

India's Bangladesh war revisited

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971 India Pakistan war is more popularly known as “Bangladesh Liberation War”. Nearly four decade ago on December 3, 1971 war broke out between India and Pakistan. Being part of this war, sweet and bitter memories are still fresh in my mind. Determination of Bengali speaking people of West Pakistan for freedom lead to emergence of a new sovereign nation we call now “Bangladesh”. On the anniversary day of our young nation let us not forget the sacrifice made by our older generation and all those who laid down their life for independence we enjoy today.

The war lasted over duration of nine months. History of mankind witnessed very large scale suppression, atrocities on Bengali speaking citizens of “East Pakistan”. This oppression led to exodus of approximately 10 million refugees and the displacement of 30 million people to neighboring India.

In March 1971, Pakistan Army launched a military operation “Operation Searchlight” against Bengali speaking civilians, students, intelligentsias’ even armed personnel, who wanted that the Pakistani military junta accept the results of the 1970 first democratic elections of Pakistan that will allow separation between East and West Pakistan. Upset military government of Pakistan Army targeted Bengali speaking civilians, minorities and noncombatants in West Pakistan. Army committed rapes as well as other crimes. In response to “Operation Searchlight” Bengali politicians and army officers announced the declaration of Bangladesh’s independence. On 26 March 1971 Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared East Pakistan’s independence as the state of “Bangladesh”. With declaration of independence, Bangladesh, Mukti Bahini was formed that included military, paramilitary and civilians. Because resources available to newly formed “Mukti Bahini” were meager to fight strong Pakistan army so “Mukti Bahini” resorted to guerrilla warfare against Pakistani forces. The Pakistan Army

engaged themselves in the systematic genocide and atrocities of Bengali nationalists and civilians, intellectuals, youth and religious minorities. India being the neighbor was caught in a situation where it could not be a silent and mute spectator of the whole situation. Huge number of refugees, man, women and children, old and young were crossing border every day to take refuge in India. Refugees were completely exhausted were in dire need of help to get food, medicines, shelter and protection.

Faced with humongous humanitarian and economic crisis, India started to aid Mukti Bahini by training and organize support to Bangladeshi resistance. In need of the hour India provided economic, military and diplomatic support to Bengali nationalists, and the Bangladesh government-in-exile was set up in Calcutta.

On December 4, 1971, Pakistan launched pre-emptive air strikes on northern India. This led to start of an all out war between India and Pakistan. Pakistan, overwhelmed by two war fronts i.e. East and newly open west front could not sustained India’s might, Pakistan’s defenses soon collapsed. On 16 December, the Allied Forces of Bangladesh and India defeated Pakistan in the east forced Pakistan to accept defeat and surrender. The surrender of Pakistan resulted in the largest number of prisoners-of-war since World War II.

This was clear from the beginning that newly formed Mukti Bahini needed support in terms of training military personals, food and supplies, providing them with uniforms, arms and ammunitions, logistic support etc. Army training camps for Mukti Bahini were located at various strategic locations in Assam and Tripura.

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Refugees were fleeing into India via

all possible routes, to escape famine and ravages of Pakistan army. When they crossed borders they met with Indian forces. Refugees were young and old, ladies and children’s completely exhausted as they had spend several days and nights, until spotted by Indian troops and moved to a safer place so that they can be looked after. These influxes were over whelming for Indian civil and military authorities. On arrival on Indian soil, food, shelter and basic medical facilities by no means can be said adequate to serve that large number of people. Experience was simply over whelming.

Well before the war started Mukti Bahini freedom fighters were trained in strictly guarded camps run by the Indian army personals. Officer and other ranks gave military and survival training to Bangladeshi volunteers. After completing their training they were required to go back to what was known as “East Pakistan” and support for freedom movement. Training camps were in remote areas of Assam and Tripura. Camp administrators were always worried that some undesirable element can infiltrate into the camp in disguise of freedom fighters and harm trainees or camp itself. Writer, while working as instructor remember an eye opening incident. In almost all cases returning volunteers soldiers were provided “Personal weapon” to protect themselves and fight as Mukti Bahini soldier. Based on the need of the fighting Bangladeshi army many of them were required to come back to base camp (as they were trained soldier and know routes and territory). Often they were required to deliver supplies, arms and ammunitions etc. to Mukti Bahini fighting on the ground. As stated above, all incoming and outgoing soldiers were under the watchful eyes of our intelligence unit to keep unwanted elements or those who on behest of enemy may foil our efforts to support to Mukti Bahini. One of these days an intelligence report came in that they suspected a traitor among “freedom fighters”. One of the recruit returned to training camp without his “Personal Weapon” i.e. his



rifle. He narrated his story that in the cover of darkness while crossing the border, back into “West Pakistan” his party were ambushed by Pakistani troops and all men in the party were killed in action. He explained in detail how brave were his team member, and how he alone survived by pretending “dead” and hiding in a drain for several days. He narrated to curious trainers that how challenging it was to cross border and return to base camp. We believed his story. But when the story was repeated second time with some more twist, intelligence officers knew that it was not true. One night he was quietly picked up for questioning. In the unit everyone was told that he was on a special mission. No one saw him again.

Period before the war was relatively difficult. On Indian side of our eastern

border, situation was very tense. We were neither in war nor in peace. It is hard for soldier to wait without action. We all knew war may break any time and we will be in action. A month before the war broke out we were asked to move closer to border. On December 3, we received our orders to move and we were in war with Pakistan. This move was massive and swift. We continuously advanced into enemy territory. Advancing through paddy fields, marshy land for about 36 hour virtually no much resistance came from enemy. Very few casualty in our unit. On December 6, 1971 at about sunset time we were on the out skirt of Komilla. It was hard to see anything in the darkness. We prepared our own defenses. Following morning as we advanced what we saw was hard to believe, in paddy fields, in drains,

everywhere dead bodies, men women and children’s bodies were scattered all over, all of them civilians. God alone knows how long they were rotting. As soldier we know that in war many of us will not return home but It was hard to believe that these innocent people were subjected to torture and death from their own country’s army. No army can have a high moral if they inflict such an insult and injury on innocent civilian. Following day we were asked to prepare to move to western borders as Pakistan was building pressure in Punjab and Rajsthatan. We were on the move to Rajasthan and this is where we heard of cease fire and surrender of Pakistan army.

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Geo-strategic implications

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ONCE again it is December, and we are celebrating the Victory Day on the 16th, the day in 1971 when Pakistani occupation forces surrendered to the combined Indo-Bangladesh Forces in Dhaka. The day marked the end of hostilities that started on the night of 25-26 March 1971 when the Pakistani Army launched “Operation Searchlight”, a military operation to crush Bengali nationalist movement. In the early hours of 26 March 1971, a declaration of independence was made by Bangladesh’s Supreme Leader, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, urging all Bengalis to rise up in arms to defend Bangladesh from the occupation forces. It would be pertinent to mention here that the Liberation War of Bangladesh was neither a religious or sectarian war nor an ethnic conflict. It was the culmination of more than two decades of struggle of the people of the then East Pakistan to assert their democratic, political, social and economic rights. It was not a secessionist movement, because it was a fight led by the Bengalis who then constituted 56% of the population of Pakistan. It was not a fight against the ordinary people of West Pakistan, rather it was against a small coterie of politico-military elites, mostly belonging to the Western wing of Pakistan, who had usurped power and denied the Bengalis their rightful share in the statecraft. It must, however, be stated that the senior-most Pakistani military officers then posted in East Pakistan, who had knowledge of the ground realities, had opposed the military options and urged a political solution to the crisis. Admiral Ahsan, Governor, East Pakistan, Lt Gen Yaqub Khan, Commander, Eastern Command and Air Cdre Zafar Masud, AOC, Eastern Air Command had all opposed military solutions; they were withdrawn prior to the military crackdown and retired soon thereafter.

As the Pakistan Army unleashed its reign of terror, the Bengali elements of the Pakistani military, para-military forces and Police, along with the youth retaliated by forming a guerrilla organization, popularly known as the ‘Mukti Bahini’ (Freedom Fighters). The military operation that the Pakistani commanders thought would be over in days, quickly snowballed into a nationwide conflict. Within weeks of the military crackdown, it became apparent that the Bangladesh conflict will not remain a domestic issue as claimed by Pakistan; rather it will have global implications involving major powers across the globe. In early April 1971, the Soviet Union, a long-time ally of India, strongly condemned the Pakistani military operations and came out with moral and material support to the Bangladesh cause. On 9 August 1971, an Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed that provided for Soviet military assistance and even intervention in case of war or emergency. The treaty acted as a great confidence builder and guarantor for Indo-Bangladesh forces that were preparing to engage the Pakistani forces in open warfare. Soviet position was supported by other Warsaw Pact countries, especially East Germany and Poland.

As Bangladesh conflict widened, India had to take very cautious steps. India in 1971 was in deep economic crisis – poverty and unemployment was rampant, economy was stagnant for decades. Food shortages, and riots and violence as a consequence, were regular features in many parts of India. Maoist insurgency was raging in West Bengal and Bihar, both states bordering Bangladesh. The north-eastern states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Assam were gripped by



decades of secessionist insurgency and ethnic violence. Indian security forces were fully committed against these insurgents, besides watching across thousands of miles of disputed borders with Pakistan and China. The added burden of millions of refugees fleeing into India from Bangladesh, and along with them elements of Bengali military personnel, who till the other day were members of the Pakistani military, was a cause of serious concern for the policy planners in Delhi. ‘Joy Bangla’ the slogan of Bengali nationalism, itself was a cause of headache for many in Delhi who smelled in it the possibility of a call for “Greater Bengal” in future. Another cause of anxiety was the left-wing student organisations within the Mukti Bahini. The Indians were worried lest they might join with the Indian Maoists to form a common operational platform. Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, appreciated the hydra-headed security threat and human disaster that were emerging on the eastern front, yet she saw in it an opportunity to cut Pakistan down to size. While she prepared for an all-out war in the near future, she kept her options open for a negotiated settlement of the crisis. It was, indeed, a big gamble she was taking with her political future. With all the uncertainties that could affect the outcome of any war, a disaster or even a stalemate would have doomed her political career.

As the war in Bangladesh dragged on and Soviet Union bolstered her ties with India, the United States saw these as attempts by the communist power to penetrate further into an area hitherto belonging to US sphere of influence. The USA had bilateral military pact with Pakistan since 1954. In 1955, Pakistan became a member of the US-led Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and in 1957 she joined South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Both the treaties, while apparently aimed at stopping communist incursion into the ‘Free World’, provided American foothold in Asia. Pakistan, while it received huge American economic and military aid, provided the US basing rights in Peshawar. It was from Peshawar, on 1 May 1960, Gary Power, a CIA pilot, flew in a U-2 spy plane on a reconnaissance mission and was shot down after penetrating 2000 miles into the Soviet air space. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev threatened Pakistan with nuclear retaliation in case of further incursion. Pakistan kept receiving generous economic and military assistance from the US throughout the

1950s and 60s. Although US military aid was suspended after the Indo-Pak in 1965, US military hardware continued to flow in through countries such as Iran, Jordan, Turkey and Germany. Meanwhile, Pakistan developed close military ties with China since the Indo-China border war in 1962. She signed a border treaty with China in 1963 recognizing Chinese suzerainty over nearly 2000 sq km of Pakistani controlled Kashmir. Karokoram Highway, a Sino-Pakistani venture, was constructed to provide direct all-weather land communication from North-eastern China to the Arabian Sea. Even friendship has its price, and Pakistan paid it in full.

In the mid-1960s, as the political and ideological rift between USSR and China widened, USA sought to establish diplomatic relations with China as a first step towards normalising relationship with the most populous country in the world and eventually to build a common axis against USSR, her principal rival in the global supremacy. USA sought Pakistan’s assistance in the initial secret rendezvous. Indeed, throughout 1969-71, Pakistan acted as a go between the USA and China. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger took off from Islamabad, Pakistan on 9 July 1971 on his secret trip to China. With this back drop, when the Eastern wing of Pakistan went up in mass upsurge followed by armed conflict, the US interest was to control and calm down the situation and maintain a status quo in the region. While urging the military government in Islamabad to seek political solution in East Pakistan, the USA was strongly supporting Pakistan’s national integrity. The US position further tilted towards Pakistan as the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty was signed. However, there were many liberal, progressive elements within and outside the US administration who lend strong support to Bangladesh’s cause, Senator Edward Kennedy being one of them. Other western powers such as UK, France and Canada took a more moderate approach and put considerable pressure on Islamabad to seek a peaceful resolution of Bangladesh conflict.

China, like the USA, saw Bangladesh War as a ploy by the Indo-Soviet axis to further consolidate its position. It viewed the war as a threat to the very existence of Pakistan, her close ally and strategic partner. While urging for a peaceful, political solution to the crisis, China wanted no compromise with the integrity of Pakistan. As the conflict escalated, China increased military assistance to Pakistan, provided strong support to Pakistan in UN and other international forum and projected Pakistan as a victim of external aggression. While China was ready to provide materiel assistance, it had neither the capability nor the desire to get physically involved in a war that it foresaw looming in the horizon. This is one message that the Pakistanis got wrong; Pakistan had assumed that in case of a war with India, the Chinese would open up a new front across the Himalayas, taking the pressure off from Pakistan. But the Chinese, realists as they are, had no reason to get embroiled in an unpopular war with too much at stake with little to gain.

Sometime before December 1971, it was apparent that Pakistani forces were facing imminent defeat in Bangladesh. By then the enormous strain of continuing a guerilla war in a hostile territory, totally cut-off from home (West Pakistan) was telling on the morale of the troops on the ground. The rural Bangladesh was virtually free from

November onward, when Pakistani forces were concentrated in fortress-like defensive deployments along the border. They were deployed in penny packets – covered large areas, but remained weak everywhere. With virtually no air force or navy, no reinforcement coming from abroad, with thousands of Mukti Bahini boys looking for an opportunity to take out Pakistani troops, the massive attack in December came almost as a coup de grace. When President Yahya launched an attack on the western front on the afternoon of 3 December 1971, the disaster that was to befall on the Pakistani heartland became all too clear. By about 10-12 December, India had started transferring some of its forces from the eastern theatre to the west. Pakistani forces in the west were already severely strained and retreating in many sectors, these additional Indian forces would have seriously jeopardized the Pakistani defences. There were clear signs that Pakistan would be facing a major defeat not only in Bangladesh, but Pakistan’s existence will be threatened. That is when US President Richard Nixon ordered a task force from the 7th Fleet, led by USS Enterprise, into the Bay of Bengal. The aim of the US Task force was not to intervene in the Bangladesh War, but to dissuade India from overrunning the Pakistani defences in the west. The US Task Force arrived in the Bay of Bengal on 12 December 1971, by then elements of combined forces had reached the outskirts of Dhaka, bypassing Pakistani defence positions along the border. As a reaction to the US deployment, elements of the Soviet fleet from the Indian Ocean entered Bay of Bengal to shadow the US Task force. In the end, neither fleets played any active role in the War, although their cat and mouse game raised the stake of the conflict a few degrees higher. In the end, while the hostilities ended with the surrender of the Pakistani forces in the east on 16 December 1971, the guns fell silent in the west the next day when India declared a unilateral cease fire with Pakistan.

16 December 1971 thus came to epitomise the victory of democracy over dictatorship, social justice over economic exploitation and secularism over narrow religious bigotry. It gave the Bengali nation an identity, a space to develop its culture and heritage in a free and unfettered atmosphere. Despite Henry Kissinger’s oft quoted warning of a ‘basket case’, Bangladesh has shown immense resilience and today able to stand on its own ground with pride and dignity. The country has shown steady progress in every field of human development and today considered as a model among the developing nations. Over the years, our relations with the global partners have matured into constructive exchanges. India continues to be our closest neighbor, major trading partner and an ally in the international arena. We have a most fraternal relation with Pakistan and share common views on many international issues. USA is our principal trading and development partner. Our relations with China, Russia, Europe and East Asia are close and harmonious. While our youth of the 1970s produced the heroes in the Liberation War, our post-war heroes are our farmers who transformed a chronic food shortage into food sufficiency, our workers who toil at home and abroad to produce so much for so little, our young entrepreneurs who have turned this once agrarian country into a thriving industrial hub. We salute our heroes on this auspicious day.

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