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THE LIGHTNING CONCEPT

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From the moment the Indian General Staff began planning for the liberation of Bangladesh, it became apparent that the key factor in the operation was going to be speed - for both political and military reasons; yet all the circumstances indicated that speed, or mobility, was going to be the most difficult thing to achieve. It was obvious that Pakistan was banking on support or even intervention of its two super allies, the USA and China, if India attacked Bangladesh. Yahya Khan made no secret of the fact that he expected to invoke CENTO and SEATO Treaty to bring the Americans in on his side; and though the Chinese had given no indication that they would physically intervene in case of war, the Pakistani President must have relied on the assumption that if he could hold out for long enough, a combination of military support and diplomatic action by the Chinese would halt India's war of liberation.

It was, therefore, essential for his eastern wing forces to delay the Indian advance for a sufficient period for these two great powers to manoeuvre. Possibly, he had already been given a hint about future manoeuvres of the mighty U.S. 7th Fleet. As with all commanders faced with the task of defending a long coastline or border, Lt. Gen. Niazi, the Pakistani commander, had two broad choices open to him for the defence of Bangladesh: a) to resist the enemy with all his strength and to aim to stop him at the border, or b) to fight a flexible battle on the border and, and if unsuccessful, plan to conduct an organised withdrawal back to the ground of his own choosing where he could offer protracted resistance.

Treachery of the Terrain

Although the decision on which course to adopt often depends on political and psychological factors - or the personality of the commander - the most important tactical consideration is the nature of the terrain. In general, it can be said that Bangladesh is perhaps the most river-crossed terrain in the world - a land ideal for defensive tactics. Not only do two of the world's great rivers flow through it, a complex criss-cross of small rivers also obstruct land movement. The greatest threat lies on the western and northern sides, not only because of the road that approaches from India, but also because the grain of the country accords with the likely direction of an Indian attack at least up to the line of the Jamuna and Madhumati rivers. From the North, i.e, the Meghalaya border, the terrain favours movements better than other parts. From the east, the threat from India was also not thought to be a major one because of a lack of infrastructure.

The plan that Lt. Gen. Niazi adopted was, as he thought, designed to meet the requirement of imposing maximum delay. It envisaged blocking all routes of entry from India by occupying strong defensive positions along all road approaches and making the best use of the terrain. He put his strongest division on the western front opposite Calcutta and constructed there his most formidable defences, for example the fortresses at Jessore and Jhenida. He pinned all his hopes on stopping the Indian forces on the border. One of the reasons that he decided on this course was that the pattern of Mukti Bahini operations during September and October had convinced him that their primary aim was to liberate a belt of territory inside Bangladesh all along the border, possibly including some important towns, which would enable them to establish the Bangladesh government - in exile on home territory and thus gain diplomatic leverage for seeking recognition. Since Lt. Gen. Niazi knew that Bangladesh policy had the support of the Indian government, he assumed that a limited territorial aim was also the policy of India.

The Indian Moves

GOC of the Indian Army's Eastern Command, Lt. Gen. J.S. Aurora was presented with a different

set of problems. By training and tradition the Indian Army's normal methods of operation had always been the set piece battle. Lt. Gen. Aurora wanted to get to Dacca within 12 to 15 days, a task achievable if only he could successfully divorce the traditional form of battle. But he was determined to accomplish it. To adhere to the lightning schedule, he decided to overcome established tactical concepts and unleash mobile, flexible thrust carried out with determination and dash. Indian forces would have to throw the enemy into such confusion that before he could resile from the surprise attack, Indian divisions would begin converging on Dacca.

No one was more aware of the difficulties inherent in this unorthodox approach to the battle than Lt. Gen. 'Jaggi' Aurora. No commander before him had ever attempted a war of movement such as this in a land where rivers run to five miles in width, where the going is all military - with no scope for fast moving armoured thrusts; where the enemy was a formidable organized foe with a reputation for fighting as high as that of the army under his command; where the nightmare logistical problems had begun to be solved only a few short weeks before the event. If it succeeded it would be only because of the highest standards of command directions and leadership, skill and boldness in execution and consummate logistical management and the fortitude of his troops.

It was difficult for Lt. Gen. Aurora to foresee which of his initial thrusts would get him to Dacca first. It was a new kind of war he was unleashing; whole brigade groups were to be moved over paddy fields, dragging their impediments behind them; roads were to be avoided; rivers were to be air-bridged by helicopter ferry services; rickshaws and cycles were to be used for transporting ammunition and equipment - all these bold concepts carried their own risk - and on its success the race to Dacca was won.

The Lightning Concept

Despite the confrontation on the eastern front mounting in intensity, there was no indication that India would invade Bangladesh. The policy announced by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi that Indian troops would cross the border only in self-defence implicitly imposed limits on the degree of penetration. Although President Yahya Khan had said on November 25th that in 10 days he "might not be here in Rawalpindi...but off fighting a war," this was taken more as an attempt at bravado than as a serious indication of aggressive intent. There was little he could gain from an all out war with India to which the conflict would inevitably escalate.

Why then did Yahya Khan launch an attack in the west? The answer perhaps lies in self-delusion that he, like others among his colleagues, has indulged for so long of launching a massive offensive deep into Indian territory. Unfortunately for them, General Hamid Khan, Pakistan's Army Chief of Staff, is not a Moshe Dayan. By November-end, the Pakistani High Command must have realized that the Indian Army had been deployed in full strength in the west. As for its own forces, the two divisions it had begun to raise in May to replace the divisions sent to the eastern wing, were still below strength and not fully operational. No one but an incurable optimist would in those circumstances hope for the cherished breakthrough. And yet that is exactly what they attempted.

On December 3rd, at 5:45 p.m. IST, Pakistan launched a pre-emptive air strike on Indian airfields - Srinagar, Avantipur, Pathankot, Uttaralai, Jodhpur, Ambala and Agra. Later in the night, which was the night of full moon, a second wave of aircraft came over to deliver a repeat blow. Incredible as it may seem, these attempts were so clumsy that not one Indian aircraft was lost on the ground. Not only that, within 24 hours the back of the Pakistani Air Force (PAF) had been broken by the Indian Air Force (IAF) counter strike. The IAF continued mounting operations in a crescendo till they reached the peak of 500 sorties a day - the highest air effort mounted anywhere since World War II. The IAF attacked Chanderi, Shorkot, Sargodha, Muri, Mianwali, Masroor (Karachi), Risalwalla (Rawalpindi), and Changa Manga (Lahore). Subsequently it was learnt that more than 25 aircraft were hit.

Pakistani propaganda that the PAF raids were in retaliation against multi-pronged Indian land

offensives all along the Punjab-Rajasthan borders convinced no one. Meanwhile, the first Pakistani Army attack went in at 8:30 p.m. IST on December 3rd against the Indian Army's Poonch and Chhamb sectors. The Pakistan Army in the west consisted of 10 infantry divisions (two of them were newly raised) a few independent brigades, two armour divisions and an independent armoured brigade. The Indian forces were only marginally superior in overall strength. They were grouped as follows:

- Lieutenant General K.P. Candeth, Western Command. Lt. Gen. Candeth commanded the bulk of the forces on the western front besides holding responsibility for the northern front facing the Chinese - from Ladakh in the north-west to the Himachal Pradesh sector up to the passes north of Shimla. The area of his responsibility in the west stretched from Jammu & Kashmir in the north down to the borders of Rajasthan.
- Lieutenant General G.G. Bewoor, Southern Command. Lt. Gen. Bewoor had moved his advanced Headquarters from Poona and he was responsible for the Rajasthan front.

The Attacks

As stated earlier, the Pakistani Army launched a major offensive in the south west of J&K, shortly after the PAF air strike went in on December 3rd. If the aim was to capture a piece of Kashmir territory, the attack also failed miserably. In the Poonch Sector and Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir, the Pakistani infantry brigade launched an attack against Poonch from the direction of Kahuta in the northwest, while commandos infiltrated behind the Poonch area to cut off the road link. But Indian forces were ready for them and the frontal thrust made little progress. When the IAF began pounding their troop concentrations in the forest north west of Poonch, the enemy decided to call off the attack.

On December 9th and 10th, the enemy prepared for a second offensive from the same direction. This time the IAF strafed and bombed them in their assembly areas and the attack fizzled out. It was then the turn of the Poonch forces to go on to be counter offensive. By December 16th, the Indian forces had occupied several posts flanking the road. In the Chhamb sector, the Pakistani II Corps went on the offensive led by two infantry brigades and the regiment of mixed Chinese T-59 and Sherman tanks. The initial thrust was held - Indian forces destroying six enemy tanks. On December 5th, Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan, the Corps Commander, threw in another brigade into the attack and another regiment of armour. This thrust cost him 23 T-59 tanks, with much of the killing done by the IAF.

The enemy, under the crass leadership of Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan, continued to launch repeated frontal assaults against well-prepared positions, incurring heavy losses. In all these futile attacks, Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan lost some 3,000 troops and nearly 50 tanks. By December 12th, he had had enough. The Butcher of Baluchistan and Dacca lived up to his reputation even as far as his own men were concerned. In the rest of the J&K theatre, it was the Indian Army that took the initiative - though not with the intention of launching major offensives or acquiring Pakistan-held territory. The Kargil sector, which is dominated by heights occupied by Pakistani forces, the straightening out of the line entailed the capture of about 15 enemy posts located at height of 16,000 feet and more. All the attacks were launched at night when the ground temperatures sank to below -17° Centigrade.

In the Tithwal sector, a large salient of Pakistan-held territory lies on the east bank of the Kishenganga river, which poses a threat to the Indians. The enemy was cleared from here too. Similarly, in Uri sector, where the Haji Pir salient provides easy infiltration access to Gulmarg, Indian forces captured posts in the Tosh Maiden area to neutralize this threat. In the Jaisalmer sector, an enemy infantry brigade supported by a regiment of armour (mixed T-59s and Shermans) launched an attack on Indian positions at Longewala. It was a bold idea, but it had not reckoned with the sands of the desert. Then, it was the turn of the armour separated from its supporting column, to flounder in the soft desert, forming an easy target for Indian aircraft. As one

of the IAF Hunter pilots described it, "It was like a duck shoot - only we had sitting ducks to shoot at." Sorties after sorties went into attack, and before long, more than 20 enemy tanks had been destroyed. All in all, the Longewala battle turned out to be quite a disaster for the enemy.

Of the three bridges over the rivers Ravi and Sutlej, the only one that lay in Indian territory was the Hussainiwala Bridge near Ferozpur. On December 3rd and 4th, the Pakistani forces launched an attack on this enclave in some strength. Fighting a delayed action in which the Pakistanis lost 18 tanks, the Indian garrison made a planned withdrawal to the east bank of the river. Retaliating in kind, the Corps Commander, Lt. Gen. Rawlley, ordered an offensive to capture the Sehjra salient, north-west of Ferozpur. The attack came as a complete surprise to the enemy and soon Sehjra was captured. In the process, the threat to Khem Karan and Harike was removed. Similarly on December 6th and 7th, Indian forces attacked and captured the Pakistan enclave on the eastern side of Ravi, guarding the Dera Baba Nanak Bridge.

In keeping with the government's policy and the strategic plan the Indian armed forces confined their major operations to the offensive-defensive. A major threat to India's J&K theatre has always been along the southern boundary of the state. The offensive was launched along the three axis - two striking southwards from Kathua-Samba stretch of the main Pathankot Jammu road; and the third, subsequent thrust from the Gurdaspur area striking westwards. The operation started on December 5th and 6th night and lasted till ceasefire, ending in the biggest tank battle of the war.

A fascinating story about the spirit of the Indian Armoured Corps concerns a young Major, a squadron commander of Hodson's Horse (the 4th Horse). Ordered to launch an attack on a Pakistani position across the Basantar River, which was supported by eight Patton tanks, he decided on a dawn attack, so that he could negotiate the soggy riverbed during the hours of darkness. While crossing the river during the night before his D-Day, the poor unfortunate found one after another of his tanks bogging down in the sand. He spent the whole night pulling his tanks, only to find that as he towed out one, another got stuck. Eventually, at 4 a.m. IST, he found himself with only four tanks on the enemy side of the river. Fortunately, he had created enough noise during the night to make the enemy think that a whole regiment was crossing over.

In the half-light of dawn, he attacked the enemy tank positions. To his utter consternation, he saw the Pakistani crew abandon their tanks and make for home. When he had rounded up the prisoners, the young major was seething - chagrin beyond description. He gathered the Pakistan crew together and vented his wrath upon them: "Don't you have any sharam (shame)? You have let down the armoured corps. You are supposed to stand and fight. You have cut our noses." And with that he marched them off to regimental headquarters.

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