

# Super powers in liberation war

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the new and none too pleasant possibility of being cornered and isolated. The apparent convergence of the Chinese and the American policies and objectives with regard to the Bangladesh issue in 1971 increased the Soviet fears in this respect and probably further hardened the Soviet resolve to back Indian assistance to Bangladesh.

Thus behind all that happened in the sub-continent over the 1971 Bangladesh struggle “was a power struggle between China and the Soviet Union and a strategic conflict between Moscow and Washington”. In South Asia during December 1971 the Soviet Union seemed to have gained most from this three-cornered fight.

A Bangladesh freed from Pakistan, which was backed by both China and America, was for the Soviet Union in 1971 a proof of the realism and immediate (though not necessarily permanent) success of its global and Asian policies. The birth of Bangladesh with India's support and sympathetic Soviet supervision did indeed mark the emergence of the Soviet Union as “the military arsenal and political defender of India with access for [Moscow's] rising naval power to the Indian Ocean and a base of political and military operations on China's southern flank”.

Irrespective of the motives and gains of the Soviet Union in its involvement in the Bangladesh war of liberation, its solid and unflinching support to the Bengali cause was invaluable to the Bengali. During the penultimate days of Indo-Pak war over Bangladesh, the Soviet

veto in the UN Security Council against US backed proposal for ceasefire paved the way for the Indo-Bangladesh allied forces to march into Dhaka and secure the defeat and surrender of 90 thousand Pakistani troops on the 16th December 1971. Soviet Union's positive role thus contributed immensely to the historic triumph of Bangladesh.

## The Role of the USA

Of the two super powers dominating the World in 1970s the USA played a more complex and somewhat negative role in the 1971 war. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the US society's response was one of positive support contradicting the state's negative role. In the pluralist and open society of the US, influential and articulate segments stood solidly behind the cause of Bangladesh.

The 1971 crisis in East Pakistan erupted at a time when the United States, under President Nixon, was busy recasting its global and Asian policies to suit the needs of the new international system which by 1970 “had become much more complex”. “The Sino-Soviet misunderstanding had ripened into heated clashes, both ideological and territorial. China had become a nuclear power ... and had found itself at war with India in 1962. The American Cold War alliance system lay in shambles and American power was deeply committed against a nationalist communist force in Vietnam. Above all the USSR had attained nuclear weapon destructive parity with the United States”.

During 1969 and 1970 President Nixon's Asian policy was dominated

by a gradual US disengagement with China. This process, which was virtually coterminous with the “re-instatement ... of the Soviet Union as necessarily the main rival of the United States, began under the so called 'Guam' or 'Nixon' doctrine; and by the beginning of 1971 the United States and China were both ready to undertake its complement the improvement of Sino American relations as a means of improving the position of both states against their common rival”. This was the immediate background of the highly controversial White House policy toward the East Pakistan crisis in 1971 when the Nixon administration supported Pakistan, an old ally of America and friend of China and opposed the democratically elected representatives of East Pakistan (aided by India, which was in turn backed by the Soviet Union) in their attempts to separate East Pakistan from its western part.

As the crisis developed the American response to it went through several discernible phases.

The first phase of quiet non-involvement began on 25 March and lasted roughly until 9 10 July 1971. During this phase the US posture was “neutral” and it described the problem in East Bengal as Pakistan's “internal matter”.

The second phase started with the secret trip by President Nixon's National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, to China during 9 10 July 1971. This marked the real beginning of the Sino US detente and led indirectly to the formalization of Indo Soviet alliance by a treaty in August. During this phase, which lasted until September, the United

States pursued diplomacy of restraint, counselling India to desist from armed conflict with Pakistan and privately pressing Pakistan to trash out a 'political settlement' of the East Pakistan issue.

During the third phase, lasting from September until December 3, when the Indo Pakistan war over Bangladesh broke out, the United States attempted to promote a constructive political dialogue between the Pakistani military government and the Bengali nationalist leaders in India, but in vain.

The fourth phase covered the period of the Indo Pak war. During the 14-day sub continental war, the United States backed Pakistan and blamed India for the escalation of hostilities and tried through the United Nations and other means to bring about a ceasefire and “save West Pakistan” from possible Indian attempts to destroy it militarily.

As noted earlier, throughout all these phases there was a great divergence between the policy and attitude of the US administration and the American press, legislative bodies, and academic community. For the most part these entities openly and emphatically sided with the Bengali nationalists and supported the Indian role in aiding and assisting them.

On 9th December “the CIA produced a report that Kissinger found alarming”. It allegedly contained minutes of an Indian Cabinet discussion on launching a major offensive against West Pakistan in order to modify the border of West Pakistan and destroy the Pakistan army. Kissinger reportedly suggested tough action to deter India.

According to Anderson's later 'relations', the President heeded Kissinger's advice and ordered a task force of eight naval ships, led by the nuclear aircraft carrier Enterprise, to sail into the Bay of Bengal in a 'show of force' aimed at India and its ally, the Soviet Union.

Nixon and Kissinger also reportedly took measures to put pressure on the Soviet Union to restrain India from attacking West Pakistan. When diplomatic contacts and communications failed to elicit the desired response from Moscow, Kissinger caused a 'pool report' to be circulated in the press that “if the Russians didn't begin to exercise a restraining influence very soon, the entire US-Soviet relations might be reexamined” and “a new look might have to be taken at the President's summitry plans”.

On 16 December as the Pakistan army in the East surrendered to the “Allied Indo Bangladesh Forces” and Bangladesh was liberated, India declared a unilateral ceasefire on the West Pakistan front and President Yahya Khan accepted the offer. Thus the hostilities ended and the US administration's fear with regard to Indian invasion of West Pakistan did not materialize.

## In the United Nations

On 4 December 1971 Kissinger reportedly told a White House strategy session: “The exercise in the UN is likely to be an exercise in futility, inasmuch as the Soviets can be expected to veto. The UN itself will in all probability do little to terminate the war ... Nothing will happen in the Security Council because of Soviet vetoes. The

whole thing is a farce”.

Nevertheless, the United States continued its efforts within the UN to achieve a ceasefire without such delay as would put Pakistan into a disadvantageous position. To this end, the US moved two draft resolutions on its own and an additional one in cooperation with Japan. None of these made any substantial reference to the need for a political settlement in East Pakistan. They simply proposed an immediate Indo Pakistan ceasefire and withdrawal of troops. Consequently they were vetoed by the Soviet Union which insisted that the proposed ceasefire should be related to an acceptable political settlement of the East Pakistan question.

The role of super powers in the war of liberation brought to bold relief the reality of international politics during the early 1970s. Each of the two super powers played its part in accordance with its own national, regional and global interests.

Bangladesh, as a part of Pakistan, was a geopolitical rarity with its own cogent reasons for successful separation from a post colonial polity. In addition, it was a land struggling for independence at a time when global politics was undergoing strategic shifts. Involvement of the superpowers, positive or negative, resulted in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign state.

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# Student politics

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challenging times from mid-seventies with a corrupt dictator and usurper taking power through a bloodless coup in early eighties. The immoral character and corrupt rule that were the hallmark of the Ershad regime left its trail in student politics as well. In his desperation to cling to power, Ershad tried to divide the student community by luring some of those leaders through both pay and positions. With the military-civil bureaucracy firmly under his grip and the distrust and disrespect between the two political parties, the only front that Ershad did not have in his favor was the student community that continued to be vigilant and resistant to his wicked schemes. As early as 1983, within a year of the new regime's consolidation of power, strong student protests shook the foundations of the regime.

The student leaders and activists as well as ordinary students played the lead role in the pro-democratic struggle against Ershad regime in the 1980s when our national leaders failed to find a common ground to unite. Had not the student fronts of both Awami League and BNP defied their national leaders and joined hands in overthrowing the dictatorial regime, God knows how long the corrupt dictator would have prevailed much to the agony of the nation. This was the finest moment of student politics in Bangladesh after the country became independent when political ideology took over political loyalty for the student leaders. Despite the violent student reprisals by the regime, protests went on unabated throughout the decade against the series of sham elections that the regime arranged to legitimize its rule. The student movements blended with the wider mass movement and ultimately led to toppling the regime in 1991. Also during the floods in 1988 and cyclone in 1991, student organizations played a praiseworthy role in the aid of suffering communities.

Since the return to democracy in the early nineties, there has been a gradual decline in both the substance and quality of student leadership. In absence of any burning national issue, the student leaders have gone through a period of iden-

tity crisis as well as lack of vision as to what should be their role in the broader context of national politics and democracy. The political parties have not made conscious effort to either reenergize their student fronts or to reformulate their roles under the changed scenario. This, compounded with poor quality of leadership in many instances, has led to clashes both within and among the student fronts of the major political parties. To make things worse, over the years there has been a rise of unhealthy culture of toll collection, vandalism, patronage of armed cadres, and hooliganism. The existing lack of tolerance among the political parties have trickled down to the lower tiers and made the rivalry among their student fronts equally aggressive, confrontational, and corrosive. One can draw a few comparisons to see the key factors that are responsible for the decline in the quality of student politics:

**The Changed Context:** There has been a broader crisis of leadership and governance in Bangladesh which has led to the disorientation of the student politics as well. Lack of vision, intolerance, violence, rent-seeking, impunity for crime and corruption now prevail in national politics which have its reflection in the sphere of student politics. The political parties mostly use students as instruments in street politics, including confrontation with other parties. Students are treated as expendable foot-soldiers. Besides, narrow politicization of university administration has prevented the academic authorities from playing their due role in ensuring a healthy campus environment.

**Decline in Content of Politics:** In '60s and '80s, the agenda of student politics were twofold: academic agenda and national political agenda. In the last two decades, the main student organizations of both ruling and main opposition party have shown little appetite for academic issues, while national political issues have been overwhelmed by narrowly defined partisan interests. In Dhaka University, DUCSU elections have not been held for two decades and the student organizations have no incentives to seek legitimacy and popularity among the general students.

**Economic Interests:** Student political organizations have become networks of distributing patronage and rent. Especially the student wing of ruling party often gets widely involved in tender bidding. Extortion, toll collection, partisan recruitment in government and non-government organizations, admission trade, control of dormitory seats, etc. are some of the other motivating factors for which a significant portion joins student politics. The evil nexus between privileged access to admission, seats, or jobs binds the beneficiaries into an obligation to commit whatever might be asked of them in the name of student politics.

**Modalities of Doing Politics:** Politics in the anti-colonial, national liberation, and pro-democratic movements often followed agitational, even violent means. However, the agitations were focused on national interest instead of narrow self-interest. It was in 1960s that arms first entered the campus, but it is only in the last two decades that student politics has been speaking the language of arms alone. The factional clashes over tender or rent, the violence over control of dormitories, etc. are mindless and undermine the student political organizations themselves.

Against such a background, there is an urgent need to bring in positive qualitative changes in the student leaders of the political parties. A significant portion of these budding leaders is expected to assume important positions of national significance in the future. From being Ministers and MPS to Upazila Chairman and Ward Commissioners they are aspirants for positions available under the existing political structure of the country. Unless there is a qualitative change in the leaders of tomorrow, the country would continue to suffer from poor leadership in the peoples' representatives at different levels of governance that has deprived Bangladesh from fully exploiting its development potentials and democratic credentials. This is vital in the country's journey to become a moderate democratic Muslim state among the middle income countries of Asia.

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# The story of Dan Coggin

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those who helped me tell their story four decades ago.” Regarding the theme of his lecture he agreed to our proposal to link the past with present focusing on the trial for the perpetrators of genocide and wrote: “However, I'm hoping for further developments and that Bangladesh will set an example for our planet with the war crimes/genocide trials transforming retribution into repentance and forgiveness in thanks to the Almighty and his son Jesus who died for mankind's sins on cross in Jerusalem. One of Earth's poorest countries could thus become a beacon throughout the world.”

Dan arrived in NY from San Francisco to make the journey to Dhaka along with Anindo in late November 2011. Anindo found Dan over-excited and also a bit hyperactive. Dan was greatly moved by the invitation to be in Bangladesh and was playing with all kinds of ideas. One of his great ideas was to take a letter of peace from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to the other Prime Ministers of the sub-continent and bring them together to usher in a new era of cooperation and peace in the region. Unfortunately before the day of the trip Dan suddenly got sick and Anindo had to call the ambulance. Dan was admitted to

the hospital where he had another stroke and never regained his consciousness. He died a peaceful death on 2nd January, 2012 at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan with his wife Somporn Coggin and sons and a daughter at his side. Anindo, his friend from the new generation of Bangladeshis, was also there. Bangladesh lost its true friend who stood by its people during the difficult period of the liberation war. We would never know what Dan had wished to say while in Bangladesh, or why he had so much confidence on the peace initiative Bangladesh can take. But we are also getting more and more information regarding Dan's contribution in our liberation war. Archer K. Blood in his memoirs wrote how Dan carried an important message from Sheikh Mujib to be conveyed to the US representative in February 1971. This shows the confidence Coggin enjoyed in those days of the leader of the Bengali nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his role surpassing professional obligations. Archer K. Blood wrote: “Dan Coggin, the Time Life correspondent based in Beirut, came to see me on the morning of February 25. He had an hour's conversation with Mujib the previous afternoon, during which Mujib asked him to sound me out on U.S. willingness to influence Yahya to accept a Six

Points constitution or, failing any agreement on the constitution, to persuade Yahya and the military to accept a constitution of two wings, which I took to mean a confederation of East and West Pakistan under the nominal authority of the President. Coggin said that Mujib had asked him to report back that evening on his conversation with me.”

Recently a journalist from Manikganj came to the LWM with information on Dan's travel to those areas in 1971. A book on the liberation history of Pirojpur narrates the visit to the killing fields by an American journalist named Mr. Coggin. Moreover, the older people of Kushtia were waiting eagerly to receive Dan who had immortalized their struggle for freedom at a crucial moment of history.

The full story of Dan Coggin we will never know but the stories of Bangladesh which Dan collected and presented will always remain with us and inspire the future generations to be close with their people and be proud of the country. The legacy of Dan Coggin will always be there like a beacon in the darkness.

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# Winter, war and refugee

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As the fighting intensified, my main concern was not only to keep relief supplies moving to the refugee camps but to ensure the safety of all our staff. The young doctors from the Kolkata and Bombay medical colleges and the Gandhian workers from Orissa and Gujarat had to be withdrawn for their safety.

We were sure in those early days of the war that it would be over very soon and that Bangladesh would be free, but we were very aware of the great relief and rehabilitation needs for the future and so we were already calculating what sort of assistance OXFAM could provide and through which organizations we might be able to work. I see from a telex which I sent in December 1971 that it was estimated by some that Bangladesh would need half a

million tons of rice per month and that there was an immediate need of 1,000 trucks, 500 buses and that “most shelter materials such as bamboos had been destroyed by the Pakistani Army.”

We were also able to procure 3 truck-carrying ferries and to assist the repair of many others. I remember that the Bangladesh Inland Waterways authority wanted to name the ferries after Liberation War martyrs but after our experiences of getting to know the flora and fauna of Bangladesh and how they are part of the country's poetry and music, we requested that the vessels be named after flowers. And thus Kamini, Kosturi and Korobi were so named and they continue to ply across the river at Goalondo to this day, even 40 years later.

As soon as Bangladesh was free

and the refugees started streaming back home, we had to close down our work in an orderly way. One day in early February 1972, I was called out of the OXFAM office and there in the garden were about 300 people. I was worried that they had come with some grievance, but soon the reason for their visit was clear. From some waste wool and some wire these people, from a camp called Digberia, had fashioned some 'woolen flowers'. These were presented to me in a roughly made bamboo vase as a token of their thanks to OXFAM. They had come to say goodbye. It was such a moving moment.

**The writer, who has had an association with Bangladesh since the Liberation War, is currently working as an adviser to a number of development and disability organizations in Bangladesh. He was awarded the 'Friends of Liberation War Honour' in March 2012 by the Government of Bangladesh.**