

Genocide, ethical imperatives and the strategic significance of asymmetric power: India's diplomatic and military interventions in the Bangladesh Liberation War (Indo-Pakistan War of 1971)

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand if the political, legal and ethical imperatives of a humanitarian war justified Indian military intervention in East Pakistan. It examines the asymmetric, dynamic national power equations that shaped the Bangladesh Liberation War and the genocide that preceded the conflict. At the height of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, this conflict was a key flashpoint in South Asia. This research was undertaken through a qualitative literature review with the help of declassified archival documents and media from numerous national archives and government databases across the world. Aided by emerging insights, perspectives and research, this paper seeks to evolve, extend and expand our existing understanding of events as they unfolded within the overall matrix of this conflict. The results show that India's ability to align its foreign policy and media narratives to its military objectives while adroitly managing big power rivalry holds lessons for how smaller states might compel strategic concessions from big powers and global institutions. This requires them to navigate both the asymmetry of national power and the asymmetry of attention during a conflict to secure their interests. In conclusion, recent times have seen an increasing trend for major global powers and alliances to declare war in the name of humanitarianism. The political and ethical imperatives of a humanitarian war in 1971 dovetailed seamlessly with larger Indian strategic goals and was one of the catalysts for the eventual unanimous adoption in 2005 of the global political commitment known as Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in the United Nations.

Keywords:

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Introduction

The Bangladesh Liberation War (the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971) marked the culmination of decades of strained relations between India and Pakistan. Both these nations were born in the crucible of partition in 1947 abetted by the receding British Empire. This paper seeks to examine the asymmetric power equations that shaped this conflict as the pre-eminent powers of the Cold War era, the United States, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, ruthlessly chased their national interests and agenda. India sought to navigate these dynamic asymmetries and retain the space to manoeuvre in order to secure her own geo strategic interests.

These were the core influences that shaped Indian foreign policy of the time as it evolved before, around and during the conflict.

Indian strategic goals in 1971 were primarily aimed at strengthening its role in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. This required a paradigm shift in the foreign policy orientation of India throughout the 1960s amidst the rapid convergence of Chinese, Pakistani and the US interests. India sought to balance these developments through its key partnership with the Soviet Union.

In the decade preceding 1971, a titanic battle of competing narratives unfolded in the capitals of the world and the United Nations. It took place amidst the shifting sands of global media and public opinion. The role of Indian diplomacy in articulating the case for Bangladesh's self-determination along with the ethical and moral dimensions of this conflict did much to prepare the grounds for a successful Indian military intervention.

The paper aims to examine the dynamic matrix and myriad reasons that shaped the motivations of the major stakeholders in the conflict. As often happens in cases of genocide, it seeks to examine the reasons behind the subsuming of humanitarian and ethical imperatives to overarching national interests. It seeks to approach the evolution of this conflict from varied viewpoints to arrive at a deeper more layered and nuanced understanding of unfolding events.

The role of the Pakistani government and its civilian militias in the state-sponsored genocide that was carried out in the cities, towns and villages of Bangladesh in 1971 has been widely researched and documented. Despite that, there remain serious distortions of history regarding the sheer scope and magnitude of this genocide. The failure to acknowledge these genocidal outrages remains a part of ceaseless attempts by the Pakistani state, its allies and proxies to absolve themselves of any guilt or responsibility.

This denial has been aided and abetted the complicity of global governments, organisations, and institutions, both then and now, in turning a blind eye to this horrific genocide.

This research was undertaken through a qualitative literature review with the help of declassified archival documents, secondary literature, oral histories and multimedia sources from numerous national archives, government and public domain databases. These included the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Department of Defence Archives (USA), National Archives of India, Federal Archival Service (FAS, Russia), The CREST database (CIA), The National Archives (United Kingdom), United Nations Audio Visual Library, Bangladesh Genocide Archive, Library of Congress and the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Data was cross-referenced to reinforce analysis, eliminate gaps and avoid the confirmation bias trap inherent in the dissemination of historical events by nations, organisations and individuals.

This paper seeks to cast light upon the reasons why the Bangladesh's genocide of 1971 and the systematic ethnic cleansing of Bengali Intelligentsia, Hindus and anyone deemed inimical to the Pakistani state remains largely forgotten. It is an attempt to foster a new body of research, education, atonement and justice for the memories of the victims.

The road to war

The seeds of the momentous victory in Bangladesh were ironically sown in the crushing military defeat of India by China in 1962. It marked a watershed moment in the evolution, structure and conduct of Indian foreign and security policies, driven till then by non-alignment and the naïve idealism of a post-colonial India.

India had understood the limits of the Non-Aligned movement by the failure of its members to condemn the Indo-China border war. Even after Nehru's demise in 1964, his immediate successors Gulzari Lal Nanda, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi continued to pay lip service to a national policy of non-alignment. While this rhetoric remained a staple of Indian foreign policy in theory, in practice things were changing. In the decade leading up to the 1971 war with Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh, India owed much of its success to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's primary policy objective driven relentlessly by its diplomats: that India's security goals were of primary importance in its foreign policy.

In the 1950s, Pakistan was a US ally through its membership of Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). These were regional mutual defence alliances promoted by the United States and its allies to secure the Middle East and Asian region from communist expansion and to frustrate the geopolitical aims of the Soviet Union. Pakistan was drawn into the US orbit, both by its primary interest in settling the Kashmir issue (over which it had already gone to war with India in 1965) and the lucrative US economic and military aid. These it believed would help neutralise its economically and militarily stronger neighbour India.

Indian foreign policy in the lead up to 1971 sought to counterbalance the relative strength of the Pakistani leadership under the American sphere of influence. The Nixon–Kissinger-driven US tilt against her produced a corresponding Indian tilt towards the Soviet Union forcing it to move away from its earlier non-aligned position.

India, Pakistan and the three powers in the game The United States

From 1969 onwards, Pakistan was the facilitator for back-channel approaches between the United States and China. This led to the immensely significant secret visit by Henry Kissinger to Beijing in July 1971 during a trip to Pakistan—a critical first step towards rapprochement. The direct consequence of Pakistani involvement and Cold War politics meant all the major players, the United States, the Soviet Union and China, had differing perspectives about the events unfolding in East Pakistan leading to the liberation war and the blood drenched birth of Bangladesh in 1971. The United States in particular saw events through the prism of Pakistan's geopolitical interests and ambitions. China and the United States were apprehensive about the drastic changes in the geopolitics of the subcontinent that could result from the break up of Pakistan. A chief area of concern was whether the new state of Bangladesh would mirror India's relationships with the Soviet Union and slide into the Soviet orbit.

This meant that it was Pakistan's interests rather than the situation on the ground and moral imperatives that became the key determinant in the United States' and China's approach to the events of 1971. The mass genocide unleashed by the Pakistan army in the then East Pakistan, the untold sufferings of the people of East Pakistan, their determined and courageous struggle for freedom went largely unnoticed. These events were of little importance to the governments of the day in the United States, the Soviet Union and China within the realpolitik-driven geopolitical calculus of the time. All three players pursued differing agendas, deploying vastly superior strategic resources, technology and national power in comparison to India.

In his book *The Blood Telegram*, Princeton Professor Gary Bass presents a scathing indictment of the US foreign policy during the Bangladesh's liberation war and genocide. The title itself refers to the unprecedented dissent cable sent on 6 April 1971 by Archer Kent Blood, the Consul General of America in East Pakistan and his colleagues. Instead of merely authorising the dissent cable drafted by a young officer named Scott Butcher, Blood added his endorsement to the views expressed within the cable ([Silverman, 2015](#)). Blood fiercely criticised the US policies (guided, aided and abetted by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger) in East Pakistan in his cables to the US State Department. It was "probably the most blistering denunciation of US foreign policy ever sent by its own diplomats" ([Bass, 2014](#), p. 71). He unequivocally called out its moral bankruptcy and the failure to denounce atrocities and the suppression of democracy ([National Security Archive \[NSA\], 2002a](#)).

FSO Archer Blood's moral stand for which he stood up to his superiors and sacrificed his career lies in sharp contrast to NSC Henry Kissinger's primacy of American geopolitical aims. [Kissinger \(1979\)](#) sought to prevent a perceived Soviet plan to fracture the American alliance system in South Asia. It was one of the various reasons he chose to ignore the Bangladesh's genocide. These two opposing viewpoints present an interesting study of the choices facing the US government at that time. By a strange coincidence, both these men were born in 1923 and were the US patriots in every sense of the term.

The US help for Pakistan during the conflict was both overt and covert. This was borne out by multiple sources over time. These included Jack Anderson's syndicated columns (these along with other secret documents came to be known as "The Anderson Papers") which began appearing in mid-December 1971 and carried excerpts from the top secret meetings of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG). The infamous US tilt towards Pakistan during the crisis of 1971 was corroborated by a trove of 46 declassified US government documents and audio clips released at the turn of the century and presently available at the [NSA \(2002b\)](#) archives.

Of particular interest are documents 28 and 44. The former was a series of transcripts of telephone conversations that took place during the first weeks of December 1971. These conversations between Nixon and Kissinger discussed the third-party transfers of fighter aircraft to Pakistan. The latter (document 44, dated 29 December 1971) suggests the diversion of F-5 fighters originally slated for Libya to Pakistan via Iran. The Iranian Embassy reported at the time that three F-5A fighter aircraft, reportedly from the United States, had been flown to Pakistan to assist in the war efforts against India. The United States not only ignored the transfer of war materials and fighter aircraft to Pakistan by countries like Jordan and Iran but it also supplied war planes directly despite an arms embargo.

At the height of the conflict, the United States sent a 10-ship naval task force (Task Force 74) detached from the Seventh Fleet off South Vietnam into the Bay of Bengal

to intimidate India. The 1972 command history of USS Enterprise, the carrier flagship of Task Force 74, bears testimony to this deployment. The summary of operations (Indian Ocean) bore the remark that these operations had begun on 15 December 1971 as a result of the Indo-Pakistan War ([Naval History and Heritage Command \[NHHC\], 1972](#)). This naval deployment was matched by the Soviets and, for a time, the naval fleets of the two superpowers of the Cold War shadowed each other in the Indian Ocean.

The US foreign policy initiatives saw it collude with communist China and a military dictatorship in Pakistan against a democratic India and the legitimate interests of the people of erstwhile East Pakistan. All this while simultaneously championing democracy and human rights in the rest of the world.

China

Sino-Indian ties were never the same after the war with India in 1962. After the war, a determined India embarked on a rapid programme of military modernisation. It committed itself to the creation of nearly a million-strong army and deploying new mountain divisions equipped and trained for high altitude warfare. The Indian army's plan for 16 divisions by the end of 1963 and rapid rearmament received financial and material backing from both the United States and Britain ([JFK Library, 1962](#)). Additionally, a 45-squadron air force equipped with supersonic aircraft, an accelerated programme of naval expansion and the strengthening of the defence production base was envisaged. In his paper "Defence Reforms after 1962" published in the *Journal of Defence Studies*, [PR Chari \(2012\)](#) describes these far reaching decisions. They resulted in the first five-year defence plan being initiated in 1964–1969. Indian confidence was subsequently bolstered by the combat performance of its troops in the Nathu La and Cho La clashes in 1967.

While China reacted with growing unease at the developing situation in East Pakistan in the latter half of the 1960s to the detriment of its ally Pakistan, there was very little it could do.

This was due to a unique confluence of internal compulsions and geopolitical circumstances. By March 1969, an acrimonious border clash with the Soviet Union broke out near Zhenbao/Damansky Island. Chinese attempts to assert claims on this small island set in motion a complex chain of interactions between China, the United States and the Soviet Union ([Lüthi, 2012](#)).

[Yang Kuisong \(2000\)](#) writing for the *Cold War History* journal mentions that "the incident played an important role in shaping the reorientation of China's US policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s."

At that time, China was also trying to repair the damage done to its reputation and resulting international isolation brought about by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969). Throughout 1969, there were feverish diplomatic overtures between Moscow and New Delhi. Many believe the "Peace, Friendship and Cooperation" treaty that India signed with the Soviet Union in August 1971 was first offered in May 1969, when Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin travelled to India to discuss an alliance with the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. The Chinese leadership viewed these moves with suspicion perceiving them (perhaps not without reason) as part of a Soviet plan to contain China. The Soviet articulation of the Brezhnev doctrine and the Chinese refusal to accept Moscow's right to

intervene militarily in any country where socialism might be threatened only deepened their mutual distrust.

It was in this context that the Chinese began exploring options for a reset in relations with India. Mao Zedong singled out India's Charge d' Affaires BC Mishra to smile and speak to him during the May Day celebrations in Peking in 1970 which he reported to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs: "We cannot keep on quarrelling like this. We should try and be friends again. India is a great country. Indian people are good people. We will be friends again someday," (Noorani, 2018). Mishra is said to have replied: "We are ready to do it today," (Noorani, 2018).

In those days, the Chinese were preoccupied on a number of fronts. Their deteriorating relationship with the Soviet Union on one hand was counterbalanced by an approaching rapprochement with the United States. China was confronted by a peculiar dilemma in 1971, amidst sustained progress in its efforts to end its international isolation. This involved reconciling the professed Chinese aim to end exploitation all over the world (Mahanty, 1983), while their diplomatic and military aid to West Pakistani achieved the exact opposite.

On 13 September of the same year, Lin Biao, Mao's designated successor, perished mysteriously in an aircraft crash (Maochun Yu, 2021). Amidst rumours of an attempted coup, the entire Chinese PLA military high command was purged in the following weeks. The ensuing chaos was one of the contributing factors to Chinese preoccupation and its reluctance to intervene in East Pakistan/Bangladesh.

The Soviet Union

The Soviet view was in turn shaped by the Cold War in Europe, the ongoing US involvement in the Vietnam War and their spiralling territorial disputes along the China–Soviet border. There was a growing closeness between Pakistan and the United States on the one hand and China on the other. This led to a series of events that culminated in the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between the governments of India and the Soviet Union, on 9 August 1971 (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 1971).

Article IX and X of the said treaty effectively committed the Soviet Union to militarily aid India if hostilities broke out. Article IV of the same treaty in a departure from the norm, reiterated the Soviet endorsement of India's non-aligned status. This provision in the treaty served to blunt any criticism both within India and internationally that India had abandoned non-Alignment, with PM Indira Gandhi declaring that she was willing to sign exactly the same treaty with any other country that wanted it.

This treaty with the Soviet Union forestalled any United Nations interventions and helped deter Chinese aggression on India's northern border. Isolated, Pakistan was forced to accede to the establishment of an independent Bangladesh in place of East Pakistan.

The Soviets were keenly aware of the importance of a friendly, non-aligned India in Asia. India's strategic location constituted a vital breach in the US-led encirclement of the Soviet Union. Even more so since the diplomatic rapprochement between China and the United States was designed to widen pre-existing fractures in the communist bloc. After brokering the Tashkent agreement between India and Pakistan in Jan 1966, Soviet policy

was for some time aimed at balancing both South Asian nations and maintaining stability in the Indian subcontinent if only to checkmate its rivals.

Non-aligned states and an isolated India

After 1962, India understood the limits of the non-aligned rhetoric at a geo strategic level. India realised early on that like most nations, non-aligned states prioritised territorial integrity above human rights (Upadhyaya, 1990). As events in East Pakistan demonstrated, the response of non-aligned nations to issues of self-determination, armed external support for independence struggles, genocide and human rights were often constrained by similar events in their own nations. This effectively prevented any support for India.

Bound by ties of culture and primarily religion, the Middle Eastern states, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Libya, Kuwait and Turkey, provided consistent diplomatic, military and moral support to Pakistan (Yunus, 2011, pp. 8–25). The conspiracy theory that a “Hindu nation”, had hatched plans to bifurcate the world’s largest Muslim nation blinded them to the ongoing genocide of millions of Muslims and Hindus in East Pakistan in 1971.

Ceylon (Sri Lanka) went so far as to provide transit and refuelling facilities to Pakistani air Force planes on their way to East Pakistan. Journalist Rakesh Krishnan (2019) writing for the *Business Today* mentions that during the months of March–April 1971, approximately 174 landings by Pakistani civilian and military aircraft took place at the Katunayake International Airport.

That the diplomatic positions of most NAM members were starkly inimical to Indian interests was evident during the vote on the UN General Assembly Resolution of 7 December 1971 calling for a ceasefire and withdrawal of forces. According to the US Department of State archives, (President’s Daily Briefs, 8 December 1971), the vote in the Assembly was 104 in favour (including the United States), 11 against (including India and the Soviet bloc with the exception of Romania). The 10 abstentions included the United Kingdom, France and Denmark (Department of State, 2005). The United States, Pakistan, China and almost every NAM nation voted in favour of the resolution, while India, the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc voted against it. The vote emphasised the isolation of India and the Soviet Union.

It was not a surprise that such political support could be mobilised in the United Nations. This was despite the overwhelming evidence emerging (since March 1971) of the refugee crisis in eastern India and the systematic annihilation of the Bengali people by the Pakistani army. The unhealthy precedent of military intervention across international boundaries remained unacceptable to a significant majority of UN members (Nanda, 1972).

The irrelevance and inaction of both the UN and the NAM contrasted sharply with the ability of the Soviets to deliver on every word of the treaty that they signed with India.

20/20 hindsight

Today, 50 years later, it becomes important to understand the sheer forces arrayed in 1971 against India and Bangladesh’s independence. India’s primary preference in the early stages of the conflict was for a political solution rather than a military one (Sisson

and Rose, 1992, pp. 153–217). Events, however, converged in a dynamic, multi causal, interlinked manner to make the latter option a certainty for India.

It was in this volatile environment that Indian foreign policy shone in what was to be one of its finest hours. The most remarkable achievement of Indian foreign policy makers lay in successfully negotiating the geopolitical contradictions of great power rivalry. They crafted a partnership with the Soviets aided by a fortuitous convergence of national interest perspectives in New Delhi and Moscow. This was vital to offset the formidable US–Pakistan–China alliance that opposed it while helping the Bangladesh's cause gain legitimacy worldwide.

Indian diplomatic initiatives involved managing these three primary external players apart from India and Pakistan –

- Deflect American pressure and accompanying threats to safeguard Pakistani interests while they pursued their own foreign policy objectives with China, Pakistan and the Soviet Union. The defeat of a US ally in a distant war though materially insignificant in itself had the potential of being perceived as an unacceptable hit to American power and prestige globally. These calculations could have resulted in a rapid escalation of US commitment and support to Pakistan.
- India sought to prevent this by presenting a clear moral and ethical conundrum to America and by extension its western allies. This was amplified by rising dissent and protest in their capitals. The concepts of conscience, morals, ethical standards and public opinion at that point in history lay at the very heart of the American war making “will” and intervention strategies. The Indians calculated rightly that the Americans had little appetite for being dragged into a fresh war while trying to extricate themselves out of the Vietnamese quagmire.
- Signing the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, which was one of their key foreign policy objectives in Asia at that time. India leveraged the treaty to turn the Soviets decisively away from Pakistan. The treaty also forestalled through the Soviet veto any subsequent UN led interventions before India could achieve her goal of liberating East Pakistan/Bangladesh. Moscow's diplomatic and military support was a key component in counterbalancing US and Chinese support to Pakistan. In one fell swoop, India provided both a shining example of the benefits of a Soviet Alliance and the inherent possibilities of Soviet cooperation with non-communist nations in Asia and Africa.
- Constraining China to offer diplomatic support for Pakistan by playing on its natural reticence to get involved in sub continental politics. This was supplemented by an offer of normalisation of diplomatic relations (by none other than the Indian Prime minister in January 1969). Around the same time, Sino-Soviet relations nosedived due to the Zhenbao/Damansky Island border incident on the Ussuri (Wusuli) river. The disproportionate Soviet response during this incident convinced the Chinese that a similar danger loomed if they attempted even limited coercive actions against India in 1971.

India's Foreign policy initiatives were aligned to her overall strategic objectives and coordinated by a handpicked group of officials. They were appointed by Indira Gandhi as an advisory group to deal with the Bangladesh crisis. Known as the Kashmir brigade, this influential group included Durga Prasad (DP) Dhar, India's Ambassador to the Soviet Union between 1969 and 1971 and head of policy planning in the Ministry of External

Affairs, Parmeshwar Narayan (PN) Haksar, the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, Triloki Nath (TN) Kaul, Foreign Secretary, Prithvi Nath (PN) Dhar, Secretary in the Prime Minister's office, and last but not least the legendary Rameshwar Nath (RN) Kao, handpicked by Indira Gandhi to be the Director of RAW in 1968.

If the credit for India's military success in the 1971 war goes to the charismatic leadership of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, then PN Haksar deserves the credit for being one of the leading brains behind the conceptualisation and execution of the diplomatic, strategic, logistical initiatives taken by India.

In his meticulously researched book *Intertwined Lives: P.N. Haksar and Indira Gandhi*, Jairam Ramesh (2019), politician, economist and long-term Congress insider offers a fascinating look at the life, times and accomplishments of PN Haksar. Haksar's role during the Bangladesh crisis deserves both recognition and remembrance.

Another interesting story emerged in an article by Zorawar Daulet Singh in 2019 for *The Print*. It points at a remarkably prescient intelligence cable sent in April 1969 by RN Kao, Chief of RAW (Research and Analysis Wing). Kao advised the government of India that the Pakistani authorities would have to resort to large scale use of force to quell the Bangladesh's freedom movement. The ensuing revolt could fan the fires of civil war and secession. Kao's implicit advice was to keep Indian intervention options open should an opportunity present itself. This was at variance with more conservative views entrenched in the Indian foreign policy establishment at that time.

This vital intelligence assessment forms the prism with which to view subsequent Indian responses to the evolving crisis in Bangladesh. To put matters in context, the first Pakistani General elections took place almost twelve months later on Dec 7 1970. Operation Searchlight, which preceded the Bangladesh's genocide by the Pakistani army, began on 26 March 1971 at Dhaka University ([Sisson and Rose, 1992](#)). By 3 December 1971, India and Pakistan were at war.

What Rao had foreseen became reality in a little over two years.

The role of Sardar Swaran Singh, Minister of External Affairs, India (equivalent to US Secretary of State) and AA Gromyko, Foreign Affairs Minister, Soviet Union, was also extremely significant. He and his team worked tirelessly behind the scenes towards the signing of the Indo Soviet treaty in 1971. The treaty was the lynchpin that averted a larger war on the subcontinent and prevented a major humanitarian catastrophe.

Sardar Swaran Singh led the Indian delegation to the UNGA in 1971 to explain India's position in the ongoing war with Pakistan and articulated India's position with great skill ([United Nations, 2015, 0:50](#)). At one point, he verbally duelled with George HW Bush, the US Ambassador to the UN who went on to become the 41st President of the United States. When Bush demanded an unconditional ceasefire by India, Swaran Singh responded, "this one sided and partisan attitude of the distinguished representative of the United States has shocked and surprised us. The United States is entitled to its own opinions and interpretations, so are we, but facts are facts" ([Standing India, 2016, 1:56](#)). Addressing the UN for more than 90 minutes on 12 December 1971 as the war raged in East Pakistan, Swaran Singh made an impassioned appeal for the world to recognise the reality of Bangladesh. He reiterated forcefully and repeatedly that the root cause of the conflict was the brutal repression of the 75 million people of East Pakistan and that if India had been guilty of anything, it was her restraint ([United Nations, 1971b](#)).

The Beginning of the Empathy, Narrative and Design (E.N.D.) Competing narratives in global media

In the decade preceding 1971, a titanic battle of competing narratives unfolded in the capitals of the world, the United Nations and in the shifting sands of national/ global public opinion. The role of Indian diplomacy in articulating the case for Bangladesh's self-determination along with the ethical and moral dimensions of this conflict did much to prepare the grounds for a successful Indian military intervention. The decisive tilting of western public opinion towards the Bangladesh's cause began ironically with an article written by a Pakistani journalist named Anthony Mascarenhas. He wrote an article titled "Genocide" for the London's *Sunday Times* on 13 June 1971. His harrowing eyewitness account was a public relations disaster and a huge betrayal (Dummett, 2011) from the Pakistan's point of view. He wrote about witnessing truckloads of human targets and any who tried to help them hauled off "for disposal". These were part of brutal "kill and burn" missions by the Pakistani army which caused the devastation of entire villages as part of so-called punitive actions (Mascarenhas, 1971a). It lifted the veil over the scale of atrocities and ethnic cleansing committed in East Pakistan, making it impossible for the world to ignore it any longer.

Ironically, the access provided to Mascarenhas was part of a wider effort to create and control the media narrative by the Pakistani establishment. Despite the deportation of western journalists at the beginning of the conflict, most managed to continue reporting the excesses and atrocities in East Pakistan (Video diary, 2016, 3:02). By the end of the year, the credibility of the Pakistani narrative was irretrievably compromised. In his book *Bhutto and the Breakup of Pakistan*, Mohammad Yunus (2011, pp. 8–25) wrote that the actual conditions prevalent in East Pakistan could no longer be whitewashed.

In the western world, Mascarenhas (1971a) was the exception to the rule when it came to reporting on the Bangladesh conflict. Despite his searing eyewitness account, he was soon eclipsed in the larger enfolding narrative of 1971. The leading voices that shaped western and global public opinion, particularly in America, belonged to western reporters like Pulitzer prize winners Sidney Schanberg (*New York Times*), Jack Anderson (*Washington Post*, responsible for the Anderson papers), Tad Szulc (*New York Times*), and John Chancellor (*NBC News*), amongst others.

The seeds of confrontation between the American fourth estate and the White House had already been sown in the Vietnam Conflict and continued their growth trajectory in the Bangladesh War. For many American activists, the Bengali cause was the natural successor of the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. By the late 1960s, the flower power counterculture movement had taken hold in America and found expression in much of the western world. There existed a groundswell of support from civil society for the oppressed Bangladesh's people and empathy for the Indian position in the conflict. It was this support that the Indians sought to leverage in negating the US administration's tilt towards Pakistan. There was a similar outpouring of public support in Europe as well (often at odds with the stated diplomatic positions of various governments).

The narrative of the ongoing genocide was amplified by the carefully crafted media interactions by the Indian PM and foreign minister (AP Archives, no date., 1:30) in major European capitals in the months preceding the war. The Indians realised that the accompanying intense media focus was an asset. The media cycle would shift soon freeing the powers to move more aggressively or passively as needed. Therefore, Indian strategic

objectives had to be met in a relatively short window of time. On 27 September 1971, Indira Gandhi travelled to Moscow. This was followed by a trip across Western Europe in October and ended on 4–5 November 1971 when she met Richard Nixon in Washington. Apart from the two superpowers, the countries she visited included Belgium, Austria, the United Kingdom, France and Germany. Everywhere she went, the message she carried was constant—the moral imperative of the Bangladesh's freedom struggle was inescapable and it was time to act.

Journalist [Inder Malhotra \(2014\)](#), writing for the *Indian Express*, narrates a fascinating incident where a BBC correspondent commented to Indira Gandhi that restraint was the need of the hour. She shot back to tremendous applause, “When Hitler was on the rampage, why didn't you say, ‘let's keep quiet, have peace with Germany and let the Jews die?’” ([BBC, 2008, 1:39](#)).

It was a telling comment that evoked the past to illuminate the present. It generated empathy in western audiences by drawing parallels and linking the memories of the Jewish Holocaust to the then ongoing genocide in Bangladesh. It was one of the many visual, cognitive and linguistic frames that were designed and disseminated to influence both global and domestic public opinion. These sought to legitimise India's policies, amplify Indian strategic narratives and justify intervention to a largely indifferent world. The Pakistani version of events as recorded in the post-war Hamood-ur-Rahman Commission report among others states that “the Indian propaganda was so successful that all efforts made by the military regime in Pakistan to defuse the situation in East Pakistan left the world unimpressed” ([Rahman, 2007, pp. 20–66](#)).

The various media narratives of humanitarianism, sovereignty, genocide, conflict that struggled for primacy on the global stage in 1971 were increasingly dovetailing into each other via a series of intersections and overlaps. One of the most interesting of these overlaps was between politics, aid and music. The concert for Bangladesh organised by George Harrison on 1 August 1971 in Madison Square Garden fundamentally altered the dynamics between popular music, political power and protest ([Onyebadi, Hossain and Aucoin, 2017, pp. 149–166](#)). Ravi Shankar's role in organising the concert highlighted both India's message and position. The Indian ability to interweave stories of what was happening in civil society, create a bipartisan consensus and rally public opinion behind the government was a precursor of what is now known by many names—Hybrid multimodal war, total war etc. It was made possible by adroitly shaping the narrative and furnishing a relatable context for the events unfolding on the subcontinent. Like any war, it was not merely the quantum of resources deployed but the quality, design and application of that deployment that was to effect outcomes.

In the fog of war, versions tend to vary wildly, as do numbers and details of deaths, massacres and rapes. The veracity of these often depends upon the contextual bias of the side narrating these events. However, there is an emerging broad consensus amongst historians across the world (aided by recently declassified documents and intelligence assessments from that period) that the scale and nature of atrocities carried out by the Pakistani military was horrific. The Foreign Affairs committee report, published in October 2012 by the [UK House of Commons \(2012\)](#), laid bare the sheer scale of the genocide. It was published as written evidence from Sujit Sen and contained excerpts from the UN Human Rights Commission report in 1981. Released on the occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHRC), it stated that even if a lower range of 1.5 million deaths was taken, the killings took place at a rate of (between) 6,000–12,000 per day, through the 267 days of genocide (UK House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, 2012).

Between June 1971 and December 1971, India relentlessly hammered the message home in television interviews and press interactions across the world, steadily building a counter narrative to the US and Pakistani positions

Another important development took place on 21 October 1971 (O'sullivan, 2021, p. 48). The British charity Oxfam published the "Testimony of Sixty," a collection of eyewitness accounts of the unfolding tragedy in East Bengal. These testimonials were statements by eminent personalities of the time such as Mother Teresa and Senator Edward Kennedy and included journalists like Anthony Mascarenhas, Nicolas Tomalin, Kevin Rafferty, John Saar, Clare Hollingworth, John Pilger and Martin Woollacott. Senator Kennedy had first-hand experience of the refugee camps in India which he had visited in August 1971. He ensured that the "Testimony of Sixty" was published on 28 October 1971 in the Congressional Record of the US senate ([Congressional Record, 1971](#), p. 37930), within a week of its publication in the United Kingdom.

This testimony galvanised broad based support on both sides of the Atlantic. Politicians, civil society and aid organisations started taking a principled stand on the Bangladesh crisis, often at odds with their elected governments. This tension between the notions of sovereignty championed by nations and human rights by the general populace was expressed through protests, demonstrations and concerts. These continued right through the fierce diplomatic battles in the UN in early December 1971.

As Bangladesh inched towards independence, the United States remained viscerally opposed to the Indian position with the Soviet Union, France and the United Kingdom abstaining on UN Security Council resolution 303 on 6 December 1971. Though the resolution was adopted by 11 votes to none, by then India had bought itself valuable time. The independent counter narratives spreading organically in western societies did much to aid the cause of Bangladesh's independence and reduce the political pressure on India.

Often by chance, circumstance and sometimes by design, India managed to align a remarkable confluence of positive global and domestic public opinion narratives in favour of action by the leaders of the world. To a large extent, this served to counterbalance its weaker heft in global politico-military equations. The range and scope of the Indian diplomatic and media outreach was fairly sophisticated for the time. This was pointed out by officials of the US state department as revealed by the recently declassified US State Department documents.

Samuel Hoskinson of the US National Security Council Staff mentioned several key points in his comments at the end of a memorandum to Henry Kissinger on 26 May 1971. Firstly, that the Indians were engaged in a fairly sophisticated diplomatic and public relations campaign, and secondly that Indira Gandhi was moving with considerable restraint in the circumstances and Indian decision making had not yet reached the stage of war ([Department of State, 2001](#)).

In his memoirs, Kissinger mentions that by 3 December 1971, Yahya Khan had at last been cornered by his subtly implacable opponent in New Delhi ([India Today Digital, 2014](#)). What he left out perhaps was that the same implacable opponent had outmanoeuvred him as well.

Three sides to every story

The creation of Bangladesh and the war of liberation in 1971 are viewed very differently in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Each country has disseminated its own

distinctly held narrative of the events that took place in 1971. The Bangladesh's people saw it as a just war of liberation from their oppressors that began in the 1950s. They resent the framing of the war either as an Indo-Pakistan War or an Indian victory. The fact that India was pursuing its own strategic objectives was also not lost on anyone.

From the Bangladesh's perspective, the *Mukti Bahini* and the East Pakistani freedom fighters were just as responsible for the victory over Pakistan as the Indian Army. In this view, they are somewhat justified. By all accounts, including those of Indian field commanders, the *Mukti Bahini* was highly effective, provided vital intelligence to the Indian forces and fought valiantly. Their guerrilla campaign successfully harassed Pakistani positions, eliminated local collaborators, destroyed bridges, river and sea barges (Marwah, 1979). A wealth of information corroborating this already exists in the public domain.

Writing on the politics of asymmetric conflict, Andrew Mack (1975) opines that the fact of invasion “generates cohesion, minimises constraints on mobilisation, and maximises the willingness to incur costs for the insurgents.” Despite the sheer scale of suffering visited on the general populace by the Pakistani Army, the fact that they organised and fought back so fiercely was astonishing.

The demand for independence in Bangladesh (East Pakistan) was by no means universal at the start of the conflict. There existed significant pockets of residual ideological support for the idea of Pakistan within Bangladesh during the conflict. Political groups based on Islamic ideology such as the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Muslim League swore allegiance to the West Pakistan's government when the liberation war of Bangladesh began. Prominent leaders, including Nurul Amin, Ghulam Azam and Khwaja Khairuddin, were instrumental in the formation of the Citizen Peace Committee which subsequently came to be known as the “East Pakistan Central Peace Committee” (Shanti Bahini). The Shanti Bahini was instrumental in the recruitment and unleashing of the dreaded Razakars, an infamous paramilitary force raised by the Pakistani Army through the East Pakistan Razakars Ordinance, 1971 (Gerlach, 2010, pp. 138–152).

By some estimates, there were almost 73,000 para-military personnel of the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces (EPCAF), *Mujahids* and *Razakars* (Khan, 1973, pp. 276–291; Prasad and Thapliyal, 2014). These paramilitary forces, which included the Al-Badr and Al-Shams, were accused after the conflict of wide-ranging war crimes. These included preparing kill lists of Bengali nationalists, intellectuals and Hindus for the Pakistani Army and the organised rape and sexual slavery of untold thousands of Bengali women. While the actual numbers of their victims continue to be debated and disputed, the term *Razakar* remains a reviled byword for a traitor in Bangladesh even today.

The *Mukti Bahini* which supported the cause of Bengali freedom and the *Shanti Bahini* which supported the efforts of the Pakistani Army to crush the rebellion were both citizen militias ideologically opposed to each other. It was ironic that the words *mukti* and *shanti* stood for freedom and peace respectively in both Bengali and Hindi languages. As the country descended into civil war, the local population turned on itself in a vicious orgy of violence.

The Pakistani narrative sees 1971 as an Indian plot to interfere in their internal matters and divide their nation by fanning discontent in East Pakistan. The brutality of the Pakistanis, though heinous, was neither unique nor unparalleled in a world history replete with genocides. Germany, Vietnam, Cambodia and Rwanda—the places may change but the story essentially remains the same.

Similarly, an attempt to steal an election by one dominant social or ethnic group of a country is by no means a remarkable occurrence in global politics. Neither in hindsight is the idea of a Pakistani general trying to subvert a democratically elected government. This is precisely what Yahya Khan did when he announced the postponement until “a later date” of the democratically elected National Assembly on 1 March 1971, characterising the situation as Pakistan’s gravest crisis ([Department of State, 2005](#)).

For Pakistan, however, these events resulted in a traumatic defeat, the loss of all its eastern territories and dealt a blow to its prestige it is still to recover from. For the average Pakistani, it still remains far easier to plead ignorance and blame their old enemy India than to introspect on the causes for this debacle.

On 26 December 1971 ([Rahman, 2007](#), pp. 6–66), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the new president of Pakistan, instituted a commission headed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Hamood-ur-Rahman. The commission was tasked to investigate the causes of the defeat and the subsequent surrender of Pakistani forces in East Pakistan. The commission submitted its first report in July 1972 followed by a supplementary report in November 1974. It interviewed more than two hundred and fifty individuals, including senior Pakistani commanders and political leaders. Also examined were hundreds of classified documents and encrypted signal traffic between East and West Pakistan.

The report laid bare the excesses committed by the Pakistani Army. These included rape, arson, killings of intellectuals, professionals and members of the Hindu minority as deliberate acts of revenge, retaliation and torture. The ethnic cleansing of Hindus was corroborated by [Simon Dring \(1971\)](#) of the *Telegraph* reporting from Dhaka (the capital) on 30 March 1971. He wrote that students were found dead in their beds, women and children were burnt alive in their houses and Pakistanis of Hindu religion were taken out and shot en masse.

These reports were classified by the Pakistani government for more than three decades. The contents of the supplementary report were published in an article by journalist [Samar Halarnkar \(2000\)](#) for a mainstream Indian magazine (*India Today*) at the turn of the century. In it, he points to the commission report highlighting “widespread atrocities, other abuses of power by Pakistani generals and a complete failure in civilian and martial-law leadership as responsible for the loss of East Pakistan” ([Halarnkar, 2000](#)).

The detailed and compelling eyewitness accounts contained in the commission report include the testimony of Lt Col. Mansoor-ul-Haq, GSO-I Division (Witness No. 260). His testimony contained specific allegations about Bengalis who were alleged to *Mukti Bahini* or Awami League members being “sent to Bangladesh”—a code name for a death sentence carried out without trial, investigations or official sanction. “Indiscriminate killing and looting could only serve the cause of the enemies of Pakistan. In the harshness, we lost the support of the silent majority of the people of East Pakistan” ([Rahman, 2007](#), pp. 20–66). The report concluded that the widespread oppression of the Hindu minority by the Army was one of the primary reasons for their large-scale exodus to India.

In India, the narrative which is almost universally accepted is that of a nation moved to intervene by the suffering of erstwhile East Pakistan and its people while the world watched unmoved. The brutal crackdown gathered pace with Operation Searchlight and culminated with the state sponsored genocide in East Pakistan. These events coupled with the inability of the United Nations to put a stop to the atrocities steadily gathered Indian political and public opinion in favour of a possible military intervention.

In a paper for the *Journal of Genocide Research*, author [Sonia Cordera \(2015\)](#) opined that two possible outcomes arose out of the repeated inability of the UN system to intervene in an ongoing genocide. The first outcome allowed for the continuation of the genocide by the perpetrating state/actor and the other led to the intervention by a regional power motivated by its own interests ([Cordera, 2015](#)). The last five decades of the 20th century witnessed the repeated occurrence of genocides despite the UN Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The slaughter continued unabated in 1971 while the major actors including the UN, Governments, media and policy makers engaged in endless debates and diplomatic hair splitting on the use of the word genocide. This arose from the mistaken belief that by avoiding the term they could evade their responsibility to confront the same. This debate rages on today as well. In those tumultuous times, India ultimately chose the second option.

A reluctant India's hand was forced by the unprecedented influx of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan. The influx of refugees also led to rising tensions with the local populace in the border states as the refugees sought employment to make ends meet ([Sisson and Rose, 1992](#), pp. 122–217).

On 1 December 1971, India reported 9,899,305 Bangladesh's refugees housed in 825 camps (Table 1). On 4 December 1971, the Indian representative informed the UNGA that India could not continue spending more than thirty million US dollars per day to look after the refugees and was near the end of her tether ([United Nations, 1971a](#)).

While all three narratives hold true within their contexts and the collective memory of the nations that spawned them, it would be prudent to remember these events were being shaped by forces far beyond the control of India, Pakistan or Bangladesh.

The combined narrative of the victors, which included the Indians and the Bangladesh's nationalists, painted a picture of Pakistani atrocities and Bengali victimhood which has remained entrenched in nationalist mythologies of India and Bangladesh. One of the few voices that have sought to bring some balance to these narratives has been that of author Sarmila Bose. She has sought to illuminate the many atrocities committed in the name of Bengali nationalism in that complex, multi causal conflict. This was also corroborated by Anthony Mascarenhas in an earlier article in May 1971 ([Mascarenhas, 1971a, 1971b, 0:12](#)). She has argued in a paper written for the *Journal of Genocide Research* "that genocide is not the most useful framework to analyse the conflict; that some of the killings committed by both sides could be termed genocide while others might not, but that they still constitute serious crimes" ([Bose, 2011](#)).

Indian State	Number of Camps	Refugees in Camps	Refugees with Host Families	Total Number of refugees
West Bengal	492	48,49,786	23,86,130	72,35,916
Tripura	276	8,34,098	5,47,551	13,81,649
Meghalaya	17	5,91,520	74,466	6,67,986
Assam	28	2,55,642	91,913	3,47,555
Bihar	8	36,732	0	36,732
Madhya Pradesh	3	2,19,298	0	2,19,298
Uttar Pradesh	1	10,169	0	10,169
Total	825	67,97,245	31,02,060	98,99,305

Table 1. Bangladeshi Refugees in India as on 1 December 1971 ([United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2000](#), p. 65).

Conclusion

India's quest to be a major power in Asia reached an inflection point during the 1971 war. India decisively shed its reputation as a perpetually reluctant player on the international stage post-independence. The strategic hesitancy brought about by its colonial past gave way to an assertive and proactive foreign policy. In the decade leading up to the 1971 war, India successfully metamorphosed into a dynamic actor aligning its foreign policy objectives with its strategic and military objectives.

[Srinath Raghavan \(2013\)](#) in his seminal *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Harvard) opines that the dissolution of Pakistan was not a foregone conclusion as has been argued by many and the creation of Bangladesh was the product of “conjuncture and contingency, choice and chance.” There is an increasing acceptance of this assessment with the passage of time. However, the Indians had prepared for conjuncture, had contingencies in place, made the most of the choices available and took every chance that fate sent their way for it was a close-run thing.

Wars by their very nature are dynamic, chaotic systems and any number of unintended outcomes can evolve rapidly. The Indian foreign policy and intelligence mandarins were acutely aware of the opportunity presented by the breakdown of civil order in East Pakistan. For India, a belligerent Pakistan posed an existential threat on both its eastern and western fronts, the removal of which justified the enormous strategic risks she took.

India in the latter half of 1971 had a fleeting window of opportunity and seized it. It was one created by the excesses of the Pakistani Army in East Pakistan, whilst the Americans, Soviets and the Chinese were either distracted or heavily committed elsewhere. Indira Gandhi and her advisors believed that by helping the Bangladesh's independence movement, India could secure multiple foreign policy objectives. These included

- Protecting an increasingly vulnerable population and their democratic aspirations from an oppressive West Pakistani administration and Army.
- To seize an unparalleled opportunity by dismembering Pakistan and eliminating the future prospect of a two-front war. Aiding the emergence of a friendly Bangladesh could allow India to redeploy its military resources and fundamentally alter the balance of power on the western front. Simultaneously, the refugee crisis on its eastern borders could be resolved.
- Permanently realign the geo strategic balance of the subcontinent and Indian Ocean in India's favour.
- Undermining the two-nation theory by highlighting Pakistan's inability to coalesce as a state based on Islam, thereby undercutting its future claims on Kashmir on the same premise.
- India successfully attained the first three objectives. Kashmir remains a flashpoint to this day.

In a world seared by the televised and photographic images of the Vietnam War, India realised the need to craft a foreign policy narrative that was consistent and cohesive. It centred relentlessly on what remains to this day, the largest humanitarian and refugee exodus faced by a modern nation state after 1945 This situation in 1971, after a decade

of wars and barely two decades from its own independence, only highlights the enormous complexity of the challenges faced by India.

Indian foreign policy, media strategy and political establishment pulled off an intricate balancing act. It did so by negotiating the triangular tightrope between the realities of war, the vagaries of media, public opinion and the cynical Cold War calculus of nations. The spectacular success of India's foreign policy in this period and the people who drove it is often overlooked and deserves to be recognised. In many ways, it facilitated and consolidated the success of the Indian armed forces and made the dream of Bangladesh's independence possible.

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