). A central objective was to internationalize the Kashmir issue and alter the status quo by occupying tactically advantageous high-altitude positions on the Indian side. This move was also intended to challenge India's control over key logistical routes and compel external diplomatic intervention, thereby elevating the dispute to the global stage.

However, Pakistan's strategy was marked by critical miscalculations at both the political and military levels. The timing of the operation closely following the diplomatic engagement symbolized by the Lahore Summit undermined its credibility and exposed contradictions between political assurances and military actions. Furthermore, the assumption that India would respond with limited force proved inaccurate, as India demonstrated both political resolve and military capability in launching a coordinated counteroffensive. Pakistan's expectation that the conflict could be sustained under the guise of irregular warfare, while avoiding escalation, underestimated the risks inherent in nuclearized rivalries and the possibility of rapid conventional response.

From a broader strategic perspective, Pakistan also appears to have overestimated the likelihood of external support, particularly from key international actors such as China. In contrast to earlier conflicts, global reactions during Kargil emphasized restraint and respect for the LoC, limiting Pakistan's diplomatic leverage. The episode thus highlights the constraints imposed by the contemporary international system, where unilateral attempts to alter territorial realities face significant resistance. In 21st-century terms, Pakistan's Kargil strategy illustrates the enduring relevance of neorealist insights: states operate under conditions of uncertainty and competition, but strategic misperceptions and flawed assumptions can undermine even carefully planned initiatives, especially in a region shaped by nuclear deterrence and intense geopolitical scrutiny.

### **India's Military Response In Kargil**

The initial phase of India's response to the Kargil War was shaped by uncertainty, limited intelligence, and the difficult terrain of the Kargil sector. Early reports of intrusion in May 1999, first identified by local civilians and subsequently verified by patrol units, revealed the presence of well-entrenched forces along the Line of Control (LoC). Initial assessments underestimated both the scale and the nature of the incursion, which later proved to involve a significant number of regular troops supported by logistics and artillery. As the situation became clearer, the Indian Army shifted from reconnaissance and containment to a more coordinated and deliberate military response.



From a neorealist perspective, India's military strategy reflected a rational effort to restore the balance of power while avoiding uncontrolled escalation. Following high-level political deliberations, particularly by the Cabinet Committee on Security, a clear mandate was established: to evict the intruders and reassert the sanctity of the LoC without crossing it. This decision underscored India's attempt to combine military effectiveness with strategic restraint, maintaining international legitimacy while addressing the immediate security threat. The use of calibrated force, including the induction of air power in support of ground operations, marked a turning point in the conflict, enhancing India's operational capabilities in high-altitude warfare.

Operationally, India pursued a threefold strategy: containment of further enemy advances, systematic eviction of entrenched forces from key positions, and consolidation of regained territory. The challenges were considerable, as Indian troops had to launch uphill assaults against fortified positions under extreme climatic conditions. However, through sustained military effort, coordination between ground and air forces, and effective use of artillery, India gradually regained control over critical sectors. In the contemporary context, India's response during Kargil illustrates the application of controlled coercion within a nuclearized environment, where strategic restraint, political oversight, and military precision collectively shape outcomes in regional security dynamics.

### **Strategic Lessons of the Kargilwar**

The Kargil War offers enduring strategic lessons for understanding conflict behavior in a nuclearized regional system. One of the central insights is that while full-scale conventional war between nuclear-armed rivals such as India and Pakistan remains unlikely, the persistence of territorial disputes continues to generate conditions for limited conflicts and proxy engagements. From a neorealist perspective, this reflects the logic of the security dilemma, where states seek to alter the balance of power without crossing thresholds that might trigger large-scale escalation. The Kargil episode thus demonstrates how nuclear deterrence constrains but does not eliminate the possibility of localized warfare.

Another key lesson relates to the political and strategic significance of territory. The loss or perceived vulnerability of territory imposes strong pressures on political leadership and public opinion, compelling states to respond decisively even in limited war scenarios. This dynamic creates both a constraint and a risk, as leaders must balance domestic expectations with the need to avoid escalation. In contemporary terms, this underscores the importance of rapid response capabilities, flexible force structures, and high levels of military preparedness, particularly in challenging terrains such as mountainous border regions. The ability to quickly detect, contain, and reverse adverse developments has become a critical component of modern strategic planning.

Finally, the Kargil conflict highlights the continuing relevance of credible deterrence and escalation management in shaping regional security outcomes. Effective deterrence requires not only nuclear capability but also strong conventional forces capable of responding across multiple levels of conflict. When a state maintains credible superiority or escalation dominance, it gains strategic space for both military maneuver and diplomatic engagement. In the 21st-century context, marked by technological advancements and evolving doctrines, these lessons emphasize the need for integrated civil-military decision-making, enhanced surveillance systems, and adaptive strategies to manage crises within a framework of controlled competition and stability in South Asia.

**Conclusion:** The Kargil War marked a significant departure from earlier patterns of low-intensity conflict in Jammu and Kashmir by escalating into a limited conventional engagement between regular



forces of India and Pakistan. Reinterpreted through a neorealist framework, the conflict highlights how enduring strategic rivalry and the pursuit of relative gains continue to shape state behavior under conditions of anarchy, even in a nuclearized environment. While nuclear deterrence constrained the geographical and operational scope of the conflict, it did not prevent the outbreak of hostilities, thereby reaffirming the persistence of limited war as a viable instrument of state policy.

For India, the Kargil episode reinforced the necessity of maintaining robust military preparedness, credible deterrence, and effective intelligence capabilities. The conflict exposed gaps in early warning and surveillance mechanisms, prompting institutional reforms and greater emphasis on coordinated civil-military decision-making. At the same time, India's calibrated response particularly its decision not to cross the Line of Control—enhanced its international standing and underscored the strategic value of restraint in conflict management. This approach demonstrated how military effectiveness can be aligned with diplomatic objectives to achieve favorable outcomes without triggering broader escalation.

From a broader regional perspective, Kargil underscores the continuing fragility of stability in South Asia, where unresolved territorial disputes, evolving military doctrines, and shifting geopolitical alignments interact in complex ways. The conflict illustrates that strategic miscalculations and flawed assumptions can undermine carefully constructed policies, especially in a high-stakes environment shaped by nuclear capabilities. In the 21st century, the lessons of Kargil remain highly relevant: sustainable regional security depends not only on deterrence but also on crisis management mechanisms, political dialogue, and the ability of states to balance competition with restraint in an increasingly interconnected global order.

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