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US Role in the 1971 Indo-Pak War: Implications for Bangladesh-US Relations

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Introduction

The year 1971 witnessed a major redrawing of the map of South Asia. It saw the emergence of a new nation, which a few decades down the line became the world's sixth largest country in terms of population, the third largest Muslim State, a democracy, albeit a volatile one: Bangladesh. It was a bipolar world in those Cold War days, with two preponderantly dominant superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. After years of perceived exploitation by Pakistan of its eastern wing, East Pakistan, a rebellion, or a 'struggle for liberation' as the latter liked to call it, had flared up, with initially tacit and later overt support from the regional pre-eminent power, India. It obtained the backing of the Soviet Union. Pakistan, led by its military ruler, President Yahya Khan, a General, endeavoured to suppress the uprising which eventually led it into a war with India. The 'Bangladesh Movement' was being led by the Awami League (which had massively won the 1970 elections but was being denied transfer of power by a combination of Yahya and the Pakistani leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto), whose head Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was incarcerated in Pakistani prison. Despite many predictions, its superpower ally the United States did not come down in its support unlike India's superpower ally the Soviet Union.

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The American decision of non-intervention appeared to run against the grain of the sentiments of the Nixon Administration. That was because – as this essay will demonstrate – of the deep dichotomy within the US community, with a huge segment of public opinion favouring the East Pakistani struggle. There were two major results - one immediate and the other long term. Immediately a Superpower conflict, that could have turned nuclear, was averted. In the long run over the years it facilitated a close relationship and partnership with Bangladesh that has lasted into the twenty first century.

Backdrop to the Crisis

The South Asian Crisis of 1971 was ill-timed for the US. There appeared to be a brightening of prospects for the success of the US foreign policy both globally and in the Asian region. Globally the US Administration saw the beginnings of a new relationship between the US and the People's Republic of China;² concrete progress on important issues in US-Soviet relations;³ the Nixon Doctrine took effect reducing US military involvement in Vietnam;⁴ all these leading to a maturing of the relationship with East Asia.

With regard to Pakistan, Yahya's continuation as the head of government (he had assumed power in 1969 after the resignation of President M Ayub Khan and the declaration of yet another Martial Law, Pakistan's second in 1969. First, he had an 'extraordinary relationship' with the American Ambassador, Joseph Farland;⁵ and second, he was being of invaluable help as a conduit linking the US to China.⁶ Interestingly, had there been a peaceful transfer of power to the Awami League following the 1970 elections, the US would also have had no cause for worries. First, an Awami League government in Pakistan would have augured well for Indo-Pakistan relations thereby generally easing the security complexities in South Asia for the US, and second an Awami League government was likely to tack close to the US, given that its main leader, now late, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, onetime Prime Minister of Pakistan, and Mujib's mentor, was staunchly pro-US. Indeed, the Americans would need to be more wary of Bhutto, never a friend.⁷ In other words, on the eve of the 1971 crisis, US interests dictated a united Pakistan preferably with Yahya at its head, or failing that, with Mujib at the helm. What the Americans

² See, Henry Kissinger: Does America Need A Foreign Policy? Towards a Diplomacy for the 21st Century, (New York: Simon& Schuster, 2001) pp. 134-149.

³ The Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), later signed in 1972, was being negotiated.

⁴ The 'Nixon Doctrine' was announced by President Richard Nixon in Guam on 25 July 1969, which stated that while the US would assist in the 'defence and development' of its allies, it would NOT attempt to undertake the defence of 'all the free nations of the world', implying 'Vietnamisation' of the Vietnam War. See Peter Beinart, 'Return of the Nixon Doctrine', Time, 1 April 2007.

⁵ Jack Anderson with George Clifford, The Anderson Papers (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), p. 274.

⁶ See Henry Kissinger, The White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), p. 714.

⁷ Bhutto's anti-American sentiments find ample expression in his book, The Myth of Independence (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

needed least was another global flashpoint that was likely to attract adversary attention which would, thereby, adversely impact on, in Nixon's words, 'the emerging structure of peace' in the 1970s.⁸

Role of the US Administration

The US Administration perceived the emerging crisis in South Asia at three levels; first, the humanitarian problems of the Bengali refugees in India and of the millions who remained behind in Pakistan; second the problem of political settlement between East and West Pakistan; and, third, the danger of war between Pakistan and India.⁹

Nixon's response to the first level, according to him, was the commitment of US\$ 91 million through the United Nations for the refugees in India, and US\$ 158 million for those suffering in Pakistan. At the second level he claimed that he had been able to obtain assurance from Yahya that Mujib would not be executed, that civilian government in East Pakistan would be restored, and rapprochement sought with the Awami League (to that end the American Administration said they were able to establish contact with some prominent exiled Awami Leaguers in Calcutta).¹⁰ With regard to the third level, Nixon stated that he sought to avert war by keeping India apprised of all US initiatives, talking to the Soviet Union, and culminating in the US Secretary of State William Rogers informing the Indian Ambassador on 11 August 1971 that the US would not continue economic assistance to a country that started the war¹¹ – a clear warning to India.

Unfortunately for the Administration, the responses at all three levels appeared to backfire. First, the assistance to India for refugees did not generate the kind of gratitude the US had hoped for, since it seemed an answer to the call of the UN Secretary General and was therefore viewed as discharging an international obligation.¹² Indeed, the relief to East Pakistan, channelled through the Pakistani government evoked Bangladeshi criticism of possible, indeed probable, diversion to the Pakistan military.¹³ Second, the attempt to establish linkage with the Awami Leaguers, mainly the Foreign Minister of the Provisional Bangladesh Government set up on 10 April 1971, Khandker Mushtaque Ahmed, only led to his isolation from the Provisional Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam and Provisional Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, and the distancing of the latter two from the Americans.¹⁴ Third, the threats made to the Indian Ambassador only further

⁸ Richard M. Nixon, *US Foreign Policy in the 1970s: The Emerging Structure of Peace*, A Report to the Congress, 9 February, 1972.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.145.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 145-146.

¹² UN Secretary General had made such an appeal on 19 May 1971. *Asian Recorder*, 18-24 June 1971, p. 10219.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6-12 August 1971, pp. 10298-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10299.

upset Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, already deeply annoyed at Washington and seeking linkages with Moscow.

As events rapidly unfolded in South Asia, considerable evidence of Washington's leanings towards Pakistan began to come to the fore.

First, though on 20 April 1971 the State Department had assured Senator Edward Kennedy, a Bangladeshi sympathiser, that there were no arms supplies in the pipeline for Pakistan¹⁵, a Pakistani ship Padma sailed from New York on 21 June 1971 with arms for Pakistan.¹⁶ The Indian Foreign Minister Sardar Swaran Singh told an angry Parliament in New Delhi that India had urged the US Administration to stop the ship from proceeding to its destination.¹⁷ Not only was the shipment not prevented, there is no record of any pressure to dissuade the Pakistanis from using the American arms from their operations in East Pakistan.

Second, the Administration was anxious to continue economic assistance to Pakistan thus appearing to prop up the Yahya regime. In June 1971 the Aid to Pakistan Consortium under the aegis of the World Bank met to consider a Bank report that suggested that contrary to Pakistan's stated views, the situation in the East was far from normal, and under these conditions assistance could not be fruitfully utilised.¹⁸ Ten of the eleven members of the Consortium concurred with the Report, but the US did not.¹⁹ Later on 3 August 1971 when the US House of Representatives passed the Foreign Aid Bill after including the Gallagher amendment for stoppage of assistance to Pakistan, Nixon protested that engaging in 'public pressures' on Pakistan would be 'counter-productive', and the crisis demanded discussions 'in private channels' (rather than influencing legislation).²⁰

Third, the Administration, even when the matter became public knowledge, did not disapprove of Pakistani use of American aircraft to shift troops from West to East Pakistan. The aircraft in question were two Boeing 707s, under lease from World Airways which reportedly did considerable business with the US Armed Forces. It was revealed that the lease was arranged with the knowledge and explicit authorisation of the State department, the Department of Commerce, and the Civil Aeronautics Board. The State Department described the deal as a 'commercial matter' but sources in the Department of Commerce revealed that the licenses, renewed on 18 June 1971 (over two and half months after the Pakistani military crackdown on the East), were subject to revocation and the leases would be invalid without the licenses.²¹

¹⁵ Bangladesh Documents, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 556.

¹⁶ New York Times, 22 June, 1971.

¹⁷ Asian Recorder, 23-29 July 1971, p. 10269.

¹⁸ New York Times, 13 July 1971.

¹⁹ Ibid, 14 July 1971.

²⁰ Baltimore Sun, 5 August 1971.

²¹ Lewis M. Simons, 'Pakistan using US Jetliners to help Move Men to Bengal', Washington Post, 19 August 1971.

Fourth, US concord with the Pakistani official line was evident in Secretary Rogers' speech at the UN General Assembly on 4 October 1971. He insisted that "the events in East Pakistan are internal events with which the people of Pakistan must deal".²² That was exactly Pakistan's formal position.

When Mrs Gandhi visited the US in November, the ensuing talks did not bring India and the US any closer to each other. Nixon derogated the Indo-Soviet Treaty signed in August that year, albeit indirectly, when he stated that India and the US were bound together by a 'higher morality that did not need legal documents'.²³

The series of evidence cited above demonstrates that if the Administration believed in the inevitability of Bangladesh's independence, as National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger claimed it did, in his *The White House Years*²⁴, the Nixon Administration seems to have made little attempts to befriend, or at least alleviate the suspicions of, the leadership that was likely to be in power in the eventually sovereign Bangladesh.

When the actual hostilities between India and Pakistan broke out in the first week of December 1971, the Administration laid the blame for war squarely on Indian shoulders with immediate cancellation of arms supplies and economic aid to India.²⁵ On 8 December 1971, while chairing a secret session of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG), Kissinger said: "There can be no doubt what the President (Nixon) wants. The President does NOT want to be even-handed. The President believes India is the attacker. We are trying to get across the idea that India has jeopardised relations with the US. We cannot afford to ease India's mind. The lady (Mrs Gandhi) is cold blooded and tough and will not turn into a Soviet satellite merely because of pique."²⁶ (Kissinger also wanted to assuage the fears of those who felt that the US actions could drive India into Soviet arms, which they eventually did).

Washington's 'tilt' (Kissinger's expression) towards Pakistan was confirmed in a series of actions by it at the UN. On 4 December 1971 the UN Security Council met on US request and voted 11-2 asking for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of foreign (Indian) forces (from Pakistani soil), which the Soviet Union vetoed.²⁷ Its adoption would clearly have prevented the creation of Bangladesh (that happened on 16 December 1971 with the surrender of the Pakistani troops in Dhaka to the Indians). When the UN General Assembly proceeded on 7 December 1971 to adopt a 14-nation draft resolution calling for cease-fire and withdrawal of forces, which

²² Cited in, Richard P. Stebbins and Elaine P. Adam (eds.), *American Foreign Policy 1971: A Documentary Record* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 226.

²³ *Asian Almanac*, Vol.10, No. 3 (1972), p. 4988.

²⁴ Quoted in *Time*, 15 October 1979, p. 54.

²⁵ *New York Times*, 7 December 1971.

²⁶ The proceedings were leaked to the media and published in the *New York Times* on 6 January 1972. Later this was cited in Jack Anderson with George Clifford, *op.cit.*, p. 281.

²⁷ Nixon, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

was carried by 104 votes to 11, the US along with China, voted for it. On 12 December 1971, at the UN Security Council, Ambassador George Bush of the US criticised the 'action of India to intervene militarily and place in jeopardy the territorial integrity and political independence of its neighbour, Pakistan.'²⁸

As a final act of support for Pakistan, the Administration ordered a Task force of the Seventh Fleet including the nuclear powered aircraft carrier Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal on 10 December 1971.²⁹ The Task Force entered the Bay on 15 December 1971, too late to make any difference to the outcome of the war.

Reasons for the 'Tilt'

The reasons for the Administration's 'tilt' towards Pakistan can be analysed at two levels, regional and global.

At a regional level, first, there was the possibility (in American perceptions), at least at the initial stages, that Yahya might succeed in quelling the Bangladesh movement. In which case, for the Americans, it might have appeared that it would be wise to avoid any action (such as display of sympathy for the Awami League and the Bangladesh freedom-fighters) that might offend Yahya. Secondly, if Bangladesh came to fruition it was possible that the territory would withdraw from the American alliance (which as a part of Pakistan it technically was) and pass under Soviet influence. Thirdly, there were Nixon's strong personal predilections shaped by mutually hostile relations with Indira Gandhi, and equally positive relations with a succession of Pakistani leaders.³⁰

There were some globally relevant reasons as well, that some of his aides, particularly Kissinger, found compelling. First, the South Asian crisis had relevance to the politics of superpower relations, between the Soviet Union and the US. Kissinger saw a sinister Soviet design in breaking up the American alliance system as well as demonstrating Chinese impotence, by supporting India's efforts to exploit Pakistan's travails.³¹ Secondly, Pakistan was an American ally, a member of the Western Alliance, whose existence was now threatened by a powerful neighbour with support from a Communist superpower. Washington ought not to, according to

²⁸ Stebbins and Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 241. It was reported that Nixon personally instructed George Bush to be firm with India. See, T. V. Kunshi Krishnan, *The Unfriendly Friends: India and America* (New Delhi: Indian Book Co., 1974) p. 29.

²⁹ Stebbins and Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

³⁰ That there was little love lost between Nixon and Mrs Gandhi was well known. On the other hand, Nixon, who was instrumental in the conclusion of the 1954 US-Pakistan Mutual Security Pact, was assiduously cultivated by Pakistan, which he visited on several occasions as a private citizen in the 1960s, even when his political fortunes in the US were at low ebb.

³¹ White House Years, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

Kissinger, ignore its commitments. As he said: “The image of a great nation, conducting itself like a shyster looking for legalistic loopholes, was not likely to inspire other allies, who had signed treaties with us or relied on our expressions in the belief that the words meant approximately what they said.”³²

Thirdly, Pakistan was a close friend of China. The Americans generally felt that China was gingerly feeling its way, encouraged by Pakistan, towards a new relationship with the US, based on the hope that the US would maintain the global equilibrium.

Voices of Dissent

Significantly, a large segment of the American body politic did not share the views of the Administration. Dissent was voiced in the media, in the legislature and in the campuses. These built up pressure on the Administration gradually. On 1 April 1971, Senators Edward Kennedy and Fred Harris criticised the role of the Administration in the crisis, and were joined by Senator William Saxbe a week later.³³ On 6 May 1971, 10 Senators cabled Secretary Rogers, urging refusal of further assistance to Pakistan unless measures were taken by the latter to alleviate “the sufferings of ‘millions starving in East Pakistan...’³⁴ On several occasions Senators Frank Church and J W Fulbright lent their powerful voices to the pro- Bangladesh lobby.³⁵

Apart from individual legislators, bodies in the Congress at times indicated a favourable attitude towards the Bangladesh Movement. In the House of Representatives, the Asia-Pacific Subcommittee commenced a hearing on the South Asian situation on 11 May 1971 when Congressman Cornelius E Gallagher described it as “potentially equal in terms of human misery to a combination of Vietnam and Biafra”.³⁶ In the Senate, the Subcommittee on Refugees, chaired by Kennedy, held three hearings on the matter between the months of June and October 1971. Both the Senate and the House passed amendments to the Foreign Assistance Act urging the cutting off of further aid to Pakistan on 3 August and 11 November 1971 respectively.³⁷

Prominent members of the US intelligentsia joined the large number of legislators. They counselled moderation on Pakistan, and also brought to bear pressure on the Administration to

³² Ibid, p. 895.

³³ Asian Recorder, 14-20 May 1971, p. 10162.

³⁴ The Senators were Walter F Mondale, Clifford P Chase, Fred R Harris, Thomas E Eagleton, George McGovern, William Proxmire, H E Hughes, Hubert H Humphrey, Birch Bayh, and Edmund S. Muskie: Congressional Records, cited in Bangladesh Documents, op. cit., p. 536.

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 581-582.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 542.

³⁷ A.M.A. Muhith, Bangladesh: Emergence of A Nation (Dhaka: Bangladesh Books International Ltd., 1978), p.329. Muhith has been the Finance Minister of Bangladesh since 2009. In 1971 he was a diplomat in Washington who had defected from the Pakistani Embassy in support of Bangladesh.

do so. On 12 April 1971 a large number of American intellectuals who described themselves as 'Friends of Pakistan' made a press statement, urging upon Pakistan that no government had the "right to impose its will by force of arms on a populace that (had) spoken so unanimously as the people of East Pakistan and whose aspirations (were) so reasonable".³⁸

Important sections of the Press took a similar stance, and they are too numerous to mention here. As early as on 31 March 1971, there were editorials in prominent newspapers asking the Administration to withhold military aid to the Pakistan government.³⁹

Within the American bureaucracy there were some opposing voices, particularly from among the officials in the State Department involved with South Asia. The US Ambassador to India was urging a position of genuine neutrality.⁴⁰ Unlike the Administration, who initially saw the crisis as an internal affair of Pakistan, Keating stated that it could be described as such "only to the limited extent that it was happening in Pakistan".⁴¹ Dissent in much stronger terms was expressed by officials posted in the US Consulate General in Dhaka. Its head, Archer Blood sent a cable to the State Department on 6 April which read: "With the conviction that US policy related to recent developments in East Pakistan serves neither our moral interests broadly defined, nor our national interests, narrowly defined, numerous (American officers) consider it their duty to register strong dissent with fundamental aspects of this policy".⁴² Allowing for a modicum of localitis⁴³, this was a trenchant criticism of his superiors in the Administration!

Conclusion

The views of a large number of prominent American legislators, academics, sections of the media, as well as many officials at various levels had a two-fold effect: First, in public perceptions they moderated the extent of the Administration's 'tilt' in favour of Pakistan. The dissent was a deterrent to Washington's greater involvement in the crisis on Pakistan's side. Second, the views of the liberal Americans, who stood up to their highest policy-makers, helped to moderate the negative sentiments of the Bangladeshi leadership, and public, who separated informed public opinion from the official stance adopted by Washington. This was underlined by

³⁸ The signatories were: Frank C Child, Edwin H Clarke II, Paul G Clark, James Coleman, Edward C Dimock Jr, Robert Dorfman, Walter P Falcon, John C H Fee, Richard M Guble, Robert Gomer, Gary Hufbauer, John Isaacs, Kirmitsu Kaneda, Maurice D Kilbridge, Stephen R Lewis Jr, Edward Mason, John W Mellor, Gustav C Papanak, Hanna Papanak, Stefan H Robock, Peter Rogers, James A F Stoner, John W Thomas, Wayne Thorne, Barbara Ward, Stanislaw Wellisz, Jerome B Weisner, and Wayne Wilcox. Washington Post, 12 April, 1971.

³⁹ For instance, the editorial in New York Times, 31 March 1971.

⁴⁰ See W Norman Brown, *The United States and India, Pakistan, Bangladesh*, Third Edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 414.

⁴¹ *Asian Recorder*, 14-20 May 1971, p. 10162.

⁴² Quoted in Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution* (London: Zed Press, 1979) p.157

⁴³ The tendency noticeable among diplomats at times to become more involved with host societies, often adversely impacting on their connections with their own headquarters.

the Acting President of the Provisional Government of Bangladesh, Syed Nazrul Islam, when he said: “We have been disappointed in the United States’ but ‘do not hold this against the American people’”.⁴⁴

It is the complexity of the manner in which US policies evolve, the competition among competing constituencies within the system often called ‘bureaucratic politics’ in foreign policy literature, that often help to rationalise the policy-outcome.⁴⁵ This is also what happened in this case. That is why it was eventually possible for both Bangladesh and the American sides to develop a healthy partnership and relationship over the following decades. Kissinger once cited a Spanish poet as saying: ‘Traveller, there is no path; paths are made by walking’.⁴⁶ Relations between United States and Bangladesh also grew through interactions as they went along, fed by mutual needs and interests, with history serving nothing more than a matrix or a backdrop and not as any impediment.

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⁴⁴ New York Times, 29 December, 1971.

⁴⁵ For similar analyses, see, Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971), M Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1974), and William Wallace, *Foreign Policy and the Political Process* (London: Macmillan, 1971)

⁴⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), p. 8.