

Gulf War and Security of South Asia

MAJ GEN RAJENDRA NATH, PVSM (RETD)

Iran-Iraq war which started in September 1980 and ended in 1988 has set many records. It has lasted eight years, the longest war in the twentieth century, in which both the countries have suffered about a million casualties. The developed countries made fabulous profits by supplying much needed war material to both countries who lacked defence industries. During this war fought along 1088 km long border, gas was used by Iraq several times to blunt the Iranian assaults contrary to Geneva convention. Later Iran also used gas but on a restricted basis. For the first time, missiles were used by both sides against civil population to break the opponent's will to fight. Iraqi forces were equipped with Russian equipment while the Iranian forces were equipped and trained by U.S.A. At the specific request of Iraqi Government India had sent a small military mission to Iraq nearly a decade before this war. Iraq had sent many officers to USSR for training. It has been sending some cadets every year for training at NDA/IMA in India also for over a decade. A large number of Iranian officers had been trained at various military institutions in USA.

It was expected that Iraqi forces would follow the Soviet tactics while the Iranian forces would use US doctrines. However, this was not quite the case during the protracted war. Actually from the point of view of development of new tactical doctrines, there is not much to learn from this bloody conflict. However, one can learn quite a few useful lessons from the strategic point of view. When the war started, Iran and Iraq had much less forces and weapons systems, from what they possess today. Iran has at present over half a million regular forces which consist of mostly army, it has a small navy while air force has almost been decimated in the long war. Iraq has nearly three and a half lakh regular forces comprising mainly army with a small navy but a fairly strong and well equipped air force. Iraqi army possesses more tanks, armoured personnel carriers and guns which gave it a better cutting edge over the Iranian army. Both the countries possess missiles, Iraq much more than Iran. Iraq has claimed that it has not only developed its own short range missiles but has test fired an anti missile also.

PROTRACTED WAR

The Shah of Iran wanted to modernise Iran and make it a strong economic and military power in South Asia. USA was also keen to make Iran, a reliable US ally, in the seventies, a viable regional force as it suited

US global interests. The US government failed to realise that the modernity as practised by Shah was not necessarily synonymous with progress, well being and true needs of the Iranian people. This resulted in Iranian revolution in 1979 and the new religious leaders of Iran were severe critics of USA. A blood bath followed and quite a few pro US senior officers of armed forces were removed, many even lost their lives. The organisation of the armed forces suffered in the process. The US in return stopped all military and economic assistance. Since Iranian armed forces were solely dependent upon USA for its military requirements, it adversely affected their operational fitness. The new rulers of Iran, full of revolutionary fervour did not quite comprehend the implications of this sudden change. It is obvious that Iraq misjudged the Iranian revolution and came to the conclusion that if it were to strike at Iran, it could gain a quick and cheap victory and in turn dominate better part of Persian Gulf. Iraq with an area of 4,34,924 sq kilometres and population of about 14 million was going to attack Iran which had nearly four times its area and over three times its populations.

In 1980, Iraq had a mechanised Corps with few mechanised and armoured divisions in the south in Basra area, another Corps with few infantry divisions in the northern hilly region while 2-3 divisions were kept near Baghdad as central reserves. The main offensive was to be launched by the mechanised corps in the south while the corps in the hills was to carry out mainly holding operations making limited ingress into the Iranian territory. The Iranian army, though bigger in size was not only somewhat disorganised but also well spread out. Some divisions were located north facing Soviet Union while few others were stationed in the north east and on eastern border. It had an armoured division and three infantry divisions facing Iraqi forces in the south while some divisions were manning the border with Iraq along the northern mountainous border. Another armoured division and few infantry divisions were held as reserve in Teheran area. There were border clashes in early 1980 between the two countries. The Iranian intelligence failed to notice the forward concentration of Iraqi mechanised corps. So the Iraqi offensive in Sep, 1980 did surprise the Iranian forces by its weight and timing. The Iraqi forces gained initial success, as Iranian forces fell back in disorder. The withdrawing Iranian troops took up positions in Khorram Shahr and Abadan cities and converted them into strong defensive bastions. This was the time for Iraqi commanders to try and inflict a crushing defeat on the withdrawing Iranian forces in a mobile battle, but they missed the golden opportunity. Instead they decided to capture the cities of Khorram Shahr and Abadan. The bitter battle for the capture of the two cities went on for few months before they fell. This gave Iran much needed time to reorganise its army, move forward its reserve formations for counter attack to recapture the two cities. By the end of 1981, Iran had recaptured Abadan and in May,

1982 Khorram Shahr. By the end of 1982, all Iraqi forces had been thrown back from the Iranian territory. Then started the ding-dong battle between the two countries which lasted for nearly six more years without any country gaining a decisive victory.

Iran launched its first offensive on Iraqi territory in 1983 and Iraq retaliated by air attacks on Iranian oil platforms to damage the oil production. In February-March, 1984, Iran launched its second offensive to cut Baghdad-Basra road and made considerable progress. Iraq used gas, its last weapon, to demoralise Iranian troops and halt their advance. In 1985 Iran launched another offensive in the area of Homeiza Marshes, north of Basra and gained some territory after severe fighting. End of 1985 witnessed the start of missile war to devastate each other's cities. In 1986, Iran succeeded in capturing Fao peninsula south of Basra. In 1987, Iranian forces captured some territory in northern Iraq while in the south they made limited gains in Majnoon area, north of Basra. This was Iran's last successful offensive. Iran had suffered heavy casualties in men and material in its attacks because of strong Iraqi defences. It suffered great losses in tanks which could not be replaced quickly while human wave tactics had not only inflicted heavy casualties on its infantry battalions but also affected their morale. By the end of 1987, the equipment situation of Iranian Army had begun to look like the 1st days of Confederacy in the American Civil War. They were desperately short of both armour and Artillery.

1988 found Iraqi forces better equipped than those of Iran and in better morale too. In March, 1988, Iraq mounted its major offensive with its mechanised forces and superior air force. Iran suffered a string of military set-backs, losing Fao Peninsula, Homeiza marshes and Majnoon area, suffering heavy losses in men and material. Iraqi forces made many deep forays inside Iran also to capture prisoners and war material, as Iranian forces fell back in disorder. In the northern region also, Iraq recaptured most of its lost territory. Hashemi Rafsanjani, parliamentary speaker and newly appointed military commander in chief (he had once served in the army for two years) persuaded Khomeini to accept the cease fire proposals in view of fast deteriorating military situation. Iran which all along had refused to accept cease fire, eventually agreed to do so after set backs on the border. The salient points that emerge from this war are summarised below.

USE OF GAS

Compared with sophisticated conventional weapons, chemical warfare is simple and does not require special or advanced technology. Chemical weapons are also relatively cheap. They are easy to deliver with a wide choice of means: bombs, missiles, artillery shells, mortars, multiple-launch rockets

and aircraft sprays. They are easy to produce. According to the USA, whereas only five countries had chemical weapons 20 years ago, there are now 15-20 countries who possess them. Meanwhile USA and USSR have stockpiled large quantity of chemical weapons. It seems that chemical weapons may be deployed by underdeveloped and poor countries who cannot develop nuclear weapons.

Iraq had built up its chemical warfare capability with the help of developed countries in the early eighties. Its main plants are located at Samarra, 10 kilometres north of Baghdad and at Fullujah, 65 kilometres west of Baghdad, which are protected by batteries of SA-2 missiles. The UN, after investigations has blamed Iraq for using gas during war. Iraq used mustard and nerve gases; nerve gas can kill within two minutes of its contact. The Iraqis used chemical weapons in the form of air dropped bombs or artillery shells which inflicted about 10,000 casualties, of which atleast 1000 died. The gas attack certainly affected morale of Iranian troops. If Iraq had nuclear weapons, it would have probably used them too, when it was in a tight corner. And so can other countries use chemical or nuclear weapons, whenever situation so demands in the interests of national security. Meanwhile, Iran has also put up a plant to manufacture chemical weapons with the help of advanced countries. Incidentally, the Chinese possess chemical weapons while Pakistan is also taking keen interest to develop them. India neither possess chemical weapons nor does it propose to develop them.

NUCLEAR CAPABILITY

Both Iraq and Iran seemed to be determined to obtain nuclear capability as fast as they can. Israeli air strike that knocked out the French built Osira reactor near Baghdad in 1981, was a set-back to Iraqi nuclear ambitions. However, the French are reportedly building a new plant in hills north of Baghdad. The Iranians are establishing nuclear facilities at Bushehr in Southern Iran with West German assistance and with French assistance at Darkhovin. An American analyst has commented that neither country is near achieving military nuclear capability as yet. However, neither wants to loose the race. and developed countries are prepared to help quietly, provided the right price is paid. The fact that Israil has already developed nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them, is another factor which is motivating them to produce nuclear weapons.

USE OF MISSILES

The missiles varying from short range to intercontinental, were originally designed to carry nuclear weapons only. Later, the developed countries started replacing nuclear warheads with conventional explosives in order to

sell them to other countries. During this war, the missiles were used to devastate each others cities. The Iraqis used at least four times the number of missiles as did Iran, thus acquiring a measure of destructive superiority. Iraq used scud or similar surface to surface missiles (SSM'S) obtained from the USSR. Since Scud B is normally credited with a range of 330 km and Scud C with 500 km. it appears local modifications have been made in Iraq, like reducing the weight of the war head or by adding a booster stage, to increase the range in order to hit distant targets like Teheran. Iraq has also fired some air launched missiles from TU 16, Badger aircraft supplied to Iraq by USSR. Iran fired limited Scud missiles against Iraq which were supplied to it by Libya and Syria. China has supplied Iran with Silkworm missiles which are ship born surface to surface missiles with a range of about 80 km. These were used a few times during the war. The Chinese are reported to have supplied missiles to Pakistan also but much information is not available regarding the type of missiles. India has to take note of this new development. USSR had offered India short range missiles way back in 1981/82 but India had not accepted the offer, as it wanted to develop its own tactical missiles. It has already test fired a short range missile but much more work is required before the missiles become an integral part of Indian armed forces. It is essential for India to develop the missiles fast or we may have to get them from the USSR.

COHERENT DEFENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY

The fundamentalist leaders of Iran failed to evolve a pragmatic foreign policy which could help its defence policy. It annoyed the USA and distanced itself from the USSR. By proposing to spread the Iranian type of Islamic revolution to Middle East Arab countries, it alienated them also. So the rich Arab nations helped Iraq financially while USSR and Western countries helped Iraq by selling latest weapons systems. USA sent its fleet in 1987 to keep Iranian navy under control. Iran found itself isolated. Iran has now realised that religious fervour is a poor substitute for lack of coordinated foreign and defence policy. One gets the feeling that perhaps strategic interests of the USA and USSR seemed to coincide temporarily in keeping Tehran in its proper place.

PROSPECTS

- (a) The first effect of the cease fire has been reduction of tension not only in the gulf region but in the Middle East as a whole. The US has started reducing its fleet and would like to reopen its ties with Iran. Iran's relations with USA have been very strained lately but in international relations every thing is possible, given time and mutual interest. USA wants to keep Russian influence out while Iran shall require

technological aid both for industrialisation and to refurbish its armed forces which were once based on US pattern.

- (b) Economies of both the countries have suffered serious damage and they will be making strenuous efforts for rapid rehabilitation. This is a great opportunity as well as a challenge for India. India has wisely kept itself aloof from the conflict and has maintained correct relations with both the countries. If Indian Government, industrialists and economists can take proper measures in advance to cooperate with Iran and Iraq in their efforts to modernise, all the three countries stand to gain.
- (c) Iranian revolution based on Muslim Fundamentalism is likely to lose its vigour initially outside Iran and in due course inside Iran also. Though war has ended in a stalemate, Iran a much bigger country has come out only as a second best in the final analysis. Revolutions need victories to sustain them, not poor stalemates. Iran's foreign policy is likely to become more analytical and pragmatic in future in order to look after its national interests.
- (d) Iran shall certainly try to build itself both economically and militarily. It has the size, the population and financial resources to become a regional power. India should continue to cultivate good relations with Iran without, in any way, affecting its cordial relations with Iraq.

China made fortune by selling weapons to Iran as well as Iraq, though its main client was Iran. The weapons were despatched through Pakistan via famous Kara Koram high way and also by sea. Pakistan played a crucial role in getting Iran arms and missiles from China. Iran's relations with Pakistan and China have improved considerably. Will this growing understanding emerge into China-Pak-Iran axis? This will be against Indian interests. This poses a tough challenge to Indian planners - both of foreign policy as well as defence. Because of recent changes in international situation, many people in India may tend to overlook the growing understanding between Iran, Pakistan and China. India should improve its relations with China and Pakistan but should remember that its main rival in the region eventually is likely to be Iran and not Pakistan while China has emerged the strongest military power in Asia.