



Between Precision and Legitimacy: How the Kargil War Shaped India's Strategic Partnerships

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,401, August 6, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Kargil War is remembered in India as a military victory, but its legacy extends far beyond the recapture of positions seized by Pakistani forces in 1999. It was an early test of India's ability to employ conventional military force under the shadow of nuclear deterrence and a turning point in its relations with both Israel and the United States. Israel continued an established pattern of assisting India during times of crisis, but in this instance, it evolved from a discreet supplier into a reliable operational partner, helping adapt precision-strike capabilities in real time according to the campaign's requirements. The United States, for its part, provided diplomatic significance to India's restraint and pressed Pakistan to withdraw. The Kargil War demonstrated that strategic autonomy does not require isolation: India can rely on external partners, integrate technologies from multiple sources, and still retain full authority over how and when to employ military force.

Every year, on 26 July, India commemorates Kargil Vijay Diwas (Kargil Victory Day). In India's national memory, the war is remembered primarily as a story of military sacrifice, national determination, and the recapture of positions occupied by Pakistani forces on the Indian side of the Line of Control. Yet the significance of the Kargil War extended well beyond the battlefield. It was the first test of India's ability to employ substantial military force against Pakistan

after both countries had publicly demonstrated their nuclear capabilities in 1998. At the same time, it accelerated New Delhi's rapprochement with two very different partners: Israel, which proved its value as a dependable operational partner in a time of crisis; and the United States, which reinforced India's position on the diplomatic stage.

The Kargil War broke out only a few months after the February 1999 signing of the Lahore Declaration, which had the aim of reducing tensions and establishing mechanisms for managing relations between the two nuclear rivals. While the political leadership spoke of reconciliation, Pakistani forces, primarily from the Northern Light Infantry, had already established fortified positions on the Indian side of the Line of Control. Pakistan initially sought to portray them as independent Kashmiri militants, but the identity of the forces and the scale of the incursion became evident during the fighting.

Pakistan's strategy rested in part on the assumption that nuclear weapons would constrain India's response. According to this logic, the fear of escalation would prevent India from employing the full extent of its military capabilities while increasing international pressure to halt the fighting before the status quo could be restored. The Kargil War thus illustrated the stability-instability paradox: nuclear deterrence at the strategic level does not necessarily prevent conflict and may, in fact, create opportunities for risk-taking and limited military action below the threshold of full-scale war.

India responded through a combination of determination and restraint. It deployed ground and air forces to recapture the occupied territory but refrained from crossing the Line of Control. This self-imposed limitation complicated military operations and imposed significant costs on forces required to assault heavily defended positions at high altitude. At the same time, however, it strengthened India's claim that its objective was the restoration of the status quo rather than the forcible alteration of the international boundary. This decision would ultimately prove to be no less significant than the achievements on the battlefield.

Israeli support before the establishment of diplomatic relations

The Kargil War was not the first occasion on which Israel assisted India during wartime. India recognized Israel as early as 1950 but refrained from

establishing full diplomatic relations until 1992. Concerns over its relations with Arab states, dependence on imported oil, its position within the Non-Aligned Movement, and its public commitment to the Palestinian cause constrained overt engagement with Israel. Behind the scenes, however, a limited but continuous security channel remained in place.

During the 1962 war with China, Israel supplied India with weapons and ammunition. Additional assistance was provided during the wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, including the transfer of mortars and ammunition. Although this cooperation remained covert and did not develop into an institutionalized partnership, it established an important precedent: whenever India faced an urgent security requirement, Israel was willing to provide assistance even in the absence of full diplomatic relations. Research on the evolution of bilateral security cooperation identifies the wars of 1962, 1965, and 1971 as early milestones in this pattern.

The establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992 made it possible to transform these covert contacts into a more structured partnership, although a high degree of discretion continued to characterize the relationship during its early years. The Kargil War therefore did not create Indo-Israeli security cooperation. Rather, its significance lay in its transformation of a pattern of ad hoc assistance into operational trust and its provision to India's security establishment of tangible proof that Israel was a partner upon which it could rely in times of crisis.

From Pokhran to Kargil

The political foundations for this development had been laid a year earlier. India's Pokhran-II nuclear tests in May 1998 prompted widespread international condemnation, sanctions, and the cancellation of official visits by numerous countries. Israel was among the few states that refrained from publicly condemning India. Although a planned visit by Israeli Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak was postponed due to the circumstances, Israel was careful not to contribute to New Delhi's diplomatic isolation.

Former Chief of the Indian Air Force N. A. K. Browne recounts that during this period, Israel agreed to host an expanded delegation from India's National Defence College after other countries had cancelled their visits. A senior Israeli

Ministry of Defense official reportedly explained to one member of the delegation that when "two elephants fight, it is the smaller animals that get hurt." Israel assessed that India and the Western powers would eventually restore their relations and concluded that if it, too, turned its back on India, the trust painstakingly built over many years could be undermined. The anecdote reflects less an expression of emotional solidarity than a clear-eyed understanding of strategic interests. Israel regarded its relationship with India as a long-term strategic asset and was unwilling to sacrifice it because of what it believed would be only a temporary period of diplomatic isolation.

Operational precision in real time

Israel's most significant contribution during the Kargil War was in the field of precision strike capabilities. In 1997, the Indian Air Force selected the Israeli-developed Litening targeting pod for its Mirage 2000 and Jaguar aircraft. On the eve of the war, however, integration of the pod with the aircraft's systems and munitions had not yet been completed. The outbreak of hostilities transformed what had been a gradual development process into an urgent operational requirement.

Pakistani forces occupied fortified positions at altitudes of approximately 15,000–17,000 feet, some of them protected by man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS). The directive prohibiting Indian forces from crossing the Line of Control further constrained flight paths and strike options. Indian Air Force aircraft were therefore required to identify and engage small, well-concealed targets at high altitude without exposing themselves unnecessarily or exceeding the political limits imposed on the campaign.

Israeli and Indian teams worked together to adapt the necessary hardware and software, with responsibilities divided among Rafael facilities in Israel, testing centers in Bengaluru and Gwalior, and units already deployed at forward operating bases. According to Air Marshal Raghunath Nambiar, integration of the Litening targeting pod with laser-guided bombs was completed within just 12 days. The pod initially enhanced target acquisition and subsequently enabled precision strikes against targets at Muntho Dalo and in the Tiger Hill area.

These airstrikes did not replace the ground campaign, which remained the decisive factor in recapturing the occupied positions. They did, however,

damage infrastructure, logistics hubs, and command positions, thereby supporting advancing ground forces. Nambiar's account also underscores the technical assistance provided by Israeli personnel throughout the integration process.

The architecture of the weapon system itself provides an illuminating example of India's approach to strategic autonomy. A French aircraft carried an Israeli targeting pod and delivered munitions based on an American guidance kit, with the various components integrated by Indian teams supported by Israeli expertise. India neither relied exclusively on a single supplier nor relinquished operational control. Instead, it combined technologies from multiple sources and employed them in accordance with the political constraints and operational objectives established by its own leadership.

In addition to its contribution in the field of precision strike capabilities, reports cited in Browne's research attribute to Israel the expedited supply of artillery ammunition, mortars, precision-guided munitions, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The precise quantities are not fully documented in official sources and should therefore be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the overall picture is clear: Israel responded rapidly to operational requirements that emerged during the fighting and helped India bridge critical capability gaps. This responsiveness strengthened Israel's standing as a reliable partner—not merely a supplier of advanced systems, but a partner capable of adapting those systems to evolving operational needs under severe time constraints.

This also explains the Kargil War's importance for the subsequent evolution of bilateral relations. In the years that followed, cooperation expanded to include surveillance systems and UAVs, radar, early-warning systems, air defense, and missile technologies. Gradually, the relationship evolved beyond the acquisition of finished products to encompass joint development, customization, and production in India. The Kargil War provided one of the most important foundations for this transformation: trust built not through declarations, but through performance during a crisis. A study published by the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) describes the war as a catalyst for deepening Indo-Israeli defense cooperation and accelerating India's efforts to close critical surveillance and intelligence gaps.

The United States: From restraint to legitimacy

If Israel strengthened India's operational capabilities, the United States helped shape the diplomatic environment in which those capabilities were employed. This contrast is particularly striking given the sanctions Washington had imposed following India's nuclear tests. Only one year later, however, the Clinton administration rejected Pakistan's attempt to portray the incursion as the work of local Kashmiri militants and instead supported the restoration of the Line of Control.

On 4 July 1999, President Bill Clinton met Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Washington. Sharif sought American intervention that would help bring the crisis to an end, but Clinton insisted on Pakistan's withdrawal to its side of the Line of Control. This marked an important turning point. Rather than treating both sides symmetrically or pressuring India to accept mediation over Kashmir, the United States distinguished between the party that had violated the Line of Control and the state acting to restore it. India's restraint – particularly its decision not to expand the war onto Pakistani territory – made it considerably easier for Washington to support this position. Scholars have described the Kargil War as the first occasion on which the United States unequivocally sided with India during a crisis with Pakistan.

The Kargil War alone, however, should not be credited with transforming Indo-American relations. That shift had begun after the end of the Cold War and deepened through the dialogue between Jaswant Singh and Strobe Talbott following India's nuclear tests. The Kargil War nevertheless served as a practical test of this emerging relationship. It enabled Washington to view India not merely as a state challenging the global non-proliferation regime, but as a responsible actor capable of employing military force while simultaneously exercising restraint. President Clinton's visit to India in 2000 marked the transition to a new phase in bilateral relations.

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***BESA Center publications and research are made possible
thanks to the generosity of Saul Koschitzky and family***