

# Principles of war and the Bangladesh War of Liberation 1971

AIR CDR (RETD) ISHFAQ ILAHI CHAUDHURY, ndc, psc

**T**HE CROWNING moment of the Liberation War of Bangladesh came on the afternoon of 16 December 1971, when the Pakistani forces unconditionally surrendered to the Allied Command in Dhaka. The event marked the culmination of a 9-month long armed struggle by the Bangladeshi people that started with the treacherous attack on unarmed civilians by the Pakistani forces on the night of 25-26 March 1971. The Liberation War had continued to remain a rallying point - an event that unites us all and makes us proud as a nation.

From the point of view of military study, the Liberation War remains significant because it was the only war fought across Bangladesh in modern times. The war had its initial resistance phase (March-April '71), guerrilla phase (May-November '71) that set the stage for a conventional war (3-16 December '71) between Allied forces of Bangladesh and India and the armed forces of Pakistan. More than two million combatants saw action in the war. Thousands laid down their lives often unknown, unheralded. The war changed the geo-strategic scenario of South Asia forever. It is with this background we shall carry out a brief study of the Liberation War in the light of the "Principles of War" as laid down in the Military Doctrine.

#### Principles of War

War, despite violence, death and destruction, had always been a part of the human history. Rise and fall of civilisations, discoveries and inventions, technological advancement and social revolutions have often been the outcome of war. Its study, therefore, had occupied the minds of great philosophers, statesmen, strategists and tacticians. From Sun Tzu (6th century BC), Kautilya (4th century BC), Clausewitz (1780-1831), Fuller (1878-1968) to Liddell Hart (1895-1970), we have substantial literature on

war. Based on their studies, the Principles of War evolved at the turn of the last century as a set of guidelines, both for war strategy and for battle tactics. The Principles of War are tenets used by military organisations to focus the thinking of leaders toward successful prosecution of combat operations. The principles are also a useful tool for us in studying and analyzing past wars. These principles varied somewhat from time to time because of the changing nature of warfare. Despite small variations, the principles stood the test of times those that were true in the age of the sword and arrow are still true in the age of computerised guided weapons. While adhering to the principles of war will not necessarily guarantee victory, its violation would certainly spell disaster.

In the subsequent paragraphs, we shall examine how the adherence to or violations of the Principles of War determined the outcome of the Liberation War in 1971.

**Offensive Action**

A military force must go on the offensive if it hopes to win the war. One cannot expect to win a war by taking the defensive only; success comes to those who aggressively move forward, catching the enemy off-guard to force them to surrender. The Bangladeshi forces proved their offensive prowess in innumerable skirmishes, ambushes and raids on Pakistani positions throughout March-November 1971. Battles of Kamalpur (Mymensingh), Salda Nadi (Comilla), Belonia (Feni) are few examples. This was quite in contrast with the Pakistani forces huddled up in bunkers trying to fight off the elusive 'Muktis'. While Pakistan Air Force (PAF) launched offensive raids on 3 December 1971 against the Indian Air Force (IAF) bases, they could not sustain the initiative due to lack of resources.

On the other hand, IAF's well-planned and sustained operations in both theatres of war caused enormous loss to the Pakistani forces. While in the west, IAF had put the PAF on the defensive, they had achieved complete control of the air in the east. Because the Pakistani forces in Bangladesh were distributed in penny-packets all along the border, they were incapable of launching a major offensive. Although Pakistan had built-up strong defensive positions along the border, the initiative had gone to the Allied forces. Allied forces in the east moved fast in all fronts, always on the offensive, never giving chance to the enemy to regroup and recover.

#### Concentration of Force

Some strategists term this as the most important principle. Study of past wars suggest that what decides the outcome of wars and battles is usually not

the total forces one has, but the quantum of forces where it counts. By December 1971, on paper, the Pakistani ground forces in Bangladesh were favourably poised for a long defensive battle: four Pakistani divisions compared to Allied forces' seven. In the events when the Allied forces attacked Pakistani strong points, such as in Hilli (Dinajpur), Ashuganj (Brahmanbaria), Chuangach (Jesore), Kamalpur (Mymensingh) they met with stiff resistance. However, the Allied strategy was to concentrate superior forces in the line of advance towards Dhaka, bypassing strongly held Pakistani positions. Thus the War ended with bulk of the Pakistani forces intact in their positions. In the air, the IAF correctly concentrated first on destroying the only runway in Tejgaon, Dhaka, thus grounding the PAF in Bangladesh within about 48 hours. It then shifted its attention to supporting the army's move towards Dhaka. Indian Navy, meanwhile, imposed a naval blockade cutting off the Pakistani forces in Bangladesh from the rest of the world.

#### Economy of Effort

This principle appears to contradict "Concentration of Effort", but in fact, the two complements each other. Economy of effort emphasizes on the most efficient and effective use of available resources without wasteful diversions and unnecessary depletion. Guerrilla operations by the Mukti Bahini throughout the War are a perfect example of "Economy of Effort", where small bands of guerrillas tied down large Pakistani forces. The run for Dhaka that was led by lightly armed paratroopers and infantry, leaving the heavier elements to contain the Pakistani forces in their positions was another example.

#### Flexibility

Flexibility is the ability to respond to unexpected changes. War and battle are complex, varying, and uncertain environments, subject to change without warning. These are rarely fought as



Indian tanks move towards Dhaka.

#### Unity of Command

#### (Cooperation)

Commanders have to ensure that the maritime, land and air components work in unison to achieve the objective. Achieving this unity between different forces, especially if they are from different countries, is particularly difficult. It is essential to establish a clear, coherent chain of command, so that all commanders receive their orders from one source - a Supreme Commander. During the Liberation War, at the highest political level, there was a clear understanding between the Bangladesh government in-exile and the Indian government. In the eastern theatre, the Allied forces under Lt. Gen. Jagit Singh Aurora worked with ease and understanding with his air and naval component Commanders as well as the Bangladeshi forces under his command. The team worked like a symphony. On the other hand, the Pakistanis suffered not only from a divisive leadership in Islamabad, but a serious gap developed between the Eastern Command and Headquarters and the Martial Law Administration. This, in the end, doomed any prospect of sustained military operations by the Pakistanis.

#### Security

The Commander must ensure that the enemy does not take advantage of his weaknesses. He is not to leave any sectors unprotected, because the enemy will hit where he is the weakest. He must have adequate reserve to deal with any adversary. Lt. Gen. Niazi, the Pakistani Commander, had so

dispersed his troops before the War that he left Dhaka virtually unprotected. When the Allied forces reached Dhaka on the morning of 16 December, Niazi had no combat troops to protect the capital. Security also means guarding and securing one's plans, deployments and movements from the enemy. Here too, the Allied forces had a vast advantage. The hostile population, especially defecting Bengali military personnel, continued to provide updated intelligence. The IAF's attack on the Governor House (Banga Bhaban) during a cabinet meeting on 14 December is a perfect example of timely intelligence put to good use.

#### Surprise

The principle of surprise is one of utmost importance. The Commander who surprises the enemy by attacking at a time and place and in a manner for which the enemy is unprepared, at once seizes the initiative. He uses secrecy, speed, and deception, to achieve the objective. "Operation Jackpot" by the Bangladeshi Naval Commandos that mined and sank a large number of ships in Chittagong and other ports on 15 August 71 is a good example of tactical surprise. PAF air attack on the IAF bases on the afternoon of 3 December, as the Indian Prime Minister was addressing a public rally in Calcutta, was a surprise, despite its failure to gain any strategic advantage. On the strategic level, the Allied forces' rush for Dhaka came as a surprise, because Pakistani plan was based on the assumption that the enemy would only occupy a chunk of territory to proclaim Bangladesh, not the Liberation of the whole country.

#### Morale

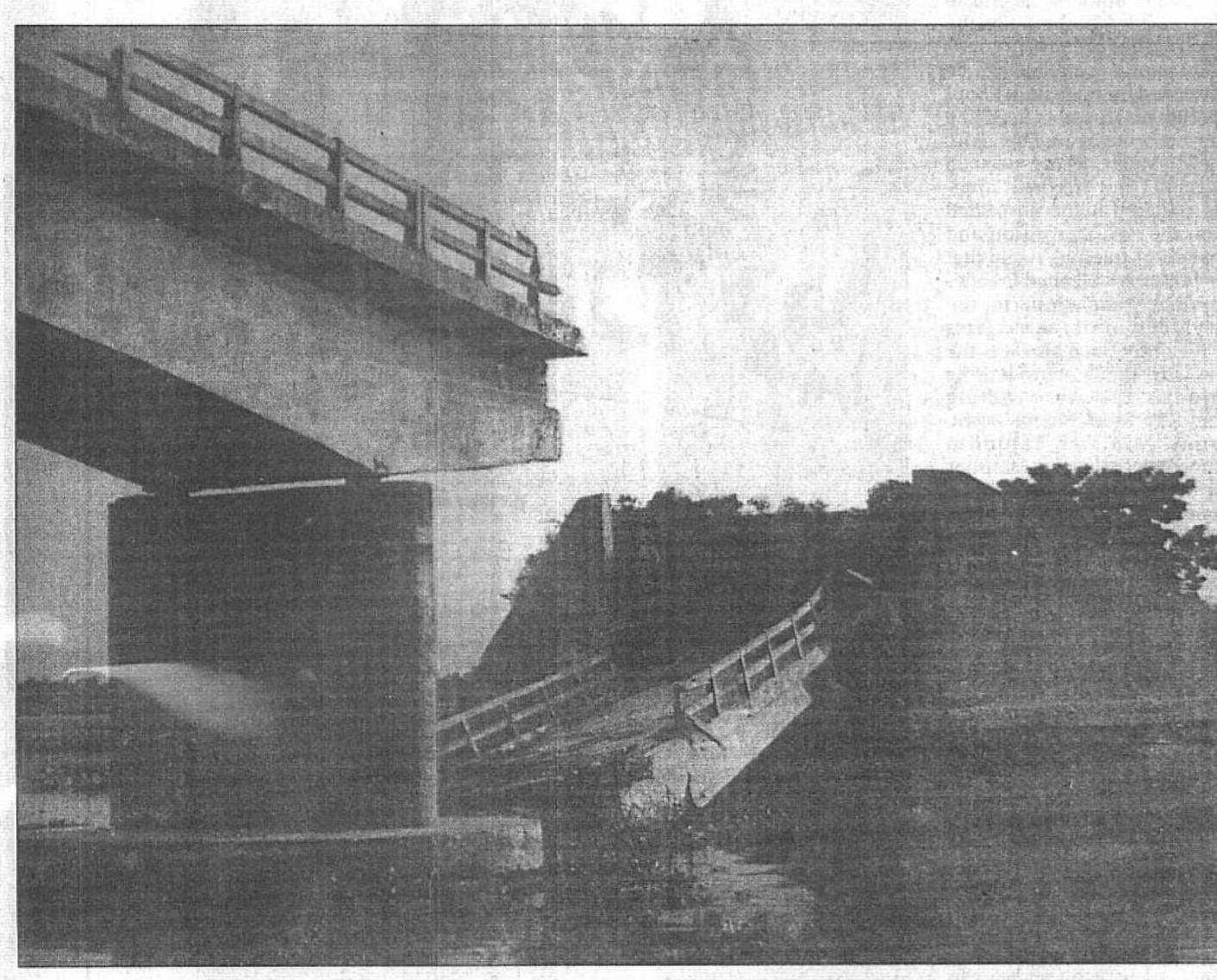
Morale is what keeps the soldiers going when the going gets tough. The Commander must prevent one's own forces from losing the will to fight while doing everything possible to lower the morale of the enemy. Throughout the War, the morale of the Mukti Bahini guerrillas was legendary appreciated even by their enemies. The reason, of course, was the deep conviction in the cause for which they were fighting. Once the full-scale war started, the Allied forces displayed high morale throughout. The troops knew that their cause is right, the public support at home and abroad is on their

side and they could see the victory ahead of them. The Pakistanis, on the other hand, were cut-off from home and were defending a land where the population had turned hostile. For example, PAF pilots ejecting on the outskirts of Dhaka were hacked to death by angry villagers, whereas the IAF pilots who ejected were received as heroes. Morale is a factor of discipline too. The discipline of the Pakistani forces had been compromised and their moral fabric destroyed because they had participated in murder, arson, loot and rape. If one could pinpoint a single factor behind the quick collapse and surrender of Pakistani forces, it would be "low morale".

#### Logistics (Administration)

This is the last but not the least important principle of war. Too often, commanders, while focusing on battle plans and manoeuvres, ignore the mundane task of providing the essential supplies food, clothing, ammunitions, fuel, spares etc. Napoleon said, "An army marches on its stomach." Yet, he lost an army trying to cross the Alps, ill-equipped, ill-prepared. Here too, the Allied forces had tremendous advantage. They had an unbroken, uninterrupted supply chain, unlike their enemy who was essentially cut-off from the rear. The friendly local population was always there to give the Allied forces a helping hand. On the other hand, movement of logistics for the Pakistanis within Bangladesh became extremely difficult because of continuous harassment by the 'Muktis' on the ground, as well as the ever-present IAF in the air. Despite huge stock of weapons and ammunitions in the dump, those could not reach the front-line forces.

The Bangladesh Liberation War could be studied from many aspects. I have tried to present only one the application of the Principles of War in its conduct. A careful study of the Liberation War would provide us with the lessons to prepare for the future. While we celebrate the Victory Day, we should spare a moment for the thousands of valiant soldiers, sailors and airmen of Bangladesh and India who fought shoulder to shoulder and whose blood flowed together to make us free.



A trail of devastation is what they left.

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