

The international context of Bangladesh Liberation War



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In 1971, the world's witnessed the emergence of its 136th nation, Bangladesh. For most analysts of the South Asian region, this did not come by surprise. The matter why was quite apparent for the experts, but the when and how especially with which consequences made the international security circles and leading politicians feel quite uncomfortable.

After the formation of Pakistan, in 1947, an extraordinary rift existed between its two wings, East Pakistan and West Pakistan, which were separated by about 2,000 km of Indian territory. A major difference was language, with Urdu the main and state-supported language in West Pakistan, and Bengali the suppressed language of its Eastern part. This disparity resulted in an ethno-linguistic movement in the early 1950s demanding that Bengali be made a state language too. The movement got further aggravated by the tremendous economic and political inequalities to the disadvantage of the Bengali people. In order to maintain superiority, West Pakistan, which treated its Eastern part as an internal colony, responded to notions of autonomy and separate identity with violent repression. Consequently, the language movement gradually but persistently transformed into a struggle for independence that began with its declaration on 26 March 1971 and ended with the liberation of Bangladesh on 16 December 1971. The trigger for open conflict between East and West Pakistan were the 1970 general elections and the negligence of the results by the then ruling junta of General Yahya Khan. In the East it was expected, that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League - which won not only most of the seats in the East but also in the National Parliament - would lead the new national government in Islamabad. However, this was blocked by the West Pakistani military, which feared the loss of its own power and control over East Pakistan if they handed over authority to Mujib. The establishment in West Pakistan was aware that a federal administration under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would lead to a tectonic shift in the country's power structure with severe impacts in the country's domestic and international field. In other words, Operation Searchlight can be seen as a pre-emptive strike on political forces like the Awami League because they could assert their legitimate power. There is no doubt that the beginning of the

violent suppression of the Bengali people through the West Pakistani armed forces marked one of the most significant and dramatic events on the subcontinent after its bloody Partition in 1947.

The question that arises is why the international community was not willing or able to stop the military operations in Pakistan's Eastern wing right from the beginning? Of course, Yahya Khan explicitly denied any involvement of Pakistani soldiers in a 'Genocide' and condemned it as propaganda against West Pakistan. However, due to the presence of international media and diplomatic missions, there was credible and impartial reporting about the start of large-scale massacres and target-killings in Dhaka. Most remarkable in this context were the reports of US Consul General Archer Blood from March 27th, 1971 until he was recalled from his post in Dhaka - obviously for being too inconvenient. Most significant was his last cable on 6 April 1971, the so called 'Blood Telegram', in which he denounced the complicity of the US administration of then US President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger in the genocide. In this context one has to state that the whole process of Bangladeshi state formation didn't happen in a 'South Asian vacuum'. The national liberation struggle of the Bengali people against the oppression of West Pakistan coincided with and became enmeshed in a major structural transformation of the international political system. The most characteristic feature of this phenomenon was that the rigid bipolarity determined by the rivaling two superpowers US and Soviet Union as well as their firm diametrical alignments following the World War II was loosening. A major provoker of this, was the Soviet-China split which became unbridgeable after the ideological differences between Maoist Beijing and Marxist-Leninist Moscow culminated at the border conflict between both countries in 1969. Not only was the myth of a monolithic communist camp publicly brought to an end, but also increasing strains within the 'anti-communist coalition' appeared. The raising conflicts over economic interests between the US, Western Europe and Japan marked the onset of a mutual alienation. As a result, the global order in the early 1970's shifted from bipolarity towards some kind of multi-polarity. Even though the 'old polar powers' US and

USSR were still dominant, new emerging players were gaining more international leverage, most notably China with its growing economic power and India with respect to its large land mass and huge population. Nevertheless, the sharp Cold War antagonism as well as the omnipresent threat of a 'Third World War' remained.

This very context had severe implications for the Bangladeshi independence struggle. The political leadership of the most significant players at the global scene were aware that the newly emerging international system became more politically volatile. Hence, it became more difficult to maintain control over areas



which were seen as part of their respective influence. Especially in Washington, after the failure of its 'Roll-Back policy' against Communism, as the Korea War and Bay of Pigs invasion demonstrated, a major redefinition of its foreign policy was getting off the ground, namely its 'Détente policy'. At the core of this decision was the understanding that a relaxation in the Soviet-US relations was necessary. In order to 'thaw' the encrusted Cold War constellation, a rapprochement with China - which would also keep 'overambitious newcomers' like India at bay - was seen as one of the most eminent cornerstones of this strategy.

The overall aim of this newly introduced Realpolitik - roughly characterised by doing away with ideology-based political decision making in favour of a pragmatic approach - was to normalize US-USSR relation, to balance Beijing and Moscow as well as to restrain the influence of the increasingly apparent alliance between New Delhi and Moscow.

The Indo-Soviet friendship treaty signed in August 1971 further aggravated Nixon's personal antipathy against India and her Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

However, regarding his new tilt towards Beijing Nixon had a major problem. Despite the fact that China under Mao

Zedong was also ready to open up towards Washington - because it was confronted with Soviet forces amassing at its borders, ostensibly in preparation for an invasion of China - the US had no direct access to the Chinese leadership at that time. This brought Pakistan in the picture. With the help of the government in Islamabad and the strong support of military top brass a secret liaison between Washington and Beijing was facilitated. China was increasingly seen as an 'ally of convenience' in order to secure US interests in South Asia, and Pakistan was identified as the only possible conduit for it. However, at the same time Washington was also

aware of Islamabad's limited capacities, especially due to the tremendous asymmetric power relations, to compete militarily successfully with the Indian Union. More concrete, US were very sceptical regarding the prospects for West Pakistan to maintain control over its eastern wing in case of an armed confrontation. The chance for Islamabad to keep in check the Bengali aspirations of liberating themselves from the West Pakistani choke was even poorer with view on the Indian support for the freedom fighters and the unfavourable geographic conditions. Basically the Nixon administration feared any foreign intervention into the Bangladesh Liberation War. The US were primarily concerned about an Indian intervention. Washington's rationale was that India would bandwagon with the struggle of the Bengali in order to finally settle its scores with Islamabad with dramatic consequences. It was expected that, if India helped to set East Pakistan free, it would be dragged in New Delhi's slipstream and thereby be turned into another client state of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, there were serious concerns among US security circles that India would use the event to send it troops towards Islamabad to oust the pro-US military regime and

perhaps even to dismember its neighbour. Given the fact that Washington saw the Pakistani military as the most suitable partner for accommodating US interests in the Pakistani rump-state and the extended region, an Indian intervention was perceived as an existential threat to US interests: it would lose its only ally on the subcontinent which also provided the key towards China. To prevent such a scenario from happening, Washington announced a policy of 'maximum intimidation' against India. Therefore, US naval forces were sent into the Bay of Bengal and China was asked to amass troops at the Indian frontier to increase pressure on the Indians. At the same time, the US attempted to enforce a ceasefire through the UN Security Council (UNSC) to protect Pakistan from a militarily enforced break-up.

However, none of these measures of the Nixon administration worked out as intended. First, the US proposal for ceasefire at the UNSC got vetoed by the Soviets. Second, the Chinese did not build-up much military pressure on its borders with India. Third, New Delhi was not impressed by the American 'gunboat diplomacy' and just ignored the presence of the 7th fleet of the US in 'its waters'. Instead, it intervened and Bangladesh gained its independence. But the most fundamental mistake of Nixon and Kissinger were their fatal misperception of Indira Gandhi's intentions regarding Pakistan and the Soviet Union. In contrast to US fears, India was not at all interested 'to slice the West Pakistani pie'. The alliance with the Soviet Union was a logical consequence of the anti-Indian sentiments in Washington. In other words, it was based on pragmatism and not on friendship. Therefore, there was no threat that India or Bangladesh be turned into a Soviet client state. For the sake of completeness, it has to be pointed out that India didn't intervene in East Pakistan because of humanitarian reasons or in order to defend democratic values.

After being overwhelmed by millions of refugees from East Pakistan and having the chance to weaken Pakistan, New Delhi's actions in towards East Pakistan were as much guided by Realpolitik as the US's. For example, the taking away of all significant military equipment left in Bangladesh by Pakistan indicates that it was not all about the well-being of the Bengali people.

Nevertheless, in sum, it seemed that 'the world' accepted the potential separation of

East Pakistan and the formation of a new independent state of Bangladesh as a fait accompli. The only remaining issue for the US, China, and partly also for the Soviet Union was, how to get West-Pakistan through the 'East-Pakistan crisis' with as little damage as possible. To be sure, all major players (besides India) had no interest to get deeply involved in the conflict, neither militarily nor diplomatically by putting sufficient pressure on Islamabad to stop the genocide among Bengali people and the pogrom-like killings of Bengali political leaders and intellectuals. Moscow and Washington just wanted to be sure that their respective adversary wouldn't gain too much influence in South Asia and that no regional player would gain regional a too dominant position. Therefore, maintaining the contentious triangle of India-Pakistan-China appeared the most appropriate strategy to maintain some kind of balance in South Asia. With the independence of Bangladesh and the preservation of territorial integrity of West Pakistan, this common goal was apparently achieved.

Therefore, leaving aside Pakistan, the governments of the major powers were officially satisfied with the outcomes of the war. The US was able to achieve its minimum goal to preserve an allied Pakistani rump-state and maintain its strength as much as possible. Furthermore it was able to keep the Soviet Union out of the conflict. China was able to stand-up against the Soviet Union which had to accept the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China. Furthermore, the US approach to seek an alliance with Beijing undoubtedly bolstered China's international leverage and prestige.

This finds its most debatable expression in granting China a permanent seat in the UNSC to the detriment of Taiwan, in October 1971. This marks a move against India which wasn't granted a permanent seat in the UNSC. Regardless, India had been able to substantially weaken its enemy Pakistan and to establish a hegemonic position in South Asia.

Furthermore, it did not yield under US pressure. Achieving such an enormous success in foreign policy, the Indira Gandhi administration in New Delhi was able to keep the increasing opposition against the increasingly autocratic style of government at bay, at least until she had to proclaim state of emergency 1975 in order to stay in power. Finally the Soviet Union was able to maintain its

alliance with India to counter-balance China.

The Bangladesh Liberation War demonstrated that the US and other members of the United Nations (UN) were willing to fade out any esteem for democratic principles and human rights in order to achieve their goal in 1971. The prevalence of inaction regarding the Genocide of the Bengali people committed by the Pakistan Armed Forces must be interpreted as a clear ignorance of the 1948 UN Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) by the respective national governments. To retrieve at least partly the 'democratic reputation' of the Western sphere, one might differentiate between the governments and societies in US and the bandwagoning Western Europe. There were deep sympathies towards the freedom struggle of the Bengali people among the civil societies and much activity was carried out to pressure their political leadership to change the policy direction in favour of the Bengali people. Here, the ground breaking article by Anthony Mascarenhas 'Genocide' (Sunday Times, June 13th, 1971) functioned as a final wake up call. This phenomenon found not only its expression that the US congress was forced to pass an embargo of weapons against Pakistan (which was illegally undermined by Nixon) but also in some of the world's greatest charity events - concerts for Bangladesh - were organized in New York to raise funds and international awareness for the refugees following the Genocide. However, these efforts were made far too late to change the unfortunate course of trajectories of global politics. To conclude, the victims of the Bangladesh Liberation War were not only sacrifices of the Pakistani army but also of the global Realpolitik at this time. Or in other words, they were a pay-off for helping the US to open up China. However, the prize for this policy - three million killed Bengali, 30 million internally displaced persons, the exodus of 10 million people, the rape of hundreds of thousands of women and the ravaging of wide parts of the country - was paid by the Bengali people.

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