Operation X in Naval Warfare History: An Early Example of Indian Maritime Hybrid Warfare

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Abstract

This article examines Operation X as an early example of maritime hybrid warfare during the Bangladesh Liberation War. While existing literature on the 1971 conflict has largely emphasised land operations, the Mukti Bahini, and conventional military engagements, the maritime dimension—particularly India's clandestine naval operations in East Pakistan—deserves greater attention. Operation X involved the Indian Navy's training and deployment of Mukti Bahini naval commandos to conduct underwater sabotage against shipping, ports, and inland waterways. This study examines the operation through the complementary concepts of asymmetric and hybrid warfare and argues that its significance lay not merely in the use of irregular maritime tactics but in their integration with India's wider conventional naval strategy. Attacks on key logistical hubs, including Chittagong, Mongla, and Narayanganj, disrupted shipping and supply networks and imposed military and economic costs on Pakistani forces. The article further examines the relationship between

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Operation X and conventional naval operations such as Operation Trident and Operation Python. It argues that Operation X offers an important historical case for understanding how conventional naval power, irregular forces, covert action, local intelligence, and attacks on maritime logistics can combine to produce strategic effects. The retrospective application of the contemporary concept of hybrid warfare is acknowledged as a conceptual limitation.

Introduction

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 is frequently characterised by the decisive land campaigns and the rapid defeat of Pakistani forces in East Pakistan. However, the maritime dimension of the conflict was also important to Pakistan's ability to sustain military operations in the eastern theatre. The genocide perpetrated by the Pakistan Armed Forces and the resulting refugee crisis placed India under increasing political, humanitarian, and security pressure. By Apr 1971, the possibility of war in the eastern sector was becoming evident.

East Pakistan's geographical isolation meant Pakistani forces depended heavily on maritime and riverine routes to move troops, equipment, fuel, and other supplies. Control of sea lines of communication and disruption of these logistical networks could therefore influence the outcome of the conflict. The Indian Navy's response extended beyond conventional fleet operations to include covert and irregular maritime activity. Operation X emerged within this wider strategy and involved training and deploying Mukti Bahini naval commandos to sabotage shipping and port infrastructure.[1]

The central argument of this article is that Operation X should be understood not simply as a covert naval or commando operation but as an important early case of integrating asymmetric maritime tactics with conventional naval power. The operation used irregular personnel, local networks, covert infiltration, underwater sabotage, and attacks on maritime logistics while forming part of a broader Indian strategy that also included overt naval operations. The article

therefore asks how Operation X combined conventional and unconventional means, what strategic effects this combination produced, and to what extent the operation can be interpreted through the contemporary concept of maritime hybrid warfare.

The study first examines the existing literature and research gap. It then considers the strategic and maritime context of the 1971 war, the planning and organisation of Operation X, its execution and effects, and finally its significance as an early example of maritime hybrid warfare.

Literature Review

Existing literature on the Bangladesh Liberation War has focused extensively on the political crisis, military operations on land, the Mukti Bahini, and the conventional campaigns of the Indian and Pakistani armed forces. The maritime dimension, particularly India's clandestine naval activity in East Pakistan, has received comparatively less attention.

Operation X: The Untold Story of India's Covert Naval War in East Pakistan (2019), by Captain M N R Samant and Sandeep Unnithan, is an important source for understanding the planning, organisation, training, and execution of the naval commando campaign. G M Hiranandani's *Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy 1965–1975* provides a broader naval and operational context.[2] Secondary sources and contemporary narratives also describe attacks at Chittagong, Mongla, and Narayanganj.

The principal gap identified in this literature is conceptual. Operation X is generally presented as a covert naval, commando, or sabotage operation rather than examined through a hybrid maritime warfare framework. This distinction is important because the operation involved more than irregular action by local personnel. Its significance also derived from the interaction between irregular forces, covert action, local intelligence, maritime sabotage, and conventional Indian naval power.

For this study, asymmetric warfare refers to exploiting capability differences through unconventional methods, while hybrid warfare refers to the coordinated employment of conventional and irregular approaches within a broader strategy.[3] The article does not claim that Indian planners in 1971 used the contemporary term 'Hybrid Warfare'. Instead, it applies the concept retrospectively as an analytical framework and examines whether Operation X's characteristics support that interpretation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical case-study approach. It examines Operation X through a descriptive and analytical reconstruction of its strategic context, planning, organisation, execution, and effects. The principal sources identified in the article include published memoirs, historical accounts, operational narratives, and secondary literature, particularly the works of M N R Samant, Sandeep Unnithan, and G M Hiranandani.

The analytical framework combines asymmetric warfare and hybrid warfare. The former assesses the operational methods employed by the naval commandos, while the latter examines the relationship between irregular maritime action and conventional naval operations. The study focuses on the interaction between means, actors, and strategic effects rather than the label alone.

The study has two principal limitations. First, the limited availability of declassified primary material concerning the planning and command structure of Operation X means that the analysis relies substantially on published memoirs and secondary accounts. Second, applying a contemporary concept such as hybrid warfare retrospectively to a 1971 operation creates a conceptual limitation. The article therefore treats Hybrid Maritime Warfare' as an analytical interpretation rather than a historical description used by the actors themselves.

Strategic and Maritime Context of the 1971 War

The political crisis following the 1970 general elections and the subsequent military crackdown created widespread violence against the Bengali population, a large refugee movement into India, and eventually the Bangladesh Liberation War. During the conflict, the Mukti Bahini emerged as the principal resistance force in East Pakistan and targeted communication networks, infrastructure, and supply routes.

East Pakistan's geography shaped the conflict's maritime dimension. The region's separation from West Pakistan made maritime and riverine transportation essential for sustaining Pakistani forces. Chittagong, Mongla, and Narayanganj served as key logistical hubs connected to an extensive inland waterway network.[4] Disrupting these routes could therefore have effects beyond the immediate destruction of individual vessels. It could disrupt the movement of supplies, restrict access to ports, and force Pakistan to divert resources to protect vulnerable maritime infrastructure.

This strategic vulnerability created an operational rationale for covert maritime sabotage. Operation X sought to exploit Pakistani forces' dependence on shipping, ports, and inland waterways while avoiding direct naval confrontation in every target area.



Image 1: Mukti Bahini Fighters

Planning and Organisation of Operation X

Operation X, officially designated Naval Commando Operations (X), was a covert maritime campaign approved by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and executed by the Indian Navy to disrupt Pakistan's logistical network in East Pakistan. Admiral S M Nanda supervised the operation, and Captain Mihir Kumar Roy, Director of Naval Intelligence, coordinated it and developed the 'Water Rat' concept to train about 600 Bengali naval commandos for underwater sabotage missions.[5]

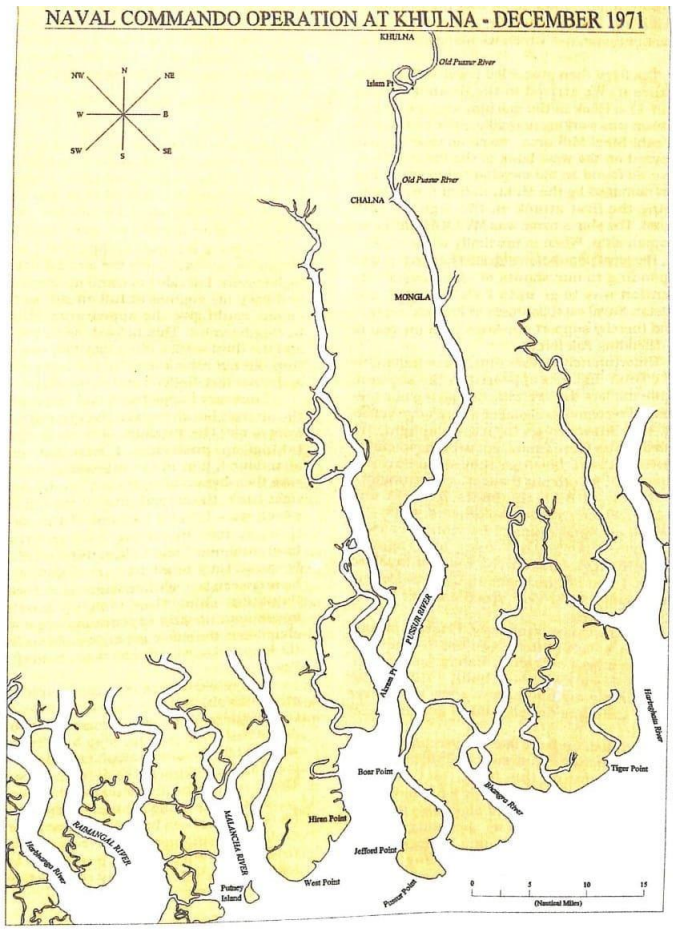
The 'Mangro Eight', a group of Bengali submariners who had defected from the Pakistan Navy, supported recruitment and local intelligence. Commander M N R Samant oversaw field operations and coordinated between Naval Headquarters and the Army's Eastern Command.[6]

A secret facility at Plassey, codenamed Camp 2 Plassey (C2P), was established to train the recruits in endurance swimming, weapons handling, and the use of limpet mines under the supervision of Indian Navy clearance divers.[7]

The operational plan was executed in three phases:

- Phase One: Fifty teams focused on ports and harbours, launching coordinated attacks on Chalna/ Khulna and Mongla to sink ships, barges, and steamers, blocking harbour access.
- Phase Two: One hundred teams moved inland to disrupt the riverine network by sinking vessels, obstructing channels, removing navigational aids, and destroying ferries and pontoons.
- Phase Three: Two hundred teams conducted large-scale operations to paralyse ports, communications, and inland waterways.[8]

Specially designed limpet mines enabled underwater sabotage, and coded All India Radio broadcasts coordinated simultaneous attacks across multiple locations.[9]



Map 1: Operation X

Source: Hiranandani, G M, *Transition to Triumph History of the Indian Navy 1965-1975*

Execution of Maritime Sabotage Operations

Infiltration Techniques

Commandos infiltrated East Pakistan through secret border points such as Hasnabad, Taki, and Agartala using methods designed to maintain secrecy.[10] Small teams of three to five commandos moved through local villages in civilian clothing, often guided by Mukti Bahini networks. They travelled mainly at night and used village safe houses during the day. For the final stage of an approach, commandos

entered the water upstream of their targets and used river currents to move towards anchored vessels while reducing the risk of detection. Camouflage methods included swimming on their backs or diagonally and using floating vegetation or bamboo reeds to remain concealed.[11]

Underwater Sabotage and Limpet Mines

Locally developed limpet mines were used to attack steel-hulled vessels. The mines were designed to attach magnetically to ships and used a delayed-fuse mechanism.[12] Commandos also adapted the mechanism to account for the time required to reach their targets. Once the commandos reached a vessel, they fixed the mines below the waterline, usually near the engine room or propeller shafts, to maximise damage.[13]

Strategic Sabotage of Key Ports

The first large-scale coordinated attacks occurred on the night of 14–15 Aug 1971 under the codename Operation Jackpot.[14] Naval commandos attacked strategic ports in East Pakistan. At Chittagong, commandos infiltrated the harbour and destroyed cargo vessels carrying military supplies. At Mongla, sabotage operations damaged foreign and Pakistani merchant ships anchored in the Pussur River, disrupting shipping and export activity. At Narayanganj, commandos targeted river steamers and inland transport facilities.[15]

These operational methods show the asymmetric character of Operation X. Small teams, local knowledge, concealment, and underwater sabotage let the commandos attack a larger logistical system without engaging Pakistani forces in conventional naval combat.



মুক্তিযুদ্ধে বাংলাদেশ নৌ–কমান্ডোদের আক্রমণের পূর্ব মুহূর্তের একটি দৃশ্য। কমান্ডোদের সবার বুকে মাইন। ছবিটি চাঁদপুর এলাকায় তোলা।

Image 2: Bangladesh Navy Commandos before at attack in Chandpur during Liberation War[16]



Oil Tanker Sunk as Government Reports Sharp Rise in Guerrilla Activity in East Pakistan

Chittagong Port Blocked
Eight Ships Sunk In A Day By Guerrillas

Freedom fighters sink 7 Pak ships

British ship holed in Pakistan port by East Bengal frogmen

Valiant struggle of the Bangla Desh freedom fighters

by PRABHAT DAS GUPTA

Image 3: Media coverage of Operation Jackpot[17]

Strategic Impact of Operation X

The attacks had effects at several levels.

Military and Logistical Effects

The destruction and damage inflicted on shipping disrupted Pakistan's maritime logistics. More than 100,000 tons of shipping were reported as sunk or damaged over the course of the operation. Sunken vessels obstructed shipping channels and reduced access to berths. The threat of further sabotage also reduced foreign shipping companies' willingness to use East Pakistani ports. The Pakistani military consequently had to divert resources to protect ports and waterways, reducing resources available for counter-insurgency operations.

Economic Effects

The attacks affected commercial shipping, port activity, and military logistics. The increased risk at East Pakistani ports further disrupted maritime trade and shipping. Thus, the operation produced effects beyond the immediate physical destruction of vessels.

Psychological and Strategic Effects

The vulnerability of ports and waterways imposed psychological pressure on the Pakistan Navy and military authorities. The need to protect maritime infrastructure and shipping complicated military operations. By constraining the movement of supplies and contributing to the disruption of maritime communications, Operation X supported the broader strategy of isolating Pakistani forces in East Pakistan.

The significance of these effects lies in the relationship between relatively small-scale tactical actions and wider strategic consequences. Operation X did not seek to defeat Pakistani naval forces through fleet engagement. Instead, it exploited vulnerabilities in the logistical system those forces depended on.



Image 4: Navy commandos attack the US ship SS Lightning in Mongla on 15 Aug 1971[18]

Operation X as Maritime Hybrid Warfare

The strongest basis for interpreting Operation X as an early example of maritime hybrid warfare lies in how different forms of military power interacted. The operation did not consist exclusively of irregular action, nor was it an independent commando campaign detached from India's wider military strategy.

First, the operation employed irregular forces. Bengali naval commandos drawn from the Mukti Bahini provided local knowledge and operated in an environment in which conventional Indian naval forces faced significant access and concealment challenges.

Second, it relied on covert and asymmetric methods. Small teams infiltrated through local networks, approached targets clandestinely, and used underwater sabotage rather than direct naval engagement. This enabled relatively small forces to impose costs on a much larger logistical system.

Third, Operation X involved intelligence and local networks. Recruiting Bengali submariners, using local intelligence, supporting

the Mukti Bahini, and coordinating with Indian naval and military authorities connected the tactical missions to a wider operational framework.

Fourth, the operation generated multiple strategic effects. The immediate effects were physical damage to shipping and port infrastructure, but these actions also disrupted logistics, affected commercial shipping, imposed security costs, and contributed to the isolation of Pakistani forces.

Finally, Operation X existed alongside conventional Indian naval power. Operation Trident and Operation Python demonstrated India's ability to conduct overt naval strikes, while Operation X provided a complementary way to attack maritime vulnerabilities through covert and irregular means. The significance therefore lies not in the existence of irregular tactics alone but in their relationship to conventional naval operations and wider strategic objectives.

On this basis, Operation X can reasonably be interpreted as an early example of maritime hybrid warfare. The term should nevertheless be applied cautiously. The operation predated the contemporary theoretical development of hybrid warfare, and the available evidence does not establish that Indian planners conceived of it in those terms. The argument is therefore analytical and retrospective: Operation X displayed several characteristics that are now associated with hybrid approaches to warfare.

Integration with Conventional Naval Operations

Operation X is best understood within the Indian Navy's broader maritime strategy during the Bangladesh Liberation War. While the naval commandos conducted covert sabotage in East Pakistan, the Indian Navy later employed conventional naval power during the war. Operation Trident and Operation Python represented overt naval strikes against Pakistani naval and logistical assets, particularly at Karachi.[19]

The contrast between these operations is analytically important. Conventional naval operations relied on naval vessels, missile systems, and direct attacks, whereas Operation X relied on irregular personnel, concealment, local networks, and underwater

sabotage. The two approaches therefore addressed different vulnerabilities and operated at different levels.

Together, they expanded India's maritime options. Conventional forces could impose direct military pressure, while covert commando operations could disrupt shipping and infrastructure in areas where conventional naval action was less suitable. Operation X should consequently be viewed as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, conventional naval power.

This integration provides the strongest basis for the article's hybrid-warfare argument: different forms of maritime power were employed against interconnected military and logistical vulnerabilities to pursue wider strategic objectives.

Operation X in the Evolution of Naval Warfare

Operation X demonstrates how maritime warfare can extend beyond traditional fleet engagements, blockades, and attacks on enemy warships. Its use of local personnel, covert infiltration, underwater sabotage, and attacks on logistical infrastructure illustrated the potential of targeting an adversary's maritime support system rather than focusing solely on its combat fleet.

The operation also demonstrated the value of local knowledge and irregular forces in complex maritime environments. Bengali commandos familiar with the waterways and local terrain could operate in areas that were difficult for conventional naval forces to access covertly. This expanded the operational reach of India's maritime campaign.

Its historical significance therefore lies less in suggesting that hybrid warfare began in 1971 and more in demonstrating an early form of the operational logic later associated with hybrid conflict: combining different actors, methods, domains, and effects to achieve strategic objectives.

Limitations

The study is constrained by the limited availability of declassified primary sources concerning the planning and command structure of Operation X. Consequently, the analysis relies substantially on published memoirs, historical accounts, and secondary sources. Applying the contemporary concept of hybrid warfare retrospectively to a 1971 operation also has conceptual limitations. The article therefore treats hybrid maritime warfare as an analytical framework rather than a term the actors themselves used.

Contemporary Relevance

The character of warfare has evolved considerably since 1971, with cyber operations, information warfare, electronic warfare, artificial intelligence, and network-centric capabilities becoming increasingly important. Contemporary conflicts also show the continued vulnerability of maritime trade, ports, energy infrastructure, and shipping to covert and irregular disruption.

Operation X remains relevant because it illustrates a principle that extends beyond its historical setting: strategic effects can be achieved by combining conventional military power with irregular capabilities and by attacking the logistical systems that sustain an adversary's military capacity. The technological environment has changed, but the importance of intelligence, concealment, local networks, operational coordination, and protecting maritime infrastructure remains.

Conclusion

Operation X was an important component of India's maritime strategy during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. By training and employing Mukti Bahini naval commandos for covert underwater sabotage, India was able to attack shipping, ports, and inland waterways that were essential to Pakistan's ability to sustain military operations in East Pakistan.

The operation's significance, however, extends beyond the physical destruction of vessels. Its strategic value arose from the combination of irregular forces, covert action, local intelligence,

maritime sabotage, and conventional Indian naval power. Operation X therefore provides a strong historical case for examining the interaction between asymmetric and conventional maritime warfare.

Although the contemporary concept of hybrid warfare must be applied retrospectively and with caution, Operation X displayed several characteristics now associated with hybrid approaches: the use of multiple actors and methods, exploitation of logistical vulnerabilities, covert action, and the integration of irregular activity with conventional military operations. Its historical legacy consequently lies in demonstrating how relatively small-scale maritime actions can generate wider military, economic, psychological, and strategic effects.

Endnotes

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