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India begins celebrations of 1965 war but Pakistan claims it was the real winner

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Each nation has wildly different views about the conflict.



India's defence ministry announced in June that it would hold a month-long celebration of the 50th anniversary of the country's 1965 war with Pakistan. The celebration is to start on Friday and end on September 23, when the fighting came to an end following a ceasefire. It is to cost around Rs 35 crore, which, unsurprisingly, has attracted criticism.

Besides the cost and the morality of celebrating a war, the commemoration is problematic because the two sides differ widely about what caused the war. In addition, the war's legacy is unusual because both India and Pakistan claim victory.

While Pakistan celebrates September 6 as Defence Day, the day it stopped an Indian military offensive targeting Lahore in its tracks, for many in India, the war began on the evening of September 1, when the Indian Air Force repelled Pakistan's massive armoured thrust at Chhamb, near Jammu.

Two narratives

Rather than uncritically accept one version of the narrative, it is important to recognise that these legacies rest on selective interpretations of victory by both sides. In fact, the argument could very well be made that the reasons for the celebration are not unanimously held – that the battles that India acknowledges and claims as victories are not the ones that Pakistan prioritises.

If India is commemorating its stopping the Pakistani army's incursion into Jammu and Kashmir in 1965, then Islamabad does not recognise this. Instead it defines its victory on the basis of its army having repelled an Indian attack on its own territory. India's priority was to repel Pakistan's armed invasion into Jammu and Kashmir that was designed to cut the state off from the rest of India. This was what the Indian prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri acknowledged in a stirring radio address to the nation on September 3, 1965.

Pakistan's priority, however, was to act against India's invasion of the international border at Wagah, which it stopped just short of Lahore. This was acknowledged by Pakistani President Ayub Khan in a special radio broadcast on September 6, following the Indian army's thrust earlier that day.

Misplaced chronology

India's defence ministry plans to begin commemorations on August 28, with the president laying a wreath at the Amar Jawan Jyoti, a flame in memory of fallen soldiers near India Gate in New Delhi. This is to mark the day that the Indian Army captured the Hajipir Pass in Kashmir in an attempt to thwart Pakistan's efforts to cut the state off from the rest of India.

But this chronology is misplaced because there were many important developments earlier in August that already indicated a war-like situation. Evidence for this comes from peace talks between India and Pakistan in Tashkent, in January 1966, brokered by the Soviet Union.

These negotiations determined that Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar on August 5. This was Pakistan's attempt to trigger an uprising in Kashmir against the Indian government by sending its soldiers into the state, and this was crucial for triggering the 17- day war. As a result, the peace treaty required both armies to withdraw their respective troops to positions they held before August 5, 1965. It was this stipulation that later required India to return the Hajipir Pass to Pakistan.

It is also worth considering that for several weeks in the summer of 1965, it was, in fact, not clear that the countries were formally at war. In the preceding months, even when the two sides had clashed in the Rann of Kutch, and rhetoric and tensions had been running high, officials on both sides closely connected with the developments were unsure whether their countries were actually in a state of war.

State of diplomacy

Among the more unusual features of this conflict was also that the two countries' diplomatic missions never shut down – the representatives did not leave their respective posts for the entire duration of the war. Admittedly, their movements were heavily restricted and all contacts with their respective headquarters severed, but that in itself was not a clear indication of a state of war.

Certainly, the Indian high commissioner in Karachi, Kewal Singh, had some doubts about whether in the legal and diplomatic senses war had actually broken out between India and Pakistan, and, if so, whether he should destroy confidential papers and cypher codes. In his autobiography, *Partition and Aftermath: Memoirs of an Ambassador*, Kewal Singh recounted how, in the absence of any official intimation, he had dispatched the Indian deputy high commissioner to Pakistan's foreign ministry in Karachi to seek a clarification about whether war had broken out.

Bizarrely, the foreign office in Karachi replied that it would need to consult with Islamabad, where the presidency and the seat of government had shifted, to provide an answer, which it would do in due course. Like Kewal Singh, the Pakistani high commission in New Delhi faced a dilemma: to destroy the cypher codes or not? The deputy high commissioner, Afzal Iqbal, later described his improvised solution: escaping the surveillance around the Pakistan High Commission in Chanakyapuri, he deposited the cypher pads with startled Iranian and Turkish ambassadors.

Deeper question

The differences in the two countries' interpretations of the war's timeline reveal a deeper issue: We are never clear about just when we are in a state of all-out war. To this day, border skirmishes are routine as is the practice of each country summoning the other's diplomatic representatives to complain about their government's gross perfidies.

Given the highly divergent accounts of victory in India and Pakistan, does it make sense for us to go in for an expensive, triumphalist, celebration without first establishing what we are commemorating, and which objectives were at stake in the conflict?