

M.G. Kabir

US POLICY AND THE BANGLADESH CRISIS OF 1971

The nine-month liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 is a major event in contemporary history. Bangladesh emerged independent in the wake of one of the most brutal bloodbaths since Hitler's collapse; three million unarmed Bengalis were butchered by the Pakistani occupation forces. The war also unleashed the biggest human migration since World War II, nearly 10 million Bengalis were forced to take refuge in India during the fateful months of 1971. The importance of the Bangladesh crisis is not limited solely and primarily to the magnitude of killings and human miseries. The episode also coincided with, and in turn influenced, developments of far-reaching consequences in world politics. While the valiant and undaunted youths of the Bengali Mukti Bahini (Liberation Army) were fighting for national independence, the big powers brought the world dangerously close to the edge of another world war. During the later part of the crisis when India and Pakistan were in direct confrontation with each other in the month of December, US President Nixon ordered the nuclear carrier USS Enterprise to the direction of Bay of Bengal. In response, the Soviet Union also sent its fleet to the Indian Ocean. China, on its part, was also mobilizing its troops along the Sino-Indian

-
1. Christopher Van Hollen, "The Tilt Policy Revisited : Nixon-Kissinger Geopolitics and South Asia", *Asian Survey*, April 1980, p. 341.

border. The US, Soviet, and Chinese manoeuvres could have led the world to the outbreak of a major war of global magnitude.

Although the unfolding of the Bangladesh crisis in early 1971 did not seem to be a matter of grave concern to the US policy makers as they decided to pursue a policy of "massive inaction" in response to the brutal army action in East Bengal, the United States was later that year deeply embroiled in the events. In an interview with *Time* magazine some thirteen years after the crisis, President Nixon confided that he had considered the use of nuclear weapon on four occasions during his presidency. The Bangladesh Crisis was one of them. According to him, Sino-US detente was his primary consideration and if the Chinese had intervened, there was "no question" that the United States would have used the nuclear option.² However, such a grave possibility risking a war of incredible magnitude was averted as the Chinese commitment to defend Pakistan militarily appeared to be tenuous.³ Following Chinese reluctance to get involved militarily, the US nuclear carrier remained aloof during the last act of the operational drama of the birth of Bangladesh in mid-December.

The paramount importance that was attached to the South Asian Crisis of 1971 by the US policy makers has been acknowledged by both Nixon and his national security adviser. Henry A. Kissinger. Kissinger has devoted a 77-page chapter of his memoirs to this episode titled, "The Tilt : The India-Pakistan Crisis of 1971". He characterized it as "perhaps the most complex issue of Nixon's first term".⁴ He further adds "the 'tilt toward Pakistan' entered the political folklore as a case history of political misjudgment. What made the crisis so difficult was that the stakes were so much greater than the common perception of them. The issue burst upon us while Pakistan was our only channel to China ; we had no other means of

2. *Time*, July 29, 1985, p. 27.

3. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1979, p. 911; *Time*, July 29, 1985, p. 27.

4. Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 913.

communication with Peking. A major American initiative of fundamental importance to the global balance of power could not have survived if we colluded with the Soviet Union in the public humiliation of China's friend and our ally."⁵

The South Asian crisis of 1971 is a classic example of presidential leadership in foreign policy. As the crisis was deepening later that year. US policy toward South Asia was almost exclusively determined by the President and his National Security Adviser often to the exclusion (and ignorance) of the foreign policy bureaucracy. "On no issue except perhaps Cambodia", Kissinger recalls, "was the split between the White House and the departments so profound as on the India-Pakistan crisis in the summer of 1971."⁶ As a result, more and more of our (US) policy was pulled into the White House", where Nixon Kissinger could control it.⁷ The White House decisions were also often made in the face of steep opposition from the Congress and the media.⁸

The "tilt" policy and the decision to send the nuclear carrier to the Bay of Bengal with the ominous risk of superpower confrontation over a regional dispute has been defended and hailed by Kissinger as a "conspicuously courageous" act of Nixon.⁹ He maintains that history will absolve Nixon for "his courage and patriotism in making such a decision...to preserve the world balance of power for the ultimate safety of all free people".¹⁰

A number of pertinent questions may be raised in this context : what was the reason for the failure of US policy makers to be sensitive to the democratic and nationalist aspirations of the people of Bangladesh ? Was it motivated by a desire to thwart the Indian design "to

5. *ibid.*, p. 900.

6. *ibid.*, pp. 863-64.

7. *ibid.*, p. 900.

8. *ibid.*, pp. 858, 869, 874-75; *New York Times*, June 17, June 22, 1971 ; *Washington Post*, July 5, October 22, and December 7, 1971.

9. Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 905.

10. *ibid.*, p. 911.

establish its preeminence on subcontinent", or to deny the Soviets a strategic opportunity? Why did Nixon decide to "tilt" toward Pakistan at the risk of driving India to the Soviet side? Was it primarily because of Pakistan's crucial role as the "only channel" to Beijing? Were the treaty obligations so formidable to support Pakistan? This paper is an attempt at answering some of these questions.

US FOREIGN POLICY MAKING

In his insightful and provocative study of US foreign policy, Richard W. Cottam has argued that US diplomacy has failed to accommodate itself to the changing circumstances of technological revolution and mass awakening in the Third World.¹¹ He has emphasized on the change of diplomatic environment in the world since the turn of the present century. The political awakening in the Third World has turned the whims of kings or intrigues of traditional oligarchy frivolous. In matters of foreign policy decision-making, the question of nationalism and popular movements are to be of immense consideration.¹² He calls the present style of diplomacy an ad-hoc one which suits the needs of the 18th and 19th centuries. The new realities of the 20th century calls for a new diplomacy based on a long-range strategy.¹³

One of the most important factors of the failure of US policy in Middle East and other sensitive areas, Cottam forcefully argues, is the lack of an understanding of the mass awakening and the resulting nationalism in those areas. So, what is needed, is a fundamental situational analysis and an outline of the direction of change on the basis of which a long-term strategy can be formulated. The advances in nuclear technology have reduced the possibility of total war between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result, the

11. Richard W. Cottam, *Competitive Interference and Twentieth Century*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967, p. 1

12. *ibid*, pp. 3-12.

13. *ibid*, p. 2.

adversaries are apt to turn to limited and proxy wars. Even limited warfare, it is argued, would be to control and contain. Consequently, it is concluded that limited warfare may be the "ultimate recourse". So, focus of attention on the part of the foreign policy makers should turn to the various forms of opposition, insurrectionist, and guerrilla movements.¹⁴ In formulating a long-term strategy, a thorough "understanding of the socio-political-economic situation, including the major trends of that situation for every state in the world" is needed.¹⁵

In doing situational analysis, the foreign policy maker has to keep in mind the relationship of the international system and the regional (sub) system. Subsystem crisis has often great ramifications for the international system. The foreign policy maker should also be aware of the system of leverage that can be used. Cottam suggests a typology of levers. There are two types of levers available to a foreign government—active and passive. Active lever is applied in an attempt to compel another government to follow a certain specific course of action promising a reward that can be withheld, or by threatening some punishment. On the other hand, when passive lever is applied, the target government is persuaded to follow a certain, usually general course of action by pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of such course of action.¹⁶

That the US policy toward the Bangladesh crisis was not based on a situational analysis is the main proposition of this essay. Thus, it was unresponsive to the nationalist aspect of the original crisis and failed to manipulate this situation in its own favour. US policy not only reflected extra-ordinary unsensitivity to the Bengali cause, it also drove the Awami League (AL), leading party of the Bangladesh movement known for its traditional pro-Western orientation, to the Indo-Soviet axis. Nixon-Kissinger strategy focusing on the China initiative disregarded the objective realities of the South Asian subcon-

14. *ibid*, p. 20.

15. *ibid*, p. 22.

16. *ibid*, p. 84.

continent and a lasting effect of this policy is India's closer strategic relationship with the Soviet Union.

Since nationalism will be the main thrust of the analysis of US policy toward the Bangladesh crisis, the term nationalism needs some clarification. Despite the phenomenal growth of nationalism over the past few centuries, the literature of nationalism still remains underdeveloped. Its definition is often too vague and means too many different things to the divergent observers. Nationalism is often equated with patriotism and other related concepts. One of the best definitions of nationalism has been advanced by Rupert Emerson. "Reduced to its barebones," he suggests, "nationalism is no more than the assertion of a particular 'we' arranged against the particular 'they' of the rest of mankind, by itself giving no clue as how the 'we' may choose to manage its own affairs."¹⁷ This definition does not make explicit relation between nationalism and statehood. But the contemporary phenomenon of nationalism is associated with the belief of a political community in its inalienable right to statehood. The votaries of nationalism claim the primary and terminal allegiance of the citizens to the nation-state.

Although the concept of nationalism is believed to have a distinct European flavour, Selig S. Harrison has warned against this eurocentricism. This mode of analysis, he argues, "is only superficially relevant to the developing countries today and is peculiarly blind to the character and power of nationalism in Asia."¹⁸ In the Asian context, where the majority of the present states are multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, or multi-racial, sub-nationalism and nationalism are often indistinguishable and are both expressions of the same phenomenon.¹⁹ This perplexing situation calls for a better understanding and respon-

17. Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation*, (Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 213.

18. Selig S. Harrison, *The Widening Gulf* (New York : Free Press, 1978) p. 4.

19. *ibid*, p. 12.

siveness on the part of the US policy makers to deal with this complex issue more to their advantage.

BACKGROUND OF THE CRISIS

Now let us turn briefly to the background of the Bangladesh crisis, i.e., the genesis of Bangladesh nationalism in this section. The swelling of the twin demand of nationalism and democracy in East Pakistan over the years attracted little attention of the US policy makers. The political developments in Pakistan, particularly in its eastern wing, were assigned a low priority, though the subcontinent itself constituted an "ideal subject for long-range studies" in US perception even at the beginning of 1971. No serious crisis was expected to sway the subcontinent which could ultimately threaten the international order.²⁰

Pakistan came into being as a Muslim state in 1947. It was carved out of the Indian subcontinent to give effect to the Muslim demand for a separate homeland. Pakistan was unique in many ways—the two parts of the country were separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory. The only feeble nexus between the people of the two parts was that of religion. The two wings of Pakistan represented different languages, cultures, customs, and traditions.

The Bengali Muslims played a key role in the Pakistan movement under the aegis of the Muslim League in colonial India. They were economically, socially and politically backward than their Hindu neighbours. Their separatist role was, in fact, the sequel of the prospects of Hindu domination in independent India. Despite their pioneering role, Bengali representation in the central leadership of the Muslim League movement was scanty. The party at the all-India level was dominated by the big landlords and newly emerging Muslim entrepreneurial classes of present Pakistan and other parts of North India. When Pakistan came into being, political power was virtually monopolized by West Pakistani refugee leaders settled there. Agony of the Bengali Muslims was not only confined to the deprivation of

20. Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 849-50.

political power at the centre. The shrewd maneuverings of the central leadership were successful to push popular Bengali leaders like Fazlul Huq and H.S. Suhrawardy to political wilderness temporarily.

The result was almost inevitable. A deep sense of frustration began to take roots in the Bengali mind in the wake of partition. This frustration prompted the Bengalis to form their own political organization, the Awami Muslim League (the name was later changed to drop "Muslim" from its nomenclature thereby giving it a more secular character) followed by the proliferation of other nationalist leftist, and secular political organizations in East Bengal.²¹ The Awami League readily grew in strength by successfully using the Bengali discontent against the central authorities. The state language issue, i.e., the central government's determination to make Urdu as the sole state language was crucial to its development. As the Pakistani ruling elite was taking more and more authoritarian turn, the language question became intertwined with the demand of full provincial autonomy for East Bengal. The championing of the aspirations of Bengalis made the Awami League the most organized and powerful political force in East Pakistan in a short span of time.

A much-delayed constitutional scheme presented by the Pakistani central ruling elite worked to the aggrandizement of Bengali discontent instead of containing it. One shocking feature of this scheme was that it purported to sharply reduce the numerical superiority of the Bengalis in the structure of the proposed central government. Furthermore, the demands of autonomy and recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages were laid to rest. These constitutional proposals ignited a fierce protest movement in East Bengal and finally a quasi-federal type constitution which was slightly favourable to the Bengalis was adopted nearly a decade after independence. Even this constitution did not reflect the perennial Bengali theme of autonomy.²²

21. The terms East Bengal and East Pakistan are used interchangeably here.

22. See, for details G.W. Choudhury, *Constitutional Development in Pakistan* (London : Longman 1969).

Bengali experience at the centre was exasperated by the central manoeuvrings in East Pakistan politics. The victorious United Front government that came to power by defeating the Muslim League in the province was summarily dismissed by the central government in 1954. However, the Bengalis had a brief experience to act as a minor partner of a coalition government at the center with Suhrawardy as the Prime Minister in 1956-57. The Bengali sense of alienation was considerably reduced by this short-lived coalition. The Bengalis, for the first time, felt some sense of efficacy and political power. However, Suhrawardy's Bengali sympathies outraged the vested interested groups in West Pakistan and triggered them to dislodge this coalition government.²³

Despite Suhrawardy's ignominious exit from power, the Bengalis were keenly waiting for the first general elections to be held in early 1959. The prospects of the Awami League coming to power at the centre by forming alliance with some West Pakistani interests were bright which alarmed the central ruling elite. This feartriggered an army coup under General Ayub Khan only five months before the scheduled elections. Ayub Khan ruled Pakistan for a period of eleven years with the backing of the civil-military bureaucracy in which Bengali representation was abominably meager. Although the representation of the Bengalis improved slightly in these two institutions during the Ayub era, East Pakistan's share of the military officers stood at less than 10 per cent. Its representation in the civil bureaucracy never exceeded 30 percent, while Bengali presence in the important central secretariat positions was marginal.²⁴ During the the long military rule of Ayub, the disparity between the two parts of Pakistan reached such an appalling state that the Bengalis lost all hopes of attaining political power and economic emancipation.

23. Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Group Interests in Pakistan Politics, 1947-1958", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 39 (1&2), 1966, pp. 90-91.

24. Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 62, 98.

Pakistan's phenomenal industrial growth was marred by a skewed growth pattern to the advantage of West Pakistan only.

Side by side with the advocates of autonomy on the political stage, the articulate Bengali economists advanced the "two-economy" theory. They argued that the "single-economy" policy pursued by the central government actually worked to the disadvantage of East Pakistan. They demanded that the economy of the two regions be regarded as separate, and regional control over revenue and foreign trade policies be established.²⁵

The deplorable economic disparity and the lack of Bengali representation in the upper crest of civil and military bureaucracies, the two key institutions which were in charge of running the country in the absence of democratic political process with an accompanying sense of utter frustration and ineffectiveness, contributed to the growth of militant Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan. The constitution that Ayub introduced and its ingenious electorate system assured the Bengalis "that they had the least chance of securing political power" in the existing system of Pakistan.²⁶

Under the prevailing circumstance of East Pakistani estrangement, Sheikh Mujib emerged as the new paladin of the throttled Bengali aspirations. Mujib, a pro-western middle class politician, became the new leader of the Awami League after the death of Suhrawardy. He was a populist leader par excellence and soon turned into the chief exponent of Bengali nationalist demands. He systematically advanced the Bengali demands in the famous 6-point formula which he termed the "charter of survival". The six-point programme envisaged a

25. For analysis of the "two-economy" thesis, see M. Anisur Rahman, *East and West Pakistan* (Cambridge ; Harvard University Center for International Studies, 1968).

26. Fazal Muqem Khan, a Pakistani General, made this admission : See his, *Pakistan's Crisis in Leadership* (Islamabad : National Book Foundation, 1973), p. 7.

loose federal and parliamentary type constitution where central authority would be limited to only two subjects – defense and foreign affairs. This programme readily captured the imagination of the Bengali public particularly, the middle class. It immediately sparked a mass movement in East Pakistan. The urban areas were almost on the verge of a nationalist explosion which soon spread to the countryside.²⁷

Pakistani central authorities pursued a hardline policy of oppression in response to the rising tide of Bengali nationalism. The leading actors of the Awami League including Mujib were imprisoned and implicated in anti-state treason charges. However, a mass upsurge in 1968–69 swept the military regime of Ayub Khan. Yahya Khan, the new military leader of Pakistan, announced the schedule for the first ever general elections to be held in 1970. He announced the elections in order to contain the mass upsurge that rocked both the wings of Pakistan. He also calculated that no political party would be able to hold a majority in the National Assembly given the regional orientations of the major contenders. The military expected to play the role of mediator in the context of sharp regional and ethnic cleavages and thus to continue its dominance in the political system.

However, the political stage in East Pakistan was taking an increasingly militant turn. The mass movement that dislodged Ayub also played an important role in the radicalization of the Bengali masses. Mujib's popularity reached an all-time record and he soon emerged as the symbol of Bengali nationalism. As a result of swollen radicalization of the East Pakistani scene, a new rhetoric of socialism was added to the earlier twin ideology of democracy and nationalism.²⁸ Mujib and his party acknowledged this change by incorporating socialism in its party ideology. However, this incorporation should

27. For a detailed account of the six-point movement, see Talukder Maniruzzaman, *Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*, (Dhaka, BBI, 1980), Chapter II.

28. Radicalization of East Bengal political scene has been studied by Talukder Maniruzzaman in his, *Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh* (Dhaka : BBI, 1975).

not be construed as an ideological revolution in the Awami League. It was rather an attempt to manipulate the situation in its favour by a political party committed to pragmatic politics.

The Awami League fought the 1970 elections with utter enthusiasm and sought a clear mandate on the six-point so that the future constitution of Pakistan could be framed according to the autonomy principles embodied in the six-point programme. The election result was a spectacular victory of the Awami League. It won 167 out of 169 seats, i. e., 98 per cent seats from East Pakistan which ensured it a clear majority in the National Assembly. The Awami League victory inverted the calculations of the military. The AL's insistence to frame a constitution guaranteeing maximum autonomy for East Pakistan pushed the ruling junta in a difficult position. Yahya postponed the first session of the newly elected assembly set for March 3, 1971 to pressure Mujib to come to terms with West Pakistani leaders. This, in turn, sparked a spontaneous mass movement of an unprecedented magnitude. Yahya flew to Dhaka to hold talks with Mujib ostensibly to buy some time to launch military offensive in the East. After a series of negotiations, the junta made the fateful decision to crackdown on the unarmed Bengalis on March 25, 1971 which ultimately resulted in the emergence of Bangladesh.

Awami League : Class and Orientation

A few words need to be added here about the political orientation of the Awami League as it will be argued later that the US policy makers failed to take cognizance of pro-western leanings of the leading organization of the Bangladesh movement. A western observer has aptly described the Awami League as "a moderate, pro-American, nationalist party "that" has never been...committed to the reorganization of East Bengal's social structure. The interests of its leaders have been limited to the expansion of their own political and economic influence within the existing order."²⁹ It has been a party of rising

29. Nicole Ball, *Regional Conflict and the International System* (Sussex : ISIO, 1974), p. 4,

Bengali middle and entrepreneurial classes since its inception. The pro-American orientation of the Awami League has been quite pronounced and the party underwent a split on the questions of alliance with the United States and regional autonomy.³⁰ When Awami League leader Suhrawardy became the Prime Minister of Pakistan, he aggressively defended Pakistan's membership in US alliance system. He even described Pakistan as "the most allied ally" of the United States in Asia.³¹

There were reports that the Awami League had political and financial backing of the United States, especially during 1970 elections. Even Kissinger mentioned about reported West Pakistani suspicion of US support to the Awami League. The trend of pro-American proclivity of the Awami League continued even after the emergence of Bangladesh inspite of its anti-imperialist rhetorics. Mujib did not want to be pushed to the Soviet side peremptorily, so he was quite reluctant to use the Soviet navy to clear the Chittagong harbour in early 1972.³³ The Awami League leadership came from well - educated upper middle class background and their members of parliament belonged to high income affluent sections of Bangladesh society.³⁴ As such the Soviet support to the Bangladesh movement was very cautious initially. It took several months for them to take the Awami League into full confidence. Brezhnev is reported to have said in late September 1971 that "there is an element of national liberation present in the situation".³⁵ The Awami League was, in fact, the political party of the

30. Maniruzzaman, *Bangladesh Revolution*, p. 37.

31. M. A. H. Ispahani, "The Foreign Policy of Pakistan, 1947-64", *Pakistan Horizon*, 17(3), p. 231.

32. Nicole Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 853.

33. Nicole Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 53-4.

34. Talukder Maniruzzaman, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-29; Rounaq Jahan, *Bangladesh Politics* (Dhaka : UPL, 1980), pp. 148-9.

35. Mueyedul Hasan, a close aide of Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, was in charge of negotiating with the Indian and Soviet officials during the

leading elites of East Pakistan in 1971. They grew in strength and consolidated their position during the 1960s.³⁶

BANGLADESH CRISIS AND THE EXTERNAL RESPONSE

Although the subcontinental crisis grew out of a domestic dispute, the regional and external big powers were gradually drawn into the vortex of this quandary. India was immediately drawn into the centerstage of this drama by the influx of millions of refugees after the Pakistani crackdown. Also, the leading elements of the Awami League and other pro-Bangladesh forces crossed over to India. As the reports of atrocities by Pakistani forces were making international headlines, an overwhelmed Indian parliament passed a unanimous resolution expressing wholehearted "sympathy and support" for the Bengalis before the expiry of the first week of the crisis.³⁷ This quick response of India should not be interpreted as part of its "grand design" to dismember Pakistan as it has been consistently done by Pakistan. In fact, India was not prepared about this contingency on its eastern flank, so it adopted a cautious policy of "limited help and wait" at the initial stage. It also ruled out the possibility of direct military intervention as the exiled Bangladesh government was pressing for such action.³⁸ At this point, interestingly enough, the Indians, Soviets, and Americans were all in favour of continuation of a united Pakistan considering their strategic interests.³⁹

Bangladesh movement period. His book gives an inside story of Indo-Soviet responses to the Bangladesh movement at different phases. See, *Muldhara Ekattor* (Dhaka : UPL, 1986), p. 111, See also, pp. 35-6, 40-41.

36. Abu Abdullah, "The Class Basis of Nationalism : Pakistan and Bangladesh", in Barbara Thomas and Spencer Haven, eds, *West Bengal and Bangladesh* (East Lansing : Asian Studies Center, 1973).
37. *Statesman* (Calcutta), April 1, 1971.
38. Muyeedul Hassan *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 30.
39. Christophar Van Hollen, *op. cit.*, p. 341 ; Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 852; Muyeedul Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

The unfolding of the crisis created a delicate situation for the Indian policy makers. The influx of refugees and the cost involved in maintaining them, the unprecedented scale of brutalities perpetrated by the Pakistanis inside Bangladesh, the tremendous domestic pressure to support the Bangladesh cause more decisively, and finally the opportunity presented by the crisis to settle the issue of regional supremacy once for all these factors were responsible for shaping the Indian policy. As the Chinese and US insensitivity to the Bangladesh cause as against their diplomatic support to Pakistan was evident, the Indian policy makers reckoned the risk of any hasty action. So, they first tried to bring about a diplomatic solution favourable to the Bangladesh cause.⁴⁰ Indira Gandhi's whirlwind tour of western European and US capitals during the later part of the year was a manifestation of India's willingness to try diplomatic course of action.

Of the external powers, the Soviet Union came out openly to denounce Pakistani army action in East Pakistan. In early April the Soviet President sent a letter to Yahya calling for an end to the military repression in East Pakistan and for a "political solution". As mentioned earlier the Soviet Union did not consider the dismemberment of Pakistan at the inception of the festering crisis. Despite the strongly worded letter of Podgorny, The Soviet Union was not making overt gestures of support to the Bangladesh movement. Abdus Samad Azad, a high-ranking representative of the exiled Bangladesh government, was not given interview by the Soviet party or government leaders in May "despite his earnest efforts".⁴¹ The Soviet response was very cautious, somewhat negative toward the Bangladesh movement when first contact was made between the Soviet representative and the exiled government in June.⁴² However the Soviet Union changed its early perception regarding the struggle

40. Nicole Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 28; Muyeedul Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 42-45.

41. Muyeedul Hasan. *op. cit.*, p. 35.

42. *ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

of the people of Bangladesh later that year.⁴³ The changed Soviet perception resulted from a reevaluation of the social forces that led the Bangladesh movement as well as out of its geopolitical interests.

The first official Chinese response to the crisis was basically a reaction to Indian interference with Pakistan's internal affairs. The Chinese insensitivity to the developments inside Bangladesh is comparable to the US position. It did not publicly condemn the Pakistani military repression. However Chinese military aid to Pakistan during the crisis was not significant.⁴⁴ Despite its hardline anti-Indian statements, it was revealed later that China had advised Yahya for a political settlement in East Pakistan regardless of Chinese support to maintain integrity of Pakistan.⁴⁵ However, Chinese verbal support for Pakistan took an aggressive tone when war broke out. It accused the Soviet Union and India of their evil design to establish Indian "hegemony" in the region. The Chinese position was partially shaped by its perception of Mujib as a national bourgeois leader.

After the fateful night of March 25, the US policy was illustrative of abysmal insensitivity to nationalist and democratic aspirations of the Third World. Instantaneous US response was "not to do anything" in spite of the urging of the US diplomats in Delhi and Dhaka for a prompt, prominent, and public denouncement of Yahya's "brutality". They also called for an immediate suspension of all military deliveries to Pakistan.⁴⁶ Obsessed with his China initiative, Nixon was willing to override other concerns of paramount importance. As such, his handwritten instruction was: "Do not squeeze Yahya at this time".⁴⁷ Even Kissinger admitted that the administration "reacted in the ungenerous spirit; there was some merit to the charge of moral insensitivity.

43. *ibid*, pp. 136-37.

44. Nicole Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

45. Mueeedul Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

46. Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 853.

47. *ibid*, p. 856.

48. *ibid*, p. 854.

LOOK FOR THE COMING ISSUES OF

biiss journal

The **biiss journal** brings out four times a year articles dealing with issues both of national and international importance.

The Institute welcomes contributions and comments.

LOOK FOR THE COMING ISSUES OF

biiss journal

Enquire :

PUBLICATION OFFICER

**BANGLADESH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL
AND STRATEGIC STUDIES**

1/46, ELEPHANT ROAD (FORMER AIR HOUSE)

DHAKA, BANGLADESH

TEL : 406234

Nixon ordered our (US) Consul General transferred from Dacca; he ridiculed Keating for having been taken over by the Indians."⁴⁸

The China initiative obscured the visions of Nixon and Kissinger who were quietly engaged in negotiating with Beijing, something which senior officials of the State Department were totally ignorant about. Nixon's eagerness to open up with China heavily influenced US policy toward the Bangladesh crisis. Kissinger expressed "profound gratefulness" to Pakistan for its role as the channel to China. He maintains, "we had...every incentive to maintain Pakistan's goodwill. It was our crucial link to Peking; and Pakistan was one of China's closest allies".⁴⁹ Pakistan's role as the channel to China figures most prominently in Kissinger's account of the crisis, it is mentioned at 18 different times. Whereas, the Bengali struggle for independence and democracy finds no place in his aggressive defense of US policy. The valiant Mukti Bahini is mentioned as "the so-called Mukti Bahini". His obfuscated vision only captured "the excesses of brutality of" the Indian-trained" Mukti Bahini,⁵⁰ while there is no mention of the three million Bengalis butchered by the Pakistanis.

Kissinger made it clear that the China initiative was the most important factor in shaping US policy toward the crisis. The claim that Islamabad was "the only channel" for opening with China has been contested by other senior officials of the State Department. They argue that other sources like Romania or Japan could have been utilized.⁵¹ Nixon's coloured judgements have partially been influenced by his long-standing dislike for India and Indira. He considered the State Department's traditional leaning toward India as obsequious, while his personal preference for Pakistan was quite well-known.⁵²

As the crisis continued, substantial sections of the American public, media, and Congress expressed their outrage at the Nixon-

49. *ibid*, p. 853.

50. *ibid*, pp. 855, 915.

51. Christopher Van Hollen, *op. cit*, p. 340; Grant Parr, "Geopolitics and East Bengal", *Foreign Service Journal*, 57 (1), January, 1980 p. 36.

52. Henry Kissinger, *op. cit*, pp. 848-49.

Kissinger policy. The State Department even imposed a suspension of military aid to Pakistan in view of reported use of US-supplied tanks and aircrafts in the suppression of Bengalis. However, the White House overrode the State Department proposal to stop all economic aid to Pakistan arguing that such an action would constitute "an intrusion in internal problems".⁵³ Despite ban on arms supply shipment of spare parts and military equipments was reported in the press. US jet liners were leased out to PIA for troop movement.⁵⁴ Moreover, the US overlooked third-party supply of arms through Jordan, Iran, and Turkey. From early July, the United States was increasingly tilting toward Pakistan.

After Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing via Islamabad, President Nixon's historic 1972 visit to China was announced on July 15. India was greatly alarmed by the Sino-US detente, since it perceived China as the greatest threat to its security since the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Moreover, the Chinese support to Pakistan and the emerging Washington-Beijing-Islamabad axis was perceived by India as an impending threat to its own security and a great obstacle to the Bangladesh cause. The announcement of the Nixon trip pushed India to the Soviet Union completely and to enter into the Soviet alliance system by relinquishing its traditional neutrality. The signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty in August was described by Kissinger as a "bomb shell".⁵⁵ Although the negotiations for this treaty had been going on for previous two years, the signing of the treaty in August was significant. India wanted to dispel the anxieties generated by the emerging Sino-Soviet rapprochement. This treaty was concluded at a historical juncture when India demonstrated "a renewed willingness to develop a cooperative relationship with the United States".⁵⁶ This is why there was sharp editorial criticism against what was described as driving India to the Soviets as a desperate last resort⁵⁷.

53. *International Herald Tribune*, June 30, 1971.

54. *New York Times*, June 22, 1971; Muyeedul Hasan, *op. cit.*, pp. 46, 67-9.

55. Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.* p. 866.

56. Cristopher Van Hollen, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

57. Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 868.

In total disregard to the developments inside Bangladesh, the United States perceived growing Indo-Soviet alliance as a reflection of Indian determination to "establish its preeminence on the subcontinent" reinforced by the Soviet intention to blow the US "system of alliance" and "to demonstrate Chinese impotence".⁵⁸ From September to December, US Policy toward the South Asian crisis was characterized by a high degree of concentration of power in Presidential leadership.⁵⁹ *The Anderson Papers* revealed the extraordinary role played by Nixon and Kissinger during the crisis. The intensity of Nixon's personal involvement can be illustrated by the following conversation of Kissinger during a meeting of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG), a subcommittee of the National Security Council, on December 3. He stated, "I am getting hell every half-hour from the President that we are not being tough enough to India. He has just called me again. He does not believe we are carrying out his wishes."⁶⁰ He also made it emphatically clear that the United States was no more trying to be "even handed" in South Asia.⁶¹

It seems that while the US policy makers took a grim view of Indo-Soviet intentions, they were nearly oblivious of the activities of the Bengali freedom fighters. Not only guerrillas trained in India were active all over occupied Bangladesh, many local groups were organized through their own initiatives. These freedom fighters were increasingly making the position of the Pakistan army vulnerable. As a result, road transportation came down to one-tenth of previous months' tally causing great drain on the economy before the beginning of September.⁶² The guerrillas were not only successful in demoralizing the Pakistan army, they were able to establish vast liberated areas in the

58. *ibid*, pp. 885-6.

59. Dan Haendel. *The Process of Priority Formation*, (Boulder Co: Westview Press, 1977), p. 112.

60. Jack Anderson, *The Anderson Papers* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 227.

61. *ibid*, p. 228

62. *The Times*, September 13, 1971.

countryside and the bordering areas by early November. They were successful in paralyzing the communication systems completely by the end of November. As a result of heightened attacks of the guerrillas, there was virtually no administration in rural areas, no industry could function. The success of the freedom fighters was so real that it made their leaders claim that the Indian Army just walked in when we (the Mukti Bahini) had already finished the job".⁶⁴

The claim of near-victory of the freedom fighters may be somewhat exaggerated, but their pinching attacks unnerved the Pakistani Generals. Squeezed by the guerrilla activities supported by India, Pakistan started a full-scale war with India on December 3. By that time the US "tilt" toward Pakistan was overwhelmingly exposed. Despite the opposition of the State Department and the Congress, Nixon was for whatever reasons determined to hurt India more.⁶⁵ He took personal initiative to view the support of Western Europe in favour of Pakistan, but Britain and France decided to stay aloof.⁶⁶ When Nixon and Kissinger were eager to support Pakistan under the provisions of US-Pakistan treaty agreements, the State Department quickly painted out that "no binding obligation existed".⁶⁷ When the Pakistani commander in East Pakistan sent a message expressing willingness to surrender on December 10, the US dissuaded Pakistan from such an action.⁶⁸

In direct contrast with the Bengali aspirations, the Nixon administration sent a part of the 7th fleet a nuclear aircraft carrier, USS Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal risking a war of incredible magnitude with the other superpower. The sending of the USS Enterprise was later defended by Kissinger as a move to restrain the Indians and Soviets and to safeguard the integrity of West Pakistan. This explanation, however, does not seem very convincing as India sent clear

63. Talukder Maniruzzaman, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

64. *ibid.*, p. 124.

65. Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 885.

66. *ibid.*, pp. 891, 899.

67. *ibid.* pp. 92-3, 95.

68. *ibid.*, pp. 905-6; Muyeedul Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 211-2.

indications that it did not have any territorial designs in West Pakistan.⁶⁹

The intense handling of the crisis by Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Kissinger, is reflected in the first use of the hotline with Moscow. Washington was willing to pay a high price to come to Pakistan's aid—the emerging detente with the Soviet Union was threatened by the announcement of cancellation of the scheduled Moscow summit. However, the emergence of Bangladesh could only be stalled for a few days by the dangerous manoeuvres of the US administration, but the inevitable could not be thwarted. The Pakistani forces signed the instrument of surrender on December 16 when the US aircraft carrier was resting in the deep waters of the Bay of Bengal.

CONCLUSIONS

US policy during the festering crisis reflects an ad-hoc nature of US foreign policy. US policy makers were taken aback by the developments in Pakistan. Neither the foreign policy bureaucracy nor top policy makers were prepared for this contingency, nor did South Asia figure as an ideal subject for immediate studies in their strategic thinking.

Going back to the questions posed at the outset of this paper, it can be safely concluded that US policy was not responsive to the Bengali cause because of its lack of situational analysis. Ad-hoc style of diplomacy is bound to be less comprehensive in its scope, often to the disregard of vital issues. It is hardly credible that the United States supported Pakistan because of previous treaty obligations or of later's membership in the US alliance system. The United States pursued a policy of "even handedness" since 1965 and US-Pakistan relations were not as warm as the early years of the cold war.

Nixon's decision to tilt to Pakistan reflects a high degree of personal preference than any carefully formulated policy. Nixon and

69. Henry Kissinger, *op cit*, pp. 905-14.

Kissinger were so much obsessed with their China initiative that their judgements were often coloured. Infatuated by the emerging Sino-US detente, they did not want to displease Islamabad, the channel to China. Although Pakistan was not the only channel available, the dependence of the US on Yahya on this count may partially justify "massive inaction" at the beginning of the crisis. However, this excuse does not seem to be acceptable after the Kissinger trip when direct contact was made with China in July. Moreover, later that year the Chinese delegation at the UN was available for direct diplomatic contact. The argument that the United States was more cautious not to be on the wrong side of China also does not seem plausible. The year 1971 was only the beginning of a *de facto* Sino-US alliance, so that active collaboration on major issues was still an unthinkable proposition. They had a lot of issues to sort out. This was a time when China was actively supporting the Vietnamese and Cambodians in their struggle against the US. The Chinese stand did not jeopardize their quest for closer relations.

A more neutral US position could have presented a completely different scenario in South Asia. US sensitivity to the nationalist and democratic aspirations in Bangladesh would have contributed to the continuity of pro-American leaning of the Awami League elites. It would have also denied the Soviet Union an expanded influence in South Asia formalized through the Indo-Soviet treaty.

The importance of nationalism as a focus of policy decision has been emphasized in this paper. Foreign policy makers are expected to recognize the importance of this factor; otherwise policy bungling is likely to be repeated in other areas of the Third World. Nationalism remains to be a potent force dividing the world. Even beneath the ideological cloak of class struggle, nationalism and national interest determined much of conflicting issues between China and the Soviet Union, or China and Vietnam. Hence there is hardly any escape from the recognition of nationalism as an important factor in the contemporary world order.