

# We pay homage to the valiant

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**O**NCE again it's the month of December and the air is filled with the patriotic spirit of the Liberation War that inspired a whole generation of Bengalis in 1971 to make supreme sacrifice for the nation. There is a new realization among the younger generation of the need to uphold the spirit of the Liberation War. Thanks to the hard works put in by various Freedom Fighters' organizations, especially the lead role played by the Sector Commanders' Forum; today's youth is more aware than before of the spirit and sacrifices made during Liberation War. There were deliberate attempts by those who usurped power after 1975 to distort the long, historic struggle that our nation waged against the Pakistani neocolonial forces. Instead of portraying it as a just struggle, the Liberation War was often portrayed by these elements as the culmination of a long drawn-out conspiracy by India, aided and abetted by pro-Indian political elements within the then East Pakistan. The war that resulted in the dismemberment of Pakistan was, in their view, an assault on Islam itself. Even in the official textbooks, websites and publications, the distortion of history was obvious and deliberate. This article aims to set some of the issues in

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, at considerable risk of her political future, went around the world capitals seeking support for the cause of Bangladesh. Despite tremendous public sympathy around the world, official support for Bangladesh was not easy to come by. Since the end of the Second World War, the borders of nation-states as they emerged from colonial rule were considered almost sacrosanct. Earlier attempts of cessation, such as was in case of Biafra in Nigeria, did not succeed despite popular domestic support for the cause. In case of Bangladesh too, western powers favoured a political solution within the framework of a united Pakistan. China, because of her strategic relationship with Pakistan and border dispute with India, sided with Pakistan on Bangladesh issue. Pakistani administration aided by the Bengali quislings went around the Muslim capitals and succeeded in convincing them that the struggle for Bangladesh was, in fact, a conspiracy to break up the largest Muslim country. Within India too, there was serious apprehension regarding the support for the independence of Bangladesh because of its possible fallout on cessationist movements within the Indian Union. The government was especially worried on the

from the northeast and north; the forces were deployed accordingly. The East Pakistan border was of tertiary importance, left to the Border security forces to deal with. As violence flared up in March 1971, thousands of refugees kept on pouring into India everyday. They were soon followed by the Bengali elements of the Pakistan Army, Border forces and the Police. After a short period of hesitation and apparent lack of direction, the government of India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi, came out in strong support of Bangladesh. Primary task at the initial stage was to provide for the food and shelter for the refugees that had gone up to two million by the end of November that year. The fact that the Indian army had neither planned nor prepared for a major operation in East Pakistan is borne from the fact that when in April 1971, Mrs. Gandhi asked the Army Chief Gen. Manekshaw, if he could launch a limited offensive in the East, Manekshaw, "risking a possible dismissal or even court-martial", told a rather shocked PM that he would need at least seven months to prepare. However, when the go ahead was given, the preparation was in great detail and deliberation.

While huge national and international effort went on to take care of the millions of refugees, many of whom had lost their near and dear ones or were themselves wounded and destitute, the Indian military swung into action to provide the base, regroup, rearm and train the nascent Mukti Bahini or Freedom Fighters (FF). In order to succeed, it is imperative for any guerrilla movement to have secure base where it could train, arm and plan, launch raids and assaults and then retreat for rest and recuperation. India provided such bases, from training and logistic bases in the rear to frontline launch pad for raids and assaults. The FFs had the freedom to choose the time, place and pace of their offensives and then fall back to the safe rear areas. The Pakistan Army, except in the immediate vicinity of the border, had no means to chase or attack the FF forces in their rear bases inside India. The initiative, therefore, always rested with the FFs.

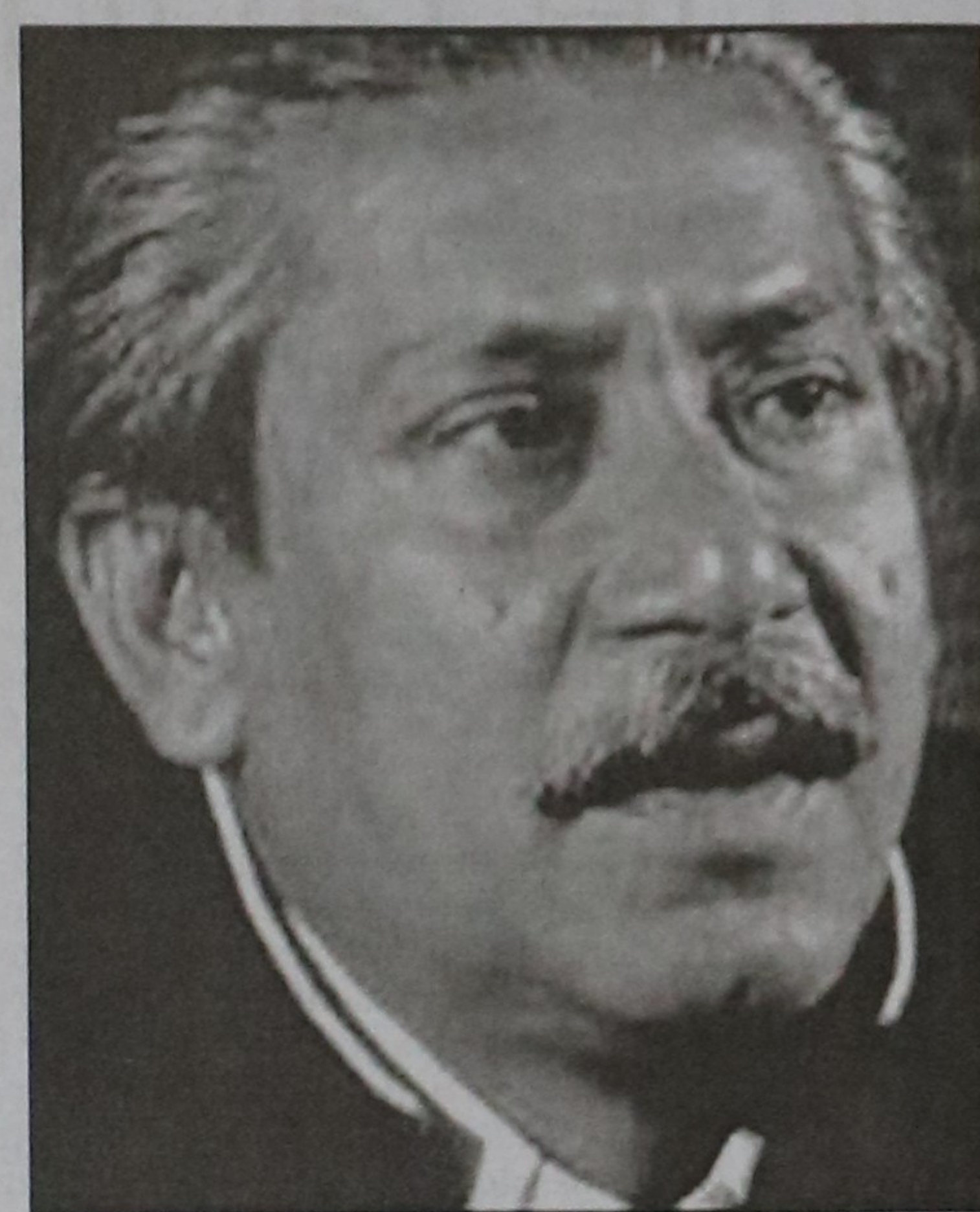
By the end of November 1971, the Pakistani forces in Bangladesh, then about three divisions strong, were dispersed thin along the 2840 Km border. These forces lacked fire power and mobility and were virtually without air support. The forces that were distributed in penny packets were cut off from one another due to constant harassing raids of the FFs. With air and sea routes with the rest of the world snapped by the end of November, the fate of Pakistani forces were virtually sealed. It was as if waiting for the Coup de grace.

As the war cloud gathered, India massed nearly 12 divisions of troops supported by a huge air and naval forces. The deployment of Indian and Pakistani forces in Bangladesh at the outbreak of war is shown in the attached map and the chart. Lt. Gen. Jagjit Singh Arora, was made Commander of all forces, including all Bangladesh forces, regular and guerrillas, in the eastern theatre. An Allied Command was established in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Despite preparation in both fronts, India was caught off guard by the pre-emptive attack by the Pakistan Air Force

(PAF) in the afternoon of 3 December 1971. The PAF was actually attacking Indian air bases in the west while Mrs. Gandhi was addressing a huge public meeting in Kolkata. However, the Indian response was swift; it launched counter-attack by land, air and sea in both fronts. The final countdown to the liberation of Bangladesh had begun.

The Indian Air Force neutralized PAF elements (one squadron of F-86E fighters) in Bangladesh within 48 hours of the start of the war. The Indian Navy with its Career Battle Group led by INS Vikrant established a naval blockade outside the two sea ports of Chittagong and Mongla. Ferocious attack by the guerilla and regular units of FFs had already taken its toll on the Pakistanis. A demoralized Pakistan Army, cut-off from home and the outside world and devoid of any supply and replenishment was sitting it out in bunkered locations. Meanwhile, in the western front, Pakistani forces were on the defensive having to lose a large chunk of territory to the advancing Indian forces. A multi-pronged Allied advance in the east bypassed many Pakistani strong points and reached the outskirts of Dhaka by 14-15 December 1971. Yet, there were fierce fighting and heavy casualties on both sides whenever the two forces met. Battles of Hilli, Kamalpur, Ashuganj, Boyra, Joydebpur saw large numbers of casualties on both sides. The War in the east ended on the afternoon of 16 December 1971 with the surrender of Pakistani forces to the Allied Command in Ramna Race Course (now Suhrawardy Uddyan), Dhaka.

The armed forces of India and Bangladesh, by their blood, sweat and toil, wrote a golden chapter in the military history of South Asia. It was an example of camaraderie and sacrifice for a higher cause beyond the narrow spectrum



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the supreme leader of our movement for freedom.

of nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, caste and creed. However, as stated at the beginning, we as a nation have not done enough to pay respect to those who died or suffered to advance our cause. One has to visit war cemeteries across the globe to see how other nations remember their allies who died while defending their freedom. There are memorials, mausoleums and museums across the world to honour the allies who came to fight for a common cause. The memorials in France or Belgium for the British and Americans who died during the two World Wars are accorded national honour. There are memorials in UK for thousands of Africans, Asians and others who fought for the British in many colonial wars.

We need to do something in Bangladesh too. A memo-

rial in Dhaka, may be within the Liberation War Complex now planned in Suhrawardy Uddyan, would be a fitting tribute to those brave Indian soldiers, sailors and airmen who fought along side ours to help liberate Bangladesh. The memorial would set the history straight and stand as an embodiment of close and friendly relations with India. The demand for such a memorial has been made in the past by various Freedom Fighters' organizations. One hopes that the authorities will take appropriate steps in that direction. It would be a small yet positive step to acknowledge the debt that we owe to the heroes of 1971, an acknowledgement long overdue.

Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury is a columnist.

## Eastern Air Command 1971: Deployment

Sector	Base	quadron	Type	Role
Jessore Sector	Kalaikunda	No. 14 Sqn	Hunter (Fighter Bomber)	Ground Attack
		No. 16 Sqn	Canberra (Medium Bomber)	Tactical Bombing
		No. 30 Sqn	MiG-21 (Fighter Interceptor)	Air Defence / Ground Attack
	Baghdogra	No. 7 Sqn	Hunter (Fighter Bomber)	Ground Attack
	Dumdum	No. 2 Sqn	Gnat (Fighter)	Air Defence / Ground Attack
Sylhet-Comilla Sector	Panagarh	No. 22 Sqn	Gnat (Fighter)	Air Defence / Ground Attack
		No. 221 Sqn	Su-7B (Fighter Bomber)	Ground Attack
		No. 15 Sqn	Gnat (Fighter)	Air Defence / Ground Attack
	Gauhati	No. 24 Sqn	Gnat (Fighter)	Air Defence / Ground Attack
	Hashimara	No. 28 Sqn	MiG-21 (Fighter Interceptor)	Air Defence / Ground Attack
		No. 7 Sqn	Hunter (Fighter Bomber)	Ground Attack

Chart Showing the Deployment of Indian Air Force Eastern Command December 1971

historic perspective.

As we recall the events of the Liberation War culminating on 16 December with the celebration of the "Victory Day", we organize seminars, lectures, film shows, march-pasts and rallies. Thousands gather in the National Mausoleum to pay homage to the Martyrs of the War. However, we often forget to recall the supreme sacrifices made by the members of the Indian military soldiers, sailors and airmen, who fought shoulder to shoulder with the Mukti Bahini, Bengali Freedom Fighters and gave their blood for the same cause. A total of 3,843 Indian military personnel of all services died and nearly 10,000 were injured, nearly half of them in the eastern front. Even those who died in the western front were there because of Bangladesh. Although the war was short (21 Nov 16 Dec 71), the casualties suffered were quite considerable. The contribution made by the members of the Indian defence forces in our Liberation War would remain as a shining beacon in the annals of military history. Yet, only 37 years later the story is largely unknown to the new generation of our youth. There is no memorial, monument or inscription, in fact, nothing that acknowledges their sacrifices in our noble cause. It is one more case of national amnesia.

Not only the military, the Indian political leadership and the government too played a significant role in molding the world opinion in our favour.

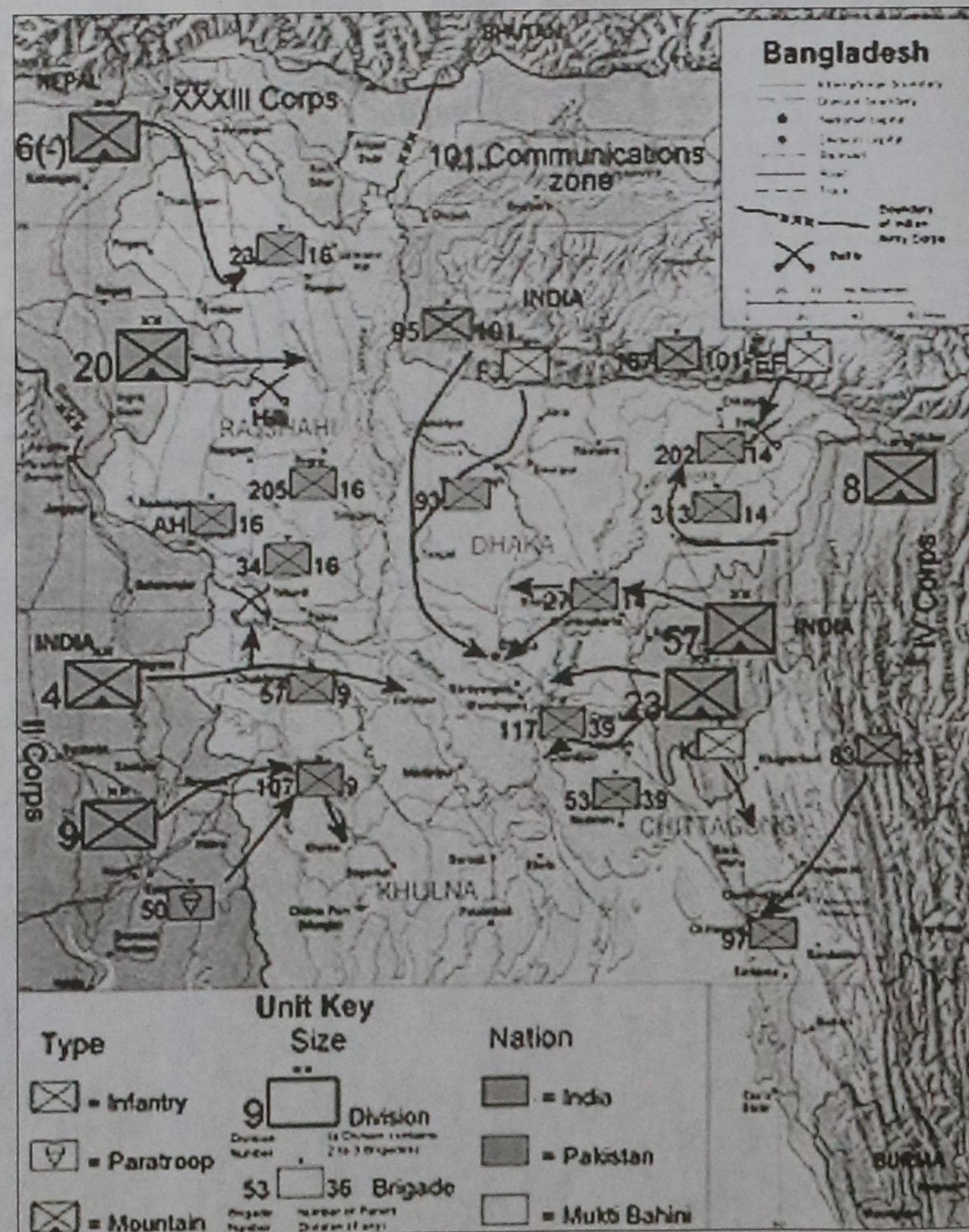
impact it might have on the Naxalite movement in West Bengal and the armed insurgency that had been going on in the Northeastern India since 1947. There were also concerns in many quarters on the possible long term impact Bangladesh movement might have on the greater Bengali nationalist identities that had a trans-border character. Notwithstanding these apprehensions, the Indian government and the people extended all-out support to Bangladesh government, its forces and the people. Fortunately for us, the Soviet Union, then one of the two Super Powers, came strongly in support of Bangladesh, again due to the strong Indo-Soviet ties that existed at that time. Who would forget the strongly worded messages that Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin delivered to President Yahya, or the 25 years of Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty that he signed, or the huge military shipments into India that he made throughout the period. When the all out war broke out, Soviet veto in the Security Council on 5 December 1971 prevented a US-sponsored resolution for immediate cessation of hostilities and return to international border.

Despite oft-quoted claims from Pakistan, India was unprepared for the turn of events in East Pakistan in March 1971. Traditionally, India's defence posture and planning had been to guard against a possible Pakistani incursion in the western front and a Chinese one

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Map Showing Disposition of Indian and Pakistani Ground Forces at the Start of the War in December 1971 and the subsequent Progress.

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