

NATIONAL GENOCIDE REMEMBRANCE DAY

# Operation Searchlight and the unrecognised genocide of 1971



TANZIRAL DILSHAD DITAN

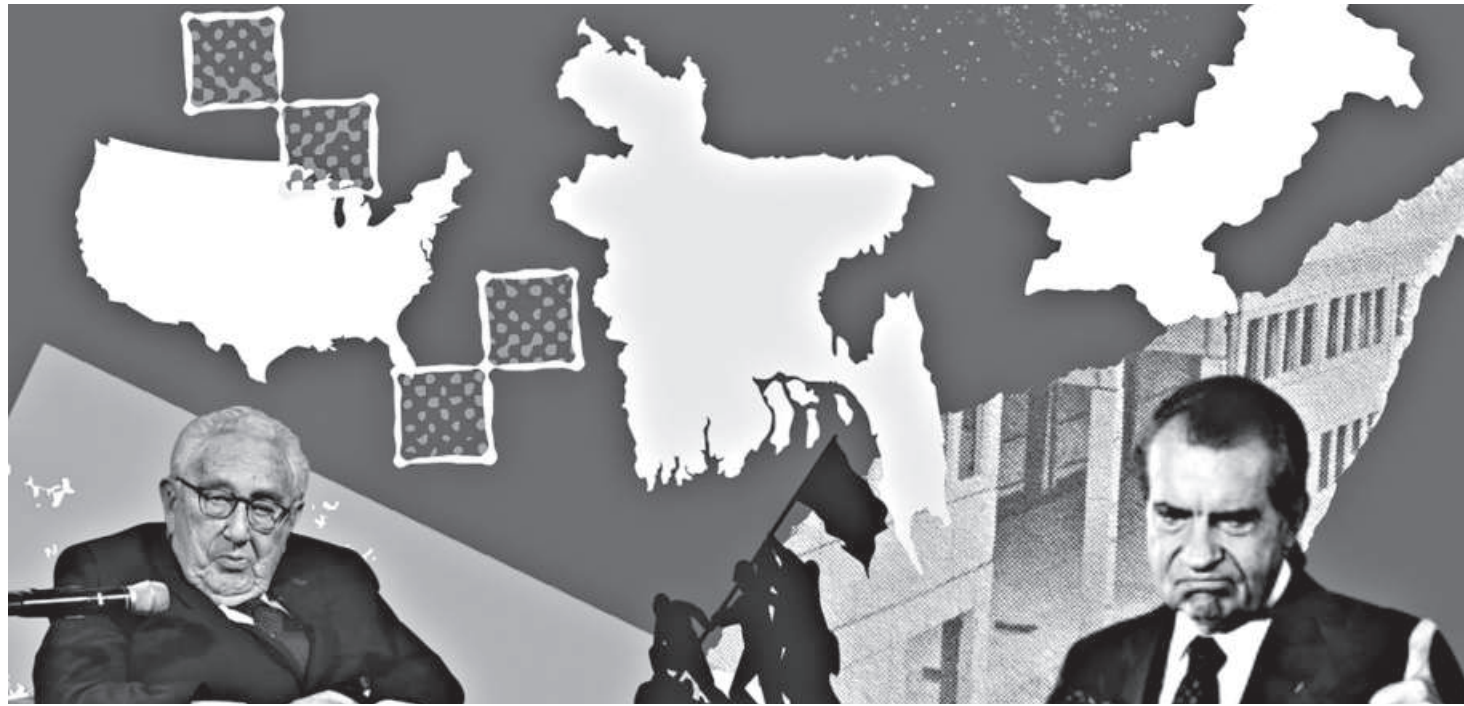
Tanziral Dilshad Ditan works in communications.

History often remembers wars through the cold geometry of maps and the sterile ink of treaties, but for those who survived the tempest of 1971, history is a haunting sensory memory—the acrid scent of gunpowder mingling with the first rains of spring, and the terrifying, rhythmic clatter of tanks as they invaded the narrow, sleeping arteries of Dhaka.

On the fateful night of March 25, 1971, a military campaign was unleashed under the chillingly ironic title “Operation Searchlight.” While the name suggests a quest to illuminate, its reality was a brutal, systematic attempt to extinguish the torch of a burgeoning democracy and the indomitable spirit of a nation. When the West Pakistan military issued orders from a couple of thousand miles away, they were aiming at the very heart and soul of the Bangalee people, attempting to erase a culture which refused to bow.

The tragedy of that dark night lay in its cold, clinical precision. It was a calculated, murderous strike designed to break our collective will. The primary targets were not fortified military installations, but the intellectual and cultural sanctuaries of our land. At Dhaka University, the “searchlight” fell upon dormitories where our brightest students and most revered professors—the visionary architects of our future—were hunted down the corridors of learning, treated as enemy combatants in the very rooms where they dreamt of a free tomorrow. The soil of the campus, once a garden of knowledge, was soaked in the blood of those whose only weapon was their conviction.

The arrest of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman shortly after midnight was intended as a decapitation strike to silence the voice of the masses. The aggressors relied on a simple logic: remove the leader and the dream of freedom dies. But the planners of Searchlight committed the ultimate error of all authoritarian regimes—they mistook a single leader for the heartbeat of an entire population.



FILE VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

The historical significance of that night is etched in blood and tears; a permanent scar on the conscience of the world. It was the precise moment when the fragile attempt of a unified Pakistan shattered forever, and the glorious, sovereign reality of Bangladesh was baptised in the ultimate sacrifice. Operation Searchlight was the catalyst for a humanitarian catastrophe of staggering proportions, forcing nearly one crore souls—mothers clutching infants, elderly men carrying the weight of their ancestors—to flee across the border in a desperate, heart-wrenching exodus for survival.

Despite the sheer scale of the atrocities—with a death toll that remains a scar on human history, estimated to be between 300,000 and 30 lakh—March 25 remains a national Genocide Remembrance Day in Bangladesh

rather than a globally recognised UN observance. The path to international justice has been obstructed by a complex web of Cold War legacies, legal technicalities, and the cold calculations of modern realpolitik.

In 1971, the UN Security Council was paralysed by a “clash of titans.” The United States (under the Nixon-Kissinger administration) and China viewed Pakistan as a strategic bridge for their secret diplomatic

viewing the carnage through the cold lens of realpolitik by refusing to name it a genocide.

While then UN Secretary-General U Thant described the events as “one of the most tragic episodes in human history,” the UN as an institution remained a bystander. The organisation prioritised the abstract concept of state sovereignty over the lived reality of human suffering—a failure that preceded the Responsibility to Protect doctrine by decades.

Consul General Archer Blood on April 6, 1971 remains a definitive witness which explicitly used the word “genocide” to describe the systematic erasure of the Hindu minority and Bangalee intellectuals.

Hope, however, is not lost. In 2023, the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) passed a landmark resolution formally recognising the 1971 atrocities as genocide. Most significantly, on March 20 this year, US Congressman Greg Landsman introduced House Resolution 1130 to the US House of Representatives. This historic resolution calls on the US government to formally recognise the 1971 atrocities—specifically those directed towards Bangalee Hindus, intellectuals, and students—as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The resolution creates a framework for future US foreign policy in South Asia, and by formally using the term “genocide,” the House aligns with the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This strengthens the legal basis for future international tribunals or reparations discussions. Together with the 2022 House Resolution 1430 to officially label the actions of the Pakistani military as genocide, the bills call on the Pakistan government to formally apologise to the people and government of Bangladesh, acknowledge its own role in the atrocities, and prosecute any surviving perpetrators in accordance with international law.

While these resolutions are significant for historical and diplomatic recognition, they are still “simple resolutions,” meaning they express the “sense of the House” but neither carry the force of law nor mandate specific executive action unless adopted and followed by further legislative steps.

As we look back through the mist of history, we realise that March 25 was not merely a conflict of geography or “East versus West.” It was a trial of fire for our shared values—a clash between the fundamental right to exist and the cruel hand of oppression. It was the moment the river delta found its voice: a voice that sang of liberation even as it wept for its fallen.

The searchlights of 1971 were meant to blind us with fear. Instead, they ignited a fire of patriotism that guided us to liberty. We owe it to all the martyrs of the Liberation War and every nameless soul massacred during the nine months of the war to ensure their story is told with the honour it deserves. Bangladesh did not just survive; she was born of a fire that cannot be put out.

opening. Consequently, they used their immense influence to frame these horrors not as a genocide, but as an “internal matter,” which would have done little to stop the violence. Vetoed by the Soviet Union, the resolution at the Security Council could not be passed. The UN was once again a stage for powerplay rather than a sanctuary for the oppressed.

A primary obstacle to early international condemnation was the unyielding stance of US leadership as then President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger maintained a notorious “tilt” towards Pakistan, prioritising their secret intermediary, Yahya Khan, over the lives of millions. Declassified White House tapes and documents reveal a haunting truth: Kissinger famously brushed aside the moral outcries of his own diplomats,

The UN currently observes December 9 as the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide. This date marks the 1948 signing of the Genocide Convention as the UN favours universal dates of remembrance to avoid “politicising” the calendar. To date, the UN has not officially recognised the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh.

The lack of a “unified” international forensic record, worsened by the systematic expulsion of foreign journalists during Operation Searchlight, has allowed revisionists to muddy the waters. Yet, documentation remains undeniable; the University College London (UCL) Fact Sheet estimates that up to 200,000 were slaughtered in the initial phase alone. Furthermore, the “Blood telegram” sent by US

## How much more credibility can the US afford to lose?



Dr Abdullah A Dewan is professor emeritus of economics at Eastern Michigan University in the US and former physicist and nuclear engineer at BAEF. He can be reached at aadeone@gmail.com.

ABDULLAH A DEWAN

In a piece published by *The Daily Star* on July 16, 2008, titled “The Iranian missile tests,” I tried to capture the nuclear illusion—an illusion not of Iran’s making, but one constructed and amplified by US-Israeli strategic narratives that persists even today. Despite the relentless portrayal of Iran as an imminent nuclear power, the evidence even then pointed in the opposite direction: the 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate, representing 16 intelligence agencies, concluded with high confidence that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons programme in 2003 and was acting within rational strategic limits. Yet that reality was buried beneath waves of speculation, threat inflation, and geopolitical theatre. What endured was not the emergence of a nuclear Iran, but the persistence of a narrative powerful enough to justify pressure, polarisation, and ultimately conflict—setting the stage for a world in which winners and losers are determined less by facts than by the strategic manipulation of fear.

For nearly two decades, global political discourse was held captive by a single

assertion: Iran stood on the brink of becoming a nuclear weapons state. The warnings were constant, urgent, and perpetually imminent, yet each passing year renewed the alarm without seeing the predicted outcome. What never materialised was the bomb; what instead materialised was war. This stark disjunction between prediction and reality is a systemic failure that compels a deeper inquiry into how a hypothetical threat was transformed into a real catastrophe, and what that transformation reveals about the evolving structure of global power.

By 2008, it was clear that Iran lacked both nuclear weapons and the conventional military capacity to pose an existential threat. Its defense spending was a fraction of that of the US—estimated at around \$11.08 billion compared to over \$600 billion for the US at the time—while its air force relied largely on ageing platforms and its naval strength remained confined to coastal deterrence.

Yet these realities did not moderate the discourse. Iran was elevated to be

shown as one of the gravest threats in the international system, not because of what it demonstrably possessed but because of how it was strategically framed. Iran consistently maintained that its nuclear programme served peaceful purposes and engaged in negotiations that permitted monitored enrichment in exchange for sanctions relief. Still, suspicion displaced proof, and capability was treated as intent for harm.

The persistence of the claim that Iran was “months away” from a bomb—repeated for nearly 20 years—should have invited scepticism. Instead, repetition became validation. From the mid-2000s through the late 2010s, successive Israeli leaders warned that Iran was “on the threshold of,” “a year away,” or “months away” from producing nuclear weapons, yet the threshold itself never arrived. When the distinction between what a state can do and what it intends to do is blurred, policy becomes driven by baseless projection, not evidence. And as we can see now, a system that acts on imagined threats eventually produces real disasters.

The parallels with Iraq are unmistakable. There, too, weapons of mass destruction that did not exist became the basis for justifying an invasion, despite inspections and contested intelligence. The first casualty of such a reality is credibility. The consequences extend far beyond the battlefield.

The Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of the world’s oil supply—nearly 20 million barrels per day—passes,

remains a structural fulcrum of global stability today. Even limited disruption can trigger spikes in oil prices, transmitting inflationary shocks across the global economy and raising the risk of synchronised slowdown and stagflation. What elevates this moment beyond a regional conflict is the emergence of geopolitical economics—the deep entanglement of geopolitical behaviour with economic systems and currency stability. In this framework, the strength of a currency is no longer determined solely by macroeconomic fundamentals, but by the credibility of the political system that underwrites it. The US dollar’s global dominance rests on predictability, rule-based conduct, and institutional trust. When policy shifts from evidence-based restraint to narrative-driven intervention, that foundation begins to fracture. Global actors respond not with abrupt withdrawal, but with gradual diversification that is reflected in rising gold purchases by central banks and the increasing use of non-dollar settlement mechanisms in parts of Asia and among BRICS economies. This is how systemic change occurs: not through sudden collapse, but via incremental erosion.

At the same time, the geopolitical landscape is undergoing a quiet but consequential realignment. The US remains militarily preeminent, yet its strategic position is increasingly constrained by declining trust among allies and partners. European nations are exploring more autonomous

security arrangements, Middle Eastern states are hedging their alignments, and the BRICS grouping benefits from this erosion of confidence, positioning itself within a gradually decentralising global order. This is the paradox of contemporary power. Military superiority can secure outcomes on the battlefield, but it cannot sustain leadership in a system where legitimacy and trust determine long-term influence. Power today is not merely the capacity to act; it is the ability to persuade others that one will act predictably and within a framework of shared rules.

In seeking to eliminate a perceived threat, the US has contributed to a broader environment of systemic insecurity. The world did not confront a nuclear-armed Iran; it now confronts the economic, institutional, and geopolitical consequences of acting as if such a reality already existed. In the process, Iran and its 92 million people may be pushed into uncertainty for years to come.

The question is not about Iran’s nuclear ambitions, but about the future of US power. A superpower cannot indefinitely sustain leadership through force combined with narrative construction. Durable leadership requires discipline—evidence-based policy, strategic restraint, and a commitment to credibility. Without such recalibration, the most enduring casualty will not be territory or alliances, but credibility itself. When credibility erodes, power does not necessarily disappear—but it only lingers, no longer leading.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

1 Transvaal settlers

6 Minty drink

11 Ohio city

12 Battery end

13 Some wedding wear

15 Shaggy ox

16 Sty resident

17 Plopped down

18 Hive leader

20 Repair

23 Stuns

27 Opera piece

28 Despicable

29 Forays

31 Small, to Simone

32 Sales pitch

34 Back, on a boat

37 Pitcher’s stat

38 Soak up

41 Tracks for equestrians

44 Caravan creature

45 Some tournaments

46 Meaty dishes

47 Train stop

**DOWN**

1 Crib occupant

2 Gumbo veggie

3 Composer

4 Satie

4 Piston connector

5 Buy eagerly

6 Like rough edges

7 First numero

8 Weather map spots

9 Writer Ferber

10 Nuisance

14 Tell whoppers

18 Campus areas

19 Belly feature

20 Remote

21 Lyricist Gershwin

22 Noon, on a clock

24 Pimple, informally

25 Yale student

26 Collection

30 Joins the bee

31 Stir-fry veggie

33 Wrath

34 Basics

35 Greek group

36 Clock reading

38 Dance part

39 “Dear me!”

40 Sibillant summons

42 Lawn coating

43 Chimp, for one

**THURSDAY’S ANSWERS**

B	O	E	R	S		J	U	L	E	P
A	K	R	O	N		A	N	O	D	E
B	R	I	D	A	L	G	O	W	N	S
Y	A	K		P	I	G		S	A	T
				Q	U	E	E	N		
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A	F	T		E	R	A		S	O	P
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C	A	M	E	L		O	P	E	N	S
S	T	E	W	S		D	E	P	O	T

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