CIU Journal | 2(1) 1–11

American Policy towards the Bangladesh Liberation War: A Brief Review

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyze the United States of America's policy towards the liberation war of Bangladesh during 1971. For doing that, this paper mainly focuses on the policy approach applied by the then two most powerful diplomats, President Richard M. Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger, of the United States of America. The information used in this paper largely comes from the documents of two volumes of the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series published by the US State Department. It was found that the Americans' influence was very pro-Pakistani and against the split of East Pakistan because they did not want the birth of another independent state in the Soviet Union sphere. However, it failed to produce any impact on the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state other than creating panic for a while and prolonging the war of liberation for a couple of days.

Keywords

Bangladesh, liberation war, 1971, Pakistan, America, Soviet Union, Richard M. Nixon, Henry A. Kissinger

American policy towards the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971 has become well-known as the policy of "tilt" in favour of Pakistan. The chief architects of this policy were President Richard M. Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger. However, the Nixon-Kissinger approach in 1971 had elements of continuity with earlier US policy in the subcontinent, dictated mainly by Cold War considerations. Pakistan's bifurcated geographical situation and centrifugal tendencies in East Bengal eventually led to a full-fledged movement for autonomy. This movement coincided with the formation of closer US-Pakistan relations, leading to the US-Pakistan defence assistance pact of 1954. Henceforth, Washington's policymakers equated American interests in the subcontinent with the maintenance of unity and

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integrity of Pakistan under pro-American ruling elites. Similar concerns were also predominant in the Nixon-Kissinger geopolitical formulations during the Bangladesh liberation war, signifying a basic continuity in US stance regarding Pakistan. Many other factors—regional and international—reinforced this tendency. However, there were also elements of change in American policy in the South Asian region caused by the ups and downs in Washington's relations with India and Pakistan based on such factors as domestic developments in both countries as well as their relations with other major powers over time.

All these factors together with the personal predilections and biases of both Nixon and Kissinger proved instrumental in the formulation policy towards the Bangladesh liberation war. This paper is mostly based on declassified documents contained in the two volumes of the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series published at regular intervals by the US State Department.[1]

Secret documents declassified in recent years demonstrate American policy and the policy-making process towards the emergence of Bangladesh through a sanguinary war of liberation from 25 March to 16 December 1971. Washington's policy-making organs (e.g. State Department, National Security Council, Central Intelligence Agency and contingency planners belonging to these and other agencies as well as US embassies and consulates in New Delhi, Islamabad, Dhaka, Karachi and Calcutta) gave a very realistic picture of the evolving situation and the shape of things to come after the Pakistan army's crackdown on the unarmed Bengalis on the night of 25 March.

Americans realized quite early that the independence of Bangladesh was only a question of time. This was particularly true of the policy planners of subordinate categories of the afore-mentioned bodies. But their perceptions and recommendations did not always have much impact on the decisions made by Nixon and Kissinger both of whom became increasingly pro-Pakistan during the nine-month long liberation war.

The reason for this should be attributed to their perceptions of how best to protect and enhance American interests in South Asia in the prevailing regional and international milieu. Both Nixon and Kissinger thought that another independent state in the subcontinent would not prove congenial to American interests, as it would mean the extension of the Soviet sphere of influence in the region, given the increasingly cordial Indo-Soviet relations during the preceding years and Moscow's sympathetic attitude toward the Bengalis from the beginning. Kissinger also cherished a very dim view of the nature and viability of Bangladesh as an independent state.

US intelligence sources had kept the administration abreast of the deteriorating situation in East Pakistan during the anti-Ayub demonstrations from

[1] Full titles of the two volumes are: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XI, South Asia Crisis, 1971 and Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–7, Documents on South Asia, 1969–1972. While the former volume is available both in print and on the internet, the latter is exclusively electronic. Also, this paper draws on my book titled *From Autonomy to Independence: The United States, Pakistan and the Emergence of Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Limited, 2014).

early 1969. Curfews were imposed in many major cities of both Wings of the country (FRUS, E-7, 1969). This Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report underlined Ayub's continued dependence on the armed forces, as whatever popular support he enjoyed had been eroding over the past few months. The report of 20 February 1969 stressed the need for an understanding to be reached by the Ayub regime with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in view of the "increasing vehemence of rioting, especially in East Pakistan" (FRUS, E-7, 1969, Document 9). Henry Kissinger's memorandum to the president, written on 25 March 1969, correctly guessed the consequences of the imposition of martial law, especially in East Pakistan. According to Kissinger, the principal question was whether or not the declaration of martial law would be "accepted by the mass of the people in East Pakistan" (FRUS, E-7, 1969, Document 13).

American policymakers became increasingly aware of the regional polarization of Pakistani politics with the beginning of the electioneering process from early 1970. Yet results of the general elections of 7 December 1970 seemed to have surprised them as well as the ruling military junta of Pakistan. To all concerned, victory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman appeared too decisive for any compromise on his Six-Point Programme. Washington closely observed the post-election political scene in Pakistan and began to perceive that the election results—Mujib's sweeping victory in East Pakistan (which gave him an overall majority in the Constituent Assembly) and Bhutto's in the West—would lead to an inevitable deadlock with serious implications for US policy. The intelligence report of 8 December pointed to the dilemma inherent in the situation, "With an absolute majority, the Awami League may be tempted to press too hard for more autonomy than the West Pakistanis are prepared to accept" (FRUS, E-7, 1970, Document 104). In view of the possibility of an eventual split between the two Wings of Pakistan, Americans thought it necessary to underline their concerns for the unity of Pakistan. In his meeting with Yahya Khan on 1 February 1971, Ambassador Joseph Farland forcefully expressed American position on the issue, pointing out that the propaganda of covert American support for the split of Pakistan "had been spread by those whose interests were inimical to the interests of the United States" (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 109). In his 22 February memorandum to President Nixon, Kissinger mentioned the uncertain situation in Pakistan that had forced the US to "walk a very narrow tightrope." He reiterated American position of supporting the unity of Pakistan, even in the face of suspicions by Pakistani ruling circles that Washington had been plotting for East Pakistani secession, which Americans consistently denied (FRUS, E-7, 1971).

On his part, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been trying to make a favourable impression on the Americans by underlining his pro-American position to Archer Blood, American consul general in Dhaka. He wished Washington to play mediatory role between him and the Yahya regime for a peaceful solution of the crisis that would be congenial to Bengali interests. But the consul general was non-committal. In fact, Mujib's pro-American credentials would not stand him in good stead as he expected. In this connection, the high point of

Sheikh Mujib's overtures to the Americans was his February 28 meeting with Ambassador Joseph Farland at his Dhanmondi residence. Although held in a very friendly atmosphere between Bangabandhu and the ambassador, this meeting led to no indication of American support for Bangladesh in the ensuing crisis (FRUS, E-7, 1971). Also, as admitted by Farland, Sheikh Mujib did not ask for any US mediation during this meeting.

By late February 1971 there remained very dim prospect for ending the impasse, and it became apparent that President Yahya was becoming more and more alienated from Sheikh Mujib and getting closer to Bhutto. It was Bhutto's refusal to attend the inaugural session of the National Assembly scheduled to be held in Dhaka on 3 March that prompted Yahya to postpone it. This precipitated the crisis, as the Bengalis sensed a conspiracy brewing in Islamabad to keep them away from power. There were instant demonstrations in Dhaka and other cities of East Pakistan and slogans were raised for complete independence. Mujib was angry at Yahya's decision and refused to accept it. He declared hartal on 2 March in Dhaka and 3 March in the whole of East Pakistan and an action programme for the following five days. On 7 March he was to announce the final decision in a public meeting. Clearly, the situation in Pakistan was heading for a crisis.

Policymakers in Washington took a closer look at the situation and contingency planners started formulating alternative policy options to be pursued in response to the circumstances. The period between Yahya's postponement of the National Assembly session on 1 March and Sheikh Mujib's speech on 7 March was very crucial for all concerned. During this time Americans considered various alternative scenarios and policy options. It was more categorically affirmed that Washington's "consistent position has been that US interests are better served by a united Pakistan than its separation into two independent states." It was also asserted that an independent Bangladesh would be "more vulnerable to many problems like internal instability, economic stagnation and external subversion than an East Pakistan affiliated with West Pakistan." For the US, therefore, there was no "realistic alternative" than supporting the unity of Pakistan (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 123). The contingency planners also recognized America's limited ability to influence events at that stage, in view of the erosion of US-Pakistan special relationship formed in the 1950s. Nor did they think the US could deter East Pakistan's move towards independence. Some of their assertions, however, were to prove very unrealistic soon. For instance, in early March they considered it "very unlikely that West Pakistan would intervene militarily to attempt to preserve the unity of Pakistan by force." They mentioned the limited number of West Pakistani forces in the East (one army division and a few aircraft) as well as the difficulties of reinforcements. "Moreover," they reasoned, "there would probably be a general lack of public and political interest in West Pakistan in preventing Bengali secession. Rather than undertaking military action, most of them would prefer to let East Pakistan go its way" (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 123).

Such projections would soon prove far from the reality as reports of the actual situation poured in. On 4 March, National Security Council Staff members Harold Saunders and Samuel Hoskinson wrote to Kissinger apprising him

of new developments like reports of Pakistani forces being flown into Dhaka by at least one air force C-130 and by commercial flights (FRUS, XI, 1971). During the following few days, as Americans considered alternative options in response to the unfolding crisis, protection of the unity of Pakistan turned out to be the preferred option. Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson, who usually advocated moderation, emphasized this in the Senior Review Group meeting of 6 March, saying, "The US, USSR, and India all have an interest in the continued unity of Pakistan and have nothing to gain from a break-up." However, his suggestion to discourage Yahya regarding the use of force against the Bengalis was turned down by Kissinger who retorted, "If I may be the devil's advocate, why should say anything?" As it turned out, he remained the devil's advocate all along during the Bangladesh liberation war. Also, the Americans were uneasy about Pakistan's suspicion of American encouragement to secession by East Pakistan and thought that telling Yahya Khan to desist from using force would merely fuel this suspicion" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 5).

Kissinger soon became convinced that the Yahya regime was determined to maintain a unified Pakistan by force if necessary (FRUS, XI, 1971). As he wrote to the president, "Yahya could decide not to take Rahman's challenge lying down and to retaliate, perhaps to the extent of arresting Rahman and the other leaders, and attempting to clamp a military lid on East Pakistan." As for American posture at this stage, Kissinger recommended non-intervention. He argued, "We could realistically have little influence on the situation and anything we might do could be resented by the West Pakistanis as unwarranted interference and jeopardize our future relations" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 8). However, this somewhat tentative approach to the crisis would soon be replaced by a more categorically pro-Pakistan stance after Yahya Khan ordered an outright military crackdown—the so-called Operation Searchlight—on the Bengalis on the midnight of 25 March.

The crackdown of the Pakistani armed forces on the Bengalis proved a turning point in American policy, as it ended all speculations about how far the Yahya regime would go to suppress Bengali demands. From this time Nixon's policy increasingly tilted in favour of Pakistan and showed little concern for the killing, looting, arson attacks and all sorts of brutalities of the Pakistani army on the Bengalis. Apart from Nixon's inherent bias against India and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Yahya's role as a conduit in the incipient Sino-American rapprochement influenced US policy. On 26 March Kissinger reported to Nixon in a very matter-of-fact manner that the West Pakistani army had "moved to repress the East Pakistan secession movement" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 10). The Pakistan army's atrocities on unarmed people did not inspire any humanitarian concern in Kissinger's mind. He recommended inaction on Washington's part. On the question "Whether to approach Yahya, urging him to end the bloodshed," Kissinger thought that it was "probably a bit early to make this decision today because we do not yet know whether calm will be restored in the East or whether the pattern of violence will continue or broaden" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 10). From this time on, he would act on

the basis of perceived interests of the US rather than any humanitarian consideration. Even vivid reports of Pakistan army's atrocities could not move Kissinger into some efforts to stop the carnage which Archer Blood, US consul general in Dhaka, termed as "selective genocide" in his 28 March telegram to the State Department. "Here in Dacca we are mute and horrified witnesses to a reign of terror by the Pak military," Blood wrote. He suggested, "We should be expressing our shock, at least privately to GOP [Government of Pakistan], at this wave of terror directed against their own countrymen by Pak military" (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 125). Samuel Hoskinson, a National Security Council staff member, echoed similar concerns in his memorandum to Kissinger. As he wrote, "Having beaten down the initial surge of resistance, the army now appears to have embarked on a reign of terror aimed at eliminating the core of future resistance. At least this seems to be the situation in Dacca. We have virtually no reliable information on the situation in the other major cities or what is going on in the countryside where most of the population resides." Under the circumstances, Hoskinson asked, "Is the present U.S. posture of simply ignoring the atrocities in East Pakistan still advisable or should we now be expressing our shock at least privately to the West Pakistanis? After our major effort to provide natural disaster relief last fall, the Administration could be vulnerable to charges of a callous political calculation over a man-made disaster" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 13).

However, such concerns and suggestions from subordinates had little impact on Kissinger's attitude or policy. On 29 March Nixon and Kissinger talked over the telephone on the situation and both appeared very happy and relieved because Yahya's forces were in control of East Pakistan (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 13, 14). They held on to their policy of utter indifference to the bloodshed in East Pakistan. Meanwhile, on 2 April Soviet President Nicolai Podgorny sent a letter to Yahya, urging him to stop the massacre and find a peaceful solution. Podgorny expressed concerns at the resort to extreme measures against the people of East Pakistan and the arrest and persecution of Sheikh Mujib and others who received the support of overwhelming majority of people in the elections. Thus American policy stood in stark contrast to the Soviet response. To a section of American diplomats at the US Consulate General and officials of the USAID, and USIS in Dhaka, the Nixon-Kissinger policy appeared very disconcerting. On 6 April, in a telegram to the State Department signed by twenty such diplomats and officials, they deplored their government's policy in very strong words. This was the famous Dissent Cable, also known as the Blood Telegram (for Archer Blood, the Consul General in Dhaka). It started thus, "Our government has failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government has failed to denounce atrocities..." (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 13, 14, 19). Both Kissinger and Secretary of State William Rogers were very annoyed at the Blood Telegram and were afraid that the cable would get leaked to Senator Edward Kennedy whose sympathy for the Bengalis had already been well-known.

In the meantime, Americans became more aware of the situation in Pakistan. Although April-May was the bleakest period of the Bangladesh liberation war, the Bengali Mukti Bahini was being organised, consisting of regular

and guerrilla fighters in which Indian help proved crucial. Even at this early stage, Americans began to realise that the Yahya regime would ultimately fail to maintain the unity of Pakistan. In the Senior Review Group (SRG) meeting of 9 April, Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco commented, "I think it is likely, however, that East Pakistan will end in some form of separatism. Our job is to maintain reasonable relations with both wings. As we view the subcontinent, in terms of our relative interest, our interest in India is probably greater than our interest in Pakistan, although not in absolute terms." Kissinger, who was presiding over the meeting, asked if everyone agreed with this analysis or there was anyone who believed that West Pakistan could "reestablish complete control over the country." No one seemed to disagree with Sisco's analysis (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 23). This matter was given closer scrutiny in the Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) of 12 April, a very important document analysing the existing situation in East Pakistan as well as the future prospect. Policy planners saw little chance of the continuity of East Bengal as a part of Pakistan. This paper also noted that Indian help for Bengali resistance was crucial, because strong domestic pressure for intervention in favour of the Bengalis and that India's own national interest would prove decisive. Moreover, a protracted insurgency by the Bengalis might shift the leadership from the moderate Awami League to the leftists, and the probable "advent of a radical regime in East Bengal would create very severe problems for India, especially in the neighboring Indian state of West Bengal" (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 131).

Policymaking organs in Washington, however, continued their search for a suitable response to the tragic drama being enacted in East Bengal. An Interdepartmental Group report emphasized the temporary nature of the Pakistan army's success in suppressing Bengali resistance. "Psychologically," this report affirmed, "concept of a united Pakistan is dead in Bengal." Interestingly, this report called into question some of the traditional US priorities in the South Asian region. For instance, it questioned the assumption that American efforts at protecting regional stability was "best served by a united Pakistan"—a view that ran counter to the Nixon-Kissinger policy of giving high priority to the unity of Pakistan. This report even suggested that "a Pakistan divided into two viable and politically stable states would be almost as acceptable from the point of view of US interests" (FRUS, E-7, n.d., Document 132). Nixon, of course, regarded the crisis as an internal affair of Pakistan, and his position neatly fitted with the desires of Yahya Khan who expressed his gratitude to the US president for this (FRUS, XI, 1971). But officials at the lower level doubted the wisdom of a total endorsement of the Yahya regime (FRUS, XI, 1971).

The April 28 memorandum of Kissinger to Nixon contained a detailed analysis of the administration's three probable options with pros and cons. Kissinger recommended option 3 which "would have the advantage of making the most of the relationship with Yahya while engaging in a serious effort to move the situation toward conditions less damaging to US and Pakistani interests." Nixon agreed to pursue this option which was "an effort to help Yahya achieve a negotiated settlement" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 36).

At this stage, the Americans perceived that an escalation of conflict might involve the Chinese militarily on Pakistan's side which, in its turn, would lead to Soviet military assistance for India. They felt the existence of a real threat for such escalation (FRUS, XI, 1971). They thought that the US action should focus on the prevention of the escalation of the crisis in the subcontinent. It was, however, realized that "a political accommodation would be extremely difficult to achieve, but it is in our interest to accelerate efforts to achieve it" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 133). Accordingly, this contingency study suggested a number of measures for the purpose of preventing the spread of the conflict.

While careful projections of American interests and suitable actions were being made by policymaking organs, Nixon and Kissinger came out openly with their inherent anti-Indian and pro-Pakistan views from early June. Their conversation of 4 June is very revealing in this connection. They took India to severe task. Referring to the Indians, Kissinger said, "Those sons-of-bitches, who never have lifted a finger for us, why should we get involved in the morass of East Pakistan?" He also portrayed a very dark picture of Bangladesh, "No resources. They're going to become a ripe field for Communist infiltration...." (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 136).

Meanwhile, New Delhi succeeded in drawing the attention of the world community to the millions of Bengali refugees on Indian soil and the resultant economic burden on India. By late June Yahya Khan was compelled, especially by this refugee problem, to announce a plan for political solution of the problem. On 28 June, he declared the plan for the return of the refugees as well as for a new constitution for Pakistan to be framed by "experts" (the elected Awami Memebers of the Assembly having been already outlawed). But this plan, with its conditions and reservations, failed to evoke a positive response even with the Americans (FRUS, 1971). Needless to say, the Bangladesh provisional government rejected this plan out of hand. Yet President Nixon hailed it as "an important step" (FRUS, XI, 1971).

On 1 July Henry Kissinger started his Asian tour. After his trips to New Delhi and Islamabad in the first week of the month, he embarked on his top secret mission to Beijing. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh liberation war got its own momentum. As for US policy, its strategic options and interests became crystallised after Kissinger's return from Beijing in the middle of the month. Henceforth, US policy became increasingly pro-Pakistan. Also, Washington and Beijing began to coordinate their South Asia policies. Chinese leaders looked upon the South Asian crisis as purely an India-Pakistan problem; they gave full moral support to Yahya and remained silent about the sufferings of the Bengalis. Bangladesh provisional government rejected this plan out of hand. Yet President Nixon hailed it as "an important step" (FRUS, XI, 1971).

In late July Yahya Khan himself told the American ambassador to Islamabad, Joseph Farland, about the training of Bengali guerrillas in twenty-nine camps in India. Reporting to Nixon, Farland said, "Now I hate to tell you this, Mr. President, but the guerrilla threat is growing by leaps and bounds. They're averaging [killing on an average] 18 Pakistanis a day now; they're averaging

two bridges a day" (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 141).

Yet, the White House continued to pursue the impractical concept of "political accommodation" between the Yahya regime and the Bangladesh government. The Americans considered this the only way to prevent an eventual war between India and Pakistan which would certainly lead to Pakistan's defeat. Kissinger asserted in the Senior Review Group (SRG) meeting of 30 July:

> But the clock is running in India faster than the clock on political accommodation. We are determined to avoid war. If it is necessary to squeeze India, we will. There will be no war if we have any pressure available. The inevitable eventual outcome of all this is an autonomous East Pakistan. Over any two or three year period, 75,000 Punjabis cannot govern 75 million Bengalis. West Pakistan needs more time for the sort of accommodation that will be required than they do to meet the urgent problem of the refugees. (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 111)

Meanwhile, the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed on 9 August. This was a very significant event in the course of the Bangladesh liberation war. It extended the moral support of a superpower for Bangladesh by boosting India's confidence against Pakistan as well as China. American policy planners began to evaluate the implications of this treaty (FRUS, XI, 1971).

Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi embarked on her tour of Western capitals on 24 October. She had two sessions with Nixon on 4 and 5 November; the Bangladesh issue being the subject of discussion in the first meeting (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 116, 179). Mrs. Gandhi mentioned the vast number of Bengali refugees in India. She gave detailed descriptions of the atrocities of the Pakistani forces in East Bengal. As she most categorically stated, "the realities were that it was no longer realistic to expect East and West Pakistan to remain together" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 116, 179, 181). On the whole, Mrs. Gandhi's conversations with Nixon reinforced, rather than reduced, the US-Indian differences.

By late November President Nixon became firmly convinced about Indian victory in a frontal war with Pakistan. As the crisis escalated, Pakistan found itself in a very desperate situation. While Washington was trying to prevent an all-out war, the Pakistanis considered such a war as the only way to extricate themselves through a ceasefire resolution in the United Nations. On 3 December, the Pakistan air force started bombing Indian air-fields along the western border. Thus a large-scale war began despite American efforts to the contrary.

After the outbreak of frontal war between India and Pakistan on 3 December, Washington started working for a speedy end to the fighting. This policy was in line with the Pakistani motive behind the air attacks on India which was to internationalize the crisis and bring about a ceasefire through the United Nations.

Kissinger blamed India for aggression despite evidences suggesting otherwise. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Richard Helms reported that the Pakistanis had attacked three Indian airfields at Srinagar, Amritsar and Pathankot in the morning of 3 December. From this time onward, Nixon and

Kissinger explored all the avenues to help Pakistan, which included efforts to extricate Pakistan through ceasefire resolutions in the United Nations, sending arms through other countries like Iran and Jordan, and toying with the idea of direct US military assistance.

Also, the US sponsored resolutions in the United Nations Security Council after 4 December failed because of the Soviet vetoes, which proved crucial to the liberation of Bangladesh. As for giving sophisticated war materials to Pakistan, Nixon and Kissinger succeeded in sending F-104 fighter planes through Jordan. But this involved the recourse to devious mechanism of breaking American laws.

Also, Kissinger became an enthusiastic supporter of the idea of direct military aid to Pakistan as against the more cautious approach of the State Department. Kissinger invoked the terms of the US-Pakistan treaties and aid-memoires of the late 1950s and early 1960s as justifications for his stance; but other members of the WSAG expressed reservations against such blatantly pro-Pakistan steps which entailed legal implications. In the WSAG meeting of 9 December, Kissinger and Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco argued, respectively, for and against giving direct military aid to Pakistan. Kissinger said that "if they [Indians] destroy the army and the air force, Pakistan will be in their paws. The result would be a nation of 100 million people dismembered, their political structure changed by military attack, despite a treaty of alliance with and private assurances by the United States." This, Kissinger stressed, would produce adverse repercussions among American allies in the Middle East like Iran, especially because India had the moral and material support of the Soviet Union. Sisco was very candid in countering Kissinger when he said, "I don't accept that view. We do have a kind of alliance with Pakistan in both the CENTO and the bilateral context, but that alliance was against communist aggression." Sisco very pragmatically asserted, "East Pakistan is gone and we both have to face that fact" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 255).

During this time, even Nixon and Kissinger had occasional differences as well. Nixon seemed more aware of the realities on the scene while Kissinger emphasized the larger implications of the results of the conflict in the subcontinent. In their 9 December conversation, Nixon drew Kissinger's attention to the spontaneous welcome given to the Indian troops by the Bengalis, and said, "You see those people welcoming the Indian troops when they come in. [unclear]. Now the point is, why is then, Henry, are we going through all this agony?" Kissinger replied, "We're going through this agony to prevent the West Pakistan army from being destroyed" (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 168).

Nixon and Kissinger tried another device to assist Pakistan: instigating the Chinese to move forces along the Sino-Indian border in order to intimidate India. On the evening of 10 December Kissinger met Ambassador Huang Hua in New York and tried hard to incite some sort of Chinese military action against India. The Chinese ambassador agreed on principle with Kissinger's assessment of the situation in South Asia and the consequences of the Indo-Soviet collaboration which, in the words of Huang, "would mean the dismember-

ment and the splitting up of a sovereign country and the creation of a new edition of Manchukuo, the Bangla Desh" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 274). Encouraged by Huang's comment, Kissinger tried to provoke the Chinese into military action against India. To allay the Chinese fear of a probable Soviet reprisal, Kissinger went to the extent of assuring Huang, in the name of President Nixon, that "if the People's Republic were to consider the situation on the Indian subcontinent a threat to its security, the US would oppose efforts of others to interfere with the People's Republic" (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 274). Kissinger seemed prepared to risk a big-power confrontation in the subcontinent. However, Chinese military intervention in the Bangladesh liberation war never materialized. Instead, China was ready to "support American moves in the United Nations for ceasefire and mutual withdrawal of troops by India and Pakistan" (FRUS, E-7, 1971, Document 178).

Meanwhile, Pakistani forces were in a desperate situation because of the assaults of India-Bangladesh joint forces and the Bengali guerrillas. On 14 December, Yahya sent a letter to Nixon which was a virtual distress call. He wrote:

> The American assistance has to assume, without any further loss of time, meaningful dimensions. ...The Seventh Fleet does not only have to come to our shores but also to relieve certain pressures which we by ourselves are not in a position to cope with. (FRUS, XI, 1971, Document 298)

But such help of "meaningful dimensions" did not materialize. On the same day the Indian planes bombed the Governor's House in Dhaka, compelling Governor A.M. Malik to resign and seek refuge in the Hotel Intercontinental which had been declared a neutral zone by the International Red Cross. The last act of Nixon and Kissinger before the surrender of the Pakistani forces to India-Bangladesh command in the afternoon of 16 December was to dispatch Task Force 74. This Task Force was headed by the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Enterprise which entered the Bay of Bengal on 14 December. The actual mission of the Task Force was a mystery. It was also potentially the most dangerous of US actions in the subcontinent in 1971. However, it failed to produce any impact on the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state other than creating panic for awhile and prolonging the war of liberation for a couple of days.

Note

The earlier version of this paper was presented in a seminar at CIU on 03 April 2019.

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Further Reading

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