

From Battlefield to Memory: Narrative Power, Civil-Military Relations, and Nuclear Risk in the Kargil War: An Interpretive Historiographical Analysis of India-Pakistan Relations

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Abstract

The Kargil War of 1999 is usually remembered as a high-altitude military confrontation in which Indian forces recovered positions occupied by Pakistani troops and Pakistan eventually withdrew. That account is important, but it does not explain why Kargil has remained such a contested episode in South Asian political memory. This article argues that the war was also a struggle over interpretation. India presented Kargil as a betrayal of the Lahore peace process, a carefully limited defensive campaign, and a clear national victory. Pakistan initially described the forces on the heights as Kashmiri mujahideen, later acknowledged varying degrees of Northern Light Infantry involvement, and then developed competing explanations that attributed the outcome either to civilian weakness or to an operation whose strategic gains were surrendered through diplomacy. These narratives were shaped by the nuclear setting, the intervention of the United States, the release of intercepted communications, the first extensive live television coverage of an India-Pakistan war, and the unresolved relationship between Pakistan's military establishment and elected civilian authority. Drawing on an interpretive historiographical analysis of official documents, military memoirs, committee reports, diplomatic accounts, and media studies, the article examines how the two states constructed, circulated, and protected their preferred memories of Kargil. It shows that narrative power does not simply follow battlefield performance. Rather, it depends on institutional credibility, control over evidence, diplomatic access, media infrastructure, and the ability to connect a war to a persuasive national story. The article concludes that Kargil should be studied as a conflict in which military action and historical meaning were produced together, while the voices of local Kashmiris and other civilians remained largely absent from both national accounts.

Keywords: Kargil War, mnemonic politics, national narratives, India-Pakistan relations, civil-military relations, nuclear deterrence

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Introduction

The Kargil War occupies an unusual place in the modern history of South Asia. The fighting took place between May and July 1999 in one of the most difficult environments in which a conventional army can operate: steep, exposed mountain positions at altitudes that placed enormous physical demands on soldiers, equipment, and logistics. Yet the conflict was not defined only by its terrain or by the battles for Tololing and Tiger Hill. It was also fought through official statements, newspaper reports, television images, intercepted telephone conversations, diplomatic briefings, military memoirs, and later commemorations. The question was not simply who controlled which ridge. It was also who could persuade domestic and international audiences that its interpretation of the war was the legitimate one.

This struggle over meaning began before the full scale of the fighting was publicly acknowledged. In February 1999, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee travelled to Lahore and signed the Lahore Declaration with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The declaration committed the two newly nuclear-armed states to dialogue, confidence-building, and peaceful efforts to address their disputes, including Kashmir (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1999). Within a few months, the Kargil operation had transformed that moment of diplomatic optimism into a central part of India's account of betrayal. The contrast between a public peace initiative and a covert military operation gave India an unusually strong narrative frame: Pakistan, in this telling, had not merely crossed the Line of Control (LoC); it had violated a promise made during a visible act of reconciliation.

Pakistan's narrative was less stable. During the conflict, the state presented the fighters occupying the heights as Kashmiri mujahideen rather than regular Pakistani troops. This description served an immediate diplomatic purpose. If the forces were independent Kashmiri fighters, Pakistan could claim that it was not conducting a conventional assault across the LoC and could present the operation as an expression of Kashmiri self-determination. As evidence accumulated, however, the account became difficult to sustain. The release of a telephone conversation involving General Pervez Musharraf and Lieutenant General Aziz Khan, together with later testimony and Musharraf's own partial admission of Northern Light Infantry involvement, weakened the original claim (Musharraf, 2006; Nawaz, 2008). After the war, the Pakistani narrative divided into competing versions: one blamed Nawaz Sharif for abandoning soldiers and surrendering a strategic opportunity; another emphasized that the military leadership had acted without fully informing the civilian government; and a third presented the operation as a limited strategic success whose political benefits were lost at the negotiating table.

The Kargil War therefore offers a useful case for studying the relationship between military conflict and historical memory. It was the first conventional war between two declared nuclear powers. It was also the first India-Pakistan conflict to be covered extensively by live television, making the battlefield visible to mass audiences in real time. Finally, it exposed the tension between Pakistan's military command and its elected civilian leadership with unusual clarity. These features made the conflict a test not only of military planning but also of narrative credibility. India possessed an important advantage in this contest because it could combine a coherent account of aggression and restraint with stronger access to international diplomatic audiences. Pakistan, by contrast, had to defend a position that became progressively less credible

as the identity and organization of the forces on the heights were revealed. The purpose of this article is not to repeat the official Indian narrative or to replace it with a Pakistani counter-narrative. It is to examine how both states constructed their accounts, what each account made visible, what each pushed aside, and why particular interpretations survived. The analysis makes four arguments. First, the conflict was a contest over historical meaning as much as a military confrontation. Second, the nuclear context changed the diplomatic value of restraint, evidence, and international legitimacy. Third, the war revealed that civil-military relations shaped not only decision-making but also the later writing of history. Fourth, both national narratives marginalized the experiences of civilians and Kashmiris, even though those communities were directly affected by the conflict and its political consequences.

The article first reviews the relevant scholarship and establishes a framework for studying memory as a political resource. It then explains the interpretive method and reconstructs the immediate context of Kargil, beginning with the Lahore Declaration and the planning of Operation Badr. The analysis next examines the Indian and Pakistani narratives, the international and nuclear dimensions of the crisis, and the role of live television and documentary evidence. A comparative discussion identifies the institutional conditions that enabled one narrative to travel more successfully than the other. The final sections address commemoration, civil-military interests, and the need to recover civilian and Kashmiri experiences.

Literature Review

Kargil scholarship and the problem of retrospective certainty

The established literature on Kargil is rich in military, diplomatic, and strategic analysis, but it is less developed as a study of public memory. The core scholarship reconstructs the causes and conduct of the conflict, the role of Pakistani regular forces, the limits imposed by the Line of Control, and the crisis-management strategies of India, Pakistan, and the United States (Lavoy, 2009; Tellis et al., 2001). Military and strategic accounts clarify the operational record and the significance of Indian restraint, airpower, and intelligence failure (Chari, 2009; Lambeth, 2012; Malik, 2006). Other studies place Kargil within the longer history of India-Pakistan rivalry and show how the crisis changed the diplomatic relationship between New Delhi, Islamabad, and Washington (Chari et al., 2003; Dixit, 2002; Gill, 2019).

The literature also reveals why Kargil remains difficult to narrate with confidence. The principal sources were produced by actors with direct institutional interests: military commanders defending decisions, politicians assigning responsibility, governments seeking diplomatic advantage, and journalists working under intense pressure. Works by Musharraf (2006), Nawaz (2008), Malik (2006), and Singh (1999) are therefore indispensable but must be read as situated accounts rather than transparent windows onto intention. Recent scholarship on the conflict continues to debate whether Kargil should be treated primarily as a limited conventional war, a crisis under the nuclear shadow, or an episode of hybrid and proxy warfare (Gill, 2019; Królikowski, 2016; Sasikumar, 2019; Zeb, 2021). This article builds on that scholarship but shifts the analytical question from what happened alone to how competing versions of what happened acquired authority.

Memory, narrative, and political legitimacy

Memory studies provides the conceptual language for making that shift. Collective memory is not a passive storehouse of facts; it is produced through social frameworks, cultural forms, rituals, and institutions (Halbwachs, 1992; Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). Political memory becomes especially important when states use the past to define identity, legitimate authority, and establish the boundaries of acceptable national interpretation (Müller, 2002; Nora, 1989; Olick, 2007; Olick et al., 2011). Research in international relations has further shown that remembered histories can influence diplomatic expectations, perceptions of threat, and the way states understand their own place in the international order (Bachleitner, 2021; Bell, 2006; Sierp, 2025).

Narrative is the mechanism through which selected facts become meaningful. Historical accounts do not merely list events; they organize them into plots with beginnings, turning points, heroes, victims, and endings (White, 1987). Narrative identity is relational: a national “self” is often defined through contrast with an external “other” and through repeated claims about continuity and responsibility (Somers, 1994). Commemoration, memorials, anniversaries, and media representations then stabilize the preferred plot while allowing institutions to displace inconvenient questions. This perspective is compatible with Rothberg’s (2009) argument that memories circulate across contexts and can be mobilized in competing, rather than isolated, directions.

Media, framing, and wartime visibility

The Kargil case also belongs to the literature on media, framing, and the political communication of war. War reporting is never a neutral relay between battlefield and audience; it is shaped by access, censorship, military-media relations, commercial incentives, and the emotional conventions of news (Carruthers, 2000; Rai, 2000). Framing theory is useful here because it directs attention to selection and salience: an event can be made to appear as aggression, defence, sacrifice, or betrayal depending on which causal interpretation and moral evaluation are foregrounded (Entman, 1993). Studies of Indian coverage show that Kargil was a major turning point in the relationship between private television, national identity, and military communication, while analysis of Bengali print media demonstrates that even within India the war was not represented through one completely uniform voice (Rai, 2000; Sinha, 2002).

Civil-military relations, Kashmir, and the politics of agency

A narrative analysis must also account for the institutions that had the power to circulate some accounts more effectively than others. Pakistan’s civil-military order, the centrality of the Army to national security policy, and the political importance of Kashmir shaped the postwar dispute over who knew what and who should be blamed (Cohen, 2004; Fair, 2014; Haqqani, 2005; Jalal, 1995; Siddiq, 2007). The Kargil debate cannot therefore be separated from the broader political economy and institutional authority of the Pakistani military. At the same time, the unresolved status of Kashmir means that Indian and Pakistani national narratives tend to treat Kashmiris as symbols of sovereignty or self-determination rather than as historical actors with differentiated experiences (Bose, 2003; Schofield, 2003).

Research gap and contribution

Three gaps follow from this review. First, much Kargil scholarship examines the credibility of competing claims without making narrative production itself the object of analysis. Second, the nuclear dimension is often treated as a strategic variable, while its effects on diplomatic storytelling and the meaning of restraint receive less attention (Das, 2021; Ganguly & Kapur, 2010; Hoyt, 2009; Kapur, 2007; Perkovich, 2001). Third, official and elite accounts remain more visible than the memories of civilians and communities in the Kargil-Dras-Batalik region. This article addresses these gaps by combining historiographical source criticism with a comparative analysis of narrative structure, institutional reproduction, and silences.

Conceptual Framework

Mnemonic Politics and the Uses of the Past

The phrase “battle of narratives” describes more than a disagreement over wording. It refers to a political struggle in which competing actors organize selected facts into explanations that justify present authority and future action. Memory is never simply stored and retrieved. It is shaped by institutions, ceremonies, school curricula, media systems, archives, and political interests. Connerton (1989) shows that societies remember through embodied practices and repeated rituals, while Assmann (2011) emphasizes the role of cultural forms, archives, and institutions in preserving some versions of the past and allowing others to fade. In this sense, remembering a war is an act of social organization.

Müller (2002) describes such processes through the idea of mnemonic politics: the deliberate use of historical memory to establish legitimacy, define belonging, and mark the boundaries of acceptable political identity. A state does not need to falsify every fact in order to produce a politically useful memory. It can select certain events, place them in a preferred order, emphasize particular victims, and omit facts that complicate the story. The resulting narrative may contain genuine evidence while still giving a distorted account of responsibility and consequence. Narrative theory adds a further dimension to this argument. White (1987) explains that historical writing gives meaning to events through structures of emplotment. Events become a tragedy, a heroic defence, a betrayal, or a national rebirth depending on how they are connected and what kind of ending they are given. Fisher (1987) similarly argues that public reasoning is often organized through stories that people judge by coherence, fidelity, and moral value. Applied to Kargil, these ideas help explain why the same military withdrawal could be read in India as proof of total victory and in Pakistan as the result of political betrayal or diplomatic pressure.

The concept also helps avoid a narrow understanding of propaganda. Propaganda is often imagined as a collection of false statements issued by a government. Mnemonic politics is broader. It includes the naming of military operations, the selection of anniversaries, the publication of memoirs, the classification of documents, and the incorporation of war stories into education. It also includes the silences that become normal over time. The absence of a question from public debate can be as politically consequential as the presence of a slogan. Kargil's narrative history is therefore best understood as an institutional process rather than as a series of isolated public-relations decisions.

Narrative, Credibility, and Nuclear Conflict

Narrative credibility becomes especially important when military escalation takes place under a nuclear shadow. The two sides must reassure domestic audiences that they are strong, while convincing international audiences that they are responsible. A state that appears reckless may lose diplomatic support even if it claims tactical success. A state that appears restrained may gain political space for its military objectives, but only if its evidence and public communication are credible.

The nuclear setting thus created a double demand. India needed to show that it could respond forcefully without crossing the LoC or expanding the war. Pakistan needed to demonstrate resolve over Kashmir without appearing to have initiated an uncontrolled conventional conflict between nuclear powers. The international meaning of each action mattered alongside its military meaning. As Ganguly and Kapur (2010) argue, nuclear stability in South Asia cannot be separated from perceptions of risk, signaling, and the political calculations of leaders. Kargil showed that nuclear weapons did not eliminate conventional conflict; instead, they made the interpretation of conventional actions more consequential.

Method and Sources

Research design

This article uses an interpretive historiographical and comparative discourse approach. It treats the Kargil War as a case study in the construction of competing national narratives. The analysis draws on four categories of material: official documents and agreements; military and political memoirs; committee and diplomatic reports; and scholarly or journalistic accounts of the war's media and international dimensions. The most important sources include the Lahore Declaration, the Kargil Review Committee report, memoirs by Musharraf and V. P. Malik, Nawaz's analysis of Pakistan's military history, Chari and colleagues' analysis of the crisis, Talbott's account of American diplomacy, and subsequent commentary on the media war (Government of India, 2000; Malik, 2006; Musharraf, 2006; Nawaz, 2008; Chari et al., 2003; Gill, 2019; Talbott, 2004).

The analysis asks three questions. How did India and Pakistan explain the origins and outcome of the war? Which actors and forms of evidence were treated as authoritative? What events, voices, or uncertainties were marginalized by the dominant accounts? The method is not designed to produce a numerical measure of media bias, and it does not claim that every source has equal evidentiary value. Memoirs, government reports, newspaper accounts, and later academic studies have different purposes and limitations. They are therefore read comparatively, with attention to authorship, institutional position, timing, and intended audience.

Source criticism and limitations

Several cautions are necessary. First, some facts remain contested, particularly the extent to which Nawaz Sharif understood the operation's scope and the exact meaning of intelligence about possible Pakistani nuclear preparations. Second, official documents may reveal institutional positions without proving that every actor privately believed the claims being made. Third, later memoirs are retrospective and often self-protective. The article therefore distinguishes between documented events, official interpretations, and competing claims about

intention. Its central concern is not to present every uncertainty as equally plausible, but to show how uncertainty itself became part of the political struggle over memory.

From Lahore to Kargil

The Peace Context

The Kargil crisis cannot be understood without the peace context that preceded it. The Lahore Declaration was more than a diplomatic document. It was a public performance of reconciliation between two states whose relationship had repeatedly been defined by suspicion and armed confrontation. Vajpayee's bus journey from India to Lahore, the symbolism of crossing a border that had once connected an undivided Punjab, and the commitment to reduce the risks associated with nuclear weapons gave the declaration considerable emotional and political value. For India, the later discovery of a Pakistani operation planned around the same period made the Lahore moment appear not only unsuccessful but deliberately deceived.

The available evidence indicates that planning for the Kargil operation had begun within Pakistan's military command before the Lahore summit. Active planning is generally traced to October 1998, while formal approval at the senior command level is associated with January 1999 (Nawaz, 2008). This timing became central to India's interpretation. The operation could be portrayed as proof that Pakistan's military leadership had used the language of peace while preparing a military *fait accompli*. The narrative of betrayal was powerful because it joined a legal claim, a diplomatic claim, and a moral claim. Pakistan had crossed the LoC, violated the understandings surrounding it, and undermined the possibility of trust immediately after a peace initiative. Pakistan's later interpretations treated the same context differently. For military supporters, the Lahore process represented a civilian initiative that did not adequately protect Pakistan's strategic interests in Kashmir. The operation could therefore be framed as an attempt to alter a stagnant strategic situation before the diplomatic process hardened the existing status quo. For critics of the military leadership, however, the contrast between Lahore and Kargil demonstrated the danger of allowing the military to pursue a secret agenda while the civilian government publicly promised peace. The same sequence of events consequently supported two very different arguments about national interest: one about strategic resolve, the other about institutional irresponsibility.

Operation Badr and the Logic of Surprise

The operation commonly known as Badr involved the occupation of high positions on the Indian side of the LoC during the winter, when some Indian posts were seasonally vacated. The forces were drawn primarily from the Northern Light Infantry and were presented at first as local or Kashmiri fighters. The planning was based on the belief that the occupation of commanding heights could threaten India's road connection between Srinagar and Leh, place pressure on Indian positions connected to Siachen, and internationalize the Kashmir dispute. Nawaz (2008) and Malik (2006) show that the operation reflected both tactical opportunity and a wider strategic assumption: that India's conventional vulnerability could be exploited under the protection of nuclear deterrence.

The operation was built around surprise. The plan depended on controlling the heights before India could understand the scale of the intrusion, while the ambiguous identity of the forces was supposed to make a rapid Indian response more difficult. Yet surprise created a second problem. Once the positions were detected, the ambiguity that had protected Pakistan diplomatically became a liability. The operation required continued denial, but the geography, organization, supply arrangements, and communications of the forces increasingly suggested a state-directed military action. A plan that depended on remaining below the threshold of open conventional war therefore became more difficult to defend as evidence accumulated. The discovery of the intrusion is associated with the report made by the local shepherd Tashi Namgyal on May 3, 1999. Indian patrols subsequently confirmed the presence of organized forces. India launched Operation Vijay on May 10, and the Indian Air Force began Operation Safed Sagar on May 26 (Malik, 2006). The campaign placed Indian forces in the difficult position of attacking troops entrenched on high ground while also maintaining the political decision not to cross the LoC. That restriction increased the military cost of the campaign, but it also strengthened the Indian narrative of limited and defensive action.

The Military Outcome and the Narrative Problem

India gradually recovered the major positions, including Tololing and Tiger Hill. On July 4, Nawaz Sharif travelled to Washington to meet President Bill Clinton. The resulting agreement committed Pakistan to withdrawing its forces behind the LoC. Withdrawal began on July 11, and the conflict ended on July 26. India had restored the earlier alignment of the LoC, while Pakistan did not achieve its stated objectives of forcing a change in the Kashmir situation or securing a negotiated advantage through the occupation of the heights.

The military result created a serious problem for Pakistan's public explanation. It was difficult to claim an uncomplicated victory when the forces withdrew, the original denial collapsed, and international opinion moved against Islamabad. India, in contrast, could connect the recovery of territory to a clear political conclusion: the status quo had been restored without an Indian concession on Kashmir. Nevertheless, the outcome was not self-interpreting. Pakistan could still argue that the operation had forced the United States to take a renewed interest in Kashmir, that the crisis demonstrated Pakistan's willingness to accept risk, and that the withdrawal prevented a larger war. The later debate therefore shifted from whether Pakistan had achieved its operational objectives to whether it had gained indirect strategic benefits.

India's Narrative of Betrayal and Restraint

India's account of Kargil rested on four connected ideas. The first was betrayal: Pakistan had launched a covert military operation while the two governments were publicly committed to peace. The second was restraint: India had chosen to recover its positions without crossing the LoC, even when crossing might have provided military advantages. The third was victory: all occupied positions were recovered and Pakistan withdrew without obtaining a concession on Kashmir. The fourth was international validation: the United States and other major powers treated Pakistan as responsible for initiating the crisis and called for withdrawal.

This narrative was effective because it linked military conduct to moral conduct. India was not presented merely as the stronger army. It was presented as the state that had acted within limits.

The decision not to cross the LoC was therefore more than a tactical rule. It became evidence of a responsible national character. The same decision also gave India diplomatic protection. By keeping the conflict on its own side of the LoC, India could argue that it was restoring the territorial status quo rather than pursuing expansion. The language used to name India's operations reinforced this framing. "Operation Vijay," meaning victory, placed the desired interpretation in the public vocabulary from the beginning. "Operation Safed Sagar," or White Sea, contributed to a symbolic account of the campaign as a difficult but controlled national effort. Names do not determine outcomes, but they shape how outcomes are remembered. Once an operation is publicly named as victory, later commemorations can attach individual sacrifice and national unity to that label.

The narrative was strengthened by the release of the Musharraf-Aziz telephone intercept. The recording was important not only because it provided evidence of command responsibility, but also because it was understandable to audiences outside the technical world of military planning. A direct conversation between senior Pakistani officers made it difficult to sustain the claim that the forces on the heights were autonomous mujahideen. India's decision to release the intercept transformed a complex question of military organization into a simple and persuasive story: Pakistani commanders had planned the operation, and Pakistan had been caught denying what it had done.

Live Television and the Emotionalization of War

Kargil was India's first "live war" in the age of private satellite television. Reporters travelled close to the front, broadcast images of artillery and mountain combat, and brought the voices of soldiers into Indian homes. The effect was not merely informational. It personalized the war. Viewers encountered individual soldiers, last letters, casualty announcements, and images of difficult climbs rather than only abstract reports about territory. The war became a national experience organized around courage, sacrifice, and recovery. This coverage helped create what might be called a post-nuclear founding myth. India had become a nuclear power only a year earlier, and the Kargil campaign could be remembered as proof that the country was capable of defending itself while exercising restraint. The image of a responsible but determined nuclear state was attractive to both domestic and international audiences. It also fitted the broader transformation of India's foreign-policy identity that was developing in the late 1990s (Mohan, 2003; Gill, 2019).

The media narrative was not free of contradiction. The Kargil Review Committee found serious failures in intelligence and surveillance. Indian agencies had not detected the scale of the operation early enough, and the result was that soldiers were sent toward fortified positions without a complete understanding of what they faced (Government of India, 2000). These failures complicate the story of seamless competence. The same live coverage that generated national solidarity also raised operational-security concerns. Reporting around Tiger Hill was criticized for potentially exposing information about Indian movements and positions (Carruthers, 2000; Malik, 2006; Sinha, 2002). India's narrative was therefore not simply a record of restraint and success. It was a carefully maintained account that foregrounded battlefield courage while limiting the political significance of intelligence failure and media risk.

Commemoration and the Production of Victory

The institutionalization of July 26 as Kargil Vijay Diwas gave the Indian narrative a recurring public form. Annual ceremonies at the Kargil War Memorial in Dras, speeches by political and military leaders, school activities, and broadcast coverage reproduce the same basic sequence: surprise, sacrifice, recovery, and victory. Commemoration turns an event into a moral lesson. The lesson drawn from Kargil is that national unity and military courage defeated aggression while restraint protected India's international standing.

This commemorative structure does not make the narrative false. Indian soldiers did fight and recover positions under exceptionally dangerous conditions. The problem is that commemoration is selective by nature. It tends to place individual heroism at the centre and move institutional failure to the margins. It also gives limited space to the civilians who lived in the Kargil-Dras-Batalik region, to the human costs of artillery exchange, or to the long-term effects of securitization. The official memory can acknowledge sacrifice while still leaving important groups without a meaningful place in the story.

Pakistan's Narratives of Denial, Betrayal, and Strategic Rationalization

Pakistan's Kargil narrative went through several stages. During the conflict, the central public position was that the forces on the heights were Kashmiri mujahideen. After the conflict, as evidence accumulated, the account shifted toward limited acknowledgment of Northern Light Infantry support. Later, military and strategic commentators emphasized the operation's supposed benefits or blamed the civilian leadership for accepting withdrawal. These stages did not produce a single settled memory. They produced a fragmented narrative field in which the military, political leaders, journalists, and later commentators competed over responsibility.

The Mujahideen Account

The claim that the fighters were independent mujahideen offered Pakistan three advantages. It denied that Pakistan had initiated a conventional war across the LoC. It presented the occupation as part of the Kashmiri struggle rather than as an interstate military operation. It also allowed Pakistan to argue that India was attacking a movement for self-determination rather than responding to Pakistani aggression. In diplomatic terms, the distinction between regular soldiers and irregular fighters mattered because it affected how the crisis would be judged under international expectations about state responsibility.

The account became increasingly difficult to maintain. India captured or documented material that suggested organization, supply, and command structures inconsistent with an entirely autonomous insurgency. The intercepted conversation between Musharraf and Aziz provided direct evidence that senior Pakistani officers were managing the operation. Lieutenant General Shahid Aziz later wrote that there were no genuine mujahideen in the sense claimed by the official narrative, and Musharraf's memoir acknowledged the participation of Northern Light Infantry battalions (Lavoy, 2009; Musharraf, 2006; Nawaz, 2008). The result was not an immediate public admission of the full operation but a gradual movement from categorical denial to qualified acknowledgment. This change illustrates how narrative positions can become trapped by their own first claims. Once Pakistan had presented the operation as an autonomous Kashmiri action, admitting regular Army involvement would also mean admitting that the original diplomatic strategy had failed. The state therefore had an incentive to preserve

ambiguity even after ambiguity had become implausible. The costs of acknowledging the truth were not only international. They also threatened the military establishment's domestic image as an institution that protected national interests through competent and deliberate action.

The Civilian Betrayal Narrative

The most influential postwar explanation within Pakistan blamed Nawaz Sharif for the withdrawal. According to the account associated with Musharraf and military supporters, Sharif knew about the operation, approved its objectives, and then panicked when the United States applied pressure at the July 4 meeting. In this version, Pakistani troops were not defeated in the field. They were denied the political support necessary to sustain their positions. The withdrawal became an act of civilian betrayal, and the military emerged as the institution whose success had been sacrificed by weak political leadership.

The alternative explanation placed responsibility on the military command. Sharif and his supporters argued that the civilian government had not been fully informed about the operation's scale, risk, or strategic aims. The Prime Minister may have known that activity was taking place along the LoC, but that did not mean he understood that regular forces had occupied nearly two hundred positions across several sectors or that the operation could trigger an international crisis. On this reading, the Washington meeting was not an act of betrayal but an attempt to prevent a dangerous conflict from becoming a wider war. The available evidence supports a cautious rather than absolute conclusion. Nawaz (2008) and later discussions suggest an asymmetry of information between the military command and the civilian government. It is possible that the Prime Minister knew something was being planned without knowing the full scope and consequences. This middle position does not resolve the political dispute, but it exposes the weakness of both simple narratives. The military cannot easily claim that a fully informed civilian government abandoned a successful operation if the civilian leadership was not given complete information. The civilian government, however, also cannot escape responsibility for allowing a system in which such a major operation could proceed without clear political control.

The October 1999 coup gave the military version institutional force. When Musharraf removed Sharif from office, the political conflict surrounding Kargil became part of the structure of the state. The military was no longer merely defending its account in public debate. It had acquired the authority to shape the political environment in which the account would circulate. This is why Kargil cannot be separated from the history of Pakistan's civil-military relations. The narrative of civilian weakness helped justify military intervention, while military intervention made it more difficult for civilians to contest the narrative on equal terms.

Strategic Success after Tactical Withdrawal

A third Pakistani interpretation sought to transform Kargil from a defeat into a strategic success. Its argument was that the operation achieved several indirect objectives. It demonstrated that Pakistan was willing to take risks over Kashmir despite the nuclear setting. It forced the United States to intervene directly in the crisis. It returned Kashmir to the centre of international diplomacy. It also, according to some readings, produced an American commitment to take a personal interest in the dispute (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010; Talbott, 2004).

This argument does not deny that Pakistan withdrew. Instead, it changes the criteria by which the war should be judged. The question becomes not whether the occupied heights were held, but whether the crisis altered the strategic environment. The argument has some analytical value because military operations can produce political effects even when their immediate objectives fail. However, it also has clear limits. The United States' pressure for withdrawal, the public association of Pakistan with the initiation of the crisis, and the damage to Pakistan's diplomatic credibility made it difficult to present the operation as an unqualified success. A state may gain international attention while losing control of the narrative through which that attention is interpreted.

The nuclear dimension was central to this strategic-rationalization account. Some Pakistani commentators disputed American claims that Pakistan had prepared nuclear weapons for possible deployment. They argued that the missiles in question were not operationally inducted and that routine military activity had been magnified by American intelligence and diplomatic interests. From this perspective, Washington used the possibility of nuclear escalation to pressure Sharif into accepting a withdrawal that served the American preference for restoring stability on India's terms. The competing nuclear accounts cannot be settled simply by repeating either government's position. Riedel's account is important because it describes what American officials believed, but it is also a political memoir and not a neutral technical assessment (Riedel, 2011; Tellis et al., 2001; Zeb, 2021). The uncertainty itself mattered. If the United States believed that Pakistan might be preparing for nuclear deployment, the crisis was more dangerous regardless of Pakistan's actual intention. Perception became part of the strategic reality. The episode therefore demonstrates the limits of treating nuclear deterrence as a purely material relationship. Deterrence depends on how signals are read, how institutions interpret ambiguous activity, and how leaders communicate under pressure.

The International and Nuclear Narrative Battlefield

The international response to Kargil strongly influenced which national story became dominant outside South Asia. The United States did not remain equidistant between India and Pakistan. Once American officials concluded that Pakistani regular forces were occupying positions on the Indian side of the LoC, the Clinton administration treated Pakistan as responsible for initiating the crisis and pressed for withdrawal (Chari et al., 2003; Gill, 2019; Riedel, 2011; Talbott, 2004). This was a major diplomatic development. It meant that India's narrative of aggression, restraint, and restoration of the status quo received support from the most influential external actor in the crisis.

The American position was shaped by several considerations. Washington wanted to prevent escalation between two new nuclear powers. It also had to manage the danger that the conflict could undermine the broader effort to stabilize relations after the nuclear tests of 1998. The Lahore Declaration gave the United States an additional political reference point: Pakistan's operation could be represented as a violation of a recent commitment to reduce tension. American intelligence regarding Pakistani military involvement and possible nuclear preparations further encouraged the administration to treat the crisis as a case requiring immediate pressure rather than balanced mediation.

For India, American involvement validated its preferred story. India's decision not to cross the LoC made it easier for Washington to support India without appearing to endorse an expansion of the war. India's military position was connected to a diplomatic posture of restraint. Pakistan, by contrast, had to argue that American pressure was unfair while also accepting the consequences of diplomatic isolation. The more it presented the withdrawal as a forced concession, the more it acknowledged that it had lost the international narrative. The nuclear shadow intensified this asymmetry. Pakistan wanted nuclear capability to deter India from exploiting its conventional advantage. Yet Kargil showed that nuclear weapons could not guarantee diplomatic freedom of action. Nuclear deterrence may have limited the risk of a much larger war, but it did not prevent international actors from assigning responsibility or demanding withdrawal. In fact, nuclear risk made the United States more determined to control escalation and more sensitive to signs that either side might miscalculate.

Kargil thus challenged a simplistic understanding of nuclear stability. The presence of nuclear weapons can make leaders more cautious, but it can also encourage limited conventional risk-taking under the assumption that the adversary will avoid a larger response. The operation was built partly on this logic. Pakistan's planners appear to have believed that India would face pressure to keep the conflict limited and that outside powers would eventually intervene to prevent escalation. The assumption was partly correct: the United States did intervene and the war did not expand into a general conflict. But the political effect was the opposite of what Pakistan expected. External intervention did not produce mediation on equal terms; it produced pressure on Pakistan to withdraw.

The Media War and Information Asymmetry

The Kargil conflict was a turning point in the relationship between war and mass communication in South Asia. India's private television networks had greater capacity to place reporters near the front and to organize a continuous national story around the fighting. Images of soldiers, mountains, artillery, and funerals circulated rapidly. Pakistan's media environment and official communication system were less able to contest India's visual narrative before international audiences. The imbalance was not simply a matter of censorship or technical capacity. It was also a matter of credibility. India could combine battlefield images with a diplomatic claim that its forces were defending their side of the LoC. Pakistan's media had to explain an operation whose official identity was becoming increasingly difficult to defend.

The Musharraf-Aziz intercept was the clearest example of information asymmetry being converted into diplomatic power. The release of the recording gave India a form of evidence that could travel across language and institutional boundaries. It could be heard by journalists, diplomats, and foreign governments without requiring a detailed understanding of the terrain. The recording also allowed India to set the agenda. Instead of responding to Pakistan's claim that the fighters were mujahideen, the international audience was invited to judge the evidence of Pakistani command responsibility. Pakistan's weakness was not only that its claim was challenged. Its communication lacked a stable alternative. If it admitted Army participation, it risked confirming India's account of aggression. If it continued to deny participation, it risked appearing dishonest. If it argued that the operation was strategically successful despite withdrawal, it had to explain why the original objectives were abandoned. Each possible response created a new vulnerability. The narrative field became fragmented because no single

explanation could satisfy military, diplomatic, and domestic political requirements at the same time.

India's advantage should not be confused with perfect media control. The live coverage also generated problems. Reporters could expose operational information, and emotionally charged broadcasts could reduce the space for critical analysis. Later commentary about Tiger Hill and the safety of embedded reporting suggests that the first live war produced institutional lessons about how the military and media should interact (Carruthers, 2000; Rai, 2000; Sinha, 2002). The Indian state learned to manage access more carefully, while the television industry learned that patriotic intensity could attract audiences even when verification was incomplete. The memory of Kargil was consequently shaped by both information and emotion. The visibility of soldier sacrifice helped India build a powerful national story, but the emotional nature of the coverage also made it difficult to discuss intelligence failures, strategic miscalculation, or civilian suffering. In Pakistan, the absence of an equally coherent visual narrative left more room for internal argument, but that argument did not necessarily produce greater historical honesty. Competing national media systems can fail in different ways: one may suppress complexity through a highly successful story, while the other may leave the public with contradictory explanations that protect institutions from clear accountability.

Comparative Analysis: Narrative Power and Institutional Credibility

The central difference between the Indian and Pakistani accounts lies in coherence. India's narrative connected the origin, conduct, and outcome of the war in a single sequence: Pakistan betrayed the Lahore peace process; India responded defensively; Indian soldiers recovered the occupied positions; Pakistan withdrew; and international actors confirmed India's position. Each part supported the others. Even India's intelligence failure could be incorporated as a temporary breakdown overcome by national courage. Pakistan's narrative did not have the same internal consistency. The mujahideen account described the conflict as an indigenous Kashmiri struggle, but evidence linked the operation to Pakistan's Army. The civilian-betrayal account blamed Nawaz Sharif for ending a campaign that military supporters portrayed as successful, but the extent of civilian knowledge remained contested. The strategic-success account emphasized diplomatic consequences, but the international response associated Pakistan with initiating a dangerous crisis. These explanations could coexist within Pakistan, but they could not easily be presented as one stable national story.

The comparison also shows that narratives are shaped by institutional incentives. India had an interest in presenting Kargil as proof of responsible military power, particularly after the nuclear tests. The story supported India's efforts to gain international legitimacy and strengthen relations with the United States. Pakistan's military establishment had an interest in protecting its authority over national security and Kashmir. It therefore needed to avoid a narrative in which the Army appeared to have undertaken a risky operation without adequate civilian control. Nawaz Sharif and his supporters had the opposite interest: they needed to show that the civilian government had been excluded from decisions that produced the crisis. The most important silences are also different. India has tended to understate the intelligence failures that allowed the intrusion to develop and the limitations of live reporting. Pakistan has tended to obscure the scale of Army responsibility, the weakness of the mujahideen claim, and the institutional consequences of military secrecy. Both states have given limited attention to Kashmir's civilian population. In the

national narratives, Kashmiris appear as the reason for the conflict or as symbols of national claims, but rarely as political actors with diverse interests and their own memories of the war.

Table 1

Comparative Narrative Positions in the Kargil War

Contested issue	Dominant framing	Indian	Major framings	Pakistani	Analytical significance
Identity of forces	Pakistani conducting a state-directed intrusion	regulars	Kashmiri later support assisting mujahideen	mujahideen; limited NLI or regulars	The category of the fighter determined responsibility and diplomatic legitimacy
Relationship to Lahore	Deliberate betrayal of a public peace process		Civilian peace policy was inadequate to protect strategic interests		The same sequence supported opposing views of peace and security
Civil-military responsibility	Army action reflected Pakistani responsibility	reflected state	Sharif either knew and abandoned the operation or was not fully informed		Kargil became part of Pakistan's struggle over military supremacy and civilian control
Meaning of withdrawal	Total Indian victory and restoration of the status quo	victory	Diplomatic necessary de-escalation, or tactical withdrawal after strategic gains	betrayal, de-escalation, or tactical withdrawal after	Battlefield outcome and political meaning were separated
Nuclear dimension	Pakistani brinkmanship threatened regional stability	brinkmanship regional	American intelligence exaggerated activity or misunderstood readiness	intelligence routine or	Perception and uncertainty shaped crisis diplomacy
International response	Validation of restraint and legal position	of India's legal	Unfair pressure and diplomatic opportunity	American and lost	Credibility with external audiences affected the historical record

Note. The table summarizes the competing narrative positions identified in the article's historiographical analysis. It does not imply that each position was internally uniform or equally supported by evidence.

The comparison does not require a false balance. Examining competing narratives does not mean treating all claims as equally credible. The evidence concerning the role of Pakistani regular forces is stronger than the original claim that the occupation was entirely independent of Pakistan's Army. Likewise, the Kargil Review Committee provides substantial evidence of

Indian intelligence failure, but that failure does not by itself make India's account of the cross-LoC intrusion false. A critical historiography must hold two ideas together: it must judge evidence, and it must examine the institutional reasons why some evidence is emphasized while other evidence is minimized.

Discussion: Why the Narratives Persist

Institutional Reproduction

Narratives survive when institutions repeat them. In India, Kargil Vijay Diwas, memorial ceremonies, school materials, military histories, and media coverage reproduce the story of heroic defence. In Pakistan, military memoirs, official commentary, public discussions of Kashmir, and the continuing prestige of the Army reproduce the idea that Kargil should not be remembered as a straightforward defeat. Repetition creates familiarity, and familiarity is often mistaken for proof. Over time, the narrative becomes part of the common sense through which later crises are understood.

Civil-Military Interests

Kargil persists as a contested memory because admitting too much would threaten powerful institutions. In India, full acknowledgment of intelligence failure would raise uncomfortable questions about accountability and institutional readiness. In Pakistan, a candid admission of unilateral military planning would raise questions about civilian supremacy, strategic competence, and the political uses of secrecy. The historical record is therefore connected to the distribution of power in the present. Institutions do not simply remember the past; they defend the conditions that allow them to govern.

The Kashmir Anchor

The conflict also remains attached to the unresolved Kashmir dispute. Neither India nor Pakistan treats Kargil as an isolated event. Each reads it through a much longer history of partition, territorial claims, military confrontation, and competing ideas of self-determination. This makes concession difficult. To acknowledge that a particular operation was misguided can appear to weaken the broader national position on Kashmir. The war's narrative therefore carries a symbolic weight larger than its immediate military objectives.

Nuclear Revisionism and Strategic Memory

The nuclear meaning of Kargil continues to invite revision. India remembers the war as proof that a responsible nuclear power can exercise force while respecting limits. Pakistan remembers it as evidence that nuclear deterrence can create space for bold action, or as a warning that military operations require stronger civilian and diplomatic coordination. These readings influence later strategic debates. The past is used to teach future leaders what kind of risk is acceptable, what kind of signaling is effective, and which institutions should be trusted.

The Absence of Subaltern Voices

The persistence of national narratives is also connected to the absence of alternative archives. Soldiers and commanders have left memoirs, governments have produced reports, and journalists have documented the fighting. The voices of local civilians, however, remain far less visible. The residents of Kargil, Dras, and Batalik experienced shelling, displacement, insecurity, and the reorganization of everyday life around a military crisis. Their experiences do not fit easily into either national story. They are neither evidence of Indian victory nor proof of Pakistani strategic resolve. Without deliberate scholarly effort, national memory will continue to speak over the people who lived in the war zone.

Implications and Future Research

Kargil offers a different historiographical challenge from earlier India-Pakistan wars. The problem is not a complete absence of evidence. There are memoirs by senior participants, government reports, declassified or partially declassified American materials, recorded conversations, extensive journalism, and later academic analysis. The difficulty is that the evidence is crowded with actors who had strong personal and institutional reasons to control interpretation. Historians must therefore read the archive not only for what it says but also for who produced it, when it was produced, and what political problem it was intended to solve.

Four priorities follow from this approach. First, the civil-military knowledge question requires further archival work. The debate over how much Nawaz Sharif knew cannot be settled by choosing between the most confident statements in opposing memoirs. It requires comparison with contemporaneous diplomatic records, internal Pakistani documents, and testimony from officials who occupied different positions in the chain of command. Second, the nuclear question requires technical analysis that distinguishes political claims from operational capability. The fact that American officials believed Pakistan might be preparing for deployment is historically important, but it does not automatically prove what Pakistan had decided or what its systems could do.

Third, scholars should examine media as an institution rather than treating it as a transparent window onto the battlefield. Live television changed the relationship between military operations, public emotion, and national identity. It also created risks of operational disclosure and narrowed the space for dissenting interpretations. Comparative research on Indian and Pakistani newspapers, television channels, military briefings, and diaspora media could show how different audiences received and reshaped the official stories.

Fourth, scholarship must recover the local and civilian dimensions of the conflict. The dominant accounts are organized around national sovereignty, military command, diplomatic pressure, and nuclear danger. Those issues matter, but they should not erase the people who experienced the war directly. Oral histories, local newspapers, district archives, family collections, and community memorials could reveal how Kargil was understood outside the capitals and military headquarters. Such research would not merely add emotional detail. It could change the explanation of the conflict by showing how civilian vulnerability influenced political decisions and later memory.

A more complete history should also resist the pressure to produce a final heroic or tragic ending. The war did end with Pakistan's withdrawal and the restoration of the LoC, but its effects

continued through the 1999 coup, the transformation of U.S.-India relations, the hardening of attitudes toward Pakistan's Kashmir policy, and the strategic lessons drawn by both nuclear powers. The meaning of Kargil is therefore not fixed at July 26, 1999. It has been repeatedly rewritten in response to later political needs.

Conclusion

The Kargil War was a military confrontation, a diplomatic crisis, and a contest over memory. India built a coherent account of betrayal, restraint, victory, and international validation. Pakistan moved from denial to qualified acknowledgment and then to competing narratives of civilian betrayal, strategic success, and institutional miscalculation. Neither account is simply a neutral record of events. Each organizes evidence in ways that protect national identity and institutional authority. The conflict demonstrates that narrative power is not an ornamental addition to military power. It affects diplomatic support, domestic legitimacy, civil-military relations, and the lessons that future generations draw from war. India's stronger international narrative reflected not only its battlefield position but also its ability to combine evidence, media access, diplomatic credibility, and a persuasive story of restraint. Pakistan's weaker narrative was not caused solely by military withdrawal. It was weakened by the contradiction between its initial denial and later admissions, as well as by the internal struggle over who had controlled the operation.

The most responsible scholarship should therefore avoid both national triumphalism and artificial equivalence. It should judge evidence carefully while examining how institutions produce memory. It should recognize the reality of Indian military sacrifice without ignoring intelligence failure, and it should take Pakistan's civil-military dispute seriously without repeating the mujahideen account as established fact. Above all, it should make room for the Kashmiri and civilian experiences that both national narratives have marginalized. Kargil remains an unfinished historical argument because the war ended, but the struggle over its meaning did not.

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