

The Evolution of India's Defense and Foreign Policy Architecture in the Post-Kargil Period

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Abstract

The 1999 Kargil war with Pakistan is one watershed event of the history of the independent India, a significant trigger of an intense and structural searching of the defense and foreign policy structure of India. The limited war, which was waged under a nuclear overhang, revealed the existence of critical, near-catastrophic failures in the Indian strategic posture: a joint deficiency in intelligence coordination, a maladaptive civil-military relationship and the failure of Indian strategic planning and operations to be joint, or even inter-service. The paper reviews the overall history of the development of defence and security apparatus in India in the last 25 years since the Kargil conflict. It is putting forward that the Kargil shock brought about a slow, tedious, and in many ways inadequate (Pant and Mukherjee, 2023) reform process. This change entailed, first, an organizational restructuring of higher defence management which eventually led to the introduction of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Second, it provoked a drastic change in the doctrine. A defensive and reactive stance was changed by a proactive and punitive one based on combating cross-border penetration and state-sponsored terrorism. Third, it required a fundamental shift in foreign policy, hastening the abandonment of the post-Cold War non-alignment to both a more pragmatic multi-alignment, typified by an almost-avoidant relationship with the United States, and a more aggressive posture in the wider Indo-Pacific. This paper will discuss all these intertwined reforms, the modernization issues that persist to date, and the bureaucratic obstacles that still characterize the strategic development of India in the 21st century.

Keywords: Kargil War 1999, Chief of Defence Staff, Civil–Military Relations, Defense Modernization, Proactive Deterrence Doctrine, Pragmatic Multi-Alignment (Foreign Policy)

The Kargil Shock: A Catalyst for Unprecedented Review

The 1999 Kargil war was not only a military success, it was a failure of the institutions. This was first when the Pakistani intruders were found heavily armed and occupying strategic heights, on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC), and this demonstrated total failure of national intelligence and surveillance. The first military action was characterized by disorientation and an expensive loss of coordination (Anand, 1999). The Indian Army had not been trained to do high-altitude conventional warfare and therefore had to engage in bloody and frontal attacks. Indian Air Force (IAF) was reluctant to use air power because it was not sure what the rules of engagement would be and whether it would escalate. This fragmentation highlighted one of the most severe weaknesses: the political, bureaucratic and military leaderships of India were working separately.

The government in turn reacted by setting up the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) under the leadership of K. Subrahmanyam. Its book, *From Surprise to Reckoning*, was a damaging judgment of the old order.

The KRC has established four key weakness areas, including intelligence, border management, defense management, and defense procurement. It pointed out that the already established system of bureaucratization of objective control resulted in the inclusion of the civilian bureaucracy into the core decision-making process and the exclusion of the armed forces into this process, without the necessary military knowledge. This was found to be the largest obstacle to a contemporary, responsive security architecture due to this civil-military relations gap (Pant & Mukherjee, 2023).

The results of the KRC saw the establishment of a Group of Ministers (GoM) on National Security that in 2001 drafted an elaborate blueprint on reform. This plan suggested a complete overhaul of the upper defense structure, intelligence services, border control, and domestic security. The most important suggestion to the GoM was that of establishing a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) to serve as a one-point military advisor to the government as well as to enhance jointness of the three services. The Kargil war, thus, was the crucible, on the basis of which the whole framework of Indian security system would be constructed, changing the national consciousness to the new vision of borders and the insular character of crisis between India and Pakistan (Adil et al., 2025; Singh, 2025). The New Delhi shock in 1999 compelled New Delhi to accept that the existing institutions were in such a dangerous state that they were inadequate to handle the security challenges of the 21st century.

Reforming the Apex: The Protracted Struggle for Jointness

The GoM report in 2001 had given a clear direction of the reform, but implementation especially on the apex defense management was gradual and filled with political and bureaucracy opposition. The brightest illustration of the absence of the civil-military relations development in India is the fact that the institution of Chief of Defence Staff, which was the primary suggestion of the GoM, has been adopted only after two decades (Pant and Mukherjee, 2023).

During 2001-2019 (nineteen years), the proposal for a CDS was held. This lag was caused by a complex combination of factors: the generally entrenched political suspicion of giving military strength in the hands of an individual, a powerful bureaucratic resistance of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) which also feared losing its influence (EVOLUTIONS, 2023), and above all, an inter-services rivalry, because the IAF and Navy both believed that a CDS would be, in fact, the Army leavers power. As an alternative to the CDS, there was the formation of a compromise known as the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) headquarters though the chief of this establishment was the committee chairman (Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee) who had a feeble mandate and therefore the structure was hardly effective in coercing jointness to occur. The IDS was formed together with other important intelligence and coordination organs. The IDS is entrusted to the formation of the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) which is mandated to gather and conduct an analysis of the intelligence that is specific to it, which is milked with the military. The Multi-Agency Centre (MAC) and National Technical Research Organization (NTRO) also emerged to integrate the intelligence of various agencies and enhance technical surveillance to directly correct the intelligence failure of Kargil.

Only in August 2019, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared the creation of the position of CDS, it was broken. The first CDS in Indian history was appointed on January 1, 2020, General Bipin Rawat. This was the largest structural reform in the Indian defense history. The CDS was awarded two hats, chairman in permanent in the Chiefs of Staff Committee and command over the newly established Department of Military Affairs (DMA) under the MoD. This was intended to do away with the civil-military silos that gave the uniformed services a direct contribution to the defense policy formulation and

the CDS to be the driving force behind the creation of integrated theatre commands. This was despite 20 years later that this reform was a direct and inevitable by-product of the errors that were uncovered in 1999, to ultimately develop a unified warfighting machine.

Doctrinal Shifts and Modernization: From Reactive Defense to Proactive Deterrence

Kargil conflict did not just result in structural reforms but also forced radical change of the Indian military doctrine and modernization interests. This war in 1999 indicated that limited war could be waged under the umbrella of nuclear which had burst the previous notion of the Indian nation that believed that the use of nuclear weapons had rendered conventional war insignificant. This realization and the problem of infiltration over the borders (Verma, n.d.) continuously forced the Indian military to develop new operational and strategic ideologies.

The greatest shift in the doctrines was that of a defensive and reactive stance to that of proactive deterrence or punitive deterrence. It also frustrated the Indian Army that it could not take any retaliation against Pakistan via Kashmir and supposedly formulated the so-called Cold Start policy (which had never been officially proved). The rationale was to launch massive preemptive strikes into the Pakistani soil that would be of high intensity before the international pressure could arrive at the scene with heavy costs that would be paid swiftly and severely to inflict on them. Despite the controversial nature of the Cold Start idea, the icy concept philosophy that it advocated took over the centre stage of the Indian mindset.

After the significant terrorist attacks, this new philosophy was put into use. The 2016 Uri attack was met with a retaliatory measure of the surgical strikes along the LoC by India. This was a paradigm shift. First, India officially admitted that it had conducted a retaliatory military operation in the land possessed by Pakistan. This is confirmed in 2019 when the Pulwama attack, whereby the IAF was involved in air striking a terrorist training camps, which is found deep in Pakistan, at Balakot. Such actions terminated the strategic reticence of India. The new structure that possessed the political will was now prepared to either be horizontal (across the LoC) or vertical (airpower) to reduce the cross-border terrorism sponsored by the state (Verma, n.d.).

This doctrinal shift was supported by a new focus on modernization, which was dangerously neglected (Stalin, 2022). Kargil had exposed severe equipment shortcomings: the Army lacked both modern artillery (the Bofors guns were the blood work), freedom of the precision-guided munitions (PGMs), and equipment to carry out the war at high altitudes. The urgency of the precision strike ability was identified by efforts of IAF to use Laser-guided bombs of Mirage 2000s. After the Kargil, military buying spurred, and was skewed towards ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) systems, including Israeli Heron drones, AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control Systems), and special-purpose military satellites. It also brought about the modernization of air, artillery and armored corps. However, it has had its share of so-called challenges (Stalin, 2022), including cripplingly slow procurement, budgetary constraints, and the multifaceted and lengthy transition to domestically produced defense manufacturing.

The Foreign Policy Pivot: From Non-Alignment to Pragmatic Multi-Alignment

The refinement in the Indian defense system following the Kargil was also intricately linked with the refinement in the Indian foreign policy which was also widespread. The Kargil war was not only a military victory, but also a diplomatic and strategic victory. The US and the rest of the world were the first to come out categorically to support India and forced Pakistan to withdraw its troops. Two lessons New Delhi

learnt out of this experience are that the post-cold war world was no longer featured by hard blocs and that it was central to invest in strategic partnerships as a way-end of achieving national security.

This view accelerated the process of making India a non-alignment country as it was. In its place there was a more practical interest-based policy that was referred to as multi-alignment or strategic autonomy. This turning point was the most dramatic shift in the relationship between the Indo-US relationship. The two countries are close in the 2008 Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal as they were not close during the Cold War, and they have started a strategic rapprochement. It was an agreement that succeeded in the bolstering of nuclear isolation of India as well as allowing it to access high end defense technology. This has been developed into an aggregate Global Strategic Partnership that is anchored on their shared concerns towards the rise of China and terrorism and is expressed through a form of forums like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

Simultaneously, India adopted a more muscular and vocal ideology of Neighborhood First. Even though diplomacy remained the priority, a viable threat of violence (through the surgical strikes) and willingness to undo the work of China and Pakistan in South Asia was currently justified in support of this policy (Adil et al., 2025). India has also transformed its relationships with the borders that had been considered through the security perspective. It has put additional strain of building the infrastructure and getting to know more about living conditions of the border communities (Singh, 2025) as the key to integrating them into the core of the country and securing the borders. It is not the internal echoing of the confidence and capabilities that India had hoped to achieve in the domestic defense apparatus following the wake up call of 1999 but the external expression of this new foreign policy, which was aggressive and pragmatic, non-dogmatic.

Conclusion

The Indian image is shifted in a strategic way, and it can be seen in the 25 years after the battle as seen through the Kargil Revisited (Chadha, 2024). It was an agonizing, but necessary trigger in the path to the fatalities of a dysfunctional, archaic security apparatus in the country, as the war of 1999 is what led the country's leadership to do it. Progress has been beyond doubt. The introduction of the Chief of Defence Staff and the Department of Military Affairs has initiated the tricky process of integrating the military and bridging their perilous civil-military relations gap (Pant and Mukherjee, 2023). India, ideologically, has lost its defensiveness, and retaliated in an aggressive and retaliatory manner to ensure that the actions of aggression between countries like the surgical and Balakot attack. On the diplomatic front it has audaciously left-taken the dogma of non-alignment of its inflexibility to the more economical and dynamic concept of multi-alignment, in which they have allied with the world powers to protect their interest.

This transformation is not complete. The weak evolution (Pant and Mukherjee, 2023) of the relations between the civil and the military is still there, and the issue of bureaucratic sluggishness (EVOLUTIONS, 2023) is quite a significant one. The logical extension of the CDS is the development of integrated theatre commands which is internally unpopular. Beyond that, modernization of the defense is still marred with the problems of poor budgetary allocations and an inefficient procurement process which will be the bane of defense when facing a two-pronged threat against China and Pakistan (Stalin, 2022). The post-Kargil building is far firmer, more offensive and capable of its 20 th -century ancestry, but it still must combine and solve its internal contradictions to pursue the Indian interest in an ever-increasing volatile world.

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