

The Mukti Bahini

Three Dimensional Guerillas

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An archer letting off an arrow may or may not kill a single man, but a wise man using his intellect can kill even reaching unto the very womb.

– Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*

INTRODUCTION

The 1971 Indo-Pakistan War fought half a century ago remains one of the few twentieth century conflicts where armed forces of both sides deployed in all three dimensions—land, sea and air—as seen during the Second World War. The war marked the demise of Great Britain as a colonial power in Asia, Africa and the Middle East and was thus one of the direct causes of India's independence. The military leadership of India and Pakistan in 1971 had fought the world war together in the army of undivided India. A handful had been commissioned into service together, some of them in the same theatres of the war. The armed forces on both sides continued the training and traditions handed down by the British in the armed forces on both sides. The war continued to inspire the planners of 1971. Lt Gen JFR Jacob, Chief of Staff in the Eastern Command, cited the mass surrender ceremonies of the Imperial Japanese Army in South-East Asia as his inspiration for staging a public signing

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of the instrument of surrender by Lt Gen AAK Niazi in Dhaka on 16 December 1971.

Guerilla warfare was another aspect of the war clearly inspired by the World War II. The war saw irregular forces being raised and trained on an unprecedented scale across the globe. As German and Japanese forces rolled across Europe and Asia engulfing countries and former western colonies, the Allies supported bands of guerillas in Europe—the dogged French resistance in occupied France, Greek partisans or the Andartes in Greece, Italian partisans and Tito's communist partisans in Yugoslavia. 'An inner circle which British PM Winston Churchill called his "Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare" aided the partisans in assassinations and acts of sabotage across Europe'.¹ Closer home, two communist guerilla movements—Viet Minh insurgents in French Indo-China (later Vietnam) and the Chinese Communist Party in China, active during World War II—captured power in their respective countries soon after the war.

The three wings of the Indian armed forces raised a Mukti Bahini (Liberation Force), an army of over 1,00,000 guerillas raised from among the Bengali population of East Pakistan. Their creation was inspired by an Indian army leadership with combat experience of similar actions during the World War II. But their eventual composition and combat operations, especially in the maritime theatre, outstripped seen since the World War II. The Bengali guerillas had a land forces component and even small naval and air force wing. They were thus among the most unique guerilla forces of the twentieth century.

A HISTORY OF GUERILLA WARFARE IN SOUTH ASIA

Guerilla warfare, literally 'small war', is the oldest form of warfare. 'It's not hard to see why this mode of warfare has become so prevalent. For one thing, it is cheap and easy: waging guerilla warfare does not require procuring expensive weapon systems or building an elaborate bureaucracy', the scholar Max Boot noted in his authoritative book *Invisible Armies*.²

It was Pakistan and not India that was the first to introduce guerilla warfare into the subcontinent as a means to achieve geopolitical outcomes. It failed on both occasions. On 22 October 1947, Pakistan Army officers launched Operation Gulmarg—the infiltration of approximately 20,000 Pathan tribesmen into the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Twenty tribal Lashkars of a thousand men each were created, ten each for the Srinagar and Poonch-Rajouri sectors. The princely state was yet to accede

to either India or Pakistan. The tribal raiders were meant to capture the Kashmir Valley and the vital towns of Poonch and Rajouri. Their objectives were foiled as the Indian Army entered the state on 25 October 1947 and repulsed the raiders.

‘Operation Gulmarg at no stage anticipated a spirited riposte as it was felt that the state forces of Jammu and Kashmir would capitulate within hours, and the Indian Army would be too preoccupied with managing the refugee and communal crisis to intervene in time’, military historian Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam notes in his book *India’s Wars: A Military History, 1947–1971*.³

In 1965, the Pakistan Army struck again. On 5 August, they launched ‘Operation Gibraltar’, infiltrating mujahid battalions and regulars into the Kashmir Valley. The ‘Gibraltar Forces’, as they were called, was said to have numbered approximately 4,000 to 5,000 and divided into approximately eight forces of five companies each. These companies of 110–120 were divided into infiltrating groups of 50 to 60 with regular Junior Commissioned Officers and a few soldiers embedded in the group to provide leadership.⁴ By 21 August that year, the operation was crushed and many of the infiltrators captured by the Indian Army. Operation Gibraltar, quite unlike the rock base it was named after, had collapsed. Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) however, continued to use its Eastern wing to support insurgents in India’s North East. As B. Raman, former Special Secretary, R&AW notes in his book *The Kaoboy of R&AW: Down Memory Lane*:

Ever since 1956, the Naga hostiles under the leadership of the late Phizo were in touch with Pakistan’s ISI. The ISI supported their struggle for independence and provided them with funds, training, arms and ammunition. It allowed them to set up sanctuaries and training camps in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of East Pakistan. Between 1956 and 1967, many gangs of Naga hostiles went to the CHT for being trained by the ISI and then returned with arms and ammunition.⁵

THE FERMENT IN EAST PAKISTAN

The Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 had created a bizarre geography of Pakistan—a country with two wings separated by 2,200 km of India’s mainland. The ethnic Bengali-speaking eastern wing chafed at being reduced to second-class citizens in a country dominated by the western wing. Pakistan’s Punjab province dominated the western wing, its armed forces and politics.

The run-up to Bangladesh's freedom struggle began in 1970, with Pakistan's first general elections of December 1970. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won elections to the National Assembly by a landslide. The Awami League won 167 of the 169 seats in East Pakistan while Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's PPP won 83 out of 144 seats in West Pakistan. The results were a setback to the ruling military junta led by General Yahya Khan. They were loathe to hand over power to a party from its eastern wing. The election results were held in abeyance prompting increasing unrest in east Pakistan. On 23 March 1971 (now observed as Bangladesh's independence day), the Awami League replaced Pakistani flags with Bangladeshi flags. Two days later, the Pakistan army began its crackdown in the eastern wing, arresting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and killing thousands of people including officers and men of the East Bengal Rifles which had mutinied.

The Pakistan Army began a genocide in its eastern wing targeting elements of the East Bengal Rifles (EBR), East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), paramilitary ansars, mujahids, Awami League office-bearers and students. They also targeted students, intellectuals, doctors, journalists and Hindus.

The start of the creation of the Mukti Bahini was the announcement on 11 April by Tajuddin Ahmed, the Prime Minister of the provisional government of Bangladesh that a liberation army was being created. The liberation army, Ahmed said, was being created from the elements of the EBR, EPR, police, ansars, mujahids and thousands of volunteers. He also ordered the creation of eight regional commands to fight the Pakistani forces, each headed by a Major or a Captain of the EBR or EPR. Colonel MAG Osmani, a retired Pakistan Army officer and member of the National Assembly was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Bangladesh Liberation Army. The Mukti Bahini was initially around 2.5 lakh strong and drawn from the ranks of young men who had fled their homes in East Pakistan.

A provisional government of Bangladesh was created on 17 April 1971 on the border with India. The town was later renamed Mujib Nagar. From May onwards, the Bangladesh army based in India carried out raids to harass and disrupt communications in East Pakistan. Pakistani army reprisals triggered off a flood of refugees into India. By the end of May, 4.3 million refugees had flooded into India and by the end of July, the figure was 7.2 million creating an enormous socio-economic burden on Indian states bordering East Pakistan. This was one of the

direct causes of the third war fought by the two countries which began on 3 December 1971.

THE MAN WITH A PLAN

The creation of the Mukti Bahini had the explicit if not overt political backing of the government of Mrs Indira Gandhi.⁶ The Mukti Bahini were raised through an operational directive issued by army chief, General SFHJ Maneckshaw to Eastern Army Commander Lt General Aurora on 1 May. General Maneckshaw directed Lt General Aurora to raise, equip and train the East Bengal cadres for guerilla operations in their own native land so as to immobilise and tie down the East Pakistan forces to protective tasks in East Bengal and subsequently, by gradual escalation of the guerilla operations, sap and corrode the morale of the Pakistan forces to impair their offensive capability against India.

The directive had its origins in a paper presented by (then) General Maneckshaw's Director Military Training, Major General (later Lt General) Inder Singh Gill. In the summer of 1971, no officer in the Indian Army knew more about guerilla warfare than Major General Inder Gill. Gill, the son of a UK-trained Sikh doctor and a Scottish mother, had been born and raised in Great Britain before the war. He was commissioned into the British Army as a 2nd lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers and had parachuted behind enemy lines in 1943 and had operated with the Greek partisans, the Andartes.

In April 1971 while he (Major General Gill) was DMT, he presented a paper to the Chiefs of Staff Committee on what India could do in East Pakistan. Inder had developed strong convictions on the usefulness of Special Services Operations in the successful conduct of war, based on his experience in Greece. In his paper, he suggested organising the East Pakistani refugee youths, those in service with Pakistan's East Pakistan Rifles, East Militia Rifles, the Militia and Paramilitary Forces and the armed police, and the young political cadres of the Awami League that had established a government in exile, as commandos and guerillas for clandestine operations inside East Pakistan. He argued that, with some training, direction and motivation, they could be employed suitably for tasks that might be militarily productive in the event of war or even for creating war-like situations.⁷

The codename given to the Eastern Command's overall training effort for the Mukti Bahini was 'Operation Jackpot'. After a significant

conference of the provisional government of Bangladesh, the eastern wing was divided into 11 sectors for operational purposes. These sectors reported to the Calcutta-based provisional government. Only one—Sector 10—was along the maritime boundaries and placed directly under the C-in-C Colonel Osmani. The numerical sectors inside East Pakistan liased with Indian sectors alphabetically named Sectors Alpha through Foxtrot-Juliet on the Indian side. The Indian sectors were headed by Brigadiers and had been set up for training and logistics and for coordinating Mukti Bahini operations.

LAND FORCES

The core of the land forces were made up of the East Pakistan Rifles and East Bengal Rifles. The original plan was to raise a force of 20,000 men by 30 September 1971. But subsequently the raising was stepped up, first by 12,000 men a month then by 20,000 men a month. By 30 November 1971, the strength of the force was increased to over 1,00,000 men.⁸ Numerically that would make them second only to an estimated 3,00,000 Communist Vietnamese guerillas the ‘Viet Cong’ who fought in Southern Vietnam between 1953 and 1975.

At their peak in November 1971, their numbers were as follows:

East Bengal Rifles (EBR)	8,156
Mukti Fauj (MF)	9,660
Mujib Bahini and Uban Force	6,000
Freedom Fighters	83,028
Total	1,06,844

Of the above, 50,810 had started operating inside East Pakistan by the end of November 1971. All freedom fighters were given four weeks’ training, including weapons training, field craft, raids and ambushes. Commando training included simple demolitions, operation of pocket-sized radio sets and transmission of Morse code messages at the rate of six words per minute. In August the period of training was reduced to three weeks.⁹

AIR FORCE COMPONENT

The Mukti Bahini Air Force codenamed ‘Kilo Flight’ was raised on 4 October 1971. It included one Dakota, one Otter and one Alouette helicopter armed with rocket pods and medium machine guns.¹⁰ On the night of 3–4 December, the Otter aircraft based at Kalashshahar,

attacked the fuel dumps at Chittagong and the Alouette helicopters raided the fuel dumps at Narayangunj. At the outbreak of the war, this force was placed under the GOC 8 Mountain Division operating in Sylhet sector. It carried out five sorties between 4 and 7 December hitting bunkers and troop concentrations at Maulvi Bazar and also destroying two steamers and two 3-ton trucks carrying troops.

NAVAL COMPONENT

The Naval component of the Mukti Bahini was unlike any in the twentieth century. The core comprised eight Bengali sailors who had deserted the Pakistani submarine PNS Mangro in France in March 1971. They were attached to the Directorate of Naval Intelligence (DNI) who began to raise a force of limpeteers (naval saboteurs) trained on the battlefield of Palashi/ Plassey in Nadia District. The eight Pakistani sailors formed the core of what would be called Naval Commando Operations (X). A total of 457 combat swimmers/limpeteers were trained under the operation also known as run by the DNI but supervised by the Eastern Army Command.¹¹

The choice of this unique form of naval guerilla operation was no accident. Bangladesh is a riverine country. Around 11 per cent of her total area was covered by rivers and waters. The largest river, the Jamuna, was formed by a confluence of the Ganga and Brahmaputra. The Jamuna was 200 kilometres long and had an average width of 10 kilometres. An elaborate network of boats, barges and ferries was the only way to transport people and commodities around. In 1971, the limpeteers targeted the boats and vessels that transported supplies and personnel for the Pakistan Army. As a result, thousands of Pakistani soldiers were drawn away from offensive operations against the Mukti Bahini towards protecting waterways from naval saboteurs.

On the night of 15 August, over 170 combat swimmers of the naval wing carried out near simultaneous attacks on the ports of Mongla, Narayangunj, Chittagong and Chandpur destroying or disabling 25 vessels—the largest such attacks since the World War II.

By August this force was given two harbor utility craft converted into mine-laying gunboats—the MV Palash and the MV Padma. The combat swimmers also known as ‘naval commandos’ by DNI sank or disabled 1,00,000 tonnes of enemy shipping in East Pakistan waging what is called a war of ‘*guerre de course*’ or commerce destruction. This guerilla war targeted not just the merchant ships that carried out jute and

tea which earned the Pakistan foreign exchange but also those bringing in arms, ammunition and food for its military garrison. The gunboats laid mines at the mouth of the Pussur river leading to East Pakistan's second largest port, Mongla, in September 1971.

Major General JFR Jacob, then Chief of Staff, Eastern Army Command, called the (naval commando missions) 'the most significant operations of the Mukti Bahini'.¹²

ASSESSMENT OF MUKTI BAHINI OPERATIONS

While the Mukti Bahini's guerilla war sapped the morale of the Pakistan army, it is doubtful this campaign by itself would have achieved the liberation of Bangladesh. Just as Europe was liberated from the yoke of Nazi Germany by Allied armies converging in from eastern and western Europe, an independent Bangladesh was created by the hammer blows of Indian armed forces in December 1971. A multi-pronged Indian army ground-offensive bypassed the fortified towns and cities and captured the centre of gravity of the eastern wing—Dhaka. The Air Force swept away the single PAF squadron based in the eastern province and flew close air support missions and logistic duties to aid the ground offensive. The Indian Navy fleet enforced a naval blockade and interdicted merchant ships fleeing with members of the Pakistani garrison. On 16 December 1971, the entire East Pakistan garrison numbering 92,208 persons had surrendered to the Indian armed forces.

The Mukti Bahini were hobbled by the lack of effective training—just three weeks as opposed to at least three months of training that would be needed to turn raw cadres into guerillas. They also had a shortage of experienced officers because of which they undertook only easy tasks. Their raids on Pakistani Border Outposts were ineffective. Where they succeeded however was in the gathering of intelligence which helped the Indian forces that were to move in.

Mukti Bahini operations also tied down large number of Pakistani forces into static guard duties. This was especially the case with the maritime wing's sabotage operations which began on the night of 15 August 1971.

Every barge with ammunition sunk, meant the Pakistani army had fewer bullets to shoot at civilians and the Indian Army. Every attack by the naval commandos—whether successful or not—meant the Pakistan army had to pull its forces away from the borders into guarding the ports and waterways. The biggest contribution of the naval guerillas was to take pressure away from the land forces element of the Mukti Bahini.

The guerilla camps were disbanded on the Indian side but the cadres went on to form the nucleus of the Bangladeshi armed forces after their War of Liberation. 'Left unstated was the fact that the Indian state had proved it was not entirely a stranger to irregular warfare, which it had been at the receiving end of since 1947'.¹³

HYBRID WARFARE

The Pakistani deep state continued its pursuit of covert operations. It greatly expanded its understanding of such warfare during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1988 where it trained and equipped the Afghan resistance, the Mujahideen, with the assistance of the CIA and other western intelligence agencies. The expertise and ordnance left over from the Afghan war was used to run covert wars against the Indian states of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, both of which continue till date. It was used to wage war against India's economic capital between 1993 and 2008 using an array of 'non-state actors'¹⁴ while using its nuclear weapons to deter a conventional Indian military response.

The analyst Commodore C. Uday Bhaskar has termed this 'Nuclear Weapons Enabled Terrorism' or NWET.¹⁵ The Afghan expertise came in handy when the Pakistani deep state armed and trained the Taliban raised from among Afghan students and veterans of the war against the Soviets. The Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ruled that country between 1996 and 2001. After 20 years in the wilderness, most of them spent in havens in Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban fought a bruising insurgency against the western supported regimes of President Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani.

In a written testimony to the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services in 2011, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that 'the Quetta Shura [Taliban] and the Haqqani Network operate from Pakistan with impunity' and that these Pakistan government proxies 'were attacking Afghan troops and civilians as well as US soldiers'. Admiral Mullen termed the Haqqani Network, 'a strategic arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency'.¹⁶

By August 2021 the Taliban had captured power almost without firing a shot as members of the Ghani regime fled following the US withdrawal.

With the receding prospect of full-scale wars between nation states, insurgency and terrorism have become the dominant forms of conflict between nation states.¹⁷ Iran and Russia have been proponents of the

same. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has supported guerilla forces in Yemen, Syria and Iraq.¹⁸ A Russian Private Military Contractor (PMC) Wagner, believed to have ties with the Kremlin, has shown up in countries across Africa and Asia where Russia has interests but is unwilling to commit boots on the ground.¹⁹ PMCs with their in-built deniability are effective means of ensuring deniability. The shift was first noticed by the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defence Report of 2006 which noted how 'in the post September 11 world, irregular warfare has become the dominant form of warfare confronting the United States'.

Covert warfare is one of the elements of what the US scholar Hoffman termed as 'hybrid warfare'. In his paper 'Conflict in the 21st century: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare', Hoffman said that:

At the strategic level, many wars have had regular and irregular components. However, in most conflicts, these components occurred in different theatres or in distinctly different formations. In Hybrid Wars, these forces become blurred into the same force in the same battlespace. While they are operationally integrated and tactically fused, the irregular component of the force attempts to become operationally decisive rather than just protract the conflict, provoke overreactions or extend the costs of security for the defender.

The 1971 War was a rare and well-documented foray into the realm of hybrid warfare by the Indian state. Indian military leaders have since examined these options. Delivering the 9th YB Chavan Memorial Lecture hosted by the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses on 28 November 2018, then Army Chief General Bipin Rawat reflected on the dilemma before the Indian state as it considered two options:

One is to engage in offensive Hybrid Warfare as a nation and the second is to defend against this threat proactively. In weighing these options, our standing in the global strategic framework, our reputation, our nation's sensibilities and training and organisation of our agencies need to be looked at comprehensively.²⁰

General Rawat suggested the 'offensive option' was the least preferred option but it could consider 'limited hybrid' in support of 'proactive defence'.

Creating unrest in our neighbour's territory should not be the first choice. Moreover, as evidenced in Pakistan, there are no good or bad terrorists. Sooner or later, such use of irregulars as a strategy destabilises the country internally. Also, it takes the focus away

from development. Thus, in my opinion, in our case, we should prefer the proactive defence option against Hybrid war, through limited Hybrid in support of proactive defence is advisable. This will involve the whole of government approach.²¹

The ‘limited hybrid’ that General Rawat suggested involves the raising of irregular forces for limited objectives rather than prolonged support which could result in a blowback. These irregular forces could then be disbanded after the achievement of the objectives. Exactly as was the case with the Mukti Bahini in 1971. Fifty years after the 1971 War, its lessons remain as relevant as ever.

APPENDIX

Table A1 Total casualties suffered by Pakistan forces in the Mukti Bahini operations up to 30 November 1971

	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Wounded</i>
(a) Regular	4,500	4,000
(b) Paramilitary	909	674
Total	5,409	4,674
Grand total	10,083	

Source: *The India–Pakistan War of 1971: A History*, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, Natraj Publishers, 2014.

Table A2 Casualties suffered by Mukti Bahini

(a) Killed	10,957
(b) Wounded	1,704
(c) Missing	839
Total	13,500

Source: *The India–Pakistan War of 1971: A History*, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, Natraj Publishers, 2014.

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