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469A Bukit Timah Road

#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770

Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239

Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447

Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg

Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



India's Role in 1971 Bangladesh War: Determinants of Future Ties

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Introduction

The past is always an important 'input' as a determinant of the present in international relations. This is no different in the case of the shaping of ties between two major South Asian countries, Bangladesh and India. An examination of India's role in the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign entity in the global scene provides a significant key to the understanding of their mutual behaviour-pattern in contemporary times. This paper will seek to demonstrate that while a large majority of Bangladeshis, with ample reason, were overtly grateful to India for the support rendered during the war of 1971, without which it is broadly agreed the independence of Bangladesh could not have been achieved, at least within that limited time-frame of nine months, yet ironically developments linked to such a role also contained elements that would render the future relationship between the two countries full of complexities.

As East Pakistan's disenchantment with the Central Martial Law government in Pakistan, now headed by President Yahya Khan, the general who succeeded Field Marshal Ayub Khan in 1969,

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh, and he can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

grew, so did separatist tendencies.² Ironically, there was considerable unease when it was felt that East Pakistan was left undefended against India during the 1965 War! There were ‘confrontations ...over issues such as language, autonomy, food security and economic policy’.³ For some time, there had been a burgeoning demand for greater autonomy, bred of a sense of exploitation by the western wing of the east and perceptible ‘disparities’ in many sectors of development, which found fruition in the ‘Six Points’ of the Awami League headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Mujib won the elections in 1970 overwhelmingly, but his natural claim to prime ministerial post in Pakistan was thwarted by a combination of Yahya and the West Pakistani Chairman of the Pakistan People’s Party, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Violent political agitation in East Pakistan followed, which assumed the form of a severe non-cooperation movement. Mujib’s dictates were virtually law. Negotiations held in March 1971 among the protagonists failed, and this was followed by a military crackdown on 25 March. Mujib was incarcerated and taken to West Pakistan, and the senior Awami League leadership fled to India, whose sympathy for them was very clear.

Initial Indian Reaction

The policy of India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi towards the growing political agitation in East Pakistan and the now-explicit demands of autonomy (swadhikar) was of utmost circumspection. There were three main reasons for this. First, an open support to any secessionist tendencies would be unpopular with other members of the international states system and would be most certainly construed as a gross interference in the ‘internal affairs’ of another country, a contravention of a key principle of the ‘non-aligned movement’ to which India claimed deep commitment; second, there was still the possibility that the leaderships of East and West Pakistan could arrive at a rapprochement during the Yahya-Mujib-Bhutto tripartite talks that would make any Indian interference look awkward; and third, any encouragement to the incipient secessionist movement by New Delhi could have adverse ramifications for such similar sentiments in some of India’s own states.

This caution was evident when India, though aware of the large movement of Pakistani troops into East Pakistan, made no attempt to forestall it either by initiating some sort of tension along the West Pakistani borders that would render the shifting of troops from West Pakistan strategically difficult, or by giving Pakistani troop movements wide publicity to draw international opprobrium to this development. Of necessity, therefore, Indian positions that evolved in 1971 were extremely complex. Broadly two phases can be marked off. One was at the outset when a political settlement was considered desirable, and action on the part of India to

² For the gradual evolution of East Pakistani or East Bengali sense of nationalism historically see Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, ‘The Roots of Bangladeshi National Identity: Their Impact on State Behaviour’, ISAS Working Paper No. 63, 10 June 2009.

³ Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 109.

force a settlement an alternative option. This phase lasted from March to August 1971. The second phase was roughly from August onwards to the War in December, when the alternative option gained increasing salience, transforming action, including a military one, into the principal strategy.

The political settlement, considered during the first phase could consist of a wide variety of options or status for the eastern wing of Pakistan between ‘autonomy’ and ‘independence’. Of course that had to have a wide measure of political acceptance. Indian Foreign Minister Swaran Singh told the lower house of the Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha) on 28 March 71 (three days after the military crackdown in Dhaka and elsewhere in East Pakistan): “We naturally wish and hope that even at this late stage it would be possible to resume democratic processes leading to the fulfilment of the wishes of the vast majority of the people there”.⁴ However, it is worthwhile noting that even while hoping for a settlement at this stage, the prospect of a military intervention as an alternative was not ruled out. Hundreds of thousands of refugees were streaming into India from East Pakistan. Gandhi issued formal instructions to the Army Chief, General SHFJ Manekshaw to prepare for the eventuality of a war. Manekshaw was told that if the government’s efforts to find a peaceful solution did not succeed, the armed forces would be ordered to achieve ‘specific objectives of opening the door to the return of the refugees’, and because of the international public pressure that India was likely to invite upon itself if it intervened, the Army would be given ‘three to four weeks’ to achieve those ends.⁵

With the passage of time, the option of a military intervention began to come to the fore. The desire, and the possibility, to seek some sort of political settlement began to recede. This assumed a sharper relief around August when it was clear that Yahya’s version of a political settlement involved Bengali ‘collaborators’ and obscurantists (thereby excluding the Awami League), something that was far from satisfactory to India. Indeed such a cabinet was installed in Dhaka. This development was unlikely also to ensure the return of the refugees. It would be a mistake to assume that Gandhi herself was transformed over time from a ‘dove’ to a ‘hawk’. At no stage was she one or the other. Various options were being simultaneously considered by her, their pros and cons being continuously weighed. At the initial stages she moved a resolution in the Parliament that was unanimously adopted. It stated that: “The House records its profound conviction that the historic upsurge of the 76 million people of East Bengal will triumph. The House wishes to assure them that their struggle and sacrifice will receive the wholehearted support of the people of India”. It was still East Bengal rather than Bangladesh, and people rather than government (of India), subtle but politically significant.

Pressure for formal recognition of Bangladesh came from the provisional government of Bangladesh set up on 10 April 1971 with Syed Nazrul Islam as Acting President and Tajuddin

⁴ Asian Recorder (14-20 May 1971) , p. 10158

⁵ Krishan Bhatia, Indira: A Biography of the Prime Minister Gandhi (London: Angus and Robertson, 1974), p. 243.

Ahmed as Prime Minister. In a letter dated 24 April 1971, Islam requested President V V Giri of India that ‘immediate recognition’ to Bangladesh be given and ‘envoys exchanged’.⁶ Such calls were also forthcoming from West Bengali leaders like Pranab Mukherjee Member of Parliament and Secretary of the Bangla Congress, and Tridib Chaudhuri, MP and General Secretary of the Revolutionary Socialist Party of India.⁷ A strike was observed in West Bengal on 31 March 1971 to express popular solidarity with the Bangladesh movement.⁸ Gandhi, however, appeared at this stage to take the position that Indian recognition might hurt the Bangladeshi cause by seeming to substantiate the Pakistani allegations that the struggle was engineered by India and was being sustained with Indian assistance.⁹

Eventual Option

The eventual military option by India was influenced by a number of factors. First, the economic pressure on New Delhi was reaching massive proportions. The exodus into India threatened to stunt its economic development. The number of refugees was expected to swell to nine million by December. The expenditure on this count in Fiscal Year 1971-72 was stipulated at US\$ 700 million. Foreign donors pledged only US\$ 200, leaving India with the responsibility of locating the massive balance resources. The total Aid to India Club commitment for that year was likely to be US\$ 1 billion, of which US\$ 600 million was expected to be used for amortisation and debt-repayment. The remainder US\$ 400 million was insufficient to cover the refugee bill, let alone other development expenses. A large call on internal resources was therefore appearing to be increasingly unavoidable.¹⁰

Second, as the civil war raged unabated, it was apprehended that the hold of the moderate Awami League would slacken and Maoists and left-wingers would gain ground, forging an alignment between extremist-Bangladeshis and pro-Peking West Bengali elements.¹¹ Such developments were likely to have adverse consequences from New Delhi’s point of view, and, therefore, needed to be nipped in the bud. This called for an intervention, if there was to be one, before the grip on the movement of the Awami League weakened.

⁶ Indira Gandhi, *India and Bangladesh Selected Speeches, Statements, March to December 1971* (New Delhi: Orient Longman’s, 1972) p. 180.

⁷ *Times of India*, 28 March 1971. Indeed when Pranab Mukherjee, as President of India, paid his first-ever state visit abroad to Bangladesh in March 2013, his contribution to Bangladesh’s independence struggle was formally acknowledged.

⁸ *Guardian* (Rangoon), 2 April 1971.

⁹ Sydney H. Scanberg, ‘Indian Position is Wait and See on Recognition of Bangladesh’, *New York Times*, 8 May 1971.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, 16 September 1971.

¹¹ *Times* London, 26 April 1971. Also, 5 May 1971.

Third, by the autumn of 1971 it was becoming clear that the United States and China, particularly the former, were urging Yahya to seek a political solution. The Nixon Administration had managed to establish links in India with certain Awami League leaders.¹² Yahya was also holding out the olive branch to some Bengalis. It could not be entirely ruled out that some sort of Bangladesh could emerge, under Sino-American auspices, which would serve their interests and would be contrary to India's. Such a solution would be unacceptable to the Hindus among the refugees who would remain a burden on India. An intervention was, therefore, felt necessary to arrest this development.¹³

Fourth, the influx of refugees into India portended a threat to certain balances in the Indian polity. Most of the refugees were Hindus, so as they poured into the Indian State of West Bengal, they upset the demographic balance of some Muslim-majority West Bengali border districts, increasing the communal tension of those areas. Also since the refugees were Bengali speaking, those who went to the Indian northeast states of Assam and Meghalaya threatened to heighten the dormant Bengali-Assamese conflict in that region. In fact Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, observed a 12-hour general strike on 9 June, in response to a call by the Tribal Youth Welfare Association to protest the presence of Bengali refugees in that State.¹⁴ It was clear, thus, the refugees had to return, and they could only go back to an independent Bangladesh achieved under Indian aegis.

Fifth, there was growing pressure to act emanating from the general Indian community which a popular-based government could hardly afford to ignore. Almost without exception, all other political parties wanted Gandhi to extend moral and material support to the liberation struggle, and even accord Bangladesh recognition.¹⁵ The Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of India regretted New Delhi's failure to 'discharge the responsibility in due measure to support the freedom struggle in Bangladesh'.¹⁶ Demand for recognition came from such varied quarters as Indrajit Gupta, the pro-Soviet Communist leader,¹⁷ AB Vajpayee of the Hindu nationalist Jana Sangh Party,¹⁸ P C Chunder, President of the West Bengal Parliamentary

¹² Richard M. Nixon, *US Foreign Policy for the 1970s: The Emerging Structure of Peace*, A Report to the Congress, 9 February 1972, p. 145.

¹³ This point is elaborated in G S Bhargava's *Indian Security in the 1960s* (Adelphi Papers, No. 125), p. 11. He also argues that if East Bengali commandos remained in India in the long run they could pose a security threat to it. To him, the emergence of Bangladesh was not in itself a security gain for India except in the marginal sense that these commandos would be gone, and that sanctuaries for Mizos and other insurgents or rebels in the northeast of India would no longer be available.

¹⁴ *Times of India*, 10 June, 1971.

¹⁵ One opposing voice was that of M R Masani, the Swatantra Party leader, who commended Gandhi's 'policy of caution', and said that India should not be the first country to recognise Bangladesh, for 'besides the authority of the West Pakistani Government, what authority is there in Bangladesh to recognise?' *Times of India*, 19 May 1971.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7 July 1971.

¹⁷ Peter Hazelhurst, 'Mrs. Gandhi refuses Bangladesh Recognition', *Times* (London) 8 May 1971.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Congress Committee¹⁹, and Dinesh Singh, former External Affairs Minister.²⁰ In fact within Gandhi's own cabinet a 'hawkish' strain emerged. A study of public statements at that time shows that while Foreign Minister Swaran Singh toed the cautious line, Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram pressed for early action.²¹

Sixth, there was the understandable psychological satisfaction to be derived from the ability to hit the implacable enemy Pakistan where it hurt gravely, especially when from the debris of the enemy's anticipated defeat in any direct conflict, was likely to emerge a friendly neighbour. India would no longer be flanked by enemies.²² In New Delhi's calculations if the Movement came to fruition it would help negate the religion-based ideology of Pakistan, and bolster the secular Indian ethos.²³

Seventh, a research report from the prestigious Indian Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, prepared by its Director K Subrahmanyam, urged that India would be well-advised to go to war. The report entitled 'Bangladesh and India's National security - the Options for India', suggested that India carve out a segment of East Bengal, vest it with the attributes of 'de facto' and 'de jure' independence, relocate the refugees there, and attempt to win for it international recognition. The newly established state of Bangladesh could be thus made a recognised party to the dispute without whose approval no ceasefire could be agreed upon and which would not approve such ceasefire till all the objectives were attained. The report argued that the chance of a Chinese intervention was minimal. Even if China doubled her force strength of 100,000 that she retained in Tibet, the mountain passes would pose acute deployment problems, especially now against the well-armed Indian presence in the region. Even if a Chinese intervention were to take place against these odds, they could hardly stay for long as winter was approaching when snow in passes would render withdrawal impossible. Considering the limited Chinese stakes in the

¹⁹ Times of India, 16 May 1971.

²⁰ Ibid., 26 May 1971.

²¹ The Swaran Singh line was clearly expressed in his Upper House (Rajya Sabha) statement: 'If at any stage we feel that recognition is necessary, we will not hesitate to give it ... There are certain norms which have to be carefully weighed such as the extent of territory controlled by the quantum of support, the extent of writ, and the repercussion of recognising a country which was till now a part of Pakistan'; Times of India, 26 May 1971..As late as October, Singh argued at the All-India Congress Committee that the political solution of the Bangladesh issue which India had been advocating could take the form of a settlement within the framework of Pakistan, or an independent Bangladesh, or greater autonomy for the region. Times of India, 9 October 1971. This was long after the exiled Awami League leaders publicly rejected as unacceptable anything less than independence. Jagjivan Ram, on the other hand, held that it was true India was in favour of a political solution, but what this solution should be had already been spelt out by the elected representatives of Bangladesh, who had opted unequivocally for independence and sovereignty. Times of India, 10 October 1971. Gandhi, who had earlier been sympathetic to the Swaran Singh line and was gradually drawn towards Ram's over time, found it necessary to 'reconstruct' Singh's AICC statement by saying that what Singh meant was if the Awami League leaders agreed to remain within the framework of Pakistan, the Indian Government would have no objection! Times of India, 14 October 1971.

²² Though later developments did show that relations with Bangladesh were not necessarily trouble-free!

²³ See Ajit Bhattacharya, 'Fumbling for a Policy: India and Bangladesh', Times of India, 17 July 1971.

issue, the report concluded that it would not be militarily meaningful for them to intervene. Without that possibility, the Indian military position vis-à-vis Pakistan was vastly superior.²⁴

Finally, what may have clinched the decision in favour of Indian military action was the evaporation of the hopes that the international community would bring to bear pressure on Yahya for an acceptable settlement. In May Gandhi said that she wanted the international community to realise that what had begun as Pakistan's internal problem was gradually transforming into an internal problem for India.²⁵ She was getting increasingly critical of the fact that assistance was not forthcoming from the wealthier nations. At the Lower House of the Parliament (Lok Sabha) she regretted that the western countries, who had allegedly fought the Second World War 'to save democracy', were not responding now when, in her view, democracy was 'so flagrantly and so brutally being destroyed'.²⁶ She rejected United Nations Secretary General U Thant's offer to place observers on both sides of the border. She argued that in the first place it tended to equate India and Pakistan, implying part-Indian responsibility for the crisis, and secondly, it would support the Pakistani projection that the issue was a bilateral one between the two countries.²⁷ Gandhi was now convinced that neither the world community nor the UN could be relied upon to act, and India would have to go it alone, if necessary.

Lead-Up to War

India's decision to intervene militarily could not be acted upon at once. Its armed forces needed three to four months to undertake the necessary preparations. Moreover, the appropriate time to act logically would be winter. That is when there would be no monsoon rains to bog down the invading Indian forces; and the northern passes would be snowed in, reducing sharply the possibility of any Chinese intervention. Gandhi had thus some time at hand to concentrate on politics, whose extension, in a Clausewitzian sense, the forthcoming war was likely to be. She now had two major objectives: One was to seek a superpower deterrence to any possible Sino-American (either singly or in a combined fashion) resistance to Indian plans, and the second was the creation of favourable international public opinion to dilute as much as possible adverse reactions to any future Indian intervention, that would break up a recognised global state, Pakistan, which was also a member of the United Nations, and not without friends.

As to the first, the Sino-US rapprochement boded ill for India, now being driven by America's willingness to 'facilitate and not obstruct China's participation in a stable international world

²⁴ Peter Hazelhurst, 'Shadow of War on the Indian Subcontinent', Times (London), 13 July 1971.

²⁵ Times of India, 19 May 1971.

²⁶ Indira Gandhi, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

²⁷ Peter Hazelhurst, 'Indian Anger at the UN Observer Plan for Both Sides of the Border', Times (London), 27 July 1971.

order'.²⁸ (Incidentally Pakistan was acting as a conduit connecting the two). Concern was evident in Swaran Singh's statement that India could not view with equanimity if it means the domination of the two superpowers over the region or a tacit agreement between them to this effect.²⁹ The Soviet Union was the only possible counter to any possible Sino-American entente in acting with regard to South Asia. As yet the Soviet Union had a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards this crisis.³⁰ Gandhi calculated that the best way to win over Moscow was to sign the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation which had been under discussion for two years now. She knew her offer to do so would be an enormous sop to please the Soviet Union.

The Treaty was signed in August. Indo-Soviet consultations were held in terms of the Treaty thus signalling to all concerned, including Peking, Washington and Islamabad, that both signatories took the Treaty seriously. The fact that the Soviets in private actually advocated 'restraint' did not matter so long as the world read into the pact a firm commitment to India's security by the Soviet Union. Though New Delhi had by this time very nearly ruled out the possibility of any serious Chinese military intervention, the pact provided a critical reassurance.

The second objective of creating favourable international public opinion was being simultaneously pursued. The methods employed were the holding of symposia, seminars and conferences, and visits abroad by Indian leaders. The Gandhi Peace Foundation organised a three-day international seminar in New Delhi in September, attended by 60 unofficial delegates from 20 countries. Memories of the Spanish Civil War were rekindled by such suggestions as the formation of an International Brigade and the staging of an international march to Islamabad.³¹

As an additional public relations project, Gandhi travelled to foreign capitals for a period of three weeks. The countries were Belgium, Australia, the United Kingdom, the US, France and the Federal Republic of Germany, mainly western countries as the empathies of the socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union (but sans China and Albania, China's closest ally those days) were in any case forthcoming. In her own words, she undertook this journey 'to leave nothing unexplored which might lead to an easing of the burden imposed upon us and to discourage those who are bent upon excuses to threaten our security'.³²

The visits were only partially successful. First, because of her recent rejection of the UN offer, and second, because it was by now clear that the only solution to the crisis acceptable to her was the dismemberment of a member-state of the United Nations, many leaders of the world, particularly those from the west, seemed to fight shy of her. Her dissatisfaction was evident, for

²⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p.136.

²⁹ *Times* (London), 21 July 1971.

³⁰ For details of how the Soviet position gradually evolved, see Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, *Dhaka-Moscow Relations: Old Ties Renewed*, ISAS Working Paper No. 167, 6 March 2013.

³¹ *Asian Recorder* (8 – 14 October 1971), pp. 10396-7.

³² Indira Gandhi, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

on her return she said: “I must make it clear that we cannot depend on the international community or even the countries I visited to solve our problems for us. We appreciate their sympathy and moral and political support, but the brunt of the burden has to be borne by us and by the people of Bangladesh”.³³

There were some benefits accrued to her, however. Though her personal relations with Nixon marked no improvement, she was able to take a reading of the attitudinal division within the American community on the South Asian crisis.³⁴ Understandably the Indian efforts now were directed towards deepening this division. The idea was to neutralise the strength or capability of the US Administration to militarily commit itself on the Pakistani side when the actual conflict would occur.

Sensing the deep danger he was now in, Yahya mellowed and on 19 November 1971 he sent a message of greetings to Gandhi on the occasion of the holy Muslim festival of Eid, in which he appealed for easing of tensions. It read: “India and Pakistan have long frittered away their energies and resources arming themselves against each other, resources which should have been used to reap the benefits of independence for our two peoples”³⁵ India rejected this overture as the offer of a ‘denuded olive brunch’.³⁶ For Gandhi it was too late to stem the tide of the surge towards the ultimate denouement.

India’s armed forces were now ready, awaiting only the government’s green signal. The entire nation was poised for action. The Provisional Government of Bangladesh was getting increasingly restive. As was the Mukti Bahini or the Bangladesh liberation forces. As December began, war had become inevitable. Pakistan, by now, was also eager to broaden the conflict. This was primarily for two reasons. First, a full-scale bilateral war between India and Pakistan would attract international intervention, necessary for Pakistan. This was because even without the war, Pakistani troops in the eastern wing were being harassed and mauled by the Mukti Bahini. Pakistan hoped that the outbreak of war would force on both India and Pakistan a cease-fire after which the Mukti Bahini would hardly be in a position to carry out its guerrilla activities (very difficult without Indian support) without international approbation. Second, by then there had already been considerable fighting involving both ground and aerial troops in the eastern sector. The Pakistanis, therefore, saw no reason not to extend the fighting to where they were comparatively in a better position than in the east, i.e., in the western sector. Immediately after midnight of 3 December 1971, Gandhi ordered Indian troops into Pakistan’s eastern wing,

³³ Ibid., p 105. ‘East Bengal’ had now been supplanted by ‘Bangladesh’ in her formal speeches, though she was still referring to its ‘people’ rather than ‘government’ which India was yet to recognise.

³⁴ This was stated by her to the author at a later date when she received him at her residence as the then Leader of Opposition. The author had earlier served as an aide to General MAG Osmany when the latter was a Cabinet Minister in Bangladesh (1972-1974). General Osmany, it may be mentioned, was the Commander-in-Chief of the Bangladesh Liberation Forces during the War of 1971.

³⁵ Times (London), 20 November 1971.

³⁶ Age (Melbourne), 22 November 1971.

declaring that Pakistan's Air Force had already initiated action.³⁷ Thus commenced the war that was to conclude with the surrender of Pakistani troops to the Indian Army in Dhaka on 16 December 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh.

Impact on Indo-Bangladesh Relations

The impact that the Indian policies had through the unfolding crisis on the Bangladeshi leadership is of cardinal importance, as it was certain to have considerable bearing on future Indo-Bangladesh relations. Needless to say that the exiled Bangladeshi leaders in India were all profoundly grateful to the Indian authorities for providing them refuge, and letting them organise the government-in-exile, before India was able to fully formalise its attitude towards the issue.³⁸ The Awami League leaders were, however, anxious to obtain formal Indian recognition, as evidenced in Acting President Nazrul Islam's letter to President Giri, on 24 April 1971, cited earlier. Even when the war seemed imminent, and recognition was still being withheld,³⁹ Nazrul Islam and Provisional Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed pressed again. The long-awaited recognition finally came on 6 December 1971. However, it does not appear that this delay had any substantial adverse impact on their mutual relations.

In fact, once the Indian decision to intervene had been taken, there were numerous contacts at senior levels between the Bangladeshi exiled leaders and the Indian authorities. In September the Indian Foreign secretary T N Kaul visited Calcutta to brief Bangladeshi leaders. D P Dhar, Gandhi's close confidant, continued the liaison. Shortly after Dhar's visit, three emissaries of the Provisional Government went to New Delhi and attended meetings at the External Affairs Ministry.⁴⁰ Tajuddin Ahmed, who had earlier welcomed the Indo-Soviet treaty,⁴¹ had close personal relationship with the Indian leaders. Not all Awami Leaders shared this close rapport with the Indians. One noteworthy exception was Khandkar Mushtaq, who was all too willing to compromise with the US, and even, as was widely believed, with Pakistan!⁴²

The bureaucrats of the Mujibnagar Foreign Office, set up in Calcutta, seem to have attempted a dispassionate assessment of the Indian position. A position paper, circulated in the office, read, and it is worth quoting at length: "India's support for Bangladesh basically comes out of her

³⁷ Indira Gandhi, *op. cit.*, p.128.

³⁸ The government-in-exile was sworn in on 10 April 1971 on a chunk of 'liberated Bangladeshi territory'. Thereafter it shifted to Calcutta and was informally known as the 'Mujibnagar government'.

³⁹ Indira Gandhi, *op.cit.*, p.193.

⁴⁰ The three emissaries were Abdus Samad Azad (future foreign minister of independent Bangladesh) and two senior diplomats who were Bengali members of the erstwhile-Pakistan Foreign Service, Abul Fateh and Mahub Alam (Chashi), *Times of India*, 8 September 1971.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2 September 1971.

⁴² See Laurence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: Unfinished Revolution* (London: Zed Press, 1979) p. 115

negative approach towards Pakistan. For political, historical, and economic reasons, India desires to weaken Pakistan, both West and East. It is not for her love of democracy or sense of brotherhood of [sic] the people of Bangladesh that India wants to uphold the cause of the liberation struggle of our people. The whole thing has a deep political motive...”⁴³ Another similar document warned: [After independence] we may resign ourselves to a period of Indian influence but we must try to minimise it as much as possible. In this way the interests of both Bangladesh and India would be served”.⁴⁴

It appears, therefore, that Bangladeshi bureaucrats-in-exile, who were destined to play a key role in the shaping of their country’s post-independence policies, were calculating that Indian policies and actions were arising from their own self-interest rather than from any nobler motives. This was of course only logical, but the point was that it was also consciously being seen as such.

Some elements in the Bangladesh Army (also known as Niyamito Bahini or ‘Regular Forces’ who comprised Bengali segments of the Pakistani military and were now fighting the war on the Bangladesh side) and the Mukti Bahini were unhappy with the overall Indian strategy.⁴⁵ This was partly evidenced by the fact, as well as exacerbated by it, that the Bangladesh Armed Forces Chief Colonel (later General) M A G Osmany was absent at the ceremony when the Pakistanis formally surrendered in Dhaka on 16 December 1971. Some Bangladeshis felt, not just marginalised at the event, but also denied the privilege of accepting the Pakistani surrender as part of the ‘joint command’ under which the war was being fought by the Indians and Bangladeshis.

Also, immediately after independence, senior leaders of the Bangladeshi and Indian armies were locked in a series of tough negotiations over ‘prize court’ or war booties. These included Pakistani military equipment including vehicles and vessels that were captured by the allies. In February 1972 a delegation headed by Foreign Secretary S A Karim of Bangladesh visited Rangoon to obtain the return of Pakistani aircraft, both civilian and military, flown to Burma by Pakistan. They failed to do so, and there was a perception that there was insufficient Indian backing to these efforts. Also the agreement in Simla of 2 July 1972, whereby all 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war including 195 war criminals were returned to Pakistan, caused some heartburning in Bangladesh. The feeling was that the Bangladeshi delegation to Simla was left with a Hobson’s choice.

⁴³ ‘Position Paper: Crisis of Bangladesh Movement’ (Calcutta), 23 September 1971. This and some other similar papers, which were not in any way official documents but individual memos were shown to the author as private collections of some of the Bangladeshi officials/public figures who were active participants in the Liberation Movement.

⁴⁴ ‘Position Paper: An Analysis of Indian Plans on Bangladesh’, No. 4/2 Reference Coll. (Calcutta), 2 October 1971.

⁴⁵ Laurence Lifschultz, *op.cit.*, p.395.

There were various shades of the left-wing of Bangladeshi political leadership, excluding the pro-Moscow National Awami Party (Muzaffar Group), that were not won over by India. Mowlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, head of the pro-Peking National Awami Party (Bhashani Group), a strong and early advocate of the Bangladesh movement, was said to find his movement 'restricted' in India.⁴⁶ Many further to the pro-Peking left were opposed to the Indian involvement from the very outset.⁴⁷ All these meant that while a preponderant majority of the Bangladeshis were deeply appreciative of India's support in the struggle for Bangladesh's independence, there were also seeds for discord buried underneath that had the potential for germination.

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⁴⁶ Ishtiaq Hussain, *India and the War of Liberation in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Forum for International Affairs, August 1978), p.8

⁴⁷ Badruddin Omar, 'India-Bangladesh Relations', *Holiday* (weekly publication) (Dhaka), 28 August 1972.