

Leap Across the Meghna River: A Tactical Manoeuvre Leading to Strategic Victory in Indo-Pak War 1971

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Abstract

The Indo-Pak War of 1971 stands out as a rare instance in India's history when the nation took the military initiative and achieved resounding success. The campaign was characterised by clear political objectives for the armed forces, exceptional joint planning at strategic, operational, and tactical levels, and exemplary tri-service coordination. The swift tri-service operation, often referred to as a 'Blitzkrieg', saw the Indian Air Force (IAF) play a crucial role and has been regarded as the fastest land advance since the North Africa campaign of World War II. The strategy focused on conducting a defensive war in the West while pursuing a decisive offensive in the East, culminating in a creative and innovative approach. A key early success was the IAF's achievement of air dominance over East Pakistan, securing control of the skies in just two days. Among the pivotal operations, the heliborne crossing on 09 Dec 1971, where the 110 and 105 Helicopter Units of the IAF airlifted troops of the 57 Mountain Division across the Meghna River, stands out as a turning point in the Bangladesh Liberation War. The exceptional

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skill, professionalism, and bravery of the pilots and airmen were instrumental in transforming the dream of capturing Dhaka into reality. This essay critically analyses a significant tactical airlift manoeuvre that played a vital role in destabilising the enemy's centre of gravity, and eventually defeat of Pakistan in the Eastern Sector.

Introduction

India carried out extensive military preparations, including the mobilisation of troops along both the eastern and western fronts. Under the leadership of General Sam Manekshaw (the then-Army Chief), the Indian military meticulously planned operations to ensure full readiness. The primary goal was the liberation of East Pakistan. India aimed to swiftly defeat Pakistani forces in the East to minimise the possibility of international intervention. The Indian military employed a *Blitzkrieg* (An intense military campaign intended to bring about a swift victory) strategy, coordinating rapid attacks by the army, air force, and navy to overwhelm Pakistani defences. On the western front, India adopted a defensive strategy, focusing on containing Pakistani advances while concentrating on the decisive eastern theatre. However, limited offensive operations were conducted to capture strategic positions and ensure the security of Indian territory. The Indian Navy played a crucial role by establishing a naval blockade of East Pakistan, cutting off supplies and reinforcements to Pakistani forces. The 1971 India-Pakistan War resulted in a remarkable and decisive victory for India and the people of East Pakistan, showcasing the highest standards of military professionalism and timely strategic decisions. It also witnessed the birth of a new nation—Bangladesh. This war stands as one of the most significant events of the 20th Century, altering national boundaries in just 13 days following the outbreak of hostilities initiated by Pakistan on 03 Dec 1971. The intense conflict culminated in a complete victory for the Indian Armed Forces, allowing India to dictate terms to the Pakistani leadership and leading to a regime change that gave birth to Bangladesh. The war outcomes, in relation to intensity of conflict, has been represented in the Figure 1.

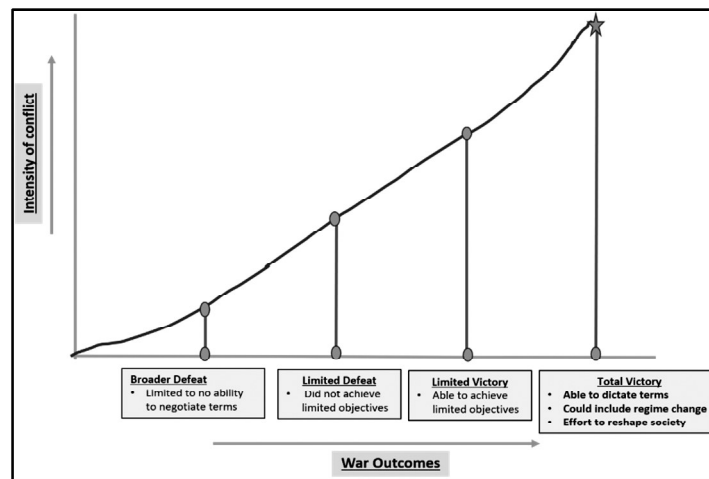


Figure 1: Spectrum of War Consequences

Military Strategy: Indo-Pak War 1971¹

According to initial plans, in the North-Western Sector, the 20 Mountain Division was tasked with capturing Bogra and advancing to the Brahmaputra River. In the Western Sector, the newly raised 2 Corps, consisting of the 9 Infantry Division and 4 Mountain Division, was assigned to capture Jessore, Magura, and Faridpur, and then advance to Dhaka using inland waterways. In the North-Eastern Sector, the 101 Communication Zone, along with the 6 Infantry Division, was employed to advance along the Jamalpur-Tangail-Dhaka axis. In the South-Eastern Sector, under the 4 Corps, the 23 Mountain Division, 8 Mountain Division, and 57 Mountain Division were tasked with securing the area up to the Meghna River. During the war, the retreating Pakistani Forces destroyed the bridges on the Meghna River. In response, the Indian Air Force (IAF) created a heli-bridge using Mi-4 helicopters, enabling troops to cross the riverine and marshy areas from Brahmanbaria to Raipura in Narsingdi over the Meghna River. This bypassed the destroyed Meghna Bridge and the Pakistani defences in Ashuganj, without a single accident or loss to enemy fire. This heli-bridging manoeuvre was a masterstroke², allowing for the concentration of forces towards the final objective of Dhaka. These pivotal moments highlight how air power orchestrated the nation's military strength to achieve the liberation of Bangladesh and force the surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers—the largest

surrender in the military history. The four Special Heli Borne Operations (SHBO), which had no precedent or established doctrine, were improvised during the conflict. They shortened the war and contributed to a swift victory, thereby, saving lives and sparing the agony of a prolonged conflict.

Sequence of Events Leading up to Operation Meghna³

The 4 Corps launched an offensive from three directions in the east, covering a stretch of 250 kms of the border between East Pakistan and Meghalaya in the north, and extending to the Feni salient in southern Tripura. The operations⁴ focused on three key areas: Sylhet, Bhairab Bazar, and Comilla. Sylhet was in the north, Comilla in the south, and strategically positioned in the centre were the towns of Ashuganj and Bhairab Bazar, which guarded the crucial Coronation Bridge across the Meghna River. While facing two Pakistani divisions, the 4 Corps also had to overcome the challenges posed by the formidable riverine terrain, which was crisscrossed by rivers and streams, making it a logistical nightmare for any offensive action. Given the vast area to be secured, Lieutenant General Sagat Singh was tasked with capturing the three sectors mentioned and securing the eastern banks of the Meghna River. However, Lieutenant General Sagat had his sights set much further—on Dhaka. Despite his ambition, his superior commander and Army Headquarters in Delhi were hesitant to plan for the capture of Dhaka, considering it beyond reach within the 15-day strategic timeframe.

The Mighty River ‘Meghna’. The Meghna River⁵ is formed by the confluence of the Surma and Kushiara rivers, which flow through the eastern part of Bangladesh. The river runs from north to south, eventually joining the Padma River to create the Gangetic delta. As one of Bangladesh’s major rivers, the Meghna stretches between 5 and 15 kms at its widest point. The Meghna served as a formidable natural barrier, protecting Dhaka, the capital and seat of power in East Pakistan, from the east, as it flows north to south along the eastern part of the region. Lieutenant General AAK Niazi (Pakistani Eastern Army Commander) believed that if the Meghna River and its bridges remained under his control, Dhaka would be secure. His primary objective was to prevent the Indian Armed Forces from crossing the river Meghna. The most straightforward defence strategy was to hold the eastern banks of

the river. If forced to retreat, destroying the bridges would eliminate any possibility of the Indian Army crossing the mighty river.

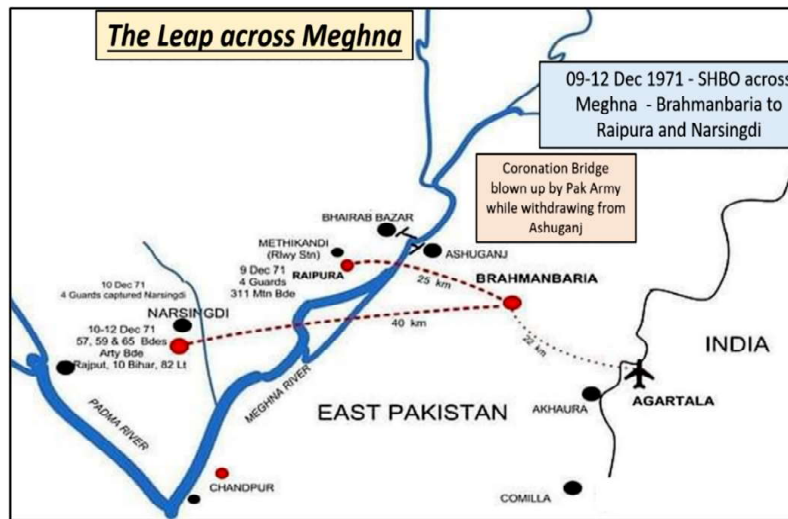
The Phases of Air-lift⁶. The 110 Helicopter Unit (HU), established on 19 Feb 1962, played a crucial role in the 1971 operations east of Dhaka. The unit's Mi-4 helicopters conducted extensive heli-bridging operations in the riverine terrain of East Pakistan, where the enemy had destroyed all major bridges. These operations⁷ were skilfully led by the Commanding Officer of 110 HU, Squadron Leader CS Sandhu, who was later awarded the Vir Chakra for his leadership in these SHBO during the war. The magnitude of the task is evident from nearly 500 sorties flown under enemy fire throughout these operations.⁸ The four phases (refer to Figure 2) of heli-lift conducted are as follows:

- **SHBO: Sylhet⁹.** Higher command formations had determined that Sylhet, a district and communication hub, held significant military importance, and its capture would deal a severe blow to the Pakistan Army. Consequently, HQ 4 Corps assigned the 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES (GR) of the 59 Mountain Brigade to capture Sylhet¹⁰ and brought in Mi-4 helicopters from 110 HU to carry out SHBO to achieve this objective. The primary mission was to heli-lift the battalion (4/5 GR) to Mirpara, on the outskirts of Sylhet, to secure the railway bridge over the Surma River and occupy the Sylhet airport and radio station to support further operations. The challenges for the unit's helicopters extended beyond Sylhet, as they were subsequently tasked with carrying out additional SHBO¹¹ to support corps objectives as the battle advanced from different axes, including Raipura, Narsingdi, and Baidya Bazar.

- **SHBO: Raipura.** On 10 Dec 1971, the 4 Corps Commander made the strategic decision to advance beyond the east bank of the Meghna River and, if possible, move towards Dhaka. With the bridge over the Meghna destroyed, the task of heli-bridging a sizeable force¹² across the river fell to the helicopters. The operation began shortly before dusk, with around 100 troops being ferried to landing pads. By the time the second wave of helicopters arrived, it was already dark, but they landed safely. The troop movement continued throughout the night and into the next day. Although the Mi-

4 helicopters were typically designed to carry 14 troops, the load was increased to 23 men per trip.

- **SHBO: Narsingdi.** On 11 Dec 1971, eight helicopters from 110 HU were relocated from Brahmanbaria to Narsingdi. By 0730 hours, each helicopter had completed three sorties. After refuelling at Agartala, the second wave took off at 0900 hours, with each helicopter completing another three sorties. Two additional missions were flown, resulting in a total of 834 troops and 58,600 kgs of supplies being airlifted across 99 sorties. Although more sorties could have been conducted, the army was unable to keep pace with the rapid execution of the SHBO. On 12 Dec 1971, 35 sorties were carried out at Narsingdi, airlifting 234 troops and 18,520 kgs of supplies. Due to heavy ground fire, there were 30 casualties, and a helicopter was sent to Sylhet to evacuate them. Unfortunately, one helicopter crashed due to an in-air fire.



Map 1: Phases of Heli-lift Across Meghna River

Source: *Faugy Strategy*¹³

- On 13 Dec 1971, 282 troops and 14,850 kg of supplies were airlifted in 30 sorties. On 14 Dec, 12 helicopters were positioned at Daudkandi early in the morning to move a battalion of troops across the Meghna River to Baidya Bazar, just seven miles from Narayanganj on the outskirts of Dhaka. By evening, 810 troops and 22,650 kgs of supplies had been airlifted in 79 sorties.

- **SHBO: Baidya Bazar.** On 15 Dec 1971, SHBO continued, airlifting 1,209 troops and 38,100 kgs of supplies to Baidya Bazar. Despite one aircraft being involved in an accident, the morale of the unit remained high. The following day, most helicopters were taken in for maintenance and inspection. One helicopter, sent to Sylhet for casualty evacuation, successfully airlifted 16 casualties, while two others were used for army communication sorties throughout the day. In the evening, five helicopters participated in the Dhaka Surrender Ceremony.

The exemplary execution¹⁴ of the Meghna operation¹⁵ involved a significant tactical airlift¹⁶, delivering over 6,000 soldiers and nearly 202 tons of various supplies, including equipment, small arms ammunition, water, kerosene, rations, and artillery with heavy ammunition directly to the battlefields, even across the vast Meghna River, which is over 05 kms wide. This was achieved continuously, day and night. Additionally, the helicopters facilitated the evacuation of hundreds of casualties, both friendly and enemy, on the return trips. The IAF helicopters consistently supported the ground troops' advance, demonstrating exceptional operational effectiveness.

The Concept of Air Assault and Defining Attributes of Helicopters

Air assault refers to the deployment of ground-based military forces using vertical take-off and landing aircraft, such as helicopters, to capture and hold strategically important terrain that had not yet been fully secured by the enemy. This method is a standard part of ground troop training, with equipment adapted for easier transport. It is distinct from airborne assault, where paratroopers and their supplies are dropped, and from air attacks, air strikes, or air raids, which rely solely on aircraft for the offensive. Air assault also differs from military transport operations like air landing or airlift, which require a secured landing zone, referred to as an airhead. The concept of air mobility has played a critical role in offensive military operations since the 1930s.

The first helicopter airlift and sling load mission, called 'Operation Windmill I', was conducted by the United States Marine Corps on 13 Sep 1951, during the Korean War. This mission supported a battalion clearing enemy positions along ridges surrounding an extinct volcano, known as 'The Punchbowl.' Seven

HRS-1 Marine helicopters completed 28 flights, delivering 18,848 pounds of supplies and evacuating 74 severely wounded soldiers. In 1952, the Special Air Service utilised Dragonfly helicopters to insert a small group of soldiers north of Kuala Lumpur. On 05 Nov 1956, the Royal Marines' 45 Commandos carried out the first-ever combat helicopter insertion during an amphibious landing as part of Operation Musketeer in Suez, Egypt.

The unique capabilities of helicopters position them as 'Force Multipliers' in any battle across tactical, operational, and strategic levels, providing leverage—a strategic and operational military advantage. Understanding the specific attributes of helicopters is essential to grasp their role as Force Multipliers in battle.

- **Access and Mobility.** Helicopters provide opportunity to the ground forces to be pre-deployed at any time, in the area of interest, as the circumstances demand. Exploiting the access afforded, helicopters can move 100 kms a day, unimpeded over all types of terrain. They can respond quickly to a situation and can disappear over the horizon, without the stigma of retreat. Time taken for helicopters to be replenished is also minimal.
- **Versatility and Flexibility.** Helicopters can, in seemingly offensive posture, appear over the horizon and yet withdraw as unobtrusively into a defensive deployment, sending subtle messages to friends and foes alike. Helicopters can change role and calibrate their response in terms of role, tasks, rapid response, and visibility, as required.
- **Lift Capability.** 'Airlift' is the only practicable means of deploying troops, equipment and logistics support, and subsequently, sustaining them on large scale. Airlift permits the land forces to scale major obstacles including rivers, mountains, and sea as well as capability to transit to other theatres as part of strategic manoeuvre.
- **Resilience.** Helicopters, though have limited capability to absorb the damage due to enemy action and weather conditions, operate forward in the highest threat environment combined with treacherous terrain condition.

Critical Analysis—How Leap Across Meghna River Shaped the Outcome of the Campaign

In 1971, the IAF had added more than a significant value in driving the operational outcome. It is imperative for us to critically analyse this tactical manoeuvre which led to strategic victory and provided a new dimension to futuristic warfare. The same has been covered in subsequent para.

Application of Manoeuvre Warfare. The theory emphasises defeating the enemy through means other than attacking his strength. Specifically, Manoeuvre theory seeks to 'Pre-empt' (defeating or neutralising the enemy before the fight has begun), 'Dislocate' (rendering enemy's strength irrelevant by removing the enemy from the decisive point or preferably removing the decisive points from them), and 'Disrupt' (neutralising enemy by successfully attacking or threatening his Centre of Gravity [CoG]) the enemy forces. The Helicopter-lift operations, named as Operation Cactus Lily, manoeuvred troops vectored directly at the enemy's CoG, thereby, acting on the enemy's morale, as explained below in Figure 3.

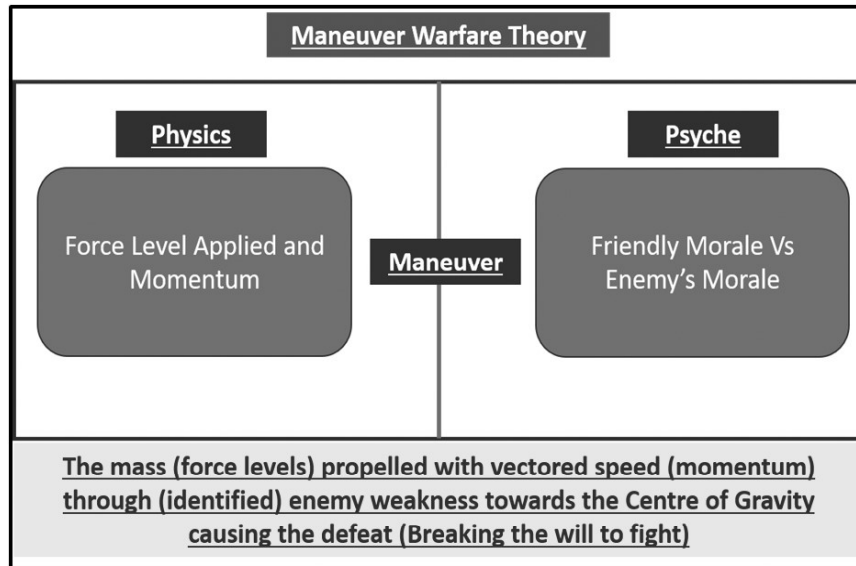


Figure 2: The Aspects of Manoeuvre Warfare Theory

This manoeuvre, according to the concept of functional dislocation, employed the combined-arms theory in battle to fight the enemy where and when he was weak, and presented him with a series of tactical dilemmas. Finally, it translated to the defeat of the enemy; principal target being enemy's mind as the force level applied with momentum targeted opponent's psyche. Thus, this action became the linchpin between the physics of war and the psychology¹⁷ of war in the campaign.

Exercising Tenets of Combined Arms Theory. The important aspect with respect to the combined arms theory is to understand the 'Complementary Principle'. Each of the combat arms has strengths and weaknesses. The infantry troops have the capabilities to control terrain while moving silently to operate in highly restrictive terrain, however, they also have serious weaknesses; they lack high velocity and move slowly when dismounted and are vulnerable in open terrain. Helicopters and combat aviation contribute their strengths of overwhelming speed, lift capability, airborne reconnaissance, and lethal firepower, while their weakness lies in vulnerability to air defence fire, inability to control terrain. Tanks have good speed and firepower but they are not good at controlling the terrain and are too noisy. In a nutshell, each of the combat arms has strengths and weaknesses, which are compensated by the other arms and in 'Combined Arms Theory', each arm serves in battle to complement the others. The theory of combined arms and complementarity was applied in an outstanding manner during the Meghna heli-lift operations, focusing on friendly force by nullifying friendly weaknesses and synergetic combination means that when different combat arms work together, the sum is greater than the parts (refer to Figure 4). Lastly, while future weapons will evolve with the expansion of combat arms, the synergism achieved through their combined application will remain unchanged, transcending current technological and organisational constraints.

Application of Principles of War. The IAF's Mi-4 helicopters played a pivotal role in the eastern theatre, transporting the Indian Army troops across numerous waterways. Between 03 and 17 Dec 1971, helicopters in the east completed 2,404 sorties, lifting 185.7 tonnes of supplies, moving 5,945 troops and evacuating 1,179 casualties. The operations of the 4 Corps mirrored the speed and effectiveness of Rommel and Guderian's Blitzkrieg, as a force of more than nine infantry battalions, supported by artillery, armour,

and engineers, was preparing to attack Dhaka when the Pakistani Army chose to surrender. The crossing of the Meghna River in both the central and southern sectors of the 4 Corps operational area sealed Dhaka's fate, leading to an unconditional surrender on 16 Dec 1971. This force manoeuvre qualified application of principles of war in totality, such as Selection and Maintenance of Aim, Maintenance of Morale, Offensive Action, Surprise, Concentration of Force, Economy of Effort, Flexibility, Security, Co-operation, Simplicity, and Administration.

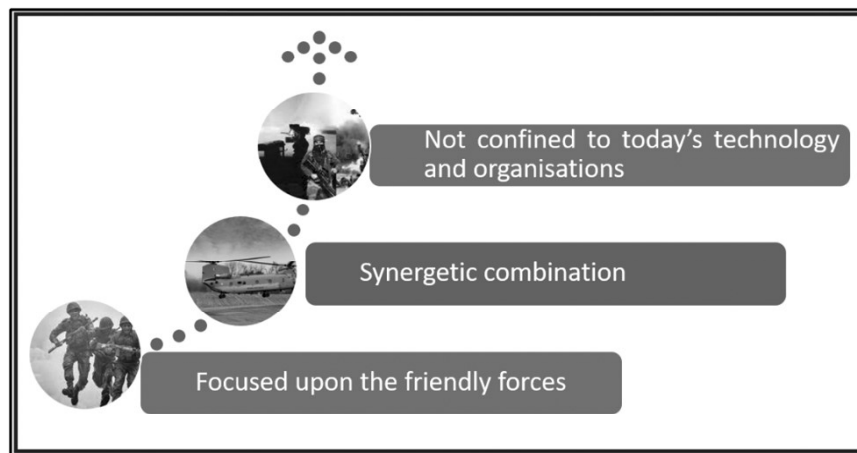


Figure 3: The Principle of Complementarity

Effects-Based Operation (EBO), which Outperformed Simple Attrition. The Meghna heli-lift operation was designed with clear objectives and a desired end state in mind, focusing on the effects needed to achieve these goals and how success would be measured. Resources were then aligned with specific actions to create those effects. This approach qualifies as an EBO, aimed at connecting tactical actions to strategic outcomes, ensuring that military objectives and combat actions aligned with the commander's broader strategic needs. EBOs often focus on second-order (or higher-order) effects rather than immediate results. The heli-lift operation served as a gateway to Dhaka, creating a higher-order impact in the war.

The Military Visionary Leadership. The creation of the heli-bridge across the Meghna River was the brainchild¹⁸ of Lieutenant General Sagat Singh¹⁹, who had been considering this bold strategy even before the war. He envisioned using vertical envelopment as

a manoeuvre to surprise the enemy, should the opportunity arise. When the Coronation Bridge at Ashuganj was destroyed, it gave Lieutenant General Sagat the chance to execute his daring plan. Despite facing significant opposition and warnings not to proceed, Lieutenant General Sagat, a commander of the calibre of Montgomery and Patton, took the initiative and created the opportunity himself. At the time, Air Chief Marshal PC Lal²⁰, who had served²¹ as the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Western Air Command, and later as Vice Chief during the 1965 war, led the IAF. He had effectively prepared the IAF, learning from the experiences of the 1965 war.

Conclusion

During Indo-Pak War 1971, heli-lift operations across Meghna River offered tactical and operational flexibility in terms of ability to quickly reconfigure and to project power at location of own choosing. The IAF was employed in offensive role as the overarching air operations offered the political leadership strategic choices and alternatives for sustainable and easily scalable levels. It was a fine example of how the application of manoeuvre warfare, combined arms theory, principles of war, EBO, and convergence of these strategic plans and the synergy at the highest levels of command coupled with excellent leadership can simultaneously produce physical as well as psychological shock.

Endnotes

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