

THROUGH THE LENS OF OPERATIONAL ART: 1971 BANGLADESH CAMPAIGN

**A Monograph
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Abstract

THROUGH THE LENS OF OPERATIONAL ART: 1971 BANGLADESH CAMPAIGN.

By Colonel Khalid M. Zaki, Indian Army, 78 pages.

The Indian Army's decisive victory in East Pakistan in 1971 is a widely acknowledged as a sterling example of operational excellence. The Bangladesh campaign, as it is commonly known, is often compared with the German *blitzkrieg* campaign in World War 2, exhibiting multiple lightening maneuvers striking deep at the enemy's center of gravity, in this case Dacca, to overwhelm and disintegrate the entrenched Pakistani defenses. Resulting in the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of the new nation of Bangladesh, it altered the balance of power in South Asia, heralding India's rise as a regional power.

As India aspires for a greater role in the region and beyond, commensurate with its growing economic and demographic profile, India's military, of necessity, has to transform itself to match rising national aspirations. Operational art forms the doctrinal foundation for this ongoing transformation, seeking to transcend the divide between the military's current tactical focus, limited operational horizon and the emerging strategic role. Drawing upon the evolutionary and contemporary understanding of the subject synthesized from the courseware, the monograph employs the 1971 Bangladesh campaign as a model to study the application of operational art in the Indian context. Its validation in a successful Indian campaign will help imbibe operational art in the Indian military doctrine, and thereby facilitate the transformation of the Indian military.

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Introduction

An analysis of India's post-Independence military campaigns reveals an overwhelming emphasis on the tactical level, neglecting the strategic and operational level of war.¹ Part of the reason for this lies in the colonial legacy of the Indian Army, wherein the British officers held most of the higher level appointments, affording little exposure to the Indian officers to anything but the tactical level. As a result, the Indian campaigns post-Independence were led by officers who were tactically sound, but had little grasp of operations and strategy. The 1971 India-Pakistan War offers the first glimpse of operational level planning by the Indian military, which reflected in the conduct of the brilliant military campaign in East Pakistan.

It was a decisive victory for India, resulting in the dismemberment of its archrival Pakistan, liberating 75 million Bengalis from the yoke of Pakistani dictatorship, to create the new state of Bangladesh. An equivalent of ten Indian divisions took part in the operations in East Pakistan, comprising 160,000 Indian troops employed in the offensive against Pakistan's 75-80,000 troops in defense.² The Pakistani army was defeated comprehensively, surrendering 93,000 prisoners of war, who were taken into custody by India. Many Indian analysts have used the term "lightening campaign" to describe the campaign, claiming it to be the Indian equivalent of the German *blitzkrieg* campaign during World War 2. As it was reported at the time, "It took only 12 days for the Indian Army to smash its way to Dacca, an achievement reminiscent of the German *blitzkrieg* across France in 1940. The strategy was the same: speed, ferocity, and flexibility."³ The intuitive and correct assessment of Dacca as the Pakistani center of gravity and

¹ G.D. Bakshi, "Operational Art in the Indian Context: An Open Source Analysis," *Strategic Analysis* 25, no. 6 (September 2001): 254. http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/sa_sasep01bag01.html (accessed January, 2012).

² Onkar Marwah, "India's Military Intervention in East Pakistan," *Modern Asian Studies* 13, no. 4 (1979): 565.

³ *The Sunday Times* of London 12 December 1971, quoted in D.K.Palit, *The Lightning Campaign* (New Delhi: Thomson Press, 1972), 16.

Aurora's flexibility in planning for its capture was a key element of the Indian victory in the 1971 war.⁴

As India's growth trajectory projects it to play a greater role in the region and globally, the Indian military seeks to transform itself to shoulder higher responsibilities and wider roles, which come with enhanced national aspirations. The military, of necessity, will have to mature its doctrine to encompass the operational and strategic levels of war. Operational art will form an essential component of this transformation, forming a bridge between its tactical expertise and strategic vision. Towards that, a review of the 1971 Bangladesh Campaign through the lens of operational art will help imbibe its tenets in the Indian context. This monograph is an attempt in this direction, using the framework of operational art to critically evaluate the campaign, and draw its lessons. A successful model of its application in the 1971 Bangladesh campaign will facilitate its assimilation into Indian military doctrine.

Methodology

The focus of the monograph is to validate the application operational art in the planning and execution of the 1971 Indian military campaign in East Pakistan, which serves as the research question. The first section develops a perspective on operational art, briefly tracing its evolution from the Napoleonic wars to the present times.⁵ Operational art is defined in the contemporary context, drawing upon the latest doctrinal publications by the U.S. Army.⁶ The broad theoretical

⁴ G.D. Bakshi, "Operational Art in the Indian Context," 258.

⁵ The evolution of operational art has been largely obtained from John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, eds., *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). The historical context is taken from Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Phillips, eds., *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 2007).

⁶ The contemporary definitions have been obtained from U.S. Department of the Army, Army Doctrinal Publication No. 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 10 October 2011) and an unpublished paper by Thomas Brusolino, "The Theory of Operational Art and Unified Land Operations," (Essay, School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2011).

framework for understanding operational art is outlined, without straitjacketing it in specific principles.⁷ The aim is to present operational art as an axiomatic rather than a formulaic process, allowing ample scope for creativity in its application.

The next three sections build the narrative of the campaign; framing the problem to provide a background to the conflict, outlining the decision-making and the planning process incorporating both the policy-making at the political level and the decision-making at the military level, and finally detailing the conduct of the campaign, highlighting the operational level, rather than getting mired in tactical actions. Not much written material is available on the specifics of the decision-making process itself, as the official history of the campaign by the Indian authorities has not been made public, and the written orders and instructions issued during the planning and conduct phase of operations remain classified.⁸ Notwithstanding the lack of official histories and documents, adequate material is available based on personal accounts of those involved from both sides of the conflict, as well as those who had a ringside view of the campaign and other analysts.⁹ In building the narrative of the campaign, the aim is to provide a

⁷ The conceptual framework for operational art is taken from James J. Schneider, *The Theory of Operational Art*: Theoretical Paper No. 3 (Fort Leavenworth: United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1 March 1988) and G.S.Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, trans. Bruce W. Menning. (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, July 2005).

⁸ Anit Mukherjee, "Facing Future Challenges: Defence Reform in India," *The RUSI Journal* 156, no. 5 (October/November 2011): 30. Mukherjee claims that India does adhere to declassification rules of the sort that exist in Western democracies. As a result, due to lack of military historiography, most debates in India's strategic community are opinion driven, anecdotal or personal accounts, which are inherently flawed. He concludes: "Ultimately, this results in loss of institutional memory and an inability to self analyze."

⁹ The narrative of the campaign is drawn largely from the primary sources. The Indian sources are: D.K. Palit, *The Lightning Campaign* (New Delhi: Thomson Press, 1972); Sukhwant Singh, *The Liberation of Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980); Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh* (Dehradun, India: Natraj Publishers, 1981), and J.F.R Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca: Birth of a Nation* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997). The Pakistani sources are: Fazal Muqeem Khan, *Pakistan's Crisis in Leadership* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1973); Sadiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1977), and A.A.K. Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998). Important secondary sources include: Brian Cloughley, *A History of Pakistan Army: Wars and Insurrection* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Pran Chopra, *India's Second Liberation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1974); Robert Jackson, *South Asian Crisis: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – A political and Historical Analysis of the 1971 War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975),

systemic understanding of the problem, looking for the sources of *difference* between the Indian and Pakistani views. In reconciling their differing perception of the *reality*, seeking the *truth* was not the objective, but the functionality or the usefulness of the narrative for the purpose of its study in application of operational art.

The final section applies the lens of operational art, based on its theoretical framework drawn up in the first section, to validate the hypothesis that the Indian campaign in the 1971 Bangladesh war was a successful model of application of operational art. It highlights the strategic leadership at both the political and military levels, and the discourse between them to analyze the campaign. The joint and integrated approach in planning is examined, bringing out certain shortcomings. The geo-strategic imperative of achieving strategic objective before intervention by international community is highlighted, calling for a bold yet flexible plan. It led to a short and swift “lightening campaign,” achieving the war aim of defeating the Pakistani army and liberating Bangladesh. It concludes by bringing out the altered geo-strategic landscape in the South Asian region – with birth of a new nation and emergence of India as a regional power – with far-reaching implications going well beyond the region and into the future.

A Perspective on Operational Art

Operational art emerged as a new and distinct component of warfare in the nineteenth century. It has been broadly defined as the grey area linking strategy and tactics, and spans the theory and practice of planning and conducting campaigns and major operations aimed at accomplishing strategic and operational objectives in a given theatre of operations.¹⁰ The linking

and Robert M. Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

¹⁰ Olsen and Crevel, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 1.

activity between strategy and tactics is called the “operational level of war” and the practice of commanders at this level “operational art.”¹¹ Without delving into the minutiae of the difference between the two or the necessity of either in presence of the other, this paper employs both the terms, focusing on their practical aspects. This section traces the evolution of operational art in the beginning of nineteenth century, as a product of the expansion of the militaries, and availability of means of communication to control them over a dispersed battlefield. The Soviets are credited with coining the term “operations” in the inter-war period, which was further developed upon by the Germans, who gave it the form we are familiar with as the *blitzkrieg* campaign during World War 2. The contemporary theory of operational art is outlined, based largely upon the concepts developed by the U.S. Army during the Cold War, to include center of gravity, lines of operations, mission command, and directed telescope, etc. The theory continues to evolve, to meet the current challenges such as terrorism, leading to the “second grammar” of operational art. Lastly, based on its theory, operational art is defined, linking tactical actions with the strategic objectives.

Genesis of Operational Art

The necessity for an intermediate level between strategic and tactical levels of war was first felt during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars in the early nineteenth century, as a consequence of the rapid expansion of the armies and the introduction of *levée en masse*. As the size of the forces grew, they had to be organized per *corps d’armée* system into armies, corps and divisions, with dedicated general staff to control them. As the size of the armies grew, so did the size of the battlefield, from a few kilometers wide in Frederick the Great’s time to a several hundred kilometers in France in 1871.¹² The products of the Industrial Revolution – the steam

¹¹ Rupert Smith, “Epilogue,” in John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, eds., *The Evolution of Operational Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 227.

¹² Krause and Phillips, *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art*, 4.

engine and the telegraph – provided the means to deploy, command, and sustain the dispersed forces over vast distances. The increased frontages and dispersion of action reduced the ability of commanders to maintain a tight control. It became impossible for a single leader to command these dispersed forces in the field and the responsibility for commanding the lower echelons was delegated to subordinate leaders. With this division of responsibilities, operational art originated, as both the Germans and the French started using the term “operations” to describe the employment of armies, corps and divisions in the field.

The dispersion of forces and the delegation of command made it impracticable to engage in a single decisive battle to destroy the opposing forces, as had hitherto been the norm. Warfare had outgrown the strategy of the “single point,” and became distributed into a number of subordinate battles and tactical actions across an ever-expanding front.¹³ These conditions led to the need to group tactical actions and battles into *operations* and group operations into *campaigns*, which sought to arrange battles and engagements simultaneously and sequentially to destroy enemy forces in a more coordinated and efficient manner.¹⁴ The summation of the objectives of the campaigns represented the objectives of the war. Because single decisive battles were no longer expected, the objective of war to destroy the enemy was broken down into a series of operations. The arrangement of tactical actions of dispersed and distributed forces in time and space in coherent operations with focus on campaign intent to pursue the strategic objectives of war led to the emergence of *operational art*.¹⁵ Maintaining its focus on campaign intent and strategic objectives, operational art forms the linkage between strategic and tactical levels of war.

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ Thomas Bruscino, “The Theory of Operational Art and Unified Land Operations,” 10.

¹⁵ Justin Kelly and Michael J. Brennan, “The Leavenworth Heresy and the Perversion of Operational Art,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 56 (1st Quarter 2010), 112. There is a more developed form of the argument in their paper: “Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy.” *SSI Monograph*, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2009. The authors argue that the operational level of war, charged with the planning and conduct of campaigns, disrupts the linkage between wars, campaigns, and operations, thereby separating the conduct

The first reference to operational art as a concept of military theory has been attributed to Aleksander A. Svechin, a Soviet officer teaching in the Red Army's military academy in 1922. He defined operational art as the conceptual linkage between tactics and strategy, the means by which senior commanders transformed tactical successes into operational "bounds" to achieve strategic success in the given theater of war.¹⁶ Svechin calls "an operation an act of war if the efforts of the troops are directed towards the achievement of a certain intermediate goal in a certain theater of military operations without interruptions."¹⁷ His contemporary and compatriot, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, developed the concept of operational art further and propagated the theory of "deep operations" in 1925. It entailed large-scale offensive by massive army groups on a broad front supported by heavy fires and airpower. A penetration through the identified weak spot by suitably echeloned forces isolated the enemy front line from their base of operations, forcing the collapse of the entire enemy front, through successive operations. The operational maneuver groups (OMG) formed by the Soviet forces during the Cold War era sought to employ this theory to defeat the NATO forces. The theory relied on the concept of "operational shock" through the depth of the enemy system to force its systemic failure.¹⁸

Theory of Operational Art

The Soviet concept found resonance in the U.S., and subsequently NATO nations, in the 1980s. It became part of the U.S. doctrine in U.S. Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations (1982).

of campaigns from the conduct of wars. This has consequently marginalized the role of politics in the direction of war.

¹⁶ Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy* (Minneapolis, MN: East View Publications, 1991), 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁸ Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), 211-236.

An important U.S. theorist of operational art was James Schneider. Schneider, a long time professor of military history at the School of Advanced Military Studies, avers that operational art is characterized by distributed operations and campaign: an orchestration of deep maneuvers and distributed battles extended in time and space but unified by common aim.¹⁹ That common aim is the retention or denial of *freedom of action*. The idea of freedom of action implies that the destruction of the opponent is better achieved by *indirect* means of envelopment and encirclement, rather than direct attritional action. At the operational level, battles are fought to achieve or deny freedom of action, rather than to achieve total destruction of the enemy. Operational art is, therefore, oriented towards geography and terrain instead the classical strategy of focusing on the enemy. The retention and seizure of key terrain features, with a view to retain freedom of action while denying the same to the enemy, thus becomes central to the practice of operational art. From the point of view of distributed operations, operational art is best expressed in the use of multiple axes of advance directed against the enemy's capacity to wage war – his *center of gravity*.²⁰

The identification of enemy's center of gravity, is therefore, the key element of operational art.²¹ Having identified it, the campaign commander determines how best to shatter or destroy that center of gravity, while maintaining the coherence and cohesion of own.²² This can be achieved by both *direct* or *indirect* means, though the latter is preferred as it would avoid

¹⁹ James J. Schneider, *Vulcan's Anvil: The American Civil War and the Foundations of Operational Art* (Fort Leavenworth: United States Army Command and General Staff College, 35-38.

²⁰ Ibid., 59.

²¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 595. Clausewitz defined center of gravity, or *schwerpunkt*, as he called it in German, the "hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. This is the point against which all our energies should be directed." As per Clausewitz, it denotes the center of mass of the army, where it is most densely concentrated. At the tactical and operational level, mass would imply the concentration of combat potential, comprising both fires and maneuver elements. At the strategic level, it transcends into the moral domain, to include the morale and will of the opposing force to resist.

²² Schneider, *The Theory of Operational Art*, 27

attritional losses.²³ During the 1940 campaign, the Germans identified the French center of gravity as located north of Sedan. Rather than execute a direct line of operation through the French front towards their center of gravity, they decided to attack it indirectly. They carried out a rapid enveloping maneuver through Sedan to paralyze the French higher command, resulting in the disintegration of their center of gravity in the north. Related to the center of gravity, is the idea of *decisive point*, which is any intermediate objective that provides a force a marked advantage over the opponent, and helps towards achieving the ultimate objective – usually referring to the center of gravity. In addition to deciding the outcome of an operation, it imposes a decision on the commander; whether to seize or retain the decisive point and how much combat power to expend towards that decision. There will be seldom enough resources to seize or retain all decisive points, and the commander must decide which are essential towards defending or attacking the center of gravity, risking the outcome of the campaign on the decision taken.

No rational human endeavor is undertaken without an objective of what is to be achieved. This is applicable in warfare as well, as Clausewitz says: “No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objectives.”²⁴ The end-state of war, is predicated on the political objectives of the war, and entails creation and maintenance of a situation that is favorable to the forces under command, and serves as one of the war termination criteria. This is accomplished by selection of

²³ The direct and indirect approach relate to the center of gravity, whether to attack or defend it directly or indirectly. The theory of “indirect approach” was advocated by the British strategist, B.H. Liddell Hart, and entails avoidance of enemy’s strength, his center of gravity, by maneuvering to bypass or go around it. The aim is to attack enemy’s flanks or rear, which are likely to be weakly held. The indirect approach is commonly associated with ‘maneuver warfare,’ which seeks to circumvent enemy’s strength and attack it from a position of advantage rather than meet it straight on.

²⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 579.

suitable objectives, at strategic and operational levels, towards achieving which the military effort must be directed.²⁵

The strategic objectives, invariably, are long term in nature and cannot be predicted with great certainty because of the number of interdependent variables involved. The campaign commander, therefore, articulates the objectives in general and conceptual terms, laying out the *operational approach*, as a broad guideline for tactical actions to be taken towards attaining the strategic objective. It is the commander's visualization of how the operation should transform current conditions into the desired conditions at end state—the way the commander wants the operational environment to look at the conclusion of operations.²⁶ The operational approach is based largely on an understanding of the operational environment and the problem being faced. These tactical actions, to achieve short-term or intermediate objectives, will have second or third order effects which influence the strategic objective. There is a cognitive tension inherent in the practice of operational art in aligning these short-term intermediate objectives with the long-term strategic aim, which requires strategic forethought to develop the operational approach.²⁷ As the intermediate objectives are attained, and the situation develops, based on fresh opportunities presenting themselves or additional information being made available, the operational approach may require to be refined, or the strategic aim itself may warrant relook. This flexibility is the hallmark of operational art, making it an iterative and cyclical process: choosing and aligning tactical actions with the strategic objectives, defining the operational approach, and refining the operational approach or the strategic aims, as per the outcome of the tactical actions.

²⁵ Schneider, *Theory of Operational Art*, 17.

²⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Publication No. 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 11 August 2011), III.1. <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine> (accessed January 18, 2012).

²⁷ Drew R. Conover, “A Commoner’s View: The Application of Operational Art in Counterinsurgency Operations” (Fort Leavenworth: United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2011), 4.

Given the intricate relationship between policy, strategy and tactics, there is a need for close coordination between the *policy maker*, the *military strategist*, and the *campaign commander*. It is critical to aligning the strategic objectives with the military means. The intention of policy must be properly understood by the campaign commander while the policy maker and the military strategist need to be cognizant of tactical realities. The campaign commander, in the linking position between the source of strategic direction and the tactical action, is the *operational artist*.²⁸ He directs the campaign to its successful conclusion, exercising strategic leadership, operational flair and tactical skill. Functioning at the operational level, he is responsible for engaging in strategic discourse and providing a tactical perspective to the development of strategy and refinement of political ends.²⁹ An often neglected aspect of study of operational art is the concept of *directed telescope* instituted by Napoleon to cut through the maze of staff bureaucracy and to overcome the challenge of commanding formations spread over vast distances. He deputed selected officers, and sent them on missions that required independent judgment, to compile reports on subordinate formations and their commanders and to gather specific information of the enemy and the environment. They acted as his eyes and ears, prevented him from becoming a prisoner of his own general staff, and allowed him to “feel the pulse” of the troops in the field.³⁰

The Germans understood conduct of war as fundamentally an art form. Though it required training in basic battle crafts and drills, in a broader sense, no rules or principles could bound a phenomenon as chaotic and prone to chance, as warfare.³¹ Their functional style was based on a highly flexible and decentralized command system known today as *auftragstaktiks*

²⁸ Rupert Smith, *Evolution of Operational Art*, 229.

²⁹ Conover, *Commoner's View*, 10.

³⁰ Martin van Creveld, “Napoleon and the Dawn of Operational Warfare,” in John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, eds., *The Evolution of Operational Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

³¹ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 9.

(mission tactics). The higher commander decided on a general mission, passed it on to the subordinate commanders in a short concise order, and then left it up to them to decide the means and methods to achieve it. This required a high level of situational awareness, of the enemy as well as friendly forces, and the field of battle. This heightened sense of awareness, continually in touch with the emerging battlefield situations, has been given the word *fingerspitzengefühl* by the Germans.³² These two concepts - *auftragstaktik* and *fingerspitzengefühl* - were incorporated in the broader German operational concept, emphasizing the need for speed and daring, maneuvering to strike hard from unexpected direction and overwhelming the enemy, and leading to their complete collapse. It laid a high premium on initiative and aggressiveness in leaders at all levels of command, with ability to perceive operations 'two-up' from their own level. *Blitzkrieg* was the manifestation of this German way of war, combining all the aforementioned concepts, and is regarded as the epitome of the practice of operational art.

Dr Antulio Echevarria introduces the concept of the "grammar" of operational art, arguing that the traditional battle-centric version emphasizing the principles and procedures of defeating the opponent by armed force is the "first grammar," while the "second grammar" deals with the present day challenges of dealing with insurgencies, guerilla warfare, and irregular warfare – the "wars amongst the people."³³ The difference between the two is that in the war amongst the people, military force is no longer required to decide the matter but to create the conditions in which the strategic result is achieved; the aim being to overcome the opponents will rather than to destroy him.³⁴ He argues that the ongoing U.S. led coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan exposed the inadequacy of the understanding of the second grammar of operational

³² Dennis E. Showalter, "Prussian-German Operational Art, 1740-1943," in John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, eds., *The Evolution of Operational Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35.

³³ Antulio J. Echevarria II, "American Operational Art, 1917-2008," in John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, eds., *The Evolution of Operational Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 137.

³⁴ Rupert Smith, *Evolution of Operational Art*, 233.

art. As a result, even after the coalition forces won the combat operations, relying primarily on overwhelming application of force, the campaign remains inconclusive. He asserts that contemporary operational art requires mastery of both the grammars of operational art in order to succeed.

The Israeli experience in evolution of operational art is instructive in this regards. After having demonstrated their mastery over first grammar in their early wars against the Arab forces, they gradually got embroiled in low intensity conflict (LIC) as they faced the Palestinian *intifada* in the occupied territories from 1980 onwards. The dominance of LIC emphasized the second grammar of operational art, applied at the two ends of the spectrum of warfare, at the tactical and strategic levels of warfare, neglecting the operational level. The ascendancy of firepower over maneuver, the cult of technology, and post-heroic tendencies, led to the decline of the first grammar of operational art.³⁵ Their indecisive campaign against the *Hezbollah* in Lebanon in 2006 was a result of their skewed emphasis on the second grammar at the cost of the first grammar, with the result that they lost the ability to conduct traditional large scale and deep ground maneuvers, essential to destroy forces and capture territory.

Therefore, lethality, the capacity for physical destruction, remains the core of military capability, and is the *raison d'être* for the existence of the military. The essence of operational art lies in the creativity in the application of lethality, suited to the circumstances. It is achieved by both fire and maneuver, and is the foundation for all other military capabilities. Operational art ensures that lethality is applied in a manner consistent with the goal of achieving the strategic objective.

³⁵ Avi Kober, "The Rise and Fall of Israeli Operational Art, 1948-2008," in John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, eds., *The Evolution of Operational Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 167.

Defining Operational Art

The U.S. Army's most recent doctrinal publication (ADP) 3-0 defines operational art as “the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”³⁶ Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 defines it as “the application of creative imagination by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, and experience.”³⁷ Through operational art, commanders link *ends*, *ways*, and *means* to achieve the desired *end state*. The publication further states that operational art is not associated with a specific echelon of command or formation, nor is it exclusive to the theater level operations. Instead, it applies to any formation that must effectively arrange multiple, tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to achieve operational and strategic objective. Just as good tacticians need some operational sense to enable them to perform usefully at the tactical level, so do operational commanders require some strategic sense if they are to conduct operations that fulfill the objectives of strategy and policy.³⁸

Thomas Bruscino, a professor at the U.S. Army's School of Advanced Military Studies, expands on this further, stating that operational art does not require any prescribed actions. He argues that prescribed actions restrict options, and therefore risk separating operations from strategy, which goes against the grain of operational art.³⁹ Therefore, rather than specifying the tactical actions, operational art seeks to orchestrate actions in time, space and purpose to pursue strategic objectives. He claims: “For the purposes of the operational artist, tactical actions are a menu from which to pick and choose as appropriate to the situation.”⁴⁰ He contends that any appropriate action undertaken towards the pursuit of strategic objectives would fall within the

³⁶ U.S. Department of the Army, Army Doctrinal Publication No. 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 10 October 2011), 9.

³⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Publication No. 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, III-5.

³⁸ Colin S. Gray, “Strategic Thoughts for Defense Planners,” *Survival* 52, no. 3 (June – July 2010), 168.

³⁹ Bruscino, “Theory of Operational Art and Unified Land Operations,” 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

ambit of practice of operational art. This entails a prerequisite of having an in-depth understanding of the strategic context and the political and social implications of the actions being taken to achieve policy objectives. Conduct of brilliant campaigns and successful maneuvers at tactical level without linking them to the strategic objectives may win the battles, but will rarely win the war. The Germans learnt this lesson in the Russian campaign on the eastern front during World War II, where they won most of their battles but still lost the war. They failed to grasp the strategic reality that their war of extermination, based on the flawed Nazi ideology, would be met determinedly by a war of survival by the Soviets, which combined with the vastness of Russia and its extreme winter, was bound to defeat them ultimately.

The genesis, theory and definition of operational art, as outlined in this section, helps gain an insight into the subject to inform its practice. Likewise, its practice also generates a feedback to modify theory based on experience in field. Study of an historical example is a good method to test the theory of operational art. The study of Bangladesh campaign, therefore, has been chosen to validate the application of operational art in a successful Indian campaign, with a view to imbibe its theory in the Indian military doctrine.

Framing the Problem

Origins of the Conflict

The origins of the 1971 India-Pakistan war for the liberation of Bangladesh are rooted in the historical context of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The Muslim conquest of India began in earnest in the 11th century of the common era and their rule reached its zenith during the Mughal Empire (1526 – 1764). The British entered India in the middle in early 18th century, through the trading posts established by the British East India Company, and gradually displaced the Mughals and other native rulers to wrest the effective control of the entire Indian sub-continent. The British rule or *Raj*, which took over from the East India Company after the Indian Mutiny in 1857, lasted for nearly two centuries, created conditions for generating greater awareness amongst the Indians of their historical and cultural heritage.⁴¹ This sowed the seeds of nationalism amongst the Indian intelligentsia, which was harnessed by Gandhi, who mobilized the masses based on the unique concept of non-violence (*Ahimsa*). However, within the nationalist movement, divisions emerged along religious lines, between the Hindus and Muslims, envisioning different versions of independent India's future, based on their varying perception of the past. The Hindus, forming the vast majority, harked back to the pre-Islamic era, which they believed was the true identity of India, while the Muslims wanted a restoration of the Muslim rule, which was impracticable, given their minority in numbers. This led to the demand for the creation for a separate homeland for the Muslims of India, raised for the first time in 1933, to be named Pakistan – the “land of the pure.”

The movement for the creation of Pakistan as the homeland for Indian Muslims has a theocratic basis that the Muslims could not survive in a Hindu majority Indian state, which they

⁴¹ Percival Spear, *A History of India*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990) provides an authoritative historical account of the history of the Indian Sub-continent from the Mughal Empire, through the British *Raj*, to the independence of India and its immediate aftermath.

feared would overwhelm the minority Muslim community. The Muslims, therefore, desired a separate homeland to preserve their identity and secure their destiny, carved out of the Muslim majority areas of India. This led to the unique creation of Pakistan, geographically divided into West and East Pakistan, but united by the bonds of a common religion- Islam. However, beneath the unity of faith, there was potential cause for tensions based on racial and ethnic differences between the two wings. The Bengali Muslims inhabiting East Pakistan were descendents of the Bengali Hindus, who had converted to Islam during the Muslim rule and shared their language and many cultural practices with their Hindu brethren. The Urdu speaking West Pakistanis, dominated by the Punjabis, claimed lineage from the various Muslim dynasties who ruled India prior to the advent of the British rule. The West Pakistanis, therefore, assumed cultural and martial superiority over the East Pakistanis. The ethnic differences based on ancestry, culture and language between the Muslims of West and East Pakistan established the necessary conditions for the civil war in Pakistan in 1971, out of which emerged the new state of Bangladesh.⁴²

The internal divisions engendered by the geographical separation and the differences in culture and language were accentuated by the economic and social deprivation of East Pakistan relative to the western wing.⁴³ The reasons for this lay in the failure of the federative arrangements within the Pakistani state, in which the sources of power and political influence were largely concentrated in the western wing, despite the Bengalis being in majority.⁴⁴

⁴² Robert Jackson, *South Asian Crisis: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – A political and Historical Analysis of the 1971 War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 9.

⁴³ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁴ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 188.

The two wings differed greatly in size and population – West Pakistan was geographically six times larger than East Pakistan, while the population of the latter as per the 1962 census was 50.8 million as against 42.9 million of the former.⁴⁵ The two wings were



Figure 1: Map of India and Pakistan in 1971, prior to the conflict. Open internet source: <http://www.clothmen.com/PageFile/pakistan-map2.jpg>; accessed April 19, 2012.

⁴⁵ Jackson, *South Asian Crisis*, 15.

separated by 1600 kilometers of Indian mainland, over which it became increasingly difficult to maintain land connection, due to straining of relations after the India-Pakistan wars of 1947 and 1965.⁴⁶

The structural problems of Pakistan were compounded by the failure of political system to accommodate the regional aspirations.⁴⁷ This was largely due to the failure of parliamentary democracy to take root in Pakistan, which impaired the relationship between the executive and the representative institutions. The executive authority was vested with the military generals turned politicians, ever since Field Marshal Ayub Khan imposed martial law in 1958 following a constitutional crisis and appointed himself the president. The military, and increasingly the bureaucracy, dominated by the West Pakistani elite, therefore wielded disproportionate influence in the political system of the country. In 1962 Ayub Khan promulgated a new constitution, which subordinated the national and provincial legislatures to the presidential executive, further diluting the nominal parity in representation afforded to East Pakistan in the earlier 1956 constitution. The political dominance of West Pakistan also had an adverse impact on the distribution of financial aid and consequently the relative economic development. This reflected in the growing gap in *per capita* income between the wings, which was 32 percent higher in the West Pakistan in 1959-60 and increased to 61 percent in 1969-70.⁴⁸

The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, took up the cause of the Bengalis in East Pakistan. In 1966, in the aftermath of the failure of Pakistan's war against India in 1965, the Awami League adopted the "six-point manifesto" to charter political and economic autonomy of East Pakistan. It entailed that the central government would be responsible only for defense and

⁴⁶ For further reading on these conflicts, which form a background of the 1971 India-Pakistan War, see *Slender was the Thread* by L.P. Sen (New Delhi: South Asia Books, 1994) and *War Dispatches: Indo-Pak Conflict 1965* by Harbaksh Singh (New Delhi: Lancer, 1990).

⁴⁷ Mohammed Ayoob and K. Subramanyam, *The Liberation War* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company, 1972), 2.

⁴⁸ Jackson, *South Asian Crisis*, 20.

foreign affairs, forfeiting its control over the economy. Meanwhile General Yahya Khan, the commander-in chief of the Pakistan Army succeeded Ayub Khan, after the latter stepped down in 1969. Yahya Khan perpetuated the rule of the military elite like his predecessor. He announced elections in the end of 1970 on the basis of universal suffrage with common vote in both the wings, thus placating the Awami League in order to buy time. The Awami League went on to win Pakistan's first democratic elections in December 1970, winning 167 seats of the 313 seats in the National Assembly. The nearest rival was the Pakistan People's Party led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto which won 85 seats, all in West Pakistan. Yahya Khan was aware that the absolute majority gained by the Awami League in the National Assembly, and the proposed adoption of the six-point manifesto meant an effective secession of East Pakistan. Realizing these implications, Yahya Khan refused to summon the National Assembly into session. The resultant deadlock over power sharing led to breakout of civil war in Pakistan by March 1971.

In response to the gradually deteriorating situation in East Pakistan, Yahya Khan appointed Lieutenant General Tikka Khan as the military governor in East Pakistan on 7 March 1971 to bring the situation under control. In addition to 14 Infantry Division already stationed in East Pakistan, two additional divisions, 9 and 16 Infantry Divisions were airlifted to Dacca. The military forces under Tikka Khan came down with a heavy hand on the Bengali nationalists. The Pakistani military launched constabulary operations codenamed "Operation Searchlight" on 25 March 1971, which temporarily stemmed the tide of the rebellion. The troops secured the capital Dacca, and then fanned out into the countryside to subdue the rebels. Although the operations succeeded in reestablishing government authority, it marked the turning point in the course of events. The brutality of the Pakistani military forces drove millions of Bengalis across the border to seek refuge in India, which imposed a huge demographic and economic burden on India. Some elements of East Pakistan military and paramilitary forces, which were being disarmed by the West Pakistani military, also managed to escape with the refugees to India, forming the future nucleus of Bangladesh army. The long-term presence of refugees in India posed a political

problem as well. Most of the refugees were Bengali Muslims, which could alter the demographic profile of the key border states in favor of the Muslims, with potential to cause communal discord with the dominant Hindu community. There was also danger of radicalization of the refugees, influenced by the communists who were quite active in Indian West Bengal.⁴⁹ There were also indications that the Bengali nationalist leaders, who sought India's help in achieving an independent Bangladesh, would look elsewhere for support, should India hesitate. In the circumstances, it could only imply Chinese involvement, which understandably, was not acceptable to India.

In addition to the political and economic problem, the refugee situation also presented India with an opportunity. If a political solution could not be found in East Pakistan, the return of refugees was unlikely. Under these circumstances, India was within its rights to use force to change the political dispensation in East Pakistan to facilitate the repatriation of the refugees.⁵⁰ All these issues provided the *casus belli* for Indian intervention in East Pakistan, and as the crisis in East Pakistan grew, the Indian leadership inched closer to the policy of confrontation.

Window of Opportunity

The instinctive Indian attitude to the situation in East Pakistan was determined by the historically rooted hostility between the two nations. Having fought two wars against Pakistan, India was not blind to the opportunities offered by the breakdown of civil order in East Pakistan.⁵¹ Indeed, hawkish elements within the Indian polity saw it as an excellent opportunity to not only dismember Pakistan, but also attack its very ideological foundation, which stood directly opposed to the secular principles on which the Indian state was founded. From a realist's point of view, a

⁴⁹ Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 61.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 188.

divided Pakistan would pose less of a threat to India's security because India would not face a two-front war in a future conflict with Pakistan. Its inability to coalesce as a state based on Islam would also undercut Pakistan's claim on the Muslim majority Indian state of Kashmir, which remains the major source of tensions between the two nations.⁵²

Initially, India preferred to await the course of developments in Pakistan before finalizing its policy. However, the massive influx of refugees in India made it a cross-border issue, drawing India into the civil war in Pakistan. The brutal crackdown by Pakistani military in East Pakistan and the tales of atrocities carried by the refugees became a staple in the Indian media and aroused the domestic public opinion in favor of intervention.⁵³

In March 1971, the Congress party under Indira Gandhi won an overwhelming majority in the Indian elections, and elected her as the Prime Minister.⁵⁴ The key cabinet ministers in her government were: Foreign Minister Swaran Singh, Defense Minister Jagjivan Ram, Finance Minister Y.B. Chavan, while she retained the Home Minister portfolio with herself.⁵⁵ Of these cabinet colleagues of Indira Gandhi, the Defense and Finance Ministers, along with some influential retired Generals were in favor of initiating an early war in March 1971, after the initial

⁵² Ganguly, *Conflict Unending*, 52.

⁵³ Jackson, *South Asian Crisis*, 148.

⁵⁴ Indira Gandhi was the daughter of Jawahar Lal Nehru, India first prime minister. On Nehru's death in 1964, she took over as the leadership of the Congress party. She initially faced resentment from the old stalwarts within her own party, who split from the party in 1969, considerably weakening her position. She was able to consolidate her authority only after her landslide victory in the general elections in March 1971, winning two-thirds of the seats in the parliament. She was thus firmly established and in full control of the party and policy making on the cusp of the impending war with Pakistan.

⁵⁵ India inherited the parliamentary form of government from the British, codified in the constitution adopted in 1950. The Prime Minister, as the leader of the majority party in the Parliament is also the head of the government. The Prime Minister appoints other ministers, primarily from the majority party, to handle various portfolios; the important ones being foreign, home, defense and finance ministries. These ministers, who are also elected representatives and members of the parliament, comprise the cabinet of ministers, who advise the Prime Minister in running the government. The ministers are assisted by a permanent cadre of civil bureaucrats, drawn from the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), who function as secretaries in the various ministries.

wave of refugees started arriving in India across the border with East Pakistan.⁵⁶ Indira Gandhi came under tremendous pressure from the public as well to act decisively and sooner rather than later. However, as the *policy maker*, she cognizant of the wider ramifications of initiating a conflict with Pakistan, and she adopted a cautious approach, seeking advice of the military and gauging the international opinion.⁵⁷

The Army Chief General S.H.F.J. “Sam” Manekshaw, who was also the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), had reservations about an early initiation of war. A World War 2 decorated veteran awarded Military Cross on the Burma Front, he understood what it takes an Army to go to war. As the *military strategist*, he was well aware that war should not be left to chance alone and that deliberate preparations were necessary to conduct it well. He had the courage of his convictions and the moral strength to press his case. While doing so, he was conscious of the risks involved in going against the Defense Minister, who was in favor of an early action. It could have led to his sacking, in case, his argument failed and the matter was decided otherwise. He conveyed his views in a meeting with Indira Gandhi on 25 March 1971, shortly after the Pakistani Army crackdown in East Pakistan, with the Defense Minister in attendance.⁵⁸ He put forward primarily three reasons in support of a later campaign, to be initiated in the winter, after deliberate preparations. First, he argued that with the Tibetan passes about to open in late June with the melting of the snows, the chances of intervention by China in aid of Pakistan were higher. Given that likelihood, India could not risk pulling back some its forces from the India-China border, which would dilute the forces available for the proposed campaign in East Pakistan. Once the passes closed in winter, the chances of Chinese intervention decreased,

⁵⁶ Pran Chopra, *India's Second Liberation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1974), 78.

⁵⁷ See Ayoob and Subramanyam, *The Liberation War*, 191-209, for a contemporary account of the approach adopted by Indira Gandhi towards the impending conflict.

⁵⁸ Depinder Singh, *Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw: Soldiering with Dignity* (Dehradun: Natraj Publishers, 2002), 129-129. The author was the Military Assistant to the Army Chief Sam Manekshaw during the conflict. He provides a vivid account of Manekshaw's meeting with Indira Gandhi, and his subsequent appearance before the cabinet, who concurred with his recommendation after initial debate.

making reserves available from the Chinese front. His second argument was concerned with the onset of monsoons in the region between July and October, when the low-lying countryside of East Pakistan became a quagmire, seriously impeding large-scale movement of forces, especially armor and vehicles. This would slow down the pace of operations, which would prolong the campaign. This was not acceptable, due to the expected pressure of the international community, the campaign needed to rapidly achieve its objectives. The rain waters usually receded by end October, making the winter season beginning from December, the ideal campaigning season. The third reason concerned the force levels required to conduct the campaign decisively.

Traditionally, Pakistan maintained a division plus in East Pakistan, which had been beefed up by two additional divisions due to the ongoing civil war, apart from various paramilitary forces deployed for internal security duties. These necessitated additional Indian forces to prosecute an offensive campaign, in a terrain that favored the defender. The movement of the required forces from other sectors and their re-orientation and preparation for the war was a deliberate process, which required time. He was not in favor of a half-baked campaign with inconclusive results. He assured Indira Gandhi of a decisive victory, provided he was given the required time to prepare his forces.

The clinching argument against an early initiation emanated from political considerations, particularly the internal and external viability of an independent Bangladesh. It became evident that “if India intervened before the necessity for doing so was clearly established in the eyes of the world, Bangladesh would be regarded as an Indian intervention and refused recognition by most countries.”⁵⁹ This also led to the recognition of the need to lend the campaign an indigenous flavor and a Bangladeshi face. This was possible by taking into confidence the leadership of the Bangladeshi government in exile, many of whom had taken refuge in India, and integrating the Bangladeshi partisans – the *Mukti Bahini*, in the military plans. It was the

⁵⁹ Chopra, *India's Second Liberation War*, 79.

convergence of India's motives with that of the Bengalis, contrived or otherwise, which made out the Indian campaign for liberation of East Pakistan a case of "just war," prosecuted in the cause of humanitarian intervention.⁶⁰

To further strengthen its case before the international community and to create legitimacy for its proposed course of action, India went on a diplomatic overdrive. India wanted "to give the international community and the United Nations sufficient time to attempt to mediate a viable political solution in East Pakistan or, in the process, expose beyond doubt their inability to do so."⁶¹ India signed a treaty of friendship with Soviet Union in early August, as a surety against opprobrium by the international community, particularly sanctions by the United Nations Security Council. This also helped neutralize, to an extent, the threat of Chinese intervention on Pakistan's behalf.⁶² To further bolster India's case, Indira Gandhi undertook a whirlwind tour of important countries in the west, starting with Moscow in September and the capitals of Western Europe and United States in October and November, conveying India's stand to the world leaders and garnering their support.⁶³ After her return in mid November, a military solution to the problem appeared to be the inevitable.

⁶⁰ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 21 and 105. According to the author, the justness of war is divided into two parts: first with reference to the reasons states have for fighting, secondly with reference to the means they adopt. The terms *jus ad bellum*, the justice of war, and *jus in bello*, the justice in war, are used to draw a distinction between them. The first requires us to make judgment about aggression and self-defense; and the second about the observance of the customary and positive rules of engagement. These two judgments are independent of each other. It is possible for a just war to be fought unjustly, and for an unjust war to be fought in accordance with the rules. This dualism is at the heart of the moral reality of war. In this respect, the author contends, the Indian invasion of East Pakistan in 1971 was an example of humanitarian intervention – not because of the purity of Indian objectives, but because its motives converged on a single course of action which was also the course of action called for by the Bengali nationalists. This explains why the Indians were in and out of the country so quickly, imposing no political controls on the emergent state of Bangladesh.

⁶¹ Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 209.

⁶² Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 66.

⁶³ Ayoob and Subramanyam, *The Liberation War*, 199-206. Indira Gandhi visited Moscow from 27 to 29 September, Washington from 4 to 5 November; and capitals of Belgium, Austria, United Kingdom, France and West Germany between 16 October and 13 November 1971

The United Nations largely remained a spectator to the buildup of forces and impending outbreak hostilities. Soviet Union repeatedly vetoed any resolution critical of India's position, calling for immediate cessation of hostilities. The only resolution introduced in the United Nations Security Council was on 6 December, after the war had already broken out. It called for an immediate ceasefire and a mutual withdrawal of troops from both sides of the border. It was adopted by the General Assembly on 8 December (Resolution 2790 (XXVI)) by an overwhelming vote of 104 to 11, and was finally adopted by the Security Council on 21 December (United Nations Security Council Resolution 307), after the ceasefire had already been implemented between the two warring nations.⁶⁴ In effect, the United Nations was merely a forum of discussing, and not resolving the issue between India and Pakistan.⁶⁵

Higher Direction of War

The highest decision making body in the government of India is the office of the Prime Minister, who as the head of the government is ultimately responsible for all decisions taken. Her core advisory group consisted of experienced and trusted civil servants, forming part of the Prime Minister's secretariat. The secretariat coordinated between the different agencies involved in the decision-making, and acted as the conduit for conveying the Prime Minister's decisions.⁶⁶ A more formal consultative institution was the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), the highest inter-ministerial decision making body. It is roughly the equivalent of the National Security Council in the U.S. government. It was comprised of the ministers of defense, finance, home and foreign affairs and was chaired by the Prime Minister. Various other ministers attended its meeting

⁶⁴ See Jackson, *South Asian Crisis*, 125-129 for the proceedings in the United Nations in adopting this resolution.

⁶⁵ Sisson and Rose, *War and Secession*, 219.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 138 -141. The authors offer a snapshot of the decision-making structures and personalities involved at various levels of the government. While the political and bureaucratic institutions have been adequately highlighted, their interaction with the military is given only a passing reference, exposing the lack of institutional mechanism in the government to facilitate the same.

depending upon the subject of discussion that required a decision. At the bureaucratic level, a secretaries committee existed which provided support to the PAC and helped implement the decisions taken and coordinated between the various ministries. It included secretaries from the nodal ministries of defense, home, foreign affairs and finance. Depending upon the matter at hand, secretaries from the other ministries and government agencies were also included, such as the civil defense and heads of paramilitary forces. Of these, D.P. Dhar deserves a special mention. As head of the policy planning in the Foreign Ministry, and former ambassador to the Soviet Union, he was appointed the special political representative of the Prime Minister. He played an important role in coordination between the Foreign and Defense ministries, and was part of all war councils in planning for the war.⁶⁷ Together, the civilian bureaucracy played an important in the decision making process, both as a channel of communication to the Prime Minister and in its policy recommendations.

At the level of the military, the three services are subject to political direction by the Defense Minister, who in turn is responsible to the Prime Minister.⁶⁸ The Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) is the highest level of decision making within the military hierarchy. The Army Chief Manekshaw functioned as the chairman of the COSC by virtue of seniority. He was responsible merely for coordination of joint and inter-service matters, and had little say over the internal matters of the other two services. Much of what could be achieved by the COSC depended upon the personal equation of the chairman with the other two service chiefs, Admiral S.N. Nanda and Air Marshal P.C. Lal. The service chiefs had little direct access to the political leadership, and had to depend upon the Defense Secretary to express their views to the Defense Minister on routine matters. Occasionally they were invited to attend the proceedings of the

⁶⁷ Sukhwant Singh, *The Liberation of Bangladesh*, 53.

⁶⁸ See Jackson, *South Asian Crisis*, 108-109 for the hierarchy and relationship between the different elements of the Indian military command system. The three services enjoy equal status and each of them is equally subject to civilian control.

Political Affairs Committee, when military related matters were being discussed. However, for most parts, the military was kept isolated from the political decision-making process in the government, which kept them apolitical in their outlook.⁶⁹

It was up to Manekshaw, who was ultimately responsible for the conduct of operations, both as the chairman of the COSC and the chief of the Army, to provide the bulk of the fighting strength for the war. He had the stature, by virtue of being a decorated war veteran and his commanding personality, to ensure that he got complete support of the political leadership in evolving and actualizing the military strategy.⁷⁰ He realized the importance of the “whole of government” approach to war, bringing on board the different ministries and agencies of the government towards the war effort. He leveraged his personal rapport with Indira Gandhi and his standing within the military establishment, to ensure all the agencies of the government were brought on board towards the war effort.⁷¹

Based on his recommendations, a Joint Intelligence Committee was set up under the vice chief of army staff, comprising representatives from the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India’s external intelligence agency, the Intelligence Bureau (IB), internal intelligence agency, and the directors of intelligence of the three services.⁷² This provided a common intelligence picture and avoided duplication between the various intelligence agencies. Similarly, a Joint Planning Committee was established within the Ministry of Defense to coordinate the operational plans of the three services, making them function as a joint team. Although, Army played the lead in planning and preparing for the war, Manekshaw always kept the other two service chiefs informed and gave due credit to the other two services for their contribution towards the war

⁶⁹ Sisson and Rose, *War and Secession*, 140.

⁷⁰ Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca*, 50-51.

⁷¹ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 54.

⁷² Chopra, *India’s Second Liberation War*, 101.

effort. This ensured their wholehearted cooperation and more than made up for the lack of joint institutional organization at the apex level.

The decision-making bodies for the higher direction of war were, therefore, well defined and established. Where they lacked, such as in civil-military interaction, D.P. Dhar was appointed the special points man to coordinate between political and military domains. Similarly, for coordinating plans of the three services, the Joint Planning Committee was set up and while the Joint Intelligence Committee was established for coordinating the inputs from the multifarious intelligence agencies. Combined with good personal relations at the highest level, and a well-managed overall political direction of the war, there was a clarity of purpose and objectives.⁷³

The exact mechanism and sequence of arriving at the political goals for the military campaign is not available, as the official history of the campaign and the military documents connected with it have not been made public. However, it is clear that the military option replaced the quest for a political solution only in stages.⁷⁴ Up to the Pakistani crackdown on 25 March, India treated the crisis in east Pakistan as an internal affair of Pakistan, not warranting an Indian intervention of any kind. By May, however, with the heavy strain of refugees crossing over to India after the military crackdown, the tone of Indian response changed, with some calling it a “demographic aggression.”⁷⁵ Some hawks in the establishment were more strident in their response, arguing that the situation in East Pakistan presented India with “an opportunity the like of which will never come again.”⁷⁶

Indira Gandhi was not swayed by the mounting public pressure and still gave primacy to a political solution to the problem. She sought help of the International community in

⁷³ Jackson, *South Asian Crisis*, 111.

⁷⁴ Chopra, *India's Second Liberation War*, 80.

⁷⁵ Sisson and Rose, *War and Secession*, 148.

⁷⁶ Ibid., quote by K Subramanyam, then director of an influential government think-tank, Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis at New Delhi.

pressurizing Pakistan to come to terms with the aspirations of the Bengali nationalists, and grant of autonomy to East Pakistan. This was the only condition under which the refugees would return to East Pakistan. The continued high handedness of Pakistani military authorities in East Pakistan led to further deterioration of the refugee situation. After the international community failed to address India's concerns in this regards, conveyed personally by Indira Gandhi during her visit to the Western capitals, the military option gained an upper hand over the political settlement of the issue.

Meanwhile, there was also a realization that the strength of resistance of the separatists in East Bengal was growing in intensity in direct proportion to the intensity of Pakistani crackdown. This presented India with an opportunity to exploit the situation by providing training and other assistance to the nationalists. This characterized the next phase in Indian decision making, from July till mid October, where there was an overt yet undeclared involvement of the Indian Border Security Force and intelligence agencies in the activities of the *Mukti Bahini* in waging a guerilla warfare against the Pakistani forces in East Pakistan. Growing Indian involvement had an inevitable reciprocal effect on Pakistan, who ordered mobilization of its forces, in anticipation of break out of full-scale hostilities. This, in turn, gave an excuse for the Indians to move their military forces close to the borders, both in the West as well as in the East. This marked the final phase in the decision-making, from October till end November, when the inevitability of war was amply evident to all concerned. Both the militaries periodically engaged in border skirmishes, often involving artillery fires as well, ostensibly in support of or against the operations of the *Mukti Bahini*.

The Indian support for the *Mukti Bahini* created a dilemma for the Pakistanis concerning the Indian objectives. Pakistan had to determine whether India had a limited aim to capture only a section of territory in East Pakistan to establish the free Bangladeshi government, or the limited intervention on behalf of the *Mukti Bahini* was prelude to an all out invasion to dismember East Pakistan. The Indian policy in this phase was deliberately contrived to keep the Pakistanis

guessing about its objectives in East Pakistan, and encourage indecision or precipitate a wrong decision within the Pakistani higher command. As it turned out, Pakistan took the latter option. However, there was no confusion in the inner circles in New Delhi on this matter or its strategy for East Pakistan.⁷⁷ The decision to go to war seemed to have firmed in after the return of Indira Gandhi from her tour abroad on 14 November, where the western nations failed to address India's concerns adequately.⁷⁸ The decision was taken after due deliberation, taking all stakeholders in confidence, in particular the military, who were given the final say in its timing and conduct.⁷⁹ The political objectives set forth for the military, which emerged from the process of politico-military deliberations, were:

To liberate Bangla Desh (*sic*) as quickly as possible;
To fight a holding action in the west and in the north, if attacked;
To make limited gains in the west, as a bargaining point in case a Pakistani surprise attack succeeded in capturing any part of Indian territory.⁸⁰

Given these aims, the military sought to translate them into operational objectives and evolved their plans accordingly.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 213.

⁷⁸ The first major engagement between regular forces of India and Pakistan in Boyra sector, opposite Jessore on 21 November and the subsequent Indian attack on Hilli on 27 November point to the state of readiness of the forces and the political will to use them aggressively when required.

⁷⁹ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 54.

⁸⁰ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 151.

The Plan

Terrain

The geographic location of East Pakistan made it vulnerable to an offensive action by India. It was separated from West Pakistan by 1600 kilometers of the Indian landmass and was



Figure 2: Map of Bangladesh, showing principal towns and waterways. Open internet source: http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/bangladesh_map2.htm; accessed 19 April 2012.

surrounded by India on three sides, with whom it shared a border of 4000 kilometers. To the south it had the Bay of Bengal, which was dominated by Indian Navy. At the southeastern extremity, it shared border with Burma near the Chittagong hill tracts. It is a typical low lying riverine terrain, which remained water logged for most part of the year, especially during the monsoons. The drainage of the country is from north to south and all the major rivers flow in that direction. The three principal rivers are the Brahmaputra (also called by its local name Jamuna), the Ganga and the Meghna. These divided East Pakistan into four distinct sectors:

(a) **Northwestern Sector:** included the towns of Dinajpur, Rangpur and Rajshahi, lying north of Ganga and west of Brahmaputra.

(b) **Southwestern Sector:** included the area of Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Khushtia, lying south of Ganga and west of Brahmaputra.

(c) **Central Sector:** included the capital Dacca, Tangail and Mymensingh, lying between Brahmaputra and Meghna.

(d) **Eastern Sector:** lay to the east of Meghna and included the towns Sylhet, Comilla and the ports of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar.⁸¹

Road and rail communications was limited, restricted across the sectors to the Hardinge bridge between northwestern and southwestern sectors and the bridge connecting central and eastern sectors near Ashuganj.⁸² The waterways provided the principal means of transportation, which could be crossed at a number of ferry sites. There were no trans-border road or rail links between India and East Pakistan, all the pre-partition routes having been discontinued. The only international airport was at Dacca, all others being subsidiary airfields with limited capacity.

Monsoons are the distinctive climatic feature of East Pakistan, inundating most of the countryside between June and October every year, frequently wreaking the havoc of floods. Any movement during this period is subject to its vagaries. Winters are relatively mild and dry, making cross-country movement possible.

The "Dacca Bowl" the triangle formed by Ganga and Meghna north of Dacca and including it, was the geo-political heart of East Pakistan, the seat of both political and military

⁸¹ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 1

⁸² Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 58.

power.⁸³ It, therefore, emerged as the ultimate objective for liberation of East Pakistan. Its vulnerability was defined by various approaches leading to it through the different sectors. The eastern sector provided shortest approach, although it implied launch from the far east of India, on extended lines of communication. The central sector provided the least obstacles, involving only the crossing of the Ganga. However, it required a launch from the hills of Meghalaya on the Indian side, which posed logistical problems.⁸⁴

Relative Strength

When the war broke out between India and Pakistan, the military balance was definitely in favor of India, especially in the Eastern theater. Since the 1962 border war with China, India's forces had greatly improved in size, training and equipment. Domestic capability for indigenous production of armaments had been developed, with help from Soviet Union and other Western powers. India received large-scale military supplies from Soviet Union, which preceded the recently signed Indo-Soviet treaty. India also acquired a great deal of equipment during the year, mostly from Russians, in critical armaments such as air defense systems. Even in manpower, the Indian officers was often more professional and identified with the rank-and-file more closely than his Pakistani counterpart.

Indian Army's Eastern Command, led by Lieutenant General J.S. Aurora, with headquarters at Calcutta, controlled the operations against East Pakistan. During the course of the campaign, Aurora virtually operated as the theater commander, even directing the operations of the air force and the naval elements deployed in the Eastern Theater.⁸⁵ By virtue of controlling all the forces operating in the Eastern Theater, Aurora clearly emerges as the *campaign commander*, in reviewing the campaign from an operational art perspective.

⁸³ Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca*, 56.

⁸⁴ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 6-8.

⁸⁵ Chopra, *India's Second Liberation War*, 126.

Amongst the land forces, Aurora had a total of seven infantry/mountain divisions, under three army corps. He also had a communication zone under his command, which was a brigade level formation, commanded by a major general. The corps wise force allocation was:

(a) **2 Corps:** led by Lieutenant General T.N. Raina, comprised of 4 and 9 Infantry Divisions, two armored regiments, one artillery regiment and engineer bridging units.

(b) **33 Corps:** led by Lieutenant General M.L. Thapan, had just 20 Mountain Division, with two additional infantry brigades, one armored regiment, one medium artillery regiment and engineer bridging units.

(c) **4 Corps:** led by Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, with 8, 23 and 57 Mountain Divisions, two armored squadrons and one artillery regiment.

(d) **101 Communications Zone:** led by Major General G.S. Gill, had 95 Mountain Brigade and 2 Parachute Battalion.⁸⁶

The mountain divisions, with primary role in the mountains on the northern borders, were organized on the lines of infantry divisions, except that they had lesser quantity of transport and lighter caliber high-trajectory artillery. The armor units were equipped with Russian T-55 tanks and amphibious PT-76 light tanks, which were well suited for river crossing operations. The rest had to rely on bridging and assault boats provided by the engineers, most of which were of World war 2 vintage. There was a chronic shortage of bridging equipment, given the massive scope of crossings planned over the numerous rivers and water channels. The shortfall was made up by improvisations, use of local resources and last minute procurements. The artillery units had 25 pounder guns, 100 mm field and 130 mm medium guns.⁸⁷

The army, overall, was well poised for its envisaged role in the conflict. Although some criticized the long time it took the army to mobilize and prepare for war, the intervening period between March and November, since the crisis blew over in East Pakistan and when the war finally began, was well utilized getting ready for the war. Major equipment deficiencies were made up and repairs undertaken where required. A number of training maneuvers and war games were conducted at all levels to rehearse and validate the plans for offensive. Major infrastructural

⁸⁶ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 103.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 44.

projects were carried out in the border areas, to improve the logistical support for the offensive. The Indian soldier was well motivated and had high morale, and was equal any mission assigned to him.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) comprised of a total of 45 squadrons of combat and transport aircraft, with 625 combat aircraft. These comprised the indigenously manufactured *MiG-21*, Russian built *Sukhoi-7*, along with older vintage Gnats, Hunters, and Canberra bombers.⁸⁸ Out of these, four squadrons of Hunters, two squadrons of *MiG-21*s, and one *Sukhoi-7* squadron was earmarked for operations in East Pakistan. In addition, a squadron of *MI-4* helicopters and some transport aircraft were also made available for operations in East Pakistan, primarily for logistical operations. The Indian Navy (IN) was relatively small compared to the other two services and its major vessels comprised of one aircraft carrier, two cruisers, three destroyers, four submarines and some landing crafts for amphibious operations, apart from a number of patrol boats. Of these, the lone aircraft carrier *INS Vikrant*, along with a destroyer, a frigate and a submarine were deployed in the Bay of Bengal, forming part of the Eastern Naval Fleet responsible for operations against East Pakistan.

Against the above force levels, Pakistan could muster three infantry divisions, one armor regiment of Chaffee tanks, an air force squadron of F-86 Sabres and four naval gunboats in East Pakistan. Apart from these regular forces, it had 73,000 paramilitary personnel organized under East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces, Scouts, *Mujahids* and *Razakars*. Later, as the war clouds gathered, two *ad-hoc* divisional headquarters and four *ad-hoc* brigade headquarters were also raised, to deceive the Indians by projecting a larger force level.⁸⁹

Both the sides had to leave a substantial portion of their forces in the West on the Pakistan-India border, especially in the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region. Despite this, and the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁹ Sadiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, 123

forces left on the India-China border, India had a clear edge over Pakistani forces in East Pakistan, which worked out to a combat ratio of 7:4 in India's favor. However, it was not deemed adequate for offensive operations against the deliberate defenses, where doctrinally a minimum of 3:1 superiority is desirable. This factor weighed heavily on Indian planners mind, calling for application of maneuver warfare to bypass the Pakistani strong points and thus avoiding attritional losses.⁹⁰ India also had a decisive superiority in air over East Pakistan, with seven squadrons along with 12 transport helicopters, pitted against a single squadron of Pakistan Air Force (PAF). The air superiority enjoyed by the IAF permitted tactical air mobility, and greatly enhanced the speed of operations, making it key to the success of the Indian plan.⁹¹

Partisan Warfare – The *Mukti Bahini*

Consequent to the crackdown by Pakistani authorities in East Pakistan as part of Operation Search Light starting in March 1971, many of the Bengali dominated regular military units (East Pakistan Rifles), paramilitary forces (East Bengal Rifles, a border guarding force) and civil police revolted and sought refuge in neighboring India. These personnel, along with other nationalistic elements within the East Pakistani administration, and the Bengali population at large, formed an auxiliary force –known as the *Mukti Bahini* - with material and moral help from India. They eventually comprised about three brigades, in addition to seventy to eighty thousand irregulars, under command of Colonel M.A.G Osmani, from the East Pakistani forces who had defected to India. They were active in harassing Pakistani army in the border regions, with assistance from the Indian Border Security Force.⁹²

The direct contribution of the *Mukti Bahini* towards the defeat of the Pakistani forces is debatable, most of it was propaganda by India and Bengali nationalists. India required their

⁹⁰ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 68.

⁹¹ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 192

⁹² Ibid., 190.

projection as freedom fighters as a cover of legitimacy for its operations ostensibly in their aid, while for the Bengalis, they sowed the seeds of nationalism. At the tactical level, it did force the Pakistan Army to disperse its forces by adopting a forward posture, so as to deny the *Mukti Bahini* any occupation of ground which they could declare as a liberated zone, especially along the border regions. They also helped tie down sizeable Pakistani forces in security of rear areas and lines of communication, dissipating their fighting strength. During the war, the *Mukti Bahini* contributed to the speed of advance of the Indians by providing ready labor and intelligence on the deployment of Pakistani forces. Most significantly, at the strategic level, it kept the glow of freedom struggle alive in the Bengali masses, and provided the Bengali face to the liberation war. The rebel officers and the administrators forming part of the force provided the nucleus of the provisional government formed under Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, after East Pakistan gained independence as Bangladesh. This significantly helped in a smooth transition of authority, helping Indian forces make an early exit.⁹³

Pakistani Plan of Defense

The Pakistani strategy was premised on the notion that the defense of East Pakistan lay in the west, since West Pakistan was considered the decisive theater.⁹⁴ The Pakistani military strategy was to mount a successful offensive in the West to capture sufficiently valuable Indian territory, most likely in the disputed territory of Kashmir, to be used in post-conflict negotiations to offset Indian gains in East Pakistan. In the event, Pakistan launched an offensive in the Chhamb sector of Jammu and Kashmir which made initial gains, but was later repulsed by the Indian forces. The main Pakistani thrust projected in Punjab did not materialize due to countervailing action by the Indian armored division. Some insignificant gains were made in the

⁹³ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 51-63

⁹⁴ Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, 124.

desert sector further south, but these were also beaten back. The other pillar of Pakistani strategy rested on an anticipated early intervention by the United Nations, led by its allies China and the United States, enforcing a ceasefire on the Indians. This would curtail the scope of Indian offensive, and limit its gains. The Pakistani forces in East Pakistan had only to hold out against the Indian offensive until the ceasefire by adopting a strong defensive posture.

In light of the above, the Pakistani General Headquarters (GHQ) assigned Lieutenant General A.A.K. Niazi, commander of Pakistani forces in East Pakistan, the mission to: “Evict guerillas. Do not allow any chunk of territory to fall into enemy hands, which they can declare as Bangladesh. Defend East Pakistan against external aggression to defend East Pakistan.”⁹⁵ This mission created conflicting requirements for Niazi. The threat of insurgency and the need to combat it demanded dispersion of troops, while the requirement of fighting the conventional forces of India necessitated concentration of forces to create superior combat ratios at the point of contact.⁹⁶ The overriding political concern was not to allow establishment of the rebel government on any land declared as liberated zone, which dictated the plan of defense.

Various options emerged before Niazi to support the given mission, based on the appreciated Indian threat. The first option was to defend the Dacca Bowl, along the banks of rivers Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna, thereby denying Indian forces their ultimate objective. This option, however, implied the surrender of all territory outside the Dacca Bowl without a fight, which was not acceptable. The second option was a modification of the first, with initial deployment along the border, falling back to Dacca for its eventual defense. This plan was predicated on having the routes of withdrawal open as the war progressed, which was not guaranteed, given the air superiority enjoyed by IAF and the likely interference by *Mukti Bahini*. Another unlikely option considered was based on mobile defense of East Pakistan, concentrating

⁹⁵ Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan*, 80.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

forces along the likely approaches of Indian forces, thereby offsetting the numerical disadvantage of Pakistani forces. However, given the active support of *Mukti Bahini* to Indian forces in terms of intelligence and sabotage, there was a likelihood of the “hunter becoming the hunted.” The final option considered was to adopt a fortress defense of selected towns, along the border and likely axes of advance of Indian forces. This would compel the Indian forces either to clear or to bypass these fortresses. The Indian Army would have to commit a large force to clear these fortresses or detach sufficient force to besiege them. In either case, India would have to divert troops from the advancing forces, slowing the pace of advance, thereby buying time for Pakistan until the international community, it was hoped, would intervene to force a ceasefire. For these reasons, Niazi chose the fourth option for deployment of his forces.⁹⁷

The concept of defense adopted envisaged defense in layers. The border outposts were the forward most elements, mostly occupied by paramilitaries, to give early warning of the Indian advance. The “strong points” based on small towns, was the next layer, which was to be the mainstay of the defenses. The “fortresses” based on major towns in each sector, formed the next layer, designated as the line of no-penetration, where the troops would fight to the last man.⁹⁸ The towns of Jessore, Jhenida, Bogra, Rangpur, Jamalpur, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Bhairab Bazar, Comilla and Chittagong were prepared as fortresses. The areas of responsibility for the defense of East Pakistan were allocated as follows:

(a) **Northwestern Sector:** 16 Infantry Division with a brigade each Rangpur and Bogra. One artillery regiment, one reconnaissance and support (R&S) battalion and an armored regiment supported it.

(b) **Southwestern Sector:** 9 Infantry Division with a brigade each at Jessore and Jhenida. It was allotted two regiments of artillery and a R & S battalion.

(c) **Central Sector:** An ad-hoc 36 Infantry Division was created for the defense of Dacca with an ad-hoc brigade at Mymensingh. Another ad-hoc 39 Infantry Division with an infantry brigade was designated for the defense of Chandpur.

⁹⁷ Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, 124.

⁹⁸ Niazi, *Betrayal of East Pakistan*, 84.

(d) **Eastern Sector:** 14 Infantry Division with brigade each at Comilla, Brahmanbaria-Akhaura, and Sylhet, with an independent brigade at Chittagong. One artillery regiment and an armor troop were allocated to this sector.⁹⁹

Despite correctly appreciating Dacca as the lynchpin – the center of gravity of the defense of East Pakistan, no dedicated forces were allocated for its defense. The ad-hoc 36 Infantry Division raised for this purpose was to take under command reinforcements promised from West Pakistan and any forces falling back from the forward lines of defense.¹⁰⁰ However, these did not materialize, leaving Dacca virtually undefended, a vulnerability exploited by the Indian forces as the war progressed.

Indian Plan of Attack

Although, the Indian military planners had been monitoring the developing crisis in East Pakistan, the planning process started in earnest only after the meeting between Indira Gandhi and Manekshaw on 25 March 1971, wherein Indira Gandhi accepted Manekshaw's advise to postpone the military action to winter.¹⁰¹ This gave a clear lead time of eight months for the Indian military to draw up the plans for the campaign. The key to the success of the plan for liberation of Bangladesh hinged on the speed of operations, both for political and military reasons. Pakistan was a member of the US led South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and a close ally of China. It was assumed that the US and China would attempt to intervene in Pakistan's favor bringing to bear diplomatic and military pressure on India to bring about an early termination of hostilities. This necessitated the achievement of the objectives of war before the ceasefire, likely to be enforced within 12-15 days of the commencement of war.¹⁰² At the strategic level, in case of threat of military intervention by China, the mountain divisions pulled

⁹⁹ Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, 126

¹⁰⁰ Niazi, *Betrayal of East Pakistan*, 86-87

¹⁰¹ Depinder Singh, *Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw*, 128.

¹⁰² Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 100.

out from the India-China border would have to be sent back, after contributing their might towards the campaign in East Pakistan. At the operational level, the speed of operations would foreclose the Pakistani plan to fall back to the Dacca Bowl, which by virtue of the river lines guarding its approaches, would make it a formidable defensive fortress, prolonging the battle for its capture. Due to this overriding requirement of speed of operations to achieve the war aims, it came to be referred the “lightening campaign.”¹⁰³

The initial planning was done primarily at the Army Headquarters in New Delhi, with inputs from the Eastern Command headquarters where necessary. By end of May 1971, the broad strategic outline of the plan emerged:

- (a) Conduct preliminary operations to draw out Pakistani forces to the border, forcing them to denude the defenses in depth, especially around Dacca.
- (b) The capture or blockading of two major ports of Chittagong and Khulna to cutoff the Pakistani forces in East Pakistan, and prevent their reinforcement from outside.
- (c) To capture critical ferry sites, bridges and airfields to isolate the Pakistani forces and prevent their withdrawal to the defenses of Dacca Bowl.
- (d) Once the Pakistani forces had been effectively isolated and disintegrated, the approaches to Dacca would lay open for exploitation by the Indian forces.¹⁰⁴

It is pertinent to note that in the initial stage of the planning, Dacca was not designated as the final objective. It was presumed that the capture of the *entrepôts* of Chittagong and Khulna would isolate East Pakistan and lead to the collapse of the Pakistani defenses.

Based on this strategy, the planners proceeded to determine specific objectives in each sector of operation. Bogra was the main objective in the Northwestern sector, to be approached along the Hilli-Gaibanda axis to cut off the Pakistani forces in the north at Dinajpur. Jessore, which was the main communication center connecting Dacca, was the objective in the Southwestern sector, along with the port of Khulna and the Hardinge bridge over Ganga. The capture of the bridge over Meghna at Ashuganj was the main objective in the Eastern sector, which would isolate Dacca from Chittagong, both of which could then be tackled piece meal. In

¹⁰³ Ibid., 94-100.

¹⁰⁴ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 68-69. Also Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca*, 60.

the north, the capture of Jamalpur and Tangail would open the way to Dacca, with a paradrop planned at Tangail to speed up the operations in this sector.

Based on these objectives, assessment and allocation of forces needed for these tasks was carried out. It was soon realized that the capture of Khulna and Chittagong from landward

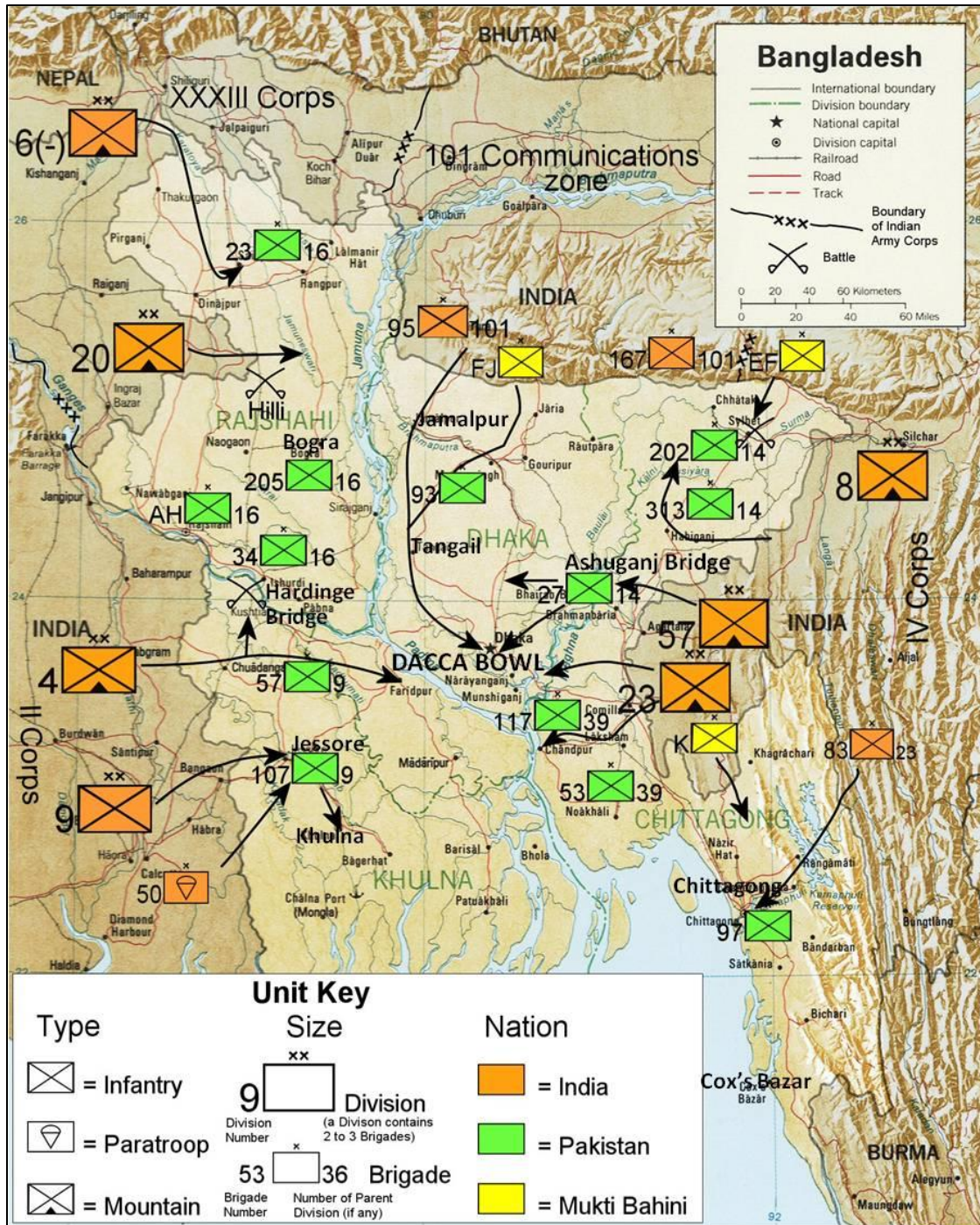


Figure 3: Indian campaign plan, showing the corps thrusts, converging onto Dacca. Open internet source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh_Liberation_War; accessed 19 April 2012.

approaches would require additional resources and time, which were not available at that time. It was then decided to blockade these ports by the navy instead of capturing these by land.

The initial operational plan made ready by the Army headquarters by early July 1971, in its outline, involved the following:

(a) **Northwestern Sector:** 33 Corps was tasked to capture Bogra or Rangpur and exploit up to the river Brahmaputra.

(b) **Southwestern Sector:** 2 Corps was tasked to capture the Jessore and Jhenida and secure the area up to river Meghna including the capture of Hardinge bridge.

(c) **Central Sector:** 101 Communication Zone was tasked to capture Jamalpur and Tangail and open the axis to Dacca, to which this sector offered the most direct approach. To speed up the advance, an airdrop was planned by 2 Parachute Battalion, which would link up with the local *Mukti Bahini* force, to capture Tangail.

(d) **Eastern Sector:** 4 Corps was tasked to secure the area up to river Meghna including Daudkandi, Chandpur and the Ashuganj bridge.¹⁰⁵

Manekshaw personally briefed Aurora on this plan at Calcutta, covering the political background, the aim and the choice and strength of the corps thrust lines.¹⁰⁶ Based on the overall strategic aim to liberate Bangladesh, the mission assigned to the Indian Eastern Command was to destroy the bulk of the Pakistani forces in the eastern theatre and to occupy the major portion of East Pakistan.¹⁰⁷ Army headquarters issued written operational instructions to Eastern Command on the above lines, and the machinery to wage war got into motion.

Based on Army headquarters directions, eastern Command issued its operational instructions in August 1971, which spelt out the sector wise allotment of forces, objectives to be achieved and the broad time line for conduct of the operations.¹⁰⁸ The sector wise operational plans were then worked out in detail, involving the corps and divisional commanders responsible, during greater part of September. The plans were examined and war-gamed down to brigade

¹⁰⁵ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 69-70.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰⁷ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 46.

¹⁰⁸ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 79.

level, till the end of October, updated and modified based on latest intelligence received regarding the Pakistani forces.¹⁰⁹

The discussions and war games held in eastern Command revealed the lacunae of missing Dacca as the final objective, driven home by Major General J.F.R. Jacob, who was the chief of staff in the Eastern Command headquarters. He argued that as the geo-political heart of East Pakistan, Dacca had to be addressed as the final objective, to ensure the defeat of the Pakistani forces in East Pakistan.¹¹⁰ On his insistence, Dacca was designated as the final objective to be captured only in end of November, on the cusp of war.¹¹¹

The overlooking of Dacca as the final objective, although it was acknowledged as the center of gravity of East Pakistan, appears to be an anomaly in the Indian planning. This came in for criticism by subordinate commanders in their accounts of the war, indicating a lack of focus in the planning by higher headquarters.¹¹² Palit points out that it would have been difficult for Lieutenant General Aurora, the Eastern Army Commander, to foresee which of his corps thrusts would be fast enough to get to Dacca first, once they had been unleashed.¹¹³ The ambiguity in designating Dacca as an objective for a specific corps offensive was deemed to provide operational flexibility which allowed the corps commander to exercise initiative to “win the race to Dacca,” thus bringing about an early victory. This is supported by Sukhwant Singh: “Once the enemy was defeated in detail by this maneuver, the race to Dacca would be started by any formation in a position to do so. It was appreciated that without the capture of Dacca, the campaign could not be concluded successfully.”¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca*, 66.

¹¹¹ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 285.

¹¹² Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 48. Also Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca*, 66.

¹¹³ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 103.

¹¹⁴ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 69.

Manekshaw, in his capacity as the COSC, presented the plan to the Air Force Chief Marshal P.C. Lal and the Naval Chief Admiral S.M. Nanda towards the end of July to enable them to formulate their service plans and thus evolve an integrated plan for the three services.¹¹⁵ It was primarily a land campaign, with the air force and navy dovetailed in the plan. This was not to underplay their contribution, which was significant, but was essentially in support of the ground operations. Ideally, the plan should have evolved jointly. However, due to lack of established joint command structures, this was not possible. To ensure coordination between the three services, certain reorganization was done at Eastern Command headquarters in Calcutta. The air force established an advance air headquarters, under an air commodore, co-located with army's Eastern Command, while the navy also sent a representative of its Eastern Fleet to it. This made the Eastern Command headquarters a truly joint theater headquarters, enabling the war to be fought as an integrated joint campaign.

The highest priority was given to close air support of the land forces by ground interdiction, while maintaining air supremacy by counter air operations. The Indian Navy, made a debut in this war, having been marginalized in the previous wars. It was assigned a key operational role of blockading the ports of East Pakistan, in particular Chittagong and Khulna, to ensure that it did not receive any reinforcements from the sea nor affect a withdrawal of its forces. It was also tasked to establish sea control to ensure that the sea-lanes remain open for Indian ships and international maritime trade. It planned to achieve this employing the naval task force based on its aircraft carrier INS *Vikrant* along with its escorts of three destroyers, frigates and a submarine. The Sea Hawks fighters based on INS *Vikrant* were to be used bomb the Pakistani naval bases and mines were to be laid around the ports to cut them off. This effectively completed the noose around the Pakistani forces in East Pakistan, and contributed significantly towards their

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 76.

sense of isolation, thereby hastening their capitulation. From operational art perspective, Citino sums up the plan as:

It was a solid plan, and in many ways remarkable one. Characterized by a realistic assessment of both sides' forces and by a healthy degree of flexibility that recognized the role of uncertainty in war, it stands in the best traditions of modern operational level planning. Its series of converging columns was a classic example of a war of movement, to be specific, an "operation on exterior lines" of the type practiced by elder Helmuth von Moltke. Moreover, its emphasis on maneuver flew in the face of Indian tradition, which leaned heavily on firepower and deliberate, set-piece battle in the British style. Its aim of total victory within two weeks, what one officer called "the lightning concept," marked a break with previous Indian war planning, which had emphasized territorial gains as post war negotiating chips.¹¹⁶

The chief asset of the Indian plan, which brought about its success, was its emphasis on maneuver over attrition. This ensured that the Indian forces were not pinned down by the defensive fortresses prepared by the Pakistanis, and were able to achieve their objective in a faster time frame, before the pressure by the international community imposed a ceasefire.

Mobilization for War

The main challenge in mobilization for the war was that, hitherto fore, India had fought wars only on two fronts, against Pakistan in the west in 1947 and 1965 and against China in the north in 1962. Therefore, no major operations were envisaged against East Pakistan and no plans had existed for the type of campaign now planned to be conducted. Consequently, there was little logistics setup in the eastern theatre in terms of rail and road communications and other infrastructure requirements to launch and sustain a major campaign.¹¹⁷ The impending operations necessitated a major realignment of the logistical system. The Border Roads Organization, assisted by the other state road constructions agencies, undertook the monumental task of building and upgrading the roads network in the region, including some forward airfields.¹¹⁸ All

¹¹⁶ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 193.

¹¹⁷ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 252-253.

¹¹⁸ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 46.

these preparations required certain lead-time, which was also one the reasons why Manekshaw had argued for a later campaign.

Separate logistics dumps had to be established for the various corps, in the areas from these offensives were planned to be launched. This posed a major challenge for 4 Corps, which formed a bulk, almost a third of the offensive content of the Indian campaign. Its staging areas in Tripura, at the far southeast corner of the theater, were at a distance of 1400 kilometers on a single line meter-gauge railway link from the broad-gauge railhead.¹¹⁹ In the event, nearly 30, 000 tons of stores were moved for 4 Corps; 14,000 tons to Krishnanagar for 2 Corps; 7,000 tons to Raigarh for 33 Corps and 4,000 tons to Tura for 101 Communications Zone.¹²⁰ Much of this movement was carried out through the monsoons, severely adding to the logistical problem.

Many of the formations taking part in the campaign were mountain divisions, having been pulled back from the northern borders with China. These were woefully short of transport and were equipped with only high-trajectory artillery, in keeping with their role on the mountains. They had to be suitably re-equipped for operations in the plains with adequate transport, especially water-crossing expedients. Considering the riverine nature of terrain in East Pakistan, the role of engineers in laying bridges and track work was critical to the success of operations. It is estimated that nearly 14,000 feet of bridging was laid by the Indian engineers during the course of the campaign.¹²¹ However, lacunae in the operational plans, catering for advance only up to the river lines by the corps thrust lines, had an adverse effect on the logistics plans as well. No additional bridging was catered for the crossing of Meghna and Brahmaputra, severely impeding the speed of advance to Dacca. This handicap was overcome through improvisations and use of

¹¹⁹ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 252.

¹²⁰ Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca*, 79.

¹²¹ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 256.

local resources.¹²² The air supremacy enjoyed by IAF also allowed aerial supply of advancing forces, which had outstripped their logistics chain of supply.

Consequent to the logistics build up, the movement of the offensive forces to their respective staging areas was another challenge. Many of the forces were pulled out from the northern borders, while many others were moved from their peacetime locations in the hinterland. Their movement posed three constraints that had to be overcome.¹²³ First, there was an utmost requirement for secrecy for the sake of security of the operational plans. The pattern of movement and timings of the forces were chosen in such a manner that their likely area of employment was not given away. Secondly, there was a physical requirement of moving these forces to their staging areas. Bulk of the movement had to be carried out over the meager rail lines available in the region, with limited unloading facilities in the detraining stations. All this had to be achieved without disturbing the routine commercial traffic, so as not to raise an alarm amidst the public. The rail facilities were upgraded and repaired and additional facilities were built where necessary. Lastly, there were political compulsions to avoid “ostensible warlike movement which would convey impressions contrary to our (Indian) public declarations.”¹²⁴ Therefore, the movement to the forward areas commenced only as late as beginning of October, and continued well after the middle of November, when the border skirmishes had already started.

¹²² Ibid., 261.

¹²³ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 47-48.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

The Lightning Campaign

The India-Pakistan war of 1971 opened formally on the evening of 3 December, following a pre-emptive strike by Pakistani air force on Indian airfields in the West. Within hours, both Western and Eastern fronts erupted into fighting. While both sides retained the bulk of their forces in the West, it was in East Pakistan that the decisive campaign was fought, which determined the outcome of war.¹²⁵

Northwestern Sector

The offensive in this sector was led by 33 Corps under Lieutenant General M.L. Thapan, against Pakistani 16 Infantry Division under Major General Nazir Hussain Shah. Thapan was the only commander taking part in this campaign who was a veteran of World War 2, and had the experience commanding a division in the previous India-Pakistan war in 1965. He was known to be cautious in his approach, prone to follow the book rather than innovate on the battlefield, which reflected in the conduct of operations in this sector.¹²⁶ The main offensive of the corps was launched by 20 Mountain Division, tasked to capture Hilli, at the narrowest stretch of this sector, to cut off the railway line coming south from Rangpur, thereby isolating the Pakistani defenses in the north. The frontal assault on Hilli turned out to be a sloggy match against its well-prepared defenses, held by up to a brigade strength. Despite repeated attacks, beefed up with reinforcements, the defenders held on. Meanwhile the 71 Mountain Brigade thrust against Thakurgaon succeeded and was threatening the fortress-town of Dinajpur in the north. Taking advantage of the opening, 340 Mountain Brigade, the corps reserve, was tasked to move north of

¹²⁵ The principal Indian sources for the war in the Western theater are: K. P. Candeth, *The Western Front: The Indo-Pak War 1971* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1984); K.C. Praval, *Indian Army after Independence* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1990), and Sukhwant Singh, *Defense of Western Border* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1998). Key Pakistani sources are: Fazal Muqeem Khan, *Pakistan's Crisis in Leadership* (Karachi: National Book Foundation, 1973), and Shaukat Riza, *The Pakistan Army: 1966-71* (Dehradun: Natraj Publishers, 1977).

¹²⁶ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 161.

Hilli and threaten Pirganj, with a view to force the thinning of Hilli to cater for this new threat to its rear.¹²⁷ The advance of 340 Brigade, led by Brigadier Joginder Singh, was a model of classic maneuver battle: “He skillfully used combat groups, consisting of tanks and tank-mounted infantry, to increase his mobility, repeatedly beating the Pakistanis to defensive lines they had intended to occupy, bypassing their frontal defenses, and attacking them from flanks and rear.”¹²⁸ After achieving the objective at Pirganj, 340 Infantry Brigade continued its advance towards Bogra, the logistical hub of Pakistani defenses in this sector. Having been depleted of its strength, Hilli fell on 12 December. 340 Infantry Brigade entered Bogra on 16 December, followed by rest of the corps, effectively ending the fighting in this sector. However, five Pakistani fortified positions continued to hold out, including Rangpur, astride Indian lines of supply, which might have posed logistic problems, had the war dragged on.

Despite the brilliant maneuver by 340 Infantry Brigade, the operations in this sector are remembered for the futility of the battle of Hilli, which took up nearly five Indian brigades of the total seven employed in this sector. It reinforced the age-old lesson to avoid frontal attacks against prepared defenses, learnt at the cost 371 killed and 961 wounded on the Indian side, most in the battle of Hilli.¹²⁹ The unimaginative and set-piece plan of attack, militated against the overall concept of maneuver in the campaign, towards which it contributed little.

Southwestern Sector

2 Corps, under Lieutenant General T.N. Raina, launched the offensive with its two divisional thrusts towards Jhenida (4 Infantry Division) in the north and Jessore (9 Infantry Division) in the south. Raina enjoyed a good reputation as a soldier, having proved his mettle in

¹²⁷ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 83.

¹²⁸ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 201.

¹²⁹ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 177.

the 1962 India-China war.¹³⁰ He later rose to be the Chief of Indian Army in 1975. He faced Pakistani 9 Infantry Division, under Major General Ansari, with a brigade each at Jhenida and Jessore and an irregular brigade at Khulna, which dissolved on the first contact battle.

After three days of battle, Jhenida fell to the Indian forces. The remnants of Pakistani 57 Brigade defending Jhenida attempted to withdraw to next defensive line at Madhumati river. However, its routes of withdrawal had been blocked by the leading elements of Indian forces, compelling the Pakistanis to fall back to Kushtia in the north. After a stubborn resistance, the Pakistanis inexplicably evacuated their fortress at Jessore on the third day. It believed that the rapid fall of Jhenida had sapped the will of Ansari, leading to this precipitate decision. The Pakistani 9 Infantry Division headquarters along with 107 Brigade fell back to Khulna in the south. Ironically, had the withdrawal been affected earlier, the Pakistanis could have managed to fall back to the Dacca Bowl, as per plan, to reinforce its defenses. However, the withdrawal routes to Dacca were now were blocked by Indian forces.¹³¹

The swift and multiple thrusts by 2 Corps led to the dismemberment of Pakistani 9 Infantry Division holding this sector, opening the door to Dacca for the Indians. Alas, instead of maintaining the momentum of advance towards the final objective, Raina was distracted by the resistance at Khushtia, and committed the 4 Division to secure it. However, the Pakistani 57 Brigade defending Khushtia managed to slip across the Hardinge bridge on the Ganges. Consequently, 4 Division secured a crossing across the Madhumati River, making skillful use of improvised water crossing expedients, with generous help from the *Mukti Bahini*, who were quite active in this sector. By 15 December, Pakistani 9 Division headquarters along with remnants,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 140.

¹³¹ Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, 141-143.

holding the far bank of the river, were surrounded by the Indian forces, forcing Ansari to surrender, hours before the general Pakistani surrender announced by Niazi.¹³²

In the overall analysis, Indian 2 Corps deserved credit for the successful offensive in this sector, more so, as it had been raised only recently, during the build up for the war. The rapid pincers launched with its two divisions, 4 and 9 Infantry Divisions, sealed the fate of Jhenida and Jessore fairly quickly, leading to the rout of Pakistani 9 Division. Raina should have taken advantage of this opportunity and exploited aggressively towards Dacca, and his corps could have been the first to enter the city.¹³³

Eastern Sector

4 Corps, under Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, was responsible for this sector and was tasked to clear all areas up to Meghna river and destroy all Pakistani forces in the sector. Given the large frontage of its operations, approximately 250 kilometers, it was the strongest corps in the offensive campaign; comprising 8, 23 and 57 Mountain Divisions and an ad-hoc force codenamed “Kilo Force.”¹³⁴ Sagat Singh was known to be an aggressive and unorthodox leader, which reflected in his plans. He launched offensive with three divisional thrusts: 8 Division towards Sylhet in the north, 57 Division in the center towards Akhaura-Brahmanbaria, and 23 Division in the south, towards Comilla-Chandpur, with follow on task to capture Chittagong along with Kilo Force.¹³⁵

General Niazi, had tasked the Pakistani 14 Infantry Division for the defense of this sector, under command of Major General Abdul Majid. A brigade each was deployed at Sylhet, Maulvi Bazar and Akhaura-Brahmanbaria. Despite intelligence made available to him that the Indian

¹³² Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 198-199.

¹³³ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 146-147.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 150.

¹³⁵ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 112.

main thrust would come in this sector, he allocated no additional forces to this vulnerable sector. Instead, an ad-hoc 39 Division headquarters was raised, which took under command the existing brigades at Comilla and Feni, along with an ad-hoc brigade at Chittagong.¹³⁶ In deploying 39 Division in the south, rather than in the center in Ashuganj-Brahmanbaria area, which was the most direct approach to Dacca, Niazi may have fallen for Sagat's deception plan, wherein a dummy supply dump and radio traffic simulating a brigade was depicted towards the southern approach to Chittagong, suggesting a major thrust in that direction.¹³⁷

4 Corps offensive is regarded as a classic example of application of Liddell Hart's concept of "expanding torrent," with divergent, highly mobile and self-contained columns exploiting the breakthrough achieved at Akhaura-Comilla to spread out towards Ashuganj (57 Division) and Daudkandi (23 Division), thereby securing the line up to Meghna in a broad sweep.¹³⁸ Undaunted by the river, which was a mile wide in this area, 57 Division executed a massive airlift operation providing an air bridge to establish a bridgehead across the Meghna. The existing bridge connecting Ashuganj to Bhairab Bazar across the river was avoided deliberately, foreseeing that it will be held in strength and would be prepared as a demolition task to prevent it falling in Indian hands. In the next few days, an entire brigade was airlifted across, followed by another brigade later. This airlift operation completely isolated the Pakistani forces defending the river line near Bhairab Bazar. The local Bengali population provided invaluable assistance to the Indians in this crossing, helping to push across the amphibious PT-76 tanks, which got bogged down while crossing the river, and fed reliable information on the Pakistani dispositions. This rapid buildup of forces across the Meghna, employing tactical airlift capability

¹³⁶ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 149.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 152.

¹³⁸ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 202.

of the IAF, demonstrated the ability of the Indian forces to execute a complex joint operation in the heat of battle, and proved to be a decisive element in the Indian victory.¹³⁹

The operations in the north by the 8 Division met with similar success. The Pakistani defensive fortress of Sylhet was besieged from all directions, and a battalion was airlifted to block the routes of withdrawal from Sylhet towards Dacca, precluding latter's reinforcement. Likewise, in the south, 23 Division secured its objectives, capturing Comilla, Daudkandi, Chandpur and Maynamati in quick succession.

The operations further south met with mixed results. On receiving intelligence reports that small groups of Pakistanis were withdrawing towards Cox's Bazar to escape to Burma, an impromptu amphibious operation was planned to secure Cox's Bazar to prevent their escape. A task force, codenamed "Romeo Force," comprising an infantry battalion group, was hastily assembled and was embarked in two naval landing ships. As no prior reconnaissance was done of the selected beaching sites, one of the vessels hit a runnel and only 12 men could disembark. This failure was compounded when it became known that there were no Pakistani troops in Cox's Bazar. The main Pakistani bastion in the south, the garrison at Chittagong, also held on until the end of the war and surrendered only after the ceasefire.¹⁴⁰

It was in the 4 Corps sector that India won the war.¹⁴¹ It was here that the boldest maneuvers took place, with active help from the air force. Sagat Singh's leadership was inspiring, enjoining his troops to outflank Pakistani resistance and cut off their routes of withdrawal towards Dacca. Faced with preponderant forces on all sides and under continuous artillery fire, the

¹³⁹ Ibid., 203.

¹⁴⁰ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 158-159.

¹⁴¹ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 202.

Pakistani defenses fell like ninepins. Citino asserts: “If any part of the operation deserved to be called a *blitzkrieg*, this was it. It was most certainly the *schwerpunkt* of the Indian offensive.”¹⁴²

Central Sector

The operations in this sector were conducted by 101 Communications Zone, comprising of only one brigade, 95 Infantry Brigade. It faced Pakistani 93 Infantry Brigade, responsible for the defense of 180 kilometers of frontage, an impractical task for a brigade. Initially, 101 Communications Zone was given essentially an administrative task, to ensure the security of the extended lines of communications to 4 Corps operating at the far southeastern flank of the Indian offensive. However, Major General G.S. Gill, commanding the formation, was not content with this defensive task and took upon himself a more aggressive role. He assembled an ad-hoc brigade sized force, code-named “FJ Force,” made up of a nucleus of regular troops and bulk of defected East Pakistani forces. He planned a two-pronged advance towards Jamalpur and Mymensingh with 95 Brigade and FJ Force respectively. However, he was wounded in a mine accident during the initial border skirmishes and was replaced by Major General G.C. Nagra, who had been the Defense Attaché to Pakistani before the war. The Indian forces took both the Pakistani strong points by 10 December after stiff fighting.¹⁴³

This set the stage for the climax of the war, wherein the Indian 2 Parachute Battalion (2 PARA) was dropped in the rear of Pakistani lines at Tangail on 11 December to block their routes of withdrawal to Dacca. Preceded by a dummy drop to deceive the Pakistanis, 2 PARA was dropped by a mixed assortment of IAF aircrafts: Russian AN-32s, Canadian Caribous, US Fairchild Packets and Dakotas. After landing, 2 PARA quickly spread out to establish roadblocks

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 143. The reply of the Commanding Officer 31 Baluch Regiment defending Jamalpur to the Indian demand for his surrender is indicative of the degree of Pakistani resistance: “We here in Jamalpur are waiting for the fight to commence. It has not started yet. So let us not talk and start it....Hoping to find you with a sten in your hand instead of a pen you seem to have so much mastery over.”

to interdict the retreating Pakistani forces. Soon after, the balance of Indian 95 Brigade married up with 2 PARA and reached the outskirts of Dacca in the early hours of 16 December where Major General Nagra also joined his leading forces.¹⁴⁴

The local detachment of the *Mukti Bahini*, played an important role in helping and guiding the Indian forces in their advance towards Dacca.¹⁴⁵ It was one of the most effective group of the insurgents, led by a fire brand leader, aptly nick-named “Tiger” Siddiqui. It comprised about 16,000 armed men and effectively dominated the Mymensingh district and the approaches to Dacca from the north. “Tiger” Siddiqui’s forces the caught any Pakistani troops attempting to move off road to take a cross-country route to Dacca. Between Nagra’s and “Tiger” Siddiqui’s forces, the remnants of Pakistani 93 Infantry Brigade disintegrated and surrendered, “the drop at Tangail was the last straw that destroyed an already overburdened Pakistani command system.”¹⁴⁶

Role of Air Force and the Navy

Given the overwhelming superiority of the IAF over the Pakistan Air Force, the latter was neutralized by the second day of the war. Moreover, what little air effort was available, was employed for the air defense of the Dacca airfield, as part of the overall defensive strategy adopted by the Pakistan Air Force.¹⁴⁷ The resultant supremacy in the air achieved by the Indian Air Force was a major contributing factor towards the bold maneuvers executed by Indian columns that could operate without the fear of enemy air strafing. The IAF averaged 500 sorties

¹⁴⁴ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 213. On reaching the outskirts of Dacca, Nagra reportedly sent a missive to Niazi, whom he knew personally from his days in Pakistan as the Defense Attaché, to surrender: “My dear Abdullah, I am here. The game is up. I suggest you give yourself up to me and I’ll look after you.”

¹⁴⁵ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 57

¹⁴⁶ Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 206.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

per day, of which 120 were in support of ground troops.¹⁴⁸ Most of these were carried out against Pakistani defensive strong points and fortresses, which facilitated their eventual capture or capitulation. The most notable action conducted by the IAF jointly with the Army was the establishment air bridge over the Meghna employing MI-4 helicopters and the airborne operation by 2 PARA at Tangail. Both these operations, carried out behind enemy lines, contributed towards the entrapment of Pakistani forces by cutting off their routes of withdrawal. This foreclosed Pakistani plans to reinforce Dacca, which along with bombing raids, added to the sense of despondency in the Pakistani headquarters located in the city, hastening Niazi's decision to surrender.

The Indian Navy, despite its relatively small size, successfully accomplished its mission of isolating East Pakistan from the sea, blocking Pakistani attempts to supply or reinforce its beleaguered forces in East Pakistan. It deployed the sole aircraft carrier INS *Vikrant* in the Bay of Bengal, from whose deck its flight of Sea Hawks carried out bombing of the port of Chalna, Chittagong and Cox's Bazar.¹⁴⁹ Although the subsequent amphibious operation to capture the Cox's Bazar turned out to be an exercise in futility, it nevertheless marked the first such operation carried out by the navy jointly with the army, indicating its growing capability and confidence to undertake such complex joint operations. Pakistan navy dispatched its submarine PNS *Ghazi* to lay mines at Vishakhapatnam harbor, where the Indian Eastern Fleet was based. It was an abortive mission, amidst conflicting claims of its sinking by the Indian Navy, and Pakistani claims of its meeting a fatal onboard accident. Overall, despite the modest size of air and naval forces committed on the Eastern front, they nonetheless contributed handsomely towards the success of the Indian campaign.

¹⁴⁸ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 115 and 143.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 148-149.

The Surrender

The Indian land forces closing in on Dacca from all sides, the blockade affected by the navy from the sea and the domination of the air by the Indian air force, presented a picture of utter rout of Pakistani forces in East Pakistan. The appearance of Indian troops led by Major General Nagra, at the outskirts of Dacca was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. The situation in the city had been deteriorating rapidly with the rout of the Pakistani strongholds in face of relentless progress of the Indian offensive converging onto the city. Desperate attempts to pull back troops for its defenses, as planned, were foiled by ground and air interdiction by the Indian forces, leaving Dacca virtually undefended. The constant strafing of military targets in the city, in particular the buildings housing the Pakistani Eastern Command headquarters, created panic amongst in the headquarters' personnel, many of whom, including senior officers, gave air to their foreboding, indicating the depth of their demoralization.¹⁵⁰

The Pakistani morale was further eroded by the psychological warfare unleashed by India, through streaming of appropriate messages over the Pakistani wireless channels, whose secrecy codes had been broken by Indian electronic warfare programmers, and announcements by the Indian public broadcaster All India Radio.¹⁵¹ Manekshaw himself came on air on the radio, urging the Pakistani troops to give up their futile fight, in which their leaders were using them as cannon fodder by in pursuit of doubtful goals. Their surrender, he said, would avoid further bloodshed and he promised them full protection under Geneva conventions. Manekshaw's message was reinforced by aircraft dropping leaflets over the Pakistani islands of resistance still holding out, sowing seeds of dissension between the troops and their officers. The hopelessness of their situation, brought home by the Indian propaganda, led to extreme demoralization of the Pakistani troops and sapped their will to resist any further.

¹⁵⁰ Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, 195.

¹⁵¹ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 133.

Niazi signed the instrument of surrender in the afternoon of 16 December 1971 in the Dacca racecourse in the presence of General Aurora. This ended the war and heralded the birth of a new nation, Bangladesh. In the aftermath of the ceasefire, 91,704 Pakistani personnel surrendered to the Indian Forces:

- (a) Pakistan Army: 69,072 including 1606 officers.
- (b) Pakistan Navy: 1413 including 91 officers.
- (c) Pakistan Air Force: 1141 including 61 officers.
- (d) Paramilitary and others: 7886.¹⁵²

The Indian losses were 1421 killed and 4061 wounded whereas Pakistan suffered 1633 fatalities (including 340 missing, believed killed) and 2592 wounded (including 53 missing) in East Pakistan.¹⁵³ These figures should be seen in relation to the comparative strength of forces employed in the campaign, in which Indian forces heavily outnumbered those of Pakistan.

Post Conflict Stabilization and Transition

The need for an organization which would immediately follow the troops to restore civil administration in the liberated areas was realized from the very beginning.¹⁵⁴ Civil affairs cells were set up at every formation headquarters, from command down to brigade level. They comprised representatives from the Indian administrative services, the military, the police, engineering and medical services, with rank and numbers commensurate with the level of headquarters. Many were Bengali speaking, easing the channels of communication with the local population. In addition, many officers from the East Pakistan civil service and police, who had sought refuge in India, also formed part of these cells. The tasks given to these civil affairs organizations were essentially: to ensure security and maintenance of law and order; to restore public utilities and services; to supply essential goods and medicines; to resettle all refugees who

¹⁵² Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 224

¹⁵³ Fazal Muqem Khan, *Pakistan's Crisis in Leadership*, 280

¹⁵⁴ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 264.

had come to India back in Bangladesh; and, to transfer administrative responsibility to the provisional government of Bangladesh at the earliest. To facilitate these tasks, the leadership of the provisional government was involved in the decision making from the outset, which “proved to be the most important single factor in the smooth running of civil affairs operations.”¹⁵⁵

Concurrent with the civil affairs, the disarmament and secure passage of the Pakistani prisoners of war to India assumed immediate importance. It was essential that the *Mukti Bahini* did not carry out any reprisal attacks against the Pakistani troops and their arms and ammunition did not fall into wrong hands. This difficult task was accomplished and all the prisoners of war were transferred to India by mid January 1972. The energy and organizational ability of the *Mukti Bahini* was gainfully utilized in raising local labor for civil affairs tasks and for resettlement of the refugees.

The repatriation and resettlement of the 10 million Bengali refugees in India was a major challenge due to the sheer scale of endeavor. The country was divided in to various zones, headed by a council to facilitate the rehabilitation of the refugees in their native areas. Restoration of public services and means of transport was a prior necessity to instill confidence in the refugees to return. Indian army engineers, together with the Bangladeshi Public Works Department, repaired and restored the essential services. The refugees returned home by middle of February 1972, allowing the civil affairs staff to wind up their operations and return to India by 20 February 1972.¹⁵⁶ This marked the transition of responsibility from Indian authorities to the provisional government of Bangladesh; a monumental task accomplished remarkably in a short time. It speaks volumes of the inter-agency coordination achieved between the various departments of the government, and their stewardship under the directions of the local military commander, who provided the leadership and logistic support.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 265.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 275.

Through the Lens of Operational Art

This section analyses the Indian military campaign through the lens of operational art based on the theoretical framework drawn up in the initial section. The strategic leadership exercised by the Indian leadership emerges as the key battle winning factor on the Indian side. The study of the principal leaders involved in the campaign reveals that Indira Gandhi as the *policy maker*, Manekshaw as the *military strategist* and Aurora as the *campaign commander*, in the context of the practice of operational art. This trio provided the strategic leadership, guiding the course of events leading up to, during, and after the campaign. While the first two functioned at the strategic level, Aurora functioned at the operational level, but nonetheless has been included as a strategic leader, since, as the campaign commander, he was required to have a strategic vision to align the tactical actions with the strategic objectives.

The higher direction of war provided by these strategic leaders illustrated a high level of cooperation and understanding between the political and military hierarchy, exemplified by mutual trust between their leaders – Indira Gandhi and Manekshaw. The political and military leadership stabilized their institutional role-in-interaction, with the former exercising the constitutionally guaranteed control over the latter. The decision-making structures, both at political and military level were well established. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was the final authority in the decision-making process, and was assisted by her secretariat, staffed by experienced and trusted bureaucrats. She sought advice of the key cabinet ministers, comprising the Political Affairs Committee, and kept them in the decision-making loop. The Secretaries Committee helped implement the decisions taken and coordinate between the different agencies of the government. D.P. Dhar, appointed the special political representative of the Prime Minister, provided the interface between the Foreign and Defense ministries. At the military level, the Chiefs of Staff Committee, comprising the three service chiefs, steered the decision-making process and were collectively responsible to the Defense Minister. These decision-making structures functioned well during the war, aided to a large extent by the personalities of the key

leaders involved. Indira Gandhi provided a firm leadership at the political level, while Manekshaw, as the Chairman of the COSC did the same for the military.

An aspect that emerges clearly in the study of the strategic leadership is their sense of timing towards the final countdown in East Pakistan.¹⁵⁷ Ever since the civil war erupted in East Pakistan, and Bengali refugees started pouring into India, there was tremendous public demand for an immediate recognition of Bangladesh and peremptory action against Pakistan. This clamor was led by the hawkish elements within the Indian polity, and included the Defense Minister Jagjivan Ram. Indira Gandhi could well have taken that course of action, confident of the political backing of party's overwhelming majority in the parliament. However, befitting her strategic vision, he deigned to confer and concur with the Army Chief Manekshaw and her political advisor D.P. Dhar. Such a practice was not common in the post-colonial independent India, where the military had been kept aloof from the political decision making process. In fact, one of the primary reasons for the Indian debacle in the 1962 India-China war was that the army was not consulted before Nehru adopted an aggressive diplomatic posture against China over the boundary issue, and the army was thus ill prepared to meet the Chinese onslaught, when diplomacy failed. Exercising astute leadership, Indira Gandhi wisely refrained from succumbing to the public pressure in plunging India into war prematurely. A hasty recognition of Bangladesh followed by a preemptive attack by India in East Pakistan would have politically isolated India in the eyes of the international community, and India would have been branded the aggressor. This could have precipitated an intervention by Pakistan's allies China and the U.S., leading to a larger conflict in the Indian sub-continent. As such, from the military point of view, forcefully put across by Manekshaw, it was not the opportune time for war. He recommended a winter campaign: it would preclude Chinese intervention as the Himalayan passes would be closed due

¹⁵⁷ S.N. Antia, "Indo-Pak War 1971: Some Reflections," *United Services Institute of India Journal* 102, no. 427 (April-June 1972):109-110

to snow, the monsoons would have subsided leaving the terrain more favorable for operations and the gestation period would allow the Indian forces to build-up and carry out deliberate planning and preparation for the war.

Manekshaw, in rendering a forthright advice, was putting himself at great personal risk, as he was going against the Defense Minister, his immediate boss, and might have been sacked if the decision went the other way. This stands out in the best traditions of rendering military advice to the civilian leadership, and in their abiding by it. As the events unfolded, this sense of timing by the political and military leadership was crucial to the successful outcome of the campaign, vindicating the decision to postpone the campaign to winter.

A connected issue concerning both the timing and leadership aspect is the diplomatic maneuvering by Indira Gandhi to shape the opinion of the international community. With Pakistan firmly in the U.S. camp, forming part of SEATO and CENTO, and its growing alliance with China, it was not outside the realm of possibility that they would intervene on behalf of Pakistan in the event of its conflict with India. The Sino-American détente following Henry Kissinger's visit to China in July 1971, further increased the degree of its probability. Realizing the potential danger of a U.S. – Pakistan – China alliance against India, Indira Gandhi launched her own diplomatic offensive. She flew to Moscow and signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship on 9 August 1971. The signing of the treaty can be seen as a reaction by India to counter-balance the American and Chinese tilt towards Pakistan, and its trump card against their intervention.¹⁵⁸ The subsequent maneuvers by elements of the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the Bay of Bengal, led by its aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise*, during the course of the conflict, confirmed the Indian fears and justified the treaty with Russia. Indira Gandhi followed up the signing of the treaty with a whirlwind tour of the capitals of various states in Western Europe and the United

¹⁵⁸ Stanley Wolpert, *India and Pakistan: Continued Conflict or Cooperation* (Berkeley: University of California, 2010), 43.

States in October and of Moscow in November that year, to explain India's predicament in face of massive refugee crisis created as a result of Pakistani actions in East Pakistan. The meetings with the various heads of states, including Presidents Nixon and Brezhnev, conveyed India's viewpoint, and sought their help to resolve the issue politically. The ambivalence shown by the various leaders to Indian position strengthened India's case for unilateral military solution. It gave a semblance of legitimacy to India's military action, making it out as an option of last resort, and helped soften and delay their response. It provided the crucial window for the military to achieve the war aims, before the international community could muster sufficient support to impose a ceasefire. It was the finest hour of Indian diplomacy, steered personally by Indira Gandhi, and provides an excellent lesson in shaping the international environment to make it conducive towards achieving national aims through military means.

The available records based on memoirs of actual participants and certain secondary sources indicate that the decision-making process was streamlined and the strategic leadership provided clear and transparent political objectives for the war. Palit claims: "Firstly, there was a clear political aim – something the service chiefs have not always received in the past.... Mrs Gandhi retained the initiative for the military action in the east and played the game of conflict control with consummate skill to gain advantage in the border confrontation in Bangladesh."¹⁵⁹ Even the Pakistani analysts grudgingly acknowledge the clarity of vision of India's strategic leadership, contrasting it with the confusion prevalent amongst their Pakistani compatriots. Shuja Nawaz admits about India: "Its biggest advantage, however, lay in the fact that it had a clear aim for its war effort: to capture and liberate East Pakistan.... On the other hand, Pakistani troops in the East had an amorphous mandate: keep India at bay."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 151.

¹⁶⁰ Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 299.

However, while personalities will continue to influence the decision-making process in any organization, there is a need to institutionalize the process based on dedicated structures. There was a definite need felt for a National Security Council headed by a National Security Advisor, to provide the Prime Minister with expert advice, consolidating inputs from all agencies of the government. This role was partly fulfilled by the Prime Minister's secretariat and her political representative, D.P.Dhar, during the conflict. Similarly, at the military level, there is a need to provide executive powers to the chairman of the COSC, rather than a mere advisory role as per norm. There is need for designating a permanent Chief of Defense Staff, who would provide the single point military advice to the political leadership, through the Defense Minister. Manekshaw, functioning as the Chairman of COSC, partly fulfilled the role of the Chief of Defense Staff, owing credit to his personal standing with the Prime Minister, and the force of his personality to elicit full cooperation from the other two service chiefs. Such fortuitous circumstances may not always be there in future, and it would be unwise to rely on personality and good will alone. The fact that the military plan was thrashed out by the army alone, and then presented to the other two service chiefs much later, who were then asked to dove-tail their service plans into it, presents itself as a case of disjointed planning. This needs rectification, by putting in place institutional structures such as an Integrated Defense Staff, who should jointly evolve the plan under the direction of the Chief of Defense Staff.¹⁶¹ Likewise, at the operational level, there is a need to graduate to joint combatant commands, integrating all the three component services, under the joint command of the campaign commander. Merely co-locating advance headquarters of the air force and the navy with army's Eastern Command headquarters in Calcutta, as done during the conflict, does not suffice. The respective service chiefs retained

¹⁶¹ Mukherjee, "Facing Future Challenges: Defense Reform in India," 33. The debate in India's defense establishment is whether to adopt the British model of having a Chief of Defense Staff or the U.S. model of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee. The opinion is tending in favor of the latter, as it would avoid the concentration of powers in the single office of the Chief of Defense Staff, and instead have a committee under the chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff to advise the defense minister.

operational control of the air and naval components taking part in the campaign, precluding unity of command by Aurora, the campaign commander. In fact, it needs to be taken further, integrating all agencies of the government involved in the war effort at the theater level, including the paramilitary forces such as the Border Security Force and the inter-agencies involved in the reconstruction in the stabilization phase post conflict. This would be a true “whole of government” approach, enabling *unified action* by the campaign commander.¹⁶²

The Indian leaders made good use of the *directed telescope* to penetrate the “fog of war,” and to communicate directly with various agencies responsible for executing the plan, cutting across departmental boundaries and chain of command. Indira Gandhi employed D.P. Dhar as her directed telescope, who functioned as her political representative and carried out liaison between the defense and foreign ministries on her behalf. He attended crucial war room briefings in Delhi as well as Calcutta, providing Indira Gandhi a direct feedback on the military planning, while providing the military with the inputs on the political and diplomatic front. Similarly, Major General Sukhwant Singh functioned as Manekshaw’s directed telescope, in his capacity as the deputy director general of military operations in the Army Headquarters. He was sent on assignments to communicate Manekshaw’s intentions to the frontline commanders, which may have been obscured in their passage to the front and obtain feedback on the progress of operations. His contribution was notable, particularly in his meeting with Sagat Singh, leading the 4 Corps offensive, when he was faced with choice between attacking Comilla, assigned as his objective, or Brahmanbaria, which would open the doors to Dacca, with the crossing of Meghna. Sukhwant Singh impressed upon Sagat the need to reach Dacca at the earliest, relaying

¹⁶² U.S. Army Doctrinal Publication 3-0, iii. Unified action is defined as the synchronization, coordination, and/or integration of the activities of government and non-government entities with military operations to achieve unity of effort.

Manekshaw's intentions, led Sagat to execute the brilliant air-mobile operation using helicopters to cross Meghna, which is justifiably the *tour de force* of the campaign.¹⁶³

While India's major political objective requiring military action lay in East Pakistan, the primary military threat from Pakistan lay in the West, where bulk of the forces of both the countries were retained.¹⁶⁴ With the contingent Chinese threat from the north, Indian military strategy catered for three fronts of war. It entailed a strong defensive posture in the west to deter a Pakistani offensive in the west and preclude it from transferring any troops to its beleaguered eastern wing. It also required having sufficient capability to retaliate in case Pakistan carried out an offensive, especially in Kashmir and Punjab. In the east, it implied massing adequate forces to achieve the liberation of Bangladesh, within shortest possible time, before international community intervened. To cater for the Chinese threat, the forces pulled out from the northern borders were to be reverted immediately after concluding the campaign in East Pakistan.

Most analysts have credited Manekshaw as the chief architect of the Indian victory, for having framed the military strategy based on the political objectives given to him by Indira Gandhi. Translation of the political objectives into military strategy first required the identification of the center of gravity of Pakistani army in East Pakistan. There is some debate whether Dacca was identified as the center of gravity initially, or it emerged later in the course of the campaign. Jacob claims that initially the ports of Chittagong and Khulna were designated as the centers of gravity, and the initial plans issued by the Army Headquarters reflected the same. Dacca was designated as the ultimate objective much later, he says, on his insistence that it was the lynchpin that needs to be addressed to force the collapse of the Pakistani Army in the east.¹⁶⁵ Major General Lachhman Singh, one of the divisional commanders during the campaign,

¹⁶³ Sukhwant Singh, *Liberation of Bangladesh*, 89, 151.

¹⁶⁴ Marwah, "India's Intervention in East Pakistan," 565. The author claims that India had 320,000 troops positioned on the western front, against Pakistan's 240,000 troops, forming the bulk of their forces.

¹⁶⁵ Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca*, 66-67

concur, and claims that the instructions for the capture of Dacca were issued only towards the end of November 1971.¹⁶⁶ However, Major General D.K. Palit, who was aware of the planning process at the Indian Army Headquarters, claims that Dacca Bowl had been clearly identified as the center of gravity, but was not specifically designated as the objective for any of the corps thrust lines, as Aurora wanted to retain the operational flexibility. He planned to designate forces for Dacca's capture, based on the progress of operations of the various corps thrusts.¹⁶⁷ As such, Dacca was captured by the Indian forces, although not by the 4 Corps, which being the heaviest thrust, was expected to do so, but by the relatively weaker northern thrust led by 101 Communication Zone, which came as a surprise. This lends credibility to Palit's claim, as assigning Dacca as an objective to any one corps thrust at the outset would have robbed the others of an opportunity, should it manifest, as it did for 101 Communication Zone in the central sector. The debate on its designation as the center of gravity and being assigned as the final objective of the Indian offensive also underscores the reality that strategic objectives can rarely be predicted with great certainty at the outset of a campaign and require a healthy skepticism in the decision-making before they become manifest.¹⁶⁸

The essence of the Indian military strategy was to achieve the military objective of the defeat of Pakistani forces in East Pakistan, in the shortest possible time-frame, to preclude any intervention by the international community, before the strategic objectives could be achieved. It entailed swift rapid thrusts along multiple thrusts, bypassing the Pakistani fortresses, and converging towards the final objective of Dacca. The Indian strategic plan sought to overwhelm the enemy by the speed of advance and multiplicity of thrusts. It called for an application of principles of maneuver warfare; a break from the Indian tradition of set-piece attritional attacks in

¹⁶⁶ Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, 285.

¹⁶⁷ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 102-103.

¹⁶⁸ Huba Wass de Czege, "Operational Art: Continually making Two Kinds of Choices in Harmony While Learning and Adapting" *Army Magazine* (September 2011): 50.

the past wars.¹⁶⁹ This, along with the speed and depth of advance, was a major element of surprise for the Pakistanis. They had expected the Indian offensive to peter out after making limited gains in attacks on selected objectives. Their assessment may have been biased by the initial Indian plans of capturing only sufficient territory to allow for the establishment of the provisional government of Bangladesh in the liberated areas, without addressing Dacca as the final objective. The Pakistanis, therefore, posturing their defenses forward, leaving little force available for the defense of Dacca. This played into the hands of the Indian planners, who planned to struck deep to capture Dacca, bypassing the Pakistani forward defenses.

The Indian strategy required a two-fold appreciation: the military's appreciation of the larger geo-political issues impinging the conduct of the campaign, and on the other hand, an understanding by the civilian leadership of military's' capability to achieve the political objectives, within the constraints of the international environment. Once the strategic guidance had been given to the military by the political leadership, the conduct of the campaign was left to them, while the civilian leadership ensured the military was given the unfettered time window to achieve the assigned objectives, by diplomatically warding off interference by international community. This displays a healthy mutual understanding and trust between the civilian and military leadership, which is the cornerstone of operational art.

In the context of the practice of operational art, in relation to the operations in East Pakistan, it was Aurora, as the campaign commander, who emerges as the *operational artist*. It was his genius that translated the strategic military objectives assigned by Manekshaw into tactical actions. He was responsible for laying down the *operational approach* for the campaign in East Pakistan that linked the strategic and tactical levels of the campaign. He commanded four corps, comprising 160,000 troops operating over a front of 1500 miles.¹⁷⁰ Together with the

¹⁶⁹ Joseph Miranda, "Indo-Pakistani Wars," *Strategy and Tactics*, no. 174 (May/Jun 1974):9-10.

¹⁷⁰ Marwah, "India's Military Intervention in East Pakistan," 565.

irregular forces of *Mukti Bahini* for whom he was responsible, he commanded about 500,000 troops. Many Indian analysts have claimed: “No lieutenant general in military history has commanded so large an army or borne so heavy a strategic responsibility.”¹⁷¹

The evolution of the campaign plan underscored the cognitive tension inherent in the practice of operational art in aligning tactical actions in time and space in order to achieve the overall strategic objective. The campaign plan made by Aurora was bold and flexible, which capitalized on the speed of execution. He was determined that he had to achieve the final objective of the capture of Dacca within 12-15 days, the appreciated window for India to achieve its war aims before the International community would likely intervene to enforce a ceasefire. His *operational approach* was to address the *center of gravity* of Dacca along multiple lines of operations, three of which were led by a corps each and the fourth by a division level force. The crossing of the major river lines along each of the corps thrusts, and the securing of the bridges and the ferry sites astride them, were the *decisive points*, on achieving which, the Indian forces would pose a decision dilemma for the Pakistani forces. The Pakistanis had a choice to either hold the line of the rivers as their defensive line, or withdraw to Dacca to fight the final battle. In the event, the choice was made for them by the sheer speed of Indian advance, which cut off their routes of withdrawal to Dacca, by rapid enveloping maneuvers. This left the defenses of Dacca vulnerable, which was penetrated by the relatively weak Indian thrust from the north led by 101 Communications Zone.

The direction of the main weight of the offensive from the northeast was also a brilliant aspect of the plan, meant to dislocate the Pakistani defenses. The terrain and distances involved, dictated that the main thrust of the Indian offensive should come from the southwest direction, being closest to the base of Indian operations at Calcutta, as well as to the lines of supply coming from the Indian hinterland. Instead, Aurora adopted the *indirect approach* in designating 4 Corps,

¹⁷¹ Palit, *The Lightning Campaign*, 105.

operating on a limb from the state of Tripura in the far northeast corner of the country, as the main effort of the Indian offensive. The Pakistani defensive layout bears out that this was not anticipated, expecting the main offensive to come from the west and were taken by surprise when it came from the opposite direction. Most impressive was the flexibility in Aurora's plan, which allowed him to take advantage of fleeting opportunities. When an opportunity came up for crossing of the Meghna at Ashuganj-Brahmanbaria, a complex air-mobile landing was undertaken to outflank the Pakistani defenses on the river. When a vacuum suddenly opened up in front of the northern thrust due to disintegration of the Pakistani forces defending that sector, a dramatic airdrop was carried out at Tangail. This gave a lead to the 101 Communications Zone, which ultimately won the race to Dacca.

The execution of the Indian campaign was characterized by the distributed operations and orchestration of deep maneuvers extended in time and space but unified by common objective – denying freedom of action to the Pakistani defenders, while retaining their own freedom of action. The Pakistani forces were fixed in the fortress towns strung all along the border, with orders to defend them to the last man. This restricted their freedom to act against the Indian forces which chose to bypass these defensive outposts, rather than get involved in a series of attritional battles to reduce them. The Indians pursued their operational objectives further in depth – securing the crossings on the river lines astride their line of advance, to mount the final offensive on Dacca. Adopting maneuver warfare, the Indian plan focused on geography and terrain instead the classical strategy of focusing on the enemy. By seizing the key crossings on the rivers surrounding the Dacca Bowl, and refusing to squander their combat potential in battles of attrition against the well dug-in Pakistani defenses, the Indians retained the freedom of action to press on the offensive towards Dacca. Simultaneously, they denied the freedom of action to the Pakistani forces, by cutting off their routes of withdrawal, and isolating them in their defensive fortresses. Their sense of isolation was further aggravated by the Indian naval blockade and the complete

dominance of the skies by the Indian air force. Citino has summed up the execution of the campaign from the operational point of view as follows:

The short campaign featured high-tempo maneuver warfare, as Indian commanders bypassed most large concentrations they encountered and drove deep into the flanks and rear of their foe. This was all the more impressive in that the Indian forces were not mechanized to any significant degree, and tanks played a significant role in only one sector, in the northwest. It highlighted the increasing importance of air mobility, using both helicopter and parachute. The paradrop onto Tangail was the most spectacular moment of the entire campaign. It employed precision air-strikes, used both tactically against Pakistani ground forces, operationally against their lines of supply, and strategically against Dacca and other government targets. The last played a key role in cracking the morale of Niazi, the commander in East Pakistan.¹⁷²

The ability of the Indians to retain their freedom of action at all times, while denying the same to the Pakistanis, was central to the practice of operational art in the campaign.

The Indians also demonstrated an understanding of the “second grammar” of operational art, that the conduct of modern wars cannot be separated from the people amongst whom it is being waged. They understood that lending a Bangladeshi face to the Indian offensive was critical to gaining a degree of legitimacy for their campaign, in the eyes of the international community. Aiding the Bengali nationalists in their struggle for independence would also ensure that the future government of Bangladesh would be favorably disposed towards India, and prevent them from seeking help from other unwelcome quarters, such as China. Based on these considerations, India helped raise, organize and train the *Mukti Bahini*, and made good use of them before and during the campaign. Their contribution was particularly notable in providing local intelligence and logistical back up to the Indian forces, while denying the same to the Pakistani forces. The Indians were thus able to channelize the nationalistic fervor of the Bangladeshi separatists to their advantage, and used them effectively to achieve their war aims. The civil affairs organization set up by the Indians in the post-ceasefire stabilization phase, to facilitate return of refugees and smooth transition of authority to civilian leadership, was also an important facet of their understanding the “second grammar.”

¹⁷² Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 210.

However, the Indians did not practice the “second grammar” at the cost of the first. At no time, the outcome of the operations by the *Mukti Bahini* predicated the success of the Indian plan. The campaign plan was founded primarily on the military aspects of operational art, and not on the insurgency being waged by the Bengali nationalists, which at best formed an addendum to the campaign plan. The Indian campaign in East Pakistan, thus, stands out as an optimal amalgam of both the grammars of operational art, and demonstrates the dexterity of their simultaneous application.

Conclusion

The Indian campaign in East Pakistan during the India-Pakistan war of 1971 serves as a model for successful application of operational art.¹⁷³ The military, led by Manekshaw, was given a clear strategic direction by Indira Gandhi – the liberation of Bangladesh in the shortest possible time, which was fundamental to the evolution of Indian strategy. Choosing the opportune time for the campaign in winter, as recommended by Manekshaw, demonstrated a mature relationship between the civilian and military leadership, based on mutual trust and understanding. The correct identification of Dacca, as the center of gravity, enabled translation of the political objectives into a coherent military strategy. Based on this, Aurora, as the campaign commander, defined the operational approach to address the center of gravity along multiple lines of operation, converging onto Dacca. He retained the flexibility designate Dacca as the final objective, based on the progress of operations of the various corps thrust lines. Although the

¹⁷³ It adequately answers all the subsidiary questions to the monograph hypothesis: Was a clear strategic guidance given by the civilian leadership to the military and what was the level of interaction between them? What was the military strategy to translate the political directive into operational objectives? How were the plans evolved to achieve these operational objectives and what degree of integration was demonstrated between the three services in the planning and execution? Which specific facets of operational art were manifest in the plans and how did they unfold as the plan was put into action? What was the quality of leadership at each level and did they retain operational flexibility to mould their actions guided by the strategic direction of the campaign? How far did the military campaign achieve the overall politico-strategic aim set out by the civilian leadership, including post-conflict stability operations and exit policy?

Indian forces lacked the institutional support for joint operations, they were able to improvise by co-locating the air force and navy element with the land component headquarters, thereby giving it a semblance of an integrated joint theater campaign. The swift maneuvers by the Indian forces, bypassing the Pakistani defensive fortresses, and avoiding set-piece attritional battles was a classical application of the principles of maneuver warfare, which is inherent in the practice of operational art. This 'maneuveristic approach' percolated down to the operational commanders, who took bold decisions in the heat of battle in pursuance of the intent of the campaign commander. Sagat's crossing of the Meghna by an impromptu air-mobile operation and the airborne operation by 2 PARA at Tangail, indicate daring leadership at operational level, and their ability to mould their actions guided by the strategic direction of the campaign.

In the overall analysis, the success of operational art lies in the achievement of the strategic objectives set forth for the campaign by the civilian leadership. The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent sovereign nation stands testimony to this achievement, which met the political objectives of the campaign in full measure. The well thought out exit policy and the peaceful transition of authority to the Bangladeshi leadership under Mujibur Rehman, is an example of post-conflict stabilization operations, and serves as a lesson in conflict termination for many ongoing conflicts around the world.

The success of the Indian campaign resulting in the liberation of Bangladesh went even beyond the immediate strategic objectives of the campaign. It led to the recognition of India as the pre-eminent regional power, thereby indelibly altering the geo-political landscape of South Asia, with implications going far beyond the region and into the future. It is on the edifice of this geo-political legacy that India today aspires for a role on the global arena.

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