

## **The Rann of Kutch and its Aftermath**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The brief armed encounter between small contingents of Indian and Pakistani armies in April 1965 resulted in what was generally perceived to be a victory for the latter. It was as a kind of an easy victory, which had earlier surprised the Chinese in the NEFA war in 1962. The overall lack of Indian preparedness for an armed defence of the disputed areas on both occasions convinced the Pakistani ruling elite that the fear of Indian military might was based on an exaggerated view. The incident of Rann of Kutch was therefore, one of the major determining factors in the eventual choice of Pakistani government to go for a military solution to Kashmir issue. This study is an attempt to explore some of the questions related to the issue of Rann of Kutch, like what was the historical origin of the conflict and where did it lead India and Pakistan in legal and political terms after independence? What led to the armed clash between two countries and what was its outcome? What perceptions did the two countries develop in the aftermath about their respective military capabilities? How did Rann of Kutch episode influence the strategic thinking of both countries on the eve of September 1965 war? The crux is that if there was no Rann of Kutch, the war if at all had taken place – would have taken a different course.

**KEY WORDS:** Indo-Pakistan strategic thinking; Impossibility of military solution, Kashmir dispute, Territory.

The territory of Kutch consists of an area of 8,461 square miles in the region of 24 parallel in the South-West of Indo-Pakistan Sub-Continent. This peninsular tract of land is surrounded by Indus towards west and Indian Ocean and Gulf of Kutch in South. Its northern and southern flanks are marked by semi-deserts and desert wilderness. The Rann on the other hand, resembles a dried salt lake and is situated in the North-East of Kutch. During the rainy season, it becomes a land locked sea. However, when water recedes after the monsoons, the surface becomes hard and dried up. Bhuj is the capital of the state (Raikes, 1954: 3). The Imperial Gazetteer of India states the following:

“The Rann of Kutch resembles a dried up sea... except a stray bird, an occasional caravan, no sign of life breaks the desolate loneliness” (Imperial Gazette of India, 1908:85).

The peculiar topography of the area supported Pakistan’s claim that the Rann comprised landlocked sea. Under international law, the boundary must run through its middle. The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908, 1909 and 1928 showed the Rann as part of the sea. The demarcation of Western portion of Sindh-Kutch boundary ran through the middle of the disputed territory.

At the time of independence in 1947, Pakistan was under the control of Rann, till India occupied a part of Northern Rann in 1956 by force. The topography and historical background of the area illustrates that Pakistan had a convincing case in claiming the areas, along the 24<sup>th</sup> parallel and also some area roughly south of the parallel. As these areas were formerly under the control and administration of Sindh, the case of Pakistan was based on the Resolution of the Government of Bombay, which administered Sindh at that time<sup>1</sup>.

The resolution defined the boundary in western area, which had been the subject of claims and counter-claims and also clearly indicated the rest of the boundary of Sindh. The boundary of Sindh was clearly delineated on the map and no attempt was made then or afterwards to challenge it<sup>2</sup>.

Indian authorities were fully aware about the strategic value of the territory of Rann of Kutch. Just after the creation of the state of Pakistan, India started developing a major naval base at Kandiala in the Gulf of Kutch and got it connected with Rajhistan through rail and road links inside India. Navanagar Air Base was also developed close to Karachi which was then the capital of Pakistan. In addition, Indians started building an army garrison station just in the south of the 24<sup>th</sup> parallel at Khavada.

The reports of oil and possible mineral deposits in the region further accelerated Indian average into the area. At that time, Pakistani authorities failed to calculate the strategic vulnerability of Pakistan. In case of hostilities between the two neighbours, it was the only territory on the borders of West Pakistan, from where the joint operations of the army, navy and air force could be launched with strength. India could thus drive a powerful wedge between Northern and Southern Sindh, cut off Karachi and a portion of Sindh from the rest of the country and deprive a truncated Pakistan of all its sea routes (Ahmad, 1971: 9).

Similarly from the military point of view, it was possible for India to launch large scale mechanized operations in the Thar-desert. The topographical conditions helped in supporting such operations for deep thrusts and it was also possible to seize maximum territory for bargaining purposes. The strategic location of Rann of Kutch forced the two belligerent neighbours to attach great importance to it. However, actual clash occurred between India and Pakistan due to India’s claim to Kanjar Kot and to Gullu Talao in January 1965. Gullu Talao located between Chad bet and Vingi while Kangar Kot being a ruined fort near Ding.

Indian army started obstructing the patrols of Sindh Rangers as well as the custom's personnel. Despite Pakistan's protests, India established new posts in this area, creating a new de facto boundary along Custom's Track on Pakistani side of the border. Later, Indian intentions were confirmed by Indian Prime Minister, Bahadur Shastri, Indian Home Minister Mr. Gulzar and Indian Defence Minister, Mr. Chavan, as they paid visits to the area and gave green signal to the exercise "Arrow Head."

This exercise, carried out by the Indian armed forces involved the use of several destroyers and frigates, including the aircraft carrier Vikranth in the Gulf of Kutch. On 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1965, it was discovered that 31-Indian Infantry Brigade had moved into Bhuj Island to reinforce 112-Indian Brigade. This additional Indian army build up caused grave apprehensions among Indus Rangers of Pakistan, whose total strength in the area did not exceed one battalion.

The local Indus Rangers parties were not strong enough to check Indian forward thrust in the area. On 14<sup>th</sup> March 1965, India established a new post called Sardar Post, about three miles south of Kanjar Kot. On 16 March, 1965, GOC 8 Division, Major General Tikka Khan, visited the Headquarters of 51-Brigade and the forwarded areas and ordered 6-Brigade at Quetta to be prepared to move forward to the general area of Umar kot (Ahmad, 1971: 35).

In the meantime, Indians had started moving forward with deeper thrusts into Pakistani side at the territory. One company of Indian troops moved from Vigikot to North-West of Dira, a point of junction of Mara and Ding lakes. On the night of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> April, Pakistan's military command realized the gravity of the situation and Commander 51-Brigade, Brigadier Muhammad Azhar finally issued orders on 5 April 1965 to retaliate, if the Indians advanced any further in order to stop violations of border area under its control.

This move was followed by 8-infantry Division under "Operation Desert Hawk" on 7 April to meet any aggression along Pakistani borders. Finally, tense situation on both sides of the border was escalated into an actual conflict between the hostile forces. First encounter took place on 10 April, 1965. Indian troops suffered heavy casualties at Sardar Kot. Pakistan also captured twenty one Indian soldiers including Major Karnail Singh. Therefore, first encounter between the armed forces of India and Pakistan along the borer of the Rann of Kutch resulted in military defeat for the former (Ahmad, 1971: 37).

There was a grim reaction in India over it. Indian Home Minister in a virulent speech in Lok Sabha on 11 April described the Sardar post incident as a challenge to nation and exhorted Indian people to harness all their energies in conflict and to think of nothing else now (Ahmad, 1971: 61).

The Indian Prime Minister Shastri, vowed in the Lock Sabha to take action against Pakistan "when the time and circumstances are ripe" (*Dawn*, 1965, April 13).

However, the Indian threat did not go unnoticed in Pakistan. As a rejoinder Mr. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the then foreign Minister of Pakistan issued a statement on 15 April, 1965 in which he declared that:

The Rann of Kutch situation is the latest example of Indian chauvinism and warned India that if it persisted in the use of force, it alone would be responsible for the consequence, which must follow (*Dawn*, 1965, April 18).

In Pakistan, the military top brass anticipated Indians intentions, not to withdraw from Rann during the coming monsoons. The conviction got further strengthened because of Indian supplies by air and sea to support their forces in the northern half of Rann. Therefore, Major General Tikka Khan, Commander 8-Division, assessed the operational situation at that time and was convinced of no reason for Pakistan to remain on the defensive. He began to outline the tactical contingency plan and conceived what is known as the "Plan Alpha", modified by the recommendation of Brigadier Iftikhar Khan Janjua. The move that was started on 26 April, culminated in the capture of Biar Bet and Sera Bet (Ahmad, 1971: 68).

At this critical juncture of military success, the political considerations of Ayub Khan came into action. His critics think that it was an opportunity which would have been capitalized for pushing the Indians away from strategically sensitive area, i.e., the northern half of Rann. However, Ayub Khan did not allow such an offensive. Therefore, the planned objectives of General Tikka Khan for the Rann of Kutch were obstructed by the command at the highest level. An analysis of the military supported the view point of these critics. For example, it was claimed that:

Indians had crossed over the inlet from the sea having constructed a causeway, with empty 44-gallon drums and Pakistan could block their only route of return by destroying the causeway. Ayub disallowed this action and the commander was told to consolidate this position and not to pursue the enemy any further (Gauhar, 1993: 309).

The damage control gestures by Ayub pointed towards the possibility of having a political settlement of the conflict. Pakistan, though victorious, proposed the ceasefire. This fact clearly points out the non-aggressive designs of Pakistan. If Pakistan wanted to commit aggression, it would have chosen a better area rather than mud flats of Rann of Kutch and also a better time, probably a time when Indian forces were defeated at the hands of Chinese in 1962.

The move for a ceasefire came through the good offices of the then British Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Wilson. On his behalf, the then British High Commissioner in Pakistan, Sir Maurice James played an important role in persuading Ayub to agree to a ceasefire because he could see that Indians were deeply upset over the set back, they had received in the Rann. He made more than

one trip to New Delhi and finally told Ayub on 1<sup>st</sup> May that a solution could be reached without a war.

His continuous efforts bore fruit and Pakistan decided not to cash its military superiority in dispute of Kutch and accepted mediation efforts by Britain and United Nations. Finally, the ceasefire came into effect between India and Pakistan on 6 June, 1965. However, the official agreement for ending the hostilities and initiating a negotiated settlement of dispute was signed by India and Pakistan on 30 June, 1965.

Ayub Khan came under severe criticism for accepting the ceasefire from senior army circles, from the foreign office officials, as well as from the articulate sections of population in general. Army was disappointed over the fact that despite the innumerable sacrifices and valour of the Pakistani troops which forced Indian troops to withdraw their retreat, had not been translated into a military victory.

While analyzing the war of 1965, Altaf Gauhar for example, noted that Ayub's judgment got impaired by the perceived military superiority of Pakistani forces in Rann of Kutch. It confirmed his old prejudice against Hindu not having stomach for a fight which turned into a belief and had the decisive effect on the course of future events (Gauhar 1993: 312). This analysis is, also, endorsed by Asghar Khan in the following words:

“Rann of Kutch encounter reinforced Ayub Khan's rising faith in our inherent strength....And increased faith in military superiority of our forces” (Khan, 1978).

Such feelings were prevalent not only in Ayub's mind but also in the minds of the commanders of Pakistani Army, both on the front and on the base. They held similar notions and generally subscribed to the view that the battles against the Indians by and large had been easy victories. However, the scenario was different in India. The agreement for withdrawal was met with considerable criticism all over the country. Various political parties of opposition sought to gain popular favour by condemning Shastri Government. Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee of Jan Sangh condemned the agreement in Rajya Sabha for being thoroughly dishonorable.

The three-men Tribunal was to consist of one nominee, each from Pakistan and India, as well as a Chairman. The Government of India nominated Ambassador Ales beer, a Judge of the constitutional court of Yugoslavia and the Government of Pakistan had nominated Ambassador Nasrolah Entezam from Iran and former President of General Assembly of the United Nations.

With regard to the nomination of Chairman, there was disagreement between India and Pakistan. Therefore, the secretary General of United Nations took initiative and appointed judge Gunnar Legergren, the president of court of Appeal for Western Sweden as Chairman of the Tribunal. The Indian case was represented by Mr. Daphtary as the leading counsel while Pakistani case was represented by Justice Manzur Qadir, as leading counsel. Pakistan pleaded that according to the available evidence, boundary line between Singh and Kutch

should be drawn through the middle of Rann. The chairman gave his decision in the following words:

In respect of those sectors of Rann in relation to which no specific evidence in way of display of Sindh authority or merely trivial or isolated evidence of such a character, supports Pakistan's claim, I pronounce in favour of territory. However, in respect of sectors where a continuous and for the region intensive Singh activity, meeting with no effective opposition from Kutch side, is established, I am of the opinion that Pakistan has made out a better and superior title (Rizvi, 1986: 126).

The refers to a marginal area south of Rahim Ki Bazar, including Pirol Valo Kun, as well as to Dhara Banni and Chhad Bet, which on most maps appear as an extension of the mainland of Sindh ... these findings concern the true extent of sovereignty on the eve of independence. I do not find that the evidence presented by parties in relation to the post independence period is of such a character as to have changed the position existing on the eve of Independence (Ahmad, 1971: 117, 118).

Mr. Nasrollah Entezam, the nominee of Pakistan, concurred with the opinion of Chairman in these words:

“In any early stage, I considered that Pakistan had made out a clear title to the northern half of the area, shown in the Survey Maps as Rann. I have now the advantage of reading opinion of the learned Chairman and in the light of it; I concur in and endorse the judgment of the learned Chairman” (Ahmed, 1971).

Indian nominee, Mr. Alex Beer, dissented from the opinion of Chairman in these words:

“... the instances cited by India regarding display of authority by Kutch confirm the boundary as recognized by two neighbours and depicted in official maps. On all above grounds, respectfully dissenting from the opinion of my two colleagues, I find that the boundary between India and Pakistan in the West Pakistan/Gujrat borders area, lies along the northern edge of Great Rann as shown in the latest authoritative map of this area” (Ahmad, 1971).

In the period following Indo – Pakistan conflict in Rann of Kutch in April-June 1965, Indian and Pakistani forces did not withdraw their troops. Instead, they remained amassed all along the frontiers. Keeping in view this fact; Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then foreign minister of Pakistan, while talking to the news reporters in Singapore stated that “we are always prepared to talk. But you cannot do so under the shadow of bayonets” (*Dawn*, 1965, April 16).

India looked at Rann of Kutch conflict through a different perspective. It rightly judged Pakistan's commitment to keep a conflict limited in scope and not to let it escalate into an international war between two countries. On its part, India

seemed to be firm on disallowing another Rann of Kutch and using the option of internationalizing a conflict if and when it emerged.

## **Notes**

1. Resolution of the Government of Bombay No. 1129, 24 February, 1914.
2. Letter of the permanent representative of India to the President of the Security Council. S/6321, 3 May, 1965, p.9.

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