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The Fundamental Principles of Covert Military Action: Lessons from India's 1971 Experience

Dheeraj Paramesha Chaya

Abstract

The success of the Indian covert actions in 1971 that led to the liberation of Bangladesh has a legendary place in India's security consciousness. This paper retells the story of India's covert actions in East Pakistan between January and December 1971. It lays down some essential rules and principles for successful covert actions that remain applicable even today. These include the need for a culture of covert action that guides the development of specialised institutions, the production of objective intelligence assessments, and appropriate management of operations.

The Baloch insurgency is a serious concern for Pakistan. Since 1970, the insurgency has gained significant momentum owing to a rising national consciousness among the Baloch people.¹ Mir Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, former Governor of Balochistan, dismissed the notion that being a Muslim was a sufficient condition to be a Pakistani and, therefore, championed the creation of an independent Balochistan.² This idea of being a Baloch before a Pakistani Muslim resonates with the 1971 insurgency in East Pakistan, which developed along the lines that the East Pakistanis were “Bengalis first, Muslims second, and Pakistanis third.”³ For both humanitarian and strategic reasons, Indian analysts are divided between proponents of covert military action in Balochistan⁴ and others who believe that talks of bravado must be tempered with realism.⁵ There also appears to be a large constituency within Balochistan seeking greater Indian support for its independence.⁶ This paper draws attention to the success of India’s covert actions^a in East Pakistan that led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

There is little in the public domain focused on examining the planning and conduct of India’s 1971 covert action. To be sure, there have been scholarly works produced on the 1971 war from various perspectives—such as international diplomatic history,⁷ military operations,⁸ intelligence operations,⁹ as well as from the perspective of other security agencies involved in the liberation efforts, primarily the Border Security Force (BSF).¹⁰ There is a lack, however, of a narrative dedicated solely to the planning and conduct of India’s covert actions in 1971 that could enable reflection and analysis half a century since those events occurred.

India’s decision to intervene in East Pakistan arose as the region started witnessing political turmoil in 1970. The general elections in Pakistan saw the Awami League of East Pakistan led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerge as the prominent party with an absolute majority, while Zulfikar Ali Bhutto secured a majority in West Pakistan. Under martial law, Pakistan was governed by the military chief at that time, General Yahya Khan. Yahya’s refusal to concede power to Mujib resulted in popular unrest in East Pakistan.

a Covert action, unlike intelligence collection, is a secret state activity meant to fulfil a foreign policy objective. This may include secret political action, propaganda, and paramilitary operations, aimed at influencing the politics, economy, military, and society in a foreign country.

Introduction

The Bengali populace rose in revolt against the military leadership and were supported by the Bengali sections of the Pakistan Army—the East Bengal Regiment and East Pakistan Rifles. The crisis escalated in March 1971 as the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight on 25 March to crack down on the protesters, thereby causing a massive refugee crisis in neighbouring Indian states. It was against this backdrop that India made the decision to begin covert action in East Pakistan.

This paper retells the story of Indian covert actions in East Pakistan prior to the liberation of Bangladesh. It aims to give insights into the fundamental rules and principles for a successful covert action to both inform and facilitate public discussion on this domain of national security and foreign policy that is little understood. The paper builds on information derived from Indian and British declassified documents, as well as published primary and secondary source material. The narration is presented in three phases as the action was planned and executed between January and December 1971, prior to the commencement of the war on 3 December. It does not explore covert operations that were conducted during the war in support of the Indian Army's war efforts, limiting the observations to covert actions during peacetime that laid the foundation for the war. The final section of the paper outlines the key lessons learned from 1971 and underlines the principles of covert action that remain relevant today.

“There is little in the public domain examining the planning and conduct of India's 1971 covert action that could enable reflection half a century later.”

Crafting Covert Action Policy

Phase 1: January-March 1971

India's focus on East Pakistan began in the mid-1960s as a response to Pakistan's covert support to Indian insurgent groups in Kashmir and the Northeast. The Indian intelligence agencies had developed contacts with Bengali patriots, cultivated student leaders, established safe houses to shelter them, and provided them with propaganda material on a large scale.¹¹ With no state policy to support the Bengalis, however, these contacts mostly served the objective of intelligence coverage. Once the crisis broke out in March 1971, several individuals began to perceive the events differently and set in motion an elaborate covert action policy. In retrospect, the *raison d'être* for India's support to the Bengali rebels appears as follows:¹²

1. The Bengalis in East Pakistan did not share the West Pakistani obsession with Kashmir and the Indian threat.
2. The Bengalis were eager to revive trade relations with India—links that were suspended following the 1965 India-Pakistan War.
3. The Awami League's secular outlook could potentially ease communal tensions and stop the migration of Hindus.
4. The Awami League, if in power, might stop sponsoring Indian insurgent groups.

Indeed, in early April, a senior member of the Awami League in the Pakistan National Assembly had conveyed to the Indians that his party was “a bulwark against Communism”; and considered the “two-nation theory dead” (a communal thesis that led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947); and therefore, “an independent Bangla Desh will solve many of [India's] problems and incidentally, it may solve also Kashmir problem once and for all.”¹³ The source also assured India that they will not encourage Indian insurgent groups to create trouble across the border.

At the same time, however, there were reasons for considering denial of support to the secessionist movement in East Pakistan. Primary among them was the possibility that an independent Bangladesh might fall under the control of pro-China communists and, worse, demand a United

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Bengal by carving out the Indian state of West Bengal.¹⁴ Weighing these conflicting factors, New Delhi was unsure of the necessary course of action. Intelligence assessments also fell short of making authoritative conclusions, compelling New Delhi to exercise restraint. Earlier, in April 1969, the R&AW, India's foreign intelligence agency, had forecast the possibility of a secessionist movement emerging in East Pakistan with the possible end result being independence.¹⁵ Yet, as late as mid-January 1971, the agency assessed that the East and West Pakistani politicians would "reach a working understanding."¹⁶ It also put forth the possibility of Pakistan creating conflict with India as "somewhat remote" although it mentioned that Yahya Khan might encounter pressure from "the hardliners" to act against India.

The mid-January assessment observed that Pakistan's main strategy against India at that point would be to infiltrate militants into Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) with the objective of conducting subversion and sabotage missions. It noted that Pakistan's efforts would be to "promote a popular uprising and to prevent the agitation from dying down." In effect, "the situation as it develops in J&K and the trend of political events in Pakistan, would have considerable bearing on the question of the Pakistani military threat to India during 1971."¹⁷ Therefore, the concern for India then was less about East Pakistan, and more around the possible effect of the situation in East Pakistan on the security situation in J&K.

Against the backdrop of this assessment, a development occurred that allowed India to launch its first covert action which would, nevertheless, have an impact on the East Pakistani situation. In July 1970, India's counterintelligence agency, the Intelligence Bureau (IB), had received inputs about a Pakistani intelligence plan for hijacking a flight from Srinagar.¹⁸ The organisation in charge of carrying out the operation was the National Liberation Front (NLF) and its key operative was Hashim Qureshi. In early January, Qureshi was nabbed by the Border Security Force (BSF) as he tried infiltrating into India. Thereafter, instead of putting him on trial, the R&AW and the BSF decided to conduct an operation with the stated objective of shedding light on Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in J&K and also assessing Sheikh Mujib's position on the Kashmir issue. In what was a significant departure from India's preference for transparency

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Phase 1: January-March 1971

and diplomacy in its foreign policy conduct, PM Gandhi approved this covert operation.

To avoid suspicions, Qureshi was given the cover of a BSF sub-inspector and protected from the J&K state CID, which had been keen on investigating him.¹⁹ Pakistan also bought into this ploy. On 30 January, Qureshi and his associates hijacked an old, decommissioned flight named Ganga that was specifically chosen by the R&AW for this operation. The hijacked flight was landed in Lahore (West Pakistan) and burnt down after the hijackers were greeted by Bhutto and the hostages were released. The hijackers were briefly hailed as heroes in Pakistan until the Indian operation became apparent and they were jailed for lengthy terms. For India, however, the operation served three key objectives. First, the international community realised Pakistan's support for terrorism in J&K. Second, India used the hijacking episode as a reason to block overflights from West to East Pakistan, thereby reducing the pressure of the Pakistani military on the Bengalis in the East. Finally, the hijacking was condemned by Sheikh Mujib, which convinced New Delhi of his secular and pro-peace credentials.²⁰

This event was the first notable expression of independent India's changed attitude towards the role of covert action in foreign policy. It also cleared doubts in New Delhi about the intentions of Awami League and its leadership with regard to J&K. This would have an important effect as the Bengali crisis worsened in March 1971. The R&AW received information that Mujib seriously considered secession as he felt his hands were tied.²¹ Armed with this knowledge, the agency began lobbying for the provision of assistance to the Bengali rebels. On 2 March, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi instructed Rameshwar Nath Kao, chief of R&AW, to organise a committee comprising the cabinet secretary, secretary to the PM, foreign secretary, home secretary, and the chief of R&AW. The committee was tasked with examining the internal and external implications of recognising an independent Bangladesh as well as the political, economic, and military implications of offering aid to Bangladesh.²² Owing to Indian diplomatic reports indicating the possibility of an East-West rapprochement and Mujib's unwillingness to convey his aims with clarity, the committee (barring Kao) decided to wait and watch.²³

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Phase 1: January-March 1971

Kao, however, brought to the attention of the committee that it would be impossible for the Pakistan Army to “crush the liberation movement.”²⁴ He warned that the prolonged fighting would lead to the movement going underground and “develop on the lines of a widespread guerrilla movement.” He also alerted the committee that the longer the struggle, greater were “the chances of its control moving into the hands of extremists and pro-China communists”, which “would be greatly to the disadvantage of India.” Consequently, Kao argued in favour of offering “aid, adequate and quick enough to ensure the early success of the liberation movement.”²⁵

Despite the majority in the committee meeting advising caution, events by the end of March convinced New Delhi that some action was required. With the influx of refugees and some of the leaders of the Awami League entering India, New Delhi decided that the Bengali rebels would receive minimal covert assistance, which included arms, ammunition, communication equipment, logistics support, food, and medicines. The Bengalis were allowed to establish a liaison unit in Delhi, an office in Calcutta, and a “liberated area” near the border. The overall authority for supervision and coordination was vested in the hands of the R&AW whilst the executive agency was the BSF. The Indian Army was envisaged to play a supportive role where needed, but as far as possible the operations were to be limited to the R&AW and the BSF given the high premium placed on “secrecy”.²⁶ From here began the second phase of India’s covert action—one that was clearly focused on throwing the spotlight on the humanitarian crisis developing in both India and East Pakistan.

Conduct of the Covert Action

Phase 2: March-August 1971

On 11 April, the formation of a Liberation Army (*Mukti Fauj* in Hindi) was declared; cadres were drawn mainly from the East Bengal regiment and the East Pakistan Rifles, whose officers and soldiers had mutinied in large numbers on learning about Operation Searchlight. This was followed by the declaration of the creation of the Bangladesh government in Mujibnagar on 17 April.²⁷ Whilst this undeniably established India's covert involvement in East Pakistan, the end goal was still unclear, with the liberation of Bangladesh never being discussed. Calling it the "commencement of the second phase of the struggle in Bangla Desh", the new strategy envisaged the employment of "guerrilla tactics, with the object of keeping the West Pakistan army continuously off their balance and to, gradually, bleed them."²⁸ The idea was simply to sustain the struggle for over a period of six to eight months to make it seem unbearable for the Pakistan Army.

Formal recognition of Bangladesh was ruled out at this point for two reasons. First, with no territory within East Pakistan under the control of the rebels, recognition was regarded meaningless. Second, recognition could "raise false hopes" regarding an overt intervention by the Indian armed forces, which at that moment was not being considered by New Delhi.²⁹ Thus, in this phase, covert action was driven by the logic of guerrilla tactics compounded by persistent propaganda offensives.

The two strategies—guerrilla warfare and psychological warfare—were to be executed together. The reason for this was that the Indian government realised that governments across the world had adopted an attitude of "wait and watch".³⁰ P.N. Haksar, the PM's Secretary, assessed that "no government recognises a revolt unless it acquires legitimacy" and "that legitimacy is acquired by control of territory and by its writ running."³¹ Since the Bangladesh government had not yet fulfilled this criterion, it was believed that international public opinion had regarded the developments in East Pakistan as "a matter of internal concern".³² Therefore, India needed to expose the true nature of the tribulations imposed on the Bengalis by the Pakistan Army; link it to the refugee crisis in India whilst expressing its desire to see the refugees return safely; and finally, justify the guerrilla operations as serving the former objective.

Conduct of the Covert Action Phase 2: March-August 1971

The R&AW's psychological warfare division, known as the Information Division, took the lead in exposing to the world the atrocities committed against the Bengalis.³³ Internationally, Kao played a critical role in coordinating efforts with Indian diplomats towards providing a voice for the Bengalis. Being aware of the need for credibility, Kao insisted that the Bengalis must be seen as independent voices under the leadership of credible Bengali leaders. All attempts at organising propaganda operations had to appear like a "movement self-supporting on the basis of collections from citizens of Bangladesh and sympathisers."³⁴ The All India Radio (AIR), in association with Radio Bangladesh, also launched a propaganda offensive.³⁵ AIR Calcutta had a well-devised programme that "relayed speeches of Mujib and PM's [Tajuddin] exhortations."³⁶ Thus, psychological operations had begun with earnestness and the R&AW sought to conduct them with as much efficiency.

Guerrilla operations, meanwhile, were not progressing as well as the propaganda operations due to three key reasons. First, there was a mismatch between Bengali aspirations and Indian objectives. Second, the operational culture of the Bengalis who were previously part of the Pakistan Army conflicted with that of the Indian Army. Finally, there were divisions within the Bengali camp that the Indians sought to exploit in view of long-term interests. The following paragraphs discuss each of these factors in turn.

When the initial training of the Mukti Fauj commenced in April, the BSF was incapable of providing sufficient assistance. There were complaints about the quality of weapons furnished. Where operational assistance was given by the BSF, the ability of the Mukti Fauj to mount attacks within East Pakistan remained largely limited. It was also observed that the BSF was operating in contradictory ways—offering fire support at certain instances, while disarming the guerrillas in others where apprehensions about negligent behaviour seemed palpable. At this point, the R&AW reported that the Mukti Fauj was losing advantage to the Pakistani forces.³⁷ This compelled PM Gandhi to transfer operational control from the BSF to the Indian Army's Eastern Command on 22 April.

Conduct of the Covert Action Phase 2: March-August 1971

The operational instructions issued to the headquarters of the Eastern Command on 1 May were to sustain a guerrilla war aimed at gradual destruction of the Pakistan Army's morale and capabilities for any offensive action in the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam. The Indian Army's plan envisaged the creation of a well organised and equipped guerrilla force of 20,000 fighters, which could gradually be enlarged to 100,000.³⁸ Despite these plans, it was not until August that the guerrilla operations gained steam, intensifying under the Indian Army's command.³⁹ The heavy-handed approach of the Indian Army officers, however, caused discontent within the Mukti Fauj. The latter was also displeased with insufficient medical supplies, weapons, and money. Owing to these factors, sections of the Mukti Fauj felt that New Delhi had "adopted a go-slow policy".⁴⁰

Notwithstanding these constraints, the propaganda machinery had kept up the image of a powerful Mukti Fauj ably tackling the Pakistani military. National and international media covering the operations reported to the British High Commission in July that there was a change "in the fortunes of the Mukti Fauj" and reasoned that "better organisation, better training, better equipment, better cooperation from the locals, and morale" were responsible.⁴¹ New Delhi too, made little effort to conceal its support to the guerrillas as a means of gaining a propaganda advantage. While newspapers carried stories of Indian assistance, there were also instances such as a member of the staff of the Indian Military Intelligence admitting to the British High Commission that assistance was being given.⁴² This was done to both convince the world about India's resolve in ensuring the safe return of the refugees as well as to assuage the press and public emotions in India that were repeatedly calling for action.

There were other reasons germane to the poor results in guerrilla warfare, which had their origins in the heterogenous composition of the Bangladesh government and the Mukti Fauj. Foremost among them were the differences between Tajuddin Ahmad, the prime minister of the government in exile, and Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni, a nephew of Mujibur Rahman. The group headed by the latter, known as the Khalifas, asserted that they were Mujib's actual choice for leadership. They despised both Tajuddin and Indira Gandhi's advisers whom they saw as pro-Moscow.⁴³

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Kao was the only individual they trusted, and this trust was reciprocated with pro-Khalifa advocacy by the R&AW in New Delhi. Based largely on the advice of P.N. Banerjee, the R&AW station chief at Calcutta, New Delhi decided to raise an alternative force known as Mujib Bahini led by Moni. The Mujib Bahini was sought to act as a counter to the emergence of an “army lobby” in independent Bangladesh.⁴⁴

The second set of differences was between the political leadership and the former soldiers of East Pakistan who now formed the Mukti Fauj. The soldiers often felt that the political leadership was not meeting their requirements sufficiently.⁴⁵ This was a complaint levelled both against the Bangladesh government and the Indian government. Colonel Osmani, the commander-in-chief of the Mukti Fauj, had requested Indian assistance in raising a full division of the regular army. Running counter to India’s preferred strategy of guerrilla warfare, New Delhi had verbally supported the idea but done nothing about it. In the event, complaints were exchanged by both sides—Col. Osmani claiming that little had been done to provide adequate guerrilla training to the volunteers whilst Lieutenant General J.S. Aurora deemed Col. Osmani unfit for guerrilla warfare because of his commitment to regular warfare.⁴⁶ Allegations and counter-allegations notwithstanding, there is no denying that the Mukti Fauj was seriously short on weapons and ammunition. It was reported that a soldier of the Mukti Fauj was not allotted more than 10 rounds of ammunition per day. Moreover, India had ensured that the large funds raised by diaspora Bengalis were not used to procure military hardware for the Mukti Fauj.⁴⁷

The final dichotomy within the Mukti Bahini was on politico-religious lines. On the one hand, there were the Hindus favoured by New Delhi, on the other were Islamists and communists who presented a security threat. A British High Commission report from early August noted, based on information provided by certain volunteers from the training camps, that the camps had about 42,000 Hindus and no Muslims. Also, during screening of volunteers, left-leaning candidates were being rejected.⁴⁸ The communist threat was the primary concern for New Delhi since the eastern region of India, adjacent to East Pakistan, had been witnessing a rising tide of Maoist/Naxalite violence.

Conduct of the Covert Action Phase 2: March-August 1971

It certainly was not helping India's cause that the communists had "out-gunned" the Mukti Fauj.⁴⁹ Similarly, radical Muslims of the region had also been organised by Pakistan as a counter to the Mukti Fauj. Known as the Razakars, these Muslim youths were adding to the anarchy prevailing in the region. Their cadres were supplemented with Muslim migrants from the Indian state of Bihar who carried out massacres of the Bengalis.⁵⁰ Although India was keen to project the situation as a "Muslim led East-Pakistani liberation movement rather than just another Indian-Pakistani (i.e., Hindu-Muslim) conflict", the ramifications of the communal factors on the security situation and the conduct of operations remained persistent.⁵¹

Therefore, in Phase 1 and 2 of the covert action policy, the combined effects of New Delhi's limited aims and differences within the Bangladesh leadership caused it to have little impact on the Pakistan Army. The real change in gears took place from August 1971 onwards when there was a sea change in the international scenario, which in turn transformed Indian objectives.

Conduct of Covert Action

Phase 3: August-December 1971

The month of August brought key changes that compelled New Delhi to address all the issues mentioned above with greater alacrity. First, any prospect of peace returning to East Pakistan was rendered impossible with the Yahya government announcing the trial of Sheikh Mujib. This meant that India could not sustain its limited aims of keeping the rebellion alive while trying to build a favourable international opinion. Until then, the international public opinion had been in favour of India but its effect on their respective governments towards restraining Yahya from committing further atrocities was limited.

Moreover, the secret visit of Henry Kissinger, US National Security Advisor, to China the previous month and the developing US-Pakistan-China axis seriously threatened India's interests. In such a scenario, rather than restraining Yahya, New Delhi realised that the Americans were actively trying to sow discord within the Awami League. Although India sought to offset this by actively encouraging the Americans to engage with the Awami leadership, it was found that the Americans were keen on engaging only with individuals opposed to Tajuddin's primacy, such as Khondkar Mushtaq.⁵² Against the backdrop of these developments, New Delhi decided to revamp the conduct of its covert action.

From early April, D.P. Dhar, who was PM Gandhi's handpicked Ambassador to the Soviet Union and who would subsequently play an instrumental role in concluding the Indo-Soviet treaty of friendship, had been a strong advocate of covert operations to sustain the Bengali rebellion. Writing to New Delhi from the Indian Embassy in Moscow on 4 April, Dhar had said,

“Our main and only aim should be to ensure that the marshes and the quagmires of East Pakistan swallow up the military potential which West Pakistan can muster...in the not very distant future the West Pakistan elements will find their Dien Bien Pho in East Bengal. This will *relieve us of the constant threat which Pakistan has always posed to our security directly and also as a willing and pliable instrument of China...*[therefore], this resistance must not be allowed to collapse [emphasis added].”⁵³

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By August, the R&AW was convinced that Bangladesh's independence was imminent, and this was India's only option to tackle the security threat posed by Pakistan and China. Echoing Dhar's words, Banerjee, R&AW's Calcutta station chief, briefed his field officers about the need to organise the guerrilla struggle in East Pakistan with the objective of breaking up Pakistan and creating a "friendly, secular pro-Indian state."⁵⁴ To do so, however, the challenges observed in Phase 2 of the operations had to be mitigated. Under these circumstances, New Delhi appointed D.P. Dhar as the chairman of the policy planning committee in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the overall supervisor of the Bangladesh operations. Dhar immediately set about rectifying the challenges posed by inter-group rivalry, supply chain constraints, and lack of coordination between Indian and Bangladeshi forces.

First and foremost, the strength of the Mukti Fauj was increased considerably. Assuming its revised identity as the Mukti Bahini, the liberation army comprised not just of former Bengali officers and soldiers, but also civilian volunteers. The change in name from 'fauj' to 'bahini' was meant to serve a psychological purpose. Whilst the former had its origin in Urdu, the latter was a Bengali word. Given that the imposition of Urdu on the Bengalis of East Pakistan was one of the key sources for the liberation struggle, the change in name from Mukti Fauj to Mukti Bahini was significant.⁵⁵

The former EPR and EBR cadres in the Mukti Bahini were called the regular force or Niyomito Bahini, whereas the freedom fighters were classified as Gano Bahini and were exempt from the military rules that governed the former. The entire guerrilla force was divided into three groups—'action groups' meant for direct guerrilla operations against the enemy; 'intelligence cells' meant for intelligence operations; and 'guerrilla bases' meant to support the guerrilla operations with propaganda activities, safe houses, and other support systems. By July, India was training 12,000 guerrillas per month.

In September, New Delhi envisaged to raise 20,000 guerrillas a month, causing the strength of the Mukti Bahini to rise above 100,000 by December.⁵⁶ The new force was well equipped with weapons and

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ammunition procured secretly from Israel. India had not yet officially recognised Israel. But, the R&AW had managed to establish ties with Israel's Mossad at Geneva, which allowed the agency to act as a conduit for the procurement and supply of arms to the freedom fighters.⁵⁷ There remained one serious problem, however, that is the infighting between the Mukti Bahini and the Mujib Bahini.

On assuming authority, Dhar had successfully charmed the Mujib Bahini to shed its suspicion of the former's pro-Moscow image. Yet, his positive relationship with both the Mujib Bahini and Mukti Bahini was failing to translate into cooperation between the two fighting forces. There was a strong perception among the Mukti Bahini leadership that the Mujib Bahini was better trained and offered operational autonomy. At least as far as training and equipment were concerned, the Mukti Bahini's perceptions were not entirely unfounded. With a strength of about 10,000 guerrillas, the Mujib Bahini was trained by the covert operation organisations of the R&AW.⁵⁸ Under the leadership of retired Major General Sujjan Singh Uban, the Mujib Bahini was offered "specialised training in the advanced techniques of guerrilla warfare" by the Special Service Bureau (SSB) and the Special Frontier Force (SFF), India's covert paramilitary units operating under the Directorate General of Security (DGS) within the R&AW. These training operations were conducted in high secrecy, with the Aviation Research Centre (ARC), another organisation under the DGS, offering "essential aerial logistic support".⁵⁹ The resultant power disparity was, therefore, disapproved by the Mukti Bahini. To offset this imbalance, Dhar, with the prime minister's approval, instructed the Mujib Bahini to cooperate with the Mukti Bahini. Dhar also permitted the Mukti Bahini to recruit leftist students to provide more teeth to its fighting abilities.

Concomitantly, New Delhi gave further momentum to its propaganda operations. A famous Indian musician of Bengali origin, Pandit Ravi Shankar, was deeply disturbed by the number of refugees that had entered India and their dire living conditions. Shankar sought help from George Harrison, a friend and guitarist for the Beatles, to organise an international awareness concert. Harrison saw this opportunity to both generate international awareness and raise funds for humanitarian relief. Consequently, roping in other famed musicians like Bob Dylan and Joan

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Baez, a concert was organised in New York in August. The concert was a success, raising some US\$250,000 in donations, far higher than the US\$20,000 that Ravi Shankar and Harrison had aimed for. Besides raising money, the propaganda effect of the songs was massive. The lyrics were politically charged, made a case for independence by preferring the use of the term 'Bangladesh' over 'East Pakistan', and copies of the songs were sold in large numbers.

India needed only to supplement these independent efforts by concerned citizens. Documentaries began to surface across the world that focused on the horrors in East Pakistan whilst international radio broadcast the songs composed in favour of Bangladesh. Indian intelligence intercepts of the External Publicity Wing (Psy-War Cell) of Pakistan's Ministry of Information and National Affairs noted distress within Islamabad owing to the documentaries' "obvious anti-Pakistan slant".⁶⁰ Similarly, radio broadcasts of songs with 'Bangladesh' in their title were regarded as "hostile propaganda against Pakistan".⁶¹ Given that the Western governments' opinion was unfavourable to India, New Delhi saw such propaganda operations as a necessary means to draw and sustain the international public opinion in its favour.

By early October, the Indian objective was revised and finalised: "to assist the Mukti Bahini in liberating a part of Bangladesh, where the refugees could be sent to live under their own Bangladesh government."⁶² India's covert actions were now beginning to be supplemented with overt military actions. Ironically, at this point, the overt military actions were sought to be maintained a secret while the covert assistance to the Mukti Bahini stood very much revealed. Throughout October, the Indian Army's role was to capture important areas within East Pakistan that would later assist a full-fledged military intervention.

To keep the situation from escalating, the Mukti Bahini conducted the offensives, with the Indian Army only providing artillery fire and limited troops. The captured territory was also held by the Mukti Bahini whilst the Indian troops retreated behind the borders. The need to keep the Indian Army's involvement secret was compelled by Indira Gandhi's desire for

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a peaceful solution, if there was one, and avoidance of international condemnation of India at the United Nations.⁶³ Despite strict instructions to maintain secrecy, however, the Indian Army's involvement in cross-border operations stood exposed to international media. When the *New York Times* carried an article citing Indian officials admitting the Indian Army's crossing of the borders in early November, a distraught PM Gandhi expressed concern and called for a thorough investigation of the leaks.⁶⁴ The logic driving New Delhi's actions was that India's covert assistance to the guerrillas supported an internationally sustainable narrative whereas overt military action would invite criticism for escalating the situation.

By the third week of November, the situation was worsening, and the scale of the Indian Army's operations rose considerably. On 19 November, the two armies were engaged in a fierce battle at Boyra in the Jessore area. By 21 November, the Indian Army had successfully captured Garibpur, a strategic location inside East Pakistan. Although three days later, PM Gandhi told the Indian parliament that the Indian troops had not crossed the borders, the scale and intensity of the operations could not be kept secret for long. A decision was thus made in the last week of November to launch a full-scale attack on 4 December. However, New Delhi expected that the Battle of Garibpur would compel Pakistan to open the western front to relieve pressure on the east. P.N. Dhar, PM Gandhi's secretary, perceived this to be an ideal situation where Yahya would be blamed for starting the war. In any case, the R&AW had reported that Pakistan would launch air strikes on the western front before India's D-Day.

On 3 December, the Pakistani Air Force targeted the Indian Air Force (IAF) bases at several locations on the western front. These were intended to be pre-emptive strikes aimed at crippling the IAF's fighting capabilities. However, with advance warning, the IAF was on alert and the fact that Pakistan launched a pre-emptive strike offered New Delhi its *casus belli*.

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The following paragraphs outline eight fundamental rules and principles of covert action that are applicable even today.

A Culture of Covert Action

The first and foremost factor evident from the success of the 1971 covert action lies not in this episode per se, but in the larger shifts in strategic culture that occurred in India following the 1962 Sino-Indian war, and more importantly, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi beginning in the late '60s. During the '50s, India had ample opportunity to experiment and hone its skills in covert action in Tibet. However, the existing ideas of national security during that time did not support covert action, as reinforced in doctrines such as the Panchsheel Agreement that committed to non-interference in other's internal affairs. It was only after the 1962 debacle in the Sino-India conflict that covert action began to enter the Indian security calculus and remained so for some decades later.

The importance of underscoring the need for cultural development is because the long-term sustenance of institutions required for covert actions depends largely on this (see next sub-section). Bereft of a national security doctrine that provides direction to policy and enables the development of dedicated institutions, there will always be the tendency for events to overtake decisions.

In 1971, in the absence of a clear national security strategy, the MEA, trained in Nehruvian philosophies, prescribed non-intervention,⁶⁵ whereas the R&AW advocated covert actions since its officers had personally witnessed the benefits in the preceding years.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, since the political leadership of the day had impressed on the R&AW the need for covert action in national security right at its inception in 1968, there was space for the agency to argue in favour of adopting such policies to respond to the developing crisis in East Pakistan.

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Although the surprises of the 1962 and 1965 wars motivated the creation of the R&AW as India's dedicated foreign intelligence agency, PM Gandhi's executive order included the need for the agency to maintain influence in the national capitals in India's neighbourhood. To this end, political action and propaganda operations had emerged as core activities of the newly created agency. However, given the ad-hoc nature of this prime ministerial directive, covert action never fit into an established Indian national security strategy, causing it to wane during the '90s.⁶⁷

Institutions of Covert Action

As mentioned above, a strong national security culture is what guides the development and sustenance of dedicated institutions for covert action. In general, the public perception is that the R&AW, being India's dedicated foreign intelligence agency, conducts covert action. While partly accurate, this is not entirely true. In 1971, despite the critical role played by the R&AW, the BSF, and the Indian Army, there were other agencies such as the Special Service Bureau (SSB) and the Special Frontier Force (SFF) that played key roles in the conduct of covert actions. The contributions of the SSB were particularly critical to the conduct and success of operations in Phases 1 and 2 as narrated above. The SSB was made responsible for running intelligence, counterintelligence, and sabotage operations, with the stated objective of "unbalancing and weakening the enemy".⁶⁸

This agency was specifically raised in the aftermath of the 1962 war, with the support of the British Special Air Service (SAS), to act as a covert action agency providing the first line of defence against an invading Chinese Army. Comprising villagers from the border regions, their service in intelligence operations and covert operations was considered so valuable that the SSB spread to almost all border states in the later years to operate as India's first line of defence.⁶⁹ Even in southern India, the agency had lent its services in training police special forces in the state of Andhra Pradesh for counterinsurgency operations. However, in the restructuring of India's national security mechanism that ensued after the Kargil war in 1999, the SSB was stripped of its role, character, and areas of operation. What was once regarded as a 'people's force' and ideally suited for covert operations has now been transformed into a uniformed central police force,

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thereby destroying its ability to conduct effective clandestine intelligence operations.⁷⁰

Clearly, lacking a coherent national security strategy and charter of duties for specific agencies, the SSB became a victim of knee-jerk reforms.⁷¹ Belatedly, realising the value of these cadres, thousands of them were absorbed by the IB even as thousands more awaited proper employment.⁷² The role played by the SSB in executing India's covert actions in 1971 highlights the importance of maintaining dedicated institutions for covert actions. Yet, this desire for institutions can only be met adequately when the primary condition of having an established national security strategy is met.

Appropriate Channels of Advice

Covert action is inherently fraught with risk, and thus requires appropriate management. The 1971 episode ranks highly on this aspect because it was led by an able leader like Indira Gandhi. More importantly, the policy was designed after a process of consultation and deliberation. Among her advisers, P.N. Haksar, head of the PM's Secretariat (PMS), was perhaps the most influential. Haksar was instrumental in developing the PMS as a think tank, drawing analyses and policy recommendations from both within and outside the government. Foreign policy decisions were also taken in consultation with T.N. Kaul, foreign secretary; R.N. Kao, head of R&AW; T. Swaminathan, cabinet secretary; and K.B. Lall, defence secretary.⁷³ Outside the government, K. Subrahmanyam remained an influential voice. Besides dispensing advice, Haksar and Swaminathan also played a vital role in conducting periodic reviews of the operations.⁷⁴

Today, 'outside government' advice need not be limited to a few individuals in the presence of a number of think tanks and academics that specialise in area studies and international relations. With the availability of a national security strategy, scholars and think tanks would be better placed to offer objective long-term analyses as opposed to the polemical pieces that populate media publications.

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The success of the 1971 episode can also be considered an aberration in India's security history given that the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) remained defunct for most of its existence. Situated initially under the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) and later moved to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the JIC was meant to serve as an all-source intelligence assessment body. However, within India's intelligence culture where the role and influence of the intelligence and security bureaucracies are largely determined by the strength of the organisational leadership and access to policymakers, the JIC seldom fulfilled these conditions. Consequently, intelligence advisory has often been competitive between several reporting agencies rather than a consensual product generated by the JIC.⁷⁵ Yet, in 1971, individuals from different bureaucracies found a way to come together and share ideas and assessments.⁷⁶

Today, there seems little clarity on the efficiency of channels of advice available for the government. Following Kargil, several changes were enforced to develop channels of advice for the government. Key among these was the strengthening of the newly created National Security Council (NSC) with a Secretariat (NSCS) to service it. This was an idea borrowed from the NSC system in the US. However, it has been observed that the NSC is "not yet indispensable to government functioning" and India lacks "coordinating mechanisms and deliberative traditions".⁷⁷ The JIC has been dismantled; experts have criticised the move but have offered little reflection on its limited influence on policy during its existence.⁷⁸

Objective Assessments to Guide Action

PM Indira Gandhi's creation of the R&AW itself was an effort to ensure that unbiased, objective assessments reached the PM. Nevertheless, there was an awareness of the fallacy of depending on a single channel for assessments. In this regard, it can be recalled that during the first phase of the operation, Kao was the strongest advocate of covert action whereas the other secretaries preferred caution owing to a lack of convincing evidence regarding Mujib's commitment to secession.

Even now, high stakes national security policies involving covert action, and possibly overt military action, carry high electoral dividends and,

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therefore, could lead to confirmation biases.⁷⁹ It is thus important to maintain analytical objectivity and policy decisions must hinge on a consultative process. As a result, in the initial stages of the 1971 covert action, India did not have liberation as its objective. It was only in Phase 3 that changes in circumstances enforced greater conviction and movement towards liberation.

The importance of objective assessment based on ground realities guiding policy becomes evident when comparing the success of 1971 with the disastrous outcome of India's covert intervention in Sri Lanka in the second half of the '80s. Whereas the 1971 covert action evolved purposefully with awareness of the existing realities, India's covert actions in Sri Lanka were forcefully executed to establish peace between Colombo and the Tamil rebel groups.⁸⁰ The result was an unrealistic peace deal that led to an intensification of the civil war and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. Therefore, once national security strategies have been drafted and institutions and mechanisms have been put in place, it is necessary for every covert action to be based on an objective assessment of the situation rather than forced to chase the desired outcomes.

Clear Political Assessment of the Partners

Although this factor seems obvious and straightforward, history is replete with covert actions that have failed due to inaccurate estimation of the partner's political agendas. The best case in point is the US partnering with Islamists during the Soviet-Afghan war. A limited assessment of the mujahideen certainly informed the Americans of their anti-communist credentials. However, incomplete assessment blinded the threat that Islamism posed. The real and long-lasting success of the 1971 covert action lies in India's thorough assessment of the Awami League and the intentions of several of its key members.

The hijacking of the aircraft in January 1971 was planned with the clear objective of studying Mujib's intentions towards India. In contrast to the US's partial assessment of the mujahideen, India went beyond merely estimating Mujib's hostility towards West Pakistan to assess his opinions on the critical national security issues that faced the Indian state, such as

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Kashmir and secularism in Bangladesh. In a sense, it is this factor more than anything else that has led to long-lasting peace and engagement between India and Bangladesh.⁸¹ In contrast, in Sri Lanka, one can find that the R&AW failed in reading the mind of Prabhakaran and missed the LTTE's intention to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi.⁸²

Operational Control of the Rebels

Considered the most sensitive aspect of covert actions, paramilitary actions particularly require to be managed well.⁸³ With too little capabilities, the rebels are susceptible to either perish or drift towards other international partners. Meanwhile, with too much power and mismanagement, there is a risk of the rebels developing independent objectives that might run counter to the sponsor. The 1971 episode remains an exemplar of the successful maintenance of operational control of the rebels. A more detailed study will certainly expose instances of mismanagement. However, the overall checks and balances placed by the Indian intelligence and security agencies ensured that the Mukti Bahini, for the most part, did not threaten India's strategic objectives. The creation of Mujib Bahini and strengthening it qualitatively to offset the numerical superiority of the Mukti Bahini is a case in point.

Contrast this with the Indian covert action in Sri Lanka in the subsequent decade and the perils of inadequate operational control of the rebels become obvious. Although the R&AW knew from experience the importance of maintaining some form of balance between the Tamil rebels, by 1987, the Liberation Tigers led by Velupillai Prabhakaran were considerably more capable than the other groups. The consequences of this oversight would become evident after the deployment of the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) to Sri Lanka. The IPKF and the R&AW then sought to hastily create a rival group called the Tamil National Army (TNA), which nonetheless disintegrated soon after the withdrawal of the IPKF.⁸⁴

Therefore, it is essential to monitor both the intentions and capabilities of the rebels continuously to keep them aligned with, or within tolerable deviations from, the objectives of the sponsor. In 1971, this was possible

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because of the managerial skills of P.N. Banerjee, Joint Director of the R&AW, who was culturally well-connected with the Bengali rebels and enjoyed trust and confidence in New Delhi. Today, there is a need for case studies and deliberations about strategising and managing sponsorship of covert paramilitary actions. Nonetheless, its criticality from a long-term policy perspective has been sufficiently established by western scholarship.⁸⁵

Propaganda Operations to Supplement Paramilitary Operations

The choice of covert means itself indicates an inherent concern for international responses to adopted plans of action. Therefore, alongside avoiding international criticism, it is also essential to shape a favourable international opinion. This is always a challenge when covert paramilitary actions are involved. Some international scholars of covert actions, therefore, regard covert paramilitary activity as “sensitive”, “controversial”, “illegal”, and “counterproductive”.⁸⁶

The success of 1971 is owed not only to exceptional control of the rebels but also a propaganda campaign that both sustained the morale of the Bengalis in East Pakistan as well as shaped international public opinion. Depending on the time and context, this sometimes required emphasising the difficulties of the Bengali people and the refugee scenario in India whereas, elsewhere, it required projecting the rebels in a positive light. For instance, in May 1971, the Indian MEA secretly assisted the Bangladeshi government in exile to create pamphlets projecting the Bengali genocide and circulate them across the world. At the same time, the Indian Prime Minister and several other cabinet ministers toured the world informing nations about the refugee crisis in India.

Given that the US was on Pakistan’s side, these diplomatic tours garnered a lot of sympathetic words but achieved little in terms of financial aid and pressure on Pakistan to end the genocide.⁸⁷ In August, as the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty was signed and India came under international condemnation for surrendering its principles of non-alignment, PM Gandhi turned the spotlight on the US’s sale of weapons to Pakistan. The Soviets who were also particular about avoiding a war were keen on the

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Indians maintaining secrecy surrounding its covert sponsorship of the Mukti Bahini. When a suggestion was made by the US to post UN observers on both sides of the India-Pakistan border, PM Gandhi compared the crisis in East Pakistan to Hitler's tyranny against the Jews and his political opponents.⁸⁸ Such propaganda and diplomatic efforts were necessary to sustain the covert action in East Pakistan.

Today, the mediums of information operations have changed, while the principles mostly remain the same. Planners of covert actions will need to pay particular attention to the psychological dimension for a successful covert action.

Critical Appreciation of the Role of Secrecy

It might seem odd that 'covert' action that is synonymous with 'secret' activity requires special mention about secrecy. However, considering that covert actions are only a means to a policy end, it is necessary to understand that the degree of secrecy required varies according to the objectives. As the recollection of Phase 2 of the covert actions above reveals, there were instances when India was actively exposing training facilities to national and international media in order to communicate resolve to the international community. But there were also instances when the Indian government had to project that the guerrilla campaign was entirely sustained by the Bengalis themselves.

For instance, in July when there was a need for arming the Mukti Bahini, India only facilitated the shipping of weapons from Belgium that were bought by the Bengali exiles. This allowed the Indian Prime Minister to deflect international queries about Indian sponsorship of the guerrilla movement by claiming the Bengalis had their own sources.⁸⁹ Therefore, whilst secrecy is important and deniability is essential in covert actions, it is not necessary that secrecy must be absolute. It must be carefully calibrated to avoid negative effects and reap positive benefits.

The appropriate maintenance of secrecy and deniability is critical, especially in the age of social media, where a jingoistic public can cause unnecessary complications. Considering the risks that modern information

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and communications technologies (ICTs) pose to the conduct of covert actions, some scholars have concluded that “Cold War-style covert operations may well be a thing of the past.”⁹⁰ The introduction of ICTs might have surely influenced means and methods of covert actions. The utility and attractiveness of it for policymakers, however, remains high. Nevertheless, careful management with regulated employment of secrecy is inevitable for a successful covert action. Especially where protection of vital information is concerned, a strong counterintelligence mechanism is unavoidable.

In 1971, the IB, the SSB, and the armed forces’ service counterintelligence wings played an active role in rounding up Pakistani spies and protecting information. Whilst there were calculated leaks to gain psychological dominance, unregulated leaks to the media, as seen during November 1971 had caused embarrassment to PM Gandhi when she was touring the world to buy international support. Thus, information security alongside regulated employment of secrecy is critical to a successful covert action.

This point can be further emphasised by observing India’s trouble in managing the Sri Lanka crisis. Through the years 1985-87, two key individuals with access to top secret government documents had been spying for western countries, leading to the strengthening of Sri Lanka’s negotiating position against India. Coomar Narain, a businessman with contacts in the government, and K.V. Unnikrishnan, the R&AW’s station chief in Madras, had been leaking information to the French and Americans, respectively, which made its way to Colombo. It was only after the Indian counterintelligence caught up with these operatives that India’s negotiating position improved.⁹¹

Consulting a diverse set of sources, this paper has reconstructed the planning and conduct of India's covert action in Pakistan between January and December 1971 prior to the outbreak of the war. A three-phase narrative has been offered through which India's covert action plans evolved. Several individuals and organisations played critical roles in planning, organising, and executing the covert action. These included career diplomats, intelligence and security officials, former Bengali soldiers from East Pakistan, Bengali freedom fighters, and independent citizens operating out of concern for the Bengali cause. Taken together, a combination of propaganda and guerrilla operations were executed throughout this period under tight supervision and oversight.

The 1971 covert action narrative has allowed for a reflection on the fundamentals of a successful covert action project. In so doing, the paper has culled eight key rules and principles that need to be followed to ensure the successful execution of a covert action. By no means should these rules be considered exhaustive. Indeed, depending on the case on hand, preparing the grounds and people for resistance will be a factor. Many such factors will need to be carefully examined according to the specific case.

The aim of this paper was to initiate and facilitate a public discussion around covert action as an instrument of policy. To this end, it has highlighted that strategic level changes in cultures, institutions and processes must facilitate purposeful execution based on objective assessments of existing realities. This in essence was the bedrock of successful covert action in 1971 and remains applicable today. [ORF](#)

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