At The Brink of Nuclear War: (Mis)Perceptions & The Kargil Crisis

The role of misperception has been considerably emphasized in the process leading to crisis and war. Robert Jervis, a leading scholar with many landmarks works in the study of war and misperceptions, has long argued that a crisis is most likely to escalate to war when states overestimate others' hostility but underestimates the extent to which their capabilities or actions can be seen as threats by their adversaries.[1] However, these misperceptions can be avoided by safeguarding common perceptual errors. Although a crisis or conflict may take place without misperception(s), it is rarely completely out of question. The Kargil crisis in 1999 between India and Pakistan is a critical case in point. It marked the first military confrontation between the two new nuclear states and is said to be the first crisis that came closest to a nuclear war since the Cuban Missile Crisis.[2] However, despite being the longest and the most intense among other Indo-Pakistani conflicts with nuclear threats looming over the horizon, it did not escalate to a nuclear war. Today, the Kargil crisis remains highly debated in the international strategic community due to its significant occurrence in the post-nuclear era. Given that, this paper will seek to address how (Jervis's model of) misperceptions of the conflict parties leads to the crisis escalating to war, and why despite huge hostility, a full-scale nuclear war is avoided.

Kargil Crisis From the Beginning

The Kargil crisis arose out of failed attempts to resolve the long-standing Kashmir disputes between India and Pakistan. Upon their independence from the British colonial government in 1947, although Kashmir aligns more with Pakistan due to its Muslim-majority population, India acceded Kashmir to its union through military force against the will of the princely state.[3] When Pakistan challenged the legitimacy of this accession, the first Indo-Pakistani war occurred. The war ended with the establishment of a Cease-Fire Line (CFL) between the two states under the United Nations inspection. After the war, most of the Kargil region remained under Indian control, and later, the remaining parts of Kargil also fell under its control after defeating Pakistan in 1971. In the following year, the Simla Agreement was signed, and both sides promised to refrain from using military force while remaining in their territory within the area of LoC (the CFL was renamed as Line of Control (LoC)). [4]

In 1984, India launched an attack to capture the disputed Siachen Glacier in Northern Kashmir, due to its perception that it is pre-empting Pakistan's plan to capture the key strategic passes in the region, directly violating the Simla Agreement. By the time Pakistan responded to the attack, India has already captured major passes on the Saltaro Range.[5] Pakistan suffered great humiliation, and this translates into its perception that Pakistan could also trespass the Simla Agreement to deter any future attacks even on the Indian side of the LoC. From the mid-1990s onwards, the two sides have constantly engaged in artillery shelling along their side of the LoC and, at times, involved in low-intensity conflicts to reclaim their lost territory.

Against these backdrops and the subsequent military buildup along the LoC, the Kashmir disputes entered a dangerous phase in 1998 when India, and later Pakistan, conducted nuclear tests triggering international sanctions against them. The Kargil crisis began in 1999 when the Pakistan military covertly crossed over the Indian side of the LoC. Due to their nuclear arsenals and the resulting international repercussions, they believe that neither side is willing to risk military confrontation and escalation. Pakistani army disguised itself with the Kashmiri freedom fighters

At The Brink of Nuclear War: (Mis)Perceptions & The Kargil Crisis
Written by Zin Mar Khing

and advanced into Indian-controlled Kargil heights believing that India would not retaliate heavily and will eventually withdraw from Siachen Glacier and re-negotiate the broader Kashmir disputes.[6] Meanwhile, believing that an attack from Pakistan is impossible, India left the critical heights vacant during winter and this facilitated Pakistani acquisition of the Kargil heights.[7] The crisis eventually escalated to war in mid-May 1999 when India realized Pakistani intrusion and retaliated heavily, involving air forces and artillery, capturing strategic positions, and pushing the Pakistani military back to their LoC. The conflict ended without nuclear escalation as U.S. intervention forced Pakistan to withdraw from the Indian side of the LoC followed by the latter ending hostility on all fronts.

Crisis Management: Misperceptions and the Kargil Conflict

The underlying question is this: Why did the Kargil crisis escalate to conflict despite the lack of Indian and Pakistani anticipation of the possibility of any military confrontations between them? Although war without misperception is possible, the Kargil crisis escalated to war due to a series of misperceptions associated with the military, political and strategic constraints on either or both conflict parties.

Robert Jervis identifies many different forms of misperceptions and explains how they increase the likelihood of war. He argues that misperceptions originate from inaccurate inferences about states' capabilities. They are often optimistic about their military assets and pessimistic about the long-term diplomatic solutions, and this thereby escalates to war as states come to believe the former bears more chance of success than the latter. In a broad sense, most Pakistanis believed that the forced accession of Muslim-majority Kashmir was neither just nor fair and that the Hindu leadership has only enabled oppressive Indian control of the region and its populations.[8] Multiple failed Pakistani attempts to 'liberate' the Kashmiri population and the brutal crackdown by Indian forces, especially with the invasion of Siachen Glacier, have only convinced Pakistan that Indian military superiority greatly overwhelmed any diplomatic/political solutions for the Kashmiris. It is the decades of Indian aggression and Pakistan's humiliating defeat that the latter came to believe that the Kargil operation was the only option to return the favour. On the Indian side, it largely viewed the Pakistani advance to its side of the LoC as a revisionist challenge to its political and territorial status quo, and therefore, it retaliated militarily.[9] In short, the Kargil conflict broke out because both sides believe that there is no other solution than the military to resolve their long-standing rivalry in the region.

More remarkably, Jervis argues that states are more prone to misperception (and war) when there is a lack of alternative information that contradicts their pre-existing assumptions about their opponents.[10] This has been apparent in Pakistan's military supremacy facilitated by the absence of political consolidation, a stable political system and the input from foreign offices, and the presence of international security challenges.[11] As important decision-making associated with national and foreign affairs centred around the military, its attitude during a crisis is largely fixated on the idea of reducing crisis stress through aggressive military means. In India, the major and the only reliable source of information for crisis decision-making has been the intelligence agencies.[12] As decision-makers become mostly dependent on the information provided by these agencies, the failure of which results in misperception. As a result, they assume a larger extent of the legitimacy of their positions or the hostile intents of their adversaries, which, as illustrated shortly, is proven to be the underlying reason for the Kargil conflict.

On the one hand, war occurs when aggressors underestimate the resolve of status quo powers and how their actions can be seen as a threat by their adversaries.[13] In essence, a war between India and Pakistan was almost unavoidable as both sides underestimated each other's intentions and capabilities. Due to asymmetric military capability and the Indian forces' partial retreat from the LoC due to harsh winter conditions and dangerous terrain, Pakistani planners believed that a "denial and deception campaign" that involved sending troops, disguised as Kashmiri freedom fighters, across the Indian side of the LoC to capture the Kargil heights will be a success.[14] They believed that this will not only enable them to reach the superior terrain before being discovered by the Indian intelligence after the winter retreat, but will also allow them to maintain a *quid pro quo* for their broader ambition to re-negotiate the Kashmir dispute, and to a lesser extent, the Siachen issue. Furthermore, as India was also increasingly restrained by international sanctions and preoccupied with the Kashmir insurgency, Pakistani officials anticipate neither India's counterattack nor the military escalation along the international border.[15] For the same reason, Pakistan's military leadership was confident that even if India retaliated militarily, Pakistan troops can successfully

At The Brink of Nuclear War: (Mis)Perceptions & The Kargil Crisis
Written by Zin Mar Khing

neutralize the potential war with India.

At the same time, India's underestimation of Pakistani intrusion has enhanced the latter's initial success in disguising as Kashmiri insurgents and acquiring the Kargil heights. Pakistan's preoccupied support for the Kashmiri revolt, the division between its political and military leadership, the deteriorating economic conditions, and India's military superiority – which has historically been able to outmaneuver Pakistan's military capability – has all tapped into the perception of Indian defense and intelligence analysts that Pakistan cannot afford to execute a conventional military operation on India, let alone surprise and deception.[16] Consequently, they did not see the risk of leaving the forward post temporarily vacant during winter. Even when unidentified militants were first discovered in the Kargil sector, the intelligence field units were slow to report believing that they are not Pakistani forces, and thus, can be handled locally.[17] This is later cited as an intelligence failure for India – a great humiliation in its failure to detect Pakistan's military buildup and prevent it from losing the strategically important terrain.

In the summer of 1999, when the Kargil crisis escalated to war with India's massive counterattack against Pakistani militants, the above perceptions of both conflict parties are proven to have been misplaced. On the Pakistan side, it has underestimated India's responses to their transgression and the strategic importance of Kargil to India. While an element of surprise in Pakistan's crisis management strategy was successful against India, whose intelligence has miserably failed to detect massive intrusion, neither the nuclear threshold nor international repercussions on its nuclear tests have prevented India from military retaliation. Pakistan's invasion of the Kargil sector, which is an important supply line for its troop stationed beyond Kargil to ensure its control over Kashmir,[18] has only provided more incentive for the Indian military to reverse the advance and recapture what it has lost. On the Indian side, the scope of Pakistan's operation took it by surprise as it underestimated the rationale of Pakistan's historical grievances and its intention to reverse the territorial status quo. Although the early period of conflict was marked by massive causalities due to India's vulnerability to Pakistan's attack from high grounds, it was able to effectively overcome the stress and "slowly brought their superior military capability to bear against" Pakistan.[19] Once Pakistan's surprise strategy was broken and India escalated the conflict to defend its status quo by authorizing its air forces and heavy artillery, Pakistan constantly found its initial mandate overstretched and was gradually forced out of Kargil back to its side of the LoC.

On the other hand, crises are more likely to escalate to war when states overestimate others' hostility and infer threatening motives from actions that can be seen as at least partly cooperative leading to war. [20]Although overestimation seems to be absent in India's crisis decision-making due to presumptions of its military superiority, it has no doubt played a role in Pakistan's misperception. First, while Pakistan perceives India's pursuit of nuclear weapons as a strategy that tilts the military balance in favor of India and pressures it to stop challenging Kashmir accession, the latter acquire these weapons merely to discourage Pakistan from supporting the Kashmir insurgency that poses an existential threat to India's territorial integrity.[21] Second, Pakistani military commanders justify Pakistan's action as a preemption to anticipated Indian military operation. This is based on their belief that India has planned a military operation to undermine any potential Pakistani inception in the Kashmir dispute.[22] However, as illustrated above, the Indian army's lack of intelligence preparedness, policing on Kargil heights, and incoordination during the initial contact with Pakistani forces have all proved this perceived Indian offensive to be a myth.

Crisis Management: Nuclear War Prevented

With the threat of nuclear use looming over the horizon, the Kargil conflict was still characterized as a limited conflict fought under the nuclear threshold. What explains how India and Pakistan manage to prevent a full-fledged nuclear war despite high hostility? The answer lies in the ability of states to signal to their adversaries about their "assumptions, beliefs, and the predictions that follow from them."[23] In the case of the Kargil conflict, nuclear war was prevented because communication happens at two-level: state and international levels.

At the state level, this communication happens between India and Pakistan. It is argued that states prefer peace to war as long as they assume uncontrollable consequences of all-out war and maintain rational control over their behaviors.[24] The nuclear war was prevented because the nuclear capability and the danger associated with escalation have restrained both sides from expanding the scope of conflict on another (nuclear) front. The nuclear

At The Brink of Nuclear War: (Mis)Perceptions & The Kargil Crisis

Written by Zin Mar Khing

war has been avoided because crisis controllability remains high despite the comparable incentives for nuclear first use. Due to its military inferiority, Pakistan has maintained its first-strike policy where nuclear readiness is guaranteed through the integration of nuclear into its conventional military assets and delegation of these capabilities to lower-level military commanders.[25] By contrast, India maintains "a no-first-strike policy" unless it believes Pakistan to have readied itself for the first nuclear attack.[26] It is maintained in a way to limit accidental or unauthorized use. In any case, the red lines for both sides are made clear: while Pakistan will strike first only when a large-scale attack has occurred that undermines its existence, India will preempt when it suspects Pakistan to have planned its nuclear first use. High controllability on both sides means that neither will intentionally breach these thresholds and risk the cost of a nuclear war.

However, states do not only signal each other, they also communicate with the international community. In essence, states may rationally be willing to bear the cost of war to foster an international reputation on the legitimacy of their actions and strengthen their bargaining power against their opponents.[27] The role of international actors has been an important dimension of the resolve of the Kargil conflict and in preventing the outbreak of nuclear war. Pakistan believed that with the mounting international concern for nuclear escalation, since both states acquire nuclear weapons in 1998, internationalizing the Kargil conflict as a geographical struggle that risks nuclear escalation will catalyze international intervention in its favor. On the other hand, India only sought limited objectives – force Pakistan's army out of the side of the LoC and reclaim the Kargil heights – and signal itself as a responsible nuclear state acting in self-defense.[28] While Pakistan's leadership emphasizes the element of secrecy in its Kargil policy by restricting the involvement of foreign offices and prohibiting media coverage of the issue, India's leadership favors a transparent policy by freely sharing its information with foreign diplomats and the media. This transparency on India's side means that India's intention to restrict its superior conventional military – capable of achieving swift and decisive victory against Pakistan – and prohibit spillover of its attacks to Pakistan's side of the LoC and maintain its image as a rational, responsible nuclear state is clearly communicated.[29] As India appeared as a victim of aggression acting in its self-defense, Pakistan is constantly portrayed as a violator of the norms of international conduct.[30] All this ensures that while Pakistan's signaling efforts were greatly undermined, India's crisis management through international signaling has worked in its favor. In the end, the nuclear war was avoided as the international community came to India's rescue holding Pakistan accountable for provoking the Kargil conflict and forcing it to retreat to its side of the LoC. While India emerged as a responsible nuclear stakeholder with closer ties to the United States, Pakistan emerged as a nuclear aggressor and a terrorist state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the underlying cause of the Kargil crisis escalation is an outcome of circles of mutual misperceptions, particularly simultaneous underestimation and/or overestimation by India and Pakistan about each other's intentions. While Pakistan underestimated India's responses to its transgression and how its acquisition of Kargil heights is seen as a threat to India, India underestimated the possibility and capability of Pakistan's advance. Although overestimation appeared to be absent in India's crisis decision-making, Pakistan's overestimation of India's intention to develop nuclear capability and initiate invasion has only made conflict unavoidable. Yet, despite huge hostility under the nuclear shadow, the conflict did not escalate into nuclear war due to the effective Indian and/or Pakistani signaling at both state and international levels.

Notes

[1] Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 685.

[2] Mark S. Bell and Julia Macdonald, "How Dangerous Was Kargil? Nuclear Crises in Comparative Perspective," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2019): 135.

[3] Peter R. Lavoy, *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict* . (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 42.

[4] It later came to be known as International Border between India and Pakistan subject to UN inspections.

[5] Mubeen Adnan, "The Kargil Crisis 1999 and Pakistan's Constraints," *Journal of Political Studies* 22, no. 1 (2015): 132.

[6] Lavoy, *Asymmetric Warfare*, 94.

[7] Ibid, 228.

[8] Adnan, "Pakistan's Constraints." For Pakistan, Kargil is not just a crisis of its own, but rather a part of the broader Kashmir and Siachen issue. As a result, they have constantly justified their cross-over on the Indian side of the LoC as a temporary posture to force India to the negotiation table for Kashmir, and to a lesser extent, Siachen disputes.

[9] Lavoy, *Asymmetric Warfare*, 65.

[10] Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (1968): 459.

[11] Iram Khalid, "Management of Pakistan India Conflicts: An Application of Crisis Decision-Making," *NDU Journal* (January 2013): 43.

[12] Ibid, 56.

[13] Jervis, "War and Misperception," 685–688.

[14] Lavoy, *Asymmetric Warfare*, 16.

[15] Ibid, 86.

[16] Adnan, "Pakistan's Constraints."

[17] Rizwan Zeb, "Revisiting the Role of Nuclear Weapons in India-Pakistan Conflict: A Case Study of the Kargil Crisis," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 41, no. 1 (May 2021): 13.

[18] Lavoy, *Asymmetric Warfare*.

[19] Adnan, "Pakistan's Constraints."

[20] Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," 475.

[21] Philip K. Kao, "India and Pakistan: Managing Tensions," *Parameters* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 87.

[22] Zeb, "Role of Nuclear Weapons," 13.

[23] Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," 463.

[24] Jervis, "War and Misperception," 691.

[25] Bell and MacDonald, "How Dangerous Was Kargil," 140.

[26] Kao, "India and Pakistan," 87.

[27] Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," 476.

[28] Debak Das, ""The Courtroom of World Opinion": Bringing the International Audience into Nuclear Crises," *Global Studies Quarterly*, no. 1 (2021).

[29] Karthika Sasikumar, "India-Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow: The Role of Reassurance,"*Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2, no. 1 (2019): 157.

[30] Das, "The Courtroom of World Opinion," 7.

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