

REVIEW AND REFLECTIONS

The detailed wide ranging account of a multi-dimensional and major historic event often obscures the overall picture. The trees hide the wood. It may be useful, therefore, to recapitulate briefly the salient features of the 1971 conflict before discussing certain matters which seem to deserve particular notice.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONFLICT

Exploitation of East Bengal by the ruling class in West Pakistan was a reality that stood out like the Himalayas. Yahya Khan himself admitted it frankly in an interview given in Washington DC in August 1978 to the correspondent of the Urdu Daily Jang(1). He explained that the problem had been with Pakistan since her birth, and was made much worse by the West Pakistani officers posted in East Bengal. Their arrogance and rapacity made the conflict almost inevitable.

Just as the election results of 1970 had come as a complete surprise to the Pakistani rulers, the crackdown in East Bengal on 25 March 1971, came as a complete surprise to India. No plans existed to meet the situation developing in the East. Nor did any military danger loom there in the first few weeks after the crack-down. The Government of India was under pressure to act then not because of any military threat but because of the tremendous public sympathy and support for the freedom fighters and Awami League workers of East Bengal who were being butchered by the Pakistan Army. A democratic Govt. could not remain totally unresponsive to such public pressure. But the Govt. of India did resist the spontaneous demand for immediate military intervention to save the lives of the East Bengal people. In the high level discussions concerning all possible courses of action open to India, the Service Chiefs, and the Chief of Army Staff in particular, advised strongly against any military intervention just then. The events in East Bengal then did not pose any imminent military danger to India. What was happening was still within the confines of East Bengal and was clearly an internal matter of Pakistan. World opinion would have been almost uniformly against any Indian intervention at that stage. The Army was also then busy in the election and law and order duties in West Bengal and troops had left behind the heavy weapons in their depots. The lines of communication to much of the

northern and eastern borders of East Bengal were totally inadequate for large scale military operations. The Himalayan passes would be open during the summer for Chinese intervention against India. In those circumstances, any military move by India would have been opportunistic, aggressive, and militarily unsound.

However, the situation soon began to change drastically. Thousands of armed and trained men of EPR and EBR came into India after running battles with the Pakistan Army in East Bengal. Refugees began coming in their lakhs, carrying tales of terrible massacres and brutalities, and hate in their hearts for the Pakistan Army. The two bodies began hitting back at the Pakistan Army along the borders with India, and the Pakistan Army did not at all show any reluctance in engaging in violent border incidents, bombardments, sorties into Indian territory etc. Provisional Bangladesh Govt. was proclaimed and it was clear that these skirmishes along the border were going to continue and were likely to get intensified. Armed bodies of men were getting together among the refugees and engaging in these skirmishes and hit and run sorties and trying all possible sources - local goondas, Naxalite terrorists, clandestine imports, theft from armouries, etc., - to acquire more and more arms and military training. The local Bengali population, indistinguishable from the refugees by language, culture and race, whole-heartedly supported these efforts of the refugees and of the EPR/EBR veterans. There was clear danger of the leadership of these bands of armed men passing into undesirable hands of ultra leftists and anti social elements(2). The Indian public as well as the Provisional Govt. of Bangladesh were putting tremendous pressure on the Govt. of India to provide atleast some support to the freedom fighters, if not outright recognition of the Govt. of Bangladesh and open military intervention. The BSF border outposts, without any written orders from above, had got involved in the violent incidents from the very beginning : the mass murders, raping, and burning villages just in front produced even in officers of the BSF an indignation so terrible as to drown their normal respect for Pak sovereignty.

It will be recalled that Indian nationalist opinion had been strongly opposed to the creation of Pakistan and the division of the country according to the Two-Nation theory. Besides declaring Indian Muslims to be a separate nation, this theory postulated inevitable and eternal antagonism between the two 'nations', and rejected the possibility of a single multi-national state in India patterned like the Soviet Union, Canada, or Malaysia. The horrors of

the partition riots etched this antagonism deep into the psyche of both Pakistanis and Indians. There had been, therefore, no love lost between India and Pakistan from the very beginning. After fighting two wars - both planned and initiated by Pakistan - their antagonism had reached a stage where their relations represented a Zero Sum Game, and the disadvantage or loss of one country became automatically the advantage and gain of the other. India hoped Mujib in power in Pakistan would bring real peace, secularism and non-alignment to the troubled sub-continent. In this situation, the natural reaction of Indian public, the press and even the forces, was to add to Pakistan's difficulty by aiding East Bengal people by all means short of open war. As a result, the general public, and the BSF also, gave all possible support to the Bangladesh forces right from the end of March 1971, although no written orders to the BSF were passed. Even a special Commando force of the BSF was formed under Brig B.C. Pande and operated against the Pakistan Army along the Tripura border from the first week of April to the third week of May. The scores of bridges damaged, rail lines disrupted and Pak units ambushed were achieved by the EBR/EPR rebels helped significantly by the BSF Commando Groups.

The problem was also considered coolly in the airconditioned office rooms in South Block. It was realised that a united Pakistan was really dead after the military crackdown in East Bengal, and birth of Bangladesh was inevitable. In discussions, even US diplomats agreed with this conclusion. India's concern had to be to ensure that the new state of Bangladesh was born with a feeling of friendliness towards India, and that its regime was not oriented towards China. The longer the Bangladeshes struggled for liberation, the greater would be the chances of the Awami leadership being replaced by ultra leftist, pro-China and anti-Indian elements. India's attitude and actions had to be oriented towards facilitating the inevitable and backing the winning horse.

Taking into consideration all these factors, the Govt. of India began to provide some token assistance in terms of equipment and training to the forces now being called the Mukti Bahini. Maj Gen O.S. Kalkat was sent to Calcutta as Director of Operations to maintain liaison and possible degree of control over the freedom fighters. His main responsibility was to regulate and to monitor the training and arming of the Mukti Bahini, which also enabled India to keep a watch on things. Technically under Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora, the Army Commander of Eastern Command, Gen Kalkat was in direct touch with the Chief of the Army Staff at New Delhi. When Kalkat failed to

establish personal rapport with the Bangladesh leaders, he was replaced by Maj Gen B.N. Sarkar, who succeeded admirably.

As the flood of refugees continued to swell and mount in the succeeding weeks, the Govt. of India began to get seriously alarmed at its implications in terms of law and order and the stresses on the social fabric itself. Many Pakistani agents were found to have come with the refugees, to create communal incidents and to sabotage vital installations in India - some 400 of them were actually apprehended. The starving refugees flooding the Calcutta metropolis and surrounding country-side began to compete with the locals for jobs, undercutting the old inhabitants. The communal complexion itself of many border areas began to change. India's vital interests thus began to come under threat. India responded by strenuous efforts to move the international community to put pressure on the Pakistan Govt. to take necessary steps which would result in the refugees going back to East Bengal. Such steps clearly meant coming to a compromise with the elected representatives of the people, so that the refugees felt assured of their safety and an honourable life on their return to their villages and towns in East Bengal. Simultaneously the armed forces of India began the contingency planning for meeting any military threat from the East and for engaging in large scale operations in that direction if such operations became inevitable.

The training and arming of the Mukti Bahini now assumed a different dimension. It was perhaps hoped in New Delhi that the stepped up Mukti Bahini operations would convince the Pakistan rulers that the price they had to pay for continuing the suppression of East Bengal was going to be very heavy, and therefore they would be well advised to come to a political settlement with the Awami League. In other words, the Mukti Bahini operations would be another form of pressure on Yahya Khan, supplementing and supporting the diplomatic pressure, to come to a political settlement.

Yahya Khan, however, saw these developments in a different light. His troops in East Bengal under the ruthless Gen. Tikka Khan had reasserted Govt. authority over the whole of East Bengal, and had driven out the recalcitrant, or "disloyal" elements into India. He had succeeded in his plans up to that point, although the extent and the ferocity of the popular resistance perhaps came to him as a surprise. A wise statesman would at that juncture have come out with a political initiative to have a settlement advantageous to him and to terminate the open

insurgency. Yahya, unfortunately, was not a statesman. He and his advisers thought that a few more weeks of savage repression would finally extinguish the flame of resistance. This was wishful thinking, as the freedom fighters were then too full of hate to care for their lives or to admit defeat. This would have also meant the refugees staying on in India indefinitely, and therefore India was determined not to allow the flame of resistance totally to be extinguished. What is more, India was definitely in a position to ensure this, as East Bengal was surrounded on three sides by Indian territory and was separated by a thousand miles from the base of the Pakistan Army in West Pakistan. Military action alone could not be the solution in East Bengal when the local population was totally alienated, and when India was clearly in a position indefinitely to keep up the pressure and ensure continuing resistance and border skirmishes in that region. Surprisingly oblivious to these considerations, Yahya Khan and his coterie continued with their military action, and the refugees continued to pour into India in ever increasing numbers, crossing the six million mark by end of June.

In fact Yahya appeared to see a new opportunity in the massive influx of refugees from East Bengal into India. If the huge, unending exodus of refugees reduced the population of East Bengal by many millions, then the majority of East Pakistan over West Pakistan would be reduced or eliminated, and the voting pattern would also change in favour of West Pakistan. The refugees coming into India, particularly in the later months, included a very large percentage of Hindus, and this was additionally welcome to the Pakistan rulers, as it meant a reduction in the strength of Hindu population, making the population of Pakistan more homogenous or 'Islamic'. If the Pakistan Govt. could get away with the repression in East Bengal and with the pushing out into India of so many millions of refugees, then an additional advantage would have been to put tremendous burden and expense on India. The resultant financial drain - estimated at a thousand million US Dollars per year - and social, political and communal turmoil for an indefinite period, would have crippled India and would have been far more damaging to her than even a serious military defeat. So Yahya thought he had the proverbial opportunity of killing two birds with one stone. And he hardened his political attitude further. Active and staunch Awami League members of the National Assembly were disqualified, their seats were declared vacant, and were filled by uncontested elections of supporters of the Pakistan ruling junta. Yahya announced in his White Paper fresh crimes and unpatriotic intentions of the Awami League and

declared that Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman would be put on secret trial which could even result in his execution. Al Badar, Al Shams, etc. were organised to intensify repression.

Documentary evidence of this grand design of the Pakistani rulers is, naturally, not available in India. But the circumstances, events and developing attitudes of the concerned parties make this a plausible and reasonable conclusion.

Noticing this further stiffening of Yahya's attitude and faced with the totally intolerable burden of so many millions of refugees, and still more refugees in their thousands coming in every day, India decided to step up its pressure, diplomatically and on the ground. Astute and highly sophisticated, it can perhaps best be described as a "strategy of controlled escalation". Handled adroitly with an uncanny sense of timing by the Indian leadership, it proved an extremely flexible and effective doctrine of state-craft and crisis management. At the beginning it was the BSF posts along the East Bengal borders and the local public which gave support to the Bangladesh freedom fighters. Subsequently the support to the freedom fighters was put on a more organised and substantial basis. Again, no documentary evidence is available to show that the Govt. of India ordered the BSF or the Army to assist the Mukti Bahini. But it is clear that the Govt. tacitly or unofficially, encouraged and approved, or at least turned a blind eye to the provision of arms, equipment and training for the Mukti Bahini by the Armed Forces of India and its officers. The MB began receiving much greater help from India. It became the Indian objective now to assist actively the Mukti Bahini to liberate substantial areas of East Bengal, so that, if the situation deteriorated further, the Bangladesh Provisional Govt. could start functioning from there, could acquire a territorial base, and thus demand recognition more legitimately from the international community. Operational plans also were issued in August to provide for such an eventuality. The earlier deficiencies in terms of deployment of forces and preparation of depots, storage dumps and line of communication all along the borders were largely rectified by September-October. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of August, although it was not aimed specifically against any country, had very definitely strengthened the Indian position against the threat of Chinese and American support to Pakistan if large scale hostilities broke out. The approaching winter, with snow blocking the Himalayan passes, meant reduced Chinese capabilities and threat from the North.

India still kept hoping for, and trying for, a political compromise between the Yahya regime and the Awami League. But she simultaneously went forward with military preparations, firstly to put pressure on Yahya, and secondly, to be prepared for any hostilities if it came to that. When Pakistan moved its army from its cantonments to the border in the West, India responded by doing the same. When Pakistani troops repeatedly intruded into Indian territory in pursuit of, or to attack the bases of the Mukti Bahini, Govt. allowed the Indian Army the right of 'hot pursuit', enabling the Indian forces to beat back the Pakistani raiders and to pursue them inside East Bengal. In her inimitable style, Mrs. Gandhi informed Parliament on 24 November 1971 that, in spite of grave and repeated Pakistani provocations she had "instructed our troops not to cross the border except in self-defence". The implications of the instructions were clear.

Major clashes took place in the Belonia and Sylhet sectors in the East and in Hilli and Bayra sectors in the West, within the borders of East Bengal. Border violations by both sides had become so common that the open and substantial involvement of Indian troops in these operations raised few eyebrows in the international community.

Both India and Pakistan perhaps kept on hoping that stern measures and show of determination would deter the other party and would lead the 'enemy' to back down. It appeared as the good old "Brinkmanship" game again. But either party increasingly got trapped in a posture which meant war if the other party did not back down.

The strain of the continuing crisis lasting over seven months was definitely beginning to tell on both the parties. As autumn freezes into winter, a point seemed to be approaching fast when the one or the other would have to open hostilities in full scale. Attrition rate of the Pak Army had gone up from 90 per month in May-June '71 to 3000 per month by November, and it was clear that East Bengal could not be "pacified" unless Indian 'interference' was stopped. The Pak troops were getting weary and demoralised. For India, the burden of 10 million refugees was getting unbearable, and Mrs. Gandhi had lost all hope of effective international pressure on Yahya after her foreign tour in November. The Bangladesh freedom fighters were losing faith in their old leaders, and new, radical leadership would gain control if the stalemate continued much longer. And campaigning season had arrived.

India desperately wanted to avoid opening full scale hostilities and thus becoming the aggressor in the eyes of the world. But it appears clear, from many evidences of various types, that India would have been forced to take military action in full strength in the first week of December, and perhaps on 4 December, even if Pakistan had not attacked before that. It was an irony of fate that Yahya broke first under the terrific strain, and himself resolved India's dilemma by launching a pre-emptive attack on 3 December 1971. The answer to the intractable, blood soaked Bangladesh question was finally provided by the roar of the cannon.

THE OPPOSING STRATEGIES

Pakistan's grand strategy outlined above had at the beginning its political and military components dovetailed and balanced nicely. In early March 1971, the troops had been withdrawn to Cantonments promptly on Mujib's demand in the hope that a total breakdown of law and order would follow, compelling Mujib himself to request calling the troops back. But the Awami League managed to maintain a semblance of order and civic life, and in fact became the de facto Govt. of East Bengal. To restore the position, the military crack-down of 25 March was considered necessary. Its success opened to Yahya Khan the possibility of restarting negotiations from a position of strength. But the top brass and hawks in Pakistan failed to realise that ultimately there could be no military solution to the political problem particularly in the situation peculiar to East Bengal. That lay at the root of Pakistan's misfortunes.

Operation instructions were issued by Eastern Command at Calcutta to its corps commanders in August, visualizing full scale operations and liberation of the whole area lying to the west of the Jamuna and to the east of Meghna river systems. The outline of these plans leaked out, or was allowed deliberately to leak out; in October Pakistan Army responded by changing its strategy and deployment in East Pakistan. To prevent the occupation of sizeable areas by the Indian and Mukti Bahini forces, the Pakistan Army decided to move out from the Central Citadel or redoubt of the Dhaka triangle to the borders, and to hold in strength the selected places and centres which were developed as Fortresses. These Fortresses were fully stocked with ammunition and supplies for a war lasting several weeks. The troops were spread out and divided into penny packets all along the border to cover the gaps between the fortresses. The strategy and deployment of forces led to the creation of a hard crust along the borders, but left no central reserve

or strike force at the disposal of Gen. Niazi. Pakistan also planned to assume the offensive on the Western Front, so that areas could be occupied in the West to be traded in the post-war negotiations for any area occupied by India in the East. Since the West was considered the decisive theatre, Niazi was instructed to maintain strong forces and an aggressive posture along the border and keep the Indian troops tied down, preventing transfer of Indian units from the East to the West. The GHQ at Rawalpindi had also ordered Gen Niazi not to yield any territory which could provide a toe-hold to the Bangladesh Government inside East Bengal. Niazi stuck to these directives instead of concentrating for a firm defence of the vital Dhaka bowl when all-out war with India became imminent in November 1971. On the contrary, Niazi ordered on 3 December that his troops would vacate no position or post till they had suffered at least 75% casualties, and had obtained permission from two levels higher in the army hierarchy. Such rigidity, amounting to an abdication of generalship, proved disastrous for his army.

However, it must be conceded, in fairness to Gen Niazi, that his problem admitted of no clearly viable solution. The strategy of forward posture and no withdrawals certainly failed. But the alternative of mobile warfare depending on rapid regroupings and manoeuvres was equally flawed in the face of total enemy air superiority, destroyed communications, bitterly hostile population and virtual absence of armour. Niazi's dilemma was indeed similar to the oft-debated problem faced by the German Field Marshals trying to beat back the Allied landing in France in 1944. Neither of the rival strategies advocated by Runstedt and by Rommel appeared clearly viable then; Niazi could hardly hope to fare better than those redoubtable masters of the art of war. And to withdraw early and merely defend the Dhaka bowl was to admit defeat even before the war had started. The Indian divisions would have quickly reached Dhaka from three directions and taken the big unfortified city by assault within a week or so. And in the process a massacre of the Pakistanis by the Mukti Bahini within Dhaka would have been almost a certainty.

Indian strategy, on the other hand, evolved slowly but methodically. Taken by surprise, perhaps Govt. of India hoped that the East Bengal masses mobilised by the Awami League, and the trained and armed EBR/EPR men in their thousands, would be able to defeat the Pakistan Army in the East with the informal assistance of the BSF. By end of April, this wishful thinking was given up. Gen. Manekshaw was formally consulted on the problem by the Govt. for the first

time in the last week of April. Indira Gandhi showed true moral courage and political strength in accepting Manekshaw's cautious advice in the face of the public clamour for immediate military intervention.

Thereafter, the military and political components of the Indian grand strategy were always kept in tandem. Diplomatic and media offensives were stepped up even while logistic preparations, operational planning and movement of forces were taken in hand, apart from the Mukti Bahini effort. The August plan of liberating segments of Bangladesh in the west and in the east was thrashed out. This plan formally held the field even during the December war. It had been accepted by the Indian leaders from April onwards that the ultimate denouement would be the complete liberation of Bangladesh in all probability. But this liberation as an operational task was stated only in Manekshaw's Signal to Aurora on 30 November. And it appears that it was only on 11 December that the Prime Minister issued a written directive to the Chiefs of Staff for the total liberation of Bangladesh.

The August plan - Operation "Cactus Lily" - still visualised an old style war, with setpiece attacks to reduce enemy strongholds, and deliberate advance upto the Jamuna-Padma in the west and the Meghna in the east. It is claimed, however, that the new tactics of bypassing strongholds and advancing swiftly to the farthest were emphasised in oral briefings and the war games held with the formation commanders. The Indian Navy was to impose an effective blockade of East Bengal ports, which perhaps made it redundant for 2 Corps to advance to Khulna, as the plan required.

Against West Pakistan, the Indian strategy was basically defensive. But the holding operations did provide for limited local offensives to keep the enemy off-balance and unable to launch major attacks. The all out war was expected to start simultaneously on the Eastern as well as the Western Front even if India was compelled to start it. But at the last minute - just a few days before the war was actually started by Pakistan - Govt. of India decided that it had no ostensible and clear justification to open hostilities in the West. The projected Indian offensive in the Chhamb sector was cancelled by Gen Manekshaw himself. Indian leaders perhaps hoped that a further escalation of fighting in the East would result in no Pak reaction in the West, just as the escalation of 21 November in the East had not. But the last minute change of posture in the West certainly put the Indian commanders in difficulty, and confused the troops.

In general, however, Indian strategy was well vindicated by the war in the West as in the East.

OBJECTIVE DHAKA ?

The capture of Dhaka in a swift short offensive was indeed a brilliant exploit of Indian arms. The capital and heart of the Pak regime in East Bengal was reached within two weeks, across some two hundred kilometres and many formidable river obstacles. But a moments' thought and a close look reveal some baffling features of the operations and raise some awkward questions. It appears rather strange that the first Indian troops to enter Dhaka came from a static formation - the 101 Communication Zone Area - and not from any of the three Army Corps launched against East Bengal. If this was all according to plan, it is stranger still that this decisive, all important thrust from the north was allowed to remain the weakest in terms of manpower, artillery and armour. And no written orders or Operation Instruction, or even a clear military Appreciation, is to be found on the subject. At the same time, it appears inconceivable that an operation of such magnitude and complexity was successfully mounted without any detailed planning and fore-thought. Whether the capture of Dhaka was pre-planned, and if so by whom, therefore deserves careful consideration on the basis of all the evidence available, from the records as well the personal recollection of the important participants.

All are agreed that no formal orders were even issued to any of the Corps commanders or to the GOC, 101 Comn. Z.A., to capture Dhaka. The August plan for 'Operation Cactus Lily' visualised only the occupation of areas to the east of the Meghna and to the west of the Jamuna-Padma rivers, with particular emphasis on the capture of the ports of Khulna and Chittagong to isolate East Pakistan from West Pakistan. The plan for the Para-drop at Tangail, finalised in October, introduced a new element involving the occupation of areas in the north also, including Mymensingh, Jamalpur and Tangail. After linking up with the Para battalion dropped at Tangail, the advancing brigade of 101 Comn. Z.A. was 'to pose a threat to Dacca'. This guarded and vague language hardly amounted to a clear task to advance to and capture Dhaka. With only one brigade of regular Indian troops allotted to it then, the 101 Comn. Z.A. was obviously in no position to do so.....anyway. And the Para drop at Tangail was only one of the several alternatives mentioned in this plan for utilising the paratroopers. Finally, as late as 30 November 1971, Army HQ ordered Eastern Command to liberate the whole of East Bengal and to capture or

destroy the entire Pak forces there. The war broke out soon after, and Eastern Command never issued formal orders to any of its formation commanders to capture Dhaka.

Detailed discussions with the concerned commanders have yielded no unanimous version. Those who then manned key positions in Army HQ, New Delhi, and in HQ Eastern Command, Calcutta, maintain that the total liberation of Bangladesh was their objective all through, and further orders would have been issued accordingly after the tasks visualised in Operation Cactus Lily had been accomplished. However, whereas the Eastern Army Commander expected the powerful 4 Corps to capture Dhaka when the time came, and had therefore allotted to it all the available helicopters - his Chief of Staff (Maj Gen Jacob) was clear in his mind that the 101 Comn. Z.A. troops - with no major river to cross on their axis of advance - would seize the big prize. As supporting evidence for his version might be mentioned the Para drop in support of this northern column, the stationing of river craft at Dhubri to supply the advancing troops, and repeated efforts to put more weight behind this thrust by allotting to it two more brigades. As it was, the northern thrust was able to use 95 Mtn Bde, the F-J Sector troops approximating another brigade and the 167 Mtn Bde, while the move of 5 Mtn Bde to this front was halted mid-way on orders from Army HQ, which was not prepared to lower its guard against the Chinese in the north. As against all this, Maj Gen Gandharva Nagra commanding 101 Comn Z.A. from 5 December, has disclaimed any instructions from Calcutta about the capture of Dhaka. And his predecessor, the late Maj Gen Gurbax Singh Gill, has stated in his Foreword to a book: "Incidentally, in our planning we had never catered for the capture of Dhaka"(3).

Lt Gen Sagat Singh, the GOC 4 Corps, is equally clear that he received no orders or plan for the capture of Dhaka. The helicopters were allotted to him primarily for casualty evacuation and liaison and inspection duties along his very wide front. He himself decided - fairly early - that his objective would be Dhaka itself, and made the plans and preparations for it with the whole-hearted cooperation of Gp. Capt Chandan Singh. He procured dry cell torches from Calcutta to mark the helipads at night, tried out heli-landing troops under operational conditions at Sylhet, and launched his troops across the Meghna when he found that the enemy was withdrawing from Bhairab Bazar area northwards towards Mymensingh/Sylhet insted of southwards towards Dhaka. It was in the nature of an encounter crossing : launching such a big force across a mighty river with the help of only a dozen medium helicopters could never be planned at Calcutta or New Delhi.

From these many conflicting versions, what really happened can still be reconstructed with a high degree of probability. As mentioned already, the Government of India concluded after the crackdown of March 1971 that events were likely to lead inexorably to the birth of an independent Bangladesh. Military commanders at different levels, when involved in the problem, certainly realised that the final solution would be the military liberation of the entire East Bengal territory. But no plan existed for major operations in that direction, nor was a clear political directive issued to the Armed Forces. The highly confused and nebulous conditions inside East Pakistan, the steady flow of reinforcements from West Pakistan into East Bengal, and China's threat in the North made it impossible for Army Headquarters to designate Dhaka as the military objective while issuing the plan for "Operation Cactus Lily" in August 1971.

However, Dhaka as the objective was definitely in the minds of the Army Headquarters, HQ Eastern Command as well as HQ 4 Corps. Since Manekshaw and Aurora were pre-occupied with innumerable problems, the main thinking on the operations in East Bengal devolved on the DMO at New Delhi and the COS at Calcutta. Major General Jacob, the Chief of Staff, argued with Maj Gen K.K. Singh, DMO, about futility of going for Khulna when Indian Navy could effectively blockade East Bengal. But, although everybody realised that Dhaka was the geopolitical heart, Army Headquarters could not then allocate sufficient forces for a deliberate plan to capture Dhaka. By the time Maj Gen Inder Singh Gill had taken over as DMO, the situation had changed and Jacob received far better response to his ambitious thinking. Between the two of them, - of course with the support of their respective superiors - Jacob and Gill quietly made all possible preparations for the capture of Dhaka when the opportunity came. Right then it was still not considered prudent to declare Dhaka as the objective in formal orders, as there were many imponderables and it was undesirable to put down in cold print an objective which might not be attainable.

Soon, however, the situation changed. The border incursions produced strong and immediate reaction from the Pakistan Army, which strung itself out in penny packets all along the borders. Deep penetration and a drive towards Dhaka then became more practicable. Although the August plan was not amended certain deeper objectives like Tangail and east bank of the Madhumati began to be given in Operation Instructions in October. Gill and Jacob perhaps considered the northern thrust as the one most

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likely to get through, and so this thrust was beefed up to the extent possible. It has been claimed that the formation commanders in the field were also given verbal instructions to go for Dhaka, and the operations were discussed in detail in war games, although this is disputed by the field commanders concerned.

Finally, the orders were revised on 30 November, giving the liberation of the whole of Bangladesh as the military task of Eastern Command. Eastern Command perhaps planned to issue orders to Sagat Singh and Nagra after they had reached the Meghna and Tangail respectively. Aurora and Jacob did not realise that the two bright field commanders would take the bit in their teeth and gallop for Dhaka even before receiving any order. Hastily, Eastern Command placed Nagra under Sagat Singh when both the formations were closing in on Dhaka, in order to avoid inadvertent clashes between the two. Dhaka fell, with its defenders encircled from three sides, bombarded from the air, demoralised by psychological warfare and disillusioned with the hopes of intervention by foreign powers.

It appears clear, therefore, that Army Headquarters and Eastern Command had thought of and made some provision for the capture of Dhaka, but had played safe and issued no formal order to any of the formations in the field. To that extent, Lt Gen Sagat Singh and Major Gen Nagra had used their own initiative, drive and professional acumen to achieve a dazzling victory. It reflects the greatest credit on the Indian Army that it produced field commanders of such calibre, capable of strategic initiative and stage management of major manoeuvres in the course of the campaign without clear orders from above. Sagat Singh in particular stood out as a General any army could be proud of, not only because he had the largest Corps to handle over the longest front but also because he surmounted the stiffest obstacles of the Meghna and Lakhya rivers. A close look at the capture of Dhaka, thus makes the exploit shine brighter than ever.

INTER SERVICES COORDINATION

All wars in modern times involve joint operations by two or more of the Services, and the necessity of ensuring the closest possible cooperation between them is universally accepted. But the unanimity goes no further, and the best pattern of inter-Services coordination for India has been the subject of intense, though muted, debate for years. The related and equally important subjects of higher

defence control organisation and civil-Services equation in the Government machinery have evoked a more intense and more muted controversy. While these crucially important and complicated issues deserve an early and detailed study by the Govt. of India, some brief observations appear necessary here.

India won the 1971 war. But some deficiencies in inter-Services cooperation came to notice even in the euphoria of victory. Close air support in the critical battle of Chhamb was delayed. Capt Samant's naval task force was attacked and decimated by friendly aircraft because its re-routing was not intimated to the IAF in time. The IAF and the IN, both attacking Karachi on the same night to overwhelm or confuse the defences, were, it was reported, totally ignorant of the others participation. Another notable example was the amphibious landing at Cox's Bazar, which came to grief due to inadequate joint planning and hasty improvisations.

India fought the Bangladesh war in exceptionally favourable circumstances, and another war would present a far worse scenario. With technology leading military doctrine in future wars, the difficulties and dangers are bound to get multiplied. The emerging trends emphasise the importance of missiles and electronic warfare, which do not traditionally belong to any of the three Services. Some innovative reorganisation in the near future appears inevitable. It would be wise to introduce the necessary changes in the defence structure at all levels well before electronic and nuclear warfare and their concomitants get imbedded in the old system.

All Service officers in their oral testimonies have demanded changes. Joint staffs were required at formation and Command levels for proper planning and conduct of operations. A theatre of operations needed a Commander with allotted elements of the three Services under his direct command, like South East Asia Command of Mountbatten in World War II and like the existing Fortress Command in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. At New Delhi were required joint planning teams and a Chief of Defence Staff organisation. The old system of coordination managed to cope with the 1971 war only due to the personal qualities of the three Service Chiefs then in position. It would be dangerous to rely on the same fortuitous good fortune in the future, and unwise to bank only on goodwill and voluntary cooperation, in place of formalised and institutionalised arrangements, in such a vital matter. In 1971, Gen Manekshaw was the real architect of India's military victory, and appears to have

functioned in effect like a Chief of Defence Staff with the backing of the Prime Minister. It is interesting to learn from him, therefore, that he received total cooperation from one Service Chief, but not from the other. Manekshaw also revealed that at one point the Prime Minister suggested making him the overall commander of the three Services for the duration of the war in order to ensure smooth coordination. But he advised her against it, lest such a temporary, short term arrangement produced heart burning and strained inter-Service relations.

An integrated Ministry of Defence would cap the new pattern suggested for the defence control organisation. With civilians and men in uniform inter-mixed at various levels, the integrated Ministry of Defence would do away with the existing duplication of men, in the Services Headquarters and in the Ministry, examining the same proposal, thereby eliminating delays and reducing costs. The intimate interaction at all levels between Army, Naval and Air Force officers and civilian administrators including Finance representatives, each contributing his special expertise and experience, would produce superior results and streamline the decision making process. Proposals presented by a Service Chief after full consideration would not require 'de novo' examination in the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Finance, and those responsible for results in the field would get more closely associated with the final decision on their recommendations.

There is also the question of creating an Army Air Corps. Army-Air coordination should aim at even higher integration and streamlining, though in 1971 it was better managed compared to the 1965 war. The quicker pace of war in the future and the induction of armed helicopters would require the ground and air elements engaged in the battle to function as a single team. The dual control inherent in the present system would impose unacceptable delays. The creation of Army Aviation Corps, it was argued, would guarantee timely fire support, liaison, and recce and would enable the field commander to overcome opposition by vertical envelopment where necessary. Against these arguments, it was pointed out that the unique flexibility, mobility and range of modern air power require centralised control for its optimum effectiveness. Consideration of the maintenance infrastructure, and economy in manpower and material management also favoured centralised control of all aircraft. The dangers and problems attendant on the control of the air space by Army and Air Force both were also stressed, illustrated by the accidental shooting down of many friendly aircraft by the Egyptian Air

Defence Command during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. In reply, the protagonists of Army Air Corps pointed out that the Armed helicopters and AOP craft would be flying close to the ground and in a different layer of the air space, which the fighters and bombers would not be using. The mistakes of the Egyptian Air Defence Command were due to the fact that it had been set up recently and had not been able to gain experience and to refine its procedures before the 1973 war broke out.

As already stated, these are large and complex issues. Their many pros and cons cannot be adequately discussed except in a separate full fledged monograph. All that is intended here is to draw attention to them, to indicate that there is a strong 'prima facie' case for a change, and to stress the urgency of a detailed study, with firm measures following it. "A system that has worked in the past" must not be retained till it actually proves disastrous.

SOME OTHER ASPECTS OF HIGHER COMMAND

Certain other matters concerning the higher direction and conduct of the war also require notice.

Loss of Territory?

The Government directive issued to the Armed Forces stipulated that, alongwith the advance into East Bengal, the guard against the Chinese threat from the North must be fully maintained, and that no territory should be lost in the operations on the Western Front. The requirement that no territory should be lost on the Western Front was dictated obviously by the plausible consideration of denying any bargaining counter to Pakistan in the post war negotiations. But it must be strongly emphasised that this directive badly handicapped the Indian Commanders. It tied their hands in planning and conducting mobile warfare and inhibited aggressive planning and bold initiatives. Since the Pakistani and Indian forces on the Western Front were in more or less equal strength, the enemy could be defeated only by superior generalship. This required concentration of decisively superior forces at selected points by thinning out troops from less important sectors, and freedom to manoeuvre forces. Only thus could a major victory be won or significant military advantage obtained. If no Indian territory was to be lost anywhere, the planners and commanders were constrained to spread out the troops evenly along the entire front, and to hold back at every level sufficient reserve to counter attack and regain territory quickly in case of enemy incursions. A significant defeat

inflicted on the Pakistani Armed forces would have caused major damage to them and also led to occupation of the territory in important areas. These advantages would have more than offset the loss of some Indian territory in certain areas, leaving India in a much better bargaining position at the post-war negotiating table. Even though such wars might not go on for very long due to international pressures, Clausewitz's dictum is still valid, and the prime objective in war must remain the attrition or destruction of the enemy's armed forces, leaving him defenceless.

An additional reason for the Government directive not to lose any territory might have been the fear of loss of morale and something like panic reaction in the public over initial military reverses. This fear was natural and probably well-justified. The remedy, however, would appear to lie not in tying down the forces to static defence but to educate the public regarding the nature and conduct of war and the elementary facts about defence matters. This education is vital in a democracy in order to encourage informed national debate and consensus on important defence decisions. Indian democracy cannot be considered safe and full-fledged while vital defence matters remain esoteric and totally unfamiliar to the citizen and the voter.

Pakistani commanders seem to have enjoyed a great advantage in this respect. They were, of course, not accountable to the public or their elected representatives but were answerable only to their own comrades and brothers-in-arms manning the government at Islamabad. So they regrouped their forces freely and conducted the operations only in the light of military requirements. They could thin out unimportant sectors, create a strong strike force of armoured and infantry divisions, and paralyse Indian offensive planning or manoeuvres by the mere threat of the strike force.

The lesson for the future is clear.

Quicker Military Responses Required

The East Bengal cauldron took a long time to come to boil. War came at least six months after it was seen coming. Such a long lead time for war preparations was exceptional and is not to be expected in the future. But even so many months were not found enough to complete all the preparations, although just enough had been done to win in the East and to hold the front in the West. The 101 Communication Zone Area operating on the Northern Axis could not be made stronger due, it has been claimed, to the logistic

difficulty of concentrating troops and dumping supplies in Meghalaya. If the Line of Communication through Meghalaya could be adequately improved, two divisions could have been launched from there by taking out troops from the three Corps. Similarly, the advance from Gadra Road on the Naya Chor axis in the southern Rajasthan sector could not be sustained due to the lack of Engineer resources to improve the lengthening L of C. The Civil Affairs Organisation inducted into Bangladesh after the Surrender was hastily improvised and did not function quite smoothly.

Indian Military planners, it seems, need to respond more quickly to the requirements of fast moving crises and operations. Since military men really learn their trade only during actual warfare, all deficiencies are almost impossible to remove in peace time. But greater efforts can perhaps be made in training to reduce the lead time and to produce quick and adequate military responses, by simplifying the procedures, reducing the paper work and providing the incremental elements also in peacetime Exercises and war games.

The Intelligence Aspect

The intelligence machinery gathering, evaluating and disseminating information about the enemy functioned perhaps better in 1971 than it had on previous occasions. The radio intercept and decoding service definitely gave valuable support before and during the operations. "Security" appears to have been well maintained throughout, and major clandestine operations were also undertaken.

But several deficiencies were also repeatedly felt. Commanders at various levels have testified to the handicap imposed on them by incorrect or inadequate intelligence. Predictive analysis by an integrated or at least well knit intelligence apparatus could have enabled the government to anticipate the momentous events of March/April 1971, and to be prepared for them. Pakistan's 7 Infantry Division was never reliably located and came to be called 'the Ghost Division' because it was reported from so many different localities. Its known existence and unknown location tied down all the Indian commanders, from the Kashmir Valley to Rajasthan, as each felt compelled to take into account the possibility of the Ghost Division striking in his sector. Even the 1 Armoured Division of Pakistan was not reliably located till the second week of December 71.

On the tactical level too, intelligence proved

far from satisfactory. The unreported but very real presence of strong Pak forces behind Islamgarh endangered the Indian Army brigade advancing on Rahimyar Khan, in the central Rajasthan sector, and it was perhaps lucky that the Indian force had not embroiled itself deeper. Again, the existence of the new road linking Kaliakair and Sabhar was discovered fortuitously and enabled the 101 Communication Zone troops to reach Dhaka without crossing a major river. It is surprising that Indian Intelligence had been totally ignorant of the existence of this road, in spite of all the sources available to it, including the Mukti Bahini and the friendly population in Bangladesh. It should also be noted that combat intelligence in the battle zone is basically the concern of the field commander.

Intelligence agencies naturally tend to play safe by forwarding to the user all reports received, and the Indian agencies acted accordingly in 1971. This only confused the users. Passing on the information without careful evaluation was unfortunate. The multiplicity of Intelligence agencies working in the field without any centralised control resulted in unhealthy rivalry and waste of effort. There were many cases in which a vitally important information gathered by the interrogation of prisoners of war did not reach in time those to whom it would have proved invaluable. There was delay in interpretation and dissemination of information from aerial photo reconnaissance. In the future, electronic warfare would play a crucial role. The need for electronic warfare units was keenly felt by some commanders even in 1971.

These deficiencies luckily did not prevent the Indian Armed Forces from conducting highly successful campaigns in 1971. But they deserve serious attention from the Indian Government.

The Mukti Bahini

Two widely different assessments about the effectiveness of the Mukti Bahini were voiced after the war.

One assessment, made by many Pakistani and Indian officers, opined that the Mukti Bahini was quite ineffective and would never have liberated Bangladesh without the active intervention of the Indian forces. The Bengalees had lived in terror of the Pak army for decades. Sent in to raid a small Pak army post, they fired a few shots from several hundred yards, and fled as soon as Pak troops fired back, often throwing away their arms in the nearest pond.

The very large force, therefore, could not liberate any sizeable area. Zia's Brigade declined to attack Kamalpur when this was suggested. The Mukti Bahini commanders were holding back, to conserve their strength and weapons intact in order to capture power after liberation.

The opposite assessment claims that, with small beginnings, the Mukti Bahini ruled in the country side after the monsoon, and also in the cities at night. They carried out explosions and assassinations in Dhaka itself. They made Pak troops afraid to move out except in large bodies, particularly at night, and hampered their mobility by destroying many bridges. Pak troops were getting demoralized by autumn. Osmani claimed that the Mukti Bahini would have liberated Bangladesh in ten more months without the intervention of the Indian Army.

The truth lies in between these totally different assessments. The Mukti Bahini could not fight pitched battles even in November 1971, as it lacked heavy weapons and air support. The frogmen of the Mukti Bahini showed great skill and dedication in their hazardous work of attacking enemy ships in harbours a hundred kilometres deep inside hostile territory. The students in the Mukti Bahini were highly motivated, though the EBR/EPR, it often seemed, were not.

Niazi said after the Surrender that the Mukti Bahini had made his forces blind and deaf. Help of the Mukti Bahini in giving intelligence, providing transport etc. was invaluable, although the information provided could not be militarily very valuable due to their lack of training and unfamiliarity with war equipment. In course of time, the Mukti Bahini would have become a formidable force, though it appears highly improbable that it could defeat the Pak Army in East Bengal on its own.

It, however, appears certain that a much smaller force better trained, better armed and highly motivated would have been more effective. The money and effort spent in training and arming this huge force of nearly 100,000 men hardly gave commensurate results during the liberation struggle. And after the liberation of Bangladesh, this horde of half-armed, half-disciplined and ill-assorted men created innumerable problems for its own government. Perhaps it was a political necessity for the Provisional Govt. of Bangladesh to raise such a large force, to keep the more volatile and militant of the refugees from mischief and to allow a controlled and monitored outlet for their feelings and energies. Tajuddin Ahmad and his colleagues may have hoped to convert the

large Mukti Bahini into some sort of a 'Land Army' to undertake reconstruction of the war ravaged country after its liberation. But events developed differently. During the struggle, the ebullient and controversial Maj Gen S.S. Uban had strongly criticised the Mukti Bahini set-up and plan : after the war Gen Manekshaw, Lt Gen Aurora and many others agreed with him substantially, though not entirely. With the benefit of hind sight, history must record it as a major mistake that a force of the size and nature of the Mukti Bahini was created. And it was undoubtedly a graver mistake that the Bangladesh forces included disparate elements like the half-civilian Gano Bahini, the professional Niyomito Bahini, and the elitist Mujib Bahini.

The Para Military Forces

During the Indo-Pak War 1971, the para military forces, and particularly the recently created Border Security Force, played a high profile role. From the middle of May, the BSF along the East Bengal border was placed under the command of the Army. In the prewar skirmishes the force was actively involved, and fought alongside the Army during the December war in several sectors. Most of the Army commanders had praised for the general performance of the BSF. But several unsatisfactory aspects were also pointed out by them.

The para military forces were expected to fulfil two very different roles: one involving active hostilities and counter insurgency operations, and the second in aid of the Civil Power. These two different roles were almost impossible to play satisfactorily. Not having been trained with Army troops in peace, the para military forces could not operate efficiently alongside the Army in war. Even their signal channels were different. Although the BSF had a good deal of fire power, the men were not trained for war. There was, above all, a lack of mutual confidence and understanding between the officers and the men of the different forces and the Army.

Army officers felt, therefore, that the BSF at least should be clubbed together with the Army and employed primarily to repel external aggression. It would be always available to go to the aid of the Civil Power in case of need, just as the Army itself was always available. But such employment should be the exception and not the normal role of the BSF. Other para military forces like the CRPF might be earmarked for the main role of maintaining law and order and assisting the civil authorities. If the BSF was to operate with the Army, the Force should reflect the work, culture and ethos of the Armed Forces and

not those of the Police. It might be necessary for the BSF to be officered by Army Officers, retired or seconded to the BSF, and the BSF in that case should be placed under the control of the Ministry of Defence instead of the Ministry of Home Affairs, on the pattern of the Coast Guard. Such arrangements, it was felt, would enable the BSF to get sufficiently integrated with the Army, enabling it to replace regular Army units in less critical sectors of the battle front.

CONCLUSION

This detailed and frank account of the 1971 war has revealed several inadequacies, and even mistakes, of the Indian Govt. leaders and commanders at different levels. Apart from those already discussed, a few other minor mistakes can be listed. Imposing, and lifting soon after, the naval "blockade" of Pakistan was one. The specially kind treatment of and amenities provided to the Pak PsOW - much beyond the provisions of the Geneva Convention - appears to have been another. It produced no discernible gratitude or friendliness towards India in the PsOW or the Pakistan public. Similarly, the generosity and consideration shown by India in the Simla Agreement did not pay off, and bought no goodwill or amity.

On the whole, however, it was indeed a brilliant performance. Strong public pressure for premature military intervention in East Bengal was successfully resisted by a conscientious Army Chief and a strong and stable Central Government leadership. For once, the diplomatic service received universal acclaim for mobilising public opinion abroad. The media was handled with exceptional competence and sensitivity. The political and military goals were carefully determined, dovetailed and pursued single mindedly. An extremely cohesive team of political leaders, Service Chiefs and bureaucrats planned everything comprehensively and well in time. The Bangladesh leaders, labouring under acute tensions and innumerable pressures, were treated with consideration and the greatest diplomatic skill. International pressures from many quarters were withstood. Redoubtable practitioners of 'real politik' like Kissinger were worsted at their own game. A frail lady and her seemingly soft, "Gandhian" people, faced with mortal peril, fought back with iron determination and uncanny skill, crushed the aggressor, made 'paper tigers' of his mighty friends, and dazzled the world with a brilliant military victory. Power balance in South Asia re-adjusted itself into a new equilibrium commensurate with the changed profile and mood of the new India. December 1971 gave birth to two new nations : Bangladesh, and India too. None could foresee then the deeply disappointing developments in the next few years.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Times of India, 29 August 1978.
2. East Bengal had many left wing parties before 1971, e.g. East Pakistan Communist Party (Marxist and Leninist) led by Muhammad Toaha and Abdul Huq, East Bengal Communist Party led by Abdul Matin and Alauddin Ahmad, and NAP (Bhashani). There were also in the Mukti Bahini some dedicated Left Groups, like Abu Tahar, Ziauddin (not famous Zia) and the secret Jatyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) which emerged openly after 1971. The Leftists favoured a long war of independence waged by the workers and peasants without major assistance from capitalist India. They wanted to win the independence struggle as well as the class struggle simultaneously.
3. Sodhi, Brig, H.S., "Operation Wind Fall".

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