

Islamabad diary

By Ayaz Amir

The ghost that won't go away

Pak-Def.

23/08/04

Amir

instance, when the prime minister's father-in-law died, Musharraf and begum flew to Lahore by helicopter to offer condolences.

The first cracks in this cosy relationship appeared over the question of India, which is slightly ironical given Gen Musharraf's current status as great advocate of Indo-Pak ditente. When the Indian prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, took his famous bus ride into Pakistan, the service chiefs were averse to the idea of receiving him at the border. Only later that evening they offered their respects to him at the governor's House, Lahore. A minor point in retrospect but one indicative of military thinking at that time.

The Lahore Declaration — a reiteration of both countries' desire to live in peace — was signed in February 1999. March and April passed off uneventfully. But in May came strange rumours of 'mujahideen' activity across the Line of Control in Kargil. Which was a bit mystifying because the Kashmiri freedom fighters were always thought to be operating inside the Kashmir Valley. What were they doing along the LoC?

If the public was in the dark, for once it was in distinguished company. For even the navy and air force chiefs knew nothing. Nor, more alarmingly, did most of the corps commanders know what the hell was happening.

Only somewhere around May 20-22 were the other service chiefs and the formation commanders who were not in the loop informed about what was afoot, that too in heroic terms about the great successes registered in "filling the gaps" along and across the Line of Control.

But who were in the loop? As it turned out, rather a limited number of senior commanders: the commander of the northern troops, Major-General Javed Hasan, now a corps commander; Commander 10 Corps, Lt Gen Mahmood, now retired and heading Fauji Fertilizer (who says Pakistani generals are not versatile?); the Chief of the General Staff, Lt Gen Aziz, now as a four-star general, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee; the DG Mil Ops, Lt Gen Tauqir Zia, later to become cricket czar (if Kargil is anything to go by, no wonder he made a mess of Pakistani cricket); and, of course, the Chief himself.

By this time the tone of radio and television broadcasts became notably patriotic. But even as the media played up 'mujahideen' successes, and the daily military briefings began increasingly to sound

like war briefings, no one cared to explain to an increasingly befuddled populace as to what this fighting was all about. Were we embarked on another bid to 'liberate' Kashmir? If so, had we calculated the risk of all-out war? For it needed no Clausewitz to realize that India would not take losses in Kashmir lying down and that Kargil if continued would mean war.

Adding to the public's puzzle was the signing of the Lahore Declaration just two months earlier. If we had resolved to tread the path of war, what was the point of that charade? If it was not a charade and we were serious about peace, what accounted for the change of heart now? It was all very confusing, with Kargil making no sense at all. On June 13, a grim council of war, presided over by the prime minister and attended by the service chiefs and some ministers, was held in the Governor's House, Lahore. Once again the army's take on the situation was upbeat. Action was going on, it was said, and very good mountain positions had been occupied. But what was the political aim of the operation? What was the army hoping to achieve? Silence on this score.

Nawaz Sharif reportedly didn't say much, asking the participants for their views but not vouchsafing any opinion of his own. One of the participants asked whether we were hoping to take Kashmir militarily. No answer. When the question was pressed again, the answer was no. Then why were we sitting on a few hills in Kargil? No answer.

We were not prepared for war, we didn't want war, but our actions, if not reversed, had put the nation on a ski-run leading inevitably to war, trigger-happy and thoughtless Guderianism having placed Pakistan in this desperate position.

How to get out of it and how to save face at the same time? The gravity of the situation had dawned on all concerned. Then Centcom commander, Gen Anthony Zinni, takes too much credit for saying he helped convince the Pakistani leadership for a pullback by starkly portraying the consequences of "war and nuclear annihilation". Zinni was in Islamabad on June 24 and 25. By that time both Nawaz Sharif and Musharraf would have clutched at any straw to get out of the army's self-created mess. And Zinni was offering a meeting with Clinton which, although not much better than a straw, at least was a face-saving straw.

Look at newspaper photos of the Kargil period. The tension on the army commander's face

is writ so large and plain that it is discernible even in black-and-white photos. Only after Nawaz Sharif visited Washington on July 4 and agreed to a troop pullback (the 'mujahideen' fiction then wearing thin) did this tension abate.

There was, however, the problem of explaining what had happened to an officer corps as mystified by the turn of events as the rest of the nation. If Kargil was such a good thing, why the abrupt withdrawal from captured positions? If the basic idea was unsound, why had it been started in the first place? In addresses at various garrison centres it was explained that Kargil had been an outstanding success which had 'internationalized' the Kashmir issue. The conclusion was left hanging in the air that but for the loss of nerve of the civilian government the successes from Kargil would have been still greater.

Was Nawaz Sharif kept in the dark about the genesis of Kargil? Of all the questions thrown up by the Kargil crisis this is about the most useless. He was the prime minister and should have known. But if, as he maintains, the wool was pulled over his eyes, what did he do when he came into the picture? He should have asked some searching questions. He seems to have done nothing of the kind, not even at the June 13 meeting in Lahore. Kargil put national security to its greatest risk since the 1971 war with India. Truman sacked Gen McArthur for much less.

All the evidence suggests that Nawaz Sharif was briefed or cursorily informed about Kargil sometime in April, probably at the Ojhri Camp, halfway between Pindi and Islamabad. He may not have been given all the details but then it was for him to find out. If he did not, he was at fault. If he did not understand, he was at fault again.

The real question about Kargil is not whether Nawaz Sharif knew or not. It is something else. What accounts for the army's institutional capacity to dream up ventures lacking any geostrategic or political context? The 1965 war (which ended up by derailing Pakistan and paving the way for the eventual separation of East Pakistan) was one such venture. The army crackdown on the Awami League in East Pakistan in 1971 was another. Kargil makes up the third of this holy trinity.

Nawaz Sharif was supposed to have a limited attention span. Kargil throws up an intriguing question. Whose intellect span was more limited, Nawaz Sharif's or the army command's?

THE ill-fated Kargil operation — carried out for no rhyme or reason appealing to the rational mind — is Banquo's ghost at General Musharraf's table, a bitter reminder of a misadventure that resulted in hundreds of deaths and cost the nation dearly.

The ghost's latest appearance was triggered by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's claim to an Indian news magazine that Musharraf who was then army chief did not take him into confidence about the Kargil operation and that he (NS) was thinking of setting up a judicial commission to probe Kargil when he was ousted from power. To which there has been a riposte from the transitional prime minister, Ch Shujaat Hussain, who says that he himself witnessed a meeting in which Musharraf, citing dates and time, told Nawaz Sharif that he had informed him (NS) about Kargil on six different occasions.

To all appearances Nawaz Sharif's claim about wanting to set up a Kargil inquiry is an afterthought, a bit of historical rewriting, because if he had been so keen on an inquiry he shouldn't have appointed Musharraf as Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, just a few days before he (Nawaz Sharif) was ousted from power.

Rest assured, however, that the would-be Guderians who launched Kargil will never face the music for their folly. This has never been the done thing in Pakistan. Was anyone ever prosecuted for the folly of the 1965 war or for the disaster of 1971? We can be reasonably sure no one is going to sit in judgment on Kargil. Generals have been the arbiters of Pakistan's destiny. We surely don't expect them to indict their own kind.

Kargil, by the standards of subcontinental warfare, was a minor affair. But its consequences were huge, with some of which we are living till today.

It may not have brought about the liberation of Kashmir any nearer but it paved the way for another military coup in Pakistan's ill-starred history. Nawaz Sharif and Musharraf were pretty thick before Kargil, Musharraf going out of his way to demonstrate that the trust placed in him (by appointing him army chief) was not misplaced. To quote but one