

Militarily Won; Diplomatically Lost – The Haji Pir Saga

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Captured by a bold and unorthodox operation against all odds and in inclement weather, Haji Pir was the only 1965 Indo-Pak War operation which India had successfully concluded from start to end, all others being left undecided. The narration describe how the pass was captured militarily but lost diplomatically.

The Genesis of the 1965 Indo-Pak War

Readers need to go backwards in time to January 1949 extending to 1964, and revisit the prevailing Pakistani psyche that led to the 1965 Indo-Pak War. India accepted a ceasefire when Pakistan was down and out, bereft of both ammunition and ideas, with Kashmir remaining as elusive as it was when Maharaja Hari Singh opted for accession to India. Lal Bahadur Shastri took over as Prime Minister after Jawaharlal Nehru died, at a time when India was in desperate straits for food, solidarity – the anti-Hindi agitation was on – and morale, having lost disastrously to China in 1962. India had started rebooting and rearming but progress wasn't spectacular.

Pakistan was then economically better off; dined and feted at the world's high table as a bulwark against Communism by the West led by the USA. Russia and China were courting it too. Pakistan had willingly become a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organisation

(CENTO) and had been provided a treasure house of US military aid under the 5 and a ½ Division Plan in the 1954-64 decade. Impressive and bluff Pakistani President Field Marshal Ayub Khan, rated by the *New York Times* as “*a man with iron in his spine and quality brains*”, after his address at the US Senate, mattered, Shastri of humble mein, small stature and unprepossessing persona, did not. Journalist Inder Malhotra in a 2012 four-article-recall of the 1965 War writes that Ayub interacted with Shastri in a one-on-one meeting at Karachi airport in October 1964. He was overheard remarking to his Foreign Minister ZA Bhutto by the then Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan: “*What can I talk to him about? He seems to have no authority at all.*” Malhotra adds that Ayub agreed to the Kutch foray of April-June 1965 to “lean on India and test Shastri’s mettle”, as recounted by then Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Deputy Station Chief in Delhi William Barnds.

Events as they unfolded at Kutch in April 1965, ended with Pakistan the clear winner, thus, reinforcing Ayub’s impression that the right time to strike and take Kashmir was in 1965. It was, thus, a well planned triad that was unleashed: *Kutch-Operation Gibraltar-Operation Grand Slam*, with China as an effective counter; a rain cheque for Pakistan in the remote event that India did not capitulate and, instead, took the impending war to Pakistan. The Operation Gibraltar hype created by Foreign Minister Bhutto and his clique wasn’t seen through by Ayub who approved the triad of operations without due thought and application. Pakistan was, of course, shocked by the turn of events; the rejection by the Kashmiris and loss of Haji Pir being paramount.

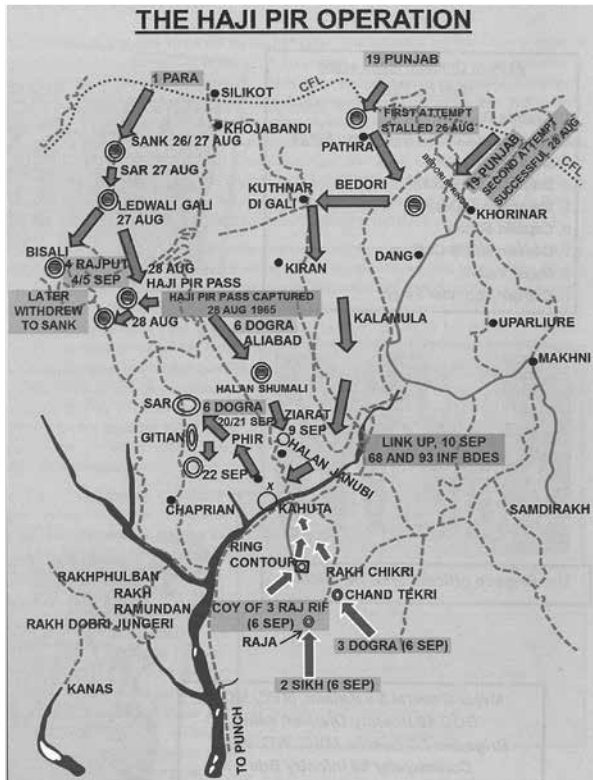
Pakistan Confronts Reality: in Kashmir; Kargil; Haji Pir...

Harsh reality first dawned on Pakistan when Operation Gibraltar was compromised at its starting blocks. This was followed by India proactively capturing three mountain peaks in Kargil, overlooking the Leh highway. The worst shock was the totally unexpected capture of Haji Pir Pass. This was strategically India’s most significant gain of the war besides being its only “complete” success in that, besides the pass, the entire Haji Pir Bulge was also taken.

The Haji Pir Saga

Well tucked in and snug, picturesque Uri, at 5,000 ft Above Sea Level (ASL) is an unexpected bit of level green hemmed in by formidable mountains. Uri is circumscribed by the deep Hyderabad Nala that commences near Haji Pir Pass and debouches into the swift flowing Jhelum river below the Uri plateau. The military garrison and fledgling town are at one end of the 56-km-long road that

How significant the road is becomes evident from the fact that until the recently revived Mughal route came up linking Shupian in Kashmir Valley to Bafliaz in Poonch Valley across the Pir Panjal range, the Srinagar-Poonch distance was a staggering 511 km. The distance from Uri to Poonch via this alignment is around 200 km which is still almost four times the earlier 56 km connectivity. This underscores the strategic importance of capture of this pass in August 1965. More significantly, the capture was achieved in such a fast-paced Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop that Pakistan, shocked by the totally unexpected operation, remained in complete disarray; with astute diplomacy at Tashkent mitigating what was an abject military loss.



Looking southwards from the viewpoint above Silikot village on the Line of Control (LoC), you get an amazing ‘sand-table’ view of the Haji Pir Bulge hill. You are, in effect, looking down at a serrated bowl with a forested floor hemmed in by two hilly pincers whose centre is the Haji Pir Pass. On the other side of the pass and blocked from your view is the Betar Nala which descends towards Poonch just as its counterpart, the Hyderabad Nala, descends towards Uri. Both nalas have narrow roads along them—the strategic 56-km-long Uri-Poonch road alignment (See Fig 1).

Seen from Uri, the left (eastern) route to Haji Pir Pass was dominated by the steep Bedori (12,336 ft) feature. Features on the right (western) route were Sank (9,498 ft) and Lediwali Gali (10,302 ft). The eastern route was tougher; the assessment being that both routes would be strongly held.

It was planned to attack the Haji Pir Bulge on both sides with the pass being the focus. The northern pincer **Operation Bakshi** was allotted to 68 Infantry Brigade/19 Infantry Division. Simultaneously, the southern thrust, **Operation Faulad**, was to advance along axis Poonch-Kahuta-Haji Pir and allotted to 93 Infantry Brigade/25 Infantry Division. 68 Infantry Brigade, the 15 Corps reserve, was specially allotted to 19 Infantry Division. It was commanded by Brig (later Lt Gen) ZC “Zoru” Bakshi, an officer with a formidable, burgeoning reputation for victory.

Operation Bakshi

For the operation, Bakshi was allotted 1 Para and 19 Punjab from 161 Infantry Brigade besides his own 4 Rajput, 6 Jak Rif and 6 Dogra. Artillery support was provided by 164 Field Regiment less battery 7 Field Regiment, 144 Mountain Battery, troop guns ex-39 Medium Regiment and section 4.2 inch mortars.

In **Phase 1**, along the eastern pincer, 19 Punjab was to capture Point 3336 (Jayshree) by 0100 hrs on August 25. On the western pincer, 1 Para was to capture Sank Ridge up to Lediwali Gali and Sawan Pathri by 0600 hrs on August 25. In **Phase 2**, 19 Punjab was to capture Bedori and Kuthnar Di Gali by 0600 hrs on August 25. On the western thrust, 4 Rajput was to capture Ring Contour and Haji Pir Pass by 1200 hrs on August 25. **Phase 3** was “mopping up” operations around Haji Pir by 19 Punjab minus a company, and 4 Rajput with 1 Para, was positioned for link up with the southern thrust. Operations were to commence not before 2000 hrs on August 24. 4 Sikh LI and 6 Jak Rif were ordered to provide firm bases for the two battalions attacking initially: 1 Para and 19 Punjab. Lastly, diversionary attacks on the night of August 24/25 were to be undertaken by 7 Bihar/161 Brigade and 6 Bihar/41 Mountain Brigade.

Conduct

Operational plans rarely survive first fielding in a real war and Operation Bakshi/Faulad followed this well proven precedent. Inclement rains delayed the relief of 1 Para by 4 Sikh LI and move of 4 Rajput, resulting not just in a 24-hour delay in commencing operations but also replacement of 4 Rajput by 1 Para in Phase 2. Operations finally commenced at 2150 hrs on August 25 with Brig Zoru Bakshi himself following the western thrust.

At Sank, 1 Para was confronted by a strongly entrenched and coordinated company of 6 AK Battalion supported by heavy weapons and was repulsed. A second attack led by Maj RS Dayal ('B' Company) followed by Maj AS Baicher ('D' Company) launched at 2230 hrs on August 26 succeeded, with Sank captured by 0430 hrs on August 27. Facing interference from Sar, Maj Baicher was ordered to capture it and succeeded. He led 1 Para up to Lediwali Gali; Maj Dayal's company capturing Sawan Pathri and Agiwas. By 1800 hrs on August 27, Lediwali Gali had been secured.

Capture of Haji Pir Pass

With the Bedori axis stalling, Commanding Officer (CO) 1 Para, Col Prabhjinder Singh was granted permission to capture Haji Pir Pass at 1400 hrs on August 27. A mixed company group under Maj Dayal was formed, his charter inclusive of capturing two intermediate objectives; descending from Lediwali Gali to Hyderabad Nala, then climbing 4,000 ft to the pass. With the enemy alerted, his move was interdicted but proceeded with in heavy rain. Dayal had decided to surprise the Pakistanis by climbing to the pass directly and so he did, after giving his men, continually in battle for 48 hours, a short halt. When day broke, his men again came under fire. Leaving the platoon in contact along with the Field Ordering Officer (FOO) to keep the enemy tied down, Major Dayal led the rest to the right shoulder of the pass, rolling down on the clueless enemy. The pass was captured at 1030 hrs on August 28. Dayal repulsed the expected, fierce counter-attack when it came the next day, surviving a Light Machine Gun (LMG) burst in close-quarter-combat that pierced his web equipment but left him unscathed.

Operations on Bedori Axis

Advancing in adverse weather, 19 Punjab led by Col Sampuran Singh, secured Pathra in Phase 1. 4 Rajput was launched through them but stalled at Bedori base, capturing it finally by 0600 hrs on August 29 after four successive attacks had failed. Subsequently, the link-up with Haji Pir was established.

Operation Faulad

True to Moltke's edict, Operation Faulad also had start-up setbacks. To reach Kahuta it was important to capture Raja and Chand Tekri which dominated it. 2 Sikh and 3 Dogra attacked, with heavy casualties on both sides, with CO 2 Sikh getting fatally wounded. Post its capture, the Poonch-Kahuta-Haji Pir road lay open and link-up was finally established on September 10.

Fig 2



At Haji Pir, shortly after capturing the Pass Maj RS Dayal on the extreme left, Lt Col Sampuran Singh (with turban), CO 19 Punjab in the middle and Brig ZC Bakshi on the extreme right.

Maj RS Dayal was awarded the Mahavir Chakra (MVC) for his brilliant unorthodox, gritty, 'follow me' leadership. Brig Zoru Bakshi and GOC 19 Infantry Division, Maj Gen SS Kalaan were also awarded the MVC for their remarkable contribution in capturing the entire Haji Pir Bulge. Col MM Khanna, CO 2 Sikh was awarded the MVC posthumously and CO 19 Punjab, the Vir Chakra (VrC).

Diplomatic Imbroglia

Inder Malhotra writes that Swaran Singh, India's Foreign Minister, as well as Prime Minister Shastri had declared, post its capture that *"India would never vacate Haji Pir Pass...Shastri at one stage even proclaimed that if Haji Pir had to be returned to Pakistan, 'some other prime minister' would do it."* These powerful words uttered by the nation's powerful political authority in Parliament and elsewhere must have sounded like music to the armed forces and the nation,

and like a death-knell to Pakistan. The refrain and its attendant euphoria did not last very long though. The war was called off when Pakistan had run out of ammunition but we had spent only 14 percent of ours (as staff-checks later proved). The Chinese ultimatum on ceasing hostilities was honoured by the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the warring nations; becoming effective at 0300 hrs on September 23. History records that at Tashkent, where the leaders of both nations met in January 1966, to talk peace under Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin's mentoring, Haji Pir was given away as were our gains in Kargil, Tithwal, Dograi and elsewhere in exchange of Chhamb and a bit more. India was stunned, but the shock was muted because Prime Minister Shastri died hours after the accord was signed, at 1630 hrs on January 10, 1966. The harsh reality that remained was that 1965 had NO VICTOR, NO VANQUISHED.

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