

Assessing Pakistan's Transgression on the Line of Control

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Summary

The next two years are likely to witness a shift in the strategic landscape of the region. The US and Western military withdrawal from Afghanistan could progressively release pressure on the Taliban-led forces, which until then would remain engaged militarily. With a favourable alignment of forces in Afghanistan and reduction of pressure from the United States, the Pakistan Army will be able to disengage some of its forces deployed on its western front and reinforce areas bordering India. Having designated domestic terrorists as the principle threat, it would be in Pakistan's interest to either engage them head on or redirect them with state support externally. It is likely that Pakistan would choose the latter course of action. In order to create circumstances for such redirection of both military forces and terrorists, the Pakistan Army will create military tension on the LoC, social upheaval in Jammu & Kashmir and religious hysteria within Pakistan as a prelude to adopting a more proactive role in Kashmir. Since these conditions are likely to be created over a period of time, the possibility of preliminary action became evident in 2012 itself when there was an overall increase in the level of infiltrations and ceasefire violations across the LoC. This increase in infiltration and ceasefire violations can only be the result of a shift in Pakistan's strategy.

On 8 January 2013, Pakistani soldiers came across the Line of Control (LoC) into Indian territory and ambushed a patrol, killing two soldiers. Unlike past instances of violations of the 2003 ceasefire agreement, which involved firing from across the LoC by Pakistan, this incident was more on the lines of a well planned operation by a Border Action Team (BAT). BATs are small groups of specialised troops, supported at times by terrorists, which target bodies of troops and isolated posts across the LoC. The aim of such actions is to create the fear of unknown, uncertainty and a defensive mindset, thereby gaining moral ascendancy. BAT operations are specialised in nature and need detailed planning, preparation and support since these are conducted in the close vicinity of enemy posts across the LoC. Pakistan's 8 January action, besides being a ceasefire violation, also involved physical transgression of the LoC and the gruesome killing of two Indian Army soldiers, including the mutilation of bodies and carrying away of the head of one as a trophy. The incident came two days after an exchange of fire between India and Pakistan in Uri sector. That was described as "Indian forces raided Pakistan's 'Sawan Patra' security check-post", resulting in the death of one soldier.¹ However, given that planning and preparation are required for any BAT action, even as the Pakistani operation inside Indian territory was aimed at regaining moral ascendancy in the sector, a number of other factors indicate the linkage of the incident with the larger aim of using Kashmir as a domestic and diplomatic tool.

Expectedly, the Pakistani establishment termed the accusation of killing Indian soldiers across the LoC as "baseless and unfounded".² This follows past Pakistani attempts of describing regular army intrusions and operations on Indian soil either as the handiwork of "irregulars", "Kashmiri freedom fighters" or "mujahideen".³ The series of lies perpetuated after the Kargil conflict, including disowning soldiers belonging to the Northern Light Infantry (NLI) battalions and mutilation of the body of Captain Saurabh Kalia, exposes the credibility of Pakistani statements.⁴

In order to understand the series of incidents on the LoC in the last few weeks, it is important to assess the circumstances in which the incident occurred.

¹ "Let the World See What LoC", *The Economist*, 10 January 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/01/india-and-pakistan>, accessed on 14 January 2013.

² "Pakistan denies attack", *Greater Kashmir*, 10 January 2013, <http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2013/Jan/10/pakistan-denies-attack-87.asp>, accessed on 11 January 2013.

³ Nadir Mir, "Kashmir is Pakistan!", *The Nation*, 4 November 2012, <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/columns/04-Nov-2012/kashmir-is-pakistan>, accessed on 11 January 2013.

⁴ Rahul Bedi, "An enclave on the boil", *Frontline*, Volume 21, Issue 11, May 22-June 4 2004, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2111/stories/20040604000406400.htm>, accessed on 11 January 2013.

Assessment of Incident

First, the description of the incident as a terrorist-led or- planned operation can only appeal to those who are unfamiliar with both the capabilities and modus operandi of the so called “mujahideen”. The information available through the media indicates that this was not a chance encounter. It was a planned operation, clearly with the aim of disturbing the status quo and raising temperatures on the LoC.

Second, there is a substantial difference in the nature of deployment on the LoC on the two respective sides. Pakistan’s threat perception is not based on an offensive Indian intent to grab territory. Nor is it influenced by a sub-conventional terrorist threat from India. Conversely, history dictates that India is vulnerable to both these threats. The Pakistan Army has in the past undertaken sneak attacks into Indian territory, with the most blatant being Kargil.⁵ Pakistan’s proxy terrorist warriors are not only trained in camps across the LoC but their stay at launch pads in the vicinity of the LoC is also facilitated.⁶ It is during their stay at these launch pads that terrorists undertake detailed reconnaissance of routes, vulnerable areas across the LoC and routine movement of Indian soldiers to plan ambushes. Pakistan does not face the threat of infiltration from India. This allows it to man posts with greater strength, even at the cost of allowing larger gaps between posts. However, India faces constant ceasefire violations as a result of cross LoC firing, BAT actions and infiltration by terrorists. This leads to manning of the LoC with minimal gaps, resulting in smaller troop deployments, which in turn makes them easier targets for BAT action.

Third, some news reports have indicated 29 Baluch⁷, the Pakistani battalion stationed opposite 13 Rajputana Rifles, as the probable perpetrator of the gruesome attack across the LoC.⁸ However, the manner of conduct of the operation provides indicators to the involvement of Pakistan’s Special Services Group (SSG). For one, the 8 January Pakistani action across the LoC did not take place in the same divisional sector as that of the 6 January exchange of fire between the two sides, which latter occurred in the Uri sector. This implies that the Pakistani decision to launch the cross-LoC attack in the Poonch sector

⁵ For an objective assessment of the Kargil Conflict see, *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2000.

⁶ Ishfaq-ul-Hasan, “Pakistan gathering militants near LoC: Intelligence reports”, *DNA*, 10 July 2012, http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_pakistan-gathering-militants-near-loc-intelligence-reports_1712882, accessed on 11 January 2013.

⁷ The Baluch regiment was formed after the amalgamation of the 8 Punjab, 10 Baloch and Bahawalpur regiments. This took place in 1956. However, the history of the regiment can be traced to 1798. For a detailed background, see *Baluch Regiment*, <http://www.pakistanarmy.gov.pk/AWPReview/TextContent.aspx?pId=157&rnd=457>, accessed on 14 January 2013.

⁸ “Pak crosses LoC, beheads one jawan, slits another’s throat”, *Hindustan Times*, 8 January 2013, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/Jammu%20Sec/2-army-jawans-killed-by-Pak-troops-along-LoC-in-Poonch/Article1-986762.aspx>, accessed on 11 January 2013.

was taken at a level beyond the two Pakistani divisions involved. A Corps, which is the next higher level, has on its orbat a SSB battalion that is trained and equipped to carry out such a task. The second indicator of SSG involvement lies in the fact that regular battalions on the LoC are heavily committed to their defensive role of holding posts. In contrast, the nature of the Pakistani cross-LoC attack needs joint planning, rehearsals and a regular working relationship with irregulars, which develops over a period of time. Given the mandate of the SSG, the operation best fits in its area of expertise. This also reinforces the argument that the operation was not a localised tit-for-tat action and was carried out after deliberate planning. The final indicator of SSG involvement comes from local reports that troops of the Baluch battalion loudly announced their non-involvement in the incident to the Indian battalion stationed opposite them with the intent of avoiding being targeted as the aggressor.

Fourth, the geography and conditions of the region facilitate laying an ambush or launching a raid. The area is characterised by thick forests and undergrowth in pockets, limiting visibility to the bare minimum. The mountainous terrain creates a number of recesses between the ridges and cliffs, which can easily allow a small body of men to move undetected. The LoC does not run in a straight line and creates geographical avenues jutting into opposing territory. Crossing undetected is easier in areas where the posts are located at a distance from the LoC and shielded by vegetation and broken terrain. While the fence along the LoC was meant to neutralise this constraint, however because of Pakistan's resistance to erection of the fence along the principal ridge line, the fence was constructed in a number of areas in its shadow, thus precluding surveillance of the LoC. This has placed the fence behind the LoC posts in most cases, making detection of infiltrators that much more difficult. These constraints are made worse during the winter, when fog reduces visibility. These circumstances can lead to established patterns of movement and vulnerable periods during hours of duty. In this case, these patterns were studied by Pakistani Special Forces and exploited by laying an ambush. Therefore, the fence is a limited obstacle and should be seen as such and laying an ambush or raiding a small body of troops by an adversary is possible under favourable conditions.

Fifth, Pakistan undoubtedly realised the repercussions of the incident. If the expected reaction was factored into the strategic calculus of military planners and they were still willing to go ahead with the operation indicates a desire to raise tensions with India.

Sixth, this is not the first incident of this type in the specific area. The very same area witnessed a similar incident in 1999. This reinforces the tactical advantages that a special operations team draws, given the geographical peculiarities and element of surprise. These conditions can be exploited by Special Forces of both countries. On the LoC, where troops are deployed in eye ball to eye ball contact, gaining and retaining moral ascendancy is of critical importance. Aggressiveness of intent and action therefore gets established within a short period of stay of a battalion. Commanders resort to military action to retain this

psychological edge. It is also for this reason that retaliatory actions are undertaken. However, the unusually limited time taken to decide on retaliation and undertake a response in the form of an ambush, which needs time to plan and lay, indicates a pre-planned and pre-meditated decision, rather than a local knee jerk reaction.

All this leads to the conclusion that the barbaric incident was a planned operation carried out by Pakistani Special Forces at a place of tactical advantage as part of a well thought out strategy. While this may have been done to achieve moral and psychological advantage militarily, however, it would be useful to understand regional events that could be a pointer towards a larger design.

Evolving Regional Dynamics and its Impact on LoC

The next two years are likely to witness a shift in the strategic landscape of the region. The US and Western military withdrawal from Afghanistan could progressively release pressure on the Taliban-led forces, which until then would remain engaged militarily. With a favourable alignment of forces in Afghanistan and reduction of pressure from the United States, the Pakistan Army will be able to disengage some of its forces deployed in the region and reinforce areas bordering India. Having designated domestic terrorists as the principle threat, it would be in Pakistan's interest to either engage them head on or redirect them with state support externally. It is likely that Pakistan would choose the latter course of action. In order to create circumstances for such redirection of both military forces and terrorists, the Pakistan Army will create military tension on the LoC, social upheaval in Jammu & Kashmir and religious hysteria within Pakistan as a prelude to adopting a more proactive role in Kashmir. Since these conditions are likely to be created over a period of time, the possibility of preliminary action became evident in 2012 itself. National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon, while referring to the level of infiltrations and ceasefire violations across the LoC, said that in the year 2012 there has been "an overall increase over 2011 and that is a fact."⁹ The progressive increase in infiltration seems difficult to explain otherwise especially given the fact that there have been successive improvements in troop deployment models, equipment held by the army on the LoC and the quality of fencing. An increase in infiltration and ceasefire violations can only be the result of a shift in Pakistan's strategy. The appearance of Hafiz Saeed on the LoC on 8 January 2013 and a statement by a top Tehrik-e-Taliban leader, Wali ur Rehman, in a rare video appearance, indicates exploitation of religious fundamentalism. Rehman said: "The practical struggle for a Sharia system that we are carrying out in Pakistan, the same way we will continue it in Kashmir, and the same way we will implement the Sharia system in

⁹ Yoshita Singh, "LoC clash: UN steps in", *Greater Kashmir*, 11 January 2013, <http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2013/Jan/11/loc-clash-un-steps-in-73.asp>, accessed on 11 January 2013.

India too. And this is the only solution for people's problems."¹⁰ The impact of fundamentalist propaganda and an increasingly belligerent stand by Pakistan is likely to witness its fallout on the LoC.

The recent bilateral dynamics between India and Pakistan have achieved little on the diplomatic front. Pakistan has shied away from granting Most Favoured Nation status to India, and there has been little progress on the Sir Creek and Siachen issues.¹¹

Pakistan is in the midst of a flux. General elections are scheduled for mid-2013. There are indications that Army Chief General Kiyani is unlikely to get an extension when his tenure ends in 2013. While this could lead political parties to raise the issue of Kashmir for political advantage, Kiyani could create conditions of uncertainty to highlight his indispensability, as was done in 2010.¹²

The US presence in Afghanistan had placed it directly in charge of events in the region. However, post 2014, it will either have to create a security architecture that continues to provide it the same influence or rely on partners to carry it forward. Historical evidence and the emerging scenario point towards Pakistan as the country that is likely to carry forward this mandate. Pakistan is likely to raise the cost of helping the United States to a level that the ensuing quid pro quo will cater for increased financial and military aid as well as a more flexible US position on Kashmir. This will not only give Pakistan an opportunity to placate the hard-line domestic audience, but also further its agenda of seizing the initiative in Kashmir.

Measures to Enhance Indian Preparedness

The LoC is likely to become the focus of Pakistani military misadventures involving heightened terrorist activity and bids to infiltrate into Jammu & Kashmir to bolster the reducing numbers of terrorists there. It will also include an increase in ceasefire violations in the form of sniping firing incidents to enhance first round effectiveness, unprovoked firing and limited BAT actions, with the blame being shifted to "Kashmiri freedom

¹⁰ See "Jihad in Kashmir and Sharia rule in India: Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan", *India Today*, 9 January 2012, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/jihad-in-kashmir-and-sharia-rule-in-india-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan/1/241389.html>, accessed on 10 January 2013.

¹¹ "Pakistan grants India most favoured nation status", *The Guardian*, 2 November 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/02/pakistan-india-most-favoured-nation-status>, accessed on 11 January 2013. The finalisation of the decision is pending and was expected during the month of January 2013.

¹² See "Kiyani gets 3-year extension as Pak Army Chief", *The Indian Express*, 23 July 2010, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/kayani-gets-3year-extension-as-pak-army-chief/650690>, accessed on 14 January 2013.

fighters". This reality necessitates the adoption of the following measures to ensure that Indian security interests are guarded in the evolving circumstances:

- The Indian troop deployment is disadvantaged on the LoC, since it needs to hold its tactical positions in strength and simultaneously guard against infiltration. This is a contradictory requirement, as the first task demands strong deployment at important ground features while the latter leads to deployment of forces in penny packets. It is the latter requirement that makes small groups of men vulnerable to ambushes and BAT actions. Under existing circumstances, the possibility of holding posts on the LoC in strength and the second tier on the LoC fence as a counter infiltration deployment could be considered.¹³ A similar condition of uncertainty can also be created for Pakistan by infiltration and clinical actions across the LoC.
- The Kargil conflict is a grim reminder of the disconnect between peace parlays and military preparedness. Irrespective of reduced violence levels within Jammu & Kashmir and peace talks between leaders of the two countries, India must not lower its guard on the LoC. The only focus of a battalion deployed in such an area is the operational challenge it faces and nothing must detract it from this critical task.
- Some of the most vulnerable phases of daily routine are administrative movements on the LoC and LoC fence: for rations, operational logistics requirements, ferrying of water and route activities. While operational measures necessitate movement and are usually accompanied by necessary security measures, administrative movements can be minimised by making posts self-contained through the provision of modern state-of-the-art amenities.
- Pakistan has for long resorted to a sub-conventional approach involving the employment of terrorists as proxy elements, which has enabled it to retain the operational initiative. This can be neutralised through a calibrated response mechanism designed to raise the cost of military misadventures. This could involve a declaratory policy of punitive strikes in response to unprovoked incidents from Pakistan. The desire for peace should not be seen as the absence of resolve.
- The introduction of modern military hardware has improved the capability of the forces deployed manifold. This initiative must be carried further to ensure a substantial technological edge for the Indian army, thereby improving the detection, tracking and neutralisation capabilities of forces deployed on the LoC.

¹³ There are places where the LoC fence is ahead of the troops guarding the LoC. This is guided by the terrain and tactical conditions of deployment.

Conclusion

The LoC, despite the ceasefire of 2003, has witnessed intermittent violations and infiltration from Pakistan into India. However, the increase in the number of both ceasefire violations and infiltration in 2012 clearly indicates a shift in Pakistan's approach towards India in general and Kashmir in particular. This shift is likely to manifest itself on the LoC, which could become the test bed for further attempts at destabilising India and testing the country's resolve. It is therefore important to understand the realities of the area and undertake suitable measures to ensure that a high state of preparedness is retained on the LoC.