



Geopolitics of Bangladesh's Liberation

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Abstract

Bangladesh's tumultuous birth in 1971 is one of the most significant geopolitical events that shaped the history of the subcontinent. The genocide unleashed by the Pakistan Army on 25 March only strengthened the Bengalis' resolve for independence. Yet this birth was not easy, as the Muslim countries and Western countries mainly the United States opposed it and continued to treat it as an internal problem of Pakistan. Its indebtedness to Pakistan for facilitating rapprochement with China remained a major consideration. As ten million refugees fled to India, India signed a 25-year treaty with the Soviet Union that changed the Cold War geopolitics and shaped the constellation of power. Bangladesh continued to suffer birth pangs as Pakistan withheld recognition and China vetoed its entry to the United Nations. The issue of the prisoners of war, trial of Pakistani officers for

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war crimes and the repatriation of stranded Bengalis in West Pakistan was lengthy and became complex, as Pakistan refused to negotiate with Bangladesh. Once referred to as an international basket case, the country has made rapid economic strides and has proved all the naysayers wrong. This article explores Bangladesh's journey especially in the context of the geopolitics of the 1971 Liberation War and its progress as a nation-state.

Bangladesh's emergence in 1971 was no less than an epoch-making event in international politics. The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 was the culmination of a long struggle that East Bengalis started soon after the creation of Pakistan. The military operation of 25 March—'Operation Searchlight'—was the fallout of a failed negotiation between Sheikh Mujib and Yahya's regime and also the military regime's decision not to transfer power to the Awami League. While Bengalis took up arms to seek liberation, traversing through the geopolitics of the Cold War era which was not ready to criticise the genocide in Pakistan as it was perceived to be an internal matter of Pakistan, was equally challenging. News coming out of East Pakistan was sparse as the Government regulated the media. The Bengalis' struggle for freedom, received international sympathy and support mostly from civil society in different countries. In some cases there was a complete disconnect between the state's approach to Bangladesh's liberation and the effort of individual citizens of that country to support the refugees that had gathered in India. For example, the approach of the United States (US) was shaped by the Cold War politics. It was indebted to Pakistan as a major ally which facilitated Kissinger's visit to Beijing that paved the way for President Nixon's visit and facilitated the US-China rapprochement. Geopolitical compulsions forced it to close its eyes to the genocide perpetrated by Yahya Khan. As the US looked away, cultural activists and former Beatle George Harrison and Indian sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar collaborated in a live concert at New York's Madison Square Garden along with other artistes to

collect funds to support the cause of Bangladesh and collected Rs. 243,418, that were donated to the UNICEF to be used for the refugees' welfare. Most importantly, this concert highlighted and sensitised the international community, especially the United States, to the developments in East Pakistan. Similarly, the US and China supported the Yahya regime and referred to the Liberation War as Pakistan's 'internal matter'; India supported the Liberation War while the Soviets provided necessary international support as part of the P-5 in the UN Security Council. A majority of the Muslim countries saw this as a ploy to divide a fellow Muslim country. This article focuses on the US and Soviet approaches and how they were shaped by the Cold War politics that determined their attitude to Bangladesh's liberation. It dwells on the politics of recognition and how Pakistan used the issue of recognition to get all the Prisoners of War (PoWs) repatriated including 173 officers for whom Mujib had insisted on a trial. The article also delves on Bangladesh's negotiations to get back Bengali officers and their families who had been stranded in Pakistan.

Cold War Geopolitics

The Cold War shaped both the United States' (US) and Soviet Union's approach to the unfolding crisis in East Pakistan. Pakistan had emerged as a Cold War partner for the US in 1954 when the two countries signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement. India that strived to stay away from bloc politics and pursued non-alignment foreign policy was weighing its options to strengthen its defence especially after the India-China war of 1962. The US imposed an embargo on supply of limited weapons to India after the 1965 India-Pakistan war. By then the Soviets, who were competing for influence in South Asia, had emerged as important suppliers of weapons to India. While the Sino-Soviet rift brought the US and China closer, the Soviet Union was keen to forge a close relationship with India. It had proposed a treaty to India in 1970 and sought New Delhi's consent. New Delhi was not keen to sign the treaty at that point, as it was extremely cautious and did not want to enter into any agreement that would compromise its strategic autonomy.

Moreover, as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, it would have an adverse effect on its global profile. However, as the East Pakistan political crisis unfolded, the geopolitical shifts within the region significantly shaped India's decision towards the Soviet offer. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of August 1971 attested to the geopolitics of that time. This treaty also shaped the Soviet approach to the conflict and the Sino-Soviet contest that had become a lynchpin of this strategic consolidation. Its actions and behaviour were guided by the United States' position and vice-versa.

From the inception of the political crisis, the US closely watched the dialogue between President Yahya Khan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the elected leader of the Awami League (AL). According to Hasan Zaheer who was posted in East Pakistan at that time, the US Ambassador told Mujib to reach an understanding with Yahya as the US would not be in a position to help Mujib.¹ It is apparent that the US took a position in favour of Yahya. This also emboldened Yahya Khan and the military regime to sincerely try for a political solution. As the refugees started flowing into India, Pakistan was keen to project the brewing crisis in its eastern province as an India-Pakistan crisis that would justify a war with India. Asghar Khan mentions that Pakistan wanted to start a war with India with the hope that they would be bailed out by the United States.²

Henry Kissinger's surprise visit to China had transformed the geopolitical situation in the subcontinent. Kissinger however had conveyed to P.N. Haksar, then Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, three days prior to his visit, that if India got involved in the conflict, China would intervene and US would not be able to do much as it "feel[s] some sort of discomfiture".³ This ended India's ambivalence regarding the signing of the proposed treaty with the Soviets, which was first offered in 1968 and finalised by the end of 1970 but was signed only after Kissinger's visit to China. The signing was justified as 'in time and space, a particular coincidence of interest'.⁴ China's position was clear, as there was no response to Mrs Gandhi's letter to the Chinese President in July 1971 to apprise him about

the situation in East Pakistan as part of India's outreach to different countries.

Defining Soviet's Approach

The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, signed in 1950, fell apart due to their disagreement over the implementation of the Treaty and divergent geo-strategic interests. This Sino-Soviet split created an opportunity for the United States to reach out to China. The Soviets' approach to the Bangladesh war was determined by its relations with China and the United States, which was its Cold War adversary. US opposition to Communism was directed more against the Soviet Union than China. However, China then was militarily weak and therefore was not considered as an adversary compared to the Soviets who had emerged as major challengers to US supremacy and global dominance.

Both India and the USSR closely observed Pakistan's approach to the East Pakistan crisis and also the policies of both the US and China towards the East Pakistan crisis. The complex relationship that China shared with India and the Soviet Union also had an impact on its bilateral relations with each of these countries and shaped China's approach to the Bangladesh Liberation War.⁵ Moreover, with the 1963 border agreement with Pakistan in the aftermath of 1962 war with India, strategic relations between the two countries were already in place. China projected India's approach to East Pakistan as 'imperialist and expansionist'. The emerging geopolitical troika (US-China-Pakistan) was a major concern for both India and USSR, especially given their position on the Bangladesh war. According to P.N. Dhar who was heading the Prime Minister's Secretariat, the treaty with the Soviet Union was pending for two years, as India was reluctant to sign it and thought such a treaty is not desirable given that India was one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement. Though Mrs Gandhi was prepared for opposition of the right wing in India for signing a treaty with a communist government, she feared that this "would encourage Leftists to further radicalise internal politics".⁶

However, the Pakistan government's White Paper of 5 August regarding developments in East Pakistan which was followed by Yahya Khan government's declaration of 7 August accusing the Awami League of secession and terming Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman a traitor, closed any possible chance of negotiated political settlement of 'East Pakistan crises'. The Soviets also tried to nudge Pakistan to resolve the crisis, using the influence they enjoyed since the 1965 Tashkent Agreement, which the Soviets had brokered between India and Pakistan. Prior to the signing of Indo-Soviet Treaty, in July, the Soviets had stopped supplying arms to Pakistan.

The US closely followed the Soviet attitude and its position on the East Pakistan crisis. In spite of the fact that the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, *USS Enterprise* sailed into the Bay of Bengal, which was a planned strategy of the United States, on 6 December, President Nixon conveyed to Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev,

...regret to say that what is happening now in South Asia, where you are supporting the Indian Government's open use of force against the independence and integrity of Pakistan, merely serves to aggravate an already grave situation. Beyond that, however, this course of developments runs counter to the recent encouraging trend in international relations to which the mutual endeavors of our two governments have been making such a major contribution. It is clear that the interests of all concerned states will be served if the territorial integrity of Pakistan were restored and military action were brought to an end. Urgent action is required and I believe that your great influence in New Delhi should serve these ends.⁷

Apart from the military support, Soviet veto was important for the Liberation War as it prevented alignment of pro-Pakistan forces in the Security Council. The Soviet Union vetoed the Resolution brought by the US and other countries like Argentina, Belgium, Burundi, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Sierra

Leone, and Somalia in the Security Council. In the General Assembly, on 8 December, a majority of the countries voted in favour of a cease-fire and withdrawal of Indian and Pakistani troops from each other's territory. Pakistani Ambassador Agha Shahi, called it "an overwhelming, historic vote", and said "no attempt must be made to disrupt the national unity of Pakistan", and urged, "that efforts be intensified in order to bring about, speedily, conditions necessary for the voluntary return of the East Pakistan refugees to their homes." He further said this must be "must be consistent with the territorial integrity and national unity of Pakistan" ruling out any negotiation with "secessionist elements"⁸. This reflects Pakistan State's approach which ruled out any compromise with the Awami League, paving the way for the creation of a new state in the subcontinent.

The United States and East Pakistan Crisis

Throughout the political crisis in East Pakistan, the US was supportive of Yahya's effort and insisted that it was internal to Pakistan even after the flow of refugees to India touched around 7-8 million in August 1971. For example, when the military regime promised on 28 June that it is going to transfer power to the civilian regime, Kissinger supported it and was happy that Pakistan was showing sincerity to resolve the problem. During his visit to India he expressed his sympathies for the refugees but was far from pressuring the Pakistani regime on the humanitarian crisis or prioritising a political solution which India insisted on. Interestingly, encouraged by US inaction, in August the military regime announced Mujib's trial for treason, prompting India to appeal to the world leaders to use their influence on the 'Yahya's regime'.

According to P.N. Dhar, in spite of India suggesting to the US to get in touch with the Mujibnagar government directly, the US was reluctant but clandestinely in touch with Khondokar Mushtaq Ahmad. This contact, according to Dhar, was to help Yahya to disrupt the Mujibnagar government's leadership.⁹ Moreover, Pakistan was moving on a path to delegitimise the Awami League (AL) and there was a fear that re-election might

be held by declaring seats of those who left for India as falling vacant or to co-opt the AL leaders by declaring general amnesty. Such attempts failed; the Pakistan government published a White Paper accusing the Awami League for plotting with India to split Pakistan and was making a case to justify a military crackdown. Furthermore, the military government of Yahya Khan gave a statement that it is going to hold a secret military trial of Sheikh Mujib.

During the war, China worked in accordance with the US advice to protect the interests of Pakistan. The US had made it clear to India that in case China intervened in one way or the other in the Bangladesh Liberation War, which was supported by India, New Delhi should not rely on the US. China's role was factored into India's war planning.¹⁰ The Indo-Soviet Treaty was precisely aimed at fighting this coalition against India that could have threatened India's security while it faced the problem of a massive influx of refugees.

On 6 November 1971, the US Secretary of State, William Rogers, also conveyed to India that "war would be tragic for India... but we cannot force Yahya Khan to deal with Mujibur Rahman whom he regards a traitor."¹¹ The US insisted that India withdraw its troops but could not guarantee whether it would lead to the normalisation of process in East Pakistan. Rather it was conveyed to India that as long as the *Mukti Bahini* was active in East Pakistan with India's support, Pakistan could not reduce military action.¹² Rather than pressuring Yahya to announce negotiations with the Mujibnagar government or to free Mujib, which India insisted on, President Nixon was interested in India-Pakistan disengagement on the border, and wanted India not to go for any military action against Pakistan. The US decided to cut off military aid to India, which was conveyed to the Indian Ambassador, in the following statement:

US will continue its effort to contribute to easing of tensions and is taking this action as result of its view that military conflict can only stand in way of political solution. American people will not understand

provision of new military supplies in the light of the present military situation.¹³

The US also analysed the situation in geopolitical context. It admitted that the Soviets were more active in “trying to settle disputes in the subcontinent” as they did not want the situation to favour China.¹⁴

The United States tried to project itself as neutral during the war even though Nixon asked Kissinger for a ‘tilt’ towards Pakistan discussing cutting-off of military aid to India while contemplating a US \$22 million economic aid for Pakistan. However, Kissinger argued that “It's hard to tilt toward Pakistan, as the President wishes, if every time we take some action in relation to India we have to do the same thing for Pakistan.”¹⁵ Pakistan also invoked the terms of an agreement signed on 05 March 1959 where military help would be extended by the US as war appeared inevitable. This was also assured by President Kennedy in 1962.¹⁶

The Nixon administration was keen that India got the blame for the war, as Kissinger informed Nixon that the major US newspapers would put a headline that “India is largely to blame for the outbreak of hostilities and it lists all the things the Indians have rejected.”¹⁷ The US President felt happy about it. On 6 December, when the war was in full swing, the US was discussing the plight of the Urdu-speaking minority in East Pakistan in the United Nations and calling upon all parties to take steps to prevent a massacre and show ‘certain coolness to the Indians’ and should make known what US did “to foster a discussion between Bangladesh and Islamabad.”¹⁸ The US justified its stand of supporting Pakistan and argued that Yahya’s military action is just a reaction to India’s support to the *Mukti Bahini*. Richard Nixon also told Henry Kissinger that the blame for the war should be put on India and throughout the war he wanted to see that Pakistan gets weapons and whether those could be supplied via Iran and Jordan.¹⁹ To escape media attention on the continuing US military supplies to Pakistan, F-5 aircraft meant for Libya were supplied to Pakistan via Iran.²⁰

The effort of the US, the then Soviet Union and China was to save West Pakistan in 1971. There was pressure on India to declare a ceasefire and return territory in West Pakistan that was occupied by India during the war. As Kissinger famously said, "Pakistan has been saved." US support to Pakistan throughout 1971 in spite of the American people supporting Bangladesh's liberation is encapsulated in Kissinger's book, *The White House Years*, where he writes, President Nixon and he "—were profoundly grateful for Pakistan's role as the channel to China. It was a service for which Pakistan's leaders, to their lasting honour, never sought any reciprocity or special consideration."²¹

While Bangladesh was liberated on 16 December 1971, the politics of recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign country continued till 1974. Pakistan's recognition was extremely significant as China vetoed Bangladesh's admission to the UN. The issue of recognition got enmeshed with the repatriation of PoWs and Bangladesh's decision to try Pakistani officers for war crimes. This also placed the repatriation of Bengali officers stationed in West Pakistan during the war in a difficult position. There was Soviet pressure on India to repatriate the PoWs but Bangladesh was party to this decision and Pakistan refused to negotiate with Dhaka.

Politics of Recognition

After liberation, the recognition of Bangladesh involved intense and complex negotiations with Pakistan over several issues that were thrown up by the war, including division of assets and repatriation of Biharis. Even today, these issues are part of bilateral politics and find mention in the context of 1971.

The question of the ideology of the two-nation theory on which Pakistan was created was increasingly questioned within Pakistan, on whether religion can remain a glue that can bind the diverse ethnicity together. However, Pakistan parried the issue by blaming India for the separation of East Pakistan and

creation of new nation and refused to recognise Bangladesh. In the 1973 constitution, in the section on the provinces of Pakistan, it laid down a provision that reads, that the constitution “shall be appropriately amended so as to enable the people of East Pakistan, as and when foreign aggression in that province and its effect are eliminated, to be represented in the affairs of the federation.”²² Not surprisingly, Bhutto made a reference to this provision while speaking on the motion to pass the constitution bill on 10 April 1973. He said:

[W]ith the return of prisoners of war, and after a small decent period, I believe the external factors will be relatively under control and then we can meet because I would always want to meet you and to continue our dialogue and our discussions because I believe that this is the best way, this is the only way. We cannot shoot our way through because we have seen that when you shoot your way through, you reach the grave, and there is no flower left.²³

The 1973 constitution interestingly declared Islam as the state religion. Bhutto claimed that the 1973 constitution has more Islamic provisions compared to the past constitutions of Pakistan and much more than the constitutions of Muslim countries including monarchist Muslim countries,²⁴ just to prove that the two-nation theory is intact and has not been delegitimised by the emergence of Bangladesh.

India also wanted to withdraw its troops from Bangladesh ‘to avoid hurting Bengali pride’ and also to reassure its neighbours about India’s objectives not to station its troops.²⁵ This was also important for the recognition of Bangladesh as an independent country.

The Politics of Recognition of Bangladesh

The question of recognising Bangladesh as an independent country brought into focus the role of China, which vetoed Bangladesh’s entry to the United Nations. On 25 August, when Bangladesh’s admission to the UN was considered, “China charged that Bangladesh stood in violation of two United

Nations resolutions—one passed in the General Assembly and the other in the Security Council....consideration of the Bangladesh application be delayed until all prisoners of war on the subcontinent were repatriated and until all foreign soldiers were removed from Bangladesh.”²⁶ China itself had joined the UN ten months ago. China portrayed the 1971 war as India-Pakistan war and insisted that its outcome was not acceptable unless there was reconciliation between Pakistan and Bangladesh, which according to China, would demonstrate that Bangladesh “is a truly independent state.”²⁷

In November 1972, the UN General Assembly passed a Resolution seeking the release of PoWs from India. However, India insisted that the PoWs had surrendered to the joint India-Bangladesh forces and it could not release them without the concurrence of Bangladesh. Arguing in the United Nations, Raja Tridev Roy representing Pakistan, said, “The position that the release and repatriation of our prisoners of war requires the agreement of “Bangladesh” is not supported by the Geneva Conventions.... Unless the Assembly addresses itself to the unresolved problems organically inseparable from admission, its consideration of this question cannot advance the possibility of the admission of “Bangladesh” to the United Nations.”²⁸ He further said,

The recognition of “Bangladesh” is different for Pakistan than for other States. It bears upon an important principle. We cannot ignore the fact that the territory which now proclaims itself as “Bangladesh” was an integral part of Pakistan, and that it was sundered from Pakistan by the use of armed force. The events of last year have already eroded the principle of the territorial integrity of States, enshrined in the Charter. There is no doubt a new reality in the subcontinent. But if this precedent is not to imperil the security and integrity of all multinational or multilingual States, it is important that its legitimacy be consecrated, not through Pakistan's coerced recognition of its existence, but through a freely negotiated and just settlement of the issues which interpose serious obstacles

to the recognition of “Bangladesh” and its admission to the United Nations.²⁹

Pakistan continued with this stand with the help of China, and also wanted the withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh. The return of the PoWs were conditional on Pakistan’s recognition of Bangladesh. Bangladesh had made it clear it would not negotiate except on the basis of sovereign equality. Pakistan also dragged the issue of recognition and made all efforts to stall any trial of its officers for war crimes. As Gary J. Bass says, “Pakistan, however, insisted that the price of its recognition—a precedent-setting act of legitimization that would allow other states to follow—was impunity for war criminals. Bangladesh had little choice but to acquiesce.”³⁰ Without Pakistan’s recognition, countries like Britain were also not willing to admit Bangladesh to the Commonwealth. Bhutto in his public posture nursed a desire, being fully aware of the futility of this wish, that both the countries can become a confederation. He saw the creation of Bangladesh as an Indian conspiracy. While Pakistan attributed the ‘war crime trial’ as contingent to regional peace, India also was non-committal as a signatory of the Geneva Convention and gave preference to peace in the region which it thought was more important than retribution. At the same time, it conveyed firmly that its decision was contingent on Bangladesh’s agreement.

Pakistan invoked the issue of national sovereignty in the International Court of Justice and argued that it acted against “internal revolt in their own country” and that “Pakistan had not committed genocide.”³¹ Bangladesh made a major concession, as a *fait accompli*, to Pakistan’s insistence on the return of PoWs without formal political recognition of Bangladesh as an independent country. Bangladesh concentrated on solving the humanitarian problems that required repatriation of Bengalis held in Pakistan camps. Bangladesh was equally keen for the repatriation of stranded Bengalis in Pakistan. Pakistan was against the repatriation of Biharis, or stranded Pakistanis as Bangladesh refers to them and was also opposed to the trial of 195 Pakistani officers on war crimes.³² Pakistan also said that it

would try 203 Bengali officers for espionage and such other charges, if Bangladesh went ahead with the war crime trials. It was resolved through US intervention which also exerted pressure on Pakistan against this trial.³³ India consulted Bangladesh regularly on these issues since Bangladesh had made it clear that it would participate in any negotiation as a sovereign equal to the Pakistani state. However, without recognition Bangladesh could not participate as an equal in the negotiation. Dhaka also rejected Pakistan's proposal to meet informally to resolve the issue. In August 1973, an agreement was reached between India and Pakistan which said that "the Special Representative of the Prime Minister of India, having consulted the Government of Bangladesh has also conveyed the concurrence of Bangladesh Government in this Agreement."³⁴ The clause with regard to repatriation reads:

Without prejudice to the respective positions of Bangladesh and Pakistan on the question of non-Bangalees, who are stated to have "opted for repatriation to Pakistan", the Government of Pakistan guided by considerations of humanity, agrees, initially, to receive a substantial number of such non-Bangalees from Bangladesh. It is further agreed that the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and Pakistan or their designated representatives will thereafter meet to decide what additional number of persons, who may wish to migrate to Pakistan, may be permitted to do so. Bangladesh has made it clear that it will participate in such a meeting only on the basis of sovereign equality.³⁵

Pakistan accorded recognition to Bangladesh on 22 February 1974, paving the way for a tripartite agreement between India-Bangladesh and Pakistan for the return of the 195 PoWs and other civilians held by India with simultaneous transfer of Bengalis held in Pakistan. India and Pakistan in April 1974 agreed that, "If a detainee claims to be the national of the country in which he is detained, his case shall be investigated and decided by mutual agreement between the two governments."³⁶ Bangladesh insisted on repatriation of non-

Bengalis, especially employees in the central government of Pakistan and their families, 25,000 hardship cases and a “minimum of some 116,000 persons” in the first phase and the fate of 200,000 persons, “who had declared their allegiance to Pakistan” in the survey conducted by the International Red Cross hung in balance as “Pakistan continued to temporise.”³⁷ Some scholars also argue that peace with Pakistan and Kashmir were priority issues for India. But at the same time, the anti-India campaign by Pakistan, accusing India of violating the Geneva Convention and approaching the International Court of Justice, brought pressure on India which could not defer the repatriation. India’s attempt to defend the right of Bangladesh to persecute war criminals did not bear any result as Pakistan put the recognition of Bangladesh on hold. Pakistan bargained hard, citing its domestic compulsions which were rejected by Bangladesh.

The question of division of assets between Bangladesh and Pakistan as well as the repatriation of Biharis remain contested topics between the two countries even now. Pakistan accepted some Urdu-speaking people from Bangladesh initially after the tripartite agreement was concluded and some of the Biharis were repatriated in the 1990s with the financial assistance of Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries. However, over a period of time, this issue had been shelved due to Pakistan’s reluctance. Bangladesh’s judiciary finally granted citizenship to the children of the ‘stranded’ Urdu speakers who were born after the liberation, to enable them to settle down as citizens of Bangladesh.

The issue of recognition from Pakistan and other Muslim countries posed political problems. Several questions were raised by Mujib’s detractors regarding the issue of secularism and speculation regarding why the Muslim world is delaying the recognition. As a *quid pro quo* for recognition, Mujib joined the second Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit in Lahore. However, except for Saudi Arabia, which had certain reservations on Bangladesh’s constitution being secular, all other Muslim countries accorded recognition to Bangladesh

after Pakistan recognised it. The Saudi recognition came after Mujib's assassination, though his government was already in talks with Saudis to recognise Bangladesh.³⁸

Pakistan not only looked towards the oil-rich countries of West Asia to emphasise its Islamic identity, it felt elated after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the introduction of 5th Amendment to the Bangladesh constitution³⁹ introduced by the military ruler General Ziaur Rahman, who succeeded Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Islamic features were introduced into the Bangladesh constitution through this amendment much as a part of a legitimisation exercise of the military government. There was no popular demand to introduce Islamic features even though the supporters of erstwhile Pakistan regime in Bangladesh continued their campaign against secularism. Later, General H.M. Ershad introduced the 8th Amendment, which declared Islam as the state religion.⁴⁰ The Supreme Court of Bangladesh held both the amendments brought by the military rulers as unconstitutional in 2011. However, the country, through the 15th Amendment to the constitution, has managed to restore many of the original features of the 1972 constitution.

Bangladesh: Overcoming the Geopolitical Challenges

The independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and its journey as an independent nation-state has been unique. In Bangladesh all the sects of Islam continue to enjoy equality and therefore unlike Pakistan, one does not see any sectarian violence. As many Bangladeshis emphasise, the emergence of Bangladesh was inherent in the creation of Pakistan⁴¹ and the Bengalis only realised the separateness and their unique identity after it became part of Pakistan.⁴²

Bangladesh, which was referred to as an international basket case by U. Alexis Johnson from the State Department and endorsed by Henry Kissinger who said "not our basket case."⁴³ However, Bangladesh has proved all the doomsday predictions wrong. Not only has Bangladesh restructured its post-war

economy and reconstructed the damage to infrastructure with the help of friendly countries, it took steps to write a constitution and held the first election in 1973 which was a watershed for the new-born country. It disarmed the groups that were fighting the Liberation War even though some groups retained arms as that had become symbols of power and dominance.⁴⁴ The state also tried to bring all the factions together, rather unsuccessfully. However, "The various factions of the *Mukti Bahini*, numbering between 100,000 and 200,000 armed men, posed a threat to the fledgling Awami League regime."⁴⁵ It faced several challenges on the domestic front. For example, the rise of radical left groups that threatened the stability of the government, the division within the politicised army, the settlement of repatriated Bangladeshis held in Pakistani custody, which includes a number of military personnel, gave rise to another set of challenges. Building the post-war economy was also not easy. According to a UN report, the cost of reconstruction in Bangladesh stood at \$938 million.⁴⁶ The international agencies provided generous aid for post-war reconstruction. There was no foreign exchange available to Bangladesh as the reserve was held back by Pakistan. Food stocks were not sufficient and Bangladesh stared at a situation of famine in 1974.

In spite of reservations regarding Bangladesh's economic future in 1971, the country's resilience against adversity is truly admirable. Bangladesh has graduated from a Least Developed Country (LDC) to a developing country. Bangladesh is ranked 135th compared to Pakistan which ranks 152 in the Human Development Index. Bangladesh has emerged as one of the successful developing countries that continues to grow at 8 per cent. In contrast, Pakistan continues to depend on the World Bank and IMF to sustain itself economically.⁴⁷ Pakistan's public debt stood at 87.5 per cent of GDP. Real GDP growth is projected to contract by 1.3 per cent in FY2020.⁴⁸ Pakistan grew at 1.9 per cent in 2019 compared to Bangladesh's 8.2 per cent. The forecast for 2022 for Bangladesh is 5.8 per cent and for Pakistan it is 4.0 per cent as per the Asian Development Bank.⁴⁹

Bangladesh has grown at an average of 6.5 per cent in the last ten years.⁵⁰ Pakistan's current account balance for 2021 as percentage of GDP is 0.093 and for Bangladesh it stood at 0.335 per cent.⁵¹ Interestingly, during the 1950s West Pakistan's growth rate averaged 2.7 per cent compared to 1.9 per cent for East Pakistan, which in the 1960s rose to 6.4 per cent for West Pakistan and 4.3 per cent in East Pakistan due to higher investment and diversification of the economy in the Western wing.⁵² Bangladesh's economic progress shows how the Eastern wing was neglected and Western wing of the country progressed at the expense of the East.

In foreign policy, the country has emerged as an important player both in regional and global politics. Bangladesh is an important counter-terrorism partner of the United States. Bangladesh has engaged Russia to build the nuclear power plant at Rooppur. It has engaged both India and China in building infrastructure and has leveraged its relations with Muslim countries of the world. It plays a leading role in UN peacekeeping missions and is one of the largest contributors of troops. In spite of geopolitical challenges that the country faced during its War of Liberation, Bangladesh pursues a foreign policy of 'friendship towards all and malice towards none' and is one of the emerging economies that has proved the naysayers wrong.

Notes

¹ Hasan Zaheer, *The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Bengali Muslim Nationalism*, Dhaka: UPL, 2001, p. 164.

² Ashgar Khan, *We've Learnt Nothing from History*, Dhaka: UPL, 2006, p. 49.

³ Jairam Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives: P.N. Haskar and Indira Gandhi*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2020, p. 220.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-23.

⁵ Fred Greene, "The Indian-Pakistan war and the Asian Power Balance", *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, January-February 1973, pp. 20-21.

⁶ P.N. Dhar, *Indira Gandhi, the "Emergency", and Indian Democracy*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 170.

⁷ Letter From President Nixon to Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev, National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 497, President's Trip Files, Exchange of Notes Between Dobrynin and Kissinger, Vol. 2. No classification marking. Washington, 06 December 1971, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/xi/45607.htm>, accessed on 05 November 2021.

⁸ Eric Pace, "U.N. Assembly, 10411, Urges Truce", *The New York Times*, 08 December 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/12/08/archives/un-assembly-10411-urges-truce-un-vote-follows-pleas-for-action.html>, accessed on 05 November 2021.

⁹ Dhar, *Indira Gandhi*, p. 172.

¹⁰ See Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of Creation of Bangladesh*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 68.

¹¹ Ramesh, *Intertwined Lives*, p. 229.

¹² Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in India/1/ National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970-73, POL INDIA-PAK. Secret; Priority; Exdis. Drafted on November 24 by Quanton, cleared in S/S by Eliot, and approved by Sisco. Repeated to Islamabad, London, Moscow, Dacca, and USUN, Washington, 25 November 1971, 0314Z, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/xi/45607.htm>, accessed on 07 November 2021, accessed on 07 December 2021.

¹³ Washington, 0519Z, 216629, Subject: US Military Sales to India, 01 December 1971, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/xi/45607.htm>, accessed on 15 November 2021.

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³² Dhar, no. 6, p. 211.

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³⁷ Kamal Hossain was involved in the negotiation as the foreign minister of Bangladesh. See Kamal Hossain, *Bangladesh Quest for Freedom and Justice*, Dhaka: UPL, 2013, p. 238.

³⁸ King Faisal had reservations on Bangladesh's constitution. Mujibur Rahman explained Bangladesh's constitution that embodied the aspiration of Bengalis, no communal society and their bitter experience and how they were butchered by their religious brother was emphasised. Later the Foreign Minister Kamal Hossain also met King Faisal and his successor. Kamal Hossain writes that recognition would have been accorded but tragic death of Mujibur Rahman changed Bangladesh's political course. See *Ibid.*, pp. 191-196.

³⁹ The 5th Amendment to the constitution legalised all the changes made by the military regime, notably the deletion of secularism and ban on politics of religion. These features in the constitution were drawn from the ideals of liberation war and is generally referred as foundational principles of Bangladesh constitution.

⁴⁰ For details see Shah Alam, "The State-Religion Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh: A Critique", *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee / Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2 Quartal 1991), pp. 209-225, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43110030.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A4cf1d39acf92d9aee61d146d578c7de>, accessed on 07 November 2021.

⁴¹ Harun ur Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906-1947*, Dhaka: UPL, 2003.

⁴² Talukdar Maniruzzaman, *Bangladesh Revolution and its Aftermath*, Dhaka: UPL, 2003 (Second Edition), p. 224.

⁴³ Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, 06 December 1971, accessed on 29 April 2022.

⁴⁴ See Hossain, p. 127.

⁴⁵ Rounaq Jahan, "Bangladesh in 1972: Nation Building in a New State", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1973, p. 200.

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