

LIBERATION WAR IN RETROSPECT: CONVERSATION AMONG SOME KEY FUNCTIONARIES

Guerrilla operations

The number of guerrillas and the supply of weapons increased substantially from October. The signing of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty in August also inspired them. The growing strength of the guerrillas so unnerved the Pakistani soldiers that they became victims of “military blindness.”

TRANSLATED BY MUMTAZ IQBAL

AK KHANDKER: Around June-July of 1971, those of us involved in the Liberation War were a bit frustrated. But in mid-August, our naval commandos conducted successful attacks on shipping at the Chittagong and Chalna ports. This was a completely different kind of operation and brought international attention to our war as it was extensively covered and widely discussed in international media and other fora. This helped lift the morale of the freedom fighters. In May, training of these commandos started near the bank of the Bhagirathi River. The chief of the training camp and instructors were all from the Indian navy. Colonel Osmany, a few others and I knew the purpose behind raising this force.

From October onwards, guerrilla activities intensified inside Bangladesh. Their effectiveness can be gauged from the response of the Pakistan army. The bodies of Pakistani soldiers killed in action used to be airlifted to West Pakistan via Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). All armed forces have an inescapable obligation to ensure that the dead bodies of soldiers, certainly of officers and other ranks, are delivered to their families by whatever means. But later, especially from October onwards, the dramatic increase in the number of Pakistani casualties made it impossible to airlift all the deceased soldiers to the west wing.

The Pakistani public also raised the question that if things are normal, then why are there so many casualties? These factors led to the discontinuation of the practice of sending the dead bodies back

in international media. But before October, our overall situation was not very promising. Apart from the naval commando operations, we did not achieve any significant success during that period.

Our sector commanders had to carry out multiple responsibilities simultaneously. First, they were under pressure to attack the enemy. Second, there was the difficult task of raising brigades. Third, training new guerrillas and arranging for their infiltration inside Bangladesh. Assuming 75 per cent of the 20,000 trained youths graduating each month had to infiltrate the country, this added up to a figure of 15,000. Add to this the fact that guerrillas who had returned wanted to join operations again. Considering the large number of guerrillas involved, it was not easy for the sector commanders to choose specific targets, draw up operational plans, arm the guerrillas, and arrange for their infiltration.

AK KHANDKER: Even if our brigades were one-third the size of conventional units, they had many non-commissioned officers (NCOs) – senior sergeants, havildars, and subedars. There were also a few

In such cases, I would discuss the matter with Prime Minister Tajuddin and get his decision. The political leadership had to approve the attack and demolition of such important establishments. A military commander cannot and should not take this decision on his own unless he has no choice and has to decide on the spot.

It was through this process of consultation that we used to move forward. However, the Bangladesh high command never had a war plan or tactical strategy in the conventional sense.

MUYEEDUL HASAN: Delhi considered the problem relating to the return of the refugees as the biggest danger. India did not have the capacity to bear the burden of refugees indefinitely. This problem had to be solved within a definite time frame. In winter, snowfall blocked the passes in India’s northeast frontier. This made a Chinese attack impossible then. So winter was the appropriate time to fight and defeat Pakistan. This would lead to the return of the refugees. India formulated its strategic and tactical plans of war based on this premise.

conduct cross-border operations. The reason behind this activity was to force the Pakistani high command to redeploy its soldiers, who were mainly concentrated in a few heavily fortified cantonments and strong points, in small groups scattered throughout the 1,400 miles frontier.

The Pakistanis fell into this trap. Their soldiers were divided into small units and lost their cohesion and coordination since they were not united. The movement of the Pakistani soldiers to the border resulted in a kind of vacuum inside the country.

The guerrillas and freedom fighters exploited this opportunity, entering the country in large numbers. Their daring operations increased and deepened the feelings of uncertainty of the Pakistanis. They lost the ability to move their forces from one frontier post to another due to “military blindness,” as already mentioned by AK Khandker. The Islamabad junta thought that they could compensate for the probable loss of the eastern province by occupying a slice of Kashmir.

That is why they had stationed the bulk of their military strength in West Pakistan. With the remaining resources, it was just impossible to maintain sufficient force throughout the cantonments, district towns, important communication centres and Bangladesh’s border simultaneously. The escalation of guerrilla activities from the end of October started to shatter the confidence of Pakistani troops rapidly.

Whenever Indian forces found that a particular tactic or plan could not be implemented, they modified it and developed something new. For example, the fierce fighting at Hilli convinced them that they could not expect to easily overcome Pakistani resistance in other places. At that time, DP Dhar was in Calcutta. He had hinted to me around November 17 that they had modified their war plan slightly. This now envisaged bypassing the enemy’s strong points while advancing towards Dhaka using alternative routes.

This was a major tactical change that yielded positive benefits swiftly. When full-scale war broke out, the Indian troops at first were able to advance rapidly towards Dhaka. Nevertheless, they ran into some difficulties. For example, after capturing Jashore, the Indian forces advanced towards Hardinge Bridge but another group was diverted towards Khulna through Jhenaidah. This was a questionable decision since neither Khulna nor Chalna was a major tactical target. The main objective was Dhaka. In that case, why was only one brigade deployed along the quickest route to Dhaka, namely from Tura, Meghalaya.

General Nagra’s forces reached the outskirts of Dhaka quickly through Kamalpur, north of Mymensingh. There too only one brigade deployed. Thus, Indian military planning also had some shortcomings.

But overall, India’s military plan was carefully thought out and crafted. During its implementation, the plan was evaluated and modified appropriately in the light of experience and actual circumstances.

SR MIRZA: Indian war strategy was carefully thought out and planned. Many military experts consider that the 1971 war was one of the biggest and best-planned in the history of

warfare. The Indians were able to rally domestic and international opinion successfully to their cause that materially helped them implement their war plan.

AK KHANDKER: At one stage of the Liberation War, the Indian army shelled and destroyed several border outposts and frontier fortifications. This forced the Pakistanis to move their troops towards the frontier zone. Taking advantage of this movement, many guerrillas were able to infiltrate Bangladesh.

The Indians had another advantage. They knew that only a squadron of fighter planes was based in Dhaka. Fighting a war without a strong air force is difficult, if not impossible, irrespective of the competence of the commanding general. Airpower is a very flexible instrument of war. The field guns and tanks have limited flexibility; for example, they can get stuck in mud and cannot easily cross rivers, making airpower truly effective.

Aircrafts can reach any place at any time quickly. When the Dhaka airport was destroyed within two days of the outbreak of war on December 4, the Pakistanis had very little to carry on the fight. Waging war without airpower or air support is impossible. The Indian forces fully exploited this opportunity.

There were two reasons for Indian success. The first was the formulation of a well thought-out and effective war plan. This was only natural since the Indian armed forces were very well organised. The second was that the Pakistani commanders fell into the trap set by the Indians. Till the very end, they were fixated on the idea that the Indians assisted by the freedom fighters were intent on establishing a liberated zone inside East Pakistan.

This would be designated as the capital of Bangladesh and thus attract attention worldwide. Hostage to this assessment, the Pakistanis strung out the bulk of their troops in small packets along the frontier area to prevent the establishment of such a zone by the guerrillas or India. At one time we also toyed with this concept but later abandoned it. The Pakistanis, however, swallowed this bait.

Thereafter, when the first elements of the Indian Army neared the outskirts of Dhaka through Tangail, moving from east to west, preliminary negotiations that started around December 9 or 10 concluded with the surrender of the Pakistani forces on December 16. So, when you ask me whether or not we had a war plan, the answer is that we did have and that was to conduct guerrilla warfare. With proper implementation of this plan, we would have been even more successful than we were.

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Book Cover of Muktijuddher Purbapap

to Pakistan. This decision clearly shows the growing strength of our resistance at the time. Pakistanis nearly everywhere in Bangladesh suffered heavily from these attacks and their morale was eroded. In my opinion, this was the brightest moment of the Liberation War.

MUYEEDUL HASAN: The amount of damage inflicted by the guerrillas upon the Pakistanis was covered

junior officers such as lieutenants and captains. In several cases, the NCOs assumed a leadership role. They went inside Bangladesh with the guerrillas and carried out their duties with utmost devotion.

The number of guerrillas and the supply of weapons increased substantially from October. The signing of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty in August also inspired them. The growing strength of the guerrillas so unnerved the Pakistani soldiers that they became victims of “military blindness.” If I cannot move from one place or outpost to another, the constrained mobility is a serious weakness because I will not know the conditions in another locality, and I will be deprived of useful intelligence.

So, where a border outpost, cantonment, or strongpoint used to send ten soldiers on patrol, they now sent 20 soldiers and as guerrilla attacks gradually intensified, the enemy forces could not move out from their positions at all. They were constantly in fear of being ambushed by the guerrillas and freedom fighters. Unable to move and gather intelligence, the Pakistani forces lost the will to fight and started fleeing. While entering Jashore, the Indian forces did not even have to fight. The Pakistanis abandoned the cantonment, leaving behind a considerable number of arms and ammunition. Serious combat took place in only a few places such as Hilli, Sylhet, and Bhairab. In most instances, the Pakistanis fled to save their lives.

Indian military officers and civilians would regularly discuss whether certain targets, especially large ones like Adamjee Jute Mills, should be attacked and destroyed.

India’s grand strategy comprised several steps. The first was to enhance her security profile against the possibility of a Chinese attack by concluding a treaty with the Soviet Union. Second, since it was very likely that India would have to go to war with Pakistan to solve the refugee problem, Gandhi visited Moscow in September to discuss with Soviet leaders and secure their support.

Thereafter, Indians provided greater assistance to our irregular forces and applied greater pressure to send more fighters inside Bangladesh. When they realised that this pressure was not yielding the desired results in accordance with their grand strategy, India directed her armed forces to conduct military operations along the border from mid-October. In several areas, the Indians fought the Pakistanis directly. Wherever possible, they involved our guerrillas as in the actions at Belonia and Salda Nadi. Here, the Bangladesh and Indian forces together fought the Pakistanis. The battles were quite big.

Tajuddin Ahmed had informed Major General BN Sarkar in September that since he would be very busy and so, unless necessary, Sarkar should from then onwards send his routine reports to me. The sector commanders were provided with radio facilities at various stages during the war. This was done to improve communication between sector commanders and their Indian counterparts. In some sectors, such as that headed by Major Ghaffar, communication between the two armies was good. Our troops there fought splendidly.

From the second week of October, Indian troops started to



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Guerrillas in action.
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