

Beginning of the End

This story is dedicated to brave personnel of the Indian Armed Forces who risk their lives and undergo tremendous hardships everyday to keep this nation safe.

Many thanks to the esteemed members of [Bharat Rakshak Forums](#) for their help by means of comments, suggestions and corrections. Special thanks to rajanb for his help with proof reading.

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Chapter 1

11:00 Hours

26 Oct 2012

National Stadium

Karachi, Pakistan

Mushtaq Naqvi, son of Pakistani President, Saqlain Naqvi was going to make his first public speech to mark his formal entry in to the troubled nation's political arena. His entry in to politics was supposed to revive the sagging fortunes of his father and party PPP before national elections in 2013. PPP was in trouble on many fronts; most serious of them being their ongoing spat with powerful factions in Pakistani Army.

A popular saying among people interested in international affairs is, “Every Country has an Army, the Pakistani Army has a country”.

Naqvi was never a really popular President to begin with. He got the post for one reason only, his wife, former PM Samina Naqvi was assassinated while campaigning before elections in December 2007. One, amongst countless conspiracy theories circulating in Pakistan, suggested that the assassination was carried out on the orders of the then all powerful military dictator and “President”, General Inzamam. Most PPP supporters believed it and nurtured a deep resentment against the Army. Adding to this mistrust was the fact that PPP was Sindhi dominated while Punjabis formed the bulk of the Pakistani army. Most of the issues troubling Naqvi originated from this bitterness amongst the two groups.

A major one was the growing closeness of PML (N), a Punjabi dominated party led by former PM Wasim Akhtar with powerful elements in army and its shady intelligence agency the ISI. Both resented PPP and its hold on civilian government and had been working behind the scenes patiently to weaken what they saw as disproportionate influence of Sindhis in nation's political arena. PML (N) and army together had launched a vicious campaign against PPP by planting stories about ill-gotten wealth and debauchery of the families of Zaradari and his PM Yaqub Raza in the media and executed targeted killings of PPP cadre, thinly disguised as terrorist attacks.

The mastermind behind this sustained campaign against Sindhi PPP was General Abdul Asgar. He was ambitious and well-connected, who thought nothing of using people or ideologies for his personal gains. Right from the time he joined army, he had cultivated the image of being a pious Muslim with hatred for anything western or what Pakistanis thought of as anti-Pakistan. But nobody, except him, knew the real General Asgar and his ambitions.

He quickly rose through the ranks to command a senior post in Pakistani Strategic Missile Group (SMG). He was a casualty of Musharraf's half-hearted attempts of purging the military of radical Islamic elements after 9/11 and was transferred to an army unit in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir bordering China and India. After Musharraf's exit, he was promoted to rank of a General and given the command of the army's garrison in Islamabad, and then in Karachi.

Being a powerful army guy in Pakistan brings many benefits; money and political influence not being least of them and General Asgar was quick to make the most of it. Very soon, he was considered to be

army chief in waiting as soon as General Beg stepped down. But Beg had other plans.

Even though he considered General Asgar favourably, General Beg had no intentions of giving up the post of army chief anytime soon. During the last 18 months, he had started to appease his paymasters in the US with fervour by providing vital intelligence against major anti-US militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Using his help, NATO forces had captured or killed a number of most wanted terrorists in a short period. Although it increased his influence within the US, and correspondingly Pakistan, the numbers of enemies among Islamist militants as well as sympathetic elements in the defence forces and amongst the civilian population increased exponentially. Like General Pervez Musharraf before him, he too alleged numerous conspiracies and attempts of assassination directed against him to gain sympathy.

Using his influence amongst US officials he managed to get extension to his already prolonged tenure, the latest one being in April 2011 that extended his virtual rule on Pakistan by another 3 years. In this, he had a lot of help from the US which was backing him to the hilt as their new "ally" in Pakistan.

It didn't go down well with many people in Pakistan, least of all with General Asgar, who saw his chances of gaining absolute power in Pakistan rapidly diminishing. It was at this time, that General Asgar started looking for allies in Pakistan's political arena and he zeroed in on Wasim Akhtar. Akhtar too, despised Beg who was protégé of his nemesis General Pervez Musharraf. Akhtar had never forgotten how Musharraf had launched the Kargil misadventure, overthrown his civilian government and put him into exile, thereby striking a crippling blow on his political clout and career. Even though he had no trust in the military, he was only too glad to forge a secret alliance with General Asgar, who promised him the positions of PM and President, in exchange for an indefinite tenure on the post of army chief for himself.

Together, they had launched a vicious covert assault on PPP and the government it led. News stories were planted in local and international media exposing ill-gotten wealth, bribery and sex scandals of various ministers and army personnel loyal to Beg who were holding key positions in the regime. Many junior leaders and cadre of PPP and its allies were assassinated in violent attacks which were conveniently blamed on Indian and Israeli intelligence agencies.

With just months to go into elections, effect of this onslaught on government and Beg's hold on it was tremendous. Nobody ever expected elections to be free and fair in Pakistan, but revelations of brazen corruption and immorality among ruling politicians and the Beg faction of the army caused the popularity of PPP and Beg plunge to an all time low. Adding to their woes was the ever increasing friction between cadre of PPP and Punjabi parties who indulged in almost daily clashes armed with automatic weapons and explosives. Punjabis having the support of General Asgar invariable had the upper hand in most of these battles. Combined with sectarian Shia-Sunni violence and frequent attacks by Talibani organisations, the situation in Pakistan was truly dire.

It was at this time when Mushtaq Naqvi was hurriedly called back from London to give a much needed boost to election campaign being led by his father. Mushtaq's publicity handlers were wise enough to cultivate his image as a suave and well educated secular Muslim who cared more about Pakistan than holding any position of power. This was particularly essential after pictures of him indulging in drinking and cavorting with women in London were published on the Internet. That was waved away as an inevitable discretion of youth, and Mushtaq Naqvi in 2012, was a far cry from the drunk womaniser that he was alleged to be.

Sitting in his bulletproof SUV along with his father as it raced to the election rally spot, he listened intently as his father gave him last minute instructions on how to conduct himself on stage in front of thousands of supporters. As the convoy reached the rally spot, it was surrounded by thousands of eager supporters, intent on catching a glimpse of their young fresh leader. Death of his mother in similar conditions was still fresh in the minds of the security detail who had forbidden any member of Naqvi family to even peek outside the heavily tinted bulletproof windows of their vehicles. Their SUV stopped at the stairs of a twelve foot high temporary stage and both father and son quickly climbed up the stairs, surrounded by dozens of well trained and heavily armed commandos.

PPP speaker Mahroof Raza who was already on stage greeted the father son duo warmly and escorted them to the chairs strategically placed so as to allow the crowd full glimpse of whoever was sitting there. After the customary hand waving, sloganeering and introductory speech by Raza, Naqvi senior took control of the mike to address the rally. He wanted this rally to be the launch pad for his son's future political career and presented Mushtaq as the next great hope for Pakistan. After waxing eloquent for what seemed like an eternity he invited his son to make his first ever speech in Pakistan. Flanked by his body-guards, Mushtaq got up from the chair and started walking towards the dais.

His short journey was rudely interrupted by sounds of gun shots fired just 70-80 meters from the stage. Panic spread quickly among the massive crowd and the stadium was full of terrified people rushing towards the nearest exit. Saqlain and Mushtaq both were quickly surrounded by their body guards who started escorting them to their convoy. At this time, whole stadium shook with a massive explosion that blew up most of the stage and put the rest on fire.

Last thing that senior Naqvi saw before losing consciousness was the sight of his son's body being tossed up high up in air like a broken rag doll.

12:15 Hours
26 Oct 2012
Secret Army Safe House
Karachi, Pakistan

Lt. Zia knocked nervously on the closed door and waited for permission to enter. He had strict instructions to leave the occupants of the room in complete privacy, but owing to urgency of situation he felt he had no other option other than to comply with what the caller on the phone had asked for. The door was unlocked by General Asgar who inquired in a level voice the nature of the interruption. Lt. Zia just told him name of the caller and handed over the phone. General Asgar put the phone to his ear and ambled up to the sofa on which he had been sitting earlier.

He winced as his ear was blasted by the frantic voice of Wasim Akhtar who seemed to be scared out of his wits.

“What the hell just happened, General? Bombing of Naqvi's rally!! I tell you General, we are all screwed.”

General Asgar asked mildly, “What are you talking about Wasim? “

“PPP rally in National stadium was bombed! Switch on the TV for god sake. Naqvi is seriously injured and his son blown to pieces. Where are you hiding General? Why the hell did you did this? Didn't you think of the consequences?” Wasim shrieked.

General Asgar’s voice suddenly took on a hard edge, “What makes you think that I'm behind this attack, Wasim? It's a very serious allegation that you are making “

Surprised by the change in tone of General's voice Akhtar could only manage to stammer “But, but... what, err who could have done this? “

“How am I supposed to know this? Do I look like an oracle? Keep watching the TV for any updates”

“But everybody will accuse me only. PPP workers are already baying for our blood. What the hell am I supposed to do now? “Akhtar’s whining voice made General Asgar wince again. Maintaining his composure, he replied in a cool voice, “Whoever did this will soon take responsibility. Your name will not be dragged in to this. “

“But what about those crazy Sindhis? They've already made up their minds that I'm behind this! Their leaders have already started mobilising supporters to avenge this bombing.”

“I believe that your men are well trained and suitably armed to defend themselves against any such stupid attacks. You yourself are guarded well enough” General Asgar smiled to himself.

“But you are missing the consequences. Even though Mushtaq was not a candidate, the elections can be postponed indefinitely due to his death. All the efforts that we had put in too discredit Naqvi and Gilani will be neutralised by the sympathy wave. “

“You don't need to worry about that either. You have my support and only you'll win these elections. When was the last time, a free and fair election, was held in Pakistan anyway? “General Asgar laughed loudly at his own joke.

“Are you really sure about this General? Remember our fortunes are tied to each other. If I go down you go down too”

“I realise that very well Mian Wasim. Both of us will certainly get what we both need. Just relax and stop worrying about it. I want you to do one thing for your own sake. Organise a press conference as soon as possible and announce your shock and sorrow at this tremendous loss to nation. Just don't overdo the sympathy bit and go out publicly. Wait for someone to take responsibility for the attack. Do you understand me?”

Wasim Akhtar replied like an obedient school boy to his teacher, “Yes General. I understand perfectly well.”

General Asgar put down the phone and smiled at the only other occupant of the room, General Mao Hu of People Liberation Army, China. “You might have guessed it by now, it was future PM of Pakistan asking his trusty general for advice in face of what he thinks is a colossal crisis”

General Hu replied, "Of course. It was only logical that he did. I assume that you were able to calm him down. Everything going according to plans?"

"As always. Would you mind if I turn up the volume on TV? I think that they are broadcasting what I've been waiting for."

They both turned their attention to the TV screen on which the news channel was playing the voice recording of a man who claimed to be a member of a new Pakistani Islamic organisation, Al Mujahideen committed to cleanse Muslim nations of corruption and immorality. He claimed full responsibility of the attack on PPP rally and blamed the Naqvis of bringing shame to whole Islamic world by their corrupt ways and allegiance to kafir USA. Within minutes of having broadcast this recording, another channel played a recording made by Haqqani's eldest son who claimed that he had personally planned this attack to avenge the death of his father due to intelligence provided by Pakistani govt. Soon, all the channels were full of self-styled experts debating and analysing this new development and the "who-really-dunnit" blame game began in earnest.

General Asgar turned down the volume and remarked, "These TV channels remind me of a circus that I once visited as a child. Shall we resume discussing our plans? "

18:00 Hours
26 Oct 2012
CIA Headquarters
Langley, USA

Bill Cosby, CIA's South Asia specialist was still going over his notes when a disheveled CIA chief Richard Cobain walked in to the meeting room. He slumped into a chair closest to the door and just lay there with his eyes closed. After a while he opened his eyes and said in a tired voice, "What are we dealing with here? Any idea who did this?"

"Four different groups, two each based in Pakistan and Afghanistan, have claimed responsibility for the attack till now. Too soon to confirm anything" Cosby replied

"I don't care what's being shown on TV. Who really did it?"

"There are so many players in this game that it's almost impossible to point out the culprit without any good piece of evidence."

Richard replied in exasperated tone of voice, "For Christ's sake, I have to brief the president within two hours over this incident. What am I supposed to tell him? Do you want me to report that even after spending billions of dollars on gizmos, spooks and buying loyalties, we don't have any information on who very nearly killed the president of our nuclear armed ally? "

Sergey Page, a senior analyst replied tentatively, "Actually we do have something that might prove interesting, but we are still missing some pieces of the puzzle. We have evidence of some kind of alliance between PML (N) led by Wasim Akhtar, General Asgar and the Chinese. A large number of PML (N) men have recently received weapons and training from people who we believe work for Pakistani army. We are not exactly sure how this bombing incident will help Wasim Akhtar, but weakening the PPP can pave the way for General Asgar to become even more powerful. But, the thing that's really worrying me is involvement of Chinese"

"What do you mean?"

"Chinese have been secretly propping up General Asgar as their man in Pakistan for quite some time now. After Beg started cooperating with us against the Taliban and Al Qaida terrorists, the only way he could survive in Pakistan was with our help. Also, our attacks on their strongholds in Af-Pak region forced many terrorists to move to safer places, the most prominent being the Muslim majority Chinese province of Xinjiang. The recent resurgence of "civil unrest" in Xinjiang is indirectly a consequence of our improved intelligence and tactics in Af-Pak".

Page paused for breath and then continued, "For the Chinese, somebody they can control will be a much better asset than the current regime headed by Beg. He was supposed to step down from post of army chief last year and hand over the reins to Asgar, but he pulled a fast one by getting himself a 3 years extension. Now, Asgar has no chance of becoming army chief unless something drastic happens.

"Drastic? Like assassination of the Naqvis?" Cobain half-inquired under his breath.

Page replied, "Possibly yes! General Asgar is a very resourceful and ambitious man. We suspect that he struck a deal with Chinese according to which he'll use their influence to gain power in exchange for crackdown on supporters of Uighur separatists in Af-Pak and possibly needling India. His dependence on the Chinese must have increased even more after Beg's newest extension.

We had no choice except to help Beg prolong his tenure. We really need his cooperation in our war against terror and the only man senior enough to take his place, Asgar was on our list of suspected terrorist sympathisers in Pakistani defence forces that we handed over to Musharraf after 9/11. His links with Chinese and radical Islamists make him very unreliable and detrimental to our interests in the region. In fact, we have proof of his involvement with some militant Islamist groups that we are fighting. Some telephone intercepts suggest that these groups have been attacking PPP cadre on his instructions. "

"Do you have any concrete evidence to prove involvement of Asgar and Chinese in this?" Richard asked sharply.

Page was unruffled, "Not yet sir. We do have bits and pieces of evidence that points to some kind of alliance between Asgar, Wasim and Chinese. But nothing substantial that'll prove their involvement with this bombing."

"Great! Less than 90 minutes before my conference with President, Joint Chief of staff and other biggies start and I have nothing to put on table except wild theories." A frustrated Richards addressed to no one in particular. "Well, gentlemen. From now on, presentation of some solid evidence to back up any theory will be highly appreciated. Thanks for your time."

19:00 Hours
PM House
New Delhi, India

A meeting between the Indian PM, the Chiefs of Army, Navy, Air Force, NSA, and the Defence Minister was already in progress when the Home Minister rushed in to the building, closely followed by his aide, who was stopped at the door by the security guard. "Sorry sir, but we can't allow your companion in. He'll have to wait outside in the lobby till the meeting is over. Orders from above"

HM paused for a moment to argue with the guard but then shrugged and went in himself alone to the secure conference room where NSA chief, Angad was debriefing PM and other participants on the current situation in Pakistan. Everybody paused for a moment when HM entered. Indian PM signaled him to take seat on the nearest available empty chair and said, "Got held up somewhere Purohit ji? Angad had just started explaining to us the current situation in Pakistan. I believe that you haven't missed anything that you already didn't know." and motioned NSA chief to continue.

"As I was saying, Pakistani politics is currently divided in to numerous camps. But the biggest ones that we need to monitor are the Naqvi-Beg and Asgar-Akhtar alliances. They are being backed up by USA and China respectively. Also there are some minor political groups like MQM, PML (Q), and ANP etc. But their role and influence is comparatively minor. In addition to these mainstream parties, there are numerous jihadi tanzeems (organisations) that we monitor. Some are pro-government, others anti and still many others declare their allegiances on case by case basis. Without any major exceptions, they all sympathise or cooperate with Taliban and Al Qaida and are one of the major support bases for these terrorist organisations.

Beg's renewed cooperation with US in war against terrorism has been a mixed bag for them. Even though, they've suffered the loss of many senior leaders by means of arrests and even killings, their wide support base and help from closet jihadis in Pak establishment, especially Army, ensures that their work continues unhindered. Our intelligence sources suggest that General Asgar has close links with many of these organisations and employs their cadre for his dirty work.

Apart from this, there are two other factors that we can't afford to miss. First one is Balochistan and second is Pak Occupied Kashmir. Both regions are in serious turmoil directly due to Chinese.

Of the two, it's POK that concerns us the most as it is Indian Territory illegally occupied by Pakistan and now being swamped with thousands of Chinese soldiers and workers. In early 2010, Pakistan allowed China to start building a massive network of roads, railway tracks and pipelines through the region connecting the two countries. Chinese hope to safe-guard their energy routes by using this line as it gives them a direct land-route to the Arabian Sea and Gwadar port. This way, they can avoid the longer and potentially less reliable route through Straits of Malacca. They have already started negotiations with Iran, Saudi Arab and some African countries to route their shipments, oil and gas through this port. Pakistanis also hope to benefit from this and have extended their full cooperation. In fact we have intelligence which proves that Chinese have been using, at least, two army bases and one air strip, in POK to move in their supplies and as storage dumps.

Satellite pictures show construction of at least four permanent colonies where no civilian Pakistani is

allowed. Each one of these colonies has one or more helipads and heavily armed guards on a 24x7 watch basis. Two of these colonies and military bases are less than 80 km from the Line of Control and can be used to launch a surprise attack against us within an hour's notice.

Not only that, there are dozens of terrorist training camps in the vicinity, some of them in direct control of ISI and Paki army. It is a very dangerous situation for us. Chinese presence in this area means that if we decide to take any action against these terrorist camps in the near future, Chinese can get in the way. We have reports from multiple sources that Pakistanis have been planning a big terrorist attack in India very soon and I have a gut feeling that Chinese presence in this area will definitely come into play some way or the other.

But the locals of that area are playing spoil-sport with Paki-Chinese plans. They allege that Chinese activities have destroyed their farms, polluted rivers and uprooted 100s of villages. Three out of four colonies are on the land belonging to the locals and they allege that they were paid insufficient compensation and in many cases, none at all. There have been many reports of protests being held by the affected villagers against the Chinese, but the Pakistani government has been able to hush it up.

Chinese have responded by kidnapping, torturing and even killing some of the more troublesome protesters. Right now, the region is witnessing serious unrest and almost daily confrontations between the locals and Chinese take place. High handedness of the Chinese in dealing with protesters is starting to look like Soviet actions in Afghanistan. Pakistanis have been turning a blind eye to this, as the affected areas are mostly inhabited by ethnic Shias.

As for Balochistan, people are faring no better there either. By and large, Balochis are moderate Muslims but some groups do have links with terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Balochi grievances are that the Punjabi and Sindhi dominated army and government are interested in exploiting natural resources of the region all the while treating them as 3rd rate citizens.

Construction of Gwadar port, without any involvement or economic benefit to the locals, is the latest and just one of the items in a very long list of grievances that they hold against the Pakistani government. Balochis have been fighting a bloody war against the Pakistani establishment for a long time. Pakistani army has used everything in its arsenal ranging from heavy artillery, air strikes and covert missions to put down the rebellion, but the hardy Balochis have kept the resistance alive. However, the entry of Chinese in to the theater has changed the situation for worse.

As I explained earlier, Gwadar port is supposed to be an important point in the new energy route for Chinese and they've invested billions of dollars in it. Common sense dictates that construction of such a massive port, transport routes, pipeline will result in large scale employment of locals and generation of goodwill for the investors. But Chinese kind of screwed up on this one too by employing Chinese workers and engineers for construction as well as daily operations of the port. Instead of helping locals by the creation of employment opportunities, Chinese actions, in the area have in fact caused the same repercussions as in PoK.

Skirmishes between the Chinese and Balochis have already started in earnest. One of the latest causes of conflict is the oil-gas pipeline that Chinese are constructing from Gwadar to China through POK. Balochis forced work on the pipeline to be halted when they came to know that it'll pass through the pastures and native village of a leader of one of the most powerful nationalist Baloch leaders, Gaffar

Khan of Baloch Nationalist Liberation Front. Negotiations between Chinese and Khan broke down over the compensation being offered by Chinese. Pakistanis intervened in their usual high-handed manner by arresting another senior leader and torturing him in custody.

Enraged by this, the Balochis responded by ambushing the army convoys passing through the area and destroying any Chinese construction vehicle and material they could lay their hands on. Unfortunately, the situation was exacerbated when Chinese alleged that two of their unarmed workers died in the attack. A joint Pakistani and Chinese assault force then attacked 3 villages killing at least 57 people, 21 of them women and destroying numerous houses. Next day, son and pregnant daughter-in-law of Khan went missing while on en-route to her parent's house. Their badly burned bodies were found two days later around two km off the road. Nobody took responsibility, but that incident closed the lid on any possible reconciliation effort.

Since then, a savage fight has been going on between the Balochis and the Paki-Chinese army with the latter using helicopter gunships and heavy artillery to completely raze down entire villages. Balochis have suffered high casualties, but they've managed to halt all construction work and supply lines to the Gwadar port through most of the area.

This conflict has forced Chinese to look for an alternate route. The first alternative, follows the coastal highway connecting Gwadar to Karachi, then roughly follows either Indus or General Trunk Highway upto Islamabad and from there to occupied Kashmir. But this alternate route is much closer to the Indo-Pak border and within our easy striking distance. Further, they have already invested billions in mapping and construction of the route through Balochistan. Such a drastic change of plans, at this time, will not only increase the operational cost of the project but also cause unacceptable delay.

For the moment, they are trying their level best to find a way out in Balochistan, but I doubt if the Balochis will oblige. They know that even if they manage to quell the rebellion, nothing short of genocide and complete ethnic cleansing will ensure safety of their route from sabotage in future. All these facts are explained in detail with maps in the reports that I've placed in front of you. You're welcome to ask any questions

HM was first, "With billions of dollars that they have at their disposal, what stops the Chinese from just buying off the locals in Balochistan and POK and prevent all this bloodshed and delay? "

"If Chinese have billions of dollars, US can print trillions even at the cost of damage to its economy that such an action might bring. In case of POK, Chinese have displaced people from dozens of mountainous villages where land suitable for farming and rearing cattle is at a premium and constructed their colonies and roads. The people who have lost their lands have nowhere to go and make a living outside POK as they don't have full rights as other Pakistanis. Even those who haven't lost their lands directly have suffered due to pollution, land-slides, flooding among other side-effects brought upon by indiscriminate Chinese activity in a fragile eco-system.

As for Balochistan, things could've been much better if Pakistani army officers were kept out of the compensation process. Balochis alleged that army siphoned off a lion's share of the money that was given by the Chinese and they were left with nothing. When Chinese attempted to talk directly, Pakis brought in their H & D (Honour and Dignity) issue in to play and also screwed up everything by picking up needless fights. Same thing happened in POK too."

PM asked the next question, "Is Chinese presence in Balochistan and POK in anyway related to the

attack on the PPP rally? “

“I only have a theory sir.” Angad replied hesitatingly.

“Let’s hear it!”

“Pakistanis have been moving slowly on the Gwadar port route due to US pressure on Beg and the civilian government. The US has been sponsoring psy-ops for quite some time against the project by questioning whether anybody except the army and its stooges will gain anything out of this, covertly of course. Beg regime was already under enormous domestic and international pressure due to corruption charges and this whisper campaign forced him to tow the US line. Work on the Balochistan route was halted many times citing environment clearances, land ownership issues and so on much to the annoyance of Chinese.

Although it seems kind of farfetched, one of the quickest ways to get the work completed as soon as possible is to have their own puppet in control instead of a US controlled one. For Chinese, there is no one better than General Asgar for this job. They've been propping him up for quite some time now, as a counter to US influence. They planned to use him to push their agenda after Beg stepped down, but Beg's three year extension put a spanner to their plans. Chinese wouldn't let their investment go down the drain and will do anything within their ability to retain their influence and activate that route. They don't see it as an option but a vital necessity. They'll do anything to weaken Beg and install their own man. This near fatal attack on Naqvi is a big blow to the public moral and image of army. Something that General Asgar and Chinese really want.”

“Why don't Chinese try buying off Beg instead of playing such dangerous games? “ Home minister inquired.

“Well, I don't think that they didn't try that. We know for a fact that two senior PLA generals visited Beg many times over that last two years, ostensibly for the same purpose you mentioned and also to pressurise him to stop the training and infiltration of ethnic Uighur militants into XinJiang. But Beg knows too well that he and PPP government can't last a day without US support.

As for the Uighur militant issue, he is powerless to oblige China without messing up US plans. It's not like reign of Musharraf when Pakis were able to use terrorists for their own means even when pretending to fight them in exchange for money and military aid. Americans have wisened up to the duplicity and perfidy of Pakis and have kept everything on a tight leash. They want to get out of Af-Pak as soon as possible and allowing Chinese controlled Asgar to rule Pakistan will make a graceful exit impossible for them.”

“So it seems like US and China are fighting a proxy war, each one using Pakistanis as pawns. “, PM said with a wry smile.

“But not without serious consequences for us.” Defence minister interjected. “A US-China battle ground in our nuclear armed neighbour is a nightmare. But I don't think any one of the two will be foolish enough to destabilise the country, it being in tatters as it already is.”

“Agreed. I don't think that either the US or China will enter into direct conflict with each other. But their cat-and mouse games are sure to cause serious unrest. It could even result in a civil war. I don't want to even contemplate that.” DM said with a shudder.

PM asked Angad, “Why has Asgar not tried to initiate a coup against Beg till now? Or did Beg try to defang Asgar?”

“It sure seems like a quick fix, but both are serving army men and any such move by either of the two will surely cause division within the army and the likelihood of a civil war. With nukes in the picture, nobody knows the consequences. Even without nukes, it's a lose-lose condition for both, unless something unexpected happens,” Angad replied

“Unexpected like?”

Angad paused for a moment before speaking, “Like Beg willingly hands over the reins to Asgar in exchange for a guaranteed safe exit and large sum of money. Or Asgar dies, in that case there is nobody senior enough in Paki army hierarchy that Chinese control to challenge Beg. But Asgar has good contacts with many Islamist terrorist organisations and most worryingly with army wing in charge of the nukes from his pre-9/11 days.

Beg can also postpone the elections, impose martial law, and cut the wings of Asgar by arresting him or by other means. On the other hand, if Beg dies, power is still in hands of civilian government and they can demote or dismiss Asgar. But I seriously doubt that Asgar and his Chinese allies will let that happen.”

“So, what does that mean for us?”

“In the case of a civil war, anything from terrorist strikes, to a full blown war to deflect any attention. Threat of a nuclear attack blamed on a rogue commander or on terrorists is very likely. Chinese will surely try to take advantage of the situation.”

“A stable Pakistan is in our interests after all!” DM remarked bitterly.

“I dare say it's not. If we play our cards right, we can use the instability in Pakistan to cut China down to size as well as rid ourselves of the shackles of terrorism and nuclear blackmail that these two threaten us with.” Angad responded eagerly to an approving nod from the army chief, General Zoravar Singh.

“Interesting” DM replied. “What are our options?”

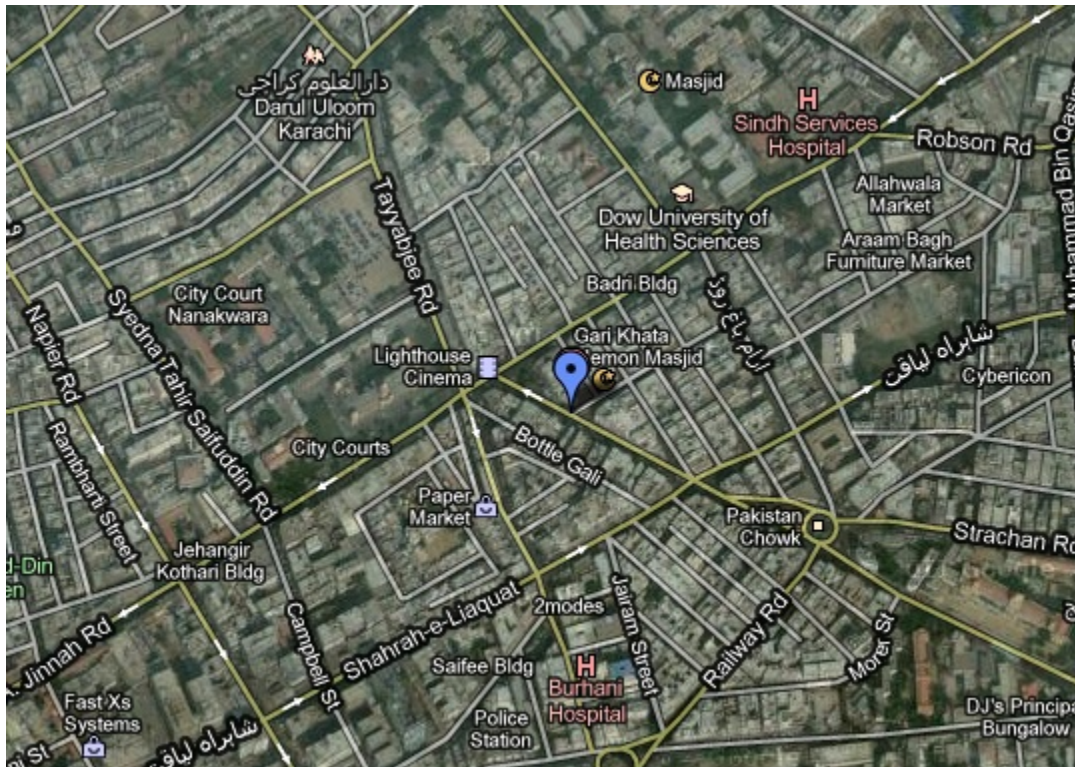
“I believe our service chiefs already have a plan that they can explain much better than me “

PM turned to the three chiefs who so far had been listening to every word intently and spoke, “Let's hear it gentlemen.”

All three chiefs shared glances with each other and nodded a silent agreement. General Zoravar Singh leaned forward on his chair and began explaining their battle plans to a fully attentive audience.

10:00 Hours
27 Oct 2012
Central Market
Karachi, Pakistan

Mohammed Shafiq was in a bad mood when he stopped his car in front of his 25 years old eatery in Central Market, one of the busiest in Karachi. He came to the city when he was barely 13 years old, after running away from his home in Multan. He did various jobs for 11 years and somehow scraped up enough money to start his own shop in Central Market. Over the years he managed to establish a reputation of serving good food at affordable prices. Most of his customers were local shopkeepers and their employees who bought their breakfast and lunch from him daily.



His daily commute of 20 minutes to his shop today took him 3 hours due to the almost curfew like security measures in place. Although Pakistanis were used to terrorist attacks and the subsequent tight security regime that invariably followed such attacks, the measures deployed today were extreme by even Pakistani standards. Every occupant of every vehicle was told to disembark and then body-searched in addition to metal-detector and dog sniffer checks. This delay had cost him earnings he made every morning that amounted to almost half of his daily income every day. He barked at Shahid, the eighteen year old helper who was dozing in front of the shop, to get the keys and open the shutters while he searched for a place to park his car. A delay of three hours meant that most of the already scarce parking spaces were already full and he had to park his car at a considerable distance from his usual place near the shop. Cursing everybody in general for his troubles he took out a cigarette and started walking towards his shop. His unpleasant mood was slightly softened at the sight of a few regulars starting to assemble in anticipation of an early lunch or a late breakfast.

Shafiq's attention was diverted by sound of a pickup truck being rashly driven that passed him by with only inches to spare. He swore loudly cursing the driver and his relatives to hell and worse. His rant was suddenly interrupted by the sight of that truck suddenly changing its direction towards the small crowd in front of his shop. Before his horrified eyes the truck ran over 3 people and stopped after hitting the wall of his shop. He shouted at the people around for help and starting running towards the scene of accident. He was still twenty meters away when the truck exploded with a loud bang and caught fire. Shafiq along with many other people was thrown back many meters by the force of the blast, wounded grievously. Fire from the truck soon reached the LPG cylinders in the eatery which exploded spreading the fire. Eight fire brigade trucks took 4 hours to extinguish the blaze which turned more than half of Karachi's most crowded market into ashes, killed thirty seven people, and wounded many more.

19:00 Hours
27 Oct 2012
PM House
New Delhi, India

Six big blasts, in four cities, within a span of four hours!" the Indian PM was incredulous, "What the hell is happening in Pakistan? "

"Bomb blasts are least of their worries right now. More Pakistani civilians have died in riots that broke out after the blasts than the blasts themselves. More are dying even as we speak. "Angad replied.

"Any idea who did this? Were all blasts planned by a single group"? PM asked even though he knew the answer he'd get.

Angad shrugged, "We are still analysing our intelligence reports. There are numerous suspects, but whoever did this, executed it really well. Unlike the attack on Paki President, no one has taken the responsibility for these attacks yet. "

"I just hope that these guys have enough sense not to blame us for this." DM remarked warily.

"That's a feeling we both share." PM murmured and lapsed into a moody silence.

"We've already issued an official statement condemning the bombings. But I have serious doubts whether it'll make any difference to these idiots. They'll blame everybody except themselves for all their troubles." DM continued. "I'd like to put our forces on border on a heightened state of alert, but I'm sure that it'll be taken as a sign of aggression."

"Only border? I'd like to put all our security agencies on high alert. I'm willing to bet you anything that some Islamist nuts have already started planning terrorist strikes against us". HM spoke to the nodding agreement of Angad.

"We can put state police and other internal security organisations on high alert without any problem but

doing it on the international border is a different matter. Doing so will not only increase tension but bring to bear international pressure on us. Pakis have always exploited anti-Hindu feelings and utilised the anti-India card to divert attention from real issues since long and any such action on our part will surely provide them with an excuse to cause some mischief.”

“Would you rather have similar terrorist attacks in our cities than take necessary actions to avoid them lest it offends the Pakis?” HM asked testily.

“Our forces in J&K are always on high alert and BSF is guarding rest of IB in western sector fairly well. In current situation, maximum we can do is to increase size and frequency of patrols without making it public. Anything beyond this will be seen as unprovoked aggression on our part. Mobilisation of army in current situation is out of question.” DM retorted.

This exchange was broken by buzzing of the intercom. Angad put the phone to his ear and without saying a word turned on the large LCD TV in room. All eyes in the room were turned to the news channel on which serving Pakistani Army Chief General Beg was reading his speech. He spoke of the recent bombings and subsequent riots and their effect on the already precarious security situation in Pakistan. He went on to announce the imposition of martial law, postponing of elections pending better security conditions and his appointment as the country's military ruler until such conditions were achieved. War against Islamic terrorism was to continue without any change as per the requirements of his allies. He finished the speech asking for help from the international community in Pakistan's hour of need.

“Well, that changes something I guess. At least he had the fig leaf of a civilian regime before this. ” PM was first to break the silence.

“He didn't mention anything about mobilisation of army or reshuffling of top posts. I can't find anything in his speech that'll specifically change anything for us in near future.” DM observed.

“What about our peace talks? We can't be seen negotiating for peace with a military dictator. “PM asked in a worried voice.

DM rolled his eyes and was about to say something when he was interrupted by HM, “You are still serious about that “peace talk” thing?

PM replied in a surprised fashion, “Why not? Do we have a choice?”

“We can worry about “peace talks” later. Right now, we have a situation at hand that needs our immediate attention.” HM responded. “What do you think of it Angad? “

“One of many things that worry me is the reaction of General Asgar. I don't think he'll take it easily. Beg didn't mention anything about him and we don't know what he is going to do. Unless Beg has offered him something substantial, he will not take it lying down. Especially, when he has the backing of the Chinese.”

“What's the worst that could come of it?”

“An attempted coup followed by a bloody civil war is one thing that comes to the mind.” DM replied glumly.

“You mean Asgar trying to overthrow Beg? But this is madness!” PM exclaimed.

“Well, we discussed something like that in our last meeting.”

DM looked towards HM before replying “Seems like we'll have to put our forces on maximum alert now. No point in taking chances when Chinese and Pakis are involved. “

“What is your opinion Angad? “ PM looked towards NSA chief hopefully.

“I agree with Defence Minister. Not only Army, even Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard should be put on high alert. It'd be foolish to just guard IB after Mumbai attack.”

“Very well then. Do whatever is necessary, but take every precaution to keep things under control. I don't want a possible nuclear war due to any misunderstanding.”

DM allowed himself a smile, “Don't worry, sir. We'll issue a press statement and send a dossier to assure everybody of our benign intentions.”

19:30 Hours
27 Oct 2012
Karachi Garrison
Pakistan

General Asgar was pacing his office waiting impatiently for his telephone to ring. General Beg's reaction to the bombings and riots had taken him completely by surprise. As soon as he came to know of it he tried contacting General Hu but was told by his aide that Hu was in a meeting with senior leaders of the Party and could not be excused. Asgar could do nothing but wait for Hu to contact him and that made him mad.

Presently the phone rang and Asgar rushed towards the table to pick it up. Smooth voice of General Hu came in on the line, “Good evening General. I understand that there've been some unexpected events?”

“Why else would I feel the need to contact you General Hu, if everything was alright?” Asgar asked angrily.

Hu ignored the jab and continued in the same voice, “Well, Beg's action were not really unexpected after what happened to Naqvis and the unfortunate blasts and riots in your country today.”

“Nothing is really unexpected once it has happened. Now what am I supposed to do? I don't even know who is behind these blasts. “

“If you leave out Islamic terrorists, who do you think can possibly benefit from this? “

“Beg himself! But is it really possible? Serving Army chief orchestrating bombings and riots to get the

chair! “

Hu replied, “We don't know if he did it or not. But think of the consequences if it is somehow proved as being the truth.”

“Even if he really did this and we manage to prove it as such, it will not amount to anything. Americans will not withdraw their support and Beg will continue his rule” Asgar lamented.

“Not if you snatch it from him”.

Asgar nearly jumped out of his chair, “A coup! That too against a serving Army General! Are you in your senses? Do you really think that Americans will let their poodle go down so easily? “

Hu replied in a soothing voice, “I know very well what I'm talking about General. If Americans are backing Beg, you have all the might and goodwill of Chinese republic behind you. You realise that China is an all weather ally of Pakistan unlike US, even your public knows this truth.”

“What will you gain from this? “

“Come on General! We both have common goals and interests that we've discussed so many times. It's just that we need to find a somewhat different way to get you to the top post. ”

“It'll not be so easy General Hu, as you might be thinking. There are a million things that could go wrong. General Beg is no fool. I'm sure that he must have planned for any such attempted coups. Grabbing power from him could turn in to a bloody and long affair. And what is going to stop Americans from coming to his aid?”

Hu replied in a reproaching voice, “You seem to forget your Chinese allies too easily, General. Whatever you need of us, you just need to ask.”

“I'm worried about American intervention because of the nukes. They'll do anything to stop me from gaining their control. You know the history. “

“You need not worry about that General. Didn't I just say that you just have to ask?”

“What? Are you djinn (genie) or something? Genei Hu?” Asgar laughed nervously.

“Maybe.” Hu replied mysteriously. “You are really worried about being nuke nude, aren't you? “

“Of course yes.”

“In that case, how about we supplying you a minimum of six nuclear missiles within two days of your request? Painted in your Pakistani colours, all ready to parade around or even launch at your enemies as you see fit. Beg needs approval from his American masters even to see the Paki nuke assets. But you'll have your own, completely independent ready to launch nuclear tipped missiles. Even if Americans disable all the nukes and missiles that your country already has, you still have something to scare your enemies. You'll get more weapons later according to your requirements. “

Asgar stammered, “Yes...yes...That'll be really great. But, what about the Indians? How do we keep

them from any mischief?”

“Indians wouldn't be able to interfere in our plans anyway. If needed, we'll keep them occupied. You just have to act fast before anybody has the chance to react. ”

“I understand. You just take care of the nuke business and keep an eye on India. I can easily handle Beg myself. After I seize power, nobody will have any option but to respect my authority.”Asgar felt some of his old confidence returning.

“Very well then. I'll be seeing you in person real soon. Goodbye and good luck.”

03:30 Hours

28 Oct 2012

Army HQ

Islamabad

The last few days had been really hectic for General Beg and his face showed it. He hadn't had a moment of rest during the last two days and his eyes were puffy and red from cigarette smoke and endless cups of tea consumed during that period. Right after his announcement of martial law on TV, he had called a meeting to discuss his future course of action with some of his trusted army and civilian officers. He had decided to keep most of the civilian bureaucratic setup unchanged for the moment to deflect some domestic pressure. All of the cabinet ministers and senior bureaucrats were to continue their work as usual. But a few changes in the Army were inevitable and officers loyal to him reaped all the benefits in form of promotions and transfers to desirable places. For General Beg, it was a necessity to consolidate his position rather than to reward his cronies. All the promoted and transferred officers were supposed to take up their commands within 24 hours but nobody was complaining. The officers who had to vacate their posts to make way for these new beneficiaries were sure to complain, but they didn't know of it yet.

After the meeting was over, he poured himself a stiff drink of scotch and called for his car to take him to his residence. The drive to his official bungalow took barely ten minutes on a crowded day; it was going to be even shorter in these wee hours. He finished his drink leisurely and ambled out of the front door of the building towards his waiting bullet-proof car. A body guard who usually sat alongside his driver in front seat saluted smartly and opened the back door for him. Beg got in the back seat and closed his eyes as the driver slowly eased his car out of the driveway. 22 heavily armed commandos in 7 cars and SUVs surrounded the car and escorted him.

He felt mobile phone in his pocket vibrating signaling arrival of a new sms, but he ignored it for the moment. Nobody sent him any sms apart from his 12 years old son, but he should've been fast asleep now. He opened his eyes just minutes later when his driver stopped the car in front of the bomb proof gate of his bungalow. There was a lawn almost 70 meters across between the gate and bungalow with a narrow paved driveway joining the two. Even though all the lights in the lawn were on, those inside the house were off, except for a single bulb on the porch of front entrance.

He yawned and took his phone out to read the message. In the meantime gate was opened and first car of his convoy started entering the premises. He fumbled with the buttons to get to message inbox and smiled quizzically when he read his son name as the sender of message. "It's a little late for the little monkey to be up. Even the lights of whole house are off."

He pressed the read button to open the message and his smiled disappeared at once. It was very short and read, "Bad men inside. Do not come. Send help."

He immediately asked his driver to stop the car. All of his convoy behind him rolled to a stop. He snatched the walkie-talkie from the guard in front seat and hailed Major Sohail riding in leading SUV of convoy. "There's a situation Major Sohail. I think my family is being held hostage inside the house."

"What! I don't understand sir" Sohail exclaimed.

"I just received this message from my son warning me that some bad men are inside and that I should send help."

"Asif is not of prankster type. Any idea who or what are we dealing with?"

"No. He didn't tell. I'm trying to call him but his phone is switched off. We need to act fast. "

"Agreed General. I'm calling for additional forces from the HQ. Meanwhile we'll check the house ourselves. You stay in your vehicle sir."

"Alright. Hurry but be very careful. "

"Roger that."

Sohail immediately gathered his men and ordered 12 of them to take positions around the house and guard the general. All the windows of the house were barricaded by grills and there were only two entrances to the house, one each in front and back. Guarded by two armed soldiers, at all times. He split the rest of his men in two five member teams, one for each entrance and decided to lead the one entering through the front door himself.

Running towards the door he prayed that Asif was indeed playing a prank on his father for once. If he was not, all his men were in serious trouble. The bad guys inside the house must already have him and rest of his team in their gun sights all this while. Feeling of butterflies in his stomach got worse as he neared the front entrance. Two guards who were supposed to be there at all times were missing. Just then, Hav. Yaqub leading his 2nd search team informed him that there were no guards on back entrance either. For a moment he considered waiting for the backup to arrive. After all, it wouldn't take 10 minutes for them to reach here. He brushed away these thoughts from his mind. He was a professional soldier trained for all kinds of situations. Backup or no backup, it was his duty to complete the mission assigned to him.

About 10 metres from the door he thought that he saw somebody moving on the balcony on 1st floor. He was about to hail whoever was there, when he saw a flash and heard the whooshing sound typical of a RPG-69. Before he had the time to react, the rocket smashed in to the ground right in the middle of his team and exploded. Two of his team members were blown to pieces while the rest were thrown off their feet by impact of the blast. As he struggled to get up and return fire, he heard sounds of heavy

gunfire and grenade blasts coming from back of the house, right where his 2nd team was supposed to be. He shouted at the survivors of his team to follow him as he ran towards the cover behind the heavy flower pots around the entrance. This time his approach was interrupted by a hail of heavy AK 47 gunfire and remaining two commandos following him dropped dead. He himself was hit by a bullet in left leg, but managed to crawl up behind cover of a flower pot where he lay bleeding, unable to move or fire back at his attackers.

General Beg was watching this carnage from the back seat of his car. Ten of his men were down without even firing a single bullet. His car was hidden from the house by a row of trees and decorative bushes, but they'll provide no cover from the bullets once the intruders in the house start firing in his direction. He had no idea how many people were inside and could only guess their intentions. He only knew that they were very heavily armed and had his family hostage. Only thing he could do was to wait for backup from HQ to arrive. Till then, it'll be better if he got himself out of their weapons range.

He ordered rest of his men to get in cars and get out of the bungalow. His driver immediately started the engine and put the car into reverse gear. His convoy, now reduced to four cars started backing up towards the gate at a high speed.

It was time to pay back for their second mistake. They had completely forgotten about the guards on the gate. As the first car neared the gate, one of the three guards on duty fired a RPG on it killing three commandos who were in it. The other two started firing from their assault rifles. Survivors took cover and started firing back. Guard who had fired the RPG was killed as he was trying to reload it. Just then, intruders in the house directed their small arms fire towards the convoy.

Inside his bulletproof car Beg was frantically shouting into the walkie-talkie calling for backup. Major Aslam answered him, "I'm almost at the gates of your bungalow General, but how do we get in?"

General Beg was furious, "What do you mean by that?"

"Your gate and boundary wall are bullet proof and bomb proof, designed to keep armed intruders out."

"For God's sake, just blow up the damned thing using C4 charges. I don't care if you use up whole stock. We are being shot to hell from two sides. Thirteen of my men are dead already."

"Understood sir. My men are placing the charges now."

Moments later, whole compound shook when the C4 charges planted by men of Major Aslam's team exploded. One of the guards near the gate was knocked down by the flying debris. Explosions also disoriented the third and last guard who was killed when he tried to run across the lawn towards the house.

Remains of General Beg's battered convoy sped out of the bungalow premises towards the reinforcements. Aslam at once came running towards Beg's car and saluted when General himself opened the door and got out to take a look at the reinforcements.

"Major, you arrived just in time to save our asses. These buggers killed half of my men in minutes and still have my family. They are no ordinary terrorists." Beg said somewhat shakily.

"We can take out these rats easily sir. Just give us the order."

“Don’t be a fool. These men might be holding my family inside the house. I can’t risk their lives. “Beg snapped. “Find out what their demands are. Only then I’ll decide on future course of action”

“Yes sir.”

Aslam was back fifteen minutes later with the news that his men had discovered that telephone lines to the house were cut from the junction box in guard house. Within minutes, Beg received news that the lines were reattached. He himself dialed his landline number and waited anxiously as the telephone inside his house rang. He was nearly startled when someone inside the house picked up the phone. Beg started shouting at once, “Hello, hello!! Who is there? Nussarat? Is that you? “

A heavy male voice replied mockingly, “Ah General Beg .You really have a long life. We were just about to call you.”

“Who the hell are you and what do you want? Where is my family? They’d better be alright; otherwise you’ll regret that you were ever born.” Beg was beside himself.

Man on the other side laughed and said, “Relax General. Your family is completely safe with us. We don’t wish any harm to them or even you. “

“Then why have you taken them hostage and why did you kill my bodyguards?”

“That was really unfortunate general. Believe me. If we had any choice, none of this bloodshed would have happened. Our plan was to meet you inside and persuade you to act according to our wishes in a reasonable and mutually beneficial way. Only if your boy was not so naughty so as to warn you, you’d know of our benign intentions firsthand.”

“Shut the hell up and tell me who you are and what do you want?” Beg bellowed into the phone.

“Well, who we are is not important General. But, what we want from you is infinitely more important. We just want you to give up one thing that you should’ve relinquished long ago “

“What is that? “

“Your post of Chief of Army Staff.” The voice replied in a very casual manner. But the effect on General Beg was anything but casual. He lost whatever self-control he had on himself and started shouting even louder into the phone.

“Who the hell you think you are you filthy son of a bitch? Do you think that you can just walk into my house and force me to handover everything that I worked for all my life just like that? I have lakhs of men at my command. I control the whole country, I control the Americans. You are nothing but a sneaking filthy rat. My men will enter the house and tear you apart within minutes.”

Man on other side of the line laughed even louder this time, “I’d not count on that if I were you. You need to understand it very clearly General that we are not ordinary terrorists. Our goal is to make sure that you give up your post with as little trouble as possible. We do have other means to persuade you apart from your family.”

“What do you mean? “

“For starters, why don’t you try calling General Khalid? Maybe that’ll make you see the light. I’ll call you after ten minutes. “

General Beg was left holding the phone to his ear. He immediately broke out of his paralytic state and asked Major Aslam to contact General Khalid. Beg had promoted Khalid in order to cut down the power of General Asgar. Khalid was to assume command of Karachi garrison from Asgar who was transferred to a Nak Bundi near Afghanistan border. There his role would’ve been nothing more than that of a border guard. Orders to this effect were issued just a few hours ago in just concluded meeting. Aslam was back within minutes looking shaken, “Sir, we have some very bad news. General Khalid convoy was attacked just outside his house just a few minutes ago. He is missing and five of his bodyguards are dead. Survivors claim that attackers who were in army uniforms bundled him into an army vehicle and sped away. “

Beg was speechless for a moment. “Can anybody tell me what the hell is going on? Are you telling me that some nuts not only took my family hostage and almost killed me inside my own house, but also managed to kidnap my most trustworthy subordinate? That too, right inside my cantonment?”

Aslam shifted uneasily on his feet but kept quiet. He was rescued by ringing of Beg’s phone. It was from his house and he at once accepted the call and snarled into the phone, “What have you done with General Khalid you bastard? Who are you working for? “

Man completely ignored his questions, “Do you realise what you are up against, General? You, your family, your cronies, nobody is safe even in your own backyard. You might wear the stars, but it’s us who control everything in this country. For your own sake General, I’d strongly urge you to give up and do exactly as we say. “

“If I resign, who’ll take up my place?”

“You need not worry about that General. After you retire, we’ll make sure that you lead a very comfortable retired life anywhere in the world. “

“It’s that bastard Asgar and you work under him? Isn’t it? I always knew that he wanted my job, but never imagined that he’d stoop so low.”

“Right now, it’s not important who wants you job. Only thing important is the safety of you and your family. After all we can’t afford to keep them tied and bound for long.” Threat in the voice was too explicit to be ignored.

“Like hell I will. You’ve signed your own death warrant asshole. None of you will leave this building alive, even if it’s the last thing I’ll ever do.”

He disconnected the call and ordered Aslam to collect a crack team to storm the house. In the mayhem that followed his orders, his men suffered twenty eight casualties. They managed to save his son but not his wife. Her dead body was found in her bedroom, shot at point blank range. Total of eleven dead intruders were found, all in army uniforms but with fake identification papers. All were later identified

as serving army person, three of them commissioned officers.

20:00 Hours
27 October 2010
Point 711 Border Post
Uri, J&K

Major Ajay Singh was staring at the written order that he had just received from Army HQ. His orderly Subedar Gurang Thapa stood by. He could read the excitement in the Gorkha's twinkling eyes. "Where are these journalists right now?" he asked quietly.

"They are staying at the HQ. They'll be here by tomorrow morning by helicopter if the weather permits. Sub Thapa replied eagerly. Sub Thapa was one of the happiest men in the unit right now. Visit of journalists from a national TV channel meant he could be on national TV. His fiancée would be impressed.

"Is old Verma out of his mind? How are we supposed to help these clowns document the situation at our borders? We are seriously short of manpower as it is and now we have to play tour guide to these dorks from the TV channel! "Ajay muttered in exasperation to himself. Then to Sub Thapa, "Get me Col. Verma. He is not the kind of man given to such frivolities. "

Much to chagrin of Maj Ajay, Col Verma was unmoved by all his protests. TV channel had obtained permission from defence and home ministries for this visit. Defence minister had called Army HQ himself to ensure that full cooperation was extended to the journalists.

"It should be no big deal Ajay. Most of their work is already done in HQ itself. All they need now is to document daily lives of soldiers at the border. Just take them with you on a patrol. Show them the border posts and tell them about your daily lives on the posts on the mountains. You should be happy that you and your men are going to be on national TV. "

"Being on TV is the last thing on my mind. Conditions are really volatile these days. We are observing a lot of activity on the Paki side. We can't risk ignorant civilians playing tourists in such a minefield. "

Col Verma explained patiently, "It's not a war field yet. You just have to act like yourself and allow these guys to film you in the process. How difficult it could be? Ministry thinks that we need all the coverage we can get and what better way to get some journos to see what we army guys daily go through protecting country's borders? These guys are not completely ignorant. Lead journalist has covered Kargil war from the battlefield itself. I believe that she can handle herself fairly well in peacetime."

"She was more trouble than anything else then. I don't think that she has improved a bit"



“You are not the one to judge that Major. Col Verma replied sternly. We have our orders and we have to follow them to best of our ability. These journalists, one of them a cameraman will be at your post by 0500 hours, by chopper. You'll allow them to do their work as explained in written order. Am I clear on this? “

“Yes Sir. Over and out.”

Maj Ajay disconnected the radio call and walked out of his weather proof shelter. He was in charge of 11 posts spread about on the mountainous terrain, each one manned by 8-12 men. Their main task was to prevent infiltration of Paki terrorists across this difficult terrain.

Each post was constructed within line of sight of at least one other post, sometimes two. But bad weather and almost daily fog during winters nullified any advantage that such arrangement provided. Each post consisted of 1-3 concrete bunker manned by 2 man heavy machine gun teams. Some of the posts had mortars for heavier fire-power and could call for artillery fire from 120 and 155mm guns cleverly hidden a few km behind them. This artillery was useful to suppress the Paki border guards whenever they tried to provide covering fire to the infiltrators. Soldiers usually slept in pre-fabricated

igloo like structures constructed of multi-layered fiber-glass and plastic material. This structure provided excellent protection against all kinds of weather.

But first line of defence for these soldiers was the fence on border. The fence itself was a formidable obstacle for any infiltrator. 12 feet high, electrified and covered with motion sensors, heat detectors and cameras with night vision, it was nearly impossible to cross. Number of successful infiltrations had come down drastically wherever the fence was constructed and soldiers were happy for that. The border was not entirely fenced due to the difficult terrain, forests and numerous nullahs and small rivers that abound in mountains. Thus there were some points where there were large gaps from where infiltrators regularly tried to slip in. Soldiers thus had to keep constant watch over such points. Each post sent out a 6 man patrol, thrice daily, to check the integrity of the fence and look out for terrorists from Pakistan trying to slip in.

By this time in October, winters usually set in and covered the whole area with snow making infiltration a very difficult affair for Pakis. Most of the infiltration attempts in this area were made just before this time. But winters were unusually mild this year. Only a light snowfall spread over two weeks happened and most of the snow melted before it snowed again. The whole area was covered with brown mud instead of white snow which was visible only on the highest rocky tips of the mountains. It made job of the soldiers doubly difficult. Not only there was no snow to slow down the infiltrators, it also made their patrol routes muddy and difficult to travel. Mules which carried most of supplies for these soldiers high up in the mountains often got stuck in the mud increasing their misery.

Pakis on other side of the fence were quite aware of this and were trying to take full advantage of the situation. In spite of the mess their own country was in, they were sparing no effort to push in as many terrorists as possible across the border. According to intelligence reports, there were a minimum of 60 terrorists waiting in various jihadi safe houses across the border, each one guarded by Paki army personnel. More terrorists were streaming in every day from terrorist training camps all around the area. Fence was taking the brunt of their attempts at infiltration and Pakis were trying to create as much gaps as possible by directly shelling and cutting it under the cover of darkness. There were reports of Pakis digging tunnels below the fence and Indians were leaving no stone unturned to counter this. Orders had come in to increase duration and frequency of the patrols. In addition to the usual gear, each patrol now carried a video camera to document all the damage and repair work done on the fence. These extended patrols were taking their toll on Indian soldiers who were short of manpower even during relatively peaceful periods.

All of this was on Maj Ajay's mind as he saw a patrol team from his post come in after repairing yet another breach in the fence a few km away. He shrugged away all thoughts of the impending visit of the journos as he prepared himself for reporting by the team. Varsha Butt from UNDE TV was not due to land for another 9 hours.

07:30 Hours
28 Oct 2010
Point 711 Border Post
Uri, J&K

Sub Gurung Thapa was proving to be an enthusiastic host for the two journalists. He had assumed the responsibility of a hospitable host right from the moment that the chopper carrying Varsha Dutt and her cameraman Sidhesh Pathik had landed. Maj Ajay Singh had received the visitors himself, but then had handed over the reign to Gurung. He in turn was only too glad to have the opportunity of getting his photos clicked and having an attentive audience. It wasn't everyday that reporters from national TV channels came visiting for interviews. After handing them much needed cups of hot coffee, he took the journalists on a guided tour of the small base, explaining everything about their daily routine. Varsha kept asking questions and nodding vigorously to his explanations while Sidhesh kept recording everything in his camera, not uttering a word. He had learnt to keep quiet when working alongside journalists with inflated egos and love for attention. He just paid full attention to the camera, leaving the journo to his/her own and it had worked for him quite well.

They were in middle of the guided tour when Gurung was called upon by Maj Ajay. The morning patrol had discovered breaches in fence nearby their post that needed immediate repairs. He had to leave the journalists under supervision of somebody else, while he accompanied the repair team Major Ajay was leading the team who wanted a firsthand look himself. As her itinerary included a visit to actual LoC (Line of Control), Dutt had no great difficulty persuading Maj Ajay to let her accompany the repair team.

The actual site of the breach was less than a Km away from the post, but mountainous terrain and muddy trails prolonged their journey to 30 minutes. The breach was in a small clearing inside a lightly wooded area. There was a gentle slope just beside the Indian fence, broken by small hill like protrusions on the mountain on the Pakistani side. Pakistani presence was marked by two small bunkers on two such hills, about 800 metres apart from each other. One bunker which was on a slightly higher elevation provided a superior view of the surroundings, while the second one provided a cover to its flank from the right side. For any Pakistani infiltrator, it was an ideal place to cross over due to easier terrain, tree cover and firing cover by Pakistanis manning the bunkers.

Varsha Butt was struggling to keep up with the soldiers marching towards the breach. She had not expected her visit to the LOC to be an exhausting affair. So far it had consisted solely of her trying not to get left behind on the muddy and rocky trails. Her expensive Swiss made snow shoes and warm suit were covered with mud and in spite of her four layered clothing the cold wind was chilling her to the bone. The small six man team led by Maj Ajay would have been more considerate if the tensions were not so high. But they were under tremendous strain themselves and couldn't afford such niceties. Sub. Gurung was cameraman of the team and he was responsible for recording all the damage to the fence and material required to repair it. Sidhesh had taken an instant liking for the cheerful Gorkha soldier and he was teaching him tricks of the photography. So, she was left with no one but herself to talk with. This she did with much gusto, grumbling to herself. Sidhesh once caught her talking to herself and considered slowing down for her. But he was enjoying Gurung's anecdotes too much to do so.

The party reached the site of the breach and at once got down to business. Major Ajay assigned three soldiers to keep watch and 2 for repair of the fence. Gurung switched on his camcorder and started

recording. The damage was not much, but a single man could pass through the breach with little difficulty. Varsha cornered Maj Ajay as soon as he was finished assigning duties and started another interview right there. Maj Ajay answered her questions as patiently he could while half of his mind was focused on the work being done by his men. He was also wary of an ambush by the Pakis and wanted the whole business to be over as soon as possible. His men reported that they would need 15 minutes to finish the job. Varsha Dutt now wanted to rattle out her impressions of the visit with the fence and Paki border posts beyond that in the background besides her. Although it was dangerous, Ajay had no choice but to acquiesce to her demands.

She at once positioned herself at an advantageous point, where Sidhesh could capture a Paki border post and the fence at the same time while keeping her in focus. Sidhesh gave the ready signal and began recording, while she started her speech.

“So, here we are the Line of Control, where Indian soldiers stare at their Pakistani counterparts day after day, night after night. This line is dotted by thousands of posts on both sides where lakhs of able bodied men who could be employed more productively elsewhere, spend their lives keeping their so called “enemy” in their gun-sights all the time.” All the soldiers within earshot cringed in disgust. Oblivious to them, she rattled on, “We spend billions of rupees just to maintain status quo while billions of people go hungry everyday. Is this the right way to...”

Her speech was interrupted by a screeching sound coming from across the border. She stopped in mid-sentence and turned around looking for the source of the sound in confusion. Maj Ajay and his men knew the sound of Paki Type-81 mortar very well and immediately swung into action. Maj Ajay rushed towards the two journalists and started dragging them towards cover behind some large rocks. First mortar landed about 80 metres from their location as they were taking cover. Almost at once, Pakis from bunker on left opened up machine gun fire, pinning them down behind the rocks,

Although the soldiers were used to be under fire, it was not true for the journalists who were scared as hell. Varsha screamed at once. “What the hell is this? Why are they firing on us?”

“It must be an ambush. They deliberately damaged the fence, knowing very well that we’ll send our men to repair it and will be sitting ducks in process.” Ajay replied over the din of gun fire. They ducked again instinctively when another mortar round came whooshing by and landed less than 40 metres from them.

“Pakis from the 2nd post are firing these mortars sir. We are not in their direct line of sight, so they can’t fire their machine guns on us. But we need to get out of this area as soon as possible.” Gurung shouted.

“This post in front must be providing them with our exact location. Chandra and Murugan take up positions and provide us with covering fire while the rest of us make a dash towards the tree cover. We’ll cover you when we reach there. Gurung, you escort Varsha and Sidhesh. Run towards the trees the moment Chandra and Murugan start their covering fire.”

Just then another mortar landed very near to the group showering them with dust and rubble. It was too much for Varsha, who at once jumped up from behind the rocks and started running, exposing herself to enemy fire. Gurung at once realised the danger she was in and jumped on her, pinning her to the ground. He then dragged her back to the cover behind rocks as she kept thrashing hysterically.

“You fucking moron. You will get me killed here! Look at me. Why did you tackle me? All my clothes are now covered with mud. These clothes cost more than your annual salary and you’ve spoiled them. You’ll suffer for this you idiot.” She screeched.

“Calm down madam. He just saved your life. You can’t talk to him like that.” Maj Ajay intervened

“You need to shut up Major. You don’t realise who you are talking to. I left my comfortable studio to make a documentary on you dumbasses and this is how you treat me? This is not acceptable. I’ll make sure that you all suffer for this.”

Gurung interrupted her charade, “Sir, the men are in position. Ready to leave at your order.”

“Very good. Chandra, Murugan, start firing. Rest of the men, follow me” Maj Ajay ordered in a calm voice...

“She is coming too, sir?” Gurung asked, gesturing towards Varsha who now lay prone behind the rocks.

“Yes. Drag her if you have to. Just ignore whatever she says.”

Murugan and Chandra had taken up positions behind two large rocks and started firing on the Paki machine gun with their INSAS. Even though, the distance was large for an assault rifle, their accurate fire silenced Paki machine gun for a while. It was the opening that Maj Ajay was waiting for. He ordered the team to rush out at once. Paki gunners saw them trying to escape and opened up fire again. But the team reached safe positions before Pakis had the chance to adjust their aim and fire accurately. Maj Ajay then ordered men alongside him to provide covering fire for Chandra and Murugan who rejoined the team safely. After checking whether everybody was OK, Ajay assigned two of his men to escort the two journalists to a safer place, while he called for reinforcements and fire on the Paki posts from adjacent Indian posts.

He didn’t know it yet, but Pakis had just started unprovoked firing on 11 other locations along LoC in J&K. Ceasefire along the border was no longer in force.

10:00 Hours
28 Oct 2010
PM House
New Delhi, India

Everybody in the meeting room wore a grim expression. None of them had expected things to deteriorate so fast. Defence Minister was supposed to be on his way to Russia for a meeting with his Russian counterpart. News of the attempted coup had come in middle of the night and he had to postpone his trip. Air Force Chief had cut short his tour of some newly activated air fields in the north-east. He could have registered his presence using video-conferencing, but he preferred to be physically present. Right now, he was exchanging notes with the Army chief who was looking even more serious than usual.

Last men to enter the meeting room were PM and NSA chief Angad, both earnestly involved in a conversation. Everybody rose up to greet the PM who took up his usual seat and motioned NSA Chief to start his briefing immediately.

"Good morning, gentlemen. We are a bit short on time due to radically changing situations in our neighbourhood. I'll come straight to the point. Last night, there was an attempted coup in Pakistan.

Some serving Pakistani soldiers, believed to be loyal to General Asgar tried to kidnap or kill General Beg inside his residence. General Beg escaped unharmed, but his wife and nearly 20 of his soldiers were killed. At the same time, his new second in command, General Khalid was kidnapped. His present whereabouts are unknown. Beg had promoted General Khalid in staff meeting last night to replace General Asgar.

Right after the news of this attack started to spread, there were reports of gun fights among Pakistani soldiers in various cantonments all over the country. Hundreds of Pakistani soldiers are believed to be dead or missing in the bloodshed."Pakistan has seen numerous coups, but this one is unprecedented in terms of players involved and the bloodshed that has followed. This infighting inside Pakistani army is sure to affect their already weak civil society badly. Pakistani civilians were already reeling under bomb blasts and subsequent riots. This mutiny will have serious consequences not only for Pakistanis but even us. This meeting is called for discussing our plan of action regarding this issue."

DM was in an unusually bad mood, partly due to postponement of his trip and he was not hiding his displeasure, "Damn these idiots! Who is in control of their nuclear weapons now? "

"In comparatively normal circumstances, General Beg. Whatever we know of Pakistani nuclear system, even if Asgar manages to get hold of a few bombs, he wouldn't be able to use them. Not even against us." Angad replied.

How is that?" DM asked eagerly.

"In return for their dollars, Americans had forced Pakis to consolidate their nukes in to a centralised system that could be monitored continuously and deactivated to prevent its misuse in conditions just like this. Their man Beg had all the launch codes and even if any rogue element manages to launch a missile against us, it wouldn't cause a nuclear explosion. "Angad explained.

"You mean to say, that right now all of their nukes are useless against us?"

"Not exactly. Only the arsenal that they couldn't hide is under control. Rest of it might still be usable."

"That's not a comforting thought." HM observed dryly.

"It certainly isn't" NSA chief agreed.

DM was on the verge of hysteria, "The whole country is breaking down. Even the army that used to hold the place together is divided now. What stops any fanatic to take advantage of the chaos and take control of a few nukes! We have to take some action."

"And what might that be? Do you have anything in mind?" PM inquired

"Well, I can't think of anything right now" DM conceded. But surely military can think of something. What do you suggest gentlemen?" he asked turning to the service chiefs sitting beside him for help.

Army chief began, "Right now, anything we do will potentially be seen as adding fuel to the fire. They, I mean some of them actually want us to get involved in the mess. This morning, Pakistanis started firing at our border posts in J&K breaking the cease fire agreement."

"Pakis have always been firing all year round to provide cover for their terrorists. What's different this time?" HM interrupted.

"The scale of firing is unprecedented. Earlier Pakis shelled our positions either to provide diversion or covering fire to their terrorist infiltrating into India, but this time they are specifically targeting our soldiers and positions. This is not limited to a specific area. Our positions in Kargil, Siachen, Uri, Poonch, and Rajauri, practically all of the north and north-west sectors in J&K came under intense fire today. It's still going on in many places. According to the orders, our men showed restraint and refrained from responding in the same way. Our casualties were light for the scale of fire, but our luck wouldn't hold for long.

"We can't fall in to this trap. If we don't show restraint this whole thing will blow up in our faces." PM said in a worried voice.

General Zoravar Singh was expecting this, "I agree sir. However, the consequences will be far more serious if we don't take any action. We lost three men in the firing today with 14 wounded. The toll is mounting even as we discuss this issue. Letting our soldiers die just like that is completely unacceptable. We have to show those Pakis that they can't take play nuke card every time to inflict damage on us. If we surrender to Pakis today, Chinese will surely try to take advantage. They have already taken control of a large part of PoK. What stops Chinese from indulging in similar mischief to further weaken and embarrass us?"

"Yes. He is right. Pakis tried to play dirty in Kargil too, thinking that we wouldn't dare attack them since they had nukes. But after we did, they washed off their hands of the whole issue. Buggers even refused to acknowledge their own dead. What if we had not taken any action and allowed them to stay fearing a nuclear attack?" DM added

"How do Chinese fit in to this picture? Are they involved? And who in Pakistan gave the orders to start the firing?" PM asked.

"Well, Chinese involvement is what is worrying us the most. As discussed in the last meeting, General Asgar is just their puppet. I'd be really surprised if we don't find any proof of their involvement in this coup. Apart from this, the area in northern J&K, where we came under fire is too close to places Chinese are present. We know for sure that Chinese have spread their tentacles much beyond the highways and tunnels they were building.

As for who is coordinating this firing, most of the evidence points to General Asgar. For starters, he was CO of the Pak Army HQ in Gilgit during Musharraf's time. Further, commanders currently serving there are believed to be loyal to him."

PM's already worried face assumed a horrified expression, "So if we retaliate to Paki firing, there is a real possibility of Chinese getting involved too? This is too much for us."

DM lost all of his patience, "Chinese have no ground to take any offense. All of J&K, including POK is ours and these turds have no business being there in first place. And we are retaliating to unprovoked Paki firing on our positions. We have all the right to do anything we want to protect ourselves."

"What if all this is a Chinese conspiracy to pick up a fight?"

HM spoke up. "So what! We give them a fight. Why the hell are we spending so much money on defence when a third rate terrorist sink hole can kill our soldiers at their own pleasure? "

DM's voice was getting too loud for the ears of the soft-spoken PM and he winced in annoyance. "So, what do you want? An all out war? "

"Of course not. But taking such provocations lying down is highly unsuitable for a country aspiring to be in UNSC. It's your pet dream after all, isn't it?" DM shot back, much to the surprise of everybody present in the meeting.

HM cleared his throat and intervened, "Cool down Shivendra ji. It's not the time or place for this. There is always a peaceful way."

"Don't you think that I know this? DM replied, in a milder tone. "But there has to be a limit. There is nothing stopping us from at least bombing the hell out of buggers who are shelling us."

Army chief took the cue, "Yes. Our hands are tied due to the ceasefire agreement. Now that they've themselves broken it, we have no obligation to play nice. At the very minimum, we should have the authority to destroy Paki positions which are firing on us."

"What about Chinese?" HM asked DM answered the question before Army chief could, "What about them? We are defending ourselves from Paki firing. If they object, they wouldn't have a leg to stand upon. "

PM took a deep breath and asked "Are you sure General, that firing back is the right thing to do?"

Army Chief responded, "We do have the option to stay quiet and take the blows, but for what? We are

losing soldiers even as we sit here. Some of the firing has affected civilian areas too. A journalist from a national TV channel was filming a documentary on our border posts in Uri, when it came under fire."

HM had not forgotten the pestering he had endured by the TV channel to grant permission for documentary. He rolled his eyes and interrupted, "Yes that Varsha Butt from UNDE TV. Saw her showing off her wounds and posing like she is some kind of war heroine. It was a mistake allowing her to be there." Realising somewhat belatedly that he was interrupting the Army chief, he apologised and requested him to continue.

Army Chief acknowledged his apology with a curt nod and resumed, "Not responding will encourage Pakis as well as Chinese to cause even more trouble. Its effect on morale of the armed forces as well as civilians is anybody's guess. We are not asking for permission for an all out attack on Pakistan. We just want the authority to defend ourselves against Paki firing."

"And you are sure that the things wouldn't spiral out of control? What if they start firing in other places too?"

"I can't give you 400% guarantee of anything apart from that my soldiers will not overstep their authority in any condition." General replied plainly. "As for rest of the international border apart from J&K is concerned, we can be reasonably sure that the Pakistani Rangers in the sector will not act in same way as their Army counterparts in J&K. We have no reason to believe that Rangers will dance to Asgar's tunes. In addition, they don't have the Chinese card to threaten us here. Pakistani forces are in no position for an offensive anywhere. Our forces are on a high alert anyway and can start mobilising within hours of receiving the orders."

"Will you require support from Air Force or Navy?"

"We had discussed the issue amongst ourselves before the meeting. My men will surely need support from AF to transport men and materials. Navy can be used to impose a sea blockade, but that's not necessary now. We can handle the offensive part ourselves. Involving AF or Navy offensively will escalate matters. "

"That reminds me, what about their Air Force and Navy?" DM asked Angad.

"Although their Air Force is in control of some nuclear bombs, they just can't launch their aircraft carrying them without us or Americans knowing. Specially since only a few F16s are nuke capable and Americans have kept a tight leash on them .As for Navy, we don't think that they pose any serious threat to us. The mutiny in the army has affected these two forces in the same way, and their operational readiness is severely degraded. Hell, I'd be surprised if they manage to fly even regular sorties. Even then we are taking no chances and we will have all of them under continuous surveillance. If they try doing anything funny, we'll be the first to know."

For first time since the meeting started, PM looked slightly at ease, "That's some comparatively better news. Very well General. You have my permission to fire back in if Pakistanis fire at you. But under no conditions, our men will cross the LoC. You can't imagine the pressure I'm currently in. People want me to just offer the other cheek. "

"I understand Sir. We'll try our best to keep things under check." A visibly relieved General Zoravar Singh replied.

"I suppose that's all there is to it? Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have a meeting scheduled with the American ambassador. Shivendra ji, do you have your statement on the situation in Pakistan ready yet? Let's discuss it in my office. PM rose up signaling end of the meeting.

17:45 Hours
Point 6431
Poonch, Jammu

Joining army was more of an accident than a conscious career choice for Shubharanjan. As a 11 years old kid, he had seen the Kargil war on TV and like every other kid of his age, he too watched the events unfolding on TV with rapt attention then forgot about it afterwards as pressure of studies and other stuff associated with growing up took all of his time. As an average student, he did alright in school and joined a fairly well reputed college. There, he joined NCC just for the extra grades it offered and completed level C. As the time of graduation approached, he too started applying for jobs with various private sector companies and government agencies, hoping to grab a well paying job like all of his classmates.

He was not entirely successful in his endeavours, managing only a clerical job in a small startup company that didn't pay enough to justify the long hours his boss demanded. He got bored of the job within weeks and started looking for change. Most of his classmates were doing comparatively well, but a lot were stuck in jobs that they hated, just like him. One day he received a letter containing his admit card for the SSB exam. He had filled up the form on the NCC counter in his college months ago without really giving it a thought and had forgotten all about it. Although he enjoyed his stint with NCC, he had never given a serious thought to idea of joining armed forces as a career choice or even as a way to serve the nation. Nobody in his family had been in armed forces, except one of the cousins of his mother and he too was in police.

“Well, what the hell! What's the harm in trying? ” He said to himself and attended the exam, then again promptly forgot about it until the day he received a letter informing him that he had passed the written and was required to attend the second round for face to face interviews and physical tests. In good physical condition, he cleared the physicals easily but was shown the door in one of face to face interviews. Piqued and puzzled by his disqualification at almost the last round, he discussed the matter with one of his college mates whose elder brother was a Colonel in the army. The Colonel was gracious enough to listen and give him as much guidance as he could in his limited time. Although in meanwhile, he had managed to land another job that paid better than the previous one, he applied again for the SSB. Even though he still had doubts about clearing the exam, much to his own surprise he did so in second attempt.

His father was both proud and slightly amused while his mother showed more of a horrified surprise

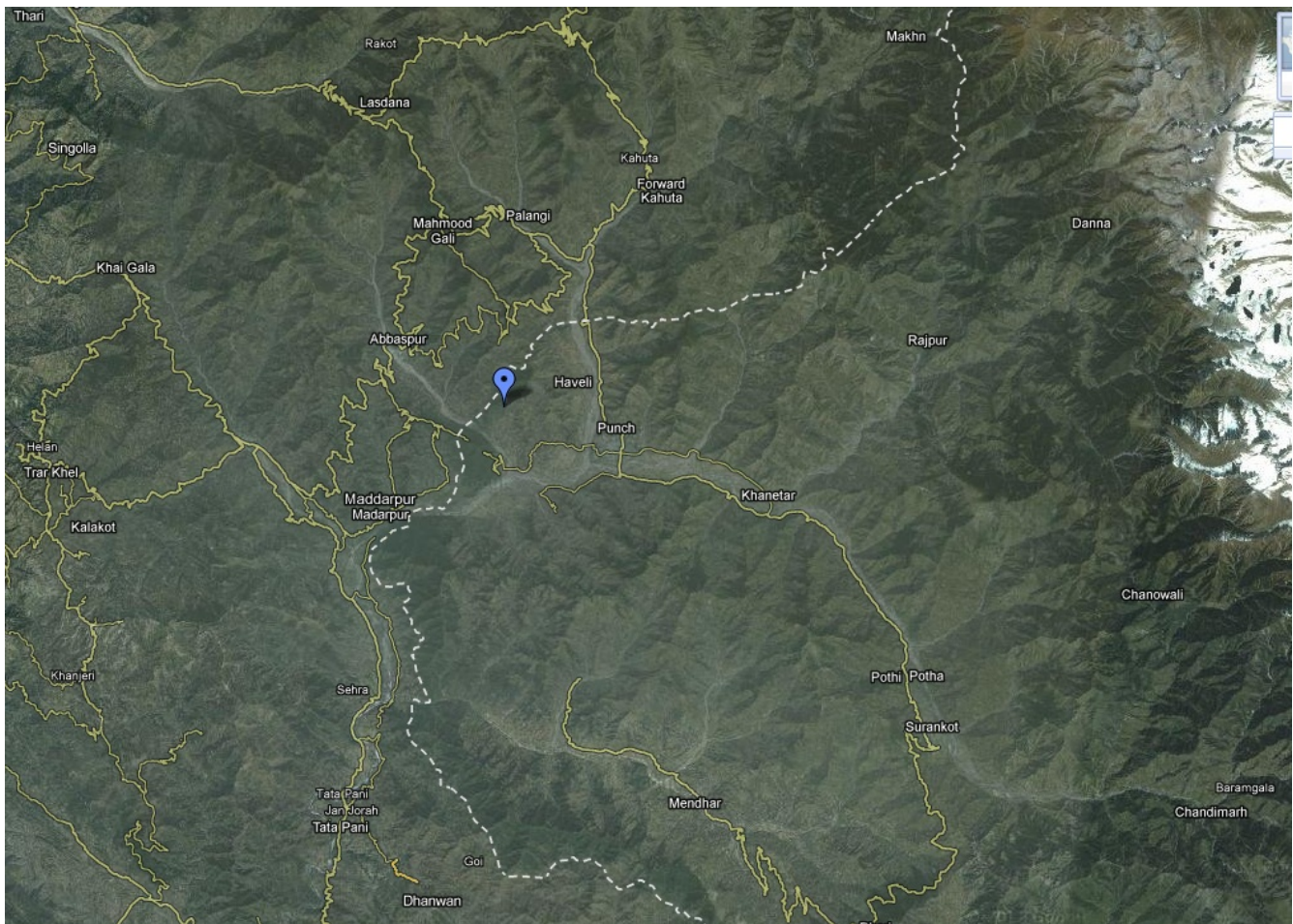
than pride. Both had been in government service their whole lives and idea of their only son joining the army had never crossed their mind. They had expected him to complete his studies, get a job somewhere, preferably in government sector and start his own family within a few years, just like the rest of the extended family. He was even well on the expected path and now this army thing! What with its risks and postings to remote places that no one even heard about.

The very concept was alien to them, but they had to give in to his wishes. Sure there was a little danger but it's not that everybody died. Private sector job was okay but was boring as hell and he had loved the NCC. He even won two awards, didn't he? Additionally, even army was paying a competitive salary after the 6th Pay Commission. Who else in the whole family had the honour of wearing the olive green uniform? And most importantly, finding a girl for marriage wouldn't be hard now.

He resigned from the job next day and reported to the IMA for his training which he passed respectably. His first tour of duty in Punjab was peaceful and routine in every aspect and lasted four months. After which he was transferred to J&K, which everybody rightly expected to be his first brush with real action. He had arrived at his post known only as Point 6431 in two weeks as an almost fresh Lieutenant still learning the ropes.

Point 6431 was just one of countless mountain peaks that formed the rugged landscape on the India-Pakistan Line of Control in J&K. Like with every other mountain peak right on the border, this one too had army posts manned all year round. Maintaining round the clock vigil all through the year was tough in summers and murderous in winters. The process was exhausting, expensive and most of all, took its toll on the soldiers who considered a posting like this akin to a punishment tour. Cut off from rest of the civilization, except for the field radio in small bunker high up in a god forsaken mountain, all the while keeping constant vigil was nobody's idea of fun. But still, the work had to be done. Neither side was sparing any effort to better or at the very least, keep up with the other side.

Conditions had not always been like this. Prior to Kargil war in 1999, most of the posts high up in the mountains were vacated during winters and reoccupied in summers by both armies. Both India and Pakistan had a gentleman's agreement on the issue and neither side tried to occupy others empty posts. The truce between two sworn enemies had held in spite of some hiccups till 1999, when Pakistani army broke the agreement and occupied numerous Indian posts while they were empty during winters. Intruders were regular Paki army personnel disguised as "mujahedeen". Indian intelligence and armed forces were caught with their pants down. A limited, yet bloody war ensued with Indian Army throwing waves of infantry and artillery attacks against a well established enemy in an impossible terrain. The war took its toll on both sides. India lost more than 600 soldiers and 5 aircraft in a war that lasted just more than three weeks. Losses on Pakistani side were much higher. Indians claiming more than 1400 while Pakistanis claiming no more than 300. Pakistanis owned up some of their dead 11 years later. They had to do it sooner or later, especially since loss of a whole army unit; NLI was difficult to hide anyway.



One of the effects of that war was a halt on the practice of abandoning posts during winters. All along the LOC, new bunkers were constructed, existing ones fortified with more supplies and armies on both sides started their round the year watch.

But Point 6431 differed from rest of the peaks. It had immense strategic value for both sides. It had been in Indian control since 1947 and unlike many other peaks, its posts were never abandoned during winters even before 1999. Much of its strategic value came from its unique position. It was directly on the top of Bahu pass, which connected India's territory with Pakistan. Although the pass had been in disuse for six decades, it was still a vital feature for both the sides. It was the only place in the sector which allowed tanks from either side to cross over in to the other. Both sides had realised the possibility and constructed roads that could support heavy armour movement right up to the opening. But Pakistanis had a major disadvantage in the fact that whoever controlled Pt. 6431 effectively controlled the pass and the control was in Indian hands.

One other advantage that controller of the peak enjoyed was the strategic view it offered, on both sides of border, especially Pakistani. While terrain on Indian side behind the peak was still uneven and covered with smaller mountains, Pakistani was more or less flat with only a small series of hillocks that actually marked the end of the mountain range in this area. Although it gave Pakis an easier and faster terrain to move their convoys, control of the peak in Indian hands negated much of their advantage.

Any movement they made was difficult to hide from the Indians. Even the small 130 mm field guns and 81 mm mortars on top of the mountain were deadly and had extended range due to the altitude advantage. Additionally, they could always call for backup from the heavier 155mm Bofors guns which were placed only a few Km back.

The importance of the pass was further increased after an old but disused route connecting Poonch to Shopian in Kashmir was activated. In earlier times, the route was used by Mughals to travel to Kashmir. It passed through Jammu, Rajauri, and Poonch and terminated in Shopian in Kashmir. The new road, formally named as Mughal Road was less than 1 hours drive from the pass and the side controlling it had a very easy route to reach both Kashmir as well as Jammu in a short amount of time.

One of the first things that Lt. Shubharanjan had noticed about the peak was the time required for travel to the post on the mountain top from army base camp just on the foot-hills. First time he traveled, it took him more than 5 hours to climb the nearly 6000m high mountain. At many places the path was no more than a small mule trail, which afforded barely enough foot-hold for a loaded mule to pass through. Iron chains and ropes were nailed in at many places to provide a hand hold for the men. Anybody slipping at any such place was sure to die a quick yet gruesome death on the hard rocks hundreds of meters below. Getting down from the top was as difficult as going up, in some places more difficult due to the loose rock and gravel. Mules and porters carried much of the supplies above, with an occasional chopper pitching in whenever available.

Conditions on Pakistani side were much easier though. The peak was more like a gentle slope, albeit littered with large rocks, which extended many km down in to the Pakistani side. It also took much less time to travel and getting men and supplies, to the top, were much easier and safer. They could have very well constructed a road if it was not for Indians controlling the peak.

He had staggered on to the peak tired, cold and out of breath in spite of the excellent physical condition he was in. His CO, a jolly Major Baljit Singh Randhwa had laughed on seeing his condition and immediately offered him a drink of brandy which Lt Shubhranjan gratefully accepted. He was filled in on the history and importance of the post by the Major himself. But it was Subedar Sonam Stobbdhan who taught him about life on top of the mountain. Among all men, he had spent the most time on the post and was the senior most NCO. He was also the leader of artillery spotter team and had taught many a soldier the tricks of raining down accurate artillery fire in mountains.

Lt Shubhranjan had shown good marksmanship in NCC as well as IMA training and was given charge of the machine gun posts. There were 2 INSAS LMGs (Light Machine Gun) and 2 MGA1 HMGs (Heavy Machine Gun) placed in fortified concrete bunkers spread around the top. Two mortar teams, each armed with 81mm mortars were usually positioned in the middle. They could move to a different position when required.

Heavier fire power was provided with M-46 130mm field guns. Although old, these Soviet manufactured artillery guns were in good condition and had fair range and accuracy for their caliber. These were placed in dug in positions shielded by the rocks and sand bags to protect them from counter-artillery fire and to hide the muzzle flash. Although in theory these guns could be moved around, there was no place to do so on the mountain top. The guns were carried up in completely knocked down condition by helicopters and mules and then assembled on top. Ammunition was transported in the same laborious way, 2-3 shells on a single mule at a time.

Close in fire support was provided by six more riflemen armed with standard 5.56mm INSAS rifles.

Soldiers wished for more fire power and men, it was almost impossible to do so using mule-porter system and already scarce Chetak and Cheetah light helicopters. Dhruvs with their higher carrying capacity were beginning to share some of the work load, but they were in short supply too. Even if they could move in more supplies and men, there was little space for either on top.

Lt. Shubhraman had learned of the above mentioned fact on the second day of his arrival when he had to scramble towards cover when Pakis started shelling the place. He was on a familiarisation tour of the post with Sub. Sonam playing the tour guide, when sound of first shell screeching towards the post hit their ears. Both men immediately scrambled towards the nearest bunker, reaching there only seconds before first of the shell landed, albeit well short of the place they were in. Pakistanis were using 122 mm Type 54, Chinese copy of Soviet M30 and ironically, Type 59I which were Chinese copy of M46 that the Indians had. Indians retaliated with shelling of their own. The duel ended as soon as it had started. Pakis didn't want to risk needling Indians more than usual due to the strategic advantage latter held and Indians on the other hand, were almost always short of ammunition.

Sitting in the bunker while guns were blazing, Shubhraman had not realised the cramped conditions inside. There was barely enough space for 2 man crew of the machine gun in the bunker and addition of 2 extra men had left little room for anyone to move without bumping into somebody else. He was too busy to pay any attention to this as he watched Sub. Sonam providing coordinates to the artillery crew on the short range radio. But he couldn't help but notice shaking of earth as Paki shells landed close by and Indian guns fired back. Although both sides had fired only 5 shells each in less than 2 minutes, it has seemed like an eternity to the young Lt, who was facing enemy fire for the first time. Slightly shocked and disoriented, he had just sat there until Sub. Sonam shook him awake after the firing stopped.

“Are you OK sir? Don't worry about this. Ye sab to chalta hi rehata hai.” The veteran Subedar had told him with a nonchalant grin and went out of the bunker motioning the still confused Lt. to follow him. They were met by Major Baljit who was always in a cheerful mood, irrespective of whatever was going around. He slapped Shubhraman on the shoulder and asked, “So Lt., did you liked the Paki welcome? Quite a show they put on to make you feel special, didn't they? “

Subhraman was still gathering his wits and could only mumble confusedly, “Yes sir!”

Both of other men laughed on hearing this much to the discomfort of somewhat embarrassed Lt. “Don't worry Lt. You will get used to it. It's nothing much.” Major Baljit said in a kindly way.

Although he nodded his agreement, Subhraman still couldn't understand how anybody could get used to high explosive shells exploding around him. “Around”, if the chap is somewhat lucky. No amount of luck is going to help someone who gets a direct hit, even within meters. He thought to himself.

The next few days passed away in a similar routine with Pakis marking their presence with an occasional burst of shelling which kept Indians on their toes. Pakis had the advantage of a terrain suitable for moving around and always fired from a different location, unlike Indians who were forced to stay in a restricted area. Although it somewhat evened out the odds, neither side liked its status. After all, nobody likes to fight an evenly matched enemy, let alone a more powerful one. Much of the work on Indian side consisted on keeping an eye on Paki movements, just to keep the odds even.

This task they performed using high powered binoculars and with additional thermal sights during night or heavy fog. Recently, army HQ in Poonch had managed to get hold of a couple of Heron UAVs. Although it had made the task much easier, there was simply too much ground to be covered by only two UAVs. Local commanders had been pressing for more UAVs but the equipment and trained manpower were hard to come by. It meant that, they could manage to receive pictures and live video feed of their sector only once every two days. Rest of the time, they had to depend on their own eyes and binoculars. Looking at the pictures taken by Heron for first time, Shubranjan immediately noticed the immense force multiplier effect an eye-in-the sky provided. Even during low visibility conditions caused by fog, clouds or night, thermal imaging cameras of the UAV could capture every detail of men and machines on the ground and stream back the images in real-time to their handlers. He had talked about it with Major Baljit and wished that they could have more time with the UAVs. Major had replied simply, “We fight with what we have Lt., not with what we wish for. I agree with what you said, but we simply don't have the resources right now.”

Seeing the expression on of Subhranjan's face, he had smiled and continued, “That’s what Brigadier Gagan said to me when I asked him for more UAVs just the way you said. Who are we to question the old man, eh? I know he is trying his best. Who knows, we might get more in coming days.”

Things had gone on as expected with Subhranjan. He had learnt from his first experience of being in enemy fire and as the more experienced soldiers had predicted, learnt to take it in stride. After nearly 2 weeks, his initial “welcome” was just another part of life on the border. Still, the soldiers watched the events unfolding in Pakistan warily. They knew that any kind of unrest in Pakistan will definitely affect the peace on border. They were not entirely wrong in this assumption and Pakis proved them right by increasing the amount of shelling just after the news of attack on Paki President had hit the news channels.

Although they were under strict orders to exercise restraint, Indians had no choice but to retaliate in self-defence. The shelling that lasted for a maximum of 10-12 rounds earlier had now escalated to full blown artillery duels being fought on multiple locations. Now after two days of facing intense firing Indians were hoping that the news of coup will dampen the enthusiasm of Pakis and volume of fire might decrease. Much to their disappointment, Pakis had actually increased the tempo.

The three senior most ranking personnel on Point 6431, Major Baljit, Lt. Shubharanjan and Subedar Sonam were huddled in a bunker discussing their plan of action in current situation. The walls of the bunker were covered with maps and recently taken pictures of Paki positions by Heron UAVs. Things were not going well for Indians. They were running short of ammunition due to paucity of stocks. The convoys that were expected to bring more supplies were delayed due to bad weather and landslides. Bad weather had also stopped the base camp from sending mules and porters up.

“What's our inventory situation Sonam?” Major Baljit without lifting his eyes from the reports he was studying.

“We are running short of ammunition for our M46s as well as 81mm mortars. Stocks for both are reduced to 31 and 42 rounds respectively. We do have enough grenades and bullets for our rifles, but that's only because we haven't had to fire them, yet. We still have enough food and water to last us a week” Sub Sonam was quick to reply.

“Going by the current rate of fire, these stocks wouldn't last for more than a day. When are we going to

get more supplies?” Shubhranjan couldn't help wondering aloud.

Sonam gestured towards the small window of the bunker “Our mules can't carry anything up due to this bloody fog and rain. They tried sending some men in the morning but the team had to turn back within one hour of leaving the camp. Using choppers in these conditions too risky. We can only hope that the weather eases soon.”

“Even if the mules start their journey right now, it'll take them at least 3 hours to reach here. If our ammo runs out sooner than their arrival, we will be in real deep shit.”

“What do we do then sir?” Sonam asked Major Baljit.

“We'll have to use our ammunition more judiciously. Fire only when you have a sure fix on their position. No need wasting firing just for the effect.”

Taking up a pointing stick, he pointed out position of Paki guns on maps and pictures, “Herons took these pictures last night. As you can clearly see, we did manage to hit one of their big guns in previous night's shelling. But they still have two more type 59Is and three Type 54s spread all over this sector, most of them pointed in our general direction. Although 59Is have more range, it's 54s that worry me more. These smaller guns are comparatively more mobile and can prove really hard to counter if Pakis keep moving them as they've started to do recently. Am I clear on this?” he asked.

Both men nodded their agreement and Major continued, “Lt., I'll need you to check on machine guns and mortar crews. Make sure that they are ready to fire and have enough ammunition. You never know when we might need to fire them. Sonam, come with me. I want to check the big guns myself.”

With this he ended the meeting and went out of the bunker followed by his two juniors. Subhranjan watched the two men walk towards M46 positions while he himself started his walk towards machine gun bunkers.

He found the soldiers slightly tired and wary but in good spirits otherwise. He was in first bunker on the eastern side when he heard the sound of artillery shells streaking in. Even just by listening to the sound of the shells as they streaked towards his post, Shubhranjan realised that something was different. But he didn't have enough time to guess what. Within seconds, one shell landed smack in middle of the post area, with two passing over the peak.

“Damn it! They are firing 155mm shells. “Lance Naik Joginder shouted in surprise.

“Seems like they have a good lock on our position as well. You sure it's a 155mm?” Shubhranjan shouted back, his ears ringing by sounds of the blast.

“100% sure sir! These shells are much bigger and even clearing the peak this time. Their 130mms can't fire that far.” Joginder replied back.

Their conversation was interrupted by the boom of Indian M46s firing back at the Pakis.

Joginder grinned at the Lt., “Heh! That's sure to teach those idiots some good lesson.”

Right about then, one of the shells fired by Pakis got lucky and landed smack on one of Indian M46s.

The ammunition dump right next to the gun caught fire and some of the shells exploded.

Shubhramanjan heard the racket with a sickening feeling as he remembered that both Major Baljit and Subedar Sonam were supposed to be right there. He at once scrambled out of the bunker and started running towards the gun's position. He stopped in his tracks when a badly wounded soldier, covered in soot and dust staggered in front of him and collapsed. He muttered deliriously, "Nobody survived sir. The shell landed right on our position." Shubhramanjan asked the soldier to keep quiet and shouted for the medic. He was also scrambling towards the gun's position along with his assistant. He at once started administering first aid to the wounded soldier.

Shubhramanjan left the three men there and resumed his search for his two compatriots. He stopped dead in his tracks when he came across the gun's position. The small clearing was nothing but a mess of twisted metal, smoke and fire. Overcome by fear and desperation he sprinted towards the clearing trying to find survivors. All he could find was splashes of blood and a few dismembered limbs. Unable to control himself, he collapsed on his knees and puked. He didn't know how much time had passed as he vaguely felt rather than heard sounds of more explosions as the fight got more intense. He was shaken out of his state by the medic who was trying to drag him back towards cover.

He shook away his arm and said confusedly, "What are you doing?" Pointing at the place where the gun was, he screamed, "We have to help them! Come with me!"

That medic, another NCO in the unit replied gently, "We can't help them sir. They are all dead. But we need to get back in to cover."

"But Major Baljit and Sub Sonam were there."

"I know sir. They are both dead. The wounded soldier you saw earlier saw them die with his own eyes. Now, we have to get out of this exposed position in to cover. Please hurry up."

He stumbled back into the command bunker where he had last discussed their strategy with now dead Major and Subedar. All of it felt unreal to the young Lt. who just realised that he was now the senior most on the post and was responsible for the well being of all the men under his command. His attention was taken up by the radio which was cackling with excited chatter. He recognised voice of Colonel Saha from the base camp calling on their call-sign, "Watchguard Alpha. This is Base 1. Do you copy? "

He picked up the receiver and replied, "Base 1, this is Watchguard Alpha. "

"Thank god, somebody replied. Who are you? Identify yourself. What was that explosion? "

"This is Lt Shubhramanjan, Sir. One Paki artillery shell hit one of our M46s. We lost 4 men including Major Baljit and Sub. Sonam." Shubhramanjan heard himself reporting mechanically.

"Shit!" Voice on the other end replied. "What about the other gun? Do you have enough ammunition?"

"Other gun is operational but we are fast running out of ammunition for it. For heavy fire power, we only have some mortars left."

"Damn it! Listen Lt., activate your UAV feed. We have just started receiving live video from one of our

UAVs flying in your sector. It seems like Pakis are making an attempt to capture your position. We can see their infantry moving up on the slope from west. Do you have a visual on them?"

"Negative sir. Visibility is less than 100 metres."

Colonel replied in a worried voice, "That's bad. That bird won't stay up there longer than 30 minutes. Listen Lt., as you might've known by now, Pakis have moved in a couple of their M198s. We are sending you reinforcements and ammunition right now. You just hang in there tight and don't let those bastards come anywhere near your positions. Use your mortars, machine guns anything to hold their advance. We'll provide you support against their heavy artillery from our 155mm guns." and added almost as an afterthought, "as long as our stocks last."

"Understood sir. I will not let Pakis take this post" Shubhranjan said with much more confidence than he actually felt.

"Good luck son. Over and out."

The young Lt. Was left staring at the headset of the communication gear for a while before he was jarred back into reality by sound of yet another Paki artillery shell landing close by. He immediately picked up the short ranged field radio to contact the crew of remaining M46 and filled them in with the new developments. The artillery crew in turn replied that they had only 13 shells remaining.

Indian 155mm gun crews immediately started targeting Paki gun positions after the feed from UAV started coming in. Indian soldiers on top of Pt 6431 could hear the distant rumble as Indian gunners fired off their first salvo targeting their Pakistani counterparts. Effect of this counter- artillery fire was immediate. Some of the Paki guns were forced to change their positions, thus providing some respite to besieged defenders on Pt 6431. But they were not quite out of danger yet. Pakistani infantry was still advancing along the rolling slope of the mountain. Even in the bad weather, Heron operators could see the mortars they were carrying. It was only a matter of minutes before they reached close enough to fire them.

Subharanjan hailed crew of his remaining M46 on radio and ordered them to concentrate their fire on advancing Paki infantry. Indians knew the territory like backs of their hands and the effect of their firing made it quite obvious. Still smarting from the losses they had sustained earlier, they let loose a volley of high explosive shells that very nearly wiped out the whole advancing column of Paki infantry.

Subhranjan watched in quiet fascination as he sat in front of UAV feed console watching shells exploding in between Pakis. But the invaders were spread out over a large area and there were not enough heavy guns to cover them all. Even as one of the advancing parties was wiped out, another group started racing upwards. Now, it was turn of Indian mortar crews. As soon as they were in range, all of them started their fire simultaneously. Although the effects were not as spectacular as the 130mm shells, they were not less damaging to the attackers. A lot of them were blown to pieces even as they were running up the slopes. Survivors tried to take cover behind the rocks, but mortars were still finding their mark with deadly accuracy.

Subhranjan allowed himself a slight smile as he watched Paki offensive break up and lose steam under sustained Indian artillery and mortar fire. Pakis had been unable to come close enough for their machine guns or mortars to be of any use. They were counting on their own heavy artillery to suppress the defenders. Banking on element of surprise, dense fog and fast deteriorating light they felt they had

good chance of taking the post without suffering too many casualties. But early warning given by the UAV and subsequent Indian artillery fire had broken the back of their offensive. With their forces severely depleted and scattered, they ordered retreat causing quite a few roars of joy and laughter from Indians. But Indians were not quite out of woods yet. Ammunition for mortars and sole 130mm gun was almost depleted and reinforcements were still more than 3 hours away.

Colonel Saha came on the radio, “Nice work Watchguard Alpha! Paki infantry is retreating, good job by your mortars. Our Bofors guns managed to break up their artillery formation but not as well as I'd have liked. Still, they'll be out of action for some time. How are you faring up there?”

“No further casualties sir, but we are all out of ammo for our 130mm. Less than 12 mortar rounds left. We need supplies immediately.”

“A team with reinforcements and ammunition is on its way Lt. You can expect them in 3 hours maximum. There'll be no UAV coverage for 3-4 hours at least, as the bird needs to be refueled and repaired. You'll have to hold on to your position till then.”

Subharanjan could feel the unease in Colonel's voice even as he broke the bad news. Lack of UAV coverage in such low visibility conditions was going to be a big handicap for Indians. Without UAV, they had to rely on their night vision devices, which had a very limited range and utility in comparison.

“I understand sir. Just try keep their heavy artillery off our backs and we can manage the rest.”

“Good. One of our convoys just delivered an artillery position locating radar. I've heard a lot of good things about it. Hope it'll do the job.”

“One good news at last.” Subharanjan thought to himself then heard the Colonel say, “Listen son, I know I'm asking a lot from you, but you have to hold your positions until reinforcements arrive. A lot depends on you tonight. God bless.”

It's going to take much more than just blessings if we want to defend the peak against another attack. Subharanjan thought to himself and went out again to check on his men.

All of them were saddened by loss of four of their friends but the hammering they had handed out to Pakis had eased their emotions somewhat. He called medic Havildar Hariom and asked him to assemble a team to collect bodies of the dead. He inquired about the injured soldier and came to know that his condition was stable but required more expert medical attention. He at first considered sending him down carried by two or more of his men on a stretcher but then decided against it. Path was too dangerous and weather too bad. Additionally he needed every hand to defend the post against further Paki attacks. He set out on another tour of his post to rearrange his defences. He moved the mortar teams to more covered nests and away from each other in order to protect them against artillery fire. He positioned 4 of his riflemen near the machine gun bunkers on western side from where 1st wave of Paki infantry had tried to break in. His artillery crew was now idle due to lack of ammunition and he ordered them to dig up additional trenches and place sandbags to provide additional cover for riflemen and mortar crews.

His men were still placing the sandbags when shelling from Pakistani side resumed sending the men scurrying for cover. This time firing was much more intense and shells were landing all over the place. All out of ammunition, Indian artillery men on peak could only watch helplessly as they saw their

comrades huddled in trenches and bunkers.

Subhranjan immediately grabbed the radio handset and requested fire support. By this time, Indians had managed to setup the fire locating radar and were analysing the flight path of shells to plot the exact location of Paki guns. "Three minutes for fire support. Stand by." Came the answer on radio.

"We don't have three minutes. Hurry up! Hurry up!" Subhranjan thought with quiet desperation as one shell landed very close to one machine gun bunker on northern side, damaging one of its walls, but thankfully nobody was injured.

It seemed like hours but finally he heard the rumble of Indian guns as they fired after tracing Paki gun positions. Indian soldiers on hearing it cheered loudly in spite of being under fire themselves. But much to their disappointment and puzzlement, this time Pakis didn't stop their shelling, neither did they change their target. Another of Paki shells this time landed close to another bunker on eastern side, collapsing part of its walls and roof, injuring the two soldiers inside. Havildar Hariom at once jumped out of his cover and started administering first aid to the wounded soldiers. Two other soldiers came to help and carried their wounded comrades to comparative safety away from the damaged bunker.

By this time, Indian guns were starting to find their mark and Pakis were forced to halt their fire and move their guns after suffering a few casualties themselves. This earned a few minutes of respite for beleaguered defenders, but they could do nothing except shaking their heads to stop the buzzing in their ears. Indian artillery guns too stopped firing as they had no way of locating new position of Paki guns until they started firing again.

"What's going on down there with Pakis? Any luck?" Subhranjan asked one of the soldiers keeping watch against Paki infantry attacks. Tearing his eyes off the night vision device he shook his head, "Can't see any movement. I'm not sure that they'll dare to launch another attack again after the beating they got. Can't see far enough anyway "

"I wouldn't count on that. Keep looking and don't let your guard down." Subhranjan said and went off to check on wounded.

He found them lying in the bunker on almost other side of the peak which usually served as storage. Havildar Hariom was still bandaging one of them when he entered. "They are out of danger but none of them is in condition to fire a gun. Although I've done the best I could, they'll need to be evacuated soon."

Subhranjan nodded, "I understand. Reinforcements are on their way. They'll be here soon and we can evacuate them then."

"They better hurry sir. I don't know whether we'll be able to survive another attack."

"Keep faith HariOm." Subhranjan smiled grimly and went out to check his defences again.

The loss of one bunker, each on the north and west sides, had weakened his position considerably against a determined infantry assault. He ordered one INSAS LMG to be taken out of the damaged bunker and placed in the trench covered by sandbags just beside it. He placed two more riflemen around it to prevent flanking attacks. His artillery crews had picked up INSAS assault rifles and were acting as riflemen now. Indians were just beginning to settle in their defensive positions when Pakis

started shelling again, this time from a different position. Indian artillery crews were even quicker this time to start the countering fire. Right about then, Indian guards noticed some movement on both sides of the slope and alerted Subhranjan. He relayed the coordinates of suspected enemy movement Indian artillery crews and they in turn let loose a volley of air-burst shells. These shells burst in mid-air and pepper their target below with red hot shrapnel.

Subhranjan wanted to use as much artillery support as possible before the enemy came too close for Indian artillery to target. By then, they'd come in range of Indian mortars but there was not enough ammunition left. There was another positive sighting of enemy troops, this time on northern side. One of the guns again changed its target and this time fired on northern side. Pakistanis by this time had started to fire smoke rounds from their mortars to hide themselves. Even though it was not a foolproof solution against thermal detectors, it still gave them enough breathing space to hide their exact location. Taking cover behind large rocks and ledges Paki infantry started inching towards Indian position for the second time in two hours.

Subhranjan watched the developing situation with increasing concern. His first priority was to stop Paki mortars from coming within firing range. Although Indians had the advantage of increased range due to altitude advantage, there were not enough of them. Indian 155mm didn't have a good firing solution on the mountain slope. To make conditions worse, the enemy was hiding behind rocks, smoke and fog. Visibility was getting worse with every minute and soon his men would be unable to see anything without NV.

In pure desperation, he picked up his rifle and a binocular with thermal sights and asked Lance Naik Joginder to accompany him with radio. Right in front of his amazed soldiers and in face of artillery shells pounding all around them, the two men got out of the bunker and started running towards the advancing enemy. Using whatever cover they could find, the two men started moving cautiously downwards. Keeping his eyes glued to the thermal sight Subhranjan was in lead while the other man followed him. They advanced 10-12 metres after which they stopped and scanned the area around them for enemy and again repeated the process. They had traveled this way for little less than a km when Subhranjan observed a platoon of enemy soldiers racing upwards almost at the foothills of the mountain. He grabbed hold of the radio and relayed the enemy's coordinates to his mortar crews. Within seconds they responded with a volley of rounds that killed most of the enemy soldiers who were caught in the open.

Alerted by the attack, another group of enemy soldiers broke their cover behind which they were hiding and turned back. Subhranjan observed them fleeing and was tempted to drop a couple of mortar rounds on them but wisely restrained himself. "There must be more enemy around I should save for," he told himself. Changing his direction towards another likely enemy approach place, he started scanning the area again. He again found some enemy soldiers advancing, but this time dispersed over a much larger area. He again relayed the coordinates to his mortar crews. Resulting fire was not enough to wipe out whole group. A few survivors took cover behind rocks in comparative safety. Somehow they managed to setup a mortar and started firing back. But the weapon was too short-legged to reach Indian positions.

"Yes. Keep wasting ammo firing at the enemy you can't even see, let alone reach. Bloody moron." Subhranjan muttered.

"Good for us. Heh." Joginer chipped in.

Probably drawn by the sound of their own men firing, the fleeing Paki group had turned back and started towards the lone Paki mortar firing at the Indians. Subhranjan waited for them to reach closer and ordered his men to fire again. This time, all the survivors from 2nd part were wiped out as one Indian mortar round landed right on top of the Paki position. Another round landed very close to their comrades group running towards them. Contrary to common sense, they were running in close to each other and only two men survived unhurt. Both of which immediately turned on their heels and ran back again.

"I wonder what their CO will say to that. " Subhranjan quipped.

"Award a Hila-Le-Bakistan, maybe? Joginder replied. Subhranjan could see his teeth in dark even without the night vision goggles as he grinned from ear to ea

Subhranjan took the radio again and inquired about ammunition status. As he had guessed, there were only two mortar rounds left. He ordered all except one mortar crew to abandon their positions and take up defensive positions with rifles around the perimeter.

"What are we going to do sir?" Joginder asked tentatively. He was impressed by the intelligence and bravery shown by the young, inexperienced Lt and his respect for him had grown manifold in the last hour.

"Well, we wait here as long it's needed." Subhranjan replied scanning the slope in front of him.

"I wonder how long that'll be." Joginder thought to himself but kept quiet.

As if guessing his question, Subhranjan added, "As soon as our reinforcements arrive or it becomes too dangerous for us to stay here."

Lying prone on their stomachs, they waited for enemy to come again. By this time, artillery fire from Paki side had reduced considerably. Indian counter-artillery fire had crippled many of their guns and the surviving guns had to be moved around to prevent them from meeting the same fate. Still an odd shell continued to streak in, but without much accuracy.

Both men waiting on the slope prayed to be spared of a lucky strike. They were both lying almost in open with little to protect them if shells landed anywhere near them. So far they had been lucky. They had been waiting for twenty minutes when Joginder thought that he saw some movement. He zoomed in as much as the sights allowed and sure enough there was a large formation of Paki soldiers moving towards their position. They had learnt from their mistakes and were spread over a large distance. He cursed them under his breath and handed over the night vision goggles to Subhranjan.

Although the enemy was out of range of Indian mortars, they could still be targeted by 155mm guns. He contacted Base 1 and asked for artillery fire. He knew he had to use up as much as support as possible before Paki soldiers came too close to target with the big guns. Artillery crew took 2 minutes to adjust their targets and fired air-burst shells over coordinates provided by Subhranjan. Instead of taking cover or retreating, paki soldiers this time ran towards source of fire.

"I guess they know for sure that our big guns can't fire if they come closer." Joginder remarked.

"Yes. I hope that our artillery takes out most of them before they pass that point."

"Me too. Though fat chance of that happening"

Although they took some casualties, Paki soldiers sprinted fast enough to pass the kill zone with five minutes. Now defence of peak lay solely on shoulders of Indians manning the peak.

"What now sir? Mortars?" Joginder asked in a worried voice as he observed Pakis running up the slope from both faces. This time they were using cover much more effectively, dodging and sprinting between rocks and ledges making them a difficult target

"We don't have any other option left. I'll direct those last mortars on Pakis coming from east. Take positions towards left of this group and pick off as many of them as you can with your rifle. I'll do the same from here. Retreat to our post if they come too close or if they have a fix on your position."

"What about the other group on the north?"

"I guess we'll have to deal with them later. Now hurry."

Joginder nodded and crawled towards the place pointed out by Subhranjan. He took cover behind a group of rocks and waited. Subhranjan ordered his mortar crew to standby and be ready to fire on his mark. He too took up a firing position and waited till the Paki group came right where he wanted. When they reached there, he carefully took aim and fired. Although he missed hitting anyone, sound of the shot caused everyone in the group to duck and take cover. As soon as it happened he ordered his mortar crew to fire off last of their mortars which they did with deadly accuracy. Even with most of them hiding behind rocks and ledges, two high explosive mortar rounds killed two and injured another three. Realising their folly, Pakis immediately got up and resumed their ascent again. Both Subhranjan and Joginder opened fire as soon as they got up causing much confusion in Paki ranks. At first no one realised where the fire was coming from and they started firing blindly but they soon got a fix on the position and started to return fire. But it was not before they had lost another three men. At this time, Joginder noted another group of Paki soldiers moving coming towards their direction and he relayed the information to Subhranjan.

Both men stopped firing and started running back towards the relative safety of their post followed by Paki invaders almost snapping at their heels. They took cover inside a trench lined by sandbags and started updating rest of the defenders with whatever intelligence they had gathered about the attackers. Subhranjan ordered every man to take good cover and put his eyes on the gun sights. Nobody was to fire until the enemy was well within the range and devoid of any benefit of cover. Indian soldiers checked their weapons for one last time and braced for the attack.

Machine gun post on the east was first one to report a visual on approaching Pakis, but they were still too far to be targeted accurately. Just a minute later, another soldier who had taken cover besides the damaged bunker in north reported visual contact on his side. Pakistanis were trying to sneak up by hiding their approach with smoke grenades and were almost successful except for the fact that there were a fair number of night vision devices with the defenders. Another proof of how close the enemy was came when one of the Paki soldiers fired a rifle grenade in general direction of the Indian post. The projectile fell well short of Indian position and exploded harmlessly. Although jittery and highly strung, Indian soldiers kept their nerve and held fire.

"Sneaky assholes! Want a fix on our positions and arc of fire before committing to an attack. Pretty

clever for a bunch of Pakis.” Joginder instructed rest of soldiers through the comm. radio, “Let them come closer. Hit them with all you've got when you can see their eyes. Don't let the Pakis bringing up the rear escape either.”

Another rifle grenade was fired which again failed to reach anywhere near the post. “Steady. Steady. Don't let these monkeys bother you like that.” he hissed again, waiting for Pakis to come closer. Fingers on triggers twitched nervously as the soldiers on both sides waited. Indian defenders had the advantage of higher positions and better cover while Pakistanis had numerical superiority. Both sides were trying to make the best of what they had and neither wanted to reveal their cards too early. For Pakis, firing rifle grenades was a way to get a fix on Indian positions and once found then find a path to either bypass those positions or to neutralise them. But Indians had refused to oblige and now Pakistanis had no choice except an all out frontal attack. Casualties would be high but that was unavoidable anyway.

Indians defenders watched nervously as attackers rapidly started converging within their sights. Though owing to distance and low light they were nothing more than dark ghost like figures approaching silently. Within minutes they had moved in so close that their eyeballs would've been visible if there was light. Subhranjan decided it was time and he ordered his men to open fire. Within a moment the almost silent peak was covered with flashes and explosions of the gun fire. Pakistani soldiers in the lead had no chance to either duck or take cover and were cut down without even firing a single shot. Survivors immediately dropped to the ground and started firing back. Quite a lot of them who had neglected to take cover behind a rock or ledge were killed in the next volley. Even those defenders without night vision devices had no difficulty in getting a fix on position of the attackers due to their muzzle flashes and they were showing no mercy. They were firing on the exposed attackers and lobbing grenades on those who had taken cover. But there were too many Pakis and too large an area for handful of defenders to cover. Even as the defenders concentrated on the east and northern ingress routes, a party of attackers started advancing through the middle.

A group of Paki soldiers escaped the notice of Indian defenders and snuck up through the middle face of the peak. Although one of the machine gun positions on the northern side saw them, they managed to scramble out of its arc of fire without taking any causality. A two man team broke out from the group and started crawling towards the machine gun bunker from its flank, intending to destroy it using grenades. Subhranjan saw one of them when he stood up and tried to throw a grenade. He at once shot the Paki who collapsed after getting hit by a 3 round burst. His companion however managed to throw a grenade towards Subhranjan before being shot himself. It landed just 2 feet from the trench where Subhranjan was and exploded before he could duck completely. Shrapnel from the grenade injured right side of his face and shoulder and the blast nearly deafened him. He collapsed on floor of the trench dazed, bleeding and ears ringing. HariOm was on his side in an instant and started dressing his wounds.

“You have a nasty wound on your cheek. It'll need stitches.” He had to shout to make himself heard over the din of gunfire.

“That can wait.” Subhranjan managed to mumble but not without wincing in pain. “Where is my gun?”

HariOm was surprised, “Uh what? You are in no condition to fight. You need to get out of here.”

“Unfortunately these damned Pakis wouldn't let me. Will do anything you say once I see off these

uninvited guests.”

He gingerly touched side of his face and winced with pain again when tried to lift his gun. Hariom looked on with concern, “Do you want a painkiller injection?”

“Thanks, but I'll pass. Now go take care of other wounded.” Subhranjan replied as he tried to take stock of the situation again.

The Paki group that had managed to sneak in through the middle had taken cover behind a group of large rocks. One of the soldiers had an Under Barrel Grenade Launcher (UBGL) on his AK-56 and was trying to fire on the machine gun bunker closest to him. Although the bunker had taken a direct hit, soldiers inside it had been unharmed. But their luck wouldn't hold on in case of another hit. Now, they were trying their best to keep that Paki from firing his UBGL again. Subhranjan realised what was going on and ordered one of his riflemen to move in closer to him. He saw the machine gun firing on the rocks behind which Pakis were hiding. After a few seconds machine gun had to stop firing for a magazine change. Pakis were waiting for just this kind break. As soon as the gun stopped firing, the Paki with UBGL popped out and tried to fire. But he had neglected to watch out for enemy outside the bunkers and paid the price with his life as soldier with Subhranjan shot his head off.

But their relief was short lived as another Paki soldier picked up that UBGL and managed to fire off one grenade on the bunker before being shot dead. Although the concrete bunker was too strong to be destroyed, it was damaged partially causing a blind spot in its arc of fire. Surviving Paki soldiers took advantage and charged towards Indian positions on its side that happened to be right where Subhranjan was. They charged towards the Indian trenches lobbing grenades and yelling loudly. This attracted attention of rest of the Indian riflemen who at once directed their fire towards the advancing group. In spite of the rain of bullets, two Paki soldiers managed to reach right up to the edge of trenches before being shot dead.

By this time another group of nine Paki soldiers from the northern side had managed to avoid the bullets of Indian defenders and had take cover right where the earlier group had. Much to the surprise of Indians, this group too broke cover and started another charge at the Indian position. Even with the hail of bullets being fired on them, three of the charging Pakis survived and jumped in to the trench trying to engage the defenders in hand to hand fight inside. Two of them died without making any mark but one managed to fire off a burst from his AK-56 before being shot dead. One of the bullets hit Subhranjan in the right shoulder. He lost hold of the rifle and fell down writhing in pain. One Indian soldier immediately moved closer to him and put a bandage on his wound trying to stop the blood loss. Somebody had shouted for the medic and Hariom was there within moments. He took out a quick clot kit from his bag and poured the granular powder on the wound. Much to everybody's relief bleeding stopped within seconds and Hariom covered the wound with a bandage. Along with another soldier he started moving an almost unconscious Subhranjan to comparative safety of a bunker in the back.

As they gently set him down in the bunker along with other seriously wounded, Subhranjan regained consciousness and attempted to get up. Hariom stopped him and gently shook his head.

“What happened to you? You're covered with blood!” Subhranjan exclaimed on seeing him.

“Well, it's not mine.” Hariom replied, trying to avoid looking him in the eyes.

“What?”

“We lost two more men in last ten minutes. It's their blood.”

“Bloody hell! These mad Pakis will pay for this.” Subhranjan shouted with rage and tried to get up. But he stumbled and would have assuredly fallen on his face if Hariom had not caught him.

“Do you want to kill yourself? That bullet has shattered your collar bone and probably nicked a major artery. I've given you a painkiller, that's why you can't feel the pain. And after that shot, you're in no condition to fire a gun either.” Hariom shouted sternly.

Feeling weak and delirious due to blood loss Subhranjan could do nothing but to let Hariom set him down. “But my men need me there” He whispered weakly.

“Sure they do, but they need you alive. You can go out to fight as soon as I feel you can. Till then, please lie down and try not to kill yourself. For the sake of your soldiers, if not your own. Now, I have to go outside and see if anybody else needs my assistance. Don't move till I come back.” With this Hariom gathered up his medical kit and ran out of bunker towards the fighting line, leaving Subhranjan lying on his back with three other wounded men besides him.

Lying in the bunker, he nodded off listening to sounds of gunfire and explosions outside. He didn't know how much time had passed since he had passed out. All he knew in his confused and drugged mind was that something had changed. Lying on his back as Hariom had left him, he tried to ascertain what had happened. It was not the pain which was nothing more than a throbbing dull ache that started from his injured shoulder and spread like waves through his body. He tried moving his arm but it was still immobile. He tried to sit up but was overcome by giddiness and immediately dropped back. Cursing the Paki soldier that had shot him he lay still for a moment. Then it hit him.

Firing had stopped!

The loud bangs of grenade explosions and bullets was now replaced by and the sounds of distant men talking amongst themselves. He strained his ears to listen but was unable to hear anything intelligible. What had happened while he had passed out?

Had Indians beaten off the Paki attack? If so, why nobody had come to check on the injured? He looked around to take stock of his surroundings. Only source of any light was a battery powered light lying on a box in the distant corner. By its light he could make up the shapes of other injured soldiers lying beside him. All of them had received painkiller shots and were either unconscious or sleeping. There was nobody else.

What if Pakis had over run the post? A cold shiver ran through his spine at the thought. That was entirely possible the way they were attacking and would have done so within minutes unless Indian reinforcements arrived. Even without knowing the time, he knew that reinforcements promised by Col. Saha should've been there by the time he was shot. Were they too late coming to aid of their comrades?

His panicked thoughts were interrupted by sounds of footsteps coming towards the bunker. He propped himself on his uninjured arm and strained his ears to listen. By the sounds, he realised there were three men walking on the path outside the bunker and would be inside in a minute. A cold sweat broke over him. What if these men were Paki soldiers intent on killing the wounded? Or worse capturing and then

torturing. Pakis are not exactly famous for humane treatment of prisoners of war. Capture was going to be much worse than death. He tried to raise the soldier lying closest to him, but he had suffered a head wound and a broken arm and was administered a generous morphine shot. He didn't move a bit even when Subhranjan kicked him. By this time, sound of footsteps was even closer.

Swearing under his breath, he abandoned the idea of trying to wake up any other soldier and started looking for a weapon. Using all of his will power he forced himself to get up and walked unsteadily towards the pile of boxes near the light. He still couldn't move his injured right arm and opened the lid with his other hand. Instead of any weapon, the box contained rock climbing gear. Cursing his luck again, he attempted to open other box when somebody turned the door handle. For a moment Subhranjan froze to the spot, remembering that he had forgotten to lock the door from inside. Now nothing could stop them from getting in. In desperation he lunged to the box he had opened previously and grabbed a small rock climbing hammer lying inside and turned off the light plunging the bunker in complete darkness. He felt the hammer in his hands. It was barely 11 inches in length and weighed a kilogram at most. Now the door was opened and Subhranjan stuck himself to the wall besides it as it opened. A streak of light entered the bunker through open door and three men entered inside one by one. His heart wildly beating he raised the puny hammer in his left hand and waited. One of the three men lit a torch and started walking towards the injured Indians while the others stood back. Subhranjan slowly walked out from behind the door, his left hand raised and sneaked up to the backs of two men, intending to knock them down with the hammer. There was no way in hell he could be able to take them all but it was much better to die fighting than being captured alive by Pakis. He reached within an arms length of the two men and steeled himself to strike. Just then, voice of a puzzled Hariom startled him, "Where the hell is Lt.? I left him right here!"

Waves of relief rolled down Subhranjan's body on hearing the medic's voice. He wanted to shout with joy, but could only manage a stifled croak, "Hariom! Is that you? You frigging son of a bitch! "

A startled Hariom moved the flashlight towards source of the voice and nearly screamed when he saw a wild faced Subhranjan waving the hammer dangerously behind the other two soldiers. To his credit, he controlled himself and said in a comparatively calmer voice, "Drop the hammer sir. It's us. We've beaten back the Pakis."

Subhranjan dropped the hammer and promptly plumped down on his ass, "That I've managed to figure out myself."

"Uh...then why this hammer sir"? One of the soldiers that had come too close to getting his skull split at the hands of the Lt. Asked with some trepidation.

"Oh, that! I was just playing safe. Just in case." Subhranjan managed this with a perfectly straight face. "Leave all this. Tell me what happened while I was here."

"Reinforcements arrived within five minutes of my leaving you here. Subedar Major Salathia arrived just in nick of time with twenty men and kicked the hell out of enemy. We had to stop him from chasing fleeing Pakis down the mountain. You should've seen it from your own eyes. It was a sight to remember." Hariom flashed one of his very rare grins.

"Where is he now?"

"He is still outside, standing guard along with rest of men against a possible counter-attack. But I doubt

it'll happen any time soon. Pakis have suffered too many casualties to mount another attack.”

“Did we lose any more of our men?” Subhranjan asked with some disquiet.

“Thankfully no. Five more soldiers did suffer shrapnel and bullet wounds but none of them serious. Just the same, a Dhruv will arrive at dawn to evacuate the wounded and the dead. Additionally an UAV will be in air within 20 minutes. You can rest easy now.”

Subhranjan let out a sigh of relief and relaxed. Suddenly he started feeling too tired to even sit up and he lay down on his back thanking his stars.

0900 Hours
29 October 2012
LMU News Broadcast

A bearded news reader was reading the news report, “Already strained relations between India and Pakistan worsened after Pakistani army started unprovoked firing on Indian positions on LoC in J&K yesterday. Additionally, Pakistani soldiers also attempted to wrest control of three Indian posts in Poonch and Kargil. Although they were beaten back with heavy losses, Indian army too suffered casualties. Although officials declined to specify the exact number, according to sources Pakistan suffered 97 dead or seriously wounded while 17 Indian soldiers lost their lives. These skirmishes between the two nuclear armed neighbours couldn't have happened at a worse time. Pakistan is on verge of breakdown after a senior army general attempted a coup against serving army chief General Beg minutes after he had assumed Presidential powers. This came after a series of bombings all over Pakistan, one of which injured Pakistani President Naqvi and killed his son.

Ruling PPP to which Mr. Naqvi belongs however strongly protested General Beg's attempt to dismiss the civilian government. In a press conference, senior leaders strongly condemned General Beg's actions and vowed to launch country wide protests against any move to undermine civilian rule. Former Prime Minister Wasim Akhtar, a bitter rival of Mr. Naqvi vowed to support PPP in its campaign against General Beg, much to surprise of political pundits. Though most people seem to think that he is doing it to avoid anybody linking him to attack on Mr. Naqvi. General Beg on the other hand, has not appeared in public after a near fatal kidnapping attempt. All attempts to contact him have proved futile; although sources close to him assure that he is alive and well.

Governments from all over the world have urged both nuclear armed neighbours to act with restraint but their pleas seem to be falling on deaf ears, at least in Pakistan where nobody is clear about who is calling the shots. There seems to be a power vacuum at the present with too many people fighting amongst themselves to decide who wears the crown. To make matters even worse, various Islamist organisations, many of them linked to Al Qaida and Taliban have taken over control of numerous places including areas near Durand line and even small towns adjoining Lahore, Peshawar and Karachi. An alliance of Baloch nationalist parties and militia has declared a virtual war by laying siege to two army bases in Balochistan province and taking more than 900 Pakistani soldiers hostage. Lines outside

airports and embassies of western countries like Canada, US are much longer and crowded than usual as more and more people are looking for a visa and the way out of this mess. At such a time these unprovoked attacks on India by Pakistani army seem nothing more than a ploy to distract the attention from real issues plaguing the country.

A press release from Pakistan home ministry however claimed that everything was in control and blamed India for adding fuel to the fire of Pakistani troubles by first supporting insurgent movements inside Pakistan and then trying to grab Pakistani territory. Issuing a strong statement, Pakistani officials claimed that the Pakistani citizens would defend the sovereignty of their country to the last of their breath and would not bend due to external pressure. They also appealed to concerned countries to help Pakistan in its hour of need.

The release further added that all of Pakistani nuclear weapons and delivery platforms are in safe custody and accounted for. But many analysts fear that jihadis might already have taken control of a few nukes.

Indian defence minister in a press conference held last evening expressed the same apprehension and called for concerned people in Pakistan to find a peaceful way out of their predicament. He claimed that India will offer any amount of help in order to help Pakistan extricate out of this messy situation. He also denied that India was trying to take advantage of turmoil in Pakistan.

Even as we speak scale of firing has come down considerably. But small arms fire is still going on in a couple of places. Now we show you a video shot yesterday morning in Uri, Jammu where Pakistani army fired mortar and machine guns on an Indian army team which was trying to repair a breach in the fence. A well known TV journalist was right there shooting a documentary when the firing started. We have obtained the full length tape and will be showing it in entirety.”

He then added with only a slight hint of an ironic smile, “Viewers are warned that this video contains graphic language. Uhh and violence too. Some people might find it disturbing.”

Then they started running uncut video recorded by cameraman Sidhesh last morning at Point 711, Uri. Unlike the edited version shown on UNDE TV, LMU version showed everything starting from Varsha Butt's confused face as first mortar landed to her tantrums when Sub. Gurung was trying to stop her from killing herself. Lakhs of people saw it on TV and many more on YouTube and other online sources.

The bearded news reader thought with a quite smile, “Say bye bye to your Pulitzer, Ms. Butt. You won't have it in this life at least

0145 Hours
30 October 2012
Pitampura, New Delhi

The white Qualis parked by the road side three men alighted. Two of them were carrying small canvas bags much like the ones favoured by workmen. They were dressed in grey uniforms typical of many construction and utility companies common in that place. A third man was wearing a white shirt and pants and he looked and behaved like their senior. He was carrying nothing apart from a small notebook and a mobile phone. They opened the back of the car and started pulling out a small hoarding advertising a discount sale on Manik Jewellers.

"Hurry up. We have to finish the job before 2:30." The senior looking man barked.

The other two men were probably used to such talk. One of them shrugged but nevertheless both quickened their steps. In two trips they had carried and deposited all their stuff below the metro line passing above the road. Its pillars were nearly 9-10 meters high and constructed right in between the divider of the road. The pillar they were interested in was nearest to the traffic lights that controlled the traffic from three roads that converged there. The place had no official name but was informally known as Radio Chowk due to the big radio tower nearby. During the day, it was bustling with thousands of people but there was nobody in sight at midnight.

After taking inventory of all the stuff, the man in white shirt let out a satisfied grunt and asked the other two to begin their work. They opened their bags and started taking out their tools. One placed a small folding ladder near the pillar and climbed on it. Taking out a measuring tape and a small piece of chalk he started making marks on the pillar with help of the other 2 men. After the markings were made, he took out a portable drill and started drilling holes in the pillar. He was still in the middle of drilling his second hole when they were interrupted by the irritated voice of a beat constable.

"What the hell you guys are doing?" The loud voice of the constable so startled him, that, he almost dropped the drill on the head of his mate standing below. The drill was a comparatively silent type but the sound carried far at that deserted hour. The policeman had walked in completely unnoticed, his footfalls masked by the sound of the drill.

White shirt guy barked at him to stop and strode towards the cop with a big smile pasted on his face. "Good evening sir. We're from NewWays Enterprises." Motioning towards the hoarding he said, "We need to put up that hoardings on metro pillars."

"At this time? Couldn't you do it during day time?" Cop asked while nudging their wares with his stick.

"We had instructions for night time only." white shirt replied without allowing any change in his smile,

"Really? Who gave you these instructions? "

"uh...our boss did. Mr. Nehra is his name. "

"Do you have permission from government agencies? You can't put up advertisements on government properties just like that. Where are the official letters?" he demanded.

"We have that too sir. In the car. I'll show you. "Saying this, he turned and started walking towards the car with cop ambling after him. He opened the car door and rummaged amongst papers littering the dashboard. After making a show of it for some time he emerged triumphantly waving a sheet of paper.

"Here it is. Letter from NDMC (New Delhi Municipal Council)."

The policeman took it from him and read through it absently. Handing the paper back, "But this is from NDMC and the pillar you are hanging your stuff belongs to Delhi Metro. You can't do anything without their approval."

"I'm sure Delhi Metro has approved it. Our boss wouldn't have sent us otherwise." white shirt stammered uneasily.

Policeman snapped, "I really don't care about your boss or his instructions... If you are going to hang this hoarding on that pillar you need..."

Rest of the sentence was left unfinished as the policeman dropped unceremoniously to the ground. One of the two uniformed guys had sneaked up behind him and hit him on the head with a hammer. He watched with cold impassive eyes as blood started to spread around the fallen constable's head.

White shirt looked at him with some surprise but quickly composed himself, "Good work."

The second uniformed guy had walked approached by then and he too was staring at the blood. In a voice barely audible he asked "Is he dead?"

White shirt crouched and felt the neck of policeman "I can't find pulse. Must be dead or would die within minutes. Now let us carry this body and dump it in that under construction house over there. It's full of rubble; nobody will find him before morning. Hurry up before anybody sees us."

The three quickly lifted limp body of the cop and hid him behind a mound of dirt. All then sprinted to the pillar and resumed their work feverishly. "You two finish drilling the holes. I'll finish connecting the electrical stuff by then. Hurry up. We've got to catch the train at 3:00. No time to waste. That moron cop could've messed up everything"

Working quickly they fitted the hoarding and packed up their tools before 2:30. "Everything finished?" White shirt asked glancing at both men in turn. Both nodded yes. "Let's go then. Change your clothes in the car. Train leaves in half an hour."

Picking up their belongings they quickly threw everything inside the Qualis and drove away towards Old Delhi railway station. They changed in to new clothes while on the road and threw old clothes and their tool bags in a sewage gutter in the way. They parked their car a few 100 meters away from the station and caught the train to Gorakhpur near Nepal border; they were out of New Delhi before 04:00 am.

0715 Hours
30 October 2012
Pitampura Police Station
New Delhi

Head constable Shashi Tamar was warming up his morning cup of tea in an ancient kettle when constable Shubhash came running through the door. "What happened? Some mad dogs chasing after you?" A bleary eyed Shashi asked with mild irritation at being disturbed so rudely.

"Leave all doggy thing aside sir. Take the keys of Gypsy. We have to go to hospital." Subhash answered breathlessly.

Suddenly alarmed at the mention of hospital Shashi asked "Why? What happened?"

"Somebody whacked Bhushan last night when he was on duty. Some labourers found him in that under construction building near Radio Chowk. Now hurry. It looks serious."

All thoughts of his morning tea and traces of sleep washed away from his head, Shashi jumped to his feet and reached for the keys , " What the fuck ! Is he alive? "

"Barely. He has a fractured skull and lost too much blood. "

"Ma ki choot whoever did this! Do you know who did this?" Shashi asked as he asked another policeman to take his place and started running towards the Gypsy parked outside station.

"How'd I know? Let's get to hospital first and hope he can answer the questions." Subhash replied with no less irritation.

Traffic was still very light and they reached hospital within 10 minutes. A familiar hospital orderly met them in the ward and informed that Bhushan had been taken in for surgery. Swearing again Shashi asked, "Did he say anything while he was conscious?"

"He was unconscious all the time he was here except for 1-2 minutes. I was there then but couldn't make heads or tails of what he was saying."

Shashi snapped, "I don't want YOU to make sense of what he said. Just tell me whatever you could hear."

Slightly taken aback at the outburst orderly looked at the policeman with reproachful eyes before continuing, "Uh...all I could make out was something that sounded like khamba, (pole). He just repeated khamba khamba. Khambe par. (On pole) "

"What? A pole fell on him or what? "Subhash exclaimed.

"No. It can't be a pole. The injury was on side of his head and looked like somebody hit him with some heavy thing. A hammer or a stone maybe." Orderly replied, feeling slightly important.

"Was he robbed?"

"No. He still had his wallet and mobile phone. "

"Hmm! How long will this surgery take?"

"I don't know for sure. 35-40 minutes if there are no complications. But you can't talk to him anytime soon. "

Shashi turned towards Subhash, "Inform SHO sahib and come with me to Radio Chowk. We might find something or someone useful there."

"Leave him alone here?" Subhash asked with horrified surprise.

"I'm calling station. They'll send somebody and inform his family." Pointing towards the orderly he continued, "He'll take care of him till anybody arrives. Wouldn't you?"

Slightly taken off balance orderly replied, "Of course. Of course. That's what I do anyway."

"Good. Come with me right now Subhash. There's no time to waste. "

Leaving the slightly confused orderly behind them, they ran to their jeep and started driving towards Radio Chowk.

Traffic was getting heavy due to morning rush. Even then they managed to travel with a high speed. Soon the radio station, made conspicuous by its tower was within their sights, although it was still 200 meters away.

"Almost there." Subhash mumbled as Shashi prepared to take a turn towards the road that proceeded to Radio Chowk. He was turning the Gypsy when their ear drums were assaulted by the sound of a massive blast. Shashi was so startled that he almost lost control of the vehicle but managed to apply the brakes before anything happened. A column of black smoke arose from the general direction of traffic lights steadily growing in size along with shouts and screams of people.

"What the hell was that?" Subhash asked in a panicked voice.

"What does it seem to you moron. Some bomb blast is that what happened! Call HQ immediately." Shashi shouted at the constable.

Within moments they reached the sight of the blast and what they saw made them freeze in their strides. The blast was so powerful that more than two meters thick pillar for metro line was nothing except for a small smoking stub of concrete poking from the ground. The two beams supported by the pillar had collapsed, forming a rough V. The 10000 Volt power lines had also snapped and were hanging precariously just 4 feet off the ground. A jam packed bus had taken the brunt of the blast as it waited adjacent to the pillar for green light. All the windows of bus were broken, its roof all but torn off and bodies of dead and injured passengers hung limply. A few cars and two-wheelers had also suffered and were on fire.

But the thing that scared the hell out of everybody was not on ground, but above it. A speeding metro train had left the adjacent metro station and was coming right towards the damaged portion. Although it

had lost all power due to damage to the power line, it still had sufficient momentum. Driver of the train had applied emergency brakes and sparks were flying off the metallic wheels. Standing on the ground, people could see the confused faces of passengers inside the train through the glass windows.

Shashi knew that the train had no chance of stopping before and wanted to avoid seeing the tragedy as it occurred. In spite of all his best efforts he couldn't tear his eyes off the horror before him. Right before his unwilling eyes, train reached site of the breach well in speed well above 25 kmph and plunged in to the gap. Its first bogey sailed through the gap for a while and hit the collapsed beam face first. That bogey was compressed to less than half of its original size as rest of the bogeys crushed it from behind. Nobody could hear anything apart from deafening screeching of metal and horrified and painful screams of passengers in the train and the bystanders. But the ordeal was far from over. The train started to list on its side and inch by inch started to slide towards the ground below. Then all of a sudden something that was holding the train on track gave away and all 4 bogeys fell on road below with a huge crash. A number of already damaged vehicles, made immobile after the blast, were crushed as the train fell on top of them.

Evening news listed 145 people dead and more than 14 injured. Many of them in a serious condition.

Condolences and calls for restraint from governments all over the world were still coming in when Mumbai and Hyderabad too were rocked by powerful blasts that killed 109 people combined

Constable Bhushan regained consciousness next morning and easily identified one of the suspects from file photos. The man's name was Mohammed Nazir, a long time member of SIMI. He was last seen at Nepal airport catching a flight to Dubai on a Pakistani passport. There were no leads to other blasts though.

0830 Hours IST 30 October 2010 PPC World News Broadcast

In a surprising development in Pakistan, General Beg a few minutes ago appeared on Pakistan TV and radio claiming that he had quelled the rebellion by some of his subordinates that had threatened to shove his nuclear armed nation in to a bloody and very dangerous civil war. Reading from a prepared statement he said that most of the rebel officers led by General Asgar have either been killed or arrested facing further trial. He assured everybody that things are under his complete control and urged everybody to get on with their lives as usual.

But international observers were far from convinced. Pointing to the still raging battles inside major Pakistani cities, they said that General Beg's claims of quelling the revolt were far from true. His opponent, General Asgar had powerful allies both within and outside Pakistan and forces loyal to him still controlled the coastal city of Karachi and parts of disputed region of Jammu & Kashmir. Further, many influential Islamist groups based in Pakistan had come out openly in support of General Asgar, mainly to show their disapproval of what they say was General Beg's sucking up to USA for money. Two of these groups have taken over the controls of civil administration in Peshawar, Malakand and Quetta.

Bhishma tanks there. For this purpose army acquired 1100 acres of land and started construction of whole tank related infrastructure there.

With efficiency typical to armed forces, the base was up and fully functional by late March 2010. The base now boasted of one of the largest workshops for tank repair and maintenance under Western command. A part of the acquired land served as training ground for the tank crews. Although not as big as Pokhran, it was an ideal place to train the tank crews on desert warfare.

Though not officially acknowledged, that tank regiment formed one of the most vital parts of much discussed Indian Cold Start doctrine. As such no effort was spared in order to keep the base well supplied. Existing highway was converted to four lanes and strengthened and an extra railway line was laid down apart from the existing one.

Its effect on the town was largely positive. Within two years the town's civilian population had jumped from less than 50000 to 58,000 thousand, most of it due to people from surrounding areas moving in to take advantage of the money being pumped in to local economy by the increased army presence. A lot of these new migrants were civilian contractors, suppliers and labourers who set up their shops there.

Tushar Aggarwal was one of such contractors who had shifted his business from Jaipur to Mirawi. He had realised the significance of army raising a brand new tank base and had opened an office in Mirawi in December 2009 itself, much before other people had the sense to do so. His business flourished due to his early bird advantage and soon his earnings from his new office eclipsed what he had been earning in Jaipur. Assigning one of his employees to take care of his Jaipur office, he moved in to Mirawi along with his family which consisted of his wife of eleven years, Sushmita, and their 8 years old son Krishna. They rented a small house with a big yard about a Km from the army base.

His business was growing steadily and family had taken well to the new town. Especially, Krishna who had never seen military life from so close. He had been granted admission in the local Army School and had made a lot of new friends. Their class had been taken on tours of the new base and given a ride on one of the brand new tanks. Ever since his visit he had been obsessed with tanks and had been begging his father to get him one too. His mother managed to placate him by buying him a toy tank much smaller in size and the one which fired up a small light in its gun instead of a high explosive shell.

Although not quite as good, he had satisfied himself with his 'tank' and was playing with it in their yard with some kids from their neighbourhood. His tank had a good aim and had 'destroyed' a car and a Lego brick castle of his two playmates. Slightly miffed, both had packed up their own toys and left for the night. He played alone for a while after they left until it started getting too dark. He too picked up his tank and proceeded to go back inside the house when he heard the sound of an army convoy passing on the road. He rushed back to the main gate and peeked outside at the procession of T-90s being transported on their carrier vehicles. He opened the gate and stepped outside, watching excitedly as the massive trucks rolled by one by one in front of his eyes. He waved his hand with much enthusiasm and some of the soldiers smiled and waved back. He kept watching as the last truck drove away from his sight. Smiling contently he put his tank on the ground and started to steer it towards the door of his house.

His attention was diverted by sudden wailing of the air raid siren. He stood to attention, slightly puzzled, listening to the oddly discomfoting sound. He had heard this sound only once before in the school. The teacher had told them to at once ask the nearest grown up for help and take shelter on

hearing this sound. But what could actually go wrong. He was perfectly safe in his own house. His chain of thoughts was interrupted by the bang of the screen door of their house as his mother rushed out looking for him. Seeing him standing right outside, the troubled expression on her face slightly receded. Standing at the door step, she asked him to come inside the house at once.

Krishna needs not to be told twice. He picked up his toy tank and started running towards his mother. All of a sudden, the dusky evening was penetrated by a bright flash of intense light as if another sun had risen up in the sky. He put up his hand to shield his eyes and tried to squint through the gap when he felt an earthquake shaking everything around him. He then felt as if a wall of fire had hit him and he fell down screaming with pain and pure terror. He cried for his mother who unfortunately for both, was in a similar situation and could do nothing to help. Moments later, their burning bodies were crushed under the rubble of their two storied brick house as it collapsed when a tremendous shock wave hit it.

2120 Hours
1 November 2012
India

Scheduled TV programming was interrupted on almost all TV channels as the ashen face of Defence Minister appeared on the screens. He started reading from a prepared speech,

"My dear countrymen, I'm here to inform you of disastrous bad news for all of us. Today India came under a surprise nuclear attack. Mirwai, a small town in Rajasthan, with population of nearly 58,000, was devastated by a nuclear bomb delivered through a missile. The attack happened at 6 pm without any warning. Although the missile was launched from Pakistan, a military spokesperson speaking on behalf of the Pakistani authorities has denied that they were involved. I can't tell you the exact figures right now, but more than 20,000 people are believed to be dead and many more injured. We are doing everything we can do to help the stricken people. Even as I speak, supplies and relief material are being rushed with utmost speed. Indian army which operates a small base there and the Air force have pressed in all of their resources to help the survivors in every way possible.

As of now, no one has taken any responsibility for this dastardly attack, but I'd like to assure all of you that whoever did this, will pay dearly for this crime against humanity. Our forces are now on the highest alert and are taking every action to identify the culprits and also to prevent any further attacks. Our chain of command and most importantly, will to fight, are still intact and will remain so.

Our country needs the assistance of every single citizen in these troubled times. Irrespective of our differences, every single one of us needs to support the government and armed forces. I appeal to all of you to remain calm and follow the instructions provided to you by local authorities. Please do not panic or try to relocate unless absolutely necessary. The government will take whatever steps are necessary to protect everyone.

Jai Hind"

The cameraman signaled end of transmission and DM slumped limply in to the chair. He ran his hands through his thinning hair twice and got up to his feet. His aide came up a cup of tea which he waved away. He was in no mood to eat or drink anything.

He opened the small door of the media room and started walking towards the PM's cabin in the special Boeing 747 informally known as AF1. PM and DM along with some senior defence and civilian officials had been bundled in to the special plane within 20 minutes of the time when first warning of the missile attack came. An IL-76 based AWACS on a patrol over Rajasthan had first detected the missile as it's reached its terminal stage. The crew had immediately sent warnings, but it was not enough to help Mirwai. There was little any one could do anyway.

DM was visiting PM at his residence when their bodyguards burst in to the room and bundled them off in to a chopper and then to AF1 with little ceremony. Much to consternation of every one, PM had suffered severe chest pain moments after plane was airborne. The doctor on board, a middle aged Air Force Major Rudra had treated him and put him under observation. News of the country's PM collapsing on hearing such news, even of this magnitude would've been really bad for morale. So it was DM who had to go on TV instead of PM to read the bad news. He had done so with much reluctance but had kept the fact to himself only. He walked slowly towards the PM's cabin and stopped in front of the door, apparently lost in thought. Two guards on the door smartly saluted him and that caused DM to come out of his reverie.

"I wish you guys stop doing this every time you see me." he smiled tiredly at the young soldiers.

"I'll keep it in mind from now on sir." Older of them smiled back politely.

"Thanks. Is doctor still inside? How is PM feeling now?" DM asked.

"Yes sir. Mr. PM wanted to see you as soon as possible. He is waiting for you." with this, he knocked on the door once and on hearing the permission to enter, opened the door and ushered the DM in.

PM was lying on a bed apparently sleeping while his wife and Maj Rudra were sitting on chairs besides him talking in low voices. Both stopped talking on seeing him and Maj Rudra got up to salute him. PM opened his eyes and looked at him with resigned eyes.

"How are you feeling now sir?" Suddenly not sure whom to ask this question, DM asked with a slight hesitation.

"Much better. Thanks to Dr. Rudra here. "PM replied looking at the doctor who looked on impassively. "Any new developments?"

"A little. Some of our people are standing by on a video conferencing call. Are you feeling well enough for this?" DM asked with some concern looking at PM and the doctor in turn.

"Sure. Let's begin right now." PM replied with some display of energy.

DM gave the doctor a questioning glance to which he replied, "Yes of course, he can do anything he

wants short of strenuous physical activity right now. But please be sure that he doesn't get too stressed. My work here is done anyway. I'll pop in from time to time to keep an eye. I think I should leave, if I have your permission."

He gave everybody in the room a quick bow and left. PM's wife also left the room after instructing both men to be careful about her husband's health.

PM watched her close the door with a tired smile and then turned to DM, "So, what did you find out?"

DM in the meanwhile had called for some senior officers and analysts on board the plane to enter the room and had turned on the video conferencing screen for other people to join in. Faces of people, some old and most of them new to both the ministers filled the room. After hurried introductions, everybody quickly got to the business. Chief spook Angad was first to begin via a video link,

"The missile was launched from a location somewhere east of Karachi. Our analysts believe that it was a Shaheen, just a repainted Chinese M-9. The bomb was Uranium 235 based with yield of slightly less than 20KT. It's a copy of an old Soviet design that was stolen by China. Apparently they also sold the same design to Pakistan and North Korea. The missile has a possible range of less than 700km with this kind of warhead. If anybody is wondering why they didn't try hitting New Delhi, Bombay or any other big city, then I assume it's because of Shaheen's limited range only. Mirwai is one of the very few possible places that can be hit with that missile when fired from that distance.

"Do we know who actually launched it?"

"Unfortunately, not yet. Control of Pakistani nuclear arsenal was supposed to be with General Beg only. But the missile was launched from the area under control of General Asgar." Angad answered.

DM jumped off his seat and begin in an excited voice, "That can mean only one thing. If General Beg had full control of every weapon, then it's entirely possible that he had launched the missile. That way he can injure us as well as gather support for his fight against Asgar." He started pacing the small room as he spoke then his voice trailed off, "But..."

Curious at his behaviour, PM asked "What?"

DM shook his head slightly and said, "Same thing can be said about General Asgar too. He too is a prime suspect just as Beg is. If he proves that it was Beg, not him that launched the missile then Beg is screwed beyond redemption. Even being the American poodle will not help him then."

HM butted in before DM had chance to finish, "Screwed how? Pakistanis have already started celebrating this strike against the kafir Hindu India. In my opinion, the culprit will gain support of Islamists and gain power, not get screwed as you said it."

DM gestured defensively, "Hey, I'm just thinking aloud. Either way, you can't have everything. You win some, you lose some. For either of them, there are going to be benefits as well as repercussions. The perpetrator took his chances and I'll be damned if I know who did this just by talking and guessing like this. "

PM who had been listening quietly asked, "If it's like what you people are saying, don't you think that either of them will try to take the credit?"

On the screen, HM just stared blankly while DM shrugged his shoulders trying to think of something. "Could be terrorists." he added.

Angad cleared his throat and said, "True. But they would've taken the responsibility as soon as it had happened. Not a single one of the rag head terrorists out there is going to miss an opportunity like this. Strangely, no one has. But most importantly, an attack like this is beyond the capability of almost all of terrorist groups out there. There is no way that a bunch of terrorists could have pulled this off without Paki army help."

"What about a rogue military commander acting independent of everyone else? DM asked

General Vaidya, a three star general replied, "Same as with terrorists. Possible, but highly unlikely without either of the two Generals in the know."

For a few seconds, everybody involved in the meeting fell quiet having reached a dead end. Then voice of PM broke the silence, "Excuse me for this silly question, but didn't Beg possess full control of all the nukes? Then how can Asgar be possibly involved in this?

"He could've taken the control of one or two missiles that Americans didn't know about." HM took the bait.

DM was quick to pounce on it, "And launched it on us without trying to take any advantage? If he really had those nukes then he could have bargained with Beg and Americans for anything. This doesn't make any sense."

HM challenged him, "Well, tell me one thing that does."

DM shrugged and slumped back in chair, "I don't know."

Angad looked slightly uneasy on the screen "I don't know if it seems important, but Gwadar is not too far away from the launch site. For what it is worth, Chinese seem to be awfully busy lately there. Far more than what seems normal."

"Busy? How?" DM asked.

"According to our intelligence reports, number of ships docking there has increased by 15% during the last three weeks. Of course it could all be unrelated, but somehow I can't shake off the feeling that something fishy is going on."

"You don't have details? It's your job to get this kind of information. We can't do a single damn thing based on your hunches only."

Angad took the remark as the unneeded insult as it was. He was still bitter over the fact that his proposals for more intelligence satellites and human intelligence had been gathering dust for years now, "What else would you expect on the money that we actually spend on intelligence? "

DM let out a sigh and rolled his eyes. But he knew that Angad was right. Intelligence organisations had

been demanding higher budgets and more freedom from political intervention for years, but successive governments including the present had been dithering on many important proposals. Who knew this attack could've been avoided if they had advance warning.

HM piped in, "Please leave all that for the moment. What's done is done. We have to do something right now. We can't just sit here and yap away. Thousands of our people have died in four attacks, one of them a nuclear one. All in a single damned day. Nations have gone to war on much less. Why are we still not bombing the hell out of those terrorist pigs? The missile was launched from Paki territory; it's a Paki missile as well as a Paki bomb. What other proof do we need?"

"For starters, identifying who actually gave the orders." DM replied.

HM opened his mouth to say something but then kept quiet. With the condition Pakistan was in, nobody had any idea whom to punish. In frustration he banged his fist on the table and groaned loudly, "Damn it all. I say we launch everything we have on those motherfucking pigs and be done with it. Do you realise how bad it is going to be for our economy, or prestige, everything that's precious to us? We lose the confidence of everyone in the world and our own citizens. We get nuked in broad daylight and can do nothing except twiddling our thumbs inside our collective asses."

General Vaidya cleared his throat and began, "We can take steps to neutralize their remaining weapons... Actually it's going to be suicidal if we don't. We just need your permission to do so." He finished looking at PM directly who appeared to be lost under deep thought.

He took a deep breath and replied, "I'm afraid that I can't allow that without positive proof General. We need concrete evidence of who actually did it."

Most of the people presented in the meeting groaned inwardly.

There was a knock on the door and Dr. Rudra asked for permission to enter. DM broke up the conference for a while and called him in. Doctor entered the cabin glancing at the video screens once and then faced the PM, "Sorry to interrupt the meeting, but some more medical tests are needed and I can't do that on this plane. I'm afraid that we'll have to get you to a hospital."

Both ministers were slightly taken aback and PM asked with surprise in his voice, "But why? I feel absolutely fine."

The doctor had heard this line many times. He replied impassively, "May be you do, but your heart doesn't. I believe that one of your arteries has some degree of blockage. We need to get you to a hospital without any delay."

"I'll be damned. Just what the doctor ordered." DM thought to himself. Then asked, "Where can we take him?"

"I checked with the pilots. Agra is the nearest place with sufficient medical equipment."

"You came in all prepared, didn't you?" PM asked with a slight resentment. But I can't go to any hospital right now. Our country is at war right now. "

DM's eyes widened a little at this, "Good to know that he realises this." While the PM continued to

argue with Dr. Rudra who kept shaking his head like a stubborn mule on every argument that PM put forward. Finally he said, “Sir, I don't have the authority to make you do anything. But as your doctor I strongly advise you to get yourselves examined in a hospital. We may not need to operate yet. If everything is right, you can still be in action. The tests wouldn't take longer than five hours.”

Pm looked towards DM with exasperated eyes. “Do you believe him”?

“There is no harm in getting you examined on ground. I'd rather do it as soon as possible.”

“Ah well. What the hell! OK doc. Five hours on ground. That's the maximum I'm giving you.”

Doctor smiled slightly, Thank you sir. I'd better control my temper if I were you in this condition.” He gave a slight bow and went out.

DM looked at the departing doctor with arched eyebrows then said, “Looks like we'll have to break up the meeting for a while.” PM started to protest but he went on regardless, “It'll give our guys time to gather more intelligence. Not too bad of an idea after all. What's your opinion General Vaidya?”

“Agree completely. I'll go and check security arrangements.”

2130 Hours
1 November 2012
Udyog Bhawan
Kolkata, India

The three stories inconspicuous Udyog Bhawan in Kolkata was completely unimportant to everybody except for the RAW and ARC people who worked there. GP, Deputy Director NTRO was going over the latest satellite images and intelligence reports gathered over the day when the red phone on his table rang. He felt an irrational fear creeping up his gut as he looked at the instrument. The news of the nuke attack had come via this phone minutes after it happened. It was going to be quite some time before he could go back to answering the calls on this secure line normally again. Nevertheless he let go of the pictures and lifted the phone. “GP here.”

“How're you doing GP?”

The subdued voice of Meir, Director of Mossad's Research Department felt a lot different from its usually cheerful tone. “What do you think old friend? This hasn't been exactly a good day.”

GP heard Meir sigh on other end of the line, “I'm really sorry for what happened today GP. I wish that whoever did this rot in hell for all eternity. “

Was Meir trying to pry some information out? Although India and Israel were allies and the two intelligence officers good friends, but intelligence business is unlike all others. Countries spy on enemies as well as their allies alike. GP let out a bitter chuckle, “Only if wishes were horses.”

Meir replied in a mysterious voice, “But I do have something for you to ride upon.”

GP's ears perked up a little. "Do I need to pay rent for the ride?"

Meir chuckled, "Well, if you insist. How about a bottle of scotch and a fried fish from your kitchen next time we meet? "

GP was mystified, "That'll be my pleasure. You, of all the people should know that."

"That I know very well my friend. The thing is that you guys have already done us a favour. We are just returning it."

"Suits me."

Meir turned serious, "You remember the small payload that your ISRO launched for us in April? "

A bulb just clicked on in GP's mind. PSLV launch that month had carried a satellite designed and made by Israelis in complete secrecy. Its capabilities and applications were a well guarded secret. Apart from a select group of people that included the satellite's designers and some in intelligence circles, nobody had any idea. GP replied in a slightly reproachful tone, "Yes I do. You guys have been awfully shy with that one. "

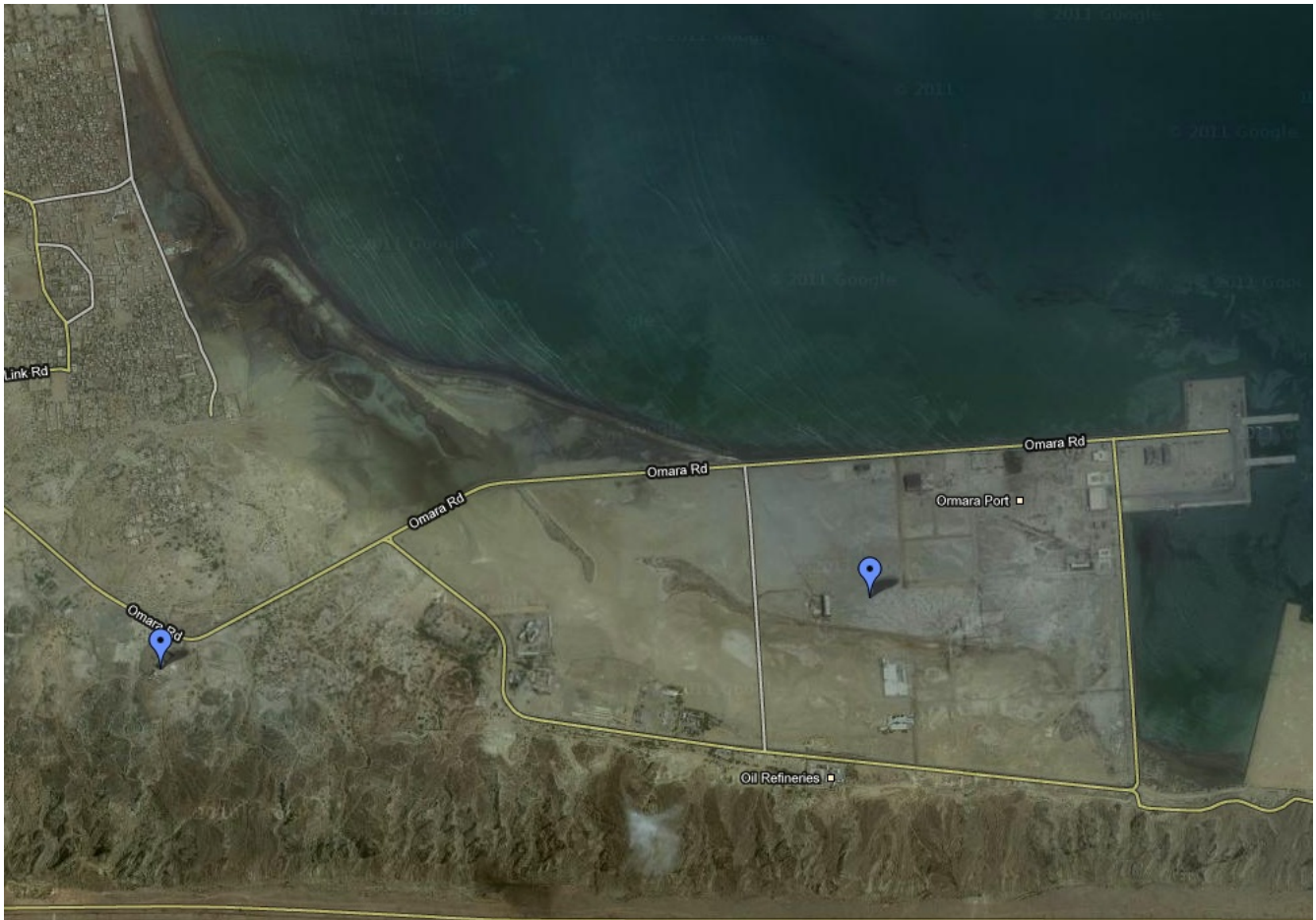
"It's time that we get this complaint sorted out. Can you check the mail? There is a surprise for you. Please let me know if you like it."

GP was suddenly inpatient, "What is it? "

"What else it could be GP? We deal in information and information it is. I hope you keep your end of bargain when we meet again. Till then, take care and Namaskar."

"Shalom friend."

GP replaced the phone on its cradle and opened his secure mailbox. A mail with blank message body and an encrypted attachment had just arrived... He put in the decryption key and extracted the files. There was a small text file and a bunch of high resolution satellite images. He opened the text file first and read it through. With mounting excitement he clicked on the images and started browsing through them. It was with a shaking hand that he picked up the intercom and called for his best analysts to come in to his cabin.



2310 Hours
1 November 2012
Udyog Bhavan
Kolkata

“Are you fucking kidding me GP? “ Angad never swore and bit his tongue as soon as he realised that he just did. “Sorry for that. But are you really sure about this? “

“There is no doubt sir. Take a look at the pictures that I've sent you. I've marked everything of interest.” GP was unnaturally calm about the whole issue

“I'm looking at them right now. But have you confirmed it from our side too?” Angad asked with ever increasing excitement.

“Checked, double checked and checked again sir. Do you want me to explain? “

“Wait for a moment. Let me get some military people on the line. ” Angad replied hurriedly and went offline to arrange a video conference. He was done within five minutes slightly out of breath. “You still there GP? I've called for General Vaidya, Air Marshal Nirmal Jeet and Rear Admiral Kailash Nath They

have those pictures too. Now start explaining.”

GP was ready, “The pictures marked 1 to 21 were taken by Israeli satellites over the span of last 3 weeks. The rest are ours. I'll begin with Israeli ones. Picture one is of a Chinese missile manufacturing plant in ShirChu, Jhiangsu province taken on 11th October. It's one of the main production centers of M9 and M11 missiles. On the second picture, take a close look on the area circled in red. You can see a small group of vehicles that look like container trucks except for their size and design of the cab. Next picture is a blow up of these vehicles. Here you can estimate the length of these trucks which comes out to be nearly 14 m, much longer than any container truck in use anywhere. Next picture in the series is of coastal docks in Tiajin, a naval base around 20 KM from Shirchu taken three days later. Here you can see these trucks lined on the upper right corner of the photograph. Satellite pictures, taken the same day, show that these trucks had vanished from Shirchu. So these are the same four trucks that we saw there. Next three photographs are of the ships which were docked there that day.”

GP paused and looked at his screen, “Are you following me?”

“I see that you've marked one of the ships. Anything special?” General Vaidya asked without taking his eyes off the printouts of the images.

“That's the most interesting part sir. But I'll come to that later. As you can see in next picture, the trucks are not there. The parking area is empty. Either they drove them off somewhere or placed them on one of the ships. Two of the ships docked there are destroyers, one is a refueling tanker and the rest small tugs. The ship that you noticed is the only civilian ship big enough to carry all these trucks. That ship left the base on 17th October. It docked once in Malaysia for refueling a week later where it identified itself as Xajing, owned by a shipping company based in Hong Kong. It was on its way to unload some toys in Pakistan. We did background checks of the company. It's just a shell company for CGBC group, a conglomerate of businesses owned mostly by senior members China's politico bureau.”

Seeing the expressions on their faces, GP realised that his audience was slowly catching on. He paused for breath and began, “Every thing's clear till now?”

“Yes. Please continue.” Angad replied somewhat impatiently.

“Next picture is of Gwadar port in Pakistan where the ship docked on 28th October. It's again marked in a red circle on the left. In the same picture on its upper left corner, you can see two of the trucks that we saw earlier in ShirChu and Tiajin, again marked in red.”

“What's you point GP? These trucks could carry anything. They could really be transporting toys for all we know.” Angad said cautiously.

“I can bet my year's salary that it was certainly not toys. First thing, if you are shipping something, only containers are used, not the whole truck. Second, size of shipping containers is a standard all over the world and these containers do not match anything. Third, cab part of these trucks too much like the trucks Chinese transport their missile upon. Fourth, dimensions of the containers are just right to contain one M-11 missile each. Fifth, trucks originating from a Chinese missile plant are unlikely to carry toys. At least not the kind my kids play with.”

He paused then added, “Not to mention, I sincerely doubt Pakis having the money to buy toys, even Chinese.”

Air Chief Nirmaljeet looked frantic, “Motherfucker! By hell, you are right GP! But there was only one missile strike. There are only 2 trucks in this picture and there are no trucks in the rest. Where the hell are they? The ship has not left the port yet. Has it?”

GP shook his head, “No sir. According to our sources, it's still docked. Even if two of the original four trucks are on the ship, one is still missing. We are still looking for that one.”

General Vaidya looked really grave “Shit. That's not good at all.”

GP paused for a while before beginning again, “Actually that's not all. Take a look at the other set of pictures.” He waited while the others looked over them.

“Damn! This train looks like it's transporting at least two missiles. But where the hell is it?” Nirmaljeet asked with visible alarm.

General Vaidya looked like somebody had punched him in the gut. Without waiting for GP he answered the question himself, “That's on the railway line Chinese have constructed through PoK.”

“Correct General. We saw this train vanish in to one of the tunnels on that line this morning. It's still in that tunnel inside PoK.”

A shiver went down GP's spine as he said that. It had taken all of will power to control the trembling in his body ever since he first understood the meaning of the pictures. Now he felt his self control weakening he went through the pictures again. “We're in real deep shit.” He muttered under his breath. Booming voice of General Vaidya broke his reverie. “GP, where are these missiles now?”

“Train mounted ones are being stored in a tunnel in south of Gilgit about 110 KM from LOC. We believe that particular tunnel is being used as a storage site for more weapons and barracks for at least 240 soldiers at any given time.”

“A train tunnel being used like that?” Nirmal Jeet asked with some incredulity.

“Yes. They've been digging that particular mountain for four years. We have reports from our agents on grounds to confirm this fact. The last three photos of second batch are of this particular tunnel including one taken from the ground of one of its exits. Chinese have long terms plans for this region.”

“What about the other three missiles in Gwadar?”

“It's entirely possible that all three have been unloaded and hidden somewhere safe. We are searching for them with everything we've got. In fact one of our satellites is scheduled to make a pass over the region in twenty minutes. We've alerted our men on ground too. I hope something will come up soon.”

Angad was twirling a pen his hands nervously, “It's not good enough GP. Not good at all. Lives of crores are at stake. We need to find those missiles and neutralize them yesterday.”

General Singh intervened, “Let him do his job Angad. This situation is much more dangerous than we previously imagined. Let's call up the ministers and get the permission to take these missiles out.”

“But we don't have information about all the missiles yet.”

“That's why we start right now. There is no time to waste.” Nirmal Jeet replied for General Vaidya, then addressed GP, “GP, you have to contact us as soon as anything comes up. There can't be any slip ups now. Use everything you've got. Do you understand?”

GP nodded as other participants of video conferencing broke the link. He stared at his screen for a few seconds apparently lost in deep thought. Then he looked at the watch and started waiting for the satellite feed about to start in fifteen minutes.

2335 Hours
Onboard AF1
Skies over Agra
India

DM reacted to the news same way Angad had. He immediately barged into the PM's cabin where Dr. Rudra was busy examining him. Both men looked at him with identical alarmed expressions. Dr. Rudra opened his mouth to protest but kept quiet on seeing how flustered DM looked. He in turn sprinted to PM's bedside and poured out the whole scenario without pausing for breath.

“That can't be true.” PM said with wide eyes even before DM was finished.

“Wake up sir. It is true.” Turning to the doctor with an irritated expression he asked, “Have you given him a narcotic or something?”

“No. Nothing yet.” Doctor replied in a surprised way.

Turning to PM with even more irritation he said, “He has not given you anything! Then why are you behaving like you've been drugged? Wake up and smell the coffee. The nuclear threat just got worse. We have to take action!” He almost shouted out the last sentence.

“What do you want me to do?” PM stammered.

DM took a deep breath and started speaking, “You are the chief decision maker for us. Dy. PM should've been here to take your place if you are sick but he is in Japan on a tour. That means either you give our military permission to take out those nukes right now or give somebody else the authority till you get back on your feet. As of now, I'm the senior most person who can take the best informed decision. So let me decide what to do.”

PM kept staring blankly at his DM for a few seconds and started speaking when DM opened his mouth to say something, “Alright Shivendra. You do what you think is right. “

0030 Hours
2 November 2012
Arabian Sea

Captain Vikram Batra read the encrypted message again and took out a small laminated photograph of Lord Ram out of his pocket. Clutching the small photograph he closed his eyes and whispered a short prayer. Lord Ram had commanded his army across the sea to fight against an asur Ravan who had kidnapped Sita. Although Cap Batra will not be commanding any army across the sea, his work did have some passing semblance to what Lord Ram did. Like the ancient King, in a way he too will cross the sea and bring the righteous wrath upon the enemies. The thought made him smile and feel stupid at once. "This is no time to harbour any illusions of grandeur, old man." He said to himself and looked around the bridge of the ship he was entrusted to command. In a way, he could afford to feel grand. After all, he was only the first officer to command Arihant, India's first nuclear submarine. His chest again slightly puffed with pride on remembering that he was also going to be the first officer to lead India's first nuclear submarine in to combat. "Back to work, back to work." He commanded himself as he put the small photograph back in his shirt pocket.

Around him, the crew members were engaged in their work with full attention. Taking in a deep breath, he picked up the intercom and started a short address to his crew men, "Hello everybody, this is your Captain speaking. As you all know, our country has been attacked by nuclear weapons. Even as I speak, our enemies are preparing for more attacks on our country and our loved ones. Right now, it's not about anything like money or religion or politics, it's about our survival as a nation with a glorious history and a prosperous future. For this purpose, we've been ordered to destroy certain enemy targets. From this moment onwards, we are officially at war. I expect each one of you to remember your training and behave accordingly. That's about everything I have to say for now. Man all battle stations."

He cut the intercom and ordered, "Make depth 100m."

"Depth 100m, aye." Navigation officer responded smartly.

"Helm turn One-zero-zero."

"Turn One-zero-zero, aye."

"Make speed 18 knots."

"Speed 18 knots, aye."

INS Arihant turned slowly and started its journey towards Pakistani coast. It was only a matter of hours before it reached close enough to make its name come true literally.

0340 Hours
2 November 2010
6x Su30-MKI Flight
Skies over Gujarat sea coast

Mission Controller aboard IL-76 based AWACS took a look at the radar screen and picked up the mouth piece to contact Striker formation, “Striker team, this is Falcon 1. Guardian will join your formation over WayPoint 1 in 3 minutes.”

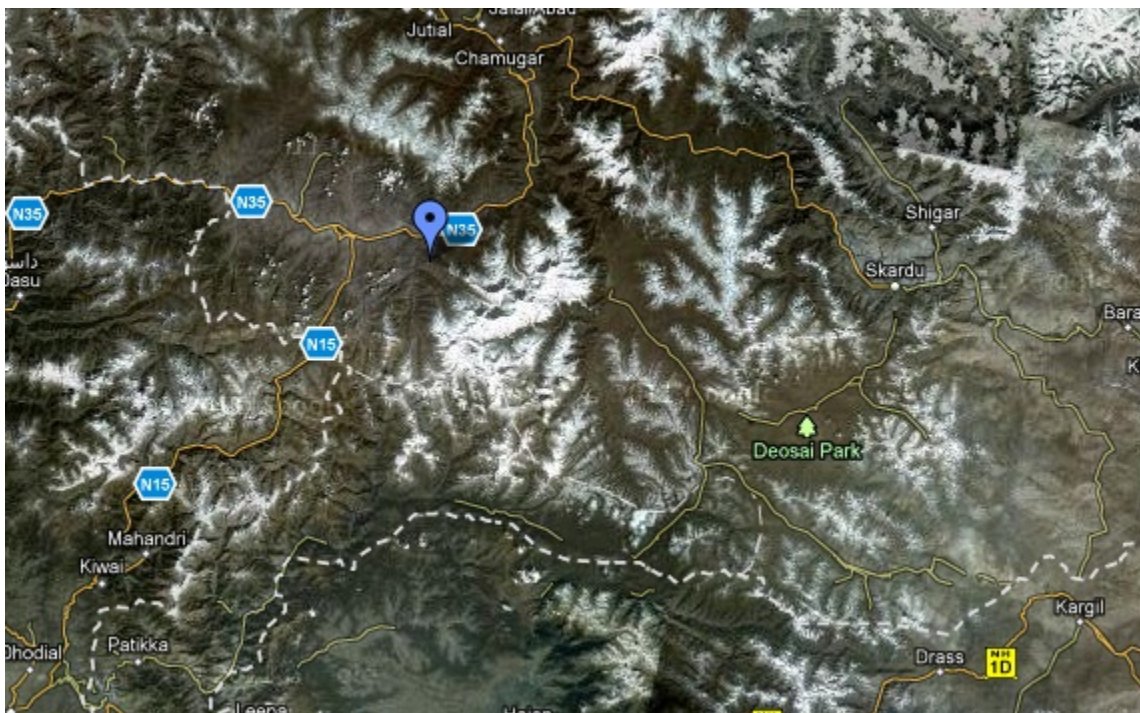
“Roger that Falcon 1.” Wing Commander Narendra, flight leader replied and craned his neck to catch a glimpse of the approaching three plane formation of Su30-MKIs tasked with providing air cover to his Striker formation. Right on time the Guardian flight took defensive positions around the other six Su30-MKIs that formed the Strikers

He strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of the Air-to-Air missiles that the Guardians were carrying. In low light of the half moon, all he could see of the Guardians was flames of their engines. He wondered if they could see the much bigger payload his formation was carrying from that distance.

He took a deep breath as the Sukhois approached next waypoint. Voice of the MC came through radio once again, “Striker formation, increase your altitude to 8000m. Time for payback. Falcon 1 out.”

“Roger that Falcon 1”. WC Narendra replied and put his plane in to a steep climb. “Time for payback indeed.”

0345 Hours
2 November 2012
70 Km South of Gilgit, POK



The two Chinese soldiers were standing guard over the unnamed mountain for two hours in to their shift. Their two comrades were asleep inside their cleverly camouflaged bunker. The two sentries were fully alert, backs erect and fingers on triggers as they stood guard. A HN-5 MANPADS, Chinese copy of Russian 9K32M Strela-2 lay in between them. Every ten minutes, one of the sentries would put a small night-vision binocular to his eyes and scan his surroundings. Each time special attention was given to the railway line that passed through the foot-hills of their mountain and vanished in to a tunnel of another bigger one adjacent to theirs. The tunnel marked entrance of railway line in to the lush green valley just behind the massive mountain. Every thirty minutes, either one of them would pick up the small hand held radio placed on the ground and report the situation. Each time he received replies from two other watch positions placed similarly on adjacent mountain tops. This chore done, the soldier would walk back to his position and again start scanning the area below him.

Two dark figures lay as still as rocks behind them, watching and marking their every move. It was not the first time they were doing that. The ten men team divided further in to smaller groups had been collecting intelligence for two weeks now. But tonight was different. They had been lying face down for an hour on the cold hard ground while a cold breeze chilled their backs. One of the figures whispered in to his small mouth piece, "Stalker alpha in position and ready." He received immediate replies from two other teams. He looked towards his team mate lying beside him and nodded. Then whispered softly, "It's a go." Both men brought out silenced Tavors and took aim on heads of the two Chinese.

"On my mark, 3,2,1." There were muffled popping noises as the two guns fired and slightly louder thumps as the two Chinese soldiers dropped unceremoniously to the ground. The two men broke cover and raced towards the bunker trying to be as quite as possible as possible. A small battery powered light illuminated the entrance. Their rifles drawn and eyes to the sights they tip-toed inside to find two Chinese fast asleep inside. Without pausing they put two shots in to each man's head.

This work done both came out and contacted their mates on radio. The two remaining Chinese posts had been neutralized too. All that was left was report from fourth team which came in three minutes later, "Fireworks attached."

"Acknowledged."

Most difficult part of their mission complete, the men slightly relaxed and checked their watches. They still had twelve minutes till the delivery of airborne package. The man with Tavor took out one small gadget from his backpack and placed it on top of the bunker. It was just a small radio marker that could be used to identify the correct location. Two of the other teams on other mountain tops did the same. In the meanwhile, his compatriot had placed a laser designator and started adjusting its aim. His target was entrance of the tunnel. Other mouth of tunnel, the one facing the valley was marked similarly. Nine minutes left and they waited.

0347 Hours
2 November 2010
Phalcon AWACS
Skies near Pakistan's southern coast

Concrete intelligence regarding remaining three missiles had come in minutes after the meeting between GP, Angad and military representatives had ended. Two of the missiles had been detected at the Omara naval base. The base was approximately 230 Km west of Gwadar and had come up in the last two years with active but hushed Chinese assistance. Third one was further east on Chama, a small island less than 40 KM west of Karachi. The coordinates were hurriedly forwarded to the Air Force which had plans to neutralize any such target ready for years. Striker flight was the one chosen to destroy those missiles.

The six Sukhois engaged afterburners and put the planes in to a steep climb. The engines screaming and the airframe under quite a bit of stress, pilots waited till they reached 8000m and then leveled out. One by one they fired off their Air to Land version of Brahmos. The missiles dropped for a few meters then the booster kicked in propelling them to near Mach 3 speeds. Their work done, all Sukhois turned over and started racing back to their base. Personnel aboard the Phalcon watched as six blips started racing towards their targets, two missiles against each target.

“Missile launch! We've just detected a missile launch from Chama Island.” Excited voice of one of the radar operators broke the attention of technicians concentrating on the six Brahmos flight.

MC rushed to the console and looked. “Damn it all to hell. They've launched that fucking missile? Keep tracking its trajectory. Send alerts to HQs immediately. Any idea where it's going? Dilli?”

“Looks like its going south. If its M11 then Mumbai is one prime target.” radar operator replied without taking his eyes off the console.

“What about the missiles at Omara? And how long before that satellite feed is available again?” MC asked getting more scared with every passing moment

“No sign of launch yet. Satellite will be in range in 60 seconds.”

“20 seconds to Brahmos impact.” radar operators tasked with tracking Brahmos flight announced.

MC bit his lips willing the Brahmos to destroy the Chinese missiles before they took off. His charm worked with the rest. The four Brahmos directed towards Omara base slammed in to their targets without any of the M11s launching. The ones directed towards Chama Island destroyed the empty launcher killing only the personnel on ground. MC walked to his chair staring at the just launched M11 missile coordinates. “Assholes launched it even before they knew we were coming. They were going to launch it no matter what!” He stared at the screen connected to satellite feed wishing the images via satellite could come sooner. He clutched his chair's arm rest tightly as the satellite link was established. Images at first blurry, then more focused and sharp started streaming in. He could see columns of smoke rising out of the Paki naval base, but couldn't confirm if the missiles were destroyed. “Well?” he inquired loudly.

“It's a kill. We've destroyed the remaining missiles.” was the reply.

“Only if we could have destroyed that bitch too. Shit!” he groaned.

0357 Hours

2 November 2012

70 Km South East of Gilgit, POK

Two figures atop the mountain waited anxiously for the planes to appear. Without turning his head from the sky that he was scanning with his binoculars one of the men said, “Wish the birds were here already.”

His companion who was manning the laser designator just grunted something unintelligible.

“What?” first man asked?

The reply was drowned by the ear splitting thunder as two Jaguars flying a few meters above the peaks passed overhead and dropped two Sudarshan laser guided bombs each on both mouths of the tunnel. Guided by the laser spot, all four bombs found their mark and exploded with loud noise. Every person nearby felt the earth shaking as the powerful explosives tore through the tunnel entrances. The explosions caused a large volume of rocks and concrete used in the construction of tunnel to collapse on the tunnel entrance and blocked it completely from both sides.

“That's what I was talking about.” First man shouted exultantly.

“I can't hear you. I think I've gone deaf.” Other man replied rubbing his ears.

“You are a whining bitch.”

“Shut the fuck up or I shove this MANPADS up yours.”

“Hah! You heard THAT all right.”

“Shh...can you hear that? “

Both men stopped their banter and looked upwards. A distant noise of jet engines was coming closer and closer. “Looks like the PARA guys are here.”

Picking up his binocular he looked up to the sky and sure enough he could see the outline of a C -130J Hercules transporter getting closer every second. It was supplemented by small dark specks that grew larger and larger into parachutes.

Within minutes the area was swarming with Indian PARA soldiers. Except three soldiers who received injuries while landing on the rough terrain, everybody else landed safely. The soldiers rapidly converged on both sides of the tunnel and took positions. Leader of the PARAS, a veteran Lt. Colonel Megh Singh contacted the Stalkers on radio, “Stalker Alpha, Jumper 1 and Jumper 2 are in position.

What's the status of that bridge? We don't want any Chinese arriving with reinforcements before we are finished with the ones inside the tunnel.”

“Jumper 1, the bridge has been destroyed and all Chinese personnel within a two KM radius neutralized.”

“Thanks for the help Stalkers.” Lt. Colonel Megh replied and turned to his soldiers. “All right men, time for action.”

0357 Hours
Missile Defence Force HQ
Mumbai

Inside the underground bomb proof bunker, Brigadier Rajinder Singh was staring at the long range radar console. Warning of an impending missile strike had come in just seconds ago jolting everybody in to action. Not that they had been slouching earlier, but the sound of klaxons always has some strange effects on people who hear it.

“How much time?”

“Three-Seven-Oh seconds before it becomes terminal. Rakshak 1 ready by for launch, Rakshak 2 in ten seconds” one technician on deputation from DRDO replied.

“You sure there are no other bogies?”

“Yes sir.”

On the screen they watched as the Pakistani M11 came closer, waiting anxiously for it to come within the kill-zone. They did not have to wait long. Within seconds a beeping sound let everybody know of the fact. “Launch Rakshak 1.” Brig Rajinder Singh ordered with a calm voice that belied what he was feeling inside. He started a countdown on a timer and ordered, “Launch Rakshak 2 on the 0 count.” He again went on to staring at the radar screen as one small blip of Rakshak 1, a PAD missile rose from its launcher and started its journey to intercept the enemy missile. 5 seconds later, another blip announced the launch of Rakshak 2. Seconds seemed like hours as the two blips from Indian side gained altitude and converged on the M11.

“10 seconds to Rakshak 1 intercept, starting now. “One technician announced. “9 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2 ,1.” then silence as the two blips merged.

“What?” Brigadier Singh shouted anxiously then smiled as data was updated on the screen in front of him.

“We have a successful intercept by Rakshak 1. Rakshak 2 will self-destruct in twenty seconds.”

Brig Singh jumped up from his chair and congratulated the grinning DRDO techies by slapping them on their backs. “When all this is over, I'll throw a grand party for everybody in this bunker. What's your favourite booze son? Anything you ask for.”

One of the technicians replied apologetically, “But I don't drink sir. “

“But you will when we have that party. Better start preparing now.” Brig. Singh laughed.

0409 Hours

2 November 2010

Falcon 1 AWACS

Skies near Pakistan's southern coast

News of successful interception of M11 had just come in and the atmosphere of anxious gloom disappeared. MC allowed himself a wry smile and said a silent prayer in thanks. Their work was not yet over though. They were still monitoring anything that could be of interest. The silence was broken by voice of radar operator, “Sir, we are detecting multiple missile launches from the sea.”

“That must be our boomer. “ MC answered excitedly. “How many launches?”

“Still counting, 7,8,9,10.” A white faced operator turned towards MC, “My god! They've launched almost everything they had. Weren't they carrying nukes?”

MC glanced at the young technician and answered, “I don't know. That's above my pay grade.”

“Pay grade or not. Even a kid knows that at least half of those missiles were nuke tipped.” technician thought silently.

“How much time left to impact?” MC asked.

“Still tracking their trajectory sir. Can't say anything right now.” came the reply.

MC nodded, “Alright. Only nukes serve these Paki buggers right.” then thought to himself, “Only 6-8 nukes wouldn't be enough.”

He need not have worried. An armada of ballistic missiles was pouring down on various other Paki targets from Indian mainland. Unfortunately for Pakis, they didn't have any kind of defense against this kind of attack.

0410 to 0600 Hours

Terrorist Islamic Mullahcracy of Pakistan

First to go was the Omara naval base as it was the nearest. A plutonium based 10 KT warhead exploded 300m above ground and every structure that existed turned to ashes within a moment. Two Agosta submarines which were moored on the docks were thrown meters away like toys by the shock wave. The heat also vapourised a large quantity of sea water and a massive cloud of steam bellowed upwards. The crumpled submarines lay like broken toys on the newly dried sea bed before water came rushing in and washed them ashore like soda cans. All the civilian vessels, unfortunate to be nearby, disappeared like they never even existed.

Next to go was Gwadar port. Warhead and yield blast were identical, but effects on ground were much more spectacular. Dozens of ships, most of them Chinese just vanished after the heat from the blast turned them in to vapour. A major fuel and gas dump, most of which was underground caught fire and the ground was rocked by 100s of sympathetic explosions, wiping out every indication of the fact that something man made had ever existed there.

Effects were similar on Karachi port. The three strikes on three naval targets wiped out every naval asset and most of shore based defences of the Pakistani armed forces.

Next target was the nuclear weapons storage base at Wah. Constructed almost entirely underground on a rocky soil, it was considered to be almost impregnable. This base like a few others was targeted by three 20 KT+ nukes. But instead of exploding in mid-air, the specially constructed warheads made out of depleted Uranium and Tungsten penetrated nearly 30 meters underground before exploding. The resulting explosions hit every structure over ground and underground with the force of Richter 10 earthquake. The structures that happened to be in the middle of two or three shock waves crumpled like sand castles burying everything and everybody under tons of concrete and rock. Even the structures hit by two or less waves were damaged irrevocably. Within seconds of the explosions, the ground exploded upwards like a volcano, throwing up enormous amounts of radioactive and molten dirt and rock hundreds of meters in to the air. Not a single person was left alive. The adjoining air force base was laid to waste by two short range Agni-I missiles

All the other major nuclear weapons storage sites in Dera Nawabshah, Sargodha, Gujranwala Fatehjang, Masroor, Quetta and Kamra were taken out almost similarly by a mix of nuclear and conventional explosives.

Sui gas plant, target of numerous Baloch nationalist attacks was taken out by a Prithvi missile carrying a thermobaric warhead. All that was left of the multi-million dollar facility was a scrap heap of twisted metal.

Karachi, Islamabad, Peshawar and Lahore cantonments were devastated by a mix of nuclear and non-nuclear air-burst and underground explosions. Casualties in these three cantonments were near 70%, the rest being too seriously injured to be of any threat to anybody else or any of use to Pakistan. Numerous terrorist camps near LoC in Muzzafrabad, Gilgit and other parts in Pak Occupied J&K were razed to ground using artillery and air strikes.

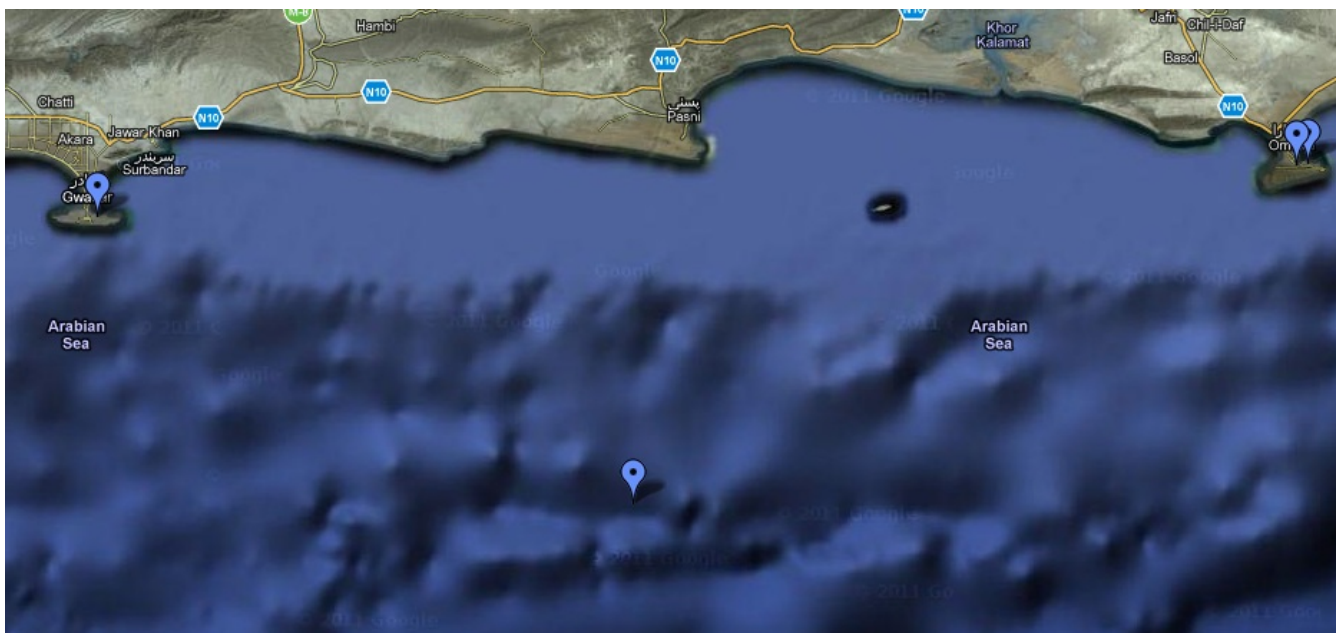
Paki Army men and Rangers deployed on Indo-Pak borders were one of very few survivors to escape from the Armageddon. Even then, their efficiency was severely compromised by near complete

destruction of their leadership, bases and supply lines. A large number of such survivors abandoned their positions or surrendered to Indian armed forces all over the border.

Civilian casualties although high by the numbers, were comparatively light considering the scale of attack. Even then, almost 10 lakhs (1 Million) civilians perished in the attack. Thousands more kept dying every minute after that for want of medical and material aid. Already weak civilian infrastructure of the country collapsed and riots and mass flights from populated centers started happening. All pleas of help from international community fell on deaf ears as aid agencies were wary of sending their workers in a nuclear war zone.

Four Chinese bases in PoK were not spared either. They were targeted first using Brahmos missiles to neutralize most of their anti-air assets then bombed to dust by repeated air strikes. Dazed survivors, many of them civilians had nowhere else to go as Indian SF had cut down all of the communication lines. With most of their defences destroyed and facing gruesome executions by mobs of locals thirsting for revenge, most of them either ran away in panic or chose to surrender to Indian army wherever they could find them.

0615 Hours
2 November 2012
Delhi Class Destroyer
Arabian Sea



Chinese submarine's location

In spite of near complete destruction of Pakistan's military, Indian military personnel were not relaxing. One of venerable Delhi class destroyers was patrolling the Arabian Sea, south of Gwadar, Pakistan which had been burnt to ashes only a few hours before. A group of technicians and operators on board the ship's bridge was bent over their consoles watching everything with full concentration.

Sonar operator announced, "We have an underwater contact at grid sector C221, around 31 Km from our current location."

"Do we have any assets in that area?" Captain asked.

"Negative sir. A Kilo is on a combat patrol 50 KM south, but we have no submarines operating so close to Pakistani coast at this time."

"Any identification of submarine?"

"Not really. Parts of our under-water sensor array have been damaged due to the nuclear explosions. We don't have a 100% fix."

"Looks like we'll have to do it the old fashioned way. Turning to his communications officer he ordered, "Designate the suspected contact as Bandit 1. Launch Sea King immediately"

To navigation officer, "Make speed 10 knots and bearing on an intercept with the bandit."

A few minutes later comms officer reported, "Sir, Sea King from Delhi has begun dropping passive sonobuoys."

"Any progress?" Commander asked.

"Not yet."

Commander nodded and waited silently. There was no escape for Bandit 1 unless Indians made some mistake or if it was really lucky. He didn't believe in luck and he was not making any mistakes, not in such a situation for sure. He didn't have to wait long. Within five minutes, report of the contact came in via the communications officer, "Sea King has made the contact sir. It's a Chinese Type-09 nuclear attack submarine. At its present speed of 11 Knots, it'll enter our waters in less than 2 hours."

"Shit!" WSO exclaimed, "These subs can carry nuclear tipped SLCMs."

"In current situation, we are assuming that it is carrying nuke missiles. There is no time left to play games." Turning to his navigator he asked, "How far is Bandit one from our current location?"

"We'll intercept on its estimated path in 50 minutes."

"Good. Keep our current course and instruct Sea King to keep following it."

As soon as he finished the sentence, slightly panicked voice of sonar operator broke in, "Sir, Bandit 1 is coming up to a possible SLCM launch depth."

WSO announced after a few seconds, "Sea King has a firing solution on Bandit 1."

Although Sea King carried two A244 torpedoes, their size and impact was much too small as compared to much bigger ones carried by the ships and submarines. But it was the only choice that Indians had at that moment as both of the bigger vessels; the Delhi destroyer and the Kilo submarine were too far away.

The captain weighed his options. He could choose to wait for the Delhi destroyer for its bigger and longer ranged torpedoes and depth charges and risk the Chinese submarine launching its missiles and running away before the ship could even come within firing range. Or he could order the Sea King to drop its much smaller torpedoes right now. Although the smaller torpedoes were not an ideal weapon to sink the Chinese submarine, he didn't have the minutes to wait for a sure-shot kill.

“Order Sea King to launch its torpedoes right now.”

Sonar operator confirmed the two torpedoes hitting water. They acquired their target within seconds and started homing in by themselves. Chinese didn't miss the sound of torpedoes hitting the water and immediately started taking evasive maneuvers. The submarine immediately put itself in to a deep dive angle on full throttle and launched decoys. This way it was successful in diverting one of the A244, but the other one found its mark and hit its target near propeller on its port side. The explosion tore a hole in to the submarine's hull and damaged the propeller shaft assembly beyond repairs. There was also some damage to one of its bigger ballast tanks which was just emptied a few moments ago as the submarine was coming near to surface. As the water started to seep in, the submarine started listing dangerously to its side owing to imbalance in weight. Its Chinese crew was forced to seal off most of its rear area and empty rest of the ballast tanks. The submarine came to the surface a minute later still listing slightly to its port side and lay still. Although it was not completely destroyed, the fact that it was tilted on its side ensured that it could not launch any of its missiles.

Sea King hovered in a tight circle with its crew keeping a close eye on any movement while waiting for its mother ship to come close enough to launch a boarding party.

On board the destroyer, a round of congratulations and pats on the backs was in progress when the sonar operator nearly jumped out of his seat, “I think I just heard gun shots from insides of the submarine! “

Although everybody in the bridge seemed bewildered, Captain seemed looked amused, “Gun shots inside the submarine? Are you really sure?”

“It surely sounded like gunshots to me.” Sonar operator replied looking slightly embarrassed.

“Hmm. We can't rule out anything at this time anyway. Turning to his comms officer he ordered, “Try contacting the submarine before we try boarding it.”

The comms officer had been trying everything but had no luck getting any response from the Chinese. He replied, “We are getting no response sir. It's like either they are not answering deliberately or their communication gear is damaged.”

“Very well. Looks like we'll have to board the submarine. Are our men ready for it?”

His 2nd in command replied, “A ten man team is getting ready as we speak. They'll be ready to go in

five minutes.”

Captain nodded approvingly, “Good. Cut open hatches of the submarine if you have to. But do it quick. There is no time for us to waste.”

A heavily armed team of ten men from the ship boarded two boats and climbed atop the tilted submarine, while the destroyer and its Sea King kept watch. They banged on the hatch shouting at the Chinese inside to open it. Still getting no response, they started cutting open an entrance using blow torches. They had just started the process when the latch was unlocked from the inside and a motley group of Chinese sailors peeked out cautiously. One by one they climbed out with their hands raised and were immediately taken in to custody. No man from either side knew any common language. Although they tried communicating by sign language, the idea was soon dropped and the Chinese were quickly bundled off to the destroyer. Indian team then decided to take chances and entered the submarine. In spite of the unexpectedly easy entry, they were not expecting a real cake walk

Leaving two men to guard the exit, rest of the team started advancing towards the bridge. The fact that the already cramped submarine was tilting to an angle made their advance a bit more complicated. Nevertheless they kept advancing and reached the bridge without facing any opposition. There they were greeted by the sullen faces of a few Chinese seamen. Except for two officers carrying handguns, rest of the crew was unarmed and they all surrendered without much persuasion.

One of the officers knew a little English and he tried talking with Indians. Using gestures and some broken English, he took them to the living quarters where a large group of Chinese sailors was gathered around the Captain's cabin chattering excitedly. On seeing one of their officers guiding the armed Indian party up to the door, they fell quiet and spread around the door.

Leader of Indian party, Chief Petty Officer Lakshman faced the Chinese officer and asked for reason behind the spectacle. Chinese officer in turn pointed towards the door and said, “Captain! Our captain inside.”

Lakshman first looked at his team mates then asked, “Ask him to open the door. He will be treated honourably and fairly.”

Chinese shook his head vehemently, “We have Pakistani. Pakistani has Captain inside. We need help to save Captain.”

Somebody from the Indian team exclaimed, “What the hell is he talking about! He has Pakistanis on board? For what? Cooking pork?”

“Keep quiet and let me try to understand the situation.” Lakshman snapped and turned to Chinese officer again, but Chinese were unable to explain anything more beyond vague gestures.

Getting frustrated with the logjam, Lakshman banged on the door and shouted in Hindi. He was startled by somebody shouting from inside in same language, “Who the fu** is it now?”

Lakshman shouted back, “We are from Indian navy and this submarine along with all its crew is under our control now. Open the door and come outside with your hands up in air. You will not be harmed.”

The man inside the room laughed ironically, "I could've never expected to be in a situation like this even in my wildest dreams." He snorted again and shouted with renewed anger, "Their damned captain is still alive. Tell all these Chinese turds to fuck off otherwise I'll snap his neck like a chicken. And I need medical attention for the General."

The Indian team outside exchanged quizzical glances. This was way beyond strange even for them. Feeling slightly bewildered Lakshman replied, "What General and who are you?"

Man inside the cabin laughed again, "You still don't know? Well, that doesn't matter. Get these idiots off the boat and send an unarmed medic inside right now."

"We have Chinese crew of this submarine under control. We assure you of your safety and full medical attention. Just open the door and let us in."

"You'll first get these Chinese out of my eyesight and then send a medic inside as I said earlier."

Lakshman was getting irritated, "Do you realise that you are in no condition to demand anything? This submarine is leaking and will sink in a few hours. You can stay locked inside and first watch your General die then drown with him to your watery grave. Or open the door like a reasonable person and let us help you."

"I don't care about dying, friend. But I have something that will prove very valuable to you. If I die, the information dies with me. Now you decide if the information that I carry on me is valuable enough for you or not."

Lakshman sighed resignedly and gestured his men to start rounding up the Chinese "Alright. I'll get them out of submarine right now. As soon as the last Chinese is out, you'll open the door and let us in."

"Fair enough. I'm waiting."

But the Chinese didn't oblige easily. As soon as Indians started escorting them out, the Chinese sailors started shouting and refused to budge. Neither side could understand what the other was saying and it was only after the Indians threatened to gun down some of more unruly members that the Chinese started to file out one by one with angry expressions on their faces.

Indian boarding party received a fairly big surprise when they entered the Captain's cabin. Inside they found a Pakistani army officer with a gun pointed at a terrified and bound Chinese submarine captain. Another Chinese officer in PLA General's uniform lay dead on the floor with three bullet wounds while a Paki army officer, who was at once identified as General Asgar himself was spread unconscious on a table. He too had been shot once through chest. The Paki officer was unarmed and everybody taken in to custody. Once at the ship, interrogation started immediately. The captured Paki officer identified himself as Lt. Zia, a trusted aide of General Asgar. The story he told his interrogators was nothing like anybody expected.

According to him, General Asgar had ordered the launch of first nuclear missile as soon as the Chinese had informed him of the arsenal's arrival. By this, he had expected to shift the blame to General Beg and force him to step down under the threat of similar nuclear strikes on Pakistan as well as India. What he hadn't counted upon was the duplicity of Chinese. Within minutes of the first launch, Pakis had intercepted a communication between General Mao Hu and a senior CPC member in China. CPC

member was quoted as ordering General Hu to fight to the last Paki. When General Asgar confronted General Hu with the intercept, the Chinese at once kidnapped Asgar and moved him and his aide to the submarine berthed at Omara. Loyalties of numerous Paki army officers had been bought earlier without anybody being wiser and Chinese faced no opposition while they took a Pakistani general hostage inside his own country. They had then ordered the launch of remaining missiles and planned to escape under the confusion. But the swift retaliatory strikes by India had put a spanner to their plans. Additionally their submarine suffered some damage during the nuclear attack at Omara.

With most of their plan screwed up, Chinese had no further use left for Asgar and meant to execute him as soon as possible. But Mao and Asgar somehow overpowered their captors and had managed to shut themselves inside the cabin in same condition as the Indians had found them. To strengthen his claim, Rashid provided Indians with a memory card containing the captured communication between General Hu and his senior in CPC.

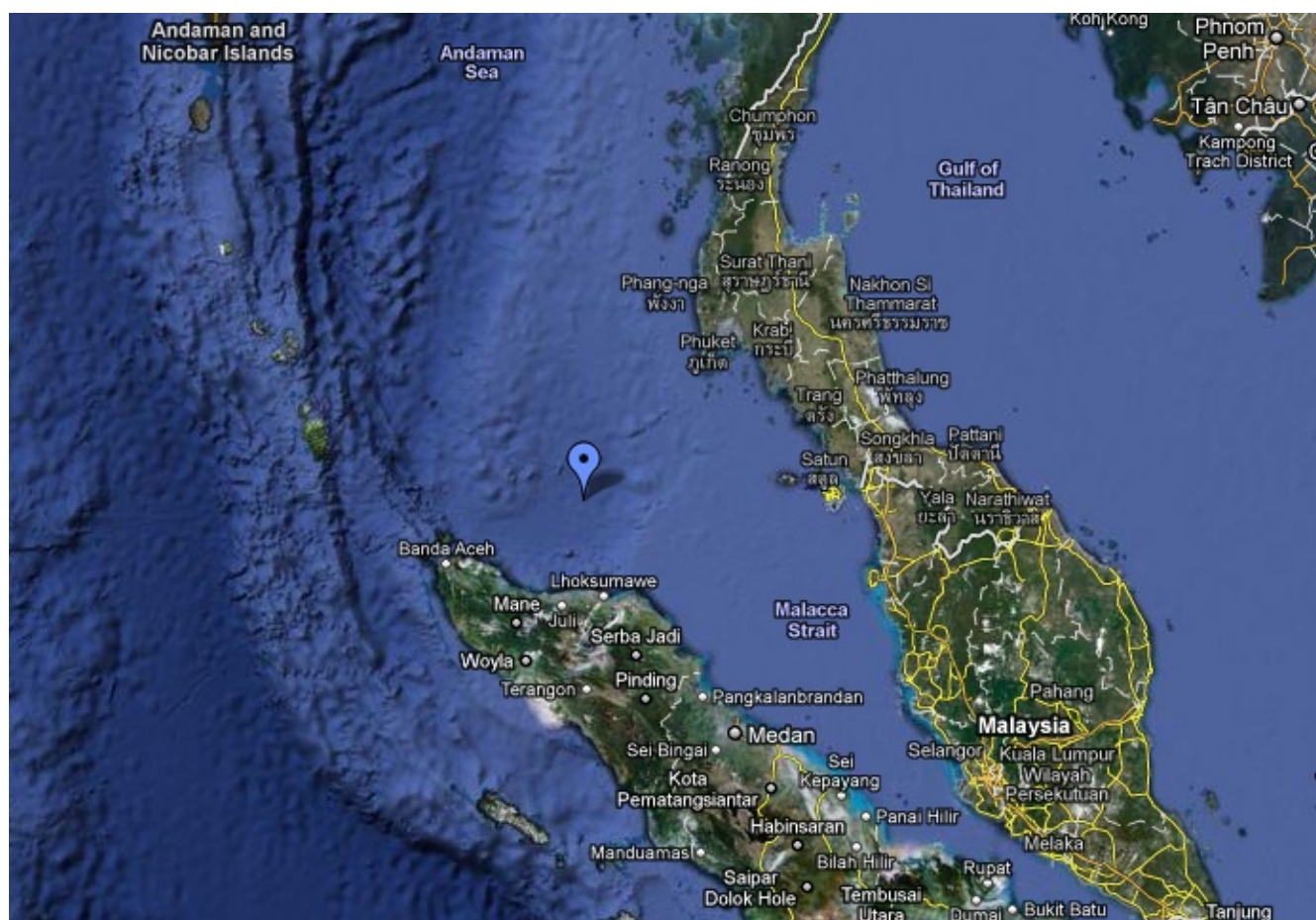
0810 Hours

Somewhere East of Malaysia

Indian Ocean

The Indian Akula was lurking in the relatively shallow waters of Indian Ocean on a routine patrol when the hostilities commenced all of a sudden. Till then, its work had mainly consisted of avoiding merchant ships and gathering intelligence on the odd military vessel that came within its range. But the sudden escalation had turned a routine intelligence gathering patrol in to a combat patrol. Right now the newest submarine of the Indian naval fleet was drifting along at speed of 7 knots just outside territorial waters of Malaysia.

Its crew was on highest alert and complete silence had been enforced on deck. That meant everything that could cause any kind of noise that included music players, loud conversations were banned. Sonar crew was bent over their respective consoles intently analyzing every contact that showed up on their passive sonar. Previously most of their contacts had been noisy merchant vessels and fishing trawlers of all shapes and sizes. Some of the crewmen claimed that they could hear them from miles away even without any gadget. Presence of so many vessels provided them some cover to hide their own noise. But it also worked for the enemy in similar way. Correctly detecting and identifying targets of interest in such conditions was a herculean task even with the ultra-modern electronic gear on board. But the news of nuclear conflict in the sub-continent had changed the conditions drastically. Most of the shipping companies plying in this area had stopped all their activities in this area pending further improvements in the security situation. A few small fishing trawlers were still active, but most of the cover offered by big vessels was gone. As with normal conditions, the advantage or disadvantage of the situation affected both sides equally.



Although the sea floor had been mapped extensively by commercial as well as military organizations, no submarine crew took the task of navigating those waters lightly. The sea is shallow and sea bed highly uneven. As if that was not enough, the sea bed is littered with wrecks of countless ships making job of navigators hairy at best of the times. In a nutshell, such were the conditions under which the Indian submarine was guarding India against another sneak attack by Chinese

Captain of Akula was monitoring all the reports being fed in to his console without pause for hours. He leaned away from his console and stretched a little in order to drive away the cramps that were beginning to set in. Addressing his sonar man he remarked, “The sea is pretty quite now, isn't it?”

Sonar man replied, “Indeed it is. It's a fish market otherwise. No pun intended.”

“Still, don't let your guard down. I'm sure that we are about to see some action very soon.”

As if on cue, one of the sonar crew members announced, “Sir, we have three faint contacts. One at bearing two-three-zero and other two at two-five-five. Approximate distance 39,000 m and 38,000 m respectively”

All signs of relaxation disappeared from the crew to be replaced by a renewed sense of urgency. Captain took a look at his console where the output from the submarines passive sonar was being fed. According to the map, the contacts were moving in from behind a small inhabited island.

“What's their speed?”

Calculating exact speed and bearing of targets at such distances has always been quite difficult. Sonar man paused for a while before answering, “Approximately seventeen knots each sir.”

Even the most modern ships are practically deaf when traveling at speeds excess of fifteen knots. At such speed, the sound of water rushing by, overpowers every other sound that might be captured by sonar under lower speeds. Therefore while traveling long distances, submarines dash at high speed and drift at lower speed alternately. By lowering their speed they can take stock of their surroundings for any threats, and then rush at high speed before slowing down again. Thereby repeating the process again and again, they can travel with a reasonable amount of situational awareness.

Captain stood up, “Good. This means that they most likely haven't detected us yet. Turn to bearing two-four-zero and make speed 4 knots.”

Helmsman acknowledged the order at once, “Bearing two-four-zero, speed 4 knots, aye.”

The silent submarine slowed down to near drifting speeds as it turned to face the incoming vessels. Inside, it's highly trained crew strained to capture any clue that could help them identify the possible new threats. Every class of sea vessel has its distinctive sound when it's traveling. Even different vessels belonging to the exact same class and category can be identified by their acoustic signatures that are almost always unique. Navies spend enormous amount of effort and money to gather such data about their opponents. Naval vessels often stalk enemy ships and submarines for days to correctly gather such data which is then analyzed and spread in to rest of the fleet to make identification of enemy vessels easier. Once a ship has such previously collected data in its computers, all it has to do is to compare the acoustic signature of a suspected target against the database it carries for an accurate identification.

After a few minutes sonarman announced, “Sir, we have a positive identification on all three targets. The one on two-three-zero is Chinese SSN Type-093, serial G13. On two-five-five, we have one Type-093, serial G-18 and a Type-094 serial L21 approximately 800m behind it. Designating the targets as Bandit 1, Bandit 2 and Bandit 3.”

A worried expression clouded faces of everybody present in the bridge. Type-093s were the latest Chinese nuclear attack submarines designed and manufactured with significant help from Russia. Although Akula was more than a match in one-on-one combat, presence of two made the conditions slightly more difficult. But what really gave everybody the goose bumps was the presence of the Type-094 SSBN. The submarine which first entered service in middle to late 2000s was capable of carrying 16 JL1 SLBMs with an approximate range of 2500 KM. It would've been a grave threat if that submarine could come within launch range of any major Indian city or even naval base at Andaman.

As of now, the lone Indian Akula was the only Indian asset that could intercept the speeding Chinese. All other ships including sole operational aircraft carrier Virat were too far away to help. If the Chinese were to launch any SLBM, only the Akula could stop them for now.

Captain ordered his helmsman to come near the surface and send out warnings to rest of the fleet. Once the message containing bearing and number of enemy submarines was sent, the captain ordered the speed to be reduced to zero and lay still gathering all the intelligence they could before making any

move. Validity of his decision was soon proved when his sonarman announced presence of another Chinese Type 093 submarine at bearing two-one-zero. It was traveling at lower speed and thus comparatively quieter. It was detected as it increased speed, most likely to keep up with rest of the fleet. As soon as he had finished announcing the presence of fourth submarine, sonar man announced again, "Sir, all of the enemy submarines have increased their speeds to 24 knots."

The way they were traveling, the Type-094 would've been close enough to launch its missiles at A&N islands in little over one hour and on to Indian mainland in another four. Time was of the essence and the sudden increase in speed as they traveled towards Indian coast suggested that they meant to do exactly that. Indians would lack any other choice except to intercept and destroy the Chinese submarines, except for the fact that there were not enough Indian assets in the area.

While he was still contemplating his tactics his communications officer handed him over a paper containing the latest directives received from HQ. It was brief and self-explanatory as most military communication is supposed to be. He was ordered to intercept and destroy enemy submarines before they could launch their missiles. No help was coming for at least four hours. He stared at the paper slip for a few seconds. Even if any ship or plane could come to help, Chinese submarines would've launched their missiles and exited from the area.

His second in command; a Lieutenant Commander stood by expectantly waiting for orders. Captain put the paper slip away and took a deep breath before addressing the crew, "All right men. We have our orders to intercept and destroy the incoming Chinese submarines before they can launch any of their missiles. Some of our ships and planes are coming to help but it'll take some time. If the Chinese decide to launch before help arrives, we are all that stand between another nuclear attack on our nation. I want all of you to be completely alert and on your toes. That's all for now. Man all battle stations."

As ordered previously, Indian Akula was lying completely still in water as the Chinese submarines came closer and closer still completely oblivious to the enemy's presence. Indian crew watched nervously on the display screen as the four blips denoting the four Chinese submarines passed by their position one by one within minutes of each other. 2nd in command commented, "They are not slowing down at all."

Captain answered, "It's their slowing down that should worry us. They can't fire while traveling so fast." He waited for a few minutes for Chinese to pass and then turning to his helms man he ordered, "Helm, make speed 12 knots. Match bearings with Bandit 3."

The Indian submarine slowly gathered speed and started following its still oblivious quarry.

He didn't want to increase speed by too much for two reasons. First, he wanted to be 100% sure of the enemy's position. Gaining too much speed would've put a penalty on his situational awareness. Second, he wanted to be as sure as possible of not giving away his location to any other enemy submarine that might be following the ones in front of him. But very soon, the Bandits reached near the range limit at which they could be accurately tracked and targeted by Akula forcing it to increase its own speed.

But unlike the racing Chinese who were dashing like there was no tomorrow, Indians took pauses between their speed bursts to slow down and listen before rushing again.

It was in between such pauses that they detected the Bandit 3 and 4 slowing down while 1 and 2 still

raced ahead. With mounting anxiety Indians noted that the Bandit 3 was very near the range of launching its missile on some of the major coastal Indian cities. Keeping their own speed at a comparative lower figure of 8 knots, Indian crewed listened intently to any sign of missile launch preparation by Chinese. Bandit 3 was still traveling too fast to launch its own missiles, so they waited matching their own speed to that of Bandit 3. One immediate loss of this approach made itself visible soon enough. Bandit 1 and 2 soon went out of range of their tracking sonar and torpedoes. But it also evened out the odds somewhat, leaving Akula with only two enemies to take care of instead of four.

Lt. Cmd. wondered aloud, “Why the hell those escorts raced away from the SSBN? Shouldn't they be guarding it?”

“They probably want to sanitize the area first or plain old diversionary tactics only. One of our anti-sub planes is patrolling that area I hope our guys get a fix on them soon enough” navigating officer guessed.

The chase went on for a few minutes more after which Bandit 3 started to slow down and lowered its speed to 5 knots. At the same time it gradually started decreasing its depth even more slowly. Bandit 4 too slowed down after gaining getting nearly a KM on Bandit 3 and deployed its towed array sonar. This forced Akula to reduce its speed further to avoid any chance of getting detected on the much sensitive towed sonar array.

“I have a really bad feeling about this.” Captain remarked.

“So do I. I don't like this one bit.” Lt. Cmd. replied.

0810 Hours
Jislan
Chinese Army Base
Occupied Tibet

“Hurry up! I don't have enough time for you to waste just lolling around.” An impatient and very nervous Chinese PLA Lieutenant barked at the head of three man electric repairmen team. The three men had been working feverishly trying to repair the broken generator for two hours. The massive 100 KVA generator was one of the two that formed a pair providing backup power source for the highly sensitive army base. The main power supply of the base was disrupted after a freak landslide had knocked out two towers a few kilometers away. The first emergency generator had immediately kicked in but had suffered a break down soon after. Resident electricians had expressed their inability to fix the generator forcing the authorities to call in a repair crew from outside.

The base itself was highly sensitive and was believed to be a storage site for nuclear tipped DF-21

ballistic and H11 long range cruise missiles. It was constructed largely underground inside a mountain and considered nearly impregnable against most aerial attacks. The missile silos themselves were spread about over a large area and hidden by clever camouflage.

All three men were ethnic Tibetans and not trusted much by almost exclusively Han military personnel. All of their belongings had been thoroughly checked before they entered the base and had been under constant guard of two armed soldiers led by an ill tempered lieutenant since then. The three men worked silently under the sullen gaze of two soldiers without much visible progress. A jumble of wires, nuts, grease and tools littered the place. After a few minutes, leader of the crew stood up and faced the lieutenant.

“The coil is damaged. It needs replacement if you want this generator to work.” he said in very good Mandarin which seemed to surprise the Lt. Glancing at his soldiers with raised eyebrows he snapped, “Then replace it. Why the hell did we call you anyway?”

“The thing weighs 130 Kgs and costs 4000 Yuans. I don't have it here.” Seeing the scowl on the face of already red faced Lt. He added quickly, “I do have one at my workshop that'll work.”

“And?” Came the terse query.

“I'll need to call somebody in my workshop to bring it over here. I'll have this generator operational within an hour once it gets here.” the middle aged electrician seemed to be getting smaller every moment under the angry stare of the army officer.

“Then do it already you moron! What are you waiting for?” Lt. Exploded, showering the already cowering electrician with spittle.

“Yes sir. I'll do it at once.” poor electrician stammered and proceeded to make the call from his cell phone but was interrupted by the army man, “What the hell you think you're doing? This base is thirty meters underground. Your cellphones don't work here. Go with that soldier and call from our line.”

“Yes sir.” the shaking electrician mumbled and followed one of the soldiers out of the generator room to the phone. The soldier escorted him to one of the phones and waited while the call was made. Once finished he again escorted the electrician back to the general room to the waiting wrathful officer. “Well?” came the inquiry.

“The coil will be here within twenty minutes sir. Is it possible to get my assistant driving the pickup truck to get here any faster? It took us thirty minutes just at the gates.” Electrician asked timidly

“I'll see what I can do with the sentries. You idiots just concentrate on fixing the damned generator. The Brigadier will have you skinned alive otherwise.” Motioning his soldiers to keep an eye, he strode out of the room leaving the repair crew slightly relaxed for a change. One of the men cautiously took out a pack of cigarettes and first offered it to the soldiers. One shook his head sternly while the other gratefully accepted.

Taking in a deep drag, the lead electrician remarked to the 2nd soldier, “Quite a stern fellow your officer is, eh?”

Trying to be as stern as his officer, the other soldier spoke before his companion could answer “Yes and very ambitious too. You speak very good Mandarin. How's that?”

“My father was a trader from Henan. He came to Tibet in 1966 and married my mother same year. Learnt to speak Mandarin from him. Studied in school too.” The lead electrician replied proudly.

“And these two?” The soldier asked, gesturing towards the other two electricians.

“Oh, this one Gyalwa is my cousin and this is his best friend Kalsang. They both know a little bit of Mandarin that was taught to them in school but not as well as me.” He flashed a grin which went unreciprocated.

Observing the cold response, the three electricians didn't try to make any more small talk and smoked quietly. Lead electrician stared at the floor and the series of events that had brought him to this place flashed before his eyes one by one. The story of a Chinese father was a lie. Both his parents had been ethnic Tibetans who had suffered greatly under the iron fist of Chinese communism. His father, a respected writer and painter in Tibetan society had been arrested and tortured after he expressed dissent against Chinese occupation and influx of Han settlers. His son was born just 4 months after he was arrested. He was released after spending 4 years in a jail without trial under the condition that he will stop every dissenting activity against the Chinese rule. Once out of jail, the reunited family had immediately collected its belongings and began a long and arduous journey south towards freedom in India. His mother lost a foot to dreaded frost bite and was barely alive when exhausted family reached a small hill town named Dharmshala in India. The health complications related to the traumatic journey haunted her for rest of her life.

Wangdak, as he was formally named, spent first few years of his childhood helping his struggling family survive the new life in a strange country. Stories of suffering borne by Tibetan people like his parents filled his heart with anger with each passing day. Then he heard about a special Indian military unit consisting of ethnic Tibetans raised by Indian government. As soon as he was of legal age, he applied and got selected. The hardy Tibetan boy passed out of military school as a highly trained Special Forces soldier expert in many languages and explosives. His first few years in Indian army were spent in routine protective duties and occasional intelligence gathering missions, which although challenging, didn't engage him enough.

Realizing his expertise and hunger soon enough, his seniors had offered him a job as an Indian spy in Tibet. He had jumped at the offer and had sneaked in to Lhasa under the guise of an electrician. His training as Special Forces soldier had come in handy and he had managed to set up a fairly robust network of spies all over his native nation of Tibet. He waited for years, biding his time to do his bit for freedom of his people when a series of events, helped in no less deal by his own planning had brought him inside the highly secure missile base.

Another Chinese soldier arrived after a few minutes and addressed the electricians, “Your truck has arrived. It's in the parking floor. Come with me if you want to get your stuff inside.” Wangdak nodded at his two colleagues and followed the soldier out of generator room. They snuffed out their cigarettes and moved towards the door as if following their senior, but stopped at the door. Gyalwa glanced once outside watching Wangdak go and closed the door. One of the guards seemed surprised, “What? You aren't going to help him?”

Gyalwa glanced at him and merely shook his head. This prompted a grunt from the soldier, “You guys haven't said a word all this time. Are you both dumb? And open that damned door. Who told you to shut it?” Gyalwa merely stared back, not moving a muscle. This caused both the soldiers to lose their temper and both moved menacingly towards the unarmed electrician. “Do you want to die you fucking moron? “

The angry rant was broken suddenly as the furious soldier choked in his own blood that suddenly started gushing out of his throat. Kalsang had moved in silently and used a sharp screw driver to sever the jugular vein of the distracted soldier. Before the other soldier could react, Gyalwa pounced on him and broke his neck in one clean jerk. They then stripped the Chinese soldiers of their uniforms and exchanged them with their own clothes. They were still collecting weapons when there was a knock on the door and voice of Wangdak came in, “I'm here with coil.” Without waiting for an answer, he opened the door and walked in along with another man pushing a cart carrying a big crate. The new man, glanced at the two Tibetans dressed in Chinese PLA uniforms and flashed a grin. “How's it going soldiers? Everything going according to plan?”

Gyalwa nodded, “Yes and let's begin what we came here for right now.”

The new man smiled again, “Of course. Help me open this crate first.” The four man team at once started dismantling the crate. With practised hands of experts they started screwing out panels and wires of the components and started collecting small white packs out of their cargo. Within a few minutes, a four man team had collected nearly 100kgs of military grade high explosives out of the faux motor coil. Once this was done, a small timer based detonator was attached to each bundle of explosives. This whole process was over in less than ten minutes.

Once the work was done Wangdak distributed the explosives and said, “Remember what I told you earlier. Each bomb in its planned position. We need to place them in exactly the right positions to take down this base. Now hurry up.”

Each man then collected his share of primed explosives and started placing them in and around generator room. All four men then walked out in to the parking floor and climbed in to their truck. Klasang started the ignition and looked around at his three companions, “We ready to go?”

Wangdak nodded and the truck slowly moved out of the parking floor in to the road that led to the base. They soon passed the sentry gate without getting challenged. As soon as they drove past the gate, the normally quiet surroundings were shattered by a loud rumble. Explosives planted by the Tibetans had exploded right on time and had ripped through command and control building constructed under the mountain. Explosions first caused the roof of generator room's floor to collapse, triggering a domino effect burying each floor under the one directly above it.

Command and control center which happened to be the second one from last floor was completely destroyed with near 100% casualties. Some of the warheads which were not mated to any missile were also buried. Although most of the missiles were not damaged, the capability to use those missiles was lost for a long time. Chinese couldn't possibly use those missiles for days if not weeks.

Gyalwa pumped his fists jubilantly and laughed loudly, “I wish we could destroy those missiles too. More fireworks.”

Wangdak slapped his shoulder and replied, “Well, that's the best that could be done under

circumstances, but don't worry. War has just begun. We are going to see plenty of action. This Chinese dragon will soon join the list of extinct species.”

1100 Hours
Daxmung Village
110 km North-East of Lhasa
Tibet

The five truck convoy flanked by three APCs thundered in to the village square throwing the normally tranquil village of Daxmung in to a tizzy. Although the village folks were no strangers to PLA and its tactics of intimidation, rumours of violence in surrounding areas made them more nervous than usual. It was no surprise then, that all the people stopped whatever they were doing and shut themselves inside their homes. A gruff looking Chinese major poked his head out of hatch of one of the APCs and shouted on a loud speaker, “All men of this village above 18 years are ordered to come out to the square and answer our questions. We just want some information. No one will be harmed if you cooperate with us.”

He repeated the order 3-4 times while driving through the lanes, getting angrier with each passing moment as nobody even dared to peep out. Finally fed up with repeating himself he warned, “All the men are ordered to come outside to village square within 30 seconds; otherwise I'll level down this whole damned village with artillery with each one of you idiots inside.”

At his signal, soldiers dismounted from trucks and rest of the APCs and formed a cordon around the houses. With their rifle butts, they pounded doors and windows, shouting obscenities at the villagers hiding inside.

There were some hints of activity inside the houses as sounds of hushed whispers and stifled sobs started to come out of the besieged homes. A single old man clutching a stick for support opened door of one of the houses and nervously walked out. A younger man followed him out immediately and tried to drag him back, but the older man firmly pushed him away.

Seeing the two men, Chinese Major snorted derisively, “That's it! That's the total number of men in this fucking village? Come out of your holes you stinking rats and answer my questions. Otherwise you all will die.”

The two Tibetan villagers had reached within a few feet of the APC and both stood there nervously shuffling on their feet. Slowly doors of some other houses opened and more men shuffled fearfully out of their houses and formed a huddle around the two men. PLA major scanned the motley group and took out a poster and threw it on the ground, motioning the villagers to pick it up. The poster contained sketches of four Tibetan men. The villagers picked up the poster and passed it around amongst themselves with each one staring at the sketched faces with a fearful confusion.

“Have you ever seen any of the men in this poster?” He asked, nonchalantly while lighting a cigarette.

The villagers exchanged confused glances amongst themselves and most of them shook their heads.
“Half of you are shaking heads while the rest are standing like statues? Do you know these men or not?”

Answer me.”

The young man who had first come out along with an older one stepped forward and said timidly, “We have never seen these men before. Neither of us knows their identity.”

The major stared at the young man for a few seconds and then nodded, “I see. Who are you?”

“My name is Dechen” pointing to the old man standing a few steps besides him he said, “and I’m son of the village’s Headman. We know every single person in this village and people who pass through. I am absolutely sure that neither of these men have ever set foot here.”

All of a sudden, the PLA major grew livid and spat out his cigarette. Grabbing Dechen by collar of his tunic he first shook him and then threw him aside. Using all of his lung power he shouted, “Don’t lie to me you fuckers. I know for certain that these men were given food and shelter in this village. Just tell me who helped them and where did they go afterward and each one of us will go home happy. Lie to me and your whole miserable village will be burnt to ashes.” Grabbing another man by his neck he shouted again. “Are you going to tell me the truth or not.”

The scared villager was shaking uncontrollably and could nothing apart from babbling for mercy. Showing a disgusted expression the major pushed him away and faced the huddled villagers. “I’m giving you one final chance to clear your names and save your village from charges of treason and waging war against glorious republic of China. You tell me who these men are and I’ll leave you alone. You’ll even be rewarded for your service to the Party. Lie and each single one of you, including your women and children will be shot and burnt while still alive. Make your choice.”

Terrified by the warning, the men hurled themselves at the feet of PLA major begging for mercy and claiming innocence. Grimacing, he kicked one of the men and shouted, “Just tell me where these men are?”

Getting no answer except for claims of innocence he kicked some more men prostrating at his feet and spat in disgust. “Very well. I gave you filthy pigs a chance and you blew it. Now suffer for your insolence.”

Grabbing an AK-56 rifle from a soldier standing nearby, he switched it on to full auto and emptied the magazine in to the crowd of villagers in front of him. A number of men who were sitting or standing on the ground collapsed after getting shot. Hearing deadly chatter of the gun, some of the women from surrounding houses who had been watching the carnage from inside rushed out of their houses wailing and crying for mercy. PLA major calmly changed the empty magazine with a full one and took aim at the group of women. Some of the women froze in their steps while others rushed on regardless of the pointed barrel. Glancing at his soldiers with slight amusement in his eyes, he shot the running women then fired rest of the bullets on remaining men.

Handing back the still smoking gun, he lit another cigarette and watched the carnage he had just caused with cold eyes. Dozens of bodies lay bloodied and twitching in the small village square. People, who escaped being shot, lay down wailing with fear and sorrow. Spitting out his half smoked cigarette, he crushed it under his boots and signaled his soldiers to get back in their vehicles. Climbing in to his APC, he surveyed the broken village once more and closed the hatch before the convoy started moving away.

1150 Hours
CIA Office
Washington DC, USA

Last few days had been really hard on the CIA chief. His eyes, now encircled by dark circles showed that the man had not been able to catch up on sleep for quite some time. He was dragging his feet through the corridors with slumped shoulders and lost expression. The situation for rest of CIA personnel in the office was made worse by his increasingly irritable temper. His subordinates wanted him to doze off for a few hours and get some much needed sleep, both for his sake as well as their own. But nobody was willing to make the suggestion to his face, not at this time when yellow matter had not only hit the fan but also got splashed the people passing by the windows.

Those normally predictable Indians had proved to be really unpredictable when they needed to behave the most. Not only they had nuked the hell out of one of the most vital US “allies” in South Asia, but had also picked up a fight with US' biggest trading partner. The stock markets had tanked all over the world while the fuel prices had sky rocketed to \$ 220 a barrel within two days. Governments in numerous countries had been forced to shut down trading in stock markets after stock worth hundreds of billions had evaporated in a matter of hours. Already, self-styled analysts and experts were shouting themselves hoarse claiming all kinds of consequences, ranging from alien intervention to a nuclear world war. Some of the more colourful “experts” were playing on the much hyped date of 21/12/2012 predicting end of the world. The result was a wave of mass panic and hysteria spreading all over the world which the governments had been unable to subdue. Riots had broken out in many cities causing even more panic and destruction.

Cosby was sitting on his chair staring at the documents containing all the details while a small army of agents and analysts ran around bringing even bigger piles of papers to him and other senior officials in the room. He felt drowsy staring at the sheets and felt himself drifting towards sleep. Even the strongest coffee was proving useless in keeping him awake and he inched closer and closer towards blessed oblivion, even if it was for a few minutes. His trance was very rudely broken by the three star Admiral who had been shouting on phone earlier.

“Hey Cosby! Cosby, wake up buddy. We are officially in deep shit now.” Admiral Adams bellowed while trying to shake the dozing spook awake.

In spite of his best efforts to sound alert and in control, Cosby could only manage a sniffled yawn, “Uh...what?”

Admiral jumped up and down excitedly “Have you been sleeping all this while now? Those damned Chinese have downed a Taiwanese F-16 over Taiwan Strait!”

All the traces of sleep immediately vanished from Cosby's eyes. “What the hell are you talking about Admiral? Why'd Chinese do such a thing? “

Admas just exploded, “You are the intelligence guy here Cosby. You figure it out. We had no information when Pakistanis launched that nuke on India. None when they tried to launch another one and absolutely no clue when Indians took the decision of nuking the cursed place off the world map. Do we run the biggest and most advanced intelligence setup in the world or what? Now one of my guys

in Taiwan phones and tells me that Chinese have picked up a fight with Taiwanese, and you ask me such questions! ”

Cosby rubbed his head tiredly and groaned pitifully, “Fuc*! “

Admiral Adams looked at the exhausted man sympathetically, but there was too much shit going on for him to be nice, “First Indians destroy Pakistan, now Chinese are about to do the same thing with Taiwan. At this rate, we'll have no allies left in that part of the world.”

This time, a two star Army General, General Matthews spoke up, “He is right Cosby. We got to do something. Losing the service of those terrorist Pakis is one thing, but loss of Taiwan will really screw things up for us in that part of the world. We have to have Taiwan intact and on our side.”

Adams nodded vigorously and added, “If Taiwan is lost, we can say goodbye to all the oil in Sparty Islands. Not to mention what it's going to cost us when people all over the world see us humiliated by loss of our allies while we keep twiddling our thumbs.”

Cosby stared at the pile of papers in front of him while speaking, “True. First Taiwan, then South Korea, then Japan. These greedy Chinese will never stop. “

Adams lit a cigar and puffed on it, “For Chinese, it was Tibet first. We did nothing then either.”

Cosby retorted “Neither did Indians, who had most to lose. After Tibetans of course.”

Matthews who had been pacing the room impatiently interrupted, “Gentlemen, this is no time to discuss history. The point is the fight between India and China needs to be broken off before it gets too serious. Much before Chinese uses it as an excuse to solve their Taiwanese problem once and for all. That means right now. Every single second counts.”

Adams nodded, “You are right General. But how do we do it? I have just two Carrier Battle Group (CBG) in near area. One is on the eastern coast of Japan which was supposed to conduct the joint exercises with Japanese. The second is in Guam for resupply and repairs. We can't intimidate either China or India with what we have.”

Cosby who had been silent all this while gave no indication that he heard anything that the two men had been discussing. He picked up a sheaf of papers and waved it, “These intelligence reports say that a full scale rebellion has broken out in Tibet and Xinjiang.”

Matthews waved away the information dismissively, “That's not important right now. Chinese always had that problem “

Adams disagreed at once. “We need to utilize whatever we can General. Have you gone through the reports yet? Tibetans claim that they've blown up a nuclear missile base.”

Cosby interrupted, “It's just not their claim Admiral. We know for sure that they are telling the truth. But the reprisals by Chinese have been very brutal. PLA has wiped out dozens of villages for revenge, Surviving Tibetan rebels are fighting with all they have, but they wouldn't last much long unless they get more help.”

Meanwhile in Xinjiang, Uighur Muslims have declared a war on Chinese Han settlers. Approximately 8 hours ago, a mob of Uighurs laid siege to a Han settlement, burnt down dozens of houses and took nearly 200 Hans hostage. Not even one survived when the rescue operation launched by Chinese blew up. Whole province is on fire as Uighurs are fighting pitched battles with Chinese military as well as civilians.

Why not use this to our advantage?"

1200 Hours Somewhere in India

The request for a telephonic meeting from the Chinese had come in just a few minutes earlier. If he was surprised by the event, defence minister Shivendra showed no indication of it. Now he waited surrounded by few of his advisers and military officers as the call was connected and voice of Chinese President Lin poured out of the phone's speaker. President Lin unlike most of his predecessors spoke good English making the job of a translator completely unnecessary. After some very brief and tense greetings, the two men came directly to the point. First salvo was fired by Chinese, "Mr. DM, I've personally followed your career graph very closely and I know it for a fact that you are a pragmatic nationalist. You do realise the enormous cost that our countries will have to pay if the current situation deteriorates in to a full scale war. Then why have you attacked our assets without any provocation?"

DM replied, "Mr. Lin, don't you think that a sneak unprovoked nuclear attack on my country that killed 50,000 people in a matter of minutes is a grave enough provocation? Nations have gone to war on much less."

Lin protested incredulously, "But the attack was carried out by Pakistan! You've already had your revenge. There is no excuse for you to pick up a fight with us."

DM was silent for a while. "Yes you slimy lizard. Keep on shouting that you had nothing to do with it. Let's see how you explain what we are releasing to the world." Outwardly he replied, "Well, for starters, how about we having concrete proof that it was your people who manufactured, transported and launched two nuclear tipped missiles at us."

Lin cleared his throat uneasily, "I'll be honest with you. It's not exactly a secret where most of Pakistan's weapons come from. But what they do with them is entirely their prerogative. We can't be held responsible for what they do with it. We have absolutely no control over anything outside our territory."

DM smirked as he sniffed his quarry walking in to a trap of his own making, "I'm sorry to contradict you Mr. President, but Pakistanis don't seem to agree. Ah, why are we wasting time on verbal sparring when I have the proof straight from the horse's mouth. Would you please wait for a few seconds?" He put the phone on silent mode and signaled his aides to play the captured conversation between General Hu and the senior CPC member. Once the player was ready, he spoke again, "Sorry for keeping you waiting, but before talking further, I'd like you to listen to this recorded conversation."

For next few minutes, Chinese President listened to the recording with absolute silence which extended for a few uncomfortable moments after it was over. DM took the cue and broke the silence himself. "I

don't expect you to personally recognise the voice of General Hu, your senior most intelligence officer in Pakistan. But I'll be more than just surprised if you don't recognise the other voice. You hear him almost every working day of yours. Hundreds of millions of your Chinese citizens see his face on TV almost daily.”

When Chinese President spoke again, the usual slight hint of arrogance was missing in his voice, “That could be a frame up by Pakis.”

Indian DM snorted bitterly, “A frame up by Pakistanis to get themselves annihilated? This conversation leaves absolutely no doubt that your CPC and PLA planned and executed this infernal operation. “

Chinese pres cut him angrily, “Xedong isn't the whole of CPC, Mr. DM. He is just a single member.”

DM retorted, “But that single man is the senior most member of CPC, ranking just marginally behind your nephew, who just happens to be your most likely successor for the post of Chinese president two years from now. Don't you honestly think that it's too much of a coincidence? “

The reply was just the same, “I still believe that it's a conspiracy against us by a single isolated element.”

“No Sir. The conspirators were Chinese and it's us who had to pay the price. I absolutely refuse to believe that anything of this scale can be planned and executed without implicit knowledge and approval of numerous senior CPC and PLA officials. We have more than just circumstantial evidence to back up our claims. We have the testimony of the Chinese personnel captured from your submarine as well as from Gilgit in Pak Occupied Kashmir. ” DM paused for a moment anticipating a reply from the Chinese but when none came, he continued, “You can't refute their testimony as well as the pictures of two nuclear tipped ICBMs that we captured from Gilgit.”

Indian DM's monologue was interrupted by excited voice of Chinese pres, “You captured what from Gilgit?”

It was the turn of DM Shivendra to be surprised. “Is the smartass playing with me or what?” Glancing at his aide, who looked more bemused than surprised he shrugged imperceptibly and said cautiously, “Two Chinese DF-21 ballistic missiles each armed with 100 KT Plutonium based warhead. Along with 11 technicians and 91 soldiers belonging to PLA's 811 Missile Brigade.”

The Chinese President was furious instantly, “You've captured our missiles and men from Pakistan too?”

DM replied in same tone, “All of J&K, including Gilgit and Aksai Chin is Indian territory. If you ever had any doubts or counter claims, clear them now. All of Pakistan occupied Kashmir is now under our control. You Chinese had no business bringing your men and missiles in Gilgit, even if it was under Pakistani control.”

Shivendra could hear Lin gnashing his teeth on the phone line in self-righteous anger, “But it was under Pakistani control Chinese couldn't have been there with their approval.”

Shivendra was beginning to enjoy the conversation, “Well, that still doesn't shed any light on why'd you send two nuclear missiles to Pakistan in violation of all international treaties and rules. Were they

stolen by Pakis or what? God forbid if these missiles fall in hands of Uighurs or Tibetan nationalists. With so much chaos, anything is possible. Don't you agree?"

Chinese pres was incredulous. "Is it nuclear blackmail?"

All traces of diplomatic civility vanished from the conversation, Shivendra replied with a hard edge in his voice, "Think of it what you want Mr. President. We've already suffered an unprovoked nuclear attack. Pakistan was just your pawn. None of us will rest until we have our revenge."

Chinese Pres almost shrieked, "But this is madness."

"Nuclear deterrence is called MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) for this very reason. We'll take hits, but you'll not escape unscathed either."

Lin changed his tone all of a sudden, "Listen Mr. Shivendra. I'm the President of China and all of this was done without my knowledge or approval. An unwanted war is not in any body's interest, except the conspirators who planned all this."

Shivendra replied coldly, "You do realise that it's no time to play games Mr. President or act innocent."

Chinese Pres protested weakly, "I'm not playing games. All this was done without my knowledge. I never planned or approved any such operation."

People present in the Indian side exchanged confused glances. If Chinese president was indeed telling the truth, it was much stranger than the reality. DM Shivendra looked at the confused faces and answered, "I don't have anything except your word for it and I hope that you will understand my predicament. I can't just act based on your personal promises when lives of billions are at stake."

Chinese Pres took a deep breath and replied, "I completely understand and I also want these tensions to end. None of us want a completely unnecessary war at this time. Economy of both of our nations will be set back by decades if this thing gets out of hand."

Indian DM replied, "There's more on stake than just economy."

"True." Lin conceded. "I'll do everything in my power to stop this madness. You've done whole world a great favour by showing me the real face of some of my compatriots. I'd like to return the favour by declaring a unilateral cease fire and cessation of all hostilities."

DM was blunt in his reply, "I'd like to trust you on this Mr. President, but owing to events that transpired earlier, any such offer will be meaningless until we see some real result on ground as well as your government and military."

Under different conditions, Chinese would have considered such response to be a major insult, but things were indeed different. "I understand it quite well. Still, I reiterate my statement. I hope a more lasting peace agreement will be reached between us as soon as I am finished with what I intend doing to Xedong and his associates. Goodbye."

With this, the conversation between leaders of two warring nation came to an end. DM cut the call and looked at the small group present in the room. “Well. What should I make of it?”

1420 Hours

PPN World News

In a stunning development a few minutes ago, Indian authorities blamed China for the nuclear attack on their soil that triggered a nuclear war with Pakistan. In a hurriedly convened press conference, a senior defence ministry official presented evidence to this effect that included pictures and videos of a captured Chinese nuclear submarine and its crew off Pakistan's sea coast. Apart from the Chinese crew, Indians captured General Asgar and one of his aides who were apparently trying to escape from Pakistan in the same submarine. A recorded conversation, between General Mao Hu, a PLA intelligence officer posted in Chinese controlled part of J&K, and Admiral (Retd.) Xedong of CPC, was also recovered. According to portions of conversation played in the press conference, Admiral Xedong ordered General Hu to launch the nuclear missiles. Apparently, the nuclear tipped missiles were smuggled into Pakistan at General Asgar's behest as a bargaining chip against his bitter rival General Beg. But General Hu used them to launch a clandestine nuclear attack on India.

Chinese officials on the other hand refused to issue any statement on this matter. Their silence on this matter is quite suspicious considering the fact that Admiral Xedong is one of the more likely candidates for the coveted Chinese PM's post once the current PM steps down.

If these allegations by India are proven to be true, then China will find itself in a very isolated position. Most of its neighbours have already put their own armed forces at high alert preventing the Chinese from concentrating bulk of their forces against India. Russia has already condemned Chinese involvement with General Asgar and put its forces on high alert.

USA too, issued a strong warning and dispatched two of its CBGs to the area after a Chinese warship shot down a Taiwanese fighter plane over Taiwan Strait. In a strongly worded statement, American president condemned the “irresponsible” attitude shown by Chinese military and warned them against any aggression against US allies and assets anywhere in the world. Japan too, has condemned the incident and put its own forces on high alert.

As if external pressure was not enough, Chinese authorities are also battling suddenly resurgent separatist movements in Buddhist majority Tibet and Muslim Xinjiang. According to news reports, both provinces are in serious turmoil after local rebels in both provinces launched bloody attacks against Chinese military and ethnic Han settlers. Although China has ordered evacuation of all foreigners from the two provinces and cut off all internet services since last night, reports of continuing violence are still pouring in through various sources.

1750 Hours

Indian Ocean

The deadly game of cat and mouse between Indian and Chinese submarines had been going on and on for hours. Nothing unusual about that. The crew had been in similar situation for much longer periods of time before. But currently, stakes were much higher. Not only their own lives, but lives of possible billions of people could be destroyed or changed unalterably by any mistake on their part. This was making them nervous. Captain of Indian Akula was aware of the fact and was doing everything in his capacity to help his crew deal with the tension in his own stern way. The way was to keep every crew member so busy that he simply wouldn't have any time to be scared. The trick was working but even he knew that there was a limit to it. He prayed feverishly that the situation will be sorted much before the snapping point was reached.

Sitting in his chair, he was poring over the constant stream of data flowing over his console. The two Chinese submarines, one attack and another missile carrier had been advancing very slowly towards Indian coast. Former was drifting slowly east around 23000 meters in front of Akula and the other around followed it a 1000 meters behind. Some of the major Indian coastal cities and A&N islands were already under the range of their missiles and they have not shown any inclination to launch their missiles. Indians could guess following two reasons for this behaviour,

- 1) They had no authorisation for launch.
- 2) In case they had authorisation, they were trying to make sure that the area was clear of any Indian anti-submarine assets before launch.

Of the two possibilities, Chinese had already been beaten on the second.

Although he had upper hand in the second, he still preferred that it'd rather be first. Chances were slim but a man always has hope, sometimes the greatest power, at others, the greatest illusion. To make things worse he had no way to make sure until Chinese made a move. Silently, he cursed the Chinese one more time and wished them to make a move. Even hostile, so that the unbearable tension and suspense could break.

Probably a mischievous God listened to his prayer and granted his wish. Chinese made a move, but in a totally unexpected way. It happened when sound of a fairly loud sonar ping startled the hell out of every crew member on bridge.

Sonarman announced excitedly, "Sir, we are being pinged by a submarine at a distance of 21000 m from Bandit 3 and 4."

"Is it one of ours?"

"No sir. Based on its acoustic signature, it doesn't sound like ours or even Chinese."

Captain arched his eyebrows at the slightly nervous sonar operator, "Then?"

Clearing his throat he replied, "It seems to be American."

Akula's Commander exclaimed. "An American submarine? Why will those idiots get involved here?"

That too in this manner announcing their presence to everyone? “

Captain reprimanded his junior officer at once, “We can discuss how and whys of American involvement later, if it's indeed an American submarine. Right now, concentrate on the task at hand. Designate the new contact as Delta 1. Give me an update on Bandits.”

“Bandit 4 is turning towards Delta 1. 4 showing no change. No indication of any hostile intentions yet.”

“It is highly unlikely that our presence is not a secret anymore to either.” Commander remarked ruefully.

Captain nodded gravely, “I agree. Turning to his weapons officer he asked, “I presume that Delta 1 is still out of range of our torpedoes?”

He replied with a nod, “Aye captain.”

Commander again exclaimed with surprise, “We aren't thinking of engaging the Americans at this stage, are we?”

Captain grimaced inwardly at his second-in command officer. “If push comes to shove, then maybe we'll have to. But right now, it's Chinese reaction that's more vital.”

He didn't have to wait long for the Chinese reaction. Before he had finished speaking, Bandit 4 had completed turning towards Delta 1's direction and started gaining speed.

“What the hell they think they are doing?”

Weapon's officer spoke up tentatively, “Chinese are within American's torpedo range while Americans are not. I think Bandit 4 is trying to get within firing range of Delta 1.”

No one else on bridge had any better idea. In spite of its obvious craziness, that was the only thing that could explain Chinese action. Captain nodded and said simply, “We'll know soon enough.”

At that instant Delta 1 responded to the Chinese charge by letting out another ping. Within seconds, sonar man announced, “Sir, Bandit 3 is turning in our direction and gaining speed. It's still out of our torpedo range though.”

Almost immediately another update came, “It seems like Delta 1 has flooded its torpedo tubes. I believe that they have a firing solution on both Bandits.”

Captain gripped the arm rests of his chair tightly, “What's the status of Bandit 3?”

“It's still heading in the same direction constantly gaining speed. Current speed is 11 knots and increasing.”

A lot of thoughts were currently passing through Indian Captain's mind. What were Americans doing there? If their intention was to sink the Chinese submarines, they could have probably done that much before Chinese knew what hit them. Even after Bandit 3 started its charge, they possibly tried to warn it

off by firing off a sonar ping rather than a torpedo. Could it be possible that they were on Indian side or were they just trying to break up the fight? Announcing their presence by pinging in possible hostile waters had no logic. It had also made the Chinese aware of Akula's presence which they were not, as was the most likely scenario before. But considering the distance between them, it was highly unlikely that American's had been aware of Akula's presence either.

Shaking his head in frustration he again turned to his weapon's officer, "Be ready to fire on Bandit 3 on my order." to which he replied eagerly, and "Aye captain."

Sonar man made another announcement, "I hear splashes. Bandit 4 has launched 2 torpedoes." Without pausing, he spoke again, "Delta 1 has launched 2 torpedoes too."

Captain muttered under his breath, "Just what the doctor ordered." Then to his weapon's officer, "Is Bandit 3 in our range yet?"

"At current speed, in less than three minutes."

Captain took a deep breath and ordered, "Fire tubes 1 & 2 at Bandit 3 as soon as it's in range."

"Tubes 1 & 2 ready for Bandit 3, aye."

In the meanwhile, Bandit 4 and Delta 1 were locked in a deadly duel. Although seemingly brave, Bandit 4 was less than a match for Delta 1. Americans were more than a generation ahead of Chinese in naval warfare. Their torpedoes not only had longer range and higher speed, but also much better terminal guidance. Therefore, even when Chinese had launched first, it was the American Mk48s, which found a terminal lock on their target first. Once they acquired the targets, their guiding wires were cut and Delta 4 immediately made a sharp turn and launched decoys. Chinese on the other hand were forced to cut wires and disengage a little earlier than required. Superior quality of American equipment was again obvious as neither of Chinese torpedoes could lock on to their target and were instead drawn away from Delta 1 by its decoys. One of American torpedoes was neutralized in similar way, but the other found its mark with deadly result for the Chinese. The torpedo tore through the hull of submarine and it sunk within minutes.

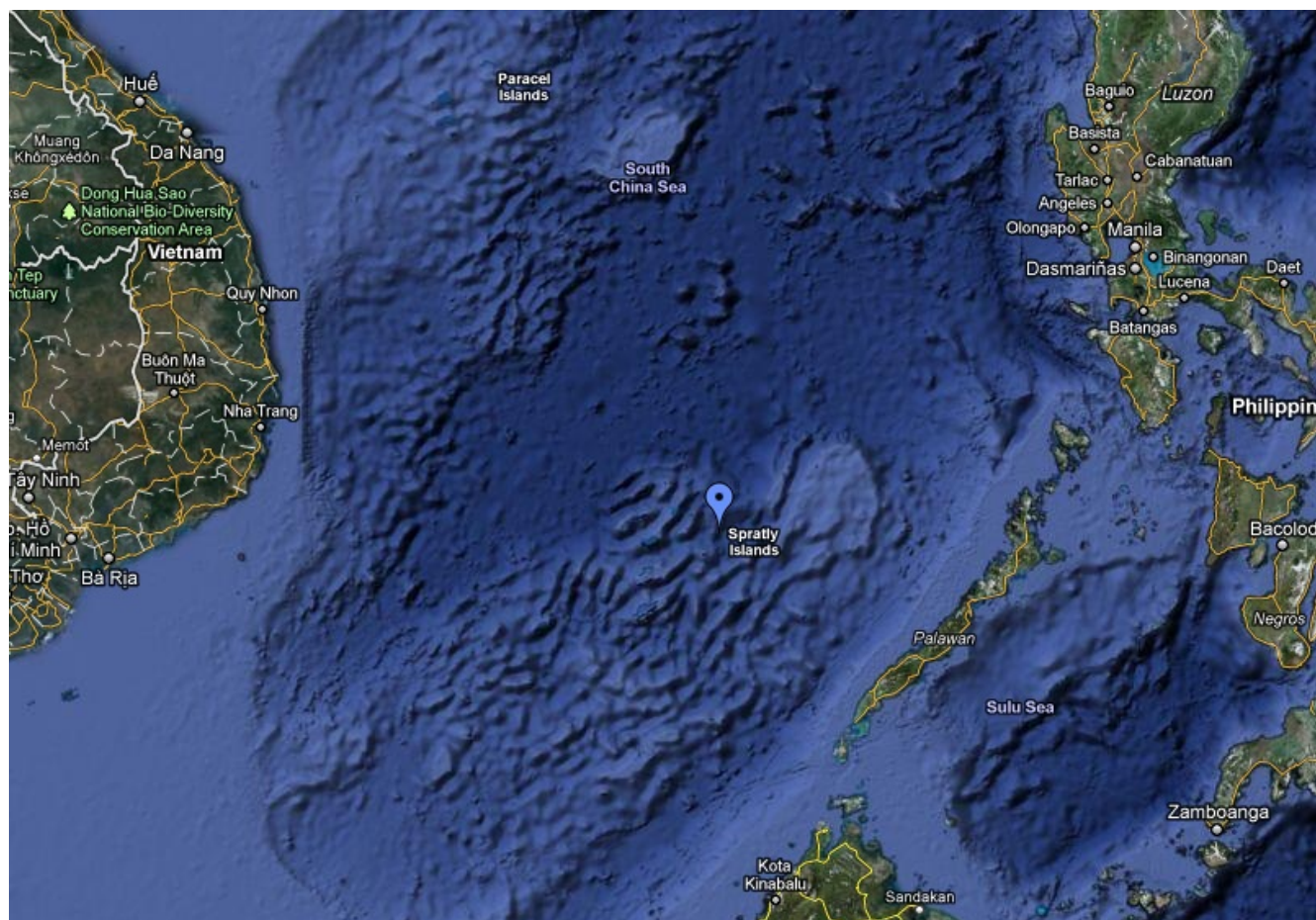
For Indians, although the technology gap was not as stark, it was comfortable enough for them to sink Bandit 3 without much trouble.

1920 Hours

Spartly Islands

Spartly Islands is name of a group of islands spread between seas of China, Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan and oil rich kingdom of Brunei. Most of the islands are small inhabited coral reefs interspersed with a few comparatively larger islands covered by dense tropical forests. Human population is sparse and most of the islands have little significance except as means of asserting the maritime boundaries of respective countries. And herein lay the catch. This whole area is believed to be one of the richest oil and natural gas fields. As such, even though the islands which are next to useless by themselves, are priceless pieces of real estate hotly contested by all the surrounding countries. There have been small

scale conflicts and tensions between the participants since a long time. China owing to its size and military prowess has been particularly successful in staking its claim on quite a few islands, much to the chagrin of its neighbours. In most of the cases, Chinese military personnel just sneaked in to the inhabited islands and raised the red flag daring any of other countries to take it down. Although other countries didn't like it a bit, they could do nothing except seething in impotent rage.



FalunGa was name of a midsized island claimed by Chinese in similar fashion. Although it's much closer to Vietnamese coast, Chinese had been able to stake their claim by bullying the weaker Vietnamese. North-western part of island, facing Vietnam was dominated by an extinct volcano peak, leaving an area of less than 4 square km of inhabitable land for the occupiers.

Over the years, Chinese had made the island a hub for their maritime patrol vessels in addition to an intelligence gathering outpost. A small number of Chinese patrol vessels and an occasional small frigate used the base to refuel and restock regularly. From being an inhabited island in 1970s, the place had grown to be an important military base populated by at least 300 Chinese technicians and military personnel. These were in direct command of a PLA officer of at least Lt. Col rank. During the time that hostilities started between India and China, a forty four year old Lt. Col Peng was officer in charge of base and he was not a happy man at the moment. Intelligence had suggested that something was definitely cooking. Neither of the other stake holders in Spratly Islands, Philippines, Vietnam or Brunei had ever approved of Chinese tactics in what each country considered its own backyard. Each one of them had been trying to undermine the Chinese and claim as much territory as possible for themselves. Defiant according to some accounts, even belligerent attitude, shown by Indians had given wings to

many hopes to detractors of China. Something diplomatic or even military by any of these countries was definitely on. Only what and when they didn't know. Lt Col Peng knew that it couldn't be a military offensive. Chinese dragon was more than capable of roasting and swallowing anybody foolish enough to attempt anything like that. But he had orders to follow and these had been to step up the base security.

Three additional patrols of two soldiers each were added to the existing 24x7 security detail and some more flood lights near the docks were installed. Although the base was still less than ideally defended, that was the best that could be done under the circumstances. Engineers and mechanics formed bulk of the Chinese population on base and those mugs could be barely tolerated with ships, guns were just not something that they could be entrusted with. HQ had promised at least a platoon worth of reinforcements two days ago, but he hadn't heard anything about it since then.

Now as the night advanced, he found himself sitting in his air conditioned office, smoking a cigar and double checking the status report he had to file next morning. The day had been very long, with him personally supervising installation of fences and trip wires, digging of trenches and shouting at the guard patrols to stay awake. To add to his woes, a medium sized patrol vessel had damaged its rudder while on a routine patrol and had to be taken out of action for at least six days. Feeling more tired than he had ever felt his whole life, he closed the file, leaned on back of his chair and inhaled deeply on his cigar. Apparently, the damned thing itself was another of infamous Chinese copies and gave him a coughing fit. Cursing incoherently in between his coughing fits he stumbled out of his chair and threw the cigar on floor in disgust.

Gathering up his belongings and files he got out of his cabin and ordered his orderly to lock it up behind him while he himself started his walk towards his residence which was nothing more than a prefabricated shelter. But at least it had a mattress and a bed. But before that he decided that he needed to check on his men. The extended patrols were taking a toll on his men and he had no idea when fresh men from mainland were going to arrive in order to ease the burden. Carrying a small satchel which contained some of his belongings and documents, he started a brisk walk towards the nearly deserted beach where he could relax for a bit as well as check on the new guard posts he had ordered.

From the distance, he could see the newly installed flood lights on each corner of the beach gleaming brightly. Very soon, he saw silhouettes of two armed soldiers as they ambled past the harsh light spot created by the flood lights. Nodding in a satisfied fashion, he stood at a distance watching the two soldier patrol as they walked through the light into darkness and back again. Taking one last look at the area, he willed his tired legs to move back to his personal cabin to a bottle of American whiskey that his men had captured from smugglers yesterday. "Hope that doesn't turn out to be another fake like those damned "Cuban cigars".

Behind his back, the two man patrol party continued their vigil. The two men were responsible for keeping an eye on almost the whole stretch of the sandy beach. Although some new lights had been installed, a large area was still without light coverage. Their patrol area thus consisted of irregular patches of light in a mostly dark beach being pounded by powerful waves. Walking slowly the team reached the last light pole and halted for rest. One of the soldiers took told his companion to wait while he went slightly ahead behind the rocks for a much needed leak. Standing beside a large rock, he unzipped his pants and started the work. He was at it for a few seconds when he noticed a slight movement at the edge of his eyes. If he wasn't occupied at that time, he would have probably investigated the incident. But as it happened, he ignored it, and it would have been only a matter of debate, if the outcome would have been any different even if he had gone on to investigate.

Just a moment after he was finished, there was a small whooshing sound and an arrow pierced his neck from behind. The startled soldier dropped on wet ground; choking on his own blood. His companion met the same fate seconds later. Four men in black clothes and masks slithered out of the darkness and quickly cut the throats of dying soldiers. Each soldier was carried by two men each and their bodies were dumped carefully out of sight. Once the work was finished, one of the attackers spoke in to his communications device in heavily accented English, "Otter 1 reporting to Crocodile. Beach is clear. "

Reply in not so accented English came in immediately, "Roger that Otter 1. Good work. Rendezvous with Otter 2 and 3 at Waypoint Charlie in fourteen minutes."

The men switched on their night-vision devices and started to sprint towards the heart of the base nearly a KM away. Although the route was longer, they kept to a path that kept them away from the lights.

Lt. Col Peng was nursing his third drink of the night in his bed. Despite his misgivings, the liquor was genuine and had given him a good deal of buzz. Coming after the highly stressful day he intended to enjoy each sip of the expensive whiskey. The stash of bootleg DVDs that was seized from the same smugglers was proving to be a good source of entertainment. Grasping the glass in his hand he leaned against the pillows and closed his eyes listening to the soundtrack of one of the Chinese movies. He was feeling far too drunk to actually watch it. In spite of all the crap he had to go through, life was not that bad after all. Sighing contently, he finished his drink and slipped even more in to his bed. His first clue of the fact that something was wrong came when things suddenly went very dark and at the same time he started having difficulty breathing. He struggled desperately to get his bearings and fought against the alcohol induced stupor made even stronger by his fatigue. A sudden hit on kidneys, almost made him puke, also made him fight off the effects of alcohol on his brain. He realised that his hands and feet were bound tightly and his face covered in some kind of dark cloth. He tried to scream but a gag prevented that. Another hit in same area made him bend over himself in agony and his scream was again muffled by the gag. Rough and firm hands dragged him to his feet and started to drag him somewhere. He tried to resist and was rewarded by another vicious hit that knocked him out.

When he came to his senses, he found himself in the same predicament, his face was still covered by a thick mask and his legs and arms tightly bound. His first instinct was to shout. His throat was parched and he needed water immediately. But almost immediately he remembered his roughing up from the last night checked himself. The self restraint was largely unnecessary as his mouth was still gagged. One thing that he sensed soon enough was that he was not on solid ground anymore. By the slow rhythmic bobbing of the hard metallic floor underneath, he realised that he was a prisoner on a ship. Trying desperately to get out of his restraints he started to twist and turn which resulted in him bumping in to another person. He froze immediately, fearing that it was one of his captors. Lying still, he cringed waiting for the hard hitting blow and was more surprised than relieved when none came. Instead, a set of fingers frantically poked and groped him. Feeling bewildered he turned and tried to touch the unknown hand with his. It was soon established that the man was not an enemy and both immediately set about to loosen each other's bonds. The task was not easy and it took them almost an hour to finally break free. At last, with impatient and trembling hands Lt Col Peng tore off the mask from his face and turned to face his helper. It turned out to be one of the men from his base, Xia Shi Gila. The junior ranked soldier immediately tried to stand up and salute his senior but Lt Col waved him to relax. Sitting cross legged on the hard floor he croaked, "What the hell happened?"

Gila was feeling dizzy from his earlier attempt to jump to attention and he plopped down on the hard

metal floor. “We were attacked last night. Many of our men killed and the rest dumped on this boat. It all happened in minutes. We don't know what hit us.”

Peng rubbed his forehead and looked around. He realized that he had been dumped inside the engine room of Chinese patrol vessel with damaged rudder. As his junior spoke he tried to take stock of his surroundings. The port holes had been covered and only a trickle of light came through. He could see somebody moving in the feeble light. Ordering the young soldier to keep quiet, he slowly moved towards the moving man and found another of his soldiers bound and tied in similar way as they were. Working feverishly they managed to unshackle the man and then found another tied in similar way. All the men had similar stories to tell. Numerous masked men in dark clothes had appeared out of nowhere and had killed or captured all the Chinese personnel on island. Some of them had been placed on to the patrol vessel which had been towed in roughly southern direction away from the usual shipping lanes. They had heard loud explosions just minutes after leaving the island.

Cursing loudly, Peng stumbled towards the portholes and tried to look outside. The glass had been painted black and windows sealed from outside. Ordering his juniors to find and open the door he tried to assimilate the situation. No matter which way he looked at it, he was screwed royally. His seniors would certainly take a very dim view of the incident if he ever survived the ordeal. At minimum they would just fire him. But a very long trip to a re-education camp or death by a firing squad seemed more plausible.

Few minutes later, he was out of the engine room on to the deck lost in gloomy thoughts oblivious to what was going on around him. Seventy more Chinese were found bound and gagged on various parts of the ship, all repeating the same story with only minor variations. There was not a clue of the attackers though. It was like they were ghosts. He listened to them absently while looking at the night sky. Day break was still hours away and he could virtually see his life and career disappear along with the night.

0350 Hours
PLA HQ
Beijing

“What the hell do you mean by that?” Chinese General Chan with three stars on his shoulders shouted in to the phone. “That base is one of our biggest in the region. How could something like that happen without us knowing?”

His subordinate, a Brigadier under his direct command was on the other line. “I don't know sir. We just received a SOS from the base informing us that some unidentified people had overrun their defences and killed or imprisoned all of the defenders. Even the Base Commander is missing.”

“I don't care about who or how many are missing or dead, I just want to know who did this and punish them.” General Chan hissed with barely suppressed rage.

The Brigadier thought for a few seconds as he contemplated his reply. News of numerous major setbacks, one after the other was playing havoc with their carefully planned strategy. What had started

out as a win-win game had turned in to a nightmare turning worse with each passing moment. “All that I can say at this stage is that whoever did this was very well equipped and trained. The whole mission reeks of a top class special operations team and a big one at that. The base with three hundred people was overrun within an hour with no casualties on their side. We should be really careful with this.”

This statement gave a pause to the furious rants of General Chan. Although the attackers had overrun the whole base but still had not assumed full control. They had come in like a surprise typhoon, destroyed everything in their path and then vanished. There were almost a dozen Chinese bases in the region, all of them much smaller and much easier targets. The fact that the attackers had chosen to attack that particular base while ignoring all the low hanging fruit was most worrying aspect of the situation. Not only had they good intelligence regarding the layout and defences of the base, its flawless execution also meant that they had prepared for it in advance. Not many countries had such kind of resources and skill at their disposal. Chan nervously chewed on his mustache as he considered all the points. “Are there any American or Russian assets in our seas? Anybody or anything suspicious enough?”

Relieved of the tension that had been gnawing on him during the pregnant pause, Brigadier replied immediately, “No sir.”

Chan snorted derisively, “You should say that you haven't been able to detect anything yet. Somebody just destroyed our base in our own backyard and we have no clue hours after it happened. Something is really screwed up.”

Poor Brigadier had no idea how to answer that, “We are trying our best to catch the miscreants. “

“These are no ordinary miscreants Brigadier. You probably don't have any idea what you are dealing with. “Shaking his head in mild irritation he asked, “Tell me something that you know. How are you searching for the attackers and our missing men?”

“We've pressed all of our remaining ships and aerial reconnaissance vehicles from Beihai and adjoining bases. But I believe we'll need more than that. If I may have your permission, can we call for reinforcements from Hangzhou? ”

“Are you really that stupid Comrade Haw? Do you really think that we can move our assets from that area with Japanese and Americans breathing down our necks? Those ships and planes stay where they are.”

Brigadier objected weakly, “But sir, it'll take us weeks to cover all that area with what we have it here.”

General Chang realised that the Brigadier was telling the truth. Pausing again for a while, he took some deep breaths and asked “What's the location of our 3rd fleet?”

“They'll pass Malaysia in few hours.”

“Call them back and order them to help with hunting down the hostiles in Spartlys.”

Brigadier was startled. Searching frantically for polite enough words he mumbled, “Sir? But, what about our plan regarding Indians?” What will Admiral say to that?”

Chan snapped back, “You need not worry about them, Colonel. I'll talk with the Admiral and even the President myself. We need to consolidate our resources not spread them thin. They are the nearest. And most capable to search and defend our remaining bases. I want them to form an impenetrable wall around west of Spartlys. “

“Yes sir.” Brigadier replied and then spoke with nervous voice again, “Sir. There is one more bit of news that you need to know.”

“What is that Comrade?”

“Vietnam has announced test launch of a ballistic missile tomorrow.”

General Chang almost jumped to the roof, “Vietnamese have announced what?”

Brigadier thought that he was beginning to enjoy the sound of panic in his senior officer's voice. “They have announced that they'll test launch a short range ballistic missile tomorrow.”

“What the hell they think they are doing? Testing a missile at this time when so much shit is flying around! When and how did they develop that missile? It's impossible.”

Brigadier Haw agreed. “We'd have known if they were actually developing it themselves. This sudden announcement is very suspicious.”

Chan asked “Have Americans or anybody else issued a statement yet?”

“No sir. It's too soon for that. We'll hear something in a few hours, hopefully.”

Chang took in a deep breath and exhaled, “Let others take care of this missile business Comrade Haw. You need to concentrate on my orders. One more thing, news of this attack should not be leaked out anywhere “

Brigadier thought of letting hot shot General know what he actually thought of feasibility of the order, but wisely decided to keep quiet about that. He took his leave with a small reply. “I understand sir. “

0350 Hours

Phalcon AWACS

Skies over Laddakh

The AWACS had been in air almost continuously for a week now allowing for maintenance and refueling breaks. That particular patrol had been under progress for three and a half hours. A lot of things were going on Chinese side but till now they had shown no inclination of launching a full scale attack. That particular fact was needling Mission Controller more than anything else. Although, most of the Chinese bases had been put on highest alert after Indian attack on Chinese bases in PoK, Chinese so far had not started mobilising their Air Force and Army assets near the border. The closest thing that

could've caused a shooting incident was when a couple of J10s under control of a Chinese AWACS flying 100 Km inside Chinese territory had come within 2 KM of border. They could've been on an intelligence gathering mission to test and needle the Indian defences. They hadn't been completely unsuccessful in this. Commander of the local Akash battery had no choice but to switch on his radar and track the incoming bandits. The J10s had immediately turned on their tails and went back after powerful Rajendra radar started to track them both. No other plane had come in as close after that. Chinese AWACS was still there flying in an oval pattern, it's emissions clearly visible in the powerful tracking radar of Indian Phalcon which in turn would've been similarly visible to the Chinese. Only thing that was different from peacetime were round the clock CAP missions on respective bases, offensive deployment of assets still hadn't happened.

MC glanced nervously at the blips denoting the 11 Chinese fighter aircraft flying in a pre-set pattern around their respective bases. 240 Km to his North-east he could detect tell tale emissions of powerful S-300 radar. Its signal going on and off as some big mountain formed an impenetrable wall as the Phalcon traveled or as Chinese switched it on and off.

0650 Hours

PPC World News

In a somewhat expected event, a senior member of Chinese ruling party, Admiral (Retd) Zlin Xedong was suspended and placed under arrest on charges of misuse of his authority. It was declared in a statement issued by a senior spokesperson of CPC. According to statement, the Chinese President was forced to issue orders to this affect after the government's investigators uncovered solid proof of his involvement in a plot to spoil developing mutually beneficial relationships between China and India. In a well planned conspiracy that involved many senior and middle level officers of Pakistani military, Admiral Xedong plotted clandestine attack on India in complete violation of official Chinese policy of peaceful and prosperous co-existence. Involvement of some other senior Chinese PLA officers is also under investigation. Exact motive of conspirators is not clear at the moment,

After the investigative team intimated President Peng of its findings, he immediately ordered Adm. Xedong to be placed under arrest awaiting further trial while investigations against other officers get completed. According to many analysts, this step is probably aimed to mollify India smarting after a surprise nuke attack which it alleges was planned and financed by Chinese military. Just hours after a devastating retaliatory nuclear attack on its arch enemy Pakistan, from where the rogue missile was launched, Indian Navy had captured a crippled Chinese submarine. Along with its full crew, Indian Navy had also captured rebel Pakistani General Asgar. From him, they had recovered recorded conversations between Admiral Xedong and a low ranking Chinese liaison officer. According to the recordings, Admiral Xedong was heard planning more attacks on India. Chinese spokesperson while sympathizing with India expressed hope that the steps taken by China in its mission to punish the miscreants will generate goodwill amongst Indians and world community. When asked by a reporter whether international agencies or India will be allowed to interrogate Admiral Xedong and his co-conspirators, the spokesperson declined to answer.

Responding to the statement, a senior official from Indian government praised the action taken by

Chinese government as a positive one but also said that much needs to be done in order to punish the guilty. In an answer to a question regarding further role of Indian forces in Pak Occupied Kashmir, he said that the area is now formally under Indian control as another part of erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Refuting the allegations of land grab, the spokesperson went on to say that part of J&K under Chinese control should be handed over back to India as it was ceded illegally by Pakistan to China. There has been no reaction from Chinese on this as yet.

Reactions from other countries have been mixed. Although most of them except for notable exception of Israel and Russia have condemned the overwhelming nuclear attack on Pakistan, all of them unilaterally urged Indian government to be more pragmatic with China. In a televised interview, General Secretary UN Behn Ki urged both India and China to tread cautiously while billions of lives are in grave danger. He also urged China to find a peaceful solution to ongoing civil unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. Although Chinese government has imposed strict curbs on news related to these provinces, sources indicate that the situation is getting worse by the day with escalating violence from all sides.

0720 Hours

India

“What do you think of it Angad?” DM asked the NIA chief who seemed to be lost in deep thought. It took a few seconds for him to realize that DM was addressing him. He had been thinking about the new development and was just dying to let it out. After a bit of start he answered, “They are lying. I'll bet my last rupee that Xedong is just a straw man. It cannot be a lone wolf or rogue mission. Support of a lot of people, right up to their higher ranking CPC people is necessary to pull off anything like this. We are talking about Chinese nukes being launched by Chinese personnel. Now they arrest some random ass and make him a sacrificial goat. We are not sure that even he would be punished at all.”

“And you base this upon?” DM asked.

“Base upon?” Angad exclaimed with wide open eyes and gestured with his hands. “You saw all the proof yourself, right from the missile plant to its transport to Pakistan. Then we have the testimony of those captured Pakis and Chinese submarine crew. There is no chance that Xedong is the only mastermind behind all this. I'll eat my shoes if somebody proves me wrong.”

“But what's their motive then? In spite of all their bravado and saber rattling previously, they haven't even expressed any official outrage over loss of three of their submarines and the men and missiles that we captured from Gilgit.” DM seemed puzzled and amused at the same time.

Angad allowed himself a wicked smile, “It was your decision to pay back the Pakis in kind that's led to the current situation. By firing the nuke from the shoulder of Pakis, they thought that they could humiliate us and tank our economy and self esteem. They thought that we'll be too afraid to retaliate and thus lose face, become weak and more prone to their bullying. Then they could strengthen their

claim on occupied and disputed territories and prance around on world stage as the undisputed champion. But our retaliatory strikes poured cold water on all of their dreams. Capturing that Chinese submarine was our wildest dream come true. The intelligence that we gathered is invaluable. They now know that we are privy to most of their plans and are more than willing to give them a bloody nose. They probably thought that in worst case scenario for them, we'll engage Pakis in a conventional war and they could come to the aid of their deeper than ocean friends and make it hell for us. But we preempted their trump card with our own."

General Zoravar Singh, who had been listening to the conversation quietly, interrupted Angad, "All that's fine, but that still doesn't answer the question. What should be our response?"

DM spoke up before Angad could answer, "What do you think General? Can we take on Chinese right now?"

General Singh glanced on his companions from the Air Force and Navy before answering, "We've been preparing for such a situation for some time. Although we are not as strong and well equipped as we'd like, but still we can hold our ground as long as it takes. Our Navy has already given them a bloody nose in two sectors. Army and Air Force are already mobilized and just awaiting orders. Our SFs are already operating inside Tibet. They'll take it a few notches up as soon as we give the signal."

DM sighed, "Pitched battles with Chinese. I'm 100% sure that this thought will give another heart attack to our PM."

Angad grinned and shrugged. DM glanced at him before continuing, "But realistically, what are our options? China isn't going to be a push over like Pakistan. What can we hope to achieve in terms of a military or political victory over them. By victory, I don't mean any kind of lame brain "moral" thing. I want something that I can use to bargain something useful from them later. Aksai Chin, Tibet anything like that."

General Singh replied, "I'll be honest with you sir. If Chinese attack us, we will give them a real beating that they will ever forget. It's not 1962. In case we attack them, they'll put up as fierce resistance as well. I cannot guarantee any territorial gains that we can use as bargaining chips later on. "

DM observed, "Typical zero sum game, eh. What's your opinion about Chinese? Do they think in similar way?"

"Based on whatever I know about Chinese, I'd say yes. Now that they realize that we've crossed nuclear threshold much earlier they expected, I believe that they'll think a lot before committing to a direct fight. At least that's what I could deduce from Chinese president's statement and their actions till now." He finished the sentence glancing in Angad's direction who silently nodded in agreement."

DM spoke with some anger "Hmm. But that's not a satisfactory conclusion to this mess. We suffered a nuclear strike and the people who actually plotted it all will likely go scot free."

Angad who seemed to be lost in his own world again replied, "As the General said, we do have our men inside their territory. We can inflict considerable amount of pain on them and blame it all on non-state actors, much like their beloved Pakis."

He paused for a moment as if lost in thought again, then resumed, “Apart from all that, Lin said that he'll order his forces to stand down and strangely it's been like that only. Their formations are on high alert but there is absolutely no indication that they are mobilizing in a war like mode against us as yet.”

Navy chief spoke up, “That's not entirely correct. We downed one of their nuclear submarines just yesterday along with another that was taken down by Americans. Two other attack submarines are still there just outside our waters. We're tracking one but other is hiding somewhere.”

DM's ears perked up, “Yes, I've been wondering about this too. What do we make up of American involvement in this? And what about that incident in Spartly Islands? Any further news on that?”

“Well, except for TV clips from Malaysian channels, we don't have any information on that. Those Chinese personnel were found drifting hundreds of Kms from their base. From whatever we could make of it, we are 100% sure that it was a well planned spec-ops mission. Very few countries can pull it off there. US of course is one. As far as that submarine incident is concerned, we're not entirely sure of their motives even now. In my opinion, they were trying to play cop when Chinese submarine decided to act Paki forcing Americans to sink it. But as I said before, it's just an educated guess.”

DM nodded in approval, “Your guess is quite accurate. I had received a call from their Secretary of Defence just a few minutes before this meeting started. He made an offer of mediating between us and Chinese just to stop the war before it turns worse.”

Suddenly perked up, Angad asked, “What did you say?”

“Haven't promised anything yet. They also said two of their aircraft carrier groups are steaming full speed in to South China Sea and Japan, Chinese also know this.”

Angad smiled, “I don't think that Chinese will swallow it so easily.”

DM looked him in the eye, “We're not going to let that attack go unpunished either.”

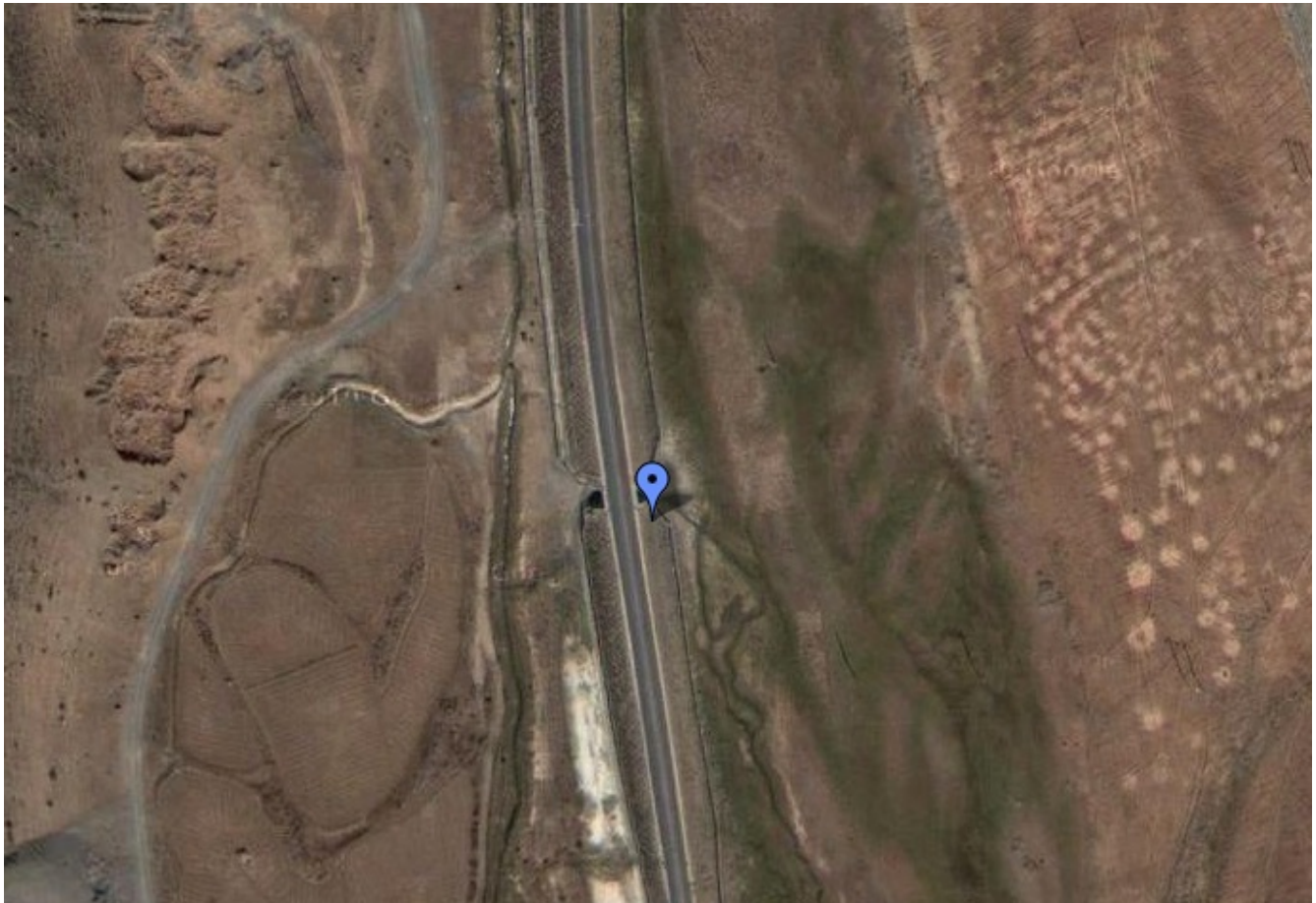
1030 Hours

Few KM North of Gonggar PLAAF Base

Qinghai–Tibet railway is one of the biggest marvels of human engineering. This railway was the first one connecting Chinese occupied Tibet to mainland China. Constructed at the cost of nearly \$ Four billion, it traverses one of the most inhospitable and harsh terrains. Total length of track exceeds 2000 Km and highest railway station in world is on this line itself (5000m +). A significant portion of the railway is constructed over semi-permanent perma-frost which poses its own challenges during warm conditions. Special measures were taken to solve the problem, which included passive cooling, deep concrete supports and sun shades.

Apart from the engineering challenges faced during the construction, the extreme altitude and cold weather poses serious problems to passengers and daily operations. It's not possible to operate normal trains at this altitude. So China had to import special trains with built in oxygen supply for passengers and ultra high grade environment control. Even the diesel locomotives are custom built.

Quite a few people thought all of this effort as a waste of money and effort. But the Chinese government thought different and poured all the resources it could spare. The strategic advantages brought about by this line vindicated all the stubbornness displayed by Chinese. Amount of cargo being transported in and out of Tibet increased by nearly 300%. But the most obvious advantage was the strengthening of Chinese stranglehold over Tibet. This railway line provided China with unprecedented ability to deploy forces over most of Tibet much faster and cheaper. Thus they had a significant advantage over India which left most of its border routes undeveloped in an extremely counter-productive defensive strategy.



At the moment this fact was quite obvious to the three man Special Forces operative team as they lay waiting just a few meters away from the famous track. Intelligence reports had indicated that numerous trains loaded with men and weapons were on their way to Tibet from mainland China as PLA rushed to quell the rebellions in Tibet and Xinjiang, while at the same time maintaining enough forces on standby to deter India. The railway track was proving to be invaluable in these conditions. Many of the PLA bases were constructed close to railway lines to take maximum advantage. Although the forces were stretched thin, steady arrival of reinforcements was proving to be life saver for Chinese commanders. It allowed them to keep existing forces directed towards India on station, while still maintaining overwhelming superiority over spirited but less capable rebels.

As of now, mission of the spec-ops team was to cripple this vital cog in Chinese occupation of Tibet and then some more.

The sophisticated Motorola radio handset cackled in to life in hands of the team leader, "Leopard Alpha, This is Leopard Charlie. We confirm arrival of target in fifteen minutes at ambush point 1."

"Roger that Leopard Charlie." Leader of Alpha team had to shout in to the radio to make himself heard as icy winds nearly drowned out his voice at normal volume. If he hadn't spent two weeks acclimatizing to the altitude he'd have serious trouble doing even that. Trekking such long distances, carrying heavy loads was simply out of question. Inhaling the cold air deeply, he ordered his companions to get ready. On the leader's signal, the two men broke away and took positions at a few meters distance from each other. The trap was almost ready. All they had to do now was to wait for the prey.

Their target, a cargo train of nearly forty trailers carrying an arsenal of Chinese armoured personnel carriers and tanks was within their sights in a few minutes. It's specially designed diesel engine pulled the load quite effortlessly as it chugged on. Leopard teams waited with bated breath as the moment of reckoning came closer. The operatives checked their weapons and adjusted the sights one last time. Right on the estimated time, the train reached its intended point and its engine shook as bunch of small explosives went off under its wheels. A small group of soldiers and engineers on-board looked here and there bewildered as wheels of the engine broke away amidst showers of sparks and fire. Their emotion of surprise soon turned to horror as four rocket propelled grenades slammed in to the engine and the single passenger compartment behind it from different directions. The soldiers who survived the initial assault jumped out and started to run only to be mowed down by murderous small arms fire. The attackers had ample time to plan the ambush and not a single person on the train was left alive. They emerged from their cover still firing on anything moving and started converging on ill-fated train.

Within the next few moments a small army of armed men had collected around the train, working feverishly unstrapping the APCs and tanks. They lacked proper equipment to do the job and thus the going was slow. Leopard Alpha leader noted the fact and shouted instructions in broken Tibetan to hurry up the process. The result was a significantly rougher handling of the vehicles as they left the trailer to land on the ground, but the process picked up speed. Time was of the essence. It was only a matter of time before Chinese noted the missing train and sent somebody to investigate. Whoever did this better be a long distance away from the site before Chinese reinforcements arrived.

It took nearly 20 minutes for men working at breakneck speed to unload the vehicles and fill their fuel tanks. Once finished, a large number of men got in to the vehicles and started to drive them away towards the road nearby. One Tibetan man came jogging towards Leopard Alpha and smiled. "Thanks for the help. Will see you soon."

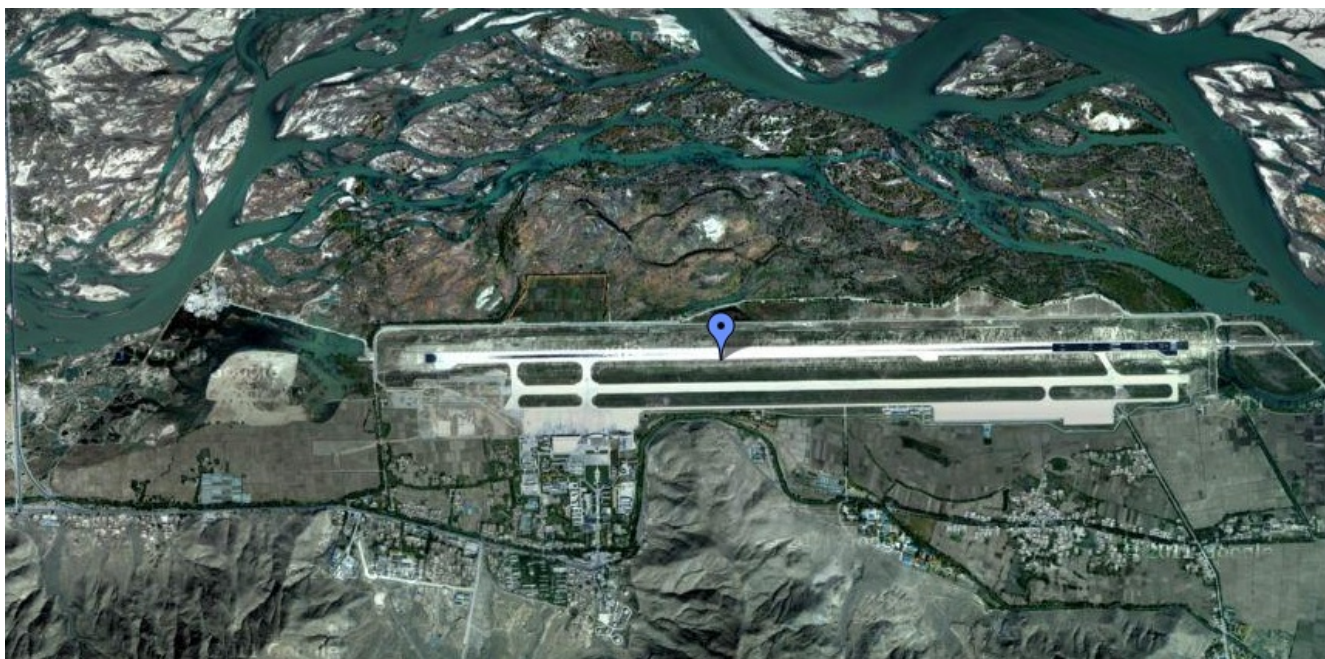
The leader saluted and smiled back. "Take care Wangdak. There is still a lot of work to be done."

Wangdak grinned and saluted back. Both men shook hands and he turned to climb in to one of the two Chinese Type-96 tanks that had been unloaded from train. Leopard team went on to its work immediately. Working separately, they attached more explosives to the stricken train and then melted away in to the terrain. A few minutes after their departure, a series of explosions shook the area as the explosives did their work, destroying the train along with its cargo and damaging a large portion of railway track along with it. Leopards felt rather than saw the explosions, but didn't turn to see the result

of their work. They still had more missions to complete. One of them was another sabotage mission that'll put the Qinghai–Tibet railway out of commission for months by destruction of one of numerous bridges on the line.

The convoy of stolen vehicles soon came followed a road that led to their destination, Lhasa-Gonggar Forward Air Base, nearly fifty Km south-west of Lhasa. Owing to highly tense conditions, lots of PLA convoys were traveling from one location to another and they moved fast without raising any suspicion. They were just another convoy on its way to deployment somewhere.

In spite of that, every man in convoy was nervous. It was only a matter of time before news of the attack and theft of vehicles was reported and an alert sounded all over the region for the rebels. They needed to act really fast if they wanted to have any reasonable chance of their mission succeeding. They soon reached Galashan tunnel, one of the longest tunnels in Asia at nearly 2.4 Km. Beyond it a 3.8km long bridge lead to a small town named Jiazhulinzhen. Lhasa-Gonggar base was just on its outskirts. Normally a civilian airport which served tourists and Tibet residents, it was a hotbed of activity. But at that time, a significant part of the air traffic was military. Numerous Chinese military transport planes were present on the base, loading and unloading men and supplies. According to rumours a detachment of J10s was scheduled to land at the base within next twelve hours to fly CAP missions. But as with most rumours, it was not confirmed yet. But the security seemed to be beefed up and every vehicle was undergoing stringent security checks.



Lhasa Gongga airbase

The convoy lead ground to a halt just outside the main gate of base. Two security guards with confused expressions on their faces walked hesitatingly towards the slightly unusual visitors. Four rebels in PLA uniforms with their fingers ready on triggers of their AK56s jumped out from trailing Type-92 APCs and flanked Wangdak's tank as he opened its hatch. Chinese guards halted and saluted on seeing the leading officer. Although they had no information of arrival of any convoy, they knew better than to challenge a PLA Colonel. Wangdak's confident orders in flawless Mandarin removed any hesitation that they had in their minds. Clearing the first security hurdle, the convoy drove in to the airbase and spread out, taking up strategic positions around its premises.

For the Chinese, the first indication that something was amiss came when nearly a dozen armed men walked in to the air traffic control building and tied up all the guards after disarming them. Once finished, four men stayed back in the control room with loaded guns pointed at the profusely sweating traffic controllers who were ordered to refuse all requests for landings and take offs. All the passengers were shunted into the airport lobby. This was not hard to do as there were little passengers owing to escalating tensions with India. Their numbers were further reduced with military aircraft forming bulk of traffic.



Lhasa Gongga Bridge

In the meanwhile both Type99 tanks followed by two APCs drove up to the military hangar area. A small guard detail was cut down in a hail of bullets before it had any chance to react. A small group of armed rebels then jumped out of APCs and swarmed into the area, searching for weapons and supplies and killing anybody who resisted. They found an IL76 and two Y8 transport planes, both of which were promptly set on fire.

Another group of APCs drove around the premises finding and destroying any anti-air defense asset they could find. The maps they had were not very reliable but their job was made easy as encountered very little resistance. The men were about to finish the last of the KS-1A SAM launchers when warning of arrival of Chinese reinforcements came in.

Reinforcements were coming in from a small Chinese military base few Km south of Lhasa. Tibetan spotters positioned near Galashan tunnel noticed their arrival and went to work. They waited as first of

the vehicles crossed the tunnel and reached the bridge. As soon as it was there, the bridge was rocked by a massive explosion which blew apart a large portion cutting off all the reinforcements. One truck and an APC were destroyed as the powerful explosion tossed them in to cold river water below. Another explosion inside the tunnel a few minutes later destroyed any remaining chance of retaking the base from rebels anytime soon.

But the two Mi-17s armed with machine guns and rocket pods which followed the convoy minutes later had no need of any road. Unfortunately for Chinese, they too proved to be of little use. Two shoulder fired SAMs took care of both, as the first chopper crashed even before it had spotted any rebel. Seeing the fiery fate of its companion, second immediately turned tail and raced back.

Wangdak ordered his men to gather up and load all the military supplies that could be carried away and move out. Their work there was done. His men followed his orders with clockwork precision and started moving out within minutes. Their departure was marked by a series of explosions which first blew up the ATC building followed by fuel storage facility. Last of the explosions made pockmarked the runway with multiple craters, putting the air base out of operational readiness for days at least.

The whole operation had unfolded in front of a few hundred civilians, many of them foreigners, all of them with phones and cameras. Only a miracle could censor news of such an event.

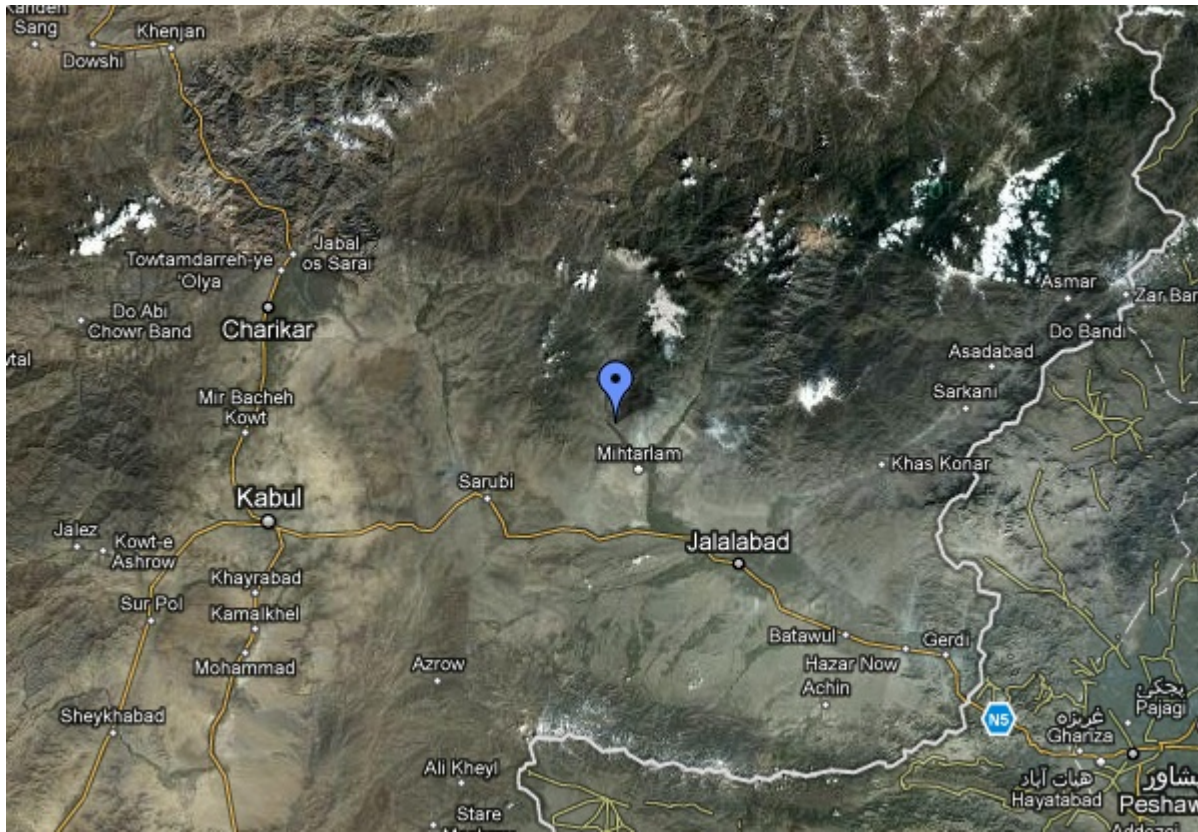
1100 Hours

Mes Aynak, Afghanistan

Mes Aynak in Afghanistan is sixty nine KM south east from Kabul and twenty five km from the Pakistan border. It lies along the famous Silk Road and was one of the biggest Buddhist centers in Afghanistan till 7th century AD and major stronghold of Kushan Empire till 4th century BC. Kushan Empire is largely forgotten, it's still famous for its archaeological importance as the second biggest archaeological site related to Buddhist heritage of Afghanistan. It gained notoriety in late 1990s as a training camp for terrorists run by Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda and was again promptly forgotten until a Chinese mining company won the contract for mining copper in 2007 for \$ 3.5 Billion. The area is believed to hold the second largest copper deposits in whole world. Afghanistan government is expected to earn \$800 million even before the mining starts in by way of royalties worth billions coming in later.

Owing to its unexplored archaeological treasures, Chinese agreed to halt all mining activities until the site was properly surveyed and excavated by archaeologists. Although the mining was expected to start in 2014, there was considerable pressure on under-funded and under-staffed international archaeological teams to release as much area as possible for mining. Such moves had been condemned from various quarters, with some people equating actions of Chinese firm equivalent to those of Taliban destroying Buddhist statues and artifacts in Bamiyan.. But money is a strong motivator and Chinese had succeeded in persuaded enough people in power to start mining excavation on a plot on site much before the agreed time line. By early 2012, five hundred Chinese workers hired by Chinese State Mining Corp. had already landed and begun initial groundwork on the site. A large number of Afghan civilians were also hired and pressed to work. For a country like Afghanistan it was like manna from heaven and nobody except the archaeological community and Americans was really complaining. Sentiment among American public, whoever cared to know about the issue was of righteous betrayal. Thousands of American lives were lost and trillions of dollars spent in helping Afghans and it was the

Chinese who were stealing multi-billion dollars under their very noses.



Although most of the supervisors and all of the management was Chinese, going was good initially. But as with most foreign run operations, the tensions started to develop between the local workers and their foreigner supervisors. While Chinese could not understand the Afghan or muslims revulsion of pork, alcohol and ban on most forms of entertainment, Afghans on their part were put off by what they felt somewhat arrogant and exploitative attitude of their Chinese supervisors. But after a few initial hiccups, both parties were able to get along tolerably well. The mining process was slowly picking up steam with scale of operations increasing steadily.

It was on such a day that Rastin Khan walked in to the cabin of his Chinese supervisor asking for a holiday for himself and a few of his colleagues, which incidentally included most of his fellow villagers who worked alongside him. Wen Gong was one of the few Chinese personnel on site who knew Pashto, one of languages spoken by Afghans. He took a look at the company's official holiday calendar and pointed it to Rastin, “No holiday here Rastin. Can't do that.”

Rastin towered over his Chinese supervisor in height by at least fourteen inches and he looked up and down on the diminutive man as one would look at a kid, “You don't understand. It's my brother's marriage and I along with my cousins and village men need to be there. It's just for four days.”

Wen shook his head emphatically, “No, what you ask for is simply impossible. We cannot allow so many people to go on leave at this time. Eighteen workers! Why do you need so many people for so long anyway?” Even before Rastin could open his mouth to reply, he spoke again, “It’s impossible anyway. You’ll have to come to work. We need every single man here.”

Rastin expressed an expression of exasperation. He was not used to some dwarfish guy in funny clothes and language; boss him around like a lowly servant. But the mining job one of very few paying jobs in the country and he swallowed his pride and controlled his steadily rising anger, “He is my only surviving brother. If I and my village men are not present in wedding, it’ll be very inconvenient and shameful for my whole family and my village. I cannot afford to lose face like this.”

Now loss of face was one expression that Wen was familiar with. But still he had to save his own, “I cannot help you in this matter then. You can take one day off tomorrow but we are facing shortage of workers and anything beyond that is impossible.”

“One day!” Rastin exclaimed with disdain. “What will I do of one day’s leave?”

Wen cut in coldly, “That’s all Rastin. Take this or leave the job. We have a long line of applicants begging for work.”

Rastin shouted in anger, “Just because you have the mine, you think that you can treat us like dirt? My father is head of my village and we take orders from no one. Least of all, stinky little rats like you.”

The burly Afghan’s loud voice had begun to cause some commotion amongst his fellow countrymen. Some of them stopped whatever work they were busy with and started jostling to hear the conversation. This attracted the attention of Chinese guards, who started waving and gesturing the workers to get back to work. The commotion was interrupted by the sound of door crashing open and supervisor Wen following flying into the crowd. A stunned silence befell the crowd only to be broken by sounds of Afghans shouting and gesturing wildly by the appearance of Rastin a moment later. A few Chinese officers flanked by armed guards came running to the rescue of Wen who was lying dazed surrounded by a somewhat hostile crowd. Arrival of armed guards further infuriated the Afghan, resulting in a fair bit of jostling.

Although the unarmed Afghans formed a smaller part of the workforce, Chinese workers thought better of antagonizing them further. But an example had to be set. It was one unruly worker today, tomorrow there will be five. Such behaviour in a Chinese enterprise was simply unacceptable and the senior Chinese manager fired Rastin and few of his friends on the spot. The announcement was greeted by loud abuses and flash strike of all the Afghan workers. They were in turn warned of dismissals themselves, but the warning fell on deaf ears. Instead, it served as the proverbial last straw for the Afghans, who went on a rampage inside the premises. A large quantity of recently imported shiny new machinery was broken and set on fire, followed by parts of the office building. Chinese guards were becoming increasingly nervous and it was only a matter of time before a few bullets were fired. Rastin along with six other workers were shot, three of them died some time later.

Members of powerful local tribes took the incident as a personal insult and grave provocation. As is the case with all such cases, blood had to be paid for with blood. It being Chinese made no difference. A Lashkar of one hundred and eighty men was soon assembled which ambushed the mining site just a few hours later. They attacked armed with RPGs, machine guns and AKs before the besieged Chinese had any chance of organising proper defence or call for help. Most of the NATO forces were away from

the area and had little desire of getting involved in another useless bloody skirmish involving locals and Chinese. As such, the Afghan Lashkar had little difficulty in overwhelming the defences and taking hundreds of Chinese personnel hostage. Except for a twenty senior officials, all of them were tied and forced marched towards general direction of Pakistan before letting go.

The incident didn't go well with Afghan government either. It immediately came under enormous domestic pressure to renegotiate the contract with Chinese, if not kick them outright.

0500 Hours
4th November 2011
Somewhere in India

Defence Secretary Pillai had twenty-four hour access to the Indian Defence Minister who was also handling charge of the Prime Minister. The PM had been operated upon to correct his heart condition and was still in ICU. Although the work load and responsibilities were enormous, DM seemed to be thriving and egging on his colleagues and subordinates to perform even better. DS Pillai didn't mind it at all and had been involved in hectic parleys with Chinese himself. He called DM with a new message from his counterpart in Chinese ministry. "Sir, Chinese want to negotiate. They've agreed to some of our demands."

If he was affected by the news, DM gave no outer sign of it, "Some of them?"

"Yes sir. They've agreed to allow us access to Admiral Xedong in prison. We can dispatch a team to interrogate him this evening itself."

"They are not deporting him? What about rest of his co-conspirators?"

"According to them, investigations are still going on and they haven't arrested anybody else yet pending further developments. Access to other suspects will be on case by case basis."

DM nodded warily, "Sure. What else?"

"They are ready to consider our claim on PoK, pending further high level talks of course."

DM showed first sign of real interest, "That's interesting. Anything about Shaksgam Valley and Aksai Chin? "

"According to them, those areas are Chinese territory. Concessions if any will be given on areas held by Pakistan only."

"We'll see to that. What are their demands?"

“Unconditional release of all of their civilians, sailors and soldiers that we have in our custody. Giving back their submarine and nuclear missiles; an official apology for attack on Chinese positions inside POK and sympathy on Xinjiang and Tibet civil unrest issue.”

DM snorted in amusement, “That's interesting. You've done a good job Shri Pillai. Let me think on this or a while.”

Call was disconnected and everybody in room shared glances. Apparently, Chinese had been facing their worst nightmares, isolation and condemnation from rest of the world, rebellion in two provinces, covert attacks by multiple parties on overseas assets and worst of all, loss of face.

NSA chief Angad spoke first, “That's quite generous of our peaceful neighbours!”

DM raised his eyebrows questioningly to which Angad replied, “They have given up nothing while asking for everything. POK was never theirs to begin with; it was between us and Pakis. Aksai Chin and Shaksgam Valley don't even figure in negotiations. We get to interrogate Xedong but no extradition. We can't prosecute him in our courts, almost all of other big fish will wiggle free and we'll never get one single extradition. Fat lot of good it'll do to us.”

“Now, look at their demands. They've asked for all of our bargaining chips and then some more. Sympathy on Xinjiang and Tibet! What the hell they are smoking? Asking for release of prisoners is one thing but what's the deal with their unconditional release? I say, let every single one of them rot in our jails till the guilty Chinese are extradited and executed.”

DM sighed and spoke, “You said it yourself that a lot of highest ranks were involved in whole conspiracy. Do you think either of them will get punished? Even Xedong has been arrested only because Peng probably sees him as a threat and thus he is the most convenient scapegoat. If I had my own way, I'd have launched those Gilgit missiles on these idiots the moment we had captured them. Would have saved us the hassle of negotiating with these retards.”

“I'd have shrunk in horror if anybody had said this a week earlier, but right now, I can't say that I disagree. After what they've done to us since the last fifty years, I feel like obliterating them myself...” Angad paused for a while looking absently at the bunch of papers lying before him. “Anyway, what do you think we should do right now? Send a team to interrogate Xedong right now?”

“I don't suppose that's going to mean anything. Maybe Xedong is just a smoke screen. I am reasonably sure that he will say exactly what he will be taught to say by his masters. A bloody sacrificial goat if anything at all.” DM shook his head in anger then spoke again, “But we don't have any good information on rest of his companions ourselves. So we can't put any pressure on them. Let's take the bait for now. See what we come up with. Assemble a team and coordinate with Chinese over this offer. Regarding POK and Aksai Chin, I'll pick up a team for negotiations myself. Nobody makes any public statements right now and everything is strictly on need to know basis unless I specify otherwise. Now let's get busy.”

1155 Hours
4 November 2012
PPC International News

In a further body blow to Pakistan, senior most leader of Baloch Nationalist Liberation Front, Gaffar Khan has declared Balochistan as an independent country. Appearing in a televised press conference in Switzerland, he declared Pakistan as a dead entity and while proclaiming Balochistan province as an independent country. We are quoting parts of the statement that he read out to media.

“Pakistan was never a real nation. Unlike other nations, it was based on nothing but an ideology of hatred and bigotry. We, the proud Baloch people, have been suffering under the unjust and unwanted rule of Pakistani military which comprises almost exclusively of Punjabis. Our voices have been brutally trampled upon and silenced for decades. Thousands of innocent Baloch civilians have died in excesses perpetrated by Pakistanis. My own son and his pregnant wife were tortured and killed by these barbarians. The Pakistani military which fancies itself as champions of Islam by bombing and killing unarmed civilians, is but no more. Today along with blessings of all of Balochi leaders we are going to end this unjust occupation of our land. From now on Balochistan is an independent sovereign country free of Paki tyranny. Governments of India and Afghanistan have already given recognition to our nation and I urge heads of all the other nations to follow their lead.”

There has been no reaction from Pakistan as yet as the country is without any semblance of governance after retaliatory Indian nuclear strikes. Its powerful military which called the shots earlier is broken and scattered, first after the infighting between two powerful Generals and Indian attack that followed. There has been absolutely no opposition to Indian advance in Pak occupied Kashmir either where locals have been largely supportive of Indian troops till now. We are still waiting for reactions from other nations to come in.

1400 Hours
4 November 2012
Taiwan News

Major cities in the Chinese mainland were rocked by violence after rumours of death of Admiral Xedong leaked out. He was arrested on charges of masterminding a conspiracy to smuggle nuclear tipped ballistic missiles to Pakistan, one of which destroyed a small western Indian town killing more than 25,000 people. India had released an audio recording of Adm. Xedong conversing with a Chinese intelligence officer in Pakistan, where he had ordered the launching of missiles. An investigation team organised by Chinese President Lin had arrested Xedong and whisked him away to an unknown location for interrogations. Absolute secrecy was maintained so as to prevent his co-conspirators from influencing the investigations.

But today as rumours of his death started appearing on internet, people started appearing in streets of his birth place Guanzhou carrying placards condemning President Lin. Within hours there were reports of protesters taking to streets in Nanjing, Wuhan and Gulyang. A small group of protesters in Beijing trying to march towards Tiananmen Square was forced to break up by Chinese riot police. Some of the protest marches got out of control as people indulged in arson and pelted stones and Molotov cocktails

at official buildings and the police forcing authorities to enlist the army in dealing with protesters. Internet access in most parts of China has been severely curtailed as almost all sites and forums not sanctioned by Chinese authorities have been blocked. An official from the home security department however claimed that Admiral Xedong is alive and well in protective custody. Terming the unrest as a result of malicious rumour mongering, he denied all reports of Xedong's death as an attempt to disrupt peace in China.

Taiwanese parliament has expressed serious concern over the situation in China as relations between the two neighbours are at an all time low following a downing of a Taiwanese fighter plane by a Chinese warship. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior law maker from the ruling party expressed concerns that China might use the excuse of spreading civil unrest and tensions with India to launch a surprise attack on Taiwan in an attempt to capture it. Echoing his sentiments, official spokesperson of Taiwanese government issued a warning to China cautioning it against further misadventure. Taiwanese defence forces are already on full battle alert to guard against any such attack. United States too has come in support of Taiwan and dispatched two carrier battle groups as a warning against any Chinese misadventure in the region.

1655 Hours

4 November 2012

Forward Army HQ

Turtok, 101 KM North East of Leh

Advancing Indian forces in Pak occupied Kashmir were facing logistical nightmares of the highest magnitude possible. Except for occasional pot shots few left-over jihadis and defiant Paki army personnel, resistance they were facing was almost non-existent. But most of their problems were related to terrain and shortage of transports. Nobody had really planned for such operations and as such decisions that would require months, if not weeks, of careful planning and setting up of logistics chains were being made on the spot based upon vague assurances of speedy resupplies from distant HQs. There were very few operational roads connecting the two parts of the divided state and those were swamped with panicked refugees trying to stream in to India. Relief camps had to be setup to help the civilians and in India which other organisations except the army are expected to deal with such a mess!

The civilian administration of J&K, in spite of all its lofty talk of love between the divided people and porous border whines had simply washed it's hands off the whole mess expecting the army to do all the dirty work. Thankfully for the army commanders, DM had personally intervened and sent some stern messages to state's CM to share the workload, thus freeing up resources desperately needed by the army elsewhere. Even then, the rush of refugees was hindering work as their long caravans clogged up miles of the few motorable roads, leaving the army with little choice except helicopters to transport men and supplies. The fact that the bulk of fleet was busy strengthening defences against China was just another inconvenience.



The hectic work detail was taking its toll on helicopter crews. Ferrying men and precious cargo always has been their job and most claimed to enjoy it. But doing the same round the clock without rest in war like conditions in unfamiliar territory is enough to cause fatigue even in best for the best of crew. And fatigue causes mistakes which could prove disastrous. The CO of Turtok base, Colonel Mudabar Chidambaram was more than aware of the fact and was trying his level best to ease the workload. But his efforts were not proving enough. His small base was inundated with frantic requests of supplies from various quarters and he couldn't do anything except send the pilots on one more sortie, one after another. He knew for a fact that his luck wouldn't hold out for long and the feeling was making him queasy. Although all the pilots under his command were highly trained professionals, there was a limit to which they could be pushed.

The base was first started as part of Operation Sadbhavna by the Indian Army in its mission to help the locals by setting up much needed medical camps, schools and vocational training centers. The rugged area had little contact with rest of the world and the for the ethnic Balti tribals of the area, work done by the army was the only thing that they could identify as governance. The base had first started off as a small helipad where helicopters from Leh landed carrying supplies to be distributed in surrounding areas. It was still exactly like that when hostilities broke out and as such, its meager resources and infrastructure were overwhelmed in a matter of hours.

Although it was only three days since the nature of work at base had changed, for Col Mudabar it seemed like another lifetime. A large portion of the local population had been evacuated except a few who stubbornly stayed back to for various reasons, mostly related to their livelihood. Right now, instead of friendly locals, base was swarming with tense armed forces personnel.

The first signal that some of his worst fears were coming true was when the communications officer reported loss of contact with one of Mi 17 helicopters approximately 10 Km south of Shaksgam Valley, in control of China.

The area had always been one of the most difficult to operate in. It was covered with some of the highest and least accessible mountain peaks with little human habitation and sustaining infrastructure. Even Pakistan didn't place any significant military resources there considering the high cost and the fact that they had gifted away surrounding areas to China. They lacked the will and resources to control the area anyway.

In a war to capture the territory, this would most probably be an advantage for the attackers, but not in this case. After near complete surrender and abandonment of posts by Pakistani Rangers and army, Indian Army was obliged to fill up the gap. But lack of any dependable infrastructure, roads etc. was a major impediment to their efforts to establish control over the region. But the most worrying aspect of the situation was nearly certain war with China. The area needed massive influx of Indian forces in shortest time possible and the many choppers like the old workhorse Mi 17 were flying back to back missions, dropping men and supplies.

Loss of radio contact was not an uncommon phenomenon in such areas. Not all of the machines had modern communication systems on board and thus were prone to communication blackouts under certain conditions. Although, most of the time it was some non-critical problem related to comms gear, it always increased the heartbeats of people involved. It didn't happen very often, but whenever it did happen, it sure subtracted a few minutes of life from everyone connected to the mission.

Currently the base was experiencing one similar situation. A Mi-17 transport helicopter with call sign Mike11 was on a sortie to drop some much needed supplies and ammunition for advancing Indian troops on a mission to consolidate their newly won positions in PoK, some 4 Km south of Chinese controlled Shaksgam Valley. Due to bad weather in the area, the pilot had lost his way and there had been no communication since last fifteen minutes. As usual, Col Mudabar was personally coordinating the flights and the creases on his forehead were getting deeper with every passing second. Each passing moment brought the night closer and there were less than an hour before it became impossible for pilots to navigate without night vision devices. Communication people on the ground were frantically calling the lost helicopter without pause as other helicopters landed or took off with their crew and cargo. But there had been no response till now.

“Any luck contacting Major Kale yet?” he asked one of the comms engineers. Missing chopper was on its way to drop the supplies for Major Kale's team and there had been no contact with him either. The answer was negative and Col. Mudabar grimaced on hearing it. “What the hell is going on down there?” he asked loudly to nobody in particular.

“Shall we send another chopper to search for them?” the question was asked by a burly Jat Subedar, most of whose duties till date had been loading and unloading of helicopters.

“Do you have one lying spare for the job?” Col snapped back annoyed. Subedar was slightly confused by the reply and was about to answer something when the voice of Major Kale came alive on radio. There was lots of static and the comms engineer had to fiddle quite a bit with the radio knobs to make the transmission audible. Col snatched the mouthpiece at once and asked Major Kale, “What's going on out there Major? Where are you guys and where is our Mi-17?”

Major Kale had to shout to get himself heard, “We were attacked. Lost the chopper and” rest of the transmission was lost as his voice was overcome by the static. But it was enough to freeze everybody within earshot. Only Col Mudabar seemed unaffected and he took control of the radio himself, shouting

in to the mouthpiece, trying to contact Major again. He seemed slightly relieved when Kale came back on air again. His story was just as bad as his first line. Major Kale's team was at an unnamed location, simply known as Point 4677, nearly three KM south of Shaksgam Valley awaiting the chopper to drop supplies. The Mi17 had come in almost right at time and was hovering and dropping supply crates when a MANPAD was launched from a hill in north taking down the chopper like a brick. Only the co-pilot had survived that too with broken legs and crushed ribs. The army team rushed to the stricken helicopter to rescue any survivors when they came under heavy machine gun and grenade fire. Two soldiers were immediately killed and three more injured before they were able to take cover and fire back. But the attackers had advantage of surprise and better positions. Indians had lost five more soldiers before they could disengage and find better positions.

Survivors had to fall back and had nothing to help them with reinforcements or extraction for quite some time to come in an unfamiliar and hostile territory. Col Mudabar slammed the mouthpiece down on the table in frustration and looked around at the worried faces around him. Gesturing with his eyes and hands he ordered everybody else to get on with their work while he took up the radio again to contact his seniors.

Help for the ambushed Indian team came in an unexpected way. It just happened that three prototypes of the new indigenous Light Combat Helicopter were finishing their high altitude weapon trials in Leh when hostilities broke out. LCH was supposed to provide heavy mobile firepower in scenarios just like this one. All the trials had gone on well to match or even exceed the expectations. So, the proposal of the senior test pilot to perform the ultimate trial by fire in combat received a guarded go ahead. Within minutes of receiving the distress call two of the LCHs, armed to the teeth with 20mm canon and 35mm rockets were rushing to aid the ambushed Indian infantry team.

Even while carrying near full loads, they could fly at altitudes nearing 6500m which provided them considerable protection from most of portable MANPADS and small arms fire. Thermal sights cued to the weapon controls allowed the pilots to locate and destroy man sized targets from any height. Rushing at speeds in excess of 300 kmph, the two choppers were in the area within minutes and started scouring the area for hostiles. Although the area in which people could disperse was large, the actual area navigable by foot was quite small owing to high mountains, glaciers and mountainous ravines. Therefore the Indian chopper team had little difficulty in locating the hostiles, who were marching towards northern border along the borders of one such mountain river.



Illustration 1: Shaksgam Valley

The lead chopper, piloted by Squadron Leader Mayur located the fifteen men hostile team first at a really vulnerable moment when they were trying to cross a small glacial river a few Km from the ambush site. Even flying at extreme altitudes, Indian helicopters had no difficulty in following the suspects owing to superb avionics on board. They kept watch waiting to provide Chinese a taste of their own medicine. They didn't have to wait too long as the Chinese men reached an icy ledge on banks of the river. The point was one of very few in the region that could be used to cross the river by infantry. Even then, they needed ropes to pass over.

Unfortunately for Chinese, they had chosen a wrong time to do so. Their orders had been to make life difficult for Indians in any way possible. Young PLA Captain leading the platoon had followed the orders enthusiastically that had resulted in deaths of 7 Indian soldiers and destruction of a Mi-17, spreading panic within Indian camp. Unfortunately neither he nor his superiors had foreseen the consequences.

Currently the Chinese soldiers marched back to their base inside Shaksgam valley on a route that passed through hostile territory interspersed by mountains, glaciers, ice and rivers. The group was standing on a ledge on the bank of one such river, trying to cross it using a temporary rope bridge, when first of the LCH located them. Chinese were blissfully unaware of their impending doom as it hovered thousands of feet above, hidden by clouds and its rotor noise masked by winds.

First of the Chinese soldiers to die didn't even know what killed them as a salvo of three rockets fired from first chopper landed smack in between them as they stood on ledge trying to keep the rope-way stable.

The explosions blew them away to pieces and broke the ropes on which two other soldiers were trying to cross over. Both fell in to the icy glacial river and drowned within a minute. Rest of their

companions fared only marginally better. A couple of them managed to pull up their guns to eye level but that was the most that they could do. Another salvo of rockets, this time fired from second chopper obliterated the confused group before they could gather any idea of what was going on. Only two Chinese soldiers survived the carnage. They were cut down by canon fire immediately after.

By picking a place and time favouring them, Indian chopper pilots had executed the ambush flawlessly. Chinese MANPADS crew had no chance of acquiring the helicopters and firing off any missile before being annihilated.

The incident didn't go unnoticed on either side which were already rushing reinforcements in to the battle. But the two LCH didn't stay to check as they turned back to their base at maximum speed.

0120 Hours

5 November 2012

Phalcon AWACS

Skies over Laddakh

The incident caused a fair amount of heart burn inside Chinese military. In spite of being stretched to the limit by Uighur and Tibetan rebels, PLA still had formidable offensive firepower at its disposal and the Mission Controller onboard Indian Phalcon AWACS was first to notice it when Chinese launched a large salvo of their much hyped DH-11 long range cruise missiles. Phalcon's radar had detected the missiles while they were still 7-8 minutes away from Leh and the crew was sending out warnings frantically.

Mission controller aboard Indian Phalcon AWACS was shouting in to the mouthpiece, "Lima this is Eagle Eye, we have 16 confirmed DH-11 inbound right at your position. I repeat, 16 DH-11 inbound at your position. Take cover immediately."

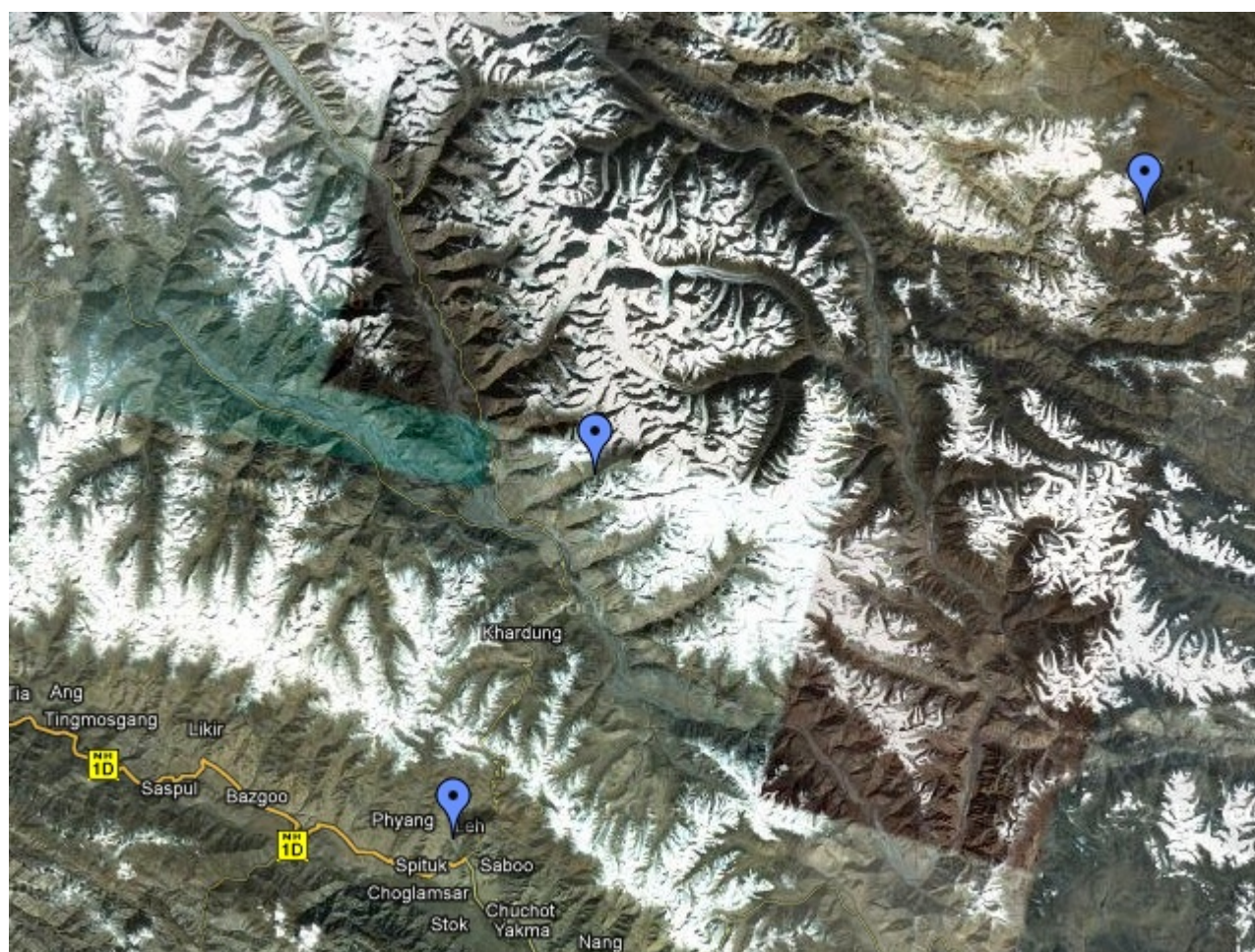
In what could be considered a mixed bag, All of Chinese missiles were launched from a single location. Sabotage by Tibetan rebels, while not entirely successful had still affected Chinese military significantly. In ideal conditions, Chinese would have launched a larger number of missiles from a wide encircling arc, confusing the defenders and saturating their air defense assets. But owing to shortage of missiles and safe places from where to launch, they were forced to launch all missiles from a single location. Although it made the job of tracking these missiles somewhat easier, it also meant that the air defenses in that particular corridor would be overwhelmed and at least some of the missiles would pass through unscathed.

Although important, such thoughts were hardly occupying anyone's mind on the besieged base. Instead, they were working furiously to meet the attack head on and save whatever they could before launching a counter attack. The base was operating at war level and all the civilian traffic had been suspended. The runway was being used exclusively by military transporters and fighter jets which were immediately airborne within a minute of the warning. The planes which could not take to air were moved to underground bunkers and rest moved as far away from the base as possible. Six more MiG 29s fully fuelled and armed joined four others which were already on CAP duty. All this while crews of

air defence wing waited tensely for the Chinese missiles to come within their kill radius. Owing to its high strategic value, Leh airbase had received some serious defence upgrades consisting of multiple Akash and SPYDER SAMs placed all around as well as inside the base. It was going to be the first baptism in combat for both of the systems.

One Akash battery placed in Chapo, nearly 110 Km forward of the base was first to acquire a lock on incoming bandits. Twelve SAMs arose majestically, almost simultaneously, to intercept first of DH-11 which were flying just 10s of metres above the mountain peaks

Of the Twelve missiles launched at seven different cruise missiles, four found their targets while the rest missed. Some failed as they lost lock on target amongst mountains, while the rest exploded harmlessly after their target was destroyed by another missile. By the time crews could reload the launchers; remaining DH-11s were already out of their kill zone or had passed by without ever coming within range.



From top to bottom: Arganglas, Chapo and Leh

Another Akash battery placed in Arganglas took out another five, but that still left out seven DH-11s which moved on to their terminal phase as they neared their designated targets. People still resident in the city now watched as seven white streaks came in from the north. Short ranged SPYDER missiles rose to intercept these and managed to knock out three before first of the cruise missiles found its target and hit the runway. The warhead consisted of runway denial explosives and damaged it enough to stop all aircraft landings and takeoffs for hours if not days. Another missile probably targeted at the helicopter wing missed its aim and crashed in to the War Memorial just a few meters north of it.

Although the helicopter hangars suffered some damage, losses were not high as most of the equipment and personnel were already away from the area. Third missile was hit by the radar guided AAA fire and crashed outside the airport in a civilian populated area causing dozens of casualties. Last of the missiles escaped the entire last ditch AAA fire and hit the underground pens of MiG 29s. But the structures were made to handle exactly such kind of hits and the damage was minimal.

Considering the amount of firepower launched to take it out, the base had escaped virtually unscathed. Only serious damage was to the runway which was put out of order for a few hours. None of the aircraft and other vital assets were damaged. Four MiG 29s which were on CAP duty earlier were starting to get a bit low on the fuel and were diverted to Srinagar.

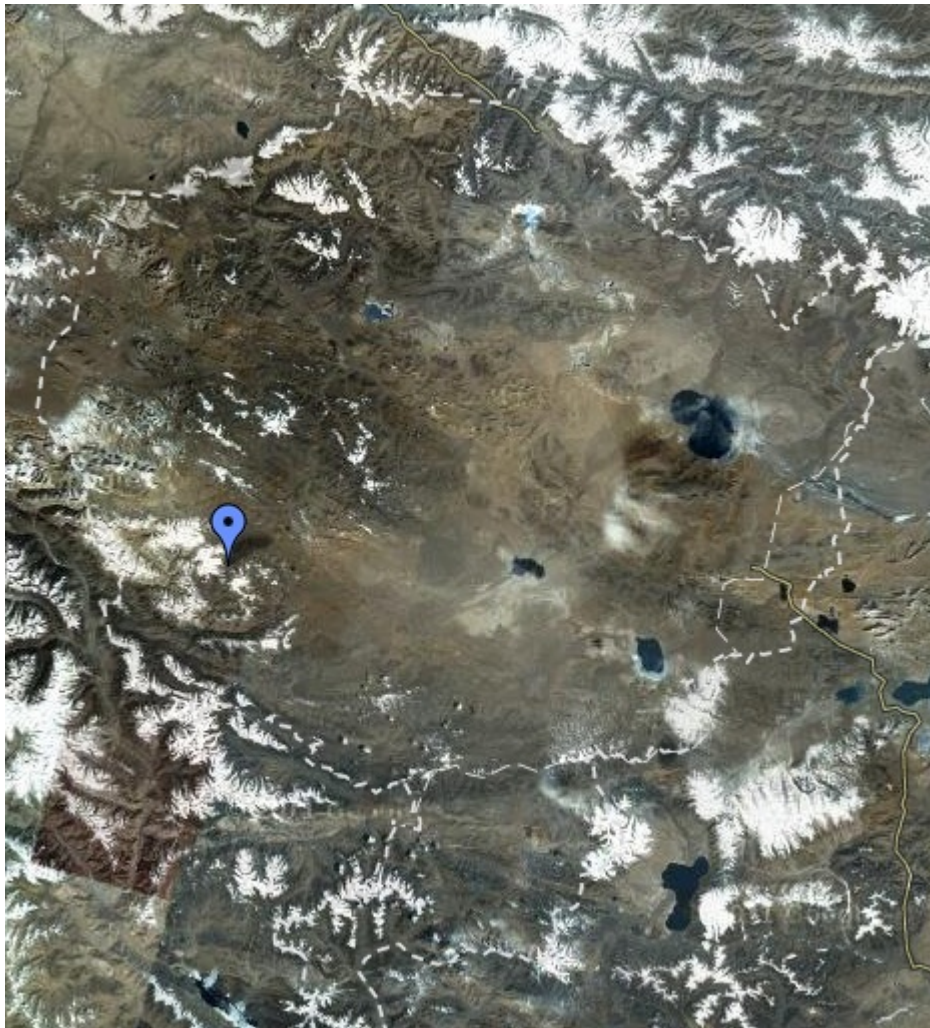
While Indian personnel in the base worked to repair the damage, others elsewhere started on their missions to inflict at least equal if not more pain to Chinese for yet another attack. Work on a counter attack had begun as soon as the warnings of incoming missiles had come in. By the time last of the Chinese missiles had been cleared out of skies, Indian missile crews were ready with their own reply. Although Chinese had a seemingly overwhelming quantitative advantage over Indians, civil war inside their two provinces and the escalating conflict with Taiwan-US and tensions with Russia had stretched their resources to the limits. Thus providing Indians with a fighting chance if they planned their moves right.

India had already declared its willingness to go nuclear against China in face of any more provocations and thus replied back in a way that few people anywhere had ever expected.

Within minutes of Chinese attack, Indians had launched their own Shaurya hypersonic cruise missiles. Although Chinese too had fairly robust air defense systems in form of S300 ABM, sheer scale of attack overwhelmed their defenses, helped in no less deal by the uniqueness of a hypersonic cruise missile. Of the nineteen missiles launched, thirteen found their targets. Unlike Chinese, the Indians had spread their choice of targets on multiple bases and the effects on Chinese military capability in those areas were crippling. Most of their military bases north of J&K in Tibet were hit with conventional explosive warheads, except for four which were annihilated with nuclear bunker busters. Those bases were suspected to store Chinese nuclear weapons and their delivery systems.

Chinese military assets in Aksai Chin were given special attention. Two whole Chinese Rapid Reaction Force divisions had been mobilized into the region to thwart any Indian offensive and these took the brunt of the damage. The Chinese edge in armour was more or less neutralised, first by three conventional missile strikes, then by bombing raids by Jaguars which followed minutes later.

The disproportionate response by Indians dealt a crippling blow on Chinese ability to wage war in Laddakh-Tibet sector and they needed to move fast in order to capitalize on it. Compared to Aksai Chin, Shaksgam Valley area was lightly defended. One reason was its previous border with ally Pakistan and another was its difficult mountainous terrain. Anything needed to maintain strong defensive positions in the area was prohibitively expensive and difficult like hell. For the Indians, biggest hurdle in Shaksgam Valley was weather and terrain. On the other hand, comparatively flatter terrain of Aksai Chin was more conducive to troop movements and pitched battles both by armour as well as infantry. Both India and China had strong military presence along this border. Although Chinese had better roads and were numerically stronger, precision missile and air strikes had neutralized much of their offensive capability.



Aksai Chin

After near complete destruction of Pakistani military, Indian armed forces were feeling confident enough to move most of their Pakistan centric defenses towards the China border, thus strengthening their position vis-a-vis Chinese. It was only 2-3 hours after the Chinese cruise missile attack that the first of Indian soldiers re-entered Indian territories illegally held by China.

0100 Hours
6th November 2012
Somewhere In India

Just like the last time, Chinese President came to the point of interest immediately, "Mr. Shivendra, I must strongly protest your army's actions in Aksai Chin and Shaksgam Valley. I thought that we had an agreement on not escalating the violence till we catch and punish the criminals on our side."

DM Shivendra shot back, "Are you that ignorant of what your military is doing right in front of you or are you just playing with us Mr. Peng? Also, our armed forces are acting under our direct orders and our orders were to not to take any further attack lying down. Your army attacked us without any provocation near Shaksgam Valley, and then fired sixteen cruise missiles at us. You think that we'll take all that provocations lying down? I had warned you earlier against any further misadventure which you ignored."

"That helicopter of yours was shot down by some overzealous guards when it seemed like it was going to cross over to our side. It was an honest mistake."

DM ground his teeth in anger, "Honest mistake! Your men not only shot down the helicopter which was 10s of KMs away from territory occupied by you, but also ambushed our soldiers who went out to help the survivors. Your men were no ordinary border guards. They were well trained Special Forces operatives and were under specific instructions to sabotage and harass our military personnel. We have their dead bodies and identity papers to show for it. Don't you lie with me on this one Mr. Peng? We all know who was responsible for what."

Seeing uncomfortable the look on other people's faces present in room, DM took a deep breath to calm himself then continued, "Even if you were not at fault there, who is going to take responsibility for firing off sixteen missiles at us ? Was that one of your investigative tactics? "

Chinese President answered with a menace in his voice, "I don't think that you understand what is at stake here. Your country has already suffered one nuclear attack. I don't even want to imagine what a full fledged nuclear war will do to your beautiful nation."

This was the last straw for DM who shot up from his chair and hissed in to the mouthpiece, "If you are blackmailing us with your nuclear toys, then you'll do well to remember the fate of your Pakistani poodles. They tried playing the same game with us and see what that brought for them. You make one stupid move and I swear that your fate will be worse than Pakis. You must be extremely naive to think that I'm making empty threats."

All the pretense of diplomacy had vanished from the conversation.

Seeing the move backfiring, Chinese Pres immediately changed track, "I hope you understand that we are not fighting over a personal issue here. Lives of one-thirds of the world's population are at stake here. Any hot-headed decision will be catastrophic for the whole world. "

"Please don't lecture me on this. It became personal for me and for everybody else when we saw more than thirty thousand fellow Indians burn to death in an instant. What surprises me that you still have the gall to call and threaten us."

Chinese President's voice assumed a conciliatory tone, "I completely understand what your country is going through, but you must understand that the attack was a conspiracy between Pakistanis and a few Chinese rogue elements. We can't let isolated incidents disrupt peace when so much is at stake."

"I'll tell you what is at stake for you. If you don't agree to what we demand, then be ready to say good bye to your China as you know it. With Pakistan, we limited our strikes to military targets. We wouldn't be so considerate in your case. Every single city of yours in our range will be burnt to ashes. I'll

personally start the massacre by firing off your two missiles that we captured from Gilgit. I had warned you of what we are capable of in our last conversation and trust me, I'll do exactly that."

"We'll do exactly what we agreed upon in our previous conversation, as soon as you call back your soldiers from our territory."

DM answered with a twisted smile, "I'm sorry to say it to you, but Aksai Chin and Shaksgam Valley don't belong to China anymore. Even as we talk, our soldiers are pushing back yours to reclaim what's rightfully ours."

"We don't have much time to play such games. I'm requesting you to put an end to hostilities and recall your soldiers. Otherwise things will get nasty real quick."

Ignoring the threat DM continued, "I hear Tibetans and Uighurs are giving you lots of trouble. Also, the US is right at your throat over that Taiwanese F-16 incident. I suggest you forget about Aksai Chin and Shaksgam and concentrate on rest of your trouble spots."

"You must know that we have the capability of doing much worse with your dissidents than what you can do with ours." was the predictable reply, which most people in the room just shrugged off.

Everyone in the room watched the verbal duel between the two leaders with bated breaths. Indian blitzkrieg in two sectors had routed the Chinese defences. In Aksai Chin, two pronged attack by Indian mountain divisions had overrun most of their defensive strongholds and taken control of vital highways that Chinese had constructed. Indians had preferred bypassing Chinese forces and encircling them wherever possible instead of engaging in pitched battles. Shaksgam Valley which had only token military presence too was overrun without much trouble. Guerrilla attacks by Tibetan rebels assisted by Special Forces had disrupted Chinese supply lines and thrown most of their battle plans out of order. Even if PLA succeeded in pushing Indians back over the next few days, it'd still be a major embarrassment for much hyped Chinese military might. And as of now, PLA looked too disorganized and disoriented even to put up a decent fight.

Indians had been bracing up for an attack further south in Arunachal Pradesh, but so far the fight had been limited to artillery duels with neither side committing to a full scale fight, which suited India just fine.

After the successive setbacks, Chinese had realised that their own position was precarious and were looking for a way to save their face. Everybody knew that Chinese President was on phone only because he was on the verge of a very embarrassing defeat. His aggressive posturing was nothing more than false bravado and attempts of intimidation, which had no effect on Indians. Seeing all of his attempts of bullying Indian leadership in to submission, Peng changed tracks.

"Listen Mr. Shivendra, We all realize that a war is not in our interest. We need to end the conflict before it expands and turns nastier. Nuclear weapons have already been used. So far, only military targets have been attacked but you know we have to end this before either of us is forced in to something even more destructive. We need to wind all this down"

DM leaned back on his chair and looked around the room at the people surrounding him and spoke, "What are you offering us?"

0700Hours
6th November 2012
BREAKING NEWS

India and China have both agreed to a ceasefire to the conflict which was threatening to put the world on brink of a nuclear war. The news has come as a major relief to the world as the battles between two nuclear armed rivals started to escalate and spread to multiple fronts. Both nations have agreed to cease hostilities and hold immediate negotiations to resolve their disputes. A Chinese delegation will land in New Delhi within next few hours to this effect.

As many of our viewers already know, India had accused China of hatching a conspiracy which culminated with two nuclear missiles being launched from Pakistan, one of which killed more than 25000 people in Rajasthan. Other missile targeted towards Mumbai was intercepted and destroyed in midair by Indian home grown missile defence system.

In retaliation, India had launched a massive nuclear and conventional weapons based attack on Pakistan which all but wiped out Pakistan from world map, causing millions of casualties. Hours after the attack, Indian military had captured a Chinese nuclear submarine just a few KM south of Gwadar port and two Chinese nuclear tipped ICBMs from a tunnel near Gilgit from Pakistan controlled part of J&K. Based upon the evidence collected, India had accused one senior member of CPC identified as Admiral (Retd) Xedong of masterminding the nuclear attack on Indian soil. China had first rejected Indian demands of handing over Admiral Xedong and seven other CPC and PLA officers and put Admiral Xedong in custody. Xedong was considered by many to be one of the most likely candidates for the post of Chinese President after Peng's terms got over next year in August. Massive riots had broken out in many Chinese cities after news of Xedong's death in custody had leaked out.

Two days after the incident, advancing Indian forces in Pak occupied Kashmir were involved in a conflict with Chinese forces near Shaksgam valley. The small fire fight quickly escalated in to something much worse as China launched more than a dozen cruise missiles at Indian bases in J&K, causing serious damage to Leh airfield. In retaliation, India attacked dozens of Chinese bases in Aksai Chin and Tibet. Although, both sides are tight lipped about it right now, some reports suggest that India used at least two nuclear tipped missiles in the attack.

Chinese forces in the area, which were already battling resurgent Tibetan and Uighur rebels, were unable to withstand the subsequent blitzkrieg of Indian air and ground attack and were forced to abandon their positions in Shaksgam Valley and Aksai Chin.

According to experts, Chinese forces were stretched too thin due to their ongoing operations against domestic insurgency which had disrupted their supply lines in the remote and rough terrain. Additionally, Chinese government had came under immense international pressure after another conflict with Taiwan and USA seemed imminent brought upon by downing of Taiwanese F-16 fighter plane by a Chinese warship. After the incident USA had dispatched two of its CBGs to help Taiwan defend itself against any further Chinese aggression.

Although no official confirmation has come in yet, it's believed that Indian, Chinese and US submarines were involved in a shooting match east of Andaman Islands which resulted in sinking of at least one Chinese submarine.

All of this has seemed to help Indian forces in their war with China as they overran Chinese defences in Shaksgam Valley and parts of Aksai Chin, before their advance slowed down due to pressure on their supply lines and fierce Chinese resistance. Before the declaration of ceasefire, Indian forces in Aksai Chin had penetrated up to 110 km in some sectors

Right now, it's unclear whether India will hand over the captured territory back to China. Although China has agreed to Indian claim on Pakistan controlled part of J&K, both parties remained tight lipped over the Chinese controlled areas. It's quite likely that India will drive a hard bargain with China over it and probably try to get a favourable agreement on long standing border disputes. Considering that Indians have a fully weaponised Chinese nuclear submarine and crew along with at least 350 Chinese soldiers and civilians in their custody, it seems that they will have an upper hand during the negotiations. Also under present circumstances, world opinion seems more or less to be on Indian side. Though it remains to be seen how it'll affect the negotiations.

1015 Hours
13th November 2012
India

DM finished reading the thick 100+ page file that contained bulk of agreements signed between India and China, closed his eyes and leaned back on his chair. He had been working like a mule for last two weeks and it was the first moment in many days when he felt that he could relax. Even then, he couldn't help but think about the deal that was about to be finalised with Chinese. Initially, Chinese negotiations team was really stubborn and inflexible, but Indians were quite a match for them and had succeeded in getting a favourable agreement after mostly acrimonious talks that lasted almost a week. But owing to unprecedented extraordinary circumstances, it was finalized in a record time.

As was expected, the talks had started in a very hostile environment. Chinese armed forces had suffered horrendous losses without much to show for it. Additionally, they had been forced to cede ground to a supposedly numerically and technically inferior enemy. Their humiliation was made even worse by the capture of two nuclear missiles along with 100s of soldiers and the capture of an intact nuclear submarine followed by sinking of another two even before the hostilities had begun. Unlike the conflict in J&K-Tibet area that followed later, these incidents had been paraded, humiliating China, by Indians on world stage. PLA officers which formed the bulk of the Chinese negotiations team were none too happy for that. They had shown their displeasure over what was termed as "lack of maturity and foresight" by India, which was promptly rebutted by their Indian counterparts.

As was expected, Chinese had brought up every outstanding issue including the status of Tibetan rebels, Arunachal Pradesh, Aksai Chin etc., most of which had little to do with the task at hand. These tactics were meant to throw Indians off the guard but the Indians too had good experience in such matters and the negotiations had dragged on for days before USA and Russia had put in all of their resources forcing the two belligerent nations to hammer out a compromise. Chinese were loathe to admit that India had successfully used tactical nuclear weapons on four of their bases and had vigorously denied all such reports. India on its part maintained a stony silence. But within days of the attack, proof to this effect had been released in public domain. There was much brouhaha in the usual circles, bringing even more pressure to get an effective ceasefire.

The Chinese, who had agreed to the Indian claim on Pakistan occupied part of J&K earlier, but balked and nearly walked out when Indians staked their claim on Shaksgam Valley and Aksai Chin. Indians on their part pointed out that Shaksgam valley was more or less under Indian control and so was almost 40% of Aksai Chin. Indian offensive had been halted just a few 10s of KMs from the vital Chinese National Highway 219. But Chinese in spite of putting in best of their efforts had been unable to push back Indians from any front except a couple.

After much heated and prolonged talks, Chinese had agreed to hand over control of Shaksgam Valley to India, in exchange of Indian pull back in Aksai Chin which was hotly contested by Indians leading to another deadlock. This was broken off after much haggling and heart burn on both sides.

After many such deadlocks, gists of some important agreements were:

- 1) All of J&K except Aksai Chin under Indian control. All of Pakistan occupied J&K and Shaksgam Valley under sovereign Indian control accompanied by removal of all Chinese personnel from these areas.
- 2) India withdraws forces from Aksai Chin back to their previous positions. Indian team spent longest amount of time on this as the territorial gains made in the sector was substantial. . Indians agreed to only a partial withdraw and refused to abandon their new and advantageous positions. The issue was not solved to satisfaction of either of the parties and postponed for future talks.
- 3) Assurance by both nations over non-interference in each other's internal conflicts. In nutshell, all Indian support to Tibetan rebels inside China ceases. Similarly, China stops supporting Naxals and separatist groups in north-east India.
- 4) In spite of their best efforts, Indians were unable to get anything agreed upon Chinese claims on Arunachal Pradesh. The matter too was left undecided pending further discussions.
- 5) Unconditional release of all the prisoners from both sides. Considering that Chinese formed almost the entire group, they were rather keen on it and willing to get it over with as soon as possible. The issue of two nuclear missiles and submarine was contested by India as winner's right to the war trophy. India later agreed to hand over the weapon systems back to China (after suitable investigations).
- 6) Chinese delegation was put under considerable pressure by Indians over the issue of extradition and trial of Chinese personnel responsible for nuclear attack on India. India never had any kind of extradition treaty with China and they used this loophole to wriggle free. Only consolation available to India were assurances "set in stone" that the guilty people will be tried and punished under international observation

After a while DM opened his eyes and called for Defence Secretary Pillai. He was one of the most senior members from the Indian negotiations team and had drafted a significant part of the recently signed agreement himself. DM had picked up the file again and was leafing through the pages when he entered. Pillai greeted the minister and waited for him to speak. DM put the file down and said, ““Well Pillai jeep. Seems like we haven't done a really bad job after all.”

"Not the best, but could've done worse. Got most of what we wanted in J&K, but couldn't get anything

done on Arunachal and extradition. A mixed bag if you ask me."

DM nodded, "Nobody ever gets everything. They refuse to handover those criminals; we refuse to go back from Aksai Chin."

Pillai looked at the file on table and said, "That's what is troubling me. Don't you think that it'll provoke them in to engaging even more mischief than usual?"

DM stood up and walked to the window of his office. After staring outside for a while, he turned and faced DS, "We've been dealing with their mischief for decades now. One time we stood up to their bullying, they back down like a whipped dog. After what we've gone through, I'm not afraid of anything. If they have any problem with our attitude, too bad mate. But that's how things are going to be from now on. "

A surprised grin formed on Pillai's face as he heard somewhat undiplomatic words coming out of possible Prime Minister of India. "So, we're signing it right now?"

DM nodded, "Yes. No point in delaying it further. I also need you to prepare a press release and a speech for the press conference. I'll need you besides me there. "

"Yes sir." Pillai stood up to take his leave.

Epilogue

3 February 2013
BNT News Release

Emergency workers and rescuers have found no trace of General Kong and retired CPC member An Wang, after the yacht they were sailing in disappeared in South China Sea, just a few KM away from coastal city of Shantou. Till now, only parts of the yacht have been discovered floating just a few km from the area where it was last reported to be thirty six hours before. It had lost contact with mainland and other ships in middle of the night during a low intensity rain storm.

Search for the yacht and its occupants are still going on. According to one rescue worker, it's nearly impossible for a yacht of that size to disappear just like that without any one seeing it at least once. Each passing moment with no trace of survivors makes any chance of their survival extremely bleak.

Although it was never declared publicly, these two were some of the senior most Chinese officials forced to resign from their posts over the role they had allegedly played in incidents that had lead to a nuclear conflict with India.

6th February 2013
Xinhua News Agency

Three PLA personnel lost their lives in a tragic road accident in Dagze. A small town near Lhasa. Dead included General Chan, his aide Major Kong and driver Corporal Fai. According to witnesses, Corporal Fai lost control of the car they were traveling in while negotiating a sharp turn and hit a road barrier. The car turned turtle on hitting the barrier and rolled down the slope to the gorge below killing all its occupants on the spot. Their bodies have been recovered and sent to their families for last rites. General Chang just had just assumed command of PLA's Dagze supply base and was on a familiarisation tour when the mishap occurred.

1223 Hours
8th February 2013
PM's Office
New Delhi, India

NSA chief Angad entered the office of India's newest PM and handed him a file, "Last night, Chinese forces again shelled some of our posts in Aksai Chin. No casualties, but seems like that they are making a routine of it."

"I suppose, some people in China are getting scared." PM Shivendra smiled and started browsing through the file. "What is going on with our Tibetan friends?"

"They're getting restless now. They say that they've been lying low for long enough. I think they are right. They've had ample time to train, regroup and gather supplies."

PM nodded, "I know. Tell them to wait just a little bit more. Also send my personal thanks for their help in our little mission in Dagze. They deserve whatever we can offer them."

Angad nodded his head in agreement and stood up to leave. Apparently, war was not over yet.

THE END
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Google Map link for most of the places mentioned in story: <http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&hl=en&msa=0&msid=204958621990119982209.0004a4b599c6649764845&ll=20.797201,88.857422&spn=48.095591,67.763672&t=h&z=4>

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