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## THE US AND INDIA-PAKISTAN WAR OF 1971

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### **Abstract:**

*The Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 had its origin in the internal crisis of Pakistan. The crises arose when Awami League, the pro-East Pakistan autonomy party won majority in the proposed national Assembly but its electoral victory was rejected by President Yahya Khan of Pakistan. Instead of finding a political solution of the problem, President Yahya Khan ordered the repression of the people in East Pakistan. Thousands of Bengali Hindus started entering into India as refugees. Hence India extended military help to Bengali members of the Pakistani military who entered India as refugees. During the crisis in East Pakistan, the United States clearly sided with Islamabad ignoring the human rights violations in East Pakistan. This paper deals with US role towards internal crisis in East Pakistan and subsequent India Pakistan War.*

### **KEYWORDS:**

US and India-Pakistan War ,political solution .

### **INTRODUCTION**

India claims that the war began with the Pakistani pre-emptive attack on Indian airfields on the last light of December 3, 1971. The Pakistan says that the war began with an Indian attack on Jessore on November 21, 1971, the day of Id-ul-Fitr.<sup>1</sup> "India's official history of war treads the middle path. It does not deny that Indian military action began well before December 4, 1971 but claims that the Mukti Bahini activities and Pakistani retaliation had brought the situation "into almost a state of undeclared war."<sup>2</sup>

India and Pakistan differs on the undeclared war between two countries in 1971. But there is unanimity on the starting of the declared war between India and Pakistan. The declared war erupted into an all out war on December 3, 1971. Pakistan attacked eight Indian Airfields in the western part of the country on the night of December 3 and the day next declared war on India. Indian Air Force performed brilliantly in the war. On western front, it destroyed Pakistan Armoured Regiment at Longewala and on the eastern front, it virtually grounded the entire Pakistan Air Force within 36 hours of the launch of offensive operations.<sup>3</sup> India won in the east, the story in the west was full of disappointments. Indian Army's 15 Corps adopted offensive posture at Chamb but was pre-empted by Pakistanis with disastrous consequences for India. India lost Hussainawala conclave as well as the bridge at Beriwal near Fazilka on account of complacency and confusion. Within 13 days, three Indian Army thrusts had reached Dhaka and the Pakistani forces in the East surrendered. The war resulted in the break up of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country. Overall this war saw limited military conflict in Kashmir.

In April 1971 the Indian leadership started insisting that little short of independence would not meet the expectations of the Awami League. But the Soviet Union had consistently avoided endorsing this position. First, the Moscow insisted, particularly prior to the signing of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty, on a negotiated settlement to avoid alienating Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, it probably did not want to offend the

US prior to the upcoming 1972 Summit. Even after signing the treaty, the Soviet leadership kept on pushing the New Delhi to move towards a negotiated settlement.

However, there occurred a pro-India shift in the Soviet policy after October 1971. Its Deputy Foreign Minister Nicolai Firyubin visited New Delhi in late October and finally backed India's position on the East Pakistan issue. Thereafter, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Western Countries to garner their support for India's position. Mrs. Gandhi partially succeeded in convincing Washington to cut off supply to Pakistan. However, this cut off was by no means complete, and American weapons were supplied to Pakistan during the conflict.

To counter India diplomatically, Pakistani PM Zulfikar Ali Bhutto led a high level military delegation to China. From any stand point, Bhutto's mission was a failure. The Chinese refused to commit themselves to Pakistan's defence. This time Beijing had taken notice of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty and was unwilling to embroil them in a costly war.

The US had decided to take pro-Pakistan stand even before war started between India and Pakistan in December 1971. US expressed deep annoyance with India and blamed Indian emotionalism for prolongation of East Pakistan crisis. Adopting a different approach, it did not feel the need to put any pressure on Pakistani dictator President Yahya Khan to resolve the crisis in East Pakistan. As tensions increased in November 1971, the US hardened its stance towards India. President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger accused India of inciting the conflict. In early December, Washington announced the suspension of military sales to India. The US not only held India responsible for war but froze its economic assistance to India too. In the UN Security Council, US representative George H.W. Bush criticized India and put a resolution in the Security Council demanding ceasefire. But it could not materialize due to Moscow's veto. USSR's motive behind using veto in the Security Council on the question of ceasefire was to help India achieve its objective in East Pakistan. This move of the Soviet Union did not surprise the US because Indo-Soviet Friendship, Peace and Cooperation Treaty had already been signed by both countries in August 1971.

Unaware of the Nixon-Kissinger secret relationship with Yahya, the US Ambassador Kenneth Keating in New Delhi, US Consul General Archer Blood in Dacca and officials in the State Department all advocated tough measures against Pakistan. But Nixon was not in favour of pressurizing Pakistan. Despite Gandhi's repeated denial of any action in West Pakistan, President Nixon and his National Security Advisor Kissinger were not convinced. They decided to save West Pakistan. Hence, President Nixon decided to press the Soviets to dissuade India from attacking in West Pakistan. But even this did not satisfy him. The President then decided to take tough action. On December 10, Washington directed its naval forces to move the Task Group 74 towards the Bay of Bengal. This was welcomed in Pakistan as the first concrete step taken by an ally to signal its resolve. As India achieved its goal in the East Pakistan, Mrs. Gandhi announced a cease-fire effective from December 19, 1971.

Washington clearly sided with Pakistan during the war, But it would be grossly incorrect to suggest that there was unified support in all quarters of the US Government for the Pakistani position. Both Houses of the US Congress expressed their displeasure for administration's policy towards the subcontinent. In May 1971, a Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted to suspend arms sales to Pakistan. In June Senator Frank Church and Senator William proposed an amendment to the Foreign Assistance Bill that called for suspension of US military and economic aid to Pakistan until food and medical relief, supervised by the UN was instituted on a regular basis in East Pakistan and the majority of Pakistani refugees in India were repatriated.<sup>5</sup>

The disenchantment with the Nixon Administration's policy was by no means confined to the legislative branch. On April 6, 1971 twenty US Consular officials led by Archur Blood, the US Consul General in Dacca, cabled a long telegram through what was known as dissent channel in the State Department indicating their inability to support the US position of tacit acceptance of the behavior of the Pakistani leadership.<sup>6</sup>

What made Nixon tilt towards Pakistan and send Naval Task Force to the Bay of Bengal? First, Pakistani dictator Yahya proved helpful for Washington during its efforts towards opening a communication with Beijing.<sup>7</sup> Second, President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger perceived the crisis almost entirely in terms of Cold War implications. The tilt was not just a means of expressing appreciation to the Pakistanis for their help in opening to China but wanted to impress the Chinese with the US handling of the crisis.<sup>8</sup> Third, it could also be attributed to India's signing of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation Treaty with Soviet Union in August 1971. Fourth, Nixon's sympathy for Yahya Khan also stemmed from his high personal preference for Pakistan. He held the Pakistanis in high regard ever since his visit in 1953 to Karachi, where their "martial" character convinced him that the Eisenhower Administration should go ahead with its plan to arm Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> Fifth, some analysts have blurred the roles played by Kissinger and Nixon by suggesting that they both disliked Indira Gandhi. Roger Morris felt

primary interest of America lay in forging a new cordial relationship with China. Lastly, the CIA Director Richard Helms claimed that Indira Gandhi was considering straightening out the border of “Azad Kashmir” and destroying Pakistan’s military capabilities. They interpreted this as India’s desire to destroy Pakistan, an US ally. But in reality India did not have any plan on western border or in PoK.

The 1971 war had shown the complete futility of attempting to change the status quo in Kashmir. Moreover, in 1972, the power configuration in the subcontinent had been decisively altered. Pakistan’s external supporters were convinced for the moment at least of the futility of tampering with the obvious: no amount of external aid and armaments would enable Pakistan to match India’s natural supremacy.<sup>10</sup>

Overall it can be said that during the India-Pakistan War of 1971, the US took pro-Pakistan position during the war. It not only held India responsible for war but sent its naval forces towards Indian Ocean for Pakistan’s help. This US tilt was a reward to Pakistan for its role in normalizing US-China relationship in the wake of the increasing tension of the Cold War.

#### END NOTES:

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