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Nehru's Pacifism and the Failed Recapture of Kashmir

Sandeep Bamzai**INTRODUCTION**

By most accounts, Jawaharlal Nehru was a pacifist, influenced to a great degree by the liberal education he obtained in the United Kingdom. Such liberal leanings — formed on the template of a deep knowledge of Indian culture, society and history — determined his outlook on not only foreign policy, but also conflict. As India searched for a post-colonial identity, Nehru's thinking

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was predicated on the nation becoming a leader of the emerging free world. Nehruvian thinker Shashi Tharoor once described India's foreign policy as “emerging out of the heart and head of one man”—Nehru, in those early years of Independence. His idealism became the basis of India's foreign policy. The BJP's foreign minister Jaswant Singh, who served as External Affairs Minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, distilled this further by describing it as 'ersatz pacifism': a conglomeration of an accommodative and forgiving Hindu milieu, with strains of Buddhist, Jain, Vaishnav, Bhakti and Gandhian views thrown in for moulding India's strategic doctrine into a docile and submissive one. All war, the master tactician Sun Tzu said, is based on deception. In his seminal book, *India at Risk: Misconceptions and Misadventures of Security Policy*, Jaswant Singh tries to pin this down on Nehru by arguing that he did not fight China properly in 1962 “and security got relegated to a much lower priority”. As a consequence, he averred, “independent India simply abandoned the centrality of strategic culture as the first ingredient of vigorous and bold national policies.”

Pakistan's *raison d'etre*, meanwhile, has revealed its singlemindedness of purpose to maim and destroy India. An ideological state imperiled by its own design and fixation, Pakistan is where it is, hamstrung by a toxic credo. Hence, as Sun Tzu says, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Pakistan's entire construct had been based on this theological modus operandi, to covet Kashmir at all cost. Nehru chose non-alignment, birthed by indigenous thinking as his own strategic imperative, and thus becoming the Light of Asia (as Winston Churchill referred to him). But the conflict with China broke him, his pacifism costing India. For India was unprepared for Chinese chicanery; the duplicitous, thinly-veiled allure of ‘friendship’ hoodwinked Nehru. Still, this did not dilute Nehru's nationalism, even as he pursued non-alignment with great vigour dictated as it was by national self-interest. He cut the umbilical cord with both the US and Soviet Union to steer clear of Cold War currents, though the fashioning of his economic model very much leaned towards socialism. Former Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao chose to call Nehru a 'universalist'. Nehru himself described India's foreign policy as “a right one, a good one and successful one”.

Remarkably, this pacifism has shaped India's own consciousness and thought process forever, standing the test of time. Hinduism and its learnings—along with filtration of other faiths and religions—became the

backbone of India's systems and processes. Nehru's own disdain for aggressive power politics calculus meant that he maintained equidistance from the superpowers to unveil a non-alignment stencil shaped by the fight for freedom. Even as successive governments practiced the same pacifism in India's foreign policy, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi broke convention by taking on a more aggressive foreign policy stance. Though the salient points were imbibed from the Nehruvian doctrine, Gandhi's strong suite was on display in the 1970s when she dismembered Pakistan, detonated a nuclear device, and swallowed Sikkim without much ado. It was an astonishing achievement for a third-world country enfeebled by years of poverty. It heralded the arrival of a bolder India, still recovering from being brutally vanquished by expansionist China in 1962.

Yet the tenets of Nehru's philosophy have endured to this day. The questions that beg answers in 2016 are these: Would Prime Minister Gandhi have acted differently from Nehru during the battle for Kashmir in 1947-48? Would the course of history have been altered had Nehru paid heed to what his generals were telling him? Would large tracts of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) have been retaken by the Indian Army to neutralise an obsessive Jinnah and his cohorts?

In time for this year's celebration of India's Independence Day, this report decodes what would possibly have been if Nehru had acquiesced with his army on the frontier. Details are culled from the author's forthcoming book, *Nehru & Kashmir*, set to be published by Harper Collins in 2018.

INDIA'S LONGEST BATTLE OF ATTRITION

On 1 November 1948 while the snow fell and bitter frost and chill enveloped the valleys across the Zoji La, the first offensive was developed by the combined efforts of the Indian Army's tanks and infantry. Among various narratives on the war, one of the standout descriptions is that of S N Dass and Dharam Pal in *Recapture of Kargil and Drass*. Examples of individual acts of heroism and reckless courage in this battle were many. In the highly tense situation before the final knockout blow while the enemy was firing from every cliff and every gorge, it was the general officer commanding (GOC) who personally took charge and led the assault. Gen. Thimmaya was at the head of the advancing columns and personally visited every section and brought the various columns—armour, infantry and gunners—into proper formation with a view to poise them against the enemy. A brilliant tactician, he realised the necessity for firepower to blast the enemy out at the Zoji La heights. Astonishingly, he

ordered the deployment of a squadron of Stuart MK-VI tanks of the 7 Light Cavalry, compelling the engineers to cut a path into the rocky terrain in less than three weeks to build an eight-kilometre-long track that could take the width and weight of the tanks. To make the precipitous climb, the tanks had to be dismantled and physically pushed up by the *jawans*—to an altitude where they had never been used before. The general himself had a narrow escape, and the death-defying tempo, enhanced all the more by his presence, compelled his men to dash forward regardless of the consequences.

The very appearance of the tanks dampened the morale of the bewildered Pakistanis who either fled or were vanquished. Once Zoji La was taken, the road to Kargil was reopened and Ladakh was safe. Ultimately, on November 24, Kargil was retaken. After the bitter fighting in which tanks played a prominent role, Indian troops entered Matayan on November 3. The next battle, and which perhaps could be regarded as equally fierce as the previous one, lasted for a full 10 days. It was the grim battle for Batkundi Hill and in this the men of the Royal Gorkha Regiment under Col. Sukhdev Pathania and the Patialas under Col. Sukhdev Singh played a notable part. The credit for capturing the most important and fiercely defended feature on this range went to the Royal Gorkhas who, in the freezing conditions of Matayan, waded through and back in the half frozen streams and finally captured the important feature on this range which subsequently was given the name of their commander: Anand Feature.

Also in this battle, tanks provided the firing cover for the assault. After its rout at Batkundi Hill, the enemy was at sixes and sevens. The Patialas, who were to march ahead after the capture of the feature and hold the line of control (LoC), had no rest. Soon they were joined by other battalions. Major Qureshi, the commanding officer on the enemy side in this sector, received a bullet in his foot near Drass. He managed to limp his way back.

Indian troops then kept up their speed till they reached Kharal Bridge, five miles from Kargil. The enemy had crossed over the Bridge and burnt it, destroying the base planks. Moving onto the higher ground, they took to sniping at the advancing Indian positions. A little distance before Kharal Bridge, one of the platoons of the Royal Gorkhas led by Major Kochar crossed the half-frozen rivers in the dead of the night and sneaked up on the enemy side while another platoon of the Gorkhas marched ahead on the main road to Kargil. Using sniper fire, the enemy killed five Gorkhas and wounded a few others. By now they were in full retreat and by November 24, Indian troops had cleared all the mountain ranges on both sides of Kargil Valley. Ladakh had been

secured again. The same gameplay was reprised in 1999 when they took high ground in the same area. Once again at great cost of men, India cleared out the enemy.

The enemy in this battle was not just outmanoeuvred and outwitted but caught unawares by the presence of tanks and armoured columns. Pakistani officers found it difficult to believe that tanks could reach the Zoji La and kept on telling their men that the tanks were jeeps camouflaged as such. Thinking that they would not be evicted, they had stockpiled on supplies, foodstuff, clothing and uniform in Pandras, Drass and Kargil. Local gossip had it that they were ultimately left with only two boxes of ammunition and therefore had to flee. But the truth was that they were shaken by Gen. Thimmaya's tactics and use of tanks at such a high altitude.



Gen. Thimmaya and PM Nehru

This was a decisive blow in the war, the longest and most attritional battle fought by the Indian Army. The defeat in the Kargil sector naturally resulted in the complete withdrawal of enemy forces from the Leh sector. The entire Zaskar and Nubra Valleys were cleared by the troops and national militia. The civilian population everywhere between Zoji La and Kargil welcomed the liberators. Harrowing tales were narrated of extortion and other misdeeds by the enemy. The conquest of Kargil synchronised with the capture of Mendhar in Jammu province. At this juncture, Pakistan thought India was going full tilt towards Gilgit in Kashmir and Kotli and Bhimber in Jammu.

To keep abreast with the developments in Kashmir, Nehru had dispatched his private secretary and 'eyes and ears' Dwarka Nath Kachru to the frontline. Remember that India was coming out of a bloody partition and was trying to find its feet as a nation state. These were cataclysmic times and required an

urgent and ceaseless feed of information. So while the Prime Minister attended to matters of state, his roving private secretary surveyed the borders to post information on the actual developments in the frontline. Previously unpublished correspondence reveal that Nehru's pacifism — guided by the principles of fair play and the fact that India had referred the Kashmir matter to the United Nations erroneously on Lord Mountbatten's insistence — meant that the Indian Army was refused permission to go all the way and reclaim what eventually became PoK and the Northern Areas. In fact, Kachru, himself a Kashmiri, chose to question the Prime Minister's decisionmaking. But Nehru, as always, chose to walk the path of straight and narrow, his idealism once again trashing pragmatism. Some of Kachru's correspondence is extremely damaging, the prism far too revealing of how the Indian Army first pushed back the raiders and then vanquished the Pakistan Army regulars, even having them on the run.

In an assessment from these areas, Kachru wrote to Nehru on 4 December 1948: "I don't know what reasons we have had for issuing instructions to halt our advance at this point and after discussions with Sheikh Abdullah, Bakshi and senior Army officers, I feel convinced that it would not be advisable to withdraw or even halt at the places which we are holding at present (don't know whether it is under UN pressure). I am personally convinced that the recapture of Kargil has committed us to the capture of Skardu because in order to hold the frontier illaqs of Ladakh and Kargil and to give the necessary security to the civil administration and the people, it would be necessary for us to liquidate the enemy pockets between Skardu and Ladakh and between Skardu and Kargil. The victory in the frontier areas has given a tremendous psychological and political advantage to us and the corresponding repercussions in the enemy set up have also been quite favourable to us. There is a state of chaos and confusion on the other side heightened by a rift in the leadership. The Raja of Khaplu in Skardu is reported to be in open revolt against Pakistan and is ready to help us. If we advance ahead on this sector, we might consolidate along lines which will ultimately prove vital to us at the time the actual ceasefire order becomes effective. This march towards Skardu would naturally ease the situation in the Guraiz sector and we might perhaps be able to advance at least as far as Burzil or even beyond. All this might naturally give us a line which may be easy to defend and maintain even in the event of a possible division. In the Jammu province holding on to Mendhar alone would not be enough unless we try to go a little ahead and secure strategic and vital points which will ultimately give us the necessary degree of security. I would have actually suggested a full blast advance towards Muzzafarabad because looking at the

whole scenario from the approaching ceasefire, which seems to be inevitable, it would be very advantageous to us if we have already reached and consolidated along the points and lines which we will ultimately demand as points and lines of demarcation between what we should have as our own and what may be left to be administered on our behalf." This advice was ignored; the result was a calamity.

As part of this continuing interface with Nehru, Kachru kept sending him confidential reports from the Valley. Earlier, on 8 July 1948, he had also sent a note. While the focus of the note was on political content and the state of the Sheikh Abdullah administration which was worse for wear, it is the military side that was equally important, in the main, regarding the morale of the troops fighting.

Kachru wrote to Nehru: "The military operations are going on successfully and according to plan and gradually large areas are being liberated and reclaimed. If, however, the request of General Thimmaya is acceded to and some more troops are loaned to him, we may in the very near future find ourselves in the occupation of Muzzafarabad and a substantial part of Poonch Jagir.

"Our troops have fortunately for us created a very good impression on the whole and are generally popular with the civilian population. But there is a peculiar feeling gradually creeping in the minds of our soldiers and the officers and whenever I had an occasion to visit them at the fronts, they have spoken to me freely and frankly hoping that their feeling would be communicated to the Government. They feel that our Government is not taking the matter of Kashmir very seriously and are not fighting the war as it should be. The Government, according to them, is anxious to avoid getting casualties and is therefore asking the Commanders to be deliberately cautious. The war therefore promises to be long drawn and that has created a sense of frustration in our troops. They are anxious to fight and are hopeful that if the Government gives them permission to go ahead and finish the job, they would be able to do so. There are bound to be casualties for which the Government should be prepared, but being superior in arms and training, they are hopeful about the outcome.

"Another important factor which they want the Government to bear in mind is that between the Indian troops and the regular Pakistan Army are interposed large numbers of tribal hordes. The Pakistan Army have orders not to come into actual combat with the Indian Army and to withdraw tactically the moment they feel that the tribal ranks between them and the Indian Army is

cracking up. The anxiety of the Pakistan Government obviously seems to be to avoid coming out into open conflict with the Indian Army and thereby also avoid detection. This weakness of the Pakistan Government's position should be taken advantage of and our troops should be ordered to go ahead. Still another worry is the UN Commission. Our officers and soldiers have in one voice expressed strong disapproval of the Government's policy offering plebiscite as the final solution of the Kashmir problem. The offer of a plebiscite, according to them, should be withdrawn now that the regular Pakistan troops are fighting in Kashmir. And then, the outcome of a plebiscite seems to them to be very doubtful and so they ask, perhaps rightly too, if it is worth fighting for a territory like Poonch where the outcome of a plebiscite could even be predicted.

“Our troops have advanced into positions near Chakoti, wherefore they must either go ahead or retreat back to Uri. They are at present on the hills on both sides of the river and so are the raiders. Once they chase the enemy from these hills and come down to Chenari, they have a clear road open to them. It is therefore necessary for the Army Command to go ahead with forward planning, but they would feel greatly relieved and doubly hopeful if they were assured that the UN Commission's intervention would not bring about a ceasefire order, in the midst of offensive operations,” Kachru said in the letter.

It would be safe to assume that Nehru was fully apprised of the military situation on the ground in Kashmir. It is also clear that things were going well and Indian troops were poised to strike deeper and further in reclaiming parts lost in the immediate aftermath of the tribal incursion as they evicted the squatters successfully. But with Nehru listening to Mountbatten and agreeing to internationalise the issue by taking it to the UN, the Prime Minister appeared hesitant to move forward more aggressively militarily despite repeated reminders and exhortations from Kachru.

The dispatches from the war zone were frequent. In yet another note dated 17 June 1948, Kachru visited Tragbal along with Gen. Thimmaya and deputy CM Bakshi. “The general, in his short exposition recorded in Tragbal, informed those gathered that he had swept the whole of Handwara area including the whole of Karna Tehsil which included the recently liberated areas of Titwal and Karen. He hoped to liberate the entire area of every raider by the end of this month and then launch his offensive towards Gurez. At the foot of Tragbal rested the Wular Lake and it was one of the most beautiful spots in Kashmir. From Targbal, it is 16 miles to Gurez, the immediate objective of our Army. We have actually gone to a point over 7 miles from Tragbal and the remaining 15 or 16 miles to Gurez may, we hope, be conquered in a couple of weeks.

“Gurez is an important town of very great importance both from the strategic and political viewpoint. Gurez is 155 miles from Gilgit and its recapture will open the road to Gilgit to our troops. Gurez at present is also the main supply base for the raiders operating in the frontier illaqa of Kargil, Ladakh and Skardu and is connected by a direct diagonal route to Drass, another important stop on the Srinagar-Ladakh road. Gurez in the hands of the raiders is therefore a great menace to us and its recapture will deal a death blow to the designs of Pakistan in the Sind Valley. The capture of Gurez should synchronise with the capture of Drass for then alone the Pakistani hordes will be trapped between these two points,” he wrote.

On 13 April 1948, this missive was sent to the Prime Minister. Again it showed how the battle was raging:

“With the onset of summer, military operations on both sides are assuming importance. In the Jammu province, the fall of Jhangar a few weeks ago, followed by a vigorous drive towards the adjoining area and particularly towards the town of Rajouri captured by the raiders in November last. Our troops entered Rajouri yesterday afternoon and the raiders ran away leaving the town looted, burnt and pillaged. The rejoicing of the people of Rajouri at the sight of Indian Army was reminiscent of the celebrations which took place in Baramulla when it was captured by us.

“The recapture of Rajouri has a great significance as it relieves the pressure on Shopian, a town 35 miles south of Srinagar and on Ramban, a small station on the Jammu-Srinagar road. It also cuts off one of the supply lines of the raiders operating in the areas of Mirpur and Poonch. In Kashmir Valley, the battle on the Uri front has again flared up into a large scale engagement and for the last one week fighting is going on in various pockets in Mahura and Uri.

“The situation on the Skardu front is, however, somewhat confusing and has to be tackled immediately. The Skardu garrison is holding on to the Fort in the town but it is practically cut off from the areas surrounding it. The pickets which were sent out are mostly missing and one or two of them have with great difficulty been able to make occasional contact with the Fort. The relieving columns sent from Srinagar have not reached yet and are still five stations from Skardu town. In the meantime the garrison is running short of supplies. Brigadier Fakir Singh, a senior officer of the Kashmir State Forces which was sent to Skardu sometime back, ran away from there leaving behind 65,000 rounds of ammo and large quantities of mortars, hand grenades and rifles. All this has fallen into the hands of the enemy.

“I discussed the Skardu situation with Gen Cariappa and Gen Kalwant Singh. They were of the opinion that air operations must be carried out in Skardu when and if necessary. This to me is a serious handicap for an Army Commander charged with the responsibility of fighting a war. The operation in Skardu particularly must to a great extent be carried on from the air. The road to the area is long and hazardous and even civil supplies may have to be carried by air. Under the existing arrangement there is great deal of coordination between the Army and the Air Force and generally air action is carried out at the request of the Army Commander. But in a war the Commander who has overall charge of the entire operation can function much more effectively and quickly if he could exercise some control over the air arm and have assistance of the Air Force at his disposal whenever he wanted it...”

There were other ticklish issues concerning the Army that were flagged by 'eyes and ears' Kachru for the PM, that a mini mutiny was brewing right at the top: “I had also occasion to spend some time with our Army Commanders, particularly Generals Kalwant Singh and Lakhindra Singh. Gen Kalwant Singh seems to have taken his transfer from the Kashmir operations very seriously. He had a long talk with me and he said that in case he was transferred, many other senior officers would also not like to serve in Kashmir. He named Gen Lakhindra Singh and Brig Usman who, he said, would never like to work under Gen Thimmaya. He suspected an Army clique against him at the HQ in Delhi and was visibly moved when he told me that the post of the chief of general staff which was his permanent job, would also not be given to him immediately. He was, he said, going to be sent overseas on a purchasing mission and pending the receipt of orders in this behalf, he was asked to go on leave.

“It is difficult for me to judge the decisions taken at the Army HQ but one thing is clear that the sudden and complete exit of Kalwant Singh from the picture of Kashmir operations would perhaps not be very desirable. To start with, the Pakistan and Azad Kashmir governments would try and make capital out of this change. Secondly, it would lower the prestige of the Army Commanders in the eyes of the public and thirdly, it would accentuate the differences and widen the rift among the Army generals at a time when they should all be united in a common endeavour. Gen Thimmaya who is succeeding Gen Kalwant Singh would no doubt be a very successful Army Commander in the Kashmir theatre.”

Probably the most significant dispatch from Kachru came on 3 April 1948, marked secret and personal to Prime Minister Nehru. This was a gist of his conversations in Delhi with the army chiefs involved in Kashmir operations:

“Gen Cariappa with whom I spent a couple of hours on the night of March 29 talked at length about Kashmir operations and the consequences arising out of our actions. He was quite hopeful that ultimately we would succeed in driving out the raiders from the State, but he was rather worried about the long border line between Kashmir and Pakistan and about the situation in Gilgit and Skardu. He was of the opinion and—and in this he was supported by the C-in-C also—that we should withdraw on the Gilgit and Skardu fronts and take up our positions at Kargil. In other words, he thinks we should give up Gilgit and Skardu and hold onto Ladakh which is easy to keep and defend. He had during his recent visit to Kashmir gone to Handwara and Uri and also spoken to the peasants and locals there. He was moved by the effect of the salt scarcity on the civilian population and he himself distributed small packets of salt. He discovered that the masses on the whole were fond of Sheikh Saheb and referred to him with great respect. He was impressed with the morale of the people in Srinagar and other towns. Gen Bucher, C-in-C, elaborated on the inadvisability of resorting to excessive air bombing. This he felt would needlessly destroy property, stiffen the resistance against us and at places increase the volume of opposition.”

This eye-opening content reveals for the first time how Nehru's idealism and stodgy belief in rule of law stood in the way of the Indian Army reclaiming PoK and perhaps right there and then, cauterising the putrefied sore of Kashmir. The map of Jammu & Kashmir may well have looked different had Kachru's advice to Nehru been heeded. [ORF](#)

(This is a preview to the author's book, Nehru & Kashmir, his fifth. He is a Visiting Fellow at Observer Research Foundation and a renowned editor and columnist. Nehru & Kashmir will be published by Harper Collins in 2018. This is the last part in a trilogy: the first is Bonfire of Kashmiriyat - Deconstructing the Accession (Rupa & Co., 2006); the second is Princetstan: How Nehru, Mountbatten & Patel Foiled It (Harper Collins, forthcoming, 2017).



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