



Beyond the “Tilt”: US Initiatives to Dissipate Bangladesh Movement in 1971

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Abstract

During the South Asian crisis in 1971, the US administration, especially the White House, stood firmly behind the Pakistani President Yahya Khan and demonstrated a disdain for India and particularly its leader Indira Gandhi. Historians and analysts have previously insisted that Pakistan’s role as a conduit of rapprochement with China and Henry Kissinger’s focus on geopolitical concerns greatly influenced the American policy decision in 1971. These claims have now been confirmed by the recently declassified US foreign policy documents in *Foreign Relations of the United States, XI* and its companion electronic volume. These volumes also suggest that the US administration undertook at least three initiatives to dissipate the Bangladesh movement, an aspect largely ignored in the historical accounts of the South Asian crisis. Drawing on the documents in these volumes, other declassified documents available at the US National Archives, and the Bangladeshi sources this paper constructs a narrative of these three US initiatives. It also insists that US clandestine efforts, described as a “political settlement” contributed to the bloodshed instead of bringing it to an end.

The role of the United States during the South Asian crisis in 1971 has once again come under the media spotlight.¹ The publication of the *Foreign Relations of the United States, XI* (FRUS XI) and its companion electronic volume, *Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, volume E-7, Documents on South Asia, 1969–1972*² has rekindled interest on what Henry Kissinger, the former National Security advisor to US president Richard Nixon, described as “perhaps the most complex issue in Nixon’s first term.”³ FRUS XI⁴ contains annotated declassified documents related to the events in 1971, especially between March and December while the companion electronic volume covers a three-year period and documents US policies towards Afghanistan, in addition to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.⁵ Although the documents in the FRUS XI provide very little new information in regard to the US policies towards the crisis in general, they are important in two ways. Firstly, they have confirmed that a combination of Nixon’s emotional attachment to General Yahya, his dislike for Indira Gandhi, Pakistan’s role as a conduit of rapprochement with China and Kissinger’s predilection for power politics and focus on geopolitical concerns greatly influenced the American policy

decision in 1971. These points have been emphasized previously by historians and analysts such as William Van Hollen,⁶ Dennis Kux,⁷ Raymond Garthoff,⁸ William Bundy,⁹ and Jussi Hanhimaki.¹⁰ These newly declassified documents provide confirmation to their analyses. Secondly, the documents suggest that the US administration showed more than a “tilt” towards Pakistan: it has tried to dissipate the Bangladesh movement. It also provides evidence of a direct contact with the Bangladesh government-in-exile in 1971 and two other initiatives to bring about a “political solution” to the on-going crisis. This aspect of the US policy has, to date, received little attention of the analysts of US foreign policy and sadly, the South Asian historiography has ignored it. In this article I will focus on these three efforts drawing on the documents in the FRUS XI, other declassified documents available at the US National Archives, and the Bangladeshi sources including interviews of people involved in the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971.

It is the contention of this article that the primary objectives of the US efforts to bring the resistance leaders (i.e. “representatives” of the Bangladesh government-in-exile who were fighting to establish an independent country in the eastern province of Pakistan) and the Pakistani administration to the table, were to maintain the territorial integrity of Pakistan and create a rift within the Bangladesh movement which would eventually dissipate the movement altogether. This paper explores the nature and the consequences of these efforts, and insists that these initiatives, especially the clandestine contacts with some of the leaders of the Bangladesh government-in-exile between June and October, deserve closer examination.

The article is divided into six sections. The second section provides the background of the crisis that emerged in early 1971; the third section discusses, in broad strokes, US policy towards the crisis, and the fourth section examines in detail the three different US attempts, described as a “political settlement” in US documents. The clandestine contacts between the US and the Bangladesh government-in-exile in Calcutta are discussed in details as these were the most elaborate and influential of the efforts made. The fifth section of the paper examines the objectives of these initiatives while the sixth section provides concluding remarks.

The background

The crisis in South Asia was a result of a series of events that began in March 1971 rooted in the domestic politics of Pakistan, then ruled by General Yahya Khan. Although the Awami League (AL), a centrist political party of the ethnic Bengali population led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), secured a landslide victory in the general election held in December 1970, Yahya Khan postponed the inaugural session of the parliament scheduled on March 3, 1971 at the insistence of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the head of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), who emerged as the leader of the minority party. Widespread street agitation throughout East Pakistan ensued resulting

in the total collapse of control of Pakistani authorities over the civilian administration in the East. The AL launched what they described as, the “non-cooperation” movement. However, there were growing demands from a large section of the populace to declare an independent Bangladesh.¹¹ In the middle of the month, intense negotiations between Mujib, Yahya, and Bhutto began in Dhaka for a peaceful solution. At the same time, thousands of soldiers from the West Pakistan were deployed to the East.

More than a week of closed-door negotiations came to a halt on the evening of March 25 as President Yahya secretly left Dhaka, having ordered a military crackdown. That night the military unleashed a reign of terror – hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, activists, and teachers of Dhaka University were killed as were Bengali members of the para-military force (EPR) and police. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the majority party, was taken into custody and soon described by President Yahya Khan as the “traitor.” Before being arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence and called upon Bengalis to take up arms and fight the Pakistani Army until the “nation is freed.”

The bloodbath, which continued over the following days throughout the entire country, forced hundreds of thousands of people to cross the border into neighboring India. Small contingents of Bengali members of the Pakistani Army, stationed in various parts of the country, mounted initial resistance. But they were no match for the Pakistani military. The leaders of the AL fled to India, established the Bangladesh government-in-exile on April 17, and organized guerrilla groups with the help of India to continue the war.

As spring rolled into summer, the indiscriminate killings reached genocidal proportions, and the number of refugees from East Pakistan climbed to millions. The genocide also helped the resistance movement gain considerable strength. Despite the claim of the Pakistani government that “normalcy” had returned, the details of indiscriminate killings by the Pakistani army continued appearing in the international press and showed that the war was far from over. Condemnation of the atrocities and calls for a just solution grew louder by the day.¹²

By the summer of 1971 the Bangladesh government-in-exile was steering the resistance war, Indian policy-makers were clearly in favor of establishing an independent Bangladesh, and the Pakistani regime was trying to portray the movement as an Indian ploy to dismember Pakistan. The US initiatives to frustrate the Bangladesh Movement took place during this period. The resistance movement, however, continued throughout the fall leading to the war between India and Pakistan in December 1971. In response to the Pakistani attacks on the Western front on December 3, India began its operation in the East, created a joint command with the Bengali guerrillas, and forced 93,000 Pakistani soldiers to surrender on December 16. Thus an independent Bangladesh state came into being.

US policy towards the Bangladesh Movement

Since the election of 1970, the US administration, like many others, was aware that a compromise solution was almost impossible,¹³ and thus the secession of East was already on the horizon. The National Security Study Memorandum 109 of December 19, 1970,¹⁴ Kissinger's memo to the President on February 22 and Secretary of State William Rogers' memorandum to the President on February 23¹⁵ all bear testimony to the fact that even before March 1 it was clear to the US administration that the break-up of Pakistan was merely a matter of time. The telegram of Consul General Archer Blood from Dhaka on December 30, 1970 also provided clear indications as to where events were heading.¹⁶ Furthermore, the AL leaders, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, sought US help in resolving the constitutional deadlock.¹⁷

The US administration's position was, at least on paper, to maintain neutrality.¹⁸ After the military crackdown on March 25, the policy, however, was of inaction. Kissinger communicated that to the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) meeting on March 26: "I have talked to the President briefly before lunch. . . . He doesn't want to do anything. . . . He does not favor an active policy."¹⁹ Maintaining the status quo at a critical juncture like this was in essence equivalent to condoning the atrocities. The President, although not in favor of supporting the action, said in a telephone conversation with Kissinger on March 28 that "we are not going to condemn it."²⁰ Almost a month after the atrocities began and long after a clearer picture emerged from the ground – on April 28, 1971 – Kissinger put before President Nixon his evaluation of the situation²¹ and policy recommendations. This memorandum was written after Consul General Archer Blood's telegrams from Dhaka to the State Department with details of the atrocities (telegram 959 – March 28;²² telegram 978 – March 29;²³ telegram 986 – March 30²⁴) and a petition by 20 Consular officials from Dhaka and supported by nine specialists on South Asian Affairs from Washington criticizing the US policies were received and discussed.²⁵ Joseph Farland, US Ambassador in Islamabad, in his initial reactions to events also concurred with Archer Blood that "Yahya's short-term action has probably made inevitable the thing he is ostensibly seeking to prevent in the long-term: the disintegration of Pakistan."²⁶

Kissinger's memorandum to the President not only codified the policies the administration had been following since the crisis erupted, but also became the guide which the administration followed to the letter until December 16, 1971. Although Kissinger acknowledged in the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) meeting on March 26 that the independence of Bangladesh was inevitable, he saw three options:

- Option 1 would be essentially a posture of supporting whatever political and military program President Yahya chooses to pursue in the East.
- Option 2 would be to try and maintain a posture of genuine neutrality.

Option 3 would be to make a serious effort to help Yahya end the war and establish an arrangement that could be transitional to East Pakistan autonomy.

Kissinger spelt out the steps needed to be taken for each of the options, and recommended that the US government go with Option 3, because,

Option 3 would have the advantage of making the most of the relationship with Yahya while engaging in a serious effort to move the situation towards conditions less damaging to US and Pakistani interests. Its disadvantage is that it might lead to a situation in which progress toward a political settlement [breaks] down, the US [alienates] itself from the 600 million people in India and East Pakistan, and the US [is] unable to influence the West Pakistan government to make the concessions necessary for a political settlement.

President Richard Nixon's response to Kissinger's comprehensive six-page briefing was a hand-written, signed note, attached to the briefing itself. Marked "To All Hands," the US president summed up official policy in six simple words: "Don't squeeze Yahya at this time." President Nixon underlined the word "Don't" thrice, just in case anyone failed to get the message.²⁷ Thus by the end of April the US administration, especially the White House, had formulated its policy towards the Bangladesh movement – not to support it; instead, to stand by its longtime ally, Pakistan.

The date of Kissinger's memo – April 28 – is noteworthy for another reason. It was written the day after the Pakistani envoy Agha Hilaly conveyed a message from Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in which "Zhou confirmed Chinese willingness to receive a secret US envoy."²⁸ Pakistan was chosen not only to be the conduit of the message but also to organize the logistics and modalities of the visit. Although Islamabad was not the only route to Peking for the US administration,²⁹ it became the principal justification for favoring Pakistan, at the expense of the cherished principles of democracy and human rights. At a time "when principles [could] make best politics,"³⁰ the White House chose to shun the principles.

Political settlement

The option that the White House had chosen to pursue called for a political settlement of the crisis. Implicit in this option was maintaining the "territorial integrity of Pakistan" as the primary consideration. The possibility of "working with both sides at once" was brushed aside in an NSC meeting in early April.³¹ This policy option, therefore, precluded the possibility of acknowledging the existence of, or official contacts with, the "Bangladesh government in exile" in Calcutta. By summer, the inefficacy of this policy was obvious to any observer. Career diplomats and analysts tried, in vain, to bring the White House, especially Kissinger, into line. The situation on the ground was changing rapidly as guerrillas emerged as a fighting force to be reckoned with. The "independence" of Bangladesh was no longer a pipedream, but became an imminent reality. In the face of strong criticisms

at home and abroad, the White House devised ways to frustrate these developments, and embarked on a number of efforts to prolong the conflict which would provide Yahya Khan with a breathing space. One of the primary objectives of these efforts was to create a rift within the Bangladesh movement. Among these efforts, three deserve closer examination. They are: the Calcutta contacts, the Islamabad talk, and the Tehran initiatives.

I. THE CALCUTTA CONTACTS

The Calcutta contacts, according to Kissinger's account, started very modestly on July 30 when Qazi Zahirul Quayum, an elected member of the AL, approached the consulate as a representative of the government in exile to begin negotiations. "This led to a futile three-month pursuit of political accommodation," Kissinger insists, "that could have amounted to something if India and the Bengalis had wanted."³² Some leaders of the Bangladesh movement claim that the initial contacts were made in late June. The initiative, it is assumed, came from the US Consulate rather than Quayum. Awami League sources interviewed in 1995 claim that in the wake of the first meeting of the elected AL leaders on July 6 in Shiliguri, Griffin, and others contacted Quayum for inside information. These contacts marked a clear departure from the official US policy that the developments in East Pakistan were internal matters of Pakistan and the US had no intention of getting involved. It is also worth mentioning that US officials had previously refused to meet any Bangladesh representatives. As early as April 13 a representative of the AL contacted the Consulate through the British Deputy High Commissioner for a meeting. The representative indicated that Tajuddin Ahmed, the Prime Minister of the Bangladesh government-in-exile, was interested to meet with US officials. While the British officials did meet Ahmed, the consulate was instructed by the State Department not to entertain such requests.³³ Yet, in late-July, an AL leader whose authenticity was not clearly established was received by the Consulate and approval was given by the White House for continuing the contacts. It was definitely not due to any change of policy but, in retrospect, one can see, was designed to buy time for the Pakistani regime. Kissinger, who believed that asking Yahya "to deal with the Awami Leaguers in Calcutta is like asking Abraham Lincoln to deal with Jefferson Davis,"³⁴ provided a green signal to the contacts and asked Joseph Farland to keep Yahya posted as to developments.

The records show that over the following three months at least 13 meetings took place between George Griffin, the political officer of the Consulate and Qazi Zahirul Quayum. Quayum requested that these contacts be handled "discreetly." He also insisted that a significant section of the AL leaders were seeking a political solution to the problem and were prepared to back down on the demand for total independence. The continued contacts with the Bangladesh (BD) representative yielded very little progress in terms of resolving the crisis, but were maintained with the utmost secrecy, so

much so that they remained unknown to Ambassador Kenneth Keating in New Delhi. Interestingly the suggestion of keeping Keating and the Delhi embassy in the dark came from Ambassador Joseph Farland stationed in Islamabad.

Perhaps the highest point of these clandestine contacts was the 90-minute meeting between the Bangladesh Foreign Minister Khondoker Mushtaq Ahmed and the Political Officer of the Consulate on September 28. During the meeting Mushtaq described himself as a “dedicated anti-communist,” expressed his dissatisfaction with the recent actions of the government in exile, reminded his listeners that the United States was an “old and good friend” and said, “we want your shoulder to lean on.”³⁵ There had been a number of meetings with Qayum and the Political Officer of the consulate insisted that Quayum arrange a meeting with the Acting President, Nazrul Islam. But it appeared to the Consulate that Islam was reluctant to see any US officials. A direct invitation was also rejected.³⁶

In the following month, the possibility of any “political settlement” through Calcutta contacts evaporated. The Prime Minister of the government in exile was apprised of these clandestine contacts. This became clear in a meeting between the Bangladesh High Commissioner in Calcutta Hossain Ali and Griffin on October 12 where Ali expressed his displeasure that the US had not communicated the Bangladesh “desires” to Yahya. Further, he questioned the utility of talks with Yahya, and why Yahya was not meeting Mujib.³⁷

The news of these contacts became public on October 24. Almost all newspapers in Calcutta carried an Associated Press story filed from London quoting “Asian diplomatic sources” that the “USG [United States Government] has established informal contacts with Bangladesh leaders in an effort to promote negotiations between them and GOP [Government of Pakistan].” Denials from the Bangla Desh Government (BDG) followed immediately. It was in this context, that the Calcutta consulate informed the State Department in a telegram on October 28 that “Calcutta contact at least at level and along lines so far employed has reached a dead end and that new approach is desirable.” The telegram went on to state that,

We do not see any sign or hope of any BDG [Bangla Desh Government] representative being prepared to risk any compromising his position in BD movement by initiating negotiations. Whatever may have been the factors and personalities behind the original Qaiyum’s initiative, changes in the situation which have occurred since July (i.e., increased Mukti Bahini activity, GOI [Government of India]-GOP [Government of Pakistan] tension, or growing leftist pressure within BD) have tended to sharply limit the maneuverability of any BDG leader. As far as we can see here, if negotiations are eventually to get under way, next move is up to Yahya.³⁸

The fallout of these contacts became further clear on the following day. As reported in the *Ananada Bazar Patrika* published from Calcutta, the AL working committee instructed all MNAs (i.e. members of parliament) to

refrain from talking to “foreign representatives, particularly American representatives, on the future of Bangladesh,” and warned members of “stern disciplinary measures” for violating the instruction. The committee decisions included an announcement that the party would agree to “no settlement short of independence.” The simmering discontent regarding the leadership was dealt a body blow with the words “there is no need of changing the AL leadership now.”

Quayum, however, maintained the contact with the consulate and called on Griffin three times in November to keep him posted as to developments. He alleged that D. P. Dhar, the Indian official in charge of maintaining liaison with the Bangladesh Government had described Mushtaq as a “traitor” during a heated conversation. He pleaded that the US administration intervene to release Mujib (even if his mobility was restricted to West Pakistan) because, he reported, the moderates were coming under pressure from the leftists, pro-Russian communists and the Soviets and “without Sheikh we cannot stand up to pressure much longer.”³⁹

II. THE ISLAMABAD TALK

Concurrent to cultivating the Calcutta contacts, another channel for a “political settlement” was opened in late October. This involved members of the AL who remained within Pakistan and was “cleared” by the Pakistani government on August 7. The “cleared” list contained 88 names. The groundwork for this option began in late July. In the Senior Review Group (SRG) meeting on July 23, as mentioned before, the “political solution” became a major issue of discussion and different options were considered. Kissinger sarcastically commented that “Yahya and his group would never win any prizes for high IQs or for subtlety of their political comprehension” and asked “can we get a program that separates the refugee issue while still leaving a vista for political accommodation?” He also opined that “the Pakistanis don’t have the political imagination to do this themselves.”⁴⁰ Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia and Near East Joseph Sisco insisted that the US will “have to nudge Yahya toward the Awami League.” Sisco also emphasized the importance of Mujib saying that “we also have to do what we can to see that he does not try Mujib.” It was at that point that the Under Secretary for State John Irwin introduced the option of dealing with those AL leaders who were in Pakistan. Irwin asked “are there any Awami Leaguers left in East Pakistan that Yahya could deal with?” and then proposed that “it would help if he could find a few Awami Leaguers who still had some respect in East Pakistan with whom he could deal.”⁴¹

Within seven days of this discussion the “cleared” list was announced. Not all the “cleared” members were in Pakistan at that time and willing to take advantage of this announcement. Those who identified and contacted the military authorities were given protection. One of these cleared and “protected” members – Nurul Islam – offered to become the mediator in

talks between Mujibur Rahman and the Pakistani authority. The proposal was put to US Consul General in Dhaka Herbert Spivack, who had replaced Archer Blood a month earlier. Islam and another member, S. B. Zaman, were cultivated by the Dhaka Consulate and the Islamabad Embassy. The meeting was scheduled through the Islamabad Embassy⁴² and the President was kept informed about the meeting as this was included in his Thursday briefing on November 17 where the group was described as “tame Awami Leaguers.” A meeting between President Yahya Khan and these two AL members took place on November 22. The details that emerged from Islamabad Embassy’s telegram on November 24 show that Islam and Zaman proposed a four-point solution. The four-point proposal of Nurul Islam and S. B. Zaman was surprisingly similar to the proposal of Quayum. None insisted on the *immediate* release of Mujib and a direct negotiation between Yahya and Mujib. Instead, the Islam-Zaman duo suggested that they talk to Mujib and then travel to Calcutta for a further discussion with Tajuddin Ahmed.⁴³ Although these proposals were a non-starter and there was very little hope that this would bring any solution to the crisis, Yahya Khan was in no mood to go beyond listening to ideas either. Furthermore, by November the situation on the ground had changed dramatically – the Calcutta contacts had ended in fiasco, the Indians had reigned in the group in favor of such contacts, the infighting within the AL had begun to subside and the Bangladeshi fighters were advancing rapidly.

III. THE TEHRAN INITIATIVE

The Tehran initiative – an effort to arrange a meeting between the Bangladesh representatives and GOP representatives – came to light in the meeting of the Senior Review Group on July 30. The meeting was a continuation of the earlier meeting of July 23 when the need for a political solution to the crisis had been emphasized by a number of participants. It was also noted in the context of a possible relief operation inside Bangladesh that “the Pakistani Army is very thinly stretched. They are extremely short of transport” (USDS 2005: 279). Richard Helms of the CIA floated the idea saying, “Has anyone given any thought to involving the Shah of Iran in working with Pakistan? He might be able to help us; at least it’s worth considering since we seem to have [run] out of gas with Pakistan.”⁴⁴ Helms’s point was immediately contradicted by Kissinger saying that “we are not out of gas with Yahya”; however Kissinger did not oppose the idea of involving the Shah of Iran. The idea was to have a meeting between some of the exiled AL leaders and GOP representatives in Tehran. This offer seems to have made no headway. Although the Shah agreed to host such a clandestine meeting, it received very little support from the Pakistani and Bangladeshi sides. Sisson and Rose (1990) provide a different narrative of the origin of this initiative. Their account, based on a Pakistani source, contends that the initiative came from the Pakistani government. Sisson and

Rose writes, “According to one Pakistani source close to Yahya in 1971, Yahya was prepared to have Mujib included in negotiations with the Awami League and even asked the shah of Iran to assist in the negotiation of a political solution with the Awami League during Yahya’s visit to Tehran in September.”⁴⁵

Nonetheless, this soon became known to the exiled leaders in India.⁴⁶ Quyaum, the Calcutta contact, came to know about the move and mentioned it to the Consulate officials as reported by Calcutta Consulate to the State Department in a telegram on August 28. The details of the effort are still lacking but it obviously remained alive until October. In Secretary Alexis Johnson’s telegram to Islamabad Embassy on October 8, there contained a section for Tehran which instructed the Ambassador to solicit the Shah’s support in obtaining a political settlement.⁴⁷ But by then the Shah had already made the point that a political solution was the only way out for Pakistan. In early October, the Shah, in a meeting with Yahya Khan, “pressed him strongly to reach a political solution.” Van Hollen reported to WSAG on October 7 that “the Shah urged Yahya to cut losses, told him frankly that he didn’t have a chance in military showdown and urged him to seek a political settlement.”⁴⁸ In Johnson’s view, that was a “positive development” as someone has been bringing the message home to Yahya. Subsequent developments, especially the sudden collapse of the Calcutta effort, seem to have taken the steam out of this effort. US documents, available to date, make no mention of this effort after October 8.

The goals of the “initiatives”

These initiatives, especially the latter two, was evidently too little and too late. Yet one can ask what the intended outcomes of these initiatives were? If we are to believe Kissinger’s 1979 account, the objectives of all these initiatives were to establish a civilian government in Pakistan, securing the release of Mujib, ensuring autonomy in the short term, and independent Bangladesh “in a matter of months.”⁴⁹ But if we are to believe Kissinger’s 1971 account, “the time required to bring about a political evolution . . . might be longer than the Indian capacity to withstand the pressures by the refugees.”⁵⁰ Anyone following the events would agree with Kissinger’s 1971 account and would reach a conclusion similar to that of Hersh “at this point, only Nixon and Kissinger believed there was any chance of a negotiated settlement between Yahya Khan and the Bengalis. During the fall, the Awami League had escalated its demands as well as guerrilla activities against the West Pakistani Army, and nothing short of total independence for Bangladesh was negotiable.”⁵¹

Kissinger’s 1979 account gives the impression that the US had a solution package in hand and was ready to press upon the parties including Pakistan. But Oldenburg, who interviewed State Department officials, writes, “several interviewees agreed that no ‘political solution’ was pressed upon Pakistan

until very late, and none could say what the solution was. If indeed it was formulated as a package by the White House, it was not certainly presented as such to the State Department.”⁵²

The Calcutta contacts were not moving events towards any negotiated settlement, as there were no positive responses from the other party – Pakistan. Kissinger’s own admission bears out the point. Kissinger, in response to the questions by the Congress on December 7, 1971, stated that the negotiations never began, nor was the U.S. ever involved “on substance.”⁵³ Additionally, President Nixon, in his State of the World Message to the Congress on 9 February 1972 acknowledged, “the United States cannot be certain that the steps it proposed would have brought about a negotiation, or that such a negotiation would have produced a settlement.”

Had the intention been to move towards a solution, other channels in India would have been explored. But on the contrary, Ambassador Keating in Delhi was discouraged from contacting any Bangladeshi officials even when the Foreign Secretary of the BDG, Mahbub Alam approached him in August. Interestingly, Mahbub Alam belonged to the same group as Quayum and Mushtaq Ahmed.

These initiatives were, therefore, “sterile exercises”⁵⁴ in terms of bringing about a positive solution to the crisis, but served to accentuate schisms within the leadership of the Bangladesh movement. The clandestine effort in Calcutta is the clearest example of this.

As the AL, from its inception, had attempted to represent a broad range of social groups, cleavages within the organization always existed. Events prior to, and after the crackdown of March 25 accentuated divisions within the party and brought forth some new elements conducive to factionalism. In 1971, there were at least three factions within the AL: first, the radical elements; second, the liberals; and third, the conservatives.

The liberal faction of the party under the leadership of Tajuddin Ahmed, took the lead in forming the government in early April. Ahmed, prodded by his close aides, presented himself as the Prime Minister of the Bangladesh government led by Mujib, in his meeting with Indira Gandhi on April 3. Ahmed didn’t know the whereabouts of his colleagues and thus made the decision without any consultation with other leaders. This became the first issue of contention within the party when Ahmed assembled the small group of leaders five days later in Calcutta. Both radicals and conservatives were up in arms against Ahmed. When Tajuddin Ahmed and a few other leaders met Khondker Mushtaq Ahmed, a senior leader of conservative inclination, on April 11, Mushtaq expressed discontent that Tajuddin had become Prime Minister. He argued that as the senior member of the team he should have taken the top job. He also expressed his desire to leave the country and go to Mecca for the rest of his life.

With the formal declaration of independence and the formation of a cabinet on April 17, the conflict subsided but did not end.⁵⁵ Disagreements resurfaced when the AL members of the National and Provincial Assemblies

met in Shiliguri (Agaratala district of India) on July 5–6, 1971. Recollections of the participants paint a picture of a cacophonous meeting attended by about 300 elected representatives of the AL. The meeting became a show of force by various groups within the party, and a large number of participants, including Mushtaq Ahmed, expressed discontent regarding the leadership, particularly the PM for his inability to gain concrete support from the Indian authorities. Some of the participants said that it would be better if they returned to Bangladesh to fight against or to compromise with the Pakistani regime. It was this view that received not-so-tacit support from the Calcutta consulate.

The signing of the Indo-Soviet treaty on August 9 provided a clear signal that Indian policy-makers were moving towards a situation where they would not remain friendless if attacked by Pakistan and/or China. While liberals welcomed this development, it caused significant discomfort to the conservatives within the AL. They viewed this as the consolidation of Indo-Soviet power and became concerned that this would strengthen the position of the liberals within the government, and therefore would be damaging to the conservatives' design. Their fear was further intensified when the Indian authority reiterated that to strengthen the movement, a national alliance incorporating pro-Moscow political parties should be formed immediately.⁵⁶ It was immensely difficult for the conservatives to oppose such a move.⁵⁷ But a very emotive issue emerged that provided them with the much needed opportunity to oppose the government position – saving the life of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

A day after the treaty was signed, a court began try Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in secret for waging war against Pakistan.⁵⁸ The verdict of the trial was a forgone conclusion, especially after Yahya's speech of March 26 and June 28 as well as his comment on August 5 that Mujib would be "punished" for "treason".⁵⁹ Several countries appealed to Pakistan to spare Mujib's life, but President Nixon in the SRG meeting on August 11 asked the State Department to remain "neutral" while Farland communicated to Yahya the US "suggestion" that "he should not shoot Mujib."⁶⁰ The Mushtaq faction within the AL leadership began insisting that the only way to save Mujib's life was to deal with the Pakistani government directly. They contended that it was an "either / or" situation between the "independent Bangladesh" and "Mujib's life." The official stance of the Bangladesh government was that anything short of independence would jeopardize the Mujib's life. Mujib was the symbol of the Bangladesh movement and his execution would not only damage the cause but also split the leadership in as many groups. Thus, on the face of it, the call for saving the life of Mujib was very appealing. The Mushatq faction alleged that the Tajuddin faction was averse to the idea of saving Mujib's life because they wanted to remain in power. This caused a stir in the exiled community and placed many dedicated supporters of Mujib in a serious dilemma. At this stage the Mushtaq faction drew up an elaborate plan of defection. The plan was that saving Mujib's

life would be the pretext for breaking ranks and returning to Pakistan. The moment chosen for this was October 1971 and the venue would be the United Nations. Mushtaq Ahmed, as Foreign Minister of the government-in-exile, was expected to be in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly to present the Bangladesh case. The plan was to announce a compromise deal with the Pakistani administration short of independence, and thus cause serious damage to, if not a complete dissolution of, the Bangladesh movement. This, needless to say, neatly fitted into the “political settlement” scheme the Nixon White House was advocating. To divert the government’s attention from their clandestine contacts with the US, the Mushtaq faction organized a series of regional meetings to criticize the Tajuddin administration.⁶¹ This move made the division within the AL leadership an open secret. When the Consulate General in Calcutta on September 20 reported of division within the leadership,⁶² this was not only on whether to meet the representatives of the US government, as the telegram suggested, but more on how to deal with the situation that emerged from this open rebellion of the Mushtaq faction. The news of the on-going trial of Mujib, which resumed on September 5, and the rumor that there had been a verdict to execute Mujib made the situation worse for the Bangladesh government.

The above description of the intrigues within the leadership shows that there was a convergence of interest between a faction of the AL leadership and the White House. The telegram from the Secretary of State to the Embassy in Pakistan on August 31 asking for comments on, among other things, the “dynamics of troublesome divisions within BD movement (including Mukti Bahini) over ‘independence vs. accommodation’”⁶³ demonstrates that the US administration was hoping that this division would bear some fruit. The Calcutta initiative, therefore, was not a “sterile exercise” from this vantage point. It made some contributions, unfortunately not in the direction of ameliorating the sufferings of the Bengalis.

Conclusion

This discussion shows that the US policy towards the South Asian crisis in 1971 was not limited to the much discussed “tilt” in favor of Pakistan, but also actively in opposition to the independence of Bangladesh, despite the fact that the key architect of this policy, Henry Kissinger, was convinced that “East Pakistan will eventually become independent.”⁶⁴ A definitive answer to the question of whether this opposition was to buy time for the United States to complete its rapprochement with China or provide Yahya Khan the opportunity to save Pakistan can only be provided by those who were engaged in the process.

But the available documents and the basic reality tells us that these efforts began weakening the Bangladesh movement and could have contributed to its demise should the process have continued for long. On the other hand,

these provided Yahya with an impression that the US administration had come to rescue him and that the resolution of the crisis was only a matter of time. The mindset of Yahya can be understood from the comment of G. W. Choudhury, the former Information Minister and a close aide of Yahya, “If Nixon had not given him [the] false hope, he’d have been more realistic.” Choudhury noted that the decision of military crackdown in March was Yahya’s own, “but there was hope that the United States would bail him out if he did something stupid.”⁶⁵ The “political settlement” efforts of the United States were thus seen from Islamabad’s vantage point as the rescue mission. There was no need for them to hold back on the military side. Consequently, the military continued the atrocities – more deaths and destruction followed. US clandestine efforts, described as a “political settlement,” therefore, contributed to the bloodshed instead of bringing an end to it.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the “South Asia in Crisis: United States Policy, 1961–1972” Conference, June 28–29, 2005, organized by the US Department of State at Washington, DC.

¹ For examples of media coverage see: BBC News, “Nixon’s dislike of ‘witch’ Indira,” http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4633263.stm, accessed June 29, 2005; CNN, “Nixon documents show India tensions,” <http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/06/29/nixon.india.ap/>, accessed June 29, 2005; *Guardian*, “Insults fly on Nixon tapes,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,12271,1517348,00.html>, accessed June 30, 2005.

² United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, XI* and companion electronic volume, *Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, volume E-7, Documents on South Asia, 1969–1972* (Washington, Office of the Historian, US Department of State), 2005.

³ H. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 913.

⁴ *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) is a documentary series that has been in publication since 1861, and is intended to present the official “historical record of major foreign policy decisions and significant diplomatic activity of the United States Government.” The documents are required to be made public by statute “not more than 30 years” after the events are recorded.

⁵ For an earlier compilation of declassified documents published by the National Security Archive, see: “The Tilt: The U.S. and the South Asian Crisis of 1971,” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 79, ed. S. Gandhian, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB79/>, accessed December 16, 2003.

⁶ C. Van Hollen, “The Tilt Policy revisited: Nixon–Kissinger geopolitics and South Asia” in *The Regional Imperative: The Administration of US Foreign Policy Towards South Asian States Under Presidents Johnson and Nixon*, ed. L. I. Rudolph and S. H. Rudolph (New Jersey, Humanities Press Inc, 1980, pp. 421–50).

⁷ D. Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947–2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Washington DC, Woodrow Wilson Center, 2001).

⁸ R. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* rev. edn (Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 1994).

⁹ W. Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York, Hill & Wang, 1998).

¹⁰ J. Hanhimaki, *The Flawed Architect, Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹¹ Student activists of the AL hoisted a new flag describing this as a ‘the flag of the independent Bangladesh’ on March 2 and put enormous pressure on the AL leaders, especially Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to follow suit. There was widespread rumor prior to the public meeting of March 7 that

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would unilaterally declare independence. See, for example, Memorandum from Harold Saunders and Samuel Hoskinson to Henry Kissinger, March 4, 1971, USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 5.

¹² For detail coverage of the genocide in international press, see F. Q. Quaderi, *Bangladesh Genocide and World Press* (Dacca, Begum Dilafröz Quaderi, 1972).

¹³ This is largely because the AL election manifesto promised that it will implement the six-point programs if voted to power. The six-point program called for regional autonomy for the East Pakistan with only foreign affairs and defense leaving to the central government. This was unacceptable to the military-bureaucratic oligarchy and the PPP.

¹⁴ Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives, NSC Files, Box 365, Subject Files, National Security Study Memoranda, Nos. 104–206. Secret.

¹⁵ Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives, NSC Files, Box 624, Country Files, Middle East, Pakistan, Vol. III, 1 Oct 70–28 Feb 71. Secret; Exdis.

¹⁶ Telegram 373, from Dhaka Consulate to State Department, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, SOC 10 PAK. Confidential.

¹⁷ Telegram 540 from Dhaka Consulate to State Department, February 28, 1971, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL PAK–US. Confidential; Priority; Limdis. Telegram 697 from Dhaka Consulate to State Department, March 10, 1971. National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL PAK. Secret; Immediate; Exdis.

¹⁸ Christopher Van Hollen, then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs insists that the “tilt” policy of the Nixon administration had been in place even before March 25. He noted that Kissinger in the SRG meeting on March 6 commented on a “special relationship” between Nixon and Yahya (Van Hollen, “Tilt Policy”, pp. 423–4). Nixon’s pro-Pakistani bent was evident in his article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1967. The article entitled “Asia after Vietnam” described Pakistan as “India’s more successful neighbor.” When he assumed office he saw India as a huge country “both challenging and frustrating.” Nixon cited in T. P. Thornton, “US-India relations during the Nixon and Ford years” in *The Hope and The Reality: US-Indian Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan*, ed. H. E. Gould and S. Ganguly (Boulder CO, Westview, 1992), pp. 93–4. The “personal friendship” between Nixon and Yahya was cemented in 1969 during Nixon’s fourth and perhaps his briefest visit to Pakistan when he sought Yahya’s help in normalizing relationship with China.

¹⁹ Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-115, WSAG Minutes, Originals, 1971 and USDS 2005: 26.

²⁰ USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 34, fn 2.

²¹ Kissinger’s evaluation of the situation described the possible roles of the external players – India, US, China, and Russia. He wrote:

India will be the most important (of the outside players). By training and equipping a relatively small Bengali resistance force, India can help keep active resistance alive and increase the chances of prolonged guerilla war. From all indications, the Indians intend to follow such a course. They could also make it difficult for Yahya to negotiate a political transition in East Pakistan by recognizing a Bengali government. They seem more cautious on this.

The US will be an important factor from outside the area: (1) We still have influence in West Pakistan and remain important to India. (b) US economic support – multiplied by US leadership in the World Bank consortium of aid donors – remains crucial to West Pakistan. Neither Moscow nor Peking can duplicate this assistance. (c) Our military supply, while relatively small and unlikely to affect the outcome of the fighting, is an important symbolic element in our posture.

The USSR is concerned that instability will work to China’s advantage, and has shown perhaps more inclination in recent years than the US towards trying to settle disputes in the subcontinent. In the short run, the Soviet interests seem to parallel our own, although they would certainly like to use this situation to undercut our position in India.

Communist China could (a) be West Pakistan’s main ally in threatening India with diversionary military moves and (b) eventually enter the contest with India for control of the East Pakistani resistance movement. For the moment, the Chinese seem to have cast their lot with the West Pakistanis.

National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 625, Country Files, Middle East, Pakistan, Vol. IV, 1 Mar 71–15 May 71. Secret. Sent for action; USDS, *Foreign Relations*, pp. 94–8.

- ²² National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 23–9 PAK. Confidential; Immediate; Exdis.
- ²³ National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 23–9 PAK. Confidential; Priority.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Telegram 1138 from Dhaka Consulate April 6, 1971, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 1 PAK–US. Confidential; Priority. Response from the Department State – Telegram 58039, April 7, 1971, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 27 INDIA–PAK. Secret; Immediate; Nodis. Reaction from Dhaka Consulate, Telegram 1249, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 27 INDIA–PAK. Secret; Priority; Nodis.
- ²⁶ Telegram 3164, from US Embassy in Islamabad, April 6, 1971, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL PAK–US. Secret; Immediate; Nodis
- ²⁷ See <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB79/>.
- ²⁸ Kux, *United States*, p. 188.
- ²⁹ In late 1970 and early 1971, the US exchanged messages through Romania. See S. M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York, Summit Books, 1983), pp. 448–9.
- ³⁰ Telegram 4494, from New Delhi Embassy to State Department, March 29 entitled “Selective Genocide,” Record Group 59, Subject Numeric File 1970–73, Pol and Def Box 2530.
- ³¹ USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 63.
- ³² Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 869; the existence of such contact was brought to light by Jack Anderson in 1973. See J. Anderson, *The Anderson Papers* (New York, Random House, 1973).
- ³³ USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 76, fn 2.
- ³⁴ Senior Review Group Meeting, August 11, 1971, see USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 327.
- ³⁵ Telegram 2575, September 28, 1971, from Calcutta Consulate to State Department. National Archives, RG 59. Central Files 1970–73, POL 27 INDIA–PAK, Secret, Nodis.
- ³⁶ Telegram 2648, October 14, 1971, from Calcutta Consulate to State Department, National Archives, RG 59. Central Files 1970–73, POL 27 INDIA–PAK, Secret, Nodis.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Telegram 2713, October 28, 1971, from Calcutta Consulate to State Department. National Archives, RG 59. Central Files 1970–73, POL 27 INDIA–PAK, Secret, Nodis.
- ³⁹ Secret Telegram, from Calcutta Consulate to State Department, November 22, 1971.
- ⁴⁰ USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 274.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 275.
- ⁴² Telegram 10927 from Islamabad Embassy to State Department, November 2, 1971, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 23–9 PAK. Telegram 10964 from Islamabad Embassy to State Department, November 3, 1971, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 29 PAK.
- ⁴³ Telegram from Islamabad Embassy to State Department, November 24, 1971, National Archives, RG 59. Central Files 1970–73, POL 29 PAK, Secret.
- ⁴⁴ USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 293.
- ⁴⁵ R. Sisson and L. E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), p. 316, fn 63.
- ⁴⁶ A number of AL leaders and journalists who were in Calcutta in 1971 confirmed this information in personal interviews conducted in 1995. Most of them, however, described this as a “rumor.” Two prominent AL leaders commented that they dismissed any such possibility because they believed that Iran would not do anything that could annoy Pakistan.
- ⁴⁷ USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 449.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 440.
- ⁴⁹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 880.
- ⁵⁰ Congressional Record, December 9, 1971, p. S21015 Background Briefing quoted in Van Hollen, “Tilt Policy,” p. 435.
- ⁵¹ Hersh, *Price of Power*, p. 456.
- ⁵² P. Oldenberg, “The Breakup of Pakistan” in *The Regional Imperative: The Administration of US Foreign Policy Towards South Asian States Under Presidents Johnson and Nixon*, ed. L. I. Rudolph and S. H. Rudolph (New Jersey, Humanities Press Inc, 1980), p. 161.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 158.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The composition of the cabinet reflected a compromise between the liberals and the conservatives. Nazrul Islam, a leader of conservative inclination, became the Acting President while Tajuddin Ahmed remained the Prime Minister. However, throughout May hectic jockeying continued. Various small groups were looking for ways to remove Tajuddin Ahmed from the post of PM. The proclamation of independence accorded the President and in his absence the Vice President the power to appoint and dismiss ministers. A number of individuals and groups approached Nazrul Islam to exercise his authority in this regard.

⁵⁶ A committee to this effect, named the Consultative Committee, was formed in early September. The cabinet approved the move after long deliberations and on the insistence of D. P. Dhar on September 9. The committee, in its final shape, however, had very limited authority and was not something that the Indian government originally expected. The move also irked the Indian conservatives within and outside the administration. Samar Guha, an academician and the Head of the "National Coordination Committee for Bangladesh Movement" alleged that D. P. Dhar and Foreign Secretary T. N. Kaul had been pushing the Bangladesh government for establishing a National Liberation Front. He termed this as "unfortunate" (*The Statesman*, September 8, 1971).

⁵⁷ Nazrul Islam and Mushtaq Ahmed, among others, opposed the formation of the consultative committee. Mushtaq Ahmed, however, traded his support for his potential trip to New York as the leader of the Bangladesh delegation to the United Nations in October.

⁵⁸ "Yahya schedules a secret trial of separatist chief tomorrow," *New York Times*, August 10, 1971.

⁵⁹ Yahya, in his speech on March 26, for example, said Mujib, "has attacked the solidarity and integrity of this country – this crime will not go unpunished."

⁶⁰ USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 327.

⁶¹ On September 12, for example, forty elected representatives of the Southern administrative zone belonging to the Mustaque and Sheikh Fazlul Hoque Moni groups, met and adopted a resolution calling on the AL high command to force Tajuddin's resignation from both the General Secretary position of the party and cabinet membership. In September, another faction led by two prominent AL leaders, Kamruzzaman and Yusuf Ali, attempted to increase their influence over the freedom fighters in the northern part of the country. They even contacted some pro-China, leftist political parties operating out of Calcutta.

⁶² Telegram 2527 from Calcutta Consulate to State Department, September 20, 1971, National Archives, RG 59, Central Files, 1970–73, POL 27 INDIA-PAK, Secret.

⁶³ USDS, *Foreign Relations*, p. 371.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁶⁵ G. W. Choudhury, "Reflections on Sino-Pakistan Relations," *Pacific Community*, 7 (2), 1976, pp. 248–70.

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