

LINE OF CONTROL

ONE

The General who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought.

—Sun Tzu

The five men moved swiftly but quietly in the dark. They could barely see each other, covered in black fatigues. They were familiar with this kind of terrain, though on proceeding, they felt that this side of the border was slightly rockier. This did not bother them, as they had spent all their childhood in far more treacherous terrain.

The leader, Ghulam, motioned to the others to pause as they climbed a small hillock. With practised expert moves, the leader scaled the rocks to reach the summit. He unslung the pair of binoculars from his shoulder and peered into the darkness. He could see no movement, but a small fire caught his attention. This would have to be the troops, most probably using the fire to keep themselves warm. The others followed him up the hill, carefully, not making any noise. Ghulam judged the distance to the camp as about 300 metres. A bit closer and he would be in attacking position.

Ghulam and his men were by now down on their haunches, creeping along the often-used trail leading to the camp. This trail was extensively used for grazing, as evident by the large numbers of dung heaps. At a distance of about a hundred metres, Ghulam stopped. He once again looked through his binoculars and smiled to himself. This was no camp, rather a small patrol of four men. The patrol must have probably stopped to rest, in a small cave on the side of a hill, for the night. Probably the rookies must have lost their way.

As Ghulam scanned the group, he realized that they were not regular Army troops. Their antiquated .303 rifles were a dead giveaway, most likely belonging to any police or paramilitary force.

Ghulam shook his head at things that were to follow. This was hardly a worthy target for someone, who as a 15-year-old, had fought the cream of the Soviet Army and later, fought the Americans in Iraq. But they would have to fight again tonight. He knew there would be many more targets for him before it was all over. Ghulam began to reach for his Kalashnikov rifle at his side, but then stopped himself. No, that would just take the fun out of what was already turning out to be a damp squib.

Inside the cave Lance Naik Ajeet was increasingly getting irritated with his men. All he had asked for was that one of them to guide the group

using the detailed map and still they were lost. While Ajeet had established radio contact with the police station, he had decided against trying to walk back in the biting cold night. He could see Havildar Santosh still fiddling with the map, and now he could not contain his irritation any more.

“What are you doing now, you buffoon?”

The Havildar looked up sheepishly and said something about directional correctness which caused Ajeet to explode into a stream of choice expletives. As he lay to sleep, he asked Havildar Pandey stand guard.

The pot-bellied Pandey managed to stay awake for about 30 minutes, during which he finished off half a pack of cigarettes, but did precious little guarding. Finally, seeing his boss asleep, he decided to take a little nap himself. He lay, muttering to himself,

‘What will I guard in this godforsaken place? I don’t think that fool even knows whether we are on this or that side of the Line of Control!’

Meanwhile, the men crept closer to the policemen who were fast asleep. It was now that Ghulam could make out their individual features glowing in the reflected light of the small fire. One of them stirred, causing Ghulam to stop dead in his tracks. But the man just rolled over to his other side and continued sleeping.

Ghulam was now at the cave's entrance. He took out a long and curved hunting knife from his belt and entered the cave, followed by his men.

He grabbed the nearest man by his hair and slit his throat with the knife, making a sickening grating noise as it cut from ear-to-ear, slicing through bone and tissue. The man's eyes popped out as he grabbed his mangled throat. He tried to cry out, but all that came out of his mouth was a steady stream of blood. In his death throes, he knocked over his rifle standing balanced against the wall. The noise awakened his comrades, who scrambled to deal with their attackers.

But, they never had a chance. The man to Ghulam's right tried to grab at him, only to be met with a vicious blow that almost decapitated him. By the time Ghulam turned around, the other two guards were already dead, lying in an expanding pool of blood. As quietly as they had come, the five men turned around and left, leaving the four Indian policemen dead in the cave, the fire spreading eerie shadows around their bodies.

'Inshallah, all raids would be this easy.'

Ghulam looked back at the cave. The fire now was barely discernable in the distance.

His hand paused over the intricately carved rook for a second and then moved away.

“Karim, checkmate!”

The clean-shaven Air Force officer looked up at his Prime Minister who as usual hadwon.

“Sir, you’ve beaten me again, but I’ll get back sometime.”

Illahi Khan smiled slightly.

“We’ll see my friend Karim. You were always the fearless one to go charging in against impossible odds. I’m the more careful one, I guess, it shows in our chess.”

Illahi Khan enjoyed his Thursday evening chess games with Air Marshall AshfaqueKarim. He found it intellectually challenging and also a diversion from the worries that had been consuming him for the last few weeks. The two men had been close friends right from their military days. While they had serious differences of opinion, especiallyon religious views, and had gradually drifted apart a lot over the years, the Thursdayevening chess games remained a link to their past.

“Sir, someday we’ll play a game where it will boil down to quixotic charges. Well, for now, I have to be going. If I’m again late for dinner, my wife will start suspecting who I actually spend Thursday evenings with.”

Illahi watched Karim get up to take leave, not without a trace of envy. Karim had maintained himself well, his washboard stomach and ramrod straight posture belying his 45 plus age. Illahi, though of the same age, had softened a lot, especially after leaving active military service. The hawk-like sharp eyes were still there as was his trademark-pointed beard, but his body was not as fit as it used to be.

Illahi got up and walked to his bookshelves to take out his well-worn copy of the Holy Qur'an, given to him by his grandfather. He had never been a one for the books, but the Qur'an was not just any book. Since childhood, he had read it almost everyday.

He walked to his CD player and put on some music. The gentle strains of *ghazals* filled the room as Illahi sat down to read the Qur'an. It was a fairly spartan room, with a simple sofa, a study table and two bookshelves. But then, Illahi had never been one for creature comforts. Like the chess games with Karim, he cherished every solitary moment he got. They served to remind him that he still had a life beyond trying to make sense of and manage the chaos, his country. As the thoughts crossed his mind, he silently rebuked himself,
'What do you mean by chaos, Illahi? This is your country. You chose to take on the mantle. You chose to make the deals you did. Now you just have to play the cards you've been dealt.'

Leading Pakistan was not an enviable job at the best of times and the times Illahi lived in now were hardly easy. The coup in Saudi Arabia,

led by an Al-Qaeda fanatic, Abu Sayed, had provided money flow, material support and groundswell of fundamentalist ideology that had led to another military coup in Pakistan, one that had brought Illahi to power.

The phone rings interrupted his thoughts. He leaned across the sofa to pick up the handset.

As Karim left the room, he heard his Prime Minister utter just three words, “Abu Sayed himself?”

More than a thousand kilometres away in New Delhi, Vivek Khosla settled down in his living room, a copy of *The Prophet* in hand. Khalil Gibran had always been one of his favourite authors. No matter how many times he read the book, Khosla could always find wisdom and solace in Gibran’s masterpiece. He had a glass of scotch in his hands as he turned the dog-eared pages. Unlike most Indian politicians who made a public pretence of virtue and engaged in most vices known to man in private, Khosla believed in making the distinction between his private and public faces as small as he could. Years ago, seniors in his party had warned him that such an attitude would never take him far in Indian politics. Well, he had proved them all wrong. At the age of 61, Khosla was relatively young by the standards of Indian politics and had reached the pinnacle of Indian democracy—he was the Prime Minister of India.

Khosla had swept to power in the general elections of 2009 after a tumultuous year, which saw two governments come to power only to fall within months. The past two years had been harrowing experience, juggling fickle-political allies, trying to push forward economic reforms in the face of staunch resistance from some of his own party members and the Opposition in Parliament, which was out to malign the government at the slightest opportunity. Khosla's greatest success had undoubtedly been in the economic field, with considerable achievements on many fronts, and continued the onward progress of the Indian-economic juggernaut. However, in the political arena, things had not been this rosy.

It had been a long journey indeed and sometimes Vivek Khosla found it difficult to accept just how far he had come from his humble beginning. He was born just after Independence in the year 1947 in a family of refugees from Pakistan, who had left considerable ancestral property in Pakistan to escape the communal holocaust consuming the Indian subcontinent. They had arrived in India with almost no money and the daunting prospect of starting all over again. Khosla's father set up the family business of textile trading in Delhi. Though the initial years were tough, the family had regained much of its wealth within a decade. After a brilliant academic career culminating in a Doctorate in Economics, Khosla had joined politics. Though most of his fellow party men were staunchly right-wing, with strong communal overtones, the

stories Khosla had heard from his father had convinced him that he would do whatever he could to prevent such fratricide in future. Now, he was truly in a position to do so.

The room was large and tastefully furnished, but bore the marks of slovenliness that his staff had come to accept as a part of his personality. There were books and tapes strewn across one of the chairs and Khosla knew that the maid would again complain the next morning.

He stretched out on the sofa and began reading.

A slight knock at the door, in the living room, caught his attention and Khosla got up to answer it. Though he normally had several servants at his official residence, Khosla preferred to be alone on Saturday nights as far as possible, so that he could catch up on his reading. Given his hectic schedule, such Saturdays were rare, which made his insistence on being left alone even stronger. As he jumped off the sofa, the niggling pain in his back reminded him that he would have to see the doctor soon. '*Getting old, Vivek!*'

In his youth, Khosla had been quite an athlete and was still fairly fit for his age, but there were things, which he had began to accept as the ravages of advancing age. Tall and trim, VivekKhosla did cut quite a striking feature and many columnists remarked that he was the most handsome Indian Prime Minister to date. The jury still differed on that one though, especially those who insisted that late Rajiv Gandhi would have given Khosla a run for his money in the looks department.

Khosla wearily opened the door to see his personal secretary with a large stack of files in hand.

“Good evening Sir! Sorry to disturb you. Here is the daily Intelligence summary and some other files for your signature.”

Khosla accepted the well-worn files. They were Indian Government regulation files, which had changed little in the last five decades. At least these days, they condescend to give computer printouts. Till mid-1990s, these files or reports would come typed by manual typewriters sealed in brown envelopes, the old fashioned way, with a Government of India wax seal. Khosla ripped open the familiar reddish-brown seal.

‘Well, some things in the Indian bureaucracy will take more than technology to change.’

He put the other files aside and picked up the two-page daily Intelligence summary prepared by the Intelligence Bureau (IB), which among other things reported what the Opposition was up to. When he first came to power, Khosla had taken an idealistic view of the situation and protested that the IB was not meant to spy on Opposition politicians. But, over time, he had come to accept that one had to do some things one did not necessarily like.

Khosla scanned the report as he sat down. As he read, he kept scribbling notes and reminders on the margins. Things looked under control. The usual couple of killings in Kashmir were, of course,

there but that had become a regular feature in India's troubled northern state. At least large-scale terrorism was on its way out.

One particular paragraph in the report caught his attention. Four policemen killed by unidentified attackers. The four members of the Jammu and Kashmir State Police were killed with knives while on a regular patrol.

This did strike him as very surprising. Why would anyone kill cops with knives in an age of rockets and automatic weapons? There had been similar killings in recent weeks and many believed that these were the handiworks of hardened Afghan mercenaries crossing the porous border shared with Pakistan and striking with the intent of spreading terror in the local populace and security forces.

'Need to check with Joshi what's up with the mercenaries.'

After the Taliban was swept from power in Afghanistan by the United States following the World Trade Centre attacks, the Taliban fighters had melted away. However, with the rise of a new regime under an Al-Qaeda affiliate, Abu Sayed, in Saudi Arabia and his active role in spreading fundamentalist terror throughout the region, the need for paid killers had risen again. Importantly, Abu Sayed could hire more of these Islamicguns, as his petro-dollars meant he could offer hard currency and not just virgins in the afterlife. Many of these *Mujahideen*, as they were known publicly now, had fanned out across the Middle East and several had appeared in that old-festerling wound in India's nationhood, Kashmir.

Abu Sayed had adopted Emir as his *nom de guerre*, a pseudonym that suited his self-image as the leader of Islam worldwide. The Emir had promised a climactic *Jihad* against the West and India had begun feeling the first blows of that struggle—*Jihad*.

Khosla put the papers aside and settled back to read. He turned to another page of *The Prophet*.

'And if you would know God, be not therefore a solver of riddles. Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children.'

Khosla wondered why people could not accept such a simple truth, expounded by the holy books of all the major religions. This acceptance would have saved thousands of lives over his country's history.

There was an almost palpable sense of gloom hanging over the long conference room as Illahi waited for everyone to settle down. In front of him were the people who, along with him, could decide the fate of Pakistan and he hoped that they would help him fulfill the difficult task that lay before him now.

It was a powerful gathering comprising Chiefs of Staff, Intelligence Chief and Defence and Foreign Ministers. There was,

however, one notable omission without whom a meeting especially this meeting could not begin.

Illahi waited for about five minutes and was about to ask for a break when the door swung open and the awaited member arrived.

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