Strategic and Tactical Lessons of the War of Liberation in the Context of the National Security of Bangladesh in the 21st Century

Syed Muhammad Ibrahim

1. The concept and meaning of National Security have undergone transformation over the years. Suffice it to say that it encompasses things beyond physical security also. If the Nation stands for its beliefs, values, sovereignty, territorial integrity, people's welfare, etc. then National Security would also imply security of all those. Threats to these have to be countered in various and multi-dimensional manner. But none of these dimensions can be said to be or expected to be effective in isolation. A confluence of more than one dimension make the matter of security meaningful. I will quote a long passage from the preface of a book, entitled "Prepare or Perish" written by General K. V. Krishna Rao PVSM, a former Chief of the Indian Army: "Threats of National Security can occur from both outside the country and from within. There does not appear to be adequate realization of this, particularly the latter aspect. In this book, therefore, not only matters relating to external threats have been covered, but also internal issues that could pose serious threats to the unity and integrity of the Nation. In doing so, I have tried to be as objective as possible. I am not a politician; but in dealing particularly with internal matters, some political issues of necessity do crop up. In the coverage of these, my only considerations have been the larger interests of the Nation and nothing else. I trust if anyone disagrees with any aspects, he would be charitable enough not to attribute any motives to me". What General K V K Rao said in a broader perspective is true for me and this paper too, albeit in a limited perspective.
2. The relevance of our War of Liberation of 1971 to our concept of National Security is practical. Officially, the nation-state of Bangladesh came into being on 26 March 1971. As Bangladesh declared its independence, it found itself occupied by a foreign hostile power, i.e. the Pakistan forces. That is to say, we began our life as a “Nation-State” in an insecure status. How did we overcome that situation? Although the answer to this short question is not actually short, we will make a short evaluation of the answer so as to make it relevant for the present times.

3. Few of the striking features of our War of Liberation, which have bearing on future National Security, are:

a. Selection and maintenance of ‘Aim’;
b. National unity;
c. Popular participation;
d. Support from outside world and neighbouring India;
e. The dislocation of the occupation forces.

These are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

4. The Declaration of Independence did not come out of a blue. The Bengali nation had been preparing for such an occasion for quite some years. The oppression and deprivation meted out to the then East Pakistan helped crystallize our urge for Independence. Many dates could be taken as landmarks for discussion, such as 1952, 1958, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1969 and lastly 1970. However, it is the 1965 war between Pakistan and India that opened our eyes regarding our physical insecurity. The Six-point Programme, declared by the Awami League, was aimed to overcome political and economic insecurity of the Bengali Nation inside Pakistan. Through political ups and downs, the Awami League fully succeeded in rallying the nation towards its Programme. This was reflected in the results of the election to National and Provincial Assemblies held in December 1970. The Awami League had near-total success. Such support and confidence of the people of the then East Pakistan in favour of the programmes of the Awami League
were also instrumental in prodding the Awami League to go for more direct and politically aggressive actions in March 1971. Till the 7th of March 1971, the people of the then Pakistan had some rays of hope in a united Pakistan. The rays lingered till 25 March. Bullets of the Pakistani Army smashed all these. Thus when the War of Liberation began, the nation was mentally ready for it. It is like a “fry-pan” warmed up ready for the recipe of the pancake to be spread on it. Since the nation was already united, the organizers of the War of Liberation and the Commanders did not have to spend much of their time in working for popular support.

5. The Bangladesh War of Liberation is an example of the famous and most important Principle of War - Selection and Maintenance of Aim. At the midnight of 25 March 1971, as the Pakistan Army launched OPERATION BLITZ, the die was cast in favour of an independent Bangladesh. On 10 April, the Government took the oath of office. Eyes of the world were fixed on the new country and the new map. The Government of Bangladesh-in-Exile was cautious to foil conspiracies of cutting short the War of Liberation by political compromise with Pakistan. Thousands had taken up arms to liberate the country from the clutches of the Pakistani Army--- the rifles would not be silenced short of that liberation. In the last twenty seven years it has come out on various occasions that there was an attempt by few senior politicians to strike a political compromise with Pakistan in mid-1971. There was support for such an arrangement from certain powerful countries, which were friendly to Pakistan. The common people were not involved in such dubious activity. The rank and file of the freedom fighters was united like a rock in their aim TO ESTABLISH A FREE AND INDEPENDENT BANGLADESH.

6. The Bangladesh War of Liberation is a bright example, in the annals of such wars, of aggressive popular participation. People did not have to be goaded into taking part in the War. Young men and students were joining the ranks of the fighters in thousands. The long-lasting influence of this phenomenon is that the memory and reminiscence of the War of Liberation still persist in every corner of the country. Every
village has a feeling of attachment to the War of Liberation. This is an investment, in terms of motivation, for the future well made in the past.

7. The aspect of discussion concerning support from neighbouring countries is important in that what we received in 1971 is not likely to be received in the future. In 1971, the desire of the Bengali Nation to become independent from Pakistan coincided with an obvious politico-strategic aim of India, which was to reduce Pakistan to smaller size and strength. Furthermore, the refugee build-up in the bordering districts of the Indian states of West Bengal, Meghalaya, and Tripura also helped invoke the sentiments of the people of the world. Let us put it starkly. In 1971, the physical aggressor was Pakistan with their forces stationed or marooned in the then East Pakistan. We the freedom fighters were then fighting on home ground. We had full support from India; Pakistan too had its allies, like the USA and China. Pakistan banked on their physical support but that was never to come.

The question now is: Who could be our enemy or aggressor in the future? In the current perspective of international relations I do not see physical aggression upon Bangladesh as practical. But should it ever occur, it has to be from our immediate neighbour(s). What sort of physical or material assistance do we Bangladeshis expect from our friends beyond immediate neighbourhood? To me the answer is almost negative in terms of physical help. Ours will possibly not be a situation like that of Kuwait in 1990 when there was an international alliance or coalition to overcome the situation. Then in the Middle East, two concurrent aims did compete for priority, namely the destruction of Saddam Hussein and Iraq, on the one hand, and the salvation of Kuwait, on the other. The third aim, that was hidden or undeclared, was a firmer control over the energy resources in the region. In our case no similar aim (or aims) will possibly receive any consideration, not to talk of the aims competing for priority. Therefore, the obvious conclusion is that we will have to fight on our own, survive on our own and win on our own. It may not be in nine months like in 1971; it may be in 9 years instead. Therefore, the lesson is, be prepared for the worst. Let us recall the good old saying "If you want peace,
prepare for war". In our context the implications are that, make an aggression on Bangladesh by any one seen unprofitable or not viable. This is the lesson.

8. I have talked of selection and maintenance of the aim, popular participation, national unity and the inevitability of fighting from inside. The crucial question now in 1998 or 99, albeit on the eve of the next century, is how do we achieve national consensus, national unity on matters like identifying possible threat, possible mode of aggression and possible reaction. How do we guarantee that the people of the country will all feel the necessity to fight it out? Will the pleasure and comforts of non-protest silence the desire to be free?

9. Our psychological and emotional preparation is weak. We as a country or nation are a poor example of nation-building. Ninety nine percent of the population eat, drink and live the same way; they speak and write in the same language, their aspirations for life are also the same. Eighty eight percent of them belong to one faith, 11 percent to another and the remaining one-percent to the other faiths. To any anthropologist or political scientist this is as ideal a combination as one could expect to have a happy and peaceful nation. But alas! The reality is different. The national sentiments are somehow divided into two segments, the India or the Pakistan factor being the adjectives. Constitutionally, we are Bangladeshis but we are divided on this matter. If we cannot achieve harmony in this, our preparation for national security (or defense) in the future will be weak. Three words are relevant: “Bangladesh”, “Bengali” and “Muslim”. With due respect to the sentiments of the common men of this country and of the friendly countries, I venture to suggest that a peaceful co-existence of these three intangibles is a must if we are to survive.

10. I will touch upon another aspect of our national security. While helping us in 1971, the Indians had to make immense sacrifices. For the sake of discussion, temporarily, let us say that India did interfere in the internal affairs of Pakistan in 1971, aimed at and successfully leading to the
dismemberment of Pakistan. India’s interference or intervention into neighbours had precedence (although minor ones) before 1971; it has recurred after 1971 also. This trend of interference, which was not initiated in 1971 but only highlighted in 1971 (because of the scale, object and publicity), has to be curtailed. Bangladesh faces a critical situation regarding our own Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and India’s Seven Northeastern States. India’s help to the insurgents of CHT delayed a political solution. In a different vein, Indian authors often accuse Bangladesh of helping the northeastern insurgents directly or indirectly. Let me quote two authors:

Sanjoy Hazarika writes in his *Strangers Of The Mist* (1994): “Yet insurgency in the 1970s, when it came, was not really new to the CHT. In the 1960s, Pakistani Intelligence and army specialists helped train and arm Mizo rebels to fight against India. The Pakistanis cleared Chakma and other hill groups to make space for training centres for the Mizo National Front (MNF). In the 1980s, Bangladesh tacitly supported Bijoy Hrangkhawls’ Tripura National Volunteer Force (TNVF). Bangladesh saw this as also its covert support to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) much later as a way of getting even with its giant neighbour. It could not meet India head-on but could hurt with a series of pinpricks” (Page-283). Earlier, Hazarika notes, “The unabated influx into Eastern India has created problems of law and order and confrontations between Indian and Bangladeshi security forces, led to a spurt in smuggling and trans-frontier gang wars in West Bengal as well as domestic troubles in Bangladesh where one Member of Parliament complains about Indian goods, especially consumer items like chilies and medicines, flood the local markets, crushing local enterprises and products. Bangladesh also blames India for what its elegant High Commissioner in New Delhi, Farooq Sobhan, describes as turning the tap on and off at its own whim. Sobhan was referring to the dispute over the Ganges River waters (Page-8).

While writing on Tripura, BG Verghese in his *India’s North East Resurgent* (1997) says, “Bijoy Hrangkhawl was politically active with the TUJS but established contact with Seng Krak and the MNF and joined a group of militants going
to the CHT for training. They were detected while returning and arrested but released for lack of conclusive evidence (Page -172). Hrangkhawl re-established contact with the MNF and formed the Tribal National Volunteers in December 1978 which sent 5 youths to the CHT for weapons training under Chuni Lal Koloi (Page -173). Why did Hrangkhawl take to arms and return to the fray after laying them down? In late 1982 he formed an underground government in exile just across the border in CHT with the idea of winning independence (Page -175).

11. From the preceding paragraph, I conclude that cross-border support for insurgencies is a problem of regional security; and being a country in the region, it is a problem of our national security. We need to come to a decision regarding such support. Let us calculate what is the maximum support that Bangladesh can offer to northeastern insurgents and how much can India offer to our CHT insurgents. It is nothing but blinding glimpses of the obvious that Bangladesh stands to lose on all counts. Therefore, Bangladesh will have to go out of the way to stop Indian support to CHT insurgents as well as to make India believe that our own hands are clean.

12. One lesson is, of course, that we need to identify friends and foes now and have such a foothold in the arena of international relations. This is needed so that, even if friends cannot come to our assistance physically, they can do so in other ways, i.e. economically or diplomatically.

TACTICAL LESSONS

13. At the tactical level, the lessons are related to the ground and economy. In 1971, our aim was conventional or traditional in that “how to make the life of the occupation forces difficult” was the prime consideration. We made our own body bleed. We damaged our bridges and culverts, we blew off our pylons, and we exploded our fuel-stations and the like. After we won the war, it took us many years to recover from the damages. This time, we must devise different ways of causing difficulties to the aggressor.
14. In 1971, the whole country was a battleground. In the next round, when we may have to fight (although I sincerely hope not), the whole country or terrain may not be equally friendly. We need to identify such geographical areas and chunks of population that will provide a stronger or more loyal base than others. This is a very critical job, yet the sooner we think of it the better it is.

15. Ours is a country, which has been defined as a heaven for the defender. But that is during conventional conflicts. How about a conventional offender and an unconventional defender? Technology, in respect of military hardware and equipment, has become such advanced that the natural advantages of the darkness of nights and the cover of the woods and forests are being snatched away. In a village, one man with the necessary equipment is as good as the whole village opposing you. Matters were not so difficult in 1971; but they are bound to be in any future conflict.

CONCLUSION

16. The century that is coming is of globalization in all spheres of activity. Physical aggressions are quite to be out of fashion since the purpose will be served by other means. Despite that preparations are a must.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
