

# The 1965 WAR: Recollections of a Bengali

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(Author's note: This account relies on memory. Facts and anecdotes are used to elucidate. Unless specified, dates are indicative).

WHEN war commenced on 6 September 1965, I was a covenanted officer in Lloyds Bank (later Grindlays, ANZ now StanChart) in the river port and important jute trading and industrial center of Narayanganj.

I was the only Bengali in the Lloyds covenanted cadre (boxwallahs). All others were Brits or Pakistanis. The staffing of foreign multinationals (e.g. ICI; Levers; Tobacco) in Pakistan mirrored more sharply the poor representation in the numbers and position of Bengalis in the bureaucracy and armed forces. This disparity became a combustible issue in Pakistan.

I mention this to show that private sector employment practices replicate a country's public sector architecture of power, a phenomenon that's not unique or limited to Pakistan. But this profile inhibited national cohesion.

## The mood

The public mood in East Pakistan exhibited a degree of euphoria even jingoism, normal when hostilities occur. The Bengalis responded as good patriots, rallied behind the government and hoped for victory.

But this feeling was not, and could not be, as robust as that amongst the West Pakistanis. The fighting was happening far away. We weren't physically threatened. Not many households were directly affected by their family members being in harm's way, since the number of Bengali servicemen especially infantry was small.

Moreover, details of infiltration in Kashmir were didn't know about Operation Gibraltar then—preceding the actual shooting war were a bit of a mystery to the Pakistani public especially Bengalis. For them, Kashmir didn't resonate in the same existential way it did amongst Punjabis.

But Bengalis were also uneasy. East Pakistan was defenceless, with three anaemic brigades. This helplessness was tempered by faint stoicism that India wouldn't or didn't need to attack in the east. The logic was that Delhi gained nothing by dividing her forces and enlarging the conflict.

Pakistan's fortunes, like India's earlier empires, would be decided on the Punjab plains; the difference was this encounter was origi-

nating from the east rather than the west, something that hadn't happened that often (except under the colonial Brits) since Alexanderian times!

It was GHQ mantra that the "battle for East Bengal would be fought in the West Punjab". Propounded by Pakistan Army's second C-in-C (1948-51) British Gen. Sir Douglas David Gracey (1 Gurkha), this dictum may have had strategic rationale but was political dynamite (The State of Martial Rule-Ayesha Jalal p.85)

We weren't sure whether Delhi's restraint in the eastern theatre was psywar strategy or biding time. This ambivalence provided scant comfort for Bengalis, isolated from the outside world, with no control over their destiny. These realisations galled.

We depended on Radio Pakistan, overseas radio and the press for war news. At first, there was confusion and apprehension, with conflicting reports that Lahore had fallen. We were relieved when this proved incorrect.

## Morale

Our morale bounded with the news that sword of honour winner Major Raja Aziz Bhatti, 17 Punjab, had received the posthumous Nishan-e-Haider (equivalent to Bir Shreshto) for repulsing attacks in the Burki area of the BRB (Bombarwala-Ravi-Bedian) Canal. This suggested our soldiers were fighting well; Indian attacks were stoutly resisted and not making headway.

The PAF's performance, especially of F-86 fighter pilot Sqn. Ldr. M.M.Alam, raised spirits. He reportedly shot down five Indian Hunters attacking Sargodha in one engagement on 6 September, becoming an instant ace (Battle for Pakistan: The Air War of 1965, John Fricker).

The IAF disputes this (see Laying the Sargodha Ghost to Rest by Pushpinder Singh in Vayu Aerospace Review November 1985). Post war findings reduced the nine kills credited to Alam to a still impressive five (refer Alam's Speed Shooting Classic, Air Cdre M. Kaiser, Defence Journal September 2001).

Much was made that Alam was a Bengali (actually, he's from West Bengal). The Dhaka Municipal Corporation gifted him a house, which he never took. Alam got an SJ and bar for his exploits. Reportedly he had a checkered career after 1965, found religion and retired as an Air Commodore in 1982.

Also much publicized was the 7 September attack on Kalaikunda air base by Dacca-based 14 Squadron

F-86Fs (dubbed Tail Choppers) led by Sqn. Ldr. (later Air Marshal) Shabbir Hussain Syed (awarded SJ) in which IAF planes were destroyed without any PAF loss.

This raid struck some of us as odd. Prudence dictated a reciprocal restraint by Pakistan in the east. We rejoiced at this exploit, wondered when the IAF would retaliate and were puzzled when it didn't, even following raids on Bagdogra, Agartala and Barrackpore.

Was Kalaikunda then not all it was claimed to be? The PAF asserted it destroyed ten and damaged five Canberras and two Hunters on the ground. It's odd to say the least that the IAF would keep bombers so far

intervention and suicidal valour (foreshadowing LITEX) were meant to boost public morale but lacked credibility and suggested a heightened level of official anxiety. Brig (ret'd.) Qayyum Sher HJ, who made a name for himself on the Lahore front, had remonstrated with ISPR Maj. (later Brig) AR Siddiqi that such drive didn't impress the front-line troops. But the PR machinery continued to churn out unadulterated nonsense relentlessly.

My apprehensions about the war's progress peaked when it was announced (by Ayub?) around 20 September that a tank battle at Chawinda, Sialkot sector was the biggest since Stalingrad (August

Probably the funniest one happened a week into the war. Narayanganj's main street was Quaid-e-Azam Road, along which Lloyds bank was located. Adjacent was the Narayanganj Club. It had seen better days but still put out an impressive lunch (especially fried bhetki with tartare sauce) served by a waiter in full but somewhat tattered regalia.

Just before noon on or around 12 September, there was a huge bang just outside the bank.

One rumour was that the IAF had dropped bombs. Immediately, the bank shut its doors. We contacted various sources to ascertain the cause.

It transpired that a three-wheeler

of cacophony. After that, peace and tranquility would return to the branch.

Lloyds froze Tolaram's accounts on the declaration of war under Islamabad's Enemy Property Ordinance. That stopped Kalyanchand's visits to the branch. At first we relished the silence his absence brought. But after a while, we missed the instant boisterousness his arrival had wrought.

## Visit to Rangpur

Around 14 September, although the jute portfolio was held by an English colleague, my Scots branch manager Steve requested me to visit Rangpur in north Bengal to check on Tolaram's stocks. He explained that

newcomer to be Capt. (later Major General) Khalid Musharruf BU, relocating with his troops (4 E Bengal or the Baby Tigers), raised just before the war. He was commissioned in 1958 in 15/17 Punjab but later transferred to 4 E Bengal. The East Bengal Regiment was the only pure Bengali unit in the Pakistani Army.

I first met Khalid in late 1963/early 1964 when he was serving with my late brother Major Mahmood Kamal, Guides Cavalry, then commanding K (Kamal) Company of the SSG (Pakistan's commando force) based in Thakurgaon, Dinajpur district.

One of K Company's tasks was to interdict the six miles wide Siliguri Gap railway not far from Thakurgaon in case of war. From the Tetulia border running alongside a river, it's possible to make out the smoke of the Indian engine. Sensibly, 14 Div. GOC Maj. Gen. Fazal Muqem Khan did not order this raid. Just as well.

An attack on Siliguri probably would have been as abortive as were SSG para raids on Adampur, Halwara and Pathankot air bases without any discernible impact on India's war making capability (see Operation Gibraltar-Role of SSG Para Commandos by ex-SSG CO Col (ret'd.) S.G. Mehdi, Defence Journal July 1988).

In the article, Col. Mehdi also states he counseled GHQ against Gibraltar, which he considered impractical. He later filed a libel suit against C-in-C Gen. Musa citing unwarranted allegations in his book My Version against Mehdi.

Evidently, the post war rhetoric amongst and between the participants on both sides appears to be as toxic and incendiary as the actual combat in 1965! The revelations of peace can be as bewilderingly opaque as the fog of war!

The 14th Division was the only division based in East Pakistan that at its best never exceeded four weak brigades from 1947 till early April 1971. Then 9 and 16 Divisions minus its heavy stuff were airlifted from Kharian and Quetta, respectively, to tackle the resistance.

My brother rated Khalid as a hardy soldier with plenty of stamina and a sound tactician. Khalid distinguished himself in 1971 (sector 2 and K Force commander), became CGS in 1972 and COAS on 5 November 1975 before losing his life two days later to dissident troops of 10 E Bengal—ironically, a unit he had raised in 1971.

Khalid's presence on the train

was reassuring. He was in a gung-ho mood, with high morale, prepared for a fight and confident of winning. He chatted and parted company after reaching Rangpur around 11PM. We never met again.

I spent the night at the railway waiting room, inspected the godowns the next day, found everything in order and caught the afternoon train to Dhaka. A small damage to the Rangpur railway station was attributed to strafing by IAF Hunter, but I couldn't corroborate this. That was the closest I got to the "war" zone, my craving for action satisfied vicariously!

## Cease fire

The cease-fire on 23 September was greeted with relief in the east and anger in the west especially amongst the Punjabis. Many of the latter were convinced Pakistan was winning when Ayub capitulated under Anglo-US pressure. But Pakistan, fighting on its inventory was down to two days POL and running short of ammo. Ayub was obliged to call it a day.

There were four E Bengal battalions in the Pakistan Army in 1965, which totaled about 230,000 men organized in eight divisions (IISS 1964-65). 1E Bengal defended the BRB Canal line stoutly, and got the highest number of awards of any unit.

Neither Islamabad nor GHQ much publicised this fact. It didn't dovetail with the conventional wisdom that Bengalis didn't make as good soldiers as the 'martial' Punjabis and Pathans. But Lahoris treated Bengali soldiers generously. Shopkeepers often refused money for goods or services.

Opinions differed about Tashkent as over the cease-fire. Bengalis supported it; Punjabis were livid. This sealed Ayub's fate. Bhutto skillfully used Punjabi resentment to sweep the province in the 1970 elections.

## Summing up

The war devastated Ayub; shattered martial myths; highlighted societal contradictions and fatally exacerbated inter-wing tensions. The crack became a chasm.

FM William Slim's Defeat into Victory is a military classic that informs and entertains. Few if any of the books on 1965 by Indian or Pakistani servicemen or civilians reach Slim's erudition. Their accounts bring to mind Lloyd George's stern admonition to FM Douglas Haig that the brass hats shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that the seat of the intelligence is in the chin!

The author is a free lancer.

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forward in the east when the war's center of gravity was in the west.

## Lifestyle and doubts

Within a week, Bengalis were taking the war in stride. We went about our work, studies and other activities as normally as possible under the circumstances. There was no petrol rationing; cars moved with their headlights half-covered with black paint; a blackout was diligently observed at night, enforced by volunteer wardens. ack-ack guns ringed the airport.

Economic, travel and social transactions including crime dropped markedly. There were no shortages or hoarding. Prices were stable or slid as demand faltered. Political activities ceased. Parties issued patriotic statements unceasingly.

But doubts about the war's progress started creeping in from the second week. They first surfaced for me when accounts circulated about horsemen in green fighting alongside Pakistani forces, and heroic volunteers strapping explosives to their bodies destroyed Centurions and Shermans by rolling under their tracks! Curious these soldiers were not named nor given awards.

These claims of extra-terrestrial

1942-February 1943).

I had read enough military history to know that the largest WW2 armoured engagement (2,700 German and 3,400 Soviet tanks deployed) was Kursk in July 1943, that is, after Stalingrad; that Stalingrad was a grinding siege fought under terrible conditions between Red Army and Wehrmacht footsloggers, and wondered about Ayub's or his speech writers' knowledge or distortion of military history.

I suspect Stalingrad was mentioned so as to resonate with the public because more Pakistanis had heard about Stalingrad as a paunch; lacked formal education; dressed modestly but untidily in inexpensive casual clothes and had an impressive mastery over numbers.

Every business day, he would turn up at the branch around noon. His entourage comprised his trusted finance manager, independent jute brokers and assorted hangers-on. He convivially bellowed his opinions throughout the branch in a booming voice; sent the advances staff into a frenzy while they struggled manfully to calculate swiftly how much money he could withdraw (between Rs.5-10 lakhs daily—a lot of money then); and left in a blaze

cycle rickshaw had burst both its rear tyres simultaneously. We breathed a sigh of relief. The rickshaw puller was roundly chastised. This experience showed the jitters below the placid surface.

Lloyds Bank was a major financier of raw jute exports where Marwaris were major players. Narayanganj branch had the largest number of Lloyds' jute clients including Tolaram Bachhra, a top exporter.

Tolaram's managing director Kalyanchand Saraogi was a character. He was short, dark, with thinning hair, a faint disheveled moustache and the beginnings of a paunch; lacked formal education; dressed modestly but untidily in inexpensive casual clothes and had an impressive mastery over numbers.

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the presence of a white man checking jute bales pledged/ hypothesized to the bank may be misinterpreted (MI6 and all that). Could I help?

Of course I would. This was a chance to earn credits. I had never visited Rangpur. A Cook's tour at bank expense sounded fun. I was young, confident and on top of the world, having married six weeks ago. My parents and new bride questioned my brashness but didn't press their objections.

I traveled by train alone first class leaving Dhaka early morning, reaching Bahadurabad Ghat early afternoon without mishap or excitement. I crossed by ferry to the western bank and got on another train for Rangpur with a compartment to myself. The train left late evening and creaked and groaned at around 30mph.

The journey was uneventful till we stopped at about 9 PM at a station I can't remember the name a short distance from Rangpur. There I saw soldiers on the platform. They boarded the train. The next thing I knew was my carriage door being flung open and an uniformed figure flung himself face down on the empty bench opposite.

## Encounter with A Soldier

After a few moments, our eyes met, and to my delight, I found the

# China's naval power: An aircraft carrier of its own?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

IN recent days, the US Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick, has expressed concerns on China's military spending and its objectives at a seminar in New York on US-China policy.

## China as "strategic competitor"

The concerns of the Bush Administration are not new. Before 9/11, the Bush administration and the then National Security Adviser Dr. Rice (presently the Secretary of State) considered China as "strategic competitor", not as "strategic partner". Being a specialist on Communist Russia, she regarded China as another "enemy" of the US in the Asia-Pacific region. This view was contrary to that of Clinton's era.

In that year in April, a US surveillance aircraft strayed into the airspace of China and a full diplomatic row began in which the Bush Administration had to climb down from its demand and had to accept what China insisted. The plane was inspected fully and then released by China.

It was the first taste of strategic weakness of the US to China. Then came 9/11 and the Bush administration changed its foreign policy gear and turned towards Iraq and the war is still continuing, although in May 2003 President Bush prematurely declared "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq.

## China new strategies

China has emerged as an industrial power and its economic growth has been staggering. Within the next two decades, economists predict that China will surpass the economy of the US. It is the third largest trading nation in the world (China's exports in last August to the US only stood at US\$67.8 billion dollars).

China is also taking new initiatives in strategic policies. It has mended its relations with Russia

and India to counter potential threat of the US in Asia Pacific. It is noted that China, Russia and India constitute 40 per cent of world's population and 20 per cent of world's GDP.

China first settled border dispute with Russia. In July of this year, Russia and China, under the umbrella of the Shanghai Accord of the Central Asian countries, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, they issued a nine-page declaration in which,

gress), released in August, the top three buyers of weapons, in 2004, were India (US\$5.7 billion), China (US\$2.2 billion) and Saudi Arabia (US\$2.9 billion) and the three top suppliers were US, Russia and Britain.

The total spending by developing world in 2004 stood at US\$21.8 billion, more than US\$6 billion than in 2003. The total arm sales and weapons transfer agreements to both industrialised and developing

that China is a long way off to possess an aircraft carrier. Even if it does, it will siphon off resources from other People's Liberation Army Navy. These include anti-access capabilities for use in a future conflict over Taiwan such as fielding more diesel-electric submarines, anti-surface cruise missile platforms and ballistic missiles with manoeuvring warheads that navy officials project could be capable of targeting US warships.

**Many strategists believe that China's ultimate intentions are unclear. Some say that since the core structure of the ex-Russian carrier was destroyed before China bought it, it is questionable whether China would pursue to invest money and effort to make the Varyag to a fully operational capability. US defence and military officials are also skeptical about the carrier because China first has to learn how to conduct integrated carrier operations with the rest of the fleet, including having to acquire the requisite escorts. Past Russian and US experiences demonstrate that such skills and operations are not quickly learnt.**

among others, they urged the US to withdraw its military bases from the Central Asian Republics as the war on Afghanistan had ended. (Uzbekistan has served its formal notice to the US to withdraw its bases by December this year). The recent Russia-Chinese military exercise is an instance in point of growing Sino-Russian relationship.

China's Prime Minister visited India last April and concluded 11 agreements covering a wide range of subjects. Most importantly China and India came into agreement to settle the border dispute. China and India restored its friendship of the early 50s and declared a new dimension of relations that might counter US's dominance in Asia Pacific.

## Global Weapon Sales in 2004

For some time China turned its attention to weapons acquisition. According to a report of the US Congressional Research Service (a division of the US Library of Con-

world in 2004 was nearly US\$37 billion.

The annual study is considered the most thoroughly publicly available report on global weapons sales. In the study's introduction, defence specialist Richard Grimmer, writes: "Relationships between arms suppliers and recipients continue to evolve in response to changing political, military, and economic circumstances. Nonetheless, the developing world continues to be the primary focus of foreign arms sales activity by conventional weapons suppliers."

According to another report, the defence budgets of the US is currently US\$400 billion, China's US\$90 billion and India's US\$30 billion. The European Union spends about US\$200 billion.

## Chinese Aircraft Carrier?

What China lacks in military power is the aircraft carrier of its own on the sea. The US arms strategists think,

Retired US Navy rear Admiral Eric McVadon, an expert on the Chinese military and former US military Attaché to Beijing, reportedly said that it would be a little surprising if China were seriously pursuing a carrier as up to now Beijing has focused on improving its anti-access capabilities in a Taiwan crisis scenario situation in which a Chinese aircraft carrier would be of marginal value.

However, it is reported that Chinese navy is conducting repairs on the ex-Russian Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier Varyag, raising the question of whether China is seeking a carrier of its own. In the latest developments, images show that the workers at the Chinese Dalian Shipyard have repainted the ex-Russian carrier with the markings and colour scheme of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

James's Defence Weekly of 17 August, 2005, writes: "JDW believes that PLAN technicians

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# China and the Indo-US Entente

JABIN JACOB

US media coverage of Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee's and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's recent visits to the US paled in comparison to the attention devoted to the forays of Chinese companies. Haier and CNOCC into the United States. Alongside the minor currency revaluation effected by China in late July, these visits have become a distant memory in Washington. Both, before and after Singh's visit, the Chinese government reminded the Bush administration where its priorities ought to lie.

The first reminder, in the context of Taiwan, was a warning by a Chinese general that the US was a nuclear target. Soon after Dr Singh's visit, a series of hard-hitting articles appeared in the Chinese press, reacting to a Pentagon report that "wantonly played up" Chinese military threats."

The Chinese messages for India ranged from warning to hopes that India would not allow the US to scuttle the improving Sino-Indian relationship. Following Mukherjee's visit, an opinion piece in the People's Daily, titled, "Washington draws India in against China", pointedly asked if the defence agreement was directed against China, calling it "of special significance...that the United States on the one hand presses the EU to keep arms embargo on China and urges Israel to cancel arms sales to China while on the other hand signs a wide-ranging defence agreement with India." The editorial described the pact as "partly intended to diminish China's influence in this region" and quoted an unnamed former Indian ambassador to the US saying that while China was not mentioned, the China factor was "only too obvious". Dr Singh's oblique reference to China in his interview to The Washington Post saying, "we have seen in our neighbourhood reckless proliferation in disregard of all international obligations", could not have endeared him to the Chinese.

Again, on 20 July, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, summoned the American chargé-affaires to register his government's displeasure over the Pentagon Report, calling it, "a move to grossly interfere in China's internal affairs and foment dissension between China and its neighbouring countries". The next day, a People's Daily opinion piece stated that the US had since the beginning of the year, "made frequent adjustments to its strategic disposition in the Asia-Pacific region" and was trying "to restrain, encircle and block up China". In all these cases, while apportioning major blame to the US, China also sought, through direct and indirect reference to

India, to remind it not to use its burgeoning ties with the US to target China.

Overall, however, China has stressed the positives in the Sino-Indian relationship, noting Wen Jiabao's successful visit to India, and the two countries' desire for a "strategic cooperative partnership". When Hu Jintao met Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh in Kazakhstan, before the SCO summit in early July, the CPC mouthpiece said, relations between China and India had a "historic opportunity for development". China also appeared to believe that India was as wary of American intentions as the Chinese saying, "India has no intention to confront with (sic) China". On 18 July, the People's Daily, reporting Condoleezza Rice's enthusiasm for "building the closest possible relationship between the US and India", stated that "[t]he Indians, traditionally wary of a US bear hug, have not been overly enthusiastic."

While observing that Dr Singh's address to a joint meeting of Congress was "an honour reserved for the United States' closest allies", and quoting Bush that the relationship between India and the US had "never been stronger", Chinese media was also noted Singh's reassurance, "I don't think either Pakistan or China has to worry".

The Chinese also used subtler tactics to get its message across to India. China, for example, had a different take from Indian commentators on American support for India's candidature for a permanent seat on the UNSC, referring to "US disquiet on the issue" before Dr Singh's visit, and later reported that Bush had turned down support for India. In another play, the Chinese press, noting that Dr Singh's coalition government depended on the Left parties for support, suggested that he had "to be careful not to upset them too much". General secretaries of the major Indian communist parties had, incidentally, concluded visits to China only recently.

The US offer, in March this year, to "help India become a major world power," notwithstanding, India must remember that the stakes are far higher for the US in the Sino-US relationship, than in Indo-US relations. Nevertheless, the China-India-US triangle, despite other triangles, still matters the most. Talk of being the "swing state" is heady stuff, but as the weakest link, Indian interests are all the more difficult to articulate or defend. It is a challenge for India that calls for smarter alignments, not non-alignment, nor an alliance.

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