Issue Brief

Kargil to Galwan:
Enduring Leadership Traits

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CLAWS

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Kargil Conflict (1999) and Galwan Clashes (2020) Two Decades Apart with Enduring Military Leadership Traits

Abstract

Certain leadership traits transcend timelines, civilisations, continents, ages, terrain, enemies, nature & character of warfare and evolving geopolitical environment. At times, it is perceived that rapidly changing technology in the strategic and tactical realms may impact traditional values and traits of leadership. Post analyzing two conflicts two decades apart, this article discusses certain enduring leadership traits that need to be nurtured in current and future leadership across the spectrum.

Keywords: Kargil War, Galwan Crisis, Evolution of Military Leadership, Gen Z, Indian Military

The Kargil War of 1999 and the Galwan Clash of 2020 were pivotal events in India's military history, with each carrying valuable lessons on leadership in the face of adversity. While the contexts and adversaries in both conflicts were different, the core leadership qualities, required to navigate these challenges, have remained constant. This article explores the leadership traits drawn from the Kargil and Galwan clashes, highlighting essential qualities and competencies that leaders must develop to address modern military and strategic challenges.

During the Kargil War (1999) and the Galwan crisis (2020), the leadership, both civilian and military, were in the prime of youth. It was the phase when, in the Indian subcontinent, geo-political influences and interferences were becoming more intimate with both India and Pakistan declaring their nuclear status in 1998 and India being termed as a *pariah* with severe sanctions being imposed. The government in the Centre was a minority one 'hanging by a slender thread'. This was also the period wherein the legacy media, fresh from the experiences of the two Gulf Wars, was creating a critical space to inform and influence strategy and operations through manipulation of public opinions locally and internationally. Live telecast and

reporting from the frontlines at the tactical level of warfighting—brutal and yet sensational and exciting, although new in the Indian subcontinent but desired by the population. More importantly in India, the civilian and military domains had just started to merge at the strategic levels, ushering in a whole-of-nation approach in the aspects related to national security. The manifestation of this synergy, rudimentary though, successfully uprooted and pushed back the Pakistan Army from the rarified atmosphere and unscalable heights of Kargil Sector.

The important facets of geopolitical environment viz. centrality of information warfare and civil-military fusion underwent momentous transitions from Kargil to Galwan, just two decades apart. Firstly, India was being sought after for world leadership role with Covid Vaccine diplomacy and as an emerging strong economy with majority and muscular government in power. Secondly, in the information environment, the world had become flat with social media and other digital spaces available to the common public to engage and inform national and world leaders. No information could be hidden from the prying eyes on the dark web or satellites. It drew everyone with a mobile into the conversation of information, intelligence, strategy and operations including influencing the future course of actions to be taken, compelling belligerence to sane actions, by the national decision makers. Deception, misinformation and disinformation were part of the campaigns targeting the gullible common citizenry, within the two countries as also across the world. The media dissection of the event of Galwan highlighted a shift in information warfare, where shaping strategic narratives became crucial (Singh, 2019). Thirdly, on the civil – military front, the evolution was made significant with the facet of synergy compelled by a strong government in the centre.

Yet, the only enduring constant was the public perceptions regarding the response of the Indian leadership at the strategic levels, both civilian and military, was found to be sluggish, indecisive and irresolute in response to the emerging situation, wherein the tactical leadership responded with alacrity. Interestingly, two common factors emerge in terms of leaderships two decades apart. First, the government in power was led by BJP, albeit in minority as a coalition during Kargil conflict and in absolute majority in Galwan incident. Secondly, the Chiefs of the Army Staff during both incidents were from the Sikh Light Infantry Regiment.

The situations surrounding Kargil conflict and Galwan clashes are different in terms of enemies, scales of troop deployments & engagements and eventually casualties, but they have enduring similarities of intelligence failure, being deceived and surprised at strategic levels and delays in robust responses. All these can be attributed to failure of leadership and structures, for not reading the strategic intent of enemy correctly and being complacent. The public debates and multiple studies post both the events have blamed the strategic leadership for many failures. However, given the democratic structures inherited by the political, bureaucratic and military of the times, one would argue that responses were well considered, robust, firm and with far reaching favourable tactical, strategic and geopolitical outcomes. Based on few essential leadership qualities/ competencies in adverse geopolitical environments, the strategic responses can be examined during the Kargil conflict and the Galwan clash.

The Evolution of Military Strategy: Kargil and Galwan

In 1999, the Kargil War unfolded during a time when the (now) senior leadership of the Galwan clashes were junior leaders who were directly involved in the conflict and were just beginning to grasp the significance of national security. The conflict marked the beginning of a shift towards a more integrated, whole-of-nation approach to security issues, particularly regarding the relationship between civilian and military domains. India successfully pushed back Pakistani forces from the heights of Kargil, and the media, through live broadcasts, played an instrumental role in shaping the public's understanding of the conflict (Kargil War Review Committee Report, 2000). In following years, India continued to strengthen its position, countering Pakistan's provocations with greater assertiveness.

However, over next two decades, while India-Pakistan relations were managed significantly, tensions with China escalated, particularly along the India-China border in the Ladakh region as well as the Eastern Sector. With incidents such as the Doklam standoff in 2017, it became clear that China will adopt a more aggressive stance. At the time of the Galwan clash, most military leaders should have predicted the fallouts of faceoffs that resulted in the clash leading to casualties.

Both Kargil and Galwan were different in terms of geography, adversary, and scale, yet they shared key similarities, such as intelligence failures, strategic surprises,

and a reactive rather than proactive approach. Though outcomes, even after being surprised were favorable to India, they came at avoidable costs, in terms of loss of human lives, prestige of being unable to predict the behavior of the two known sworn enemies and negative effects to the economy. These shortcomings and the consequences can be attributed to failures in leadership, who were unsuccessful to interpret correctly the enemy's strategic intentions and allowed complacency and deception to cloud judgment (Aggarwal, 2021).

Takeaways

Leadership, at all levels, must hone their skills for crystal gazing and understand the emerging geopolitical conditions, particularly those of the sworn competitors or enemies.

Education in strategy at all levels is as essential as that of tactical skills. Strategy has far-reaching impact in terms of range and depth. While a considerable time and energy is spent on tactics of developing leaders, it has an impact in short term and along a narrow bandwidth.

Preemptive and proactive actions, to deter opposition to start a move, is imperative for which developing "coup d' oeil", as Clausewitz states, is important.

Intuitive Thinking, Tolerance for Ambiguity and Foresight

- *Kargil War.* Prior to May 1999, the prevailing consensus among political and military leaders was that, a war between nuclear-armed states, particularly India and Pakistan, was untenable. This belief, coupled with the warm personal relationship between the two nations' Prime Ministers, contributed to a failure to understand Pakistan's strategic intentions. Pakistan's objective was not only to disrupt India's strategic routes such as the NH-1D road, in which they failed, but also to internationalise the Kashmir issue, where they succeeded (Kargil War Review Committee Report, 2000). However, in the long term, India gained in geopolitical stature for its robust military response and also for being a responsible Nation (Pandey DP, 2008).

- ***Galwan Clash.*** In 2020, both India and China had strong leadership. Diplomatic engagements such as the Wuhan and Mahabalipuram summits had set the stage for a reduction in tensions. In fact, just days before the Galwan clash, military commanders from both sides had engaged in dialogue aimed at de-escalation. Due to such diplomatic efforts and positive military engagements, India failed to read the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) true intentions, thus leading to the surprise clash. Several strategic factors, such as India's rising economic power, opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's domestic narrative of national rejuvenation, likely played a role. India's over-reliance on diplomacy and dialogue failed to address these factors (Aggarwal, 2021). While robust proactive response by occupying the strategically important Kailash Ranges, mobilisation of strategic forces and application of all elements of DIME, resulted in eventual disengagement and restoration of status quo ante in May 2020 with respect to patrolling and domination, the relationship and trust levels between the two countries have hit the lowest levels. China came out to be the biggest loser in global standing in terms of being an 'unnecessary irresponsible muscular action' as a military force, howsoever modern and large, it can be contested and is not to be feared.

Takeaways

Future leaders must be well-versed in not only military affairs but also in political, diplomatic and economic landscapes.

Intuitive decision-making, similar to financial market analyses, blends expertise, gut feeling, data, and should be employed with a sense of responsibility and ethical integrity.

Both conflicts underscore the need for robust intelligence capabilities to prevent surprise attacks and misjudgments (Sharma, 2022).

Courage to Take Bold Actions

- ***Kargil War.*** Throughout the Kargil conflict, India maintained escalation control, strategically responding to Pakistan's provocations without

crossing critical lines. The surgical strikes, including the 2016 Uri and 2019 Balakot operations, demonstrated India's growing assertiveness on the global stage (Singh, 2019).

- *Galwan Clash.* On the northern borders, however, China controlled the escalation. The scars of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, combined with China's economic rise and military modernisation, gave birth to a psychological hesitation within India's leadership. This resulted in flawed strategic approaches, such as neglecting infrastructure development in border regions and over-relying on diplomatic dialogue. However, the aftermath of the Galwan clash saw a recalibration of India's approach, marked by bold strategic moves like the occupation of the Kailash range and revisiting of the engagement rules (Sharma, 2022).

Takeaways

Trust within the military hierarchy plays a critical role in empowering junior leaders to take bold decisions. A shift towards a more agile leadership structure, as evident from the direct involvement of senior commanders in tactical decisions, highlights a growing awareness of this need.

Historical figures like Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw and Captain Vikram Batra exemplify how courage and bold decision-making can lead to strategic advantages (Aggarwal, 2021).

In future conflicts, it is essential for staff officers and junior leaders to help senior leadership make bold decisions, guided by thorough analysis and contingency planning.

Adaptability, Agility and Information Warfare

- *Kargil War.* During the Kargil conflict, the Indian military demonstrated adaptability by amending its engagement strategy in line with the government's directive to not cross the Line of Control (LoC). Concurrently, diplomatic efforts were mobilised to expose Pakistan's actions on the global stage (Kargil War Review Committee Report, 2000).

The direction of the Government to the military and the change in strategy indicated to the world that India was a responsible nation with its Military firmly under civilian control. It also informed the robustness of the military to change strategy and apply operational directives as per the need of the geopolitical environment. This led to a positive shaping of the attitudes of the world and militaries towards India (Pandey, 2008). The legacy media played a major role in shaping the Indian Narrative including that of as a responsible Nation and Military wherein the bravery aspects were shown to the world through interviews of the combatants from the frontline. Additionally, publicised visits of the National Leaders and senior military officers including the Chief of the Army Staff multiple times, in close ranges of the combat areas, also drew appreciation from the public thus developing the positive media narratives to get the Nation behind the Military.

- *Galwan Clash.* Following the Galwan clash, India displayed strategic agility by increasing troop deployments in key areas, altering rules of engagement and initiating operations in the Kailash ranges. The Military took bold and resolute actions on the ground by diverting substantive forces to the Northern Front while maintaining balance elsewhere and declaring China as enemy number one. It helped shape the mind of the Chinese decision makers to avoid trouble which would have difficult consequences. The government also worked to de-escalate tensions with China through diplomatic, economic and informational engagements (Sharma, 2022). The exploitation of the information terrain, particularly in the social media domain, remained sluggish with responses emerging from individual and international accounts. India was quite behind the curve in the information domain but made up eventually.

Takeaways

Military leaders must anticipate second and third-order effects of strategic actions and be prepared for the unexpected, with creative solutions that accounts for the complexity of modern warfare and geopolitical and economic environment.

With the rise of social media and digital platforms, leaders must also be adept at managing narratives and public perceptions, ensuring the integrity of military operations and avoiding the manipulation of public sentiment (Chandra, 2021).

The Influence of Socio-Economic Changes on Military Leadership

The military leadership in India has witnessed significant socio-economic changes in the past few decades. Despite these shifts, core military values such as courage, integrity and "service before self" remains deeply ingrained in the armed forces. However, the changing socio-economic landscape has led to shifts in the attitudes and behaviors of junior military personnel, particularly those from the millennial and Gen Z generations.

- *Qualities of Gen Z.* Members of Gen Z, who now constitutes a significant portion of military personnel, exhibit tech-savviness, a strong sense of social responsibility, and an emphasis on work-life balance. They are more likely to challenge traditional hierarchies and prefer collaborative working environments. However, they may also exhibit impatience for results, a tendency to prioritise personal time, and a transactional approach to relationships (Chandra, 2021).
- *Strengths of Gen Z.* Gen Z members bring a high level of technological proficiency, confidence, and physical fitness— all of which are assets in modern military operations. Their focus on independence and integrity aligns with the values of the military, but they may require guidance in professional etiquette and communication (Chandra, 2021).
- *Strategies to Engage Gen Z.* To effectively engage this generation, military leadership must strike a balance between autonomy and directive leadership. Providing regular feedback, involving Gen Z in decision-making, and recognizing their contributions will foster a sense of value and motivation in them. Leading by example and demonstrating ethical leadership will further instill trust within the ranks (Sharma, 2022).

Conclusion: A Blend of Tradition and Innovation

Reflecting on the lessons from the Kargil and Galwan conflicts, it is clear that leadership in the military must evolve to meet the changing dynamics of warfare. The key leadership attributes— intuitive thinking, courage, adaptability and the ability to take bold actions— must be honed and integrated with contemporary insights on technology, media & information management, and generational shifts in personnel.

As military institutions look ahead, the challenge will be to combine the timeless values that have sustained the armed forces with the innovative strategies and leadership approaches required to navigate an increasingly complex and unpredictable global security landscape. By doing so, the continued resilience and effectiveness of the Indian Armed Forces in the face of modern threats will endure.

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About the Author

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, (Retd) carries experience across various terrain and operational environments. Commissioned into the 9th Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry Regiment, he has showcased exemplary leadership in diverse roles, including participation in Operation Vijay (Kargil) in 1999. With notable commands at Siachen Glacier, Chushul Sector in Eastern Ladakh, and prestigious appointments such as GOC of the 15 Corps in Kashmir valley, he has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in challenging scenarios.

His illustrious career encompasses instructional roles at the National Defence Academy, service as a Military Observer in UNTAC, Cambodia, and pivotal staff appointments along the Line of Control and in Army Commands. Holding two postgraduate degrees from esteemed institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the National War College at National Defence University, Washington D.C., as well as an M.Phil from the National Defence College, New Delhi, he is renowned for his strategic acumen and expertise.