

**STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL LEVEL MILITARY
EDUCATIONAL IMPERATIVES AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION:
THE CASE OF BANGLADESH**

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“A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God’s earth. What we should aim at producing is men who possess both culture and expert knowledge in some special direction. Their expert knowledge will give them ground to start from, and their culture will lead them as deep as philosophy and as high as art.”

----- **Alfred North Whitehead in The Aims of Education**

INTRODUCTION

The proper function of military education at higher levels of mental cultivation is still imperfectly understood. The kind of debates raised on the issue leaves much to be desired. What needs to be investigated is the purpose of ascertaining the goals necessary in developing the military mind. The problem arises primarily from the nature of the military profession. The profession of war is unique in the sense that it is a rationally expansive field involving a multi-dimensional discipline that has the capacity to absorb ever-expanding realms of dynamic pressure of our time. The simple question of whether war is an art or a science itself poses challenging predicament to the discourse centering on the military’s professional obligations.

Before undertaking the task of exploring the true nature of military education, it is imperative to understand the functional environment that the military aims to create through its roles and tasks. The military operates at three levels: tactical, operational and strategic. These levels are also determinants of the kind of training and education that the military as a professional body calls for. The most articulate and technically sound of these is the tactical level where needs and the actions to be undertaken to fulfill them can be clearly delimited. Difficulties arise in the domain of operational and strategic levels because of their many overlapping and nebulous ramifications. In particular, the strategic level functioning of the military is a complex issue where the separation between the military and the non-military parameters impinging upon military exigency, has generated a host of illustrative and interesting themes.

Contemporary ideas about strategic levels of military function are wider and more extensive field of investigation now than it was in the past. The most important notion is to broaden the space of intellectual engagement of top military leaders in the multi-disciplinary intellectual pursuit of knowledge. This encompasses an empathic intertwining of both the state and the individual at the level of rational comprehension. As such, it has to embrace all the dimensions of security ----- military, politics, economic, social, diplomatic, technological and environmental. It proliferates into domestic, trans-national, regional and global issues involving vertical and horizontal interplay. It consists of an academic exploration into the civil and military regions of knowledge and endeavours to develop their combined strength so as to cultivate military's vast expanse of professional landscape. It is this inclusion of non-military aspect into the military domain that makes the military mind of today much more amenable to modern means of education than it was even a decade ago.

The changing patterns of societal revolutions have expanded the definition of security beyond traditional domains into non-traditional ones. Both domains have their significance within the national boundary as well as outside it. This growing intellectual pressure on revisioning security has blurred the traditional spatial boundaries of authority or professional expertise for the military as was conceived in traditional security paradigm. At present, a state is required to have senior generals, admirals and air marshals who must be experts on warfare as well as equipped to offer solid advice on security to the political leadership. This societal demand on intellectual and psychical capacities of top military leadership has added a new dimension to military strategy.

While at the tactical and operational levels, professional military training mostly deals itself with science, at higher level of strategic planning, they are linked more and more to the realm of art. Such a combination of art as well as science requires modern day military leaders to be not only able commanders in their professional duties but also equipped to cultivate the intellect. The combination ensures that they contribute to statecraft during crises or an emergency.

There have been few moments in the history of the Bangladesh military which resembled the present situation where we see a preoccupation with disseminating professional knowledge to its members in a manner that is appropriate and goal-oriented towards achieving excellence. Since all education is aimed at building a rational model, military education in Bangladesh must develop and pursue a distinctive course with a view to producing worthwhile consequences that will fulfill ever-growing professional demands.

THE LANDSCAPE OF MILITARY STRATEGIC THOUGHT

Military thought on strategy is indebted to two enduring texts: Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and Clausewitz's *On War*. Despite their antiquity, they provide the cognitive spark that can still illuminate the passion of an inquiring mind. Their relevance lies in their presentation of certain fundamental principles raised almost to the level of objective laws. These laws have not changed over time and are impervious to any distortion. One can only take the risk of negating them at one's own peril. For example, their brilliance is embodied in the way they envisage war as an instrument of policy, thereby correctly establishing the abidingly umbilical relationship between political objectives and military operations. Thus, this orientation makes strategy an object demanding intellectual mastery and utilization of the state's resources for the purpose of implementing its policy in war. In other words, military strategy *per se* cannot perform the task of waging a war; a nation's entire asset at the material, psychical and physical planes need to be counted.

Therefore, military strategy must be viewed as a highly pragmatic and scientifically complex intellectual exercise. It is dependent on geographical, societal, economical, and political realities, as well as on factors that not only train minds to wage war but also educate military professionals to strategize ways how not to wage war or how to orchestrate its peaceful resolution. Its substance lies in producing a unified course of actions that is dependent upon diverse contingencies.

The second level of military function is called the operational level. It is the exclusive domain of war-making professionals. It is the testing ground of a general's ability in directing his forces and marshalling other resources for executing a mission given him through strategic guidance. With regard to warfare, the operational level can be designated as 'operational art'. This implies that the core military function is embodied in the operational art that is the exclusive domain of generals, admirals and air marshals. Orchestrating war at the operational level, after all, is a highly concerted endeavour, in contemporary times often involving multinational and coalition forces. Excellence and mastery in operational art, therefore, remains the core expertise of the highest level of military professionalism. The ability to co-ordinate forces with resources available in order to converge the right amount and the right time into the designated place of engagement requires extraordinary mental skills. Such skills do not depend merely on scientific education but demands as well judgement resulting from years of arduous and painstaking pursuit of reflective knowledge. In addition, operational art is continually being changed and modified by

Revolutions in Military Affairs (RMA). State of art technology, network-centric warfare, Information Communication and Technology (ICT) etc. are important tools of operational art that military professionals need to incorporate and update constantly.

The realm of strategy and operational art has been greatly influenced and shaped by changes in the global security paradigm. The end of the Cold War and the emergence of new kinds of threats in failed and fragile states have created complex humanitarian emergencies, global terrorism, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and internecine ethnic conflicts, gradual decline of inter-state wars and their replacement by global connectivity of warring parties have changed the ways wars are being fought in the last one hundred years.

War no longer involves only clashes between two opposing armies. Today, it is difficult to confirm its features within defined boundaries. It could involve a conventional army fighting an unconventional enemy, a state-centric force facing a multi-centric foe or a traditional troop meeting an asymmetric threat. Therefore, the expanded strategic domain, operational art and new threats emerging all the time necessitate that military education be reformed and recast for present day scenarios and exigencies.

The Context of Bangladesh

The geography of Bangladesh confers upon her a unique position. Spatially, it bestrides two important geographical regions, namely, South Asia and South East Asia. It offers to many the shortest route to trade, commerce, and economic privileges. This is a great advantage to Bangladesh in terms of strategic location. On the other hand, all sides except the south of Bangladesh is bordered by India. Up north and north east, a small distance away across Indian territory lies Nepal and China. Since both India and China are rising powers, and since Bangladesh is adjacent to and in close proximity of these powerful states, it is not immune to the opportunities and challenges facing these two nations.

Bangladesh's location thus has concurrent implications for geo-politics and can give rise to some tensions. The surrounding areas are afflicted by insurgency as is the case with northeast India and in the Arakan state of Myanmar. Bangladesh has also not been spared an irredentist movement in its Southeast region. It has had to fight an insurgency war there, which has been successfully terminated through a peace deal. However, the reemergence of insurgency is still possible, and proximity of the Golden Triangle as a transit route of narco-trafficking and gun-running make Bangladesh susceptible to severe security tensions.

As a maritime nation, Bangladesh shares the Bay of Bengal with India and Myanmar. The delimitation of the maritime boundary in this area is an outstanding issue. Bangladesh is sandwiched between these two neighbors and there are potential strategic complications that may arise from any failure in the amicable resolution of maritime boundary and disputes.

Bangladesh is also a lower riparian country of the Ganges and Brahmaputra basin system. Like other lower riparian states elsewhere, she is entangled in multi-lateral water management disputes with her neighbours. The overuse and withdrawal of water by upper riparian countries has had serious adverse effects on its eco-system. Global warming and the specter of sea-level rise could submerge one-third of the country. According to some experts, this adds to the challenges facing Bangladesh. As part of the Himalayan and the Bay of Bengal climatic systems, it is prone to floods and cyclones.

As a nascent democracy too, Bangladesh faces many domestic challenges. It is still in the category of Least Developing Countries (LDC) and is struggling to meet diverse problems due to lack of equity, employment, low Human Resource Development (HRD), distributive justice, all-pervasive corruption, and undeveloped state institutions. In spite of impressive growth in most of the social indices sustaining a GDP growth of 6 to 6.5 percent over the last decade and also a dynamic civil sector, it is troubled by continuous political instability that is due to lack of democratic practice within political parties, 'winner takes it all attitude', non-compromising attitude of the politicians, wanton politicisation of state institutions and absence of competent political leadership. Over-population has also led to unwarranted migration to neighbouring states.

The wave of global terrorism and the Afghan fall out have not spared Bangladesh. It has seen the rise of homegrown radical Islam although this threat has been curbed significantly. Nevertheless, there is still the possibility that radicalism may reemerge as a serious threat to internal security of the country unless sustained vigilance is maintained and the reasons that breed radicalism are addressed by serious intellectual examination and at the same time, by undertaking stern measures.

These are some of the issues that need to be taken into consideration in revisioning security studies relating to Bangladesh. They suggest that for Bangladesh, economic security and development strategy are linked to its freedom to maneuver at national, regional and international levels. After all, the discourse on national development cannot be seen in isolation. Its ramifications are important for anyone trying to arrive at a holistic perspective.

This is what makes the role of Bangladesh military so significant in adoption of a comprehensive approach towards the question of national security and development. The military's success in recent years stems from its engagements in the Chittagong Hill Tracts against the insurgency there that has prevented the country its nationhood from becoming prey to any sort of divisiveness.

Since the military is a well-organized outfit, it has made a fundamental and effective contribution during national crises such as disaster management, insurgencies and even political deadlocks. Not only domestic crisis, the armed forces have played a laudatory role in the maintenance of global peace and security. At present, it is the second largest troop contributing country for UN peacekeeping mission.

In Bangladesh, serving senior military officers take up appointments in civil sectors on deputation, go on ambassadorial appointments and assume higher leadership posts in the United Nations peacekeeping missions. Many senior military generals have taken up key positions in national politics after retirement.

The instances cited above of the many roles played by senior military officers, are important in devising a comprehensive curriculum for the training of the officer corps. The ultimate goal of such a curriculum should be to produce leaders, not only for military purposes but also to meet other social needs. Leaders do not emerge in a day. It requires years of experience strengthened by appropriate tools of education to create a leader. No wonder that Plato provided Alexander, the Great, with the intellectual stewardship which led to the latter's accomplishments. For military leaders to run military establishments in an enlightened manner requires an understanding of subjects that are integral to a military's institutional development. Merely remaining confined to the teaching of war is too limiting and can never bring about effective results at a time when the traditional security paradigm is gradually giving way to the compulsions of a much broader notion of security.

Because of its strategic and domestic imperatives, the military in Bangladesh has to play an important strategic role in addition to its conventional military one. This, in turn, calls for a military education system that should provide knowledge of areas in which the role of the military is directly or indirectly intuited.

New Paradigm for Military Education

In every age, as paradigm shift has had to adapt to dominant intellectual thinking, so should the military's outlook. It is the task of the strategic practitioner to mould himself and remain abreast with the theoreticians' reformulation of

social dynamics. If we draw on historical experience, a three-fold typology of the military institution can be framed. The first is the *modern* type, which dates from the nineteenth century to the end of World War II. The second is the *late-modern* type, which stretched from the mid-twentieth century to the early 1990s and is coterminous with the Cold war period. The post-modern type is that of the present age and is postulated to continue so into the conceivable future. The post-modernist notion of the military coincides with current post-modernist theory. The term 'post-modern' as applied to the military implies significant departure from earlier forms of military organisation.

The post-modern military is characterized by three major organizational changes. First, is the shift in military purpose from fighting wars to involvement in roles and tasks that are not considered to be military in the traditional sense. The second is the growing use of the military in multinational forces for peacekeeping operations. These operations entail authorization by agencies from beyond the nation-state. The United Nations, as a global supra-national body, has made a major impact upon the psyche on national militaries and the way they need to conduct themselves at international level. The third is the increasing inter-penetrability of the civilian and military spheres, both structurally and culturally. This inter-penetrability has also given rise to inter-operability of both military and civilian functions not merely at administrative levels but in the areas of information-sharing and knowledge dissemination as well. It is in all these three areas that appropriate academic curricula can play a significant infusing role.

At the strategic leadership level, it is essential to master the multi-dimensional aspects of strategy. Senior military leaders must become expert in the trilateral model of policy-strategy-operational art. The need is for not only mastering war studies but also to become adept in strategic studies in subjects like politics, international affairs, economics and scientific thought. The goal is to educate and train military leaders in double-hatted exigencies of war fighting with skills and expertise that will enable them to combat the emergent new threats, and provide advice to the state in politico-strategic matters. The ultimate phase of learning for top-echelon military leaders should be geared towards giving them a comprehensive and connected view of things. The field of operational and strategic learning may perhaps be easy to pursue in isolation but to connect them under one roof is what merits the attention of military institutions. A post-modern military leader, while prosecuting strategic knowledge cannot simply ignore operational art; one who has mastered the numerous elements of operation, cannot simply overlook the potentials of wisdom inherent in the strategic fruits of liberal education.

PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's armed forces accord the highest importance to the intellectual and professional excellence of its military leaders. It has adopted an education system that systematically educates a military leader through the process of imbibing tactics, operational art and strategy through different methods of learning. Three courses that embody the full range of professional military education beginning from the lowest tactical and strengthening to the highest strategic level with the interjection of the operational level in the middle are Staff Course, War Course and National Defence Course.

Staff Course is meant for officers of rank of major/equivalent from army, navy and air force. The course is basically aimed at sharpening the mental skills at the tactical level of war. Some operational level instruction is provided in the form of ideas about campaign planning and the operational level of war. The major emphasis is on developing the minds of officers to produce effective staff work. This is meant to emphasize training for critical thinking. The ability to understand a problem and focus on the most efficacious solutions is given the highest priority.

The Armed Forces War Course (AFWC) is for selected Lieutenant Colonels/Colonels and their naval and air force equivalents. It aims towards producing military commanders well versed in the planning and management of warfare and operations other than war at the operational art level. The emphasis is on mastering the planning and execution of military campaigns and major operations. Operational art is considered to be a core military expertise for generalship. The course also draws its curriculum from the higher level of military strategic thought and from related issues. It is the highest military course for officers of the Bangladesh armed forces.

Experts on operational art also have to acquire a sound understanding of strategic and national security imperatives. Non-traditional security issues, such as terrorism, disaster management, conflict resolution, and peacekeeping-making to nation-building and their operationalization form part of operational art level studies. The Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operations and Training, in short BIPSOT, offers on the other hand, operational art level education in peacekeeping and peace-support operations. After all, the post-modern military professional operating in the peacekeeping context is a war fighter as well as a peacekeeper. All these areas of military involvement in actions, called Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), have offered new challenges to military education in terms of tactics and operational art. The successful implementation of MOOTW poses great challenges. It requires multi-dimensional inter-agency

co-ordination and integration of military and non-military functions. There are cross-cutting areas of responsibilities that demand correct and thoughtful understanding of civil and military obligations on the part of those conducting operations other than war. The Bangladesh Armed Force's educational system at the operational level is aligned to these challenges.

The third and highest course offered for military officers is the National Defence Course (NDC). It is not a military course *per se*. It is a course of strategic domain where all elements of power, namely, military, economic, political, diplomatic, social, technological are its constituents. As such, major contribution to the course contents is taken from the non-military dimensions of strategic thought. That is why a substantial proportion of the class composition of the course includes senior civil servants of the rank of joint secretary or of equivalent status. Military course members are of the rank of brigadiers/colonels and their equivalents from navy and air force. This is a course which educates future policy makers who will be operating within a strategic environment. The aim is to blend harmoniously higher civil and military officers through the sharing of knowledge. Much of this harmonious blending is aimed at tackling national, regional and global problems that impinge on each other, and fine tuning their solutions.

Strategic level national goals warrant interaction amongst civil-military bureaucrats, academics and experts for deeper understanding of interlinked issues and interplay of thought at the national, regional and international levels. Hence, civil-military mix is given much importance in the National Defence Course. This approach also prepares state policy to benefit from civil-military mix at the strategic level of policy formulation and implementation. Inclusion of civil bureaucrats in the National Defence Course has done enormous good in educating military officers about the civil service. Civil servants, for their part, get a close look at the military's role in national security. This exposure to each other's role is an enabling factor in balancing traditional and non-traditional aspects of security. That security predisposes development can only be properly understood if the foundation of strategic thought is strengthened through exposure to numerous shades of opinions, observations and experiences that call for a holistic investigation into security studies.

The National Defence College, Bangladesh is an institution which is designed to offer the operational and strategic level military education. The establishment of this institution in 1999 is a great achievement for Bangladesh and a significant land mark in the history of military education. What is even more encouraging is that each of three courses is augmented by research-based post-graduate level

civil education, namely Masters in Defense Study for Staff Course, Masters in War Study for War Course and Masters in Philosophy in national security for National Defense Course.

Military education in Bangladesh owes a great deal to outside influences. Strategic and operational level education is augmented by foreign training in renowned institutions both in the neighbourhood and the West. 'National Security Education' is supplemented by Security Studies and Defence Management Studies undertaken routinely at prestigious security and management institutes, notably there in the United States of America. Seminars, workshops and symposiums both at home and abroad enable Bangladesh military officers of today to remain current and be able to cross-fertilize concepts and ideas in security, governance, global politics, economics, social aspects and many other vital issues.

Effects of Full-Spectrum Education

The military education at the operational and strategic levels in Bangladesh aspires towards maintaining full-spectrum capability. Politico-strategic military education enables the military to engage in participatory nation-building without nurturing the desire of military intervention in state-running. Post-modern developments in military thought have helped the military in strengthening civil-military relationships by augmenting civil confidence in the military. Top military leaders are not merely confined to exploiting their energies in the operational art of warfare but also in the strategic art of providing effective advice to political leadership about strategic issues. The results so far have been encouraging. The figure in the next page summarizes the main points of our discussion.

Operational and Strategic Level Military Education

Operational	Strategic
<p>— Aim: To educate on Operational Art.</p> <p>— Target: Cols/Lt Cols and equivalent from navy and air force.</p> <p>— Contents: Joint/Combined operations.</p> <p>— Focus: Specific to military.</p> <p>— Measures of Effectiveness: Intellectual development as planners for campaigns and major operations.</p> <p>— Outcome: Professional expertise in military strategy.</p>	<p>— Aim: To educate on strategic issues.</p> <p>— Target: Brigadiers/Colonels and their equivalent in army & air force; joint secretaries and their equivalents from civil service.</p> <p>— Contents: Security and Development.</p> <p>— Focus: Broad and multi-dimension.</p> <p>— Measures of Effectiveness: Development in understanding of strategic environment of socio-political, economic, informational, international and military significance.</p> <p>— Outcome: Professional military and civilian expertise in national strategy.</p>

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh's top military leadership has correctly identified an all-encompassing functional role for military leaders in the 21st century. It knows that military's future lies in espousing knowledge across the full spectrum of national life. But the mode of that knowledge must be pragmatic, substantive and holistic. Merely binding the military to war will deprive future leaders of the ability to live up to international commitments. That is why, in order to create world class military commanders and leaders, military education in Bangladesh has fused operational art and strategic art. This combination will give the nation professionals well-equipped, both internally and externally, to meet the challenges of 21st century through skilful application of their intellectual merit.

Sources:

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Author

***Lieutenant General Abu Tayeb Muhammad Zahirul Alam**, rcds, psc was born on 06 October 1952 in Chittagong, Bangladesh.*

General Zahirul Alam until recently has been the Commandant of National Defence College, Bangladesh an appointment he assumed on 04 January 2004.

General Zahirul Alam was commissioned in the Bangladesh Army on 11 January 1975 in the Corps of Infantry. He is a proud member of the first batch of the Bangladesh Military Academy. He was awarded the 'Sword of Honour'. He was promoted to the rank of major general on 20 July 2000 and Lieutenant General on 26 May 2007.

General Zahirul Alam in his long military career served in a variety of important command, staff and instructional appointments. He commanded two infantry battalions, two infantry brigades and two infantry divisions. He was an instructor in the Bangladesh Military Academy. His staff appointments include General Staff Officer-3 (Operation) at the Division Headquarters, Brigade Major, General Staff Officer –1 (Counter Insurgency) at an operational Division and Colonel Staff in an Infantry Division. He served at the Army Headquarters as Director Military Training.

General Zahirul Alam has attended various training and courses both at home and abroad. He is a graduate of British Army Staff College, Camberly (1985-86). He participated in a seminar on Counter Insurgency organized by US Pacific Command, at Hawaii in 1989 and an Executive Seminar on multi-agency negotiation at Harvard University, USA in May 2001. He participated in the Shangri-la Dialogue, the 6th IISS, Asia Pacific Security Summit at Singapore from 1-3 June 2007. He also participated in the 11th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Head of Defence Universities, Colleges and Institutions meeting at Canberra, Australia from 09-11 October 2007.

General Zahirul Alam has a Bachelor of Arts degree from Chittagong University (1980) and a Master's degree in War Studies from King's College, London (1992-93). He is a graduate of year 2003 of the prestigious Royal College of Defence Studies, UK.

General Zahirul Alam has participated in a number of military operations. He has active service to his credit in Counter Insurgency Operation at Chittagong Hill Tracts both in Staff and Command appointments. The key appointments were General Staff Officer Grade -3(Operation) and General Staff Officer Grade -1(Counter Insurgency) at Division Headquarters engaged in Counter Insurgency Operation, Commanding Officer of an Infantry Battalion and Commander of an Infantry Brigade in Counter Insurgency .

General Zahirul Alam participated in peacekeeping mission under United Nations. He commanded a mechanized infantry battalion in United Nations Iraq Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) from 26 November 1994 to 04 March 1996.

General Zahirul Alam is a widely traveled person. He has visited many countries. Some notable ones are People's Republic of China, Malaysia, United Kingdom, Germany, United States of America, Kuwait, India, Nepal, Russia, Estonia, Singapore, Turkey, Czech Republic, Thailand, Belgium, Vietnam, Australia, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia etc.

He loves to read books and journals and watch feature programmes on the television. He is a learner golfer.

He is married to Shefa Noor. They have a son named Muhammad Asif Zahir (21) and a daughter named Fara Fatima Zahir (17).

***Air Commodore Mahmud Hussain** was born on 20 December 1960. He joined Bangladesh Air Force on 19 September 1978, and was commissioned on 01 February 1981 in the Helicopter-stream of GD(P) branch. In his service career, he has held important command, instructional and staff appointments. He did his staff college course from DSCSC, Mirpur in 1998, and obtained First Class in the Masters in Defence Studies (MDS). He also attended the second staff college course in the United States of America and received a Masters Degree in Operational Art and Military Science from Air University, Alabama. He has served in the UN mission twice; first as a Military Observer in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia in 1993-94 and then, as a Contingent Commander of the first BAF Contingent in Democratic Republic of Congo in 2003-2004. Before joining NDC, he was the Senior Instructor (Air) at DSCSC. He has visited Singapore, Guam, India, Sri Lanka, UAE and Turkey on official and training duties. He joined NDC on 21 Dec 2006 as Senior Directing Staff (Air).*