

**INDIA, THE UNITED STATES, AUSTRALIA AND
THE DIFFICULT BIRTH OF BANGLADESH**

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FOREWORD

Allan Gyngell AO FAIA

For more than 80 years, the mission of the AIIA has been to deepen public understanding in Australia of international politics and to support a better-informed public debate about our engagement with the world.

A vital part of that mission has been the Institute's long involvement in supporting some of Australia's best scholarship on the history of Australian foreign policy. This continuing work includes our *Australia in World Affairs* volumes, dating back to 1950, our series on Australian foreign ministers and many other books published with the Institute's help or under our auspices.

This new series of monographs is designed to do something different. Our objective here is to throw light on key moments in Australian diplomatic history not just through academic research, but by drawing on the experiences of Australian diplomats and officials who were engaged in the events. Sometimes the focus of the publication will be a dramatic event, sometimes longer-term patterns of Australian engagement with a particular issue in the multilateral arena. Sometimes the central concern will be diplomatic tradecraft, the way the work is done.

As the first work in this series it is a great pleasure for the AIIA to publish this account of Australia's response to the 1971 civil war in what was then East Pakistan, the subsequent war between India and Pakistan, and the emergence of the new state of Bangladesh.

Its author, Ric Smith, is one of Australia's most distinguished diplomats and public servants. He has held some of our country's most senior official positions as Secretary of the Defence Department, Deputy Secretary of DFAT and Ambassador to China and Indonesia. He is an Officer in the Order of Australia, a recipient of the Public Service Medal and a Fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs.

In this work, Ric, who was a young Australian foreign service officer in New Delhi at the time, combines the insights of scholarship with what he calls 'the footprints of personal memory' to show how the Australian Government responded to these dramatic developments and the way we differed from the position of our close ally, the United States. It is an important and revealing insight into a largely neglected aspect of Australia's relations with Asia, with India and with the USA, and offers some valuable lessons for Australian diplomatic practice.

We are grateful to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for their help with publication.

Allan Gyngell AO FAIIA

National President

Australian Institute of International Affairs

PROLOGUE

Late June, 1971: Bengalis are straggling across the borders into India as the Pakistan Army continues its murderous crackdown in East Pakistan. By December, the number seeking refuge in India will reach ten million. But now, among those limping past the stone border markers and bamboo watchtowers into Tripura, in India's northeast, comes a small family: a mother and father half dragging, half carrying two boys aged about seven and five, each of them wounded and sobbing in pain; and all, like those ahead and behind them, wracked by fear as air-burst mortars explode in the paddy fields and their villages burn.

I help the family up the steamy jungle path to my local taxi, drive them a few miles over rough tracks to the state capital, Agartala, where the streets are crowded with distressed people looking for shelter and food, and deliver them to a hospital already overflowing with their sick and wounded compatriots. The boys are laid on mats on a concrete floor in a crowded corridor. A nurse carefully removes pieces of shrapnel from one boy's head and the other's stomach, cleans and bandages their wounds as best she can, gets a drink of dubious looking water for the boys and their mum and dad, and asks them to wait – who knows for how long – but at least they are safe now; if not from the risk of disease and illness, then at least from the ravages of their nation's army.

I can't stay, but I leave a few rupees for the family and a few for the hospital, and head for the airport. A cargo of Australian aid delivered earlier by an RAAF Hercules – rolls of plastic "polyfabric" for makeshift shelters, cans of food and boxes of medical supplies – is being distributed at the side of the airfield. I take the Indian Airlines flight for Calcutta, where the tragedy is unfolding on an even greater scale.

INTRODUCTION

Anatol Lieven's pithy summary captures the tragedy of 1971 incomparably: "No freak of history like united Pakistan, its two ethnically and culturally very different wings separated by 1,000 miles of hostile India, could possibly have lasted for long... The tragedy is not that it failed, but that a situation made for a civilized divorce should instead have ended in horrible bloodshed."¹

While the scars of the crisis remain evident in South Asia, elsewhere the horrible bloodshed of 46 years ago has been too easily forgotten. Rwanda, Cambodia, Tiananmen Square and the Balkans have long served as the critical reference points in popular political commentary on post-1945 international brutality, but Bangladesh is seldom mentioned. As the number of people displaced by the ongoing tragedy in Syria and Iraq passed the ten million mark after several years of civil war, who remembered that the same number of Bengalis fled from East Pakistan in the space of just seven months in 1971?

And as Rohingyas displaced from their homes by Myanmar's brutal army have streamed across the borders into Bangladesh in recent days, who recalls that what Bangladesh is doing for them now mirrors what India did for Bengalis 46 years ago?

The crisis that unfolded in East Pakistan in 1971 is historically significant because it opened the way to the demise of Pakistan as it had existed since 1947 and to the birth of a new state, Bangladesh. But it deserves to be remembered as well because of the repression and bloodshed that attended the birth, including the deaths of an estimated 300,000 people and the displacement of those ten million.*

* The matter of how many people were killed has been contentious. A post-war Pakistan Government enquiry put the figure at 26,000; the Bangladesh Government claimed it was three million. Two American political scientists (Sisson and Rose) estimated the number to be 300,000. A 2008 *British Medical Journal* study adduced a figure of 269,000. As to the numbers of refugees who crossed into India, the figures cited by Indian authorities (and used in this essay)

Yet the events themselves are only part of the story. The Pakistani oppression and the millions of refugees who fled into India attracted enormous popular attention in the West, influencing governments to review their instinctively cautious policies. Something similar was happening at the same time in regard to Vietnam, and many of the same players were active in the two cases, but the influence was more immediate in Bangladesh. This again makes it the more surprising that the story of the birth of Bangladesh, and the pain that accompanied it, are not better remembered in the West.

Nor is it just the pain that is remembered in South Asia: there is a lasting and important memory of what was seen as the perfidy of American policy. The dissenting reporting of America's consul general in Dhaka, the ironically named Archer Blood, is part of that story. More significant though were the very personal, and often contentious, views and decisions of President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Dr Henry Kissinger.

Their judgements and their willingness, in the end, to risk drawing the Soviet Union and China into conflict are largely forgotten now outside the subcontinent. Their handling of these issues tends to be overlooked in favour of judgements about the duumvirate's successes in other areas of policy, especially of course in the opening to China. But their actions regarding Bangladesh should not be forgotten, and certainly were not in New Delhi. Indeed, Kissinger's role in the crisis has helped ensure that his reputation in Asia does not match his revered standing in the West.

In all this, there is also an important story to tell about Australian policy in response to the crisis – based on our own analysis and judgements; an independent Australian policy different from those of the United States and China – which is neither well remembered nor fully explained.

are generally considered to be accurate because of the Indian bureaucracy's painstaking way of recording them. They were generally not questioned by UNHCR or aid agencies.

This essay is a reflection on the events which led to the breakup of Pakistan and to the painful birth of Bangladesh, and on the policy responses to these events. It is divided into four main parts:

- Part I, *Forgotten History: The Origins, March 1969-June 1971*, traces the crisis from its beginnings to mid-1971;
- Part II, *A Regional Crisis Goes Global: July 1971-December 1971*, reviews the Great Power politics which came into play in the lead up to the war between India and Pakistan in December 1971 and its evolution from a regional crisis to one in which the United States was willing, as National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger later acknowledged, “to risk war in the triangular Soviet-Chinese-American relationship”². This section reflects on the legacy for Indo-American relations.
- Part III, *History Untold: As Australia Saw It*, outlines Australian policy responses and how they differed from those of the United States. It considers why it was that, on this occasion at least, a conservative coalition government in Canberra felt able to pursue an independent policy and to distinguish itself from its Washington ally.
- Part IV, *Reflections and Reverberations*, recalls the incongruities of the international relationships of 1971 and notes the ironies evident in the developments of later years, including US support for the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) concept. It also suggests some of the diplomatic lessons that can be drawn from the 1971 saga and comments on Australia/India relations and how the ghosts of 1971 haunt Bangladeshi politics 46 years on.

Parts I and II draw heavily on two relatively recent books on the Bangladesh crisis: Gary J Bass’s *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and the Forgotten Genocide* (Knopf, 2013) and Srinath Raghavan’s *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Harvard University Press, 2013). Both broke new ground drawing on recently accessible material including documents from the State Department and the Nixon tapes.

In reviewing how Australia responded to the evolving crisis, Part III draws on declassified documents from the Australian archives and conversations with other officers of the then Department of Foreign Affairs who were close to the events in question. It also recalls my own experience as a junior officer in the High Commission in New Delhi from 1970 to 1973: following as it were the footprints of personal memory.

PART I
THE ORIGINS: A REGIONAL CRISIS
MARCH 1969-JUNE 1971

Pakistan's Perspective: "Majority alone does not count"

The trigger for the events which unfolded in East Pakistan in 1971 was the decision by Pakistan's President and chief martial law administrator General Yahya Khan, following the ousting of President Ayub Agha Muhammed Khan in late March 1969, to hold elections for a national assembly which would draft a new constitution for Pakistan.

Field Marshal Ayub, who had himself seized power in a military coup in 1958, had acceded to Yahya's takeover in the face of increasing agitation within Pakistan for a return to democracy. While this agitation had strong roots in Pakistan, it had in turn fed off the student and civil unrest that had been evident in many other countries through 1968. As Srinath Raghavan argues persuasively, "the uprising in Pakistan [in 1968] mirrored, in many respects, the movements in other parts of the world."³

Ayub did not believe Pakistan should return to civilian rule but lacked the stomach to fight the growing domestic pressure for elections. Yahya, however, believed that he could have it both ways: his conception was for a new constitution which would at once provide for a democratically elected parliament but at the same time enshrine a role for Pakistan's military forces as "guardians" of the state: the "Turkish model", as it was called.

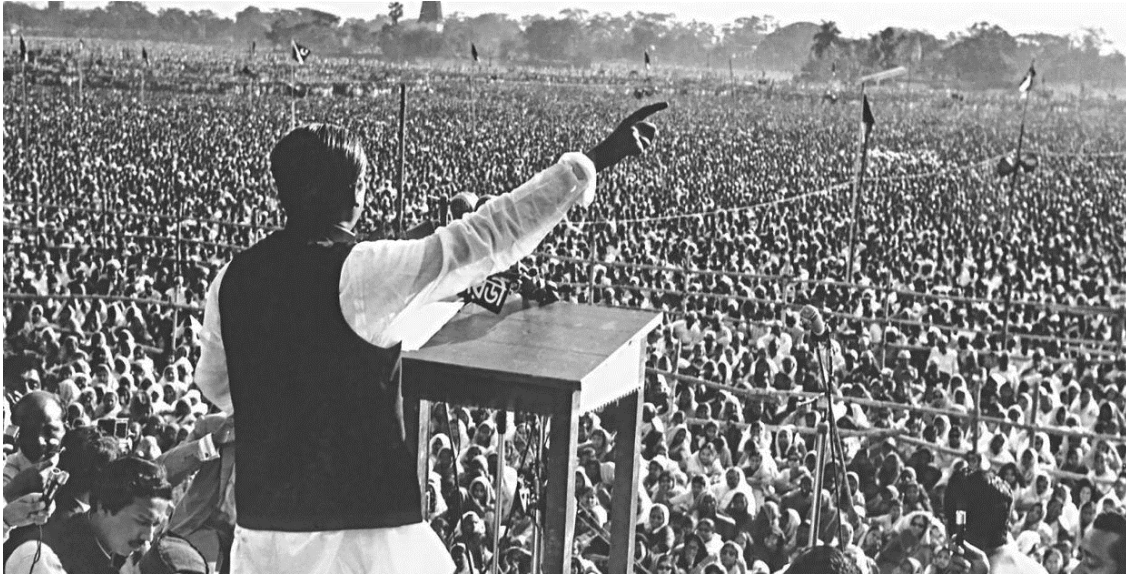
Having taken the reins, Yahya set in train arrangements for an election for a 300-member national assembly to be held on 5 October 1970. The two most prominent political leaders of the time, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had both been in prison but were released on the eve of Yahya's assumption of power and went on to lead election campaigns in West and East Pakistan respectively.

Devastating floods in East Pakistan in July led to a decision to postpone the election until 7 December. In the meantime, on 12 November, a catastrophic typhoon struck East Pakistan, killing an estimated 500,000 people and leaving millions homeless.* The lack of concern shown by Yahya and his government in response to the typhoon, as to the earlier floods, worsened what the US National Security Adviser Dr Henry Kissinger described to President Richard Nixon as “the deep antagonism of the Bengali people for the Central Pakistan Government”.⁴ The election nevertheless went ahead as scheduled in all but 11 seats, in which votes were cast in January.

In the event, Mujib’s Awami League, campaigning on a six-point plan for a strong degree of autonomy for the East which had originally been developed in 1966, won 160 of the 162 open seats contested in East Pakistan and seven of the 13 nationwide women’s seats. Mujib’s strong showing surprised Yahya and his military advisers, and probably also Mujib himself. The vote for the 138 seats in the West was more fractured, with Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) winning the largest bloc, 81.

Yahya then faced a challenge in seeking to negotiate the terms on which the assembly would sit. Neither he nor Bhutto could contemplate a national assembly in which East Pakistan’s Awami League had the decisive voice. Bhutto was on record as saying after the election that “Punjab and Sindh are the bastions of power in Pakistan. Majority alone does not count in national politics”.⁵ He was suspicious of Yahya and offended by his reference to Mujib, in January 1971, as “the future Prime Minister,”⁶ but he could see that his interests were clearly aligned with Yahya’s. Mujib was intractable on his six points, though he continued to talk of autonomy within

* It was described at the time as the biggest natural disaster in modern history, and in terms of lives lost may well remain so: the toll from the 1976 Tangshan earthquake in China was estimated at 240,000, and that from the 2004 South Asian tsunami as 200,000. Assuming the loss of 500,000 people in the typhoon and 300,000 in the 1971 civil war, East Pakistan lost 800,000 people in a little over one year.



A rally at the Dhaka racecourse attracted several hundred thousand people who were fired up by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 7 March, 1971.

Photo by Jalaluddin Haider for the *Bangabandhu The Man Behind the Nation*.

Pakistan and, in the early stages at least, used the term “confederation”.

As the negotiations continued amidst increasing Awami League-led demonstrations in East Pakistan, the opening of the national assembly was postponed from 15 February 1971 to 3 March, and then to 25 March, and then on 1 March postponed *sine die*. A rally at the Dhaka racecourse on 7 March attracted several hundred thousand people fired up by Mujib, who, though he stopped short of declaring independence, proclaimed that “our struggle this time is a struggle for independence”.⁷ The protests were increasingly violent, and the first week of March saw 172 demonstrators killed by security forces.

The negotiations continued amidst turmoil in the East and gained further urgency when Yahya came to Dhaka on 15 March. He was joined by Bhutto and the leaders of the lesser West Pakistan parties on 20 March. Mujib’s six points were at stake, but in the course of the negotiations the future of martial law also became a major issue: Mujib demanded its repeal once the national assembly met, but Yahya

insisted on retaining his authority. The talks finally broke down on 24 March.

Yahya had plans in place for military intervention and from early in the year had been quietly moving additional troops into East Pakistan. As one foreign journalist wrote later, “the generals were holding back, choosing their time, making sure they were ready and, above all, giving the Bengalis a scaffold’s length of rope.”⁸ With the talks at an end, Yahya flew out of Dhaka early on 25 March and, back in West Pakistan, authorised the launch late that night of Operation Searchlight, a military crackdown intended to restore order in East Pakistan and to bring the Bengalis to heel.

Commanded by Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, known as the “butcher of Baluchistan” because of his role in suppressing uprisings in Pakistan’s north-western province, Operation Searchlight began vigorously, at its outset targeting universities and the Awami League leadership. Dhaka University in particular was targeted in the first few days of the operation, with heavy casualties. Mujibur Rahman managed to get a message to a radio station held by pro-Bengali forces proclaiming the independence of Bangladesh but was taken into custody soon after and transferred to a jail in West Pakistan.

Other Awami League leaders escaped and either went underground or made their way to India. Those who made it to India set up a Bangladeshi government-in-exile, located at Mujibnagar in West Bengal. The East Bengali resistance – the “Mukti Fauz” – was joined quickly by deserters from the Bengali units of the Pakistan armed forces led by a former Pakistan Army officer, Colonel MAG Osmani. Its successes were few in the first weeks of the crackdown, and by mid-April it seemed that the Pakistani forces were in control, though the toll had been heavy. For the following few months, the campaign was described by Pakistan’s spokesmen as “pacification”.

With Indian-supplied arms and advice about guerrilla-type tactics, initially through the Border Security Force, the Mukti gradually became more effective in harassing the Pakistan Army but had limited

success in its objective of establishing liberated zones. By August, it was still in the field, but, like the government-in-exile, it was riven by factional dissent and, denied Indian recognition, began contemplating turning elsewhere for support.

India's Response: "Tentative and improvisational"⁹

In India, meanwhile, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had been ruling with a minority government supported by the Communist Party of India (CPI) since she split the Congress Party in 1969. Late in 1970 she announced a national election, to be held in early March 1971, a year earlier than scheduled. Campaigning on the slogan *garibi hatao* (abolish poverty), her Congress (R) Party won a remarkable 326 of the 529 seats in the Lok Sabha with the old guard Congress (O) reduced to just 26.* Mrs Gandhi was thus firmly in the saddle as the crisis unfolded in East Pakistan.

While the popular mood was with the East Bengalis, there was uncertainty within the government about whether an independent East Bengal would be in India's interests. Would the splintering of the 1947 two-state framework lead some of India's more restless states to break away from the Republic, vindicating the "centrifugal forces" risk that some commentators had long foreseen? Would Bengali nationalism infect West Bengal? Would an independent East Bengal inspire the already active separatists in Nagaland and Mizoland? Would it prove a base for greater Chinese support for the Naxalites and other rebel groups in India's northeast? And would an independent East Bengal be economically viable or just another drag on India's economy?†

* The "R" in Mrs Gandhi's Party's name was for "Requisitionists". The "O" stood for "Organisation"; this party was led by the Congress veteran Morarji Desai and embraced the "syndicate" members whom Gandhi had deposed in 1969.

† The British journalist David Loshak reported later in 1971 that Marxist extremists in West Bengal had in fact formulated their own version of the Awami League's six-point plan, and that Naxalites were said to be in close contact with the Mukti Fauz. (David Loshak, *Pakistan Crisis* (London: Heinemann, 1971), 132.)



An East Pakistan refugee group leaves Meherpur seeking safety in India April 19, 1971. The refugees had to seek safety after Bangladesh rebels were forced to retreat by Pakistani government troops.

Image supplied courtesy of Associated Press/AAP Image.

Deliberations about these concerns were soon overtaken by recognition that East Bengal's separation from Pakistan was not a matter of choice: it had become inevitable. Easy as it was to foresee this reality, policymaking was nevertheless challenging. The flow of East Bengalis into India posed both political and economic challenges. The preponderance of Hindus among them, especially in the early stages, and reports of genocide against Hindus, excited Hindu nationalists in India, including the influential acolyte of Mahatma Gandhi, Jayaprakash Naryan. The prime minister thus became increasingly concerned about the prospect of communal violence in India.

At the same time, the burden on the economies and services of the states into which the East Bengalis were fleeing was becoming more and more difficult to bear: Tripura, for instance, with a population of

about 1.5 million, is reckoned to have taken in some 900,000 refugees by July, and the figure grew to exceed the state's population.¹⁰

Indian hawks, including the influential strategist K Subrahmanyam, advocated war as early as April, but war was not an easy option. There were doubts about whether the Indian Army was ready, and conditions for an attack into East Bengal were unlikely to be propitious until later in the year, after the monsoon. The chief of army staff, General Sam Manekshaw, later claimed that Prime Minister Gandhi had wanted to launch a military intervention as early as April, but that he dissuaded her. While Bass does not contest this, in Raghavan's view "these claims hardly comport with reality"; Manekshaw's account of the situation, he suggests, became fuller and more self-serving with successive recounting in his retirement.¹¹

The account offered by PN Dhar, then an adviser to the prime minister, seems credible: Mrs Gandhi, he says, arranged for Manekshaw to appear before a meeting of her council of ministers to make a strong statement against early military intervention in order to help her handle some of her more aggressive colleagues.¹²

The International Response: "Crushingly disappointing"

Whatever the military constraints, the Indian Government was also very conscious that world opinion was likely to be hostile to early and overt Indian support for the dismemberment of another country. Humanitarian aid for the refugees was one thing, but acceptance of an Indian assault on East Pakistan would be another.

India worked hard to garner international understanding, but, while aid was forthcoming, Prime Minister Gandhi remained frustrated and disappointed by the international response to the intrusion of millions of refugees into India and the continuing instability on her country's borders. India looked at first to the UN, in which it had invested much since independence, but found little sympathy from the ever-cautious Secretary General U Thant, who – with Nigeria's Biafra separatist movement fresh in his mind – was conscious that opinion in the UN

was more sympathetic to a member state facing secessionist forces than to a state seeming to meddle in a member's affairs.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadruddin Aga Khan, visited India in June, but, as part of the UN system, he too took a cautious approach, declining to address the political issues and playing down the extent of the refugee problem.*

India's past shared leadership of the non-aligned movement (NAM) might have offered hope of support from that community, but the NAM too had a strong aversion to anything that might look like interference in internal affairs, and anyway there was a strong base of support for Pakistan as a Muslim nation. Nor was the Commonwealth likely to be helpful: it embraced a wide range of attitudes to India and Pakistan, and many of its newly decolonised members were fragile within their own boundaries and thus concerned not to see a secession movement succeed.

A number of governments nevertheless urged President Yahya Khan to show restraint and to pursue a political settlement in East Pakistan. Governments in Western Europe, and the Canadian and Australian Governments among others, expressed views along these broad lines in terms which varied according to perceptions of their separate interests in Pakistan. But while these urgings gave India some satisfaction, they were clearly not influencing Pakistani policy or actions – the oppression in East Pakistan continued and the refugees continued to flow – and nor did they translate readily into support for India.

In June, Indian government envoys were despatched to a wide range of countries to advocate the need for Pakistan to reach a settlement with the Bengali political leadership to allow the return of the refugees. The envoys attracted more aid but reported little disposition to apply any more political pressure to Pakistan. There was in fact a contradiction within the cautious approaches adopted by many governments – on the one hand, they were reluctant to intervene in

* Sceptical Indians also noted that Sadruddin was well connected in Pakistan.

what they said was an internal matter, but on the other there was also a tendency to see the issue as one between India and Pakistan – leading thus to proposals for mediation between India and Pakistan, including by the Commonwealth: proposals which were rejected by both sides.

In all, as Gary Bass summarises it, “India’s global diplomatic rounds proved crushingly disappointing.”¹³ As British journalist David Loshak wrote later that year, the “trade union of nation states is for the status quo at almost any cost... it sticks to the rigid closed shop rules”.¹⁴

The US Response: “The most complex issue of Nixon’s first term”

While the UN and lesser states jockeyed around the issue, the bigger powers also took their positions. The attitude of the United States, with all its apparent leverage with Pakistan, was of course critical.

The relationship between India and the United States had been unsteady for many years. As Kissinger remarked, by 1971 the relationship “had achieved a state of exasperatedly strained cordiality, like a couple that neither separate nor get along.”¹⁵

This situation had its origins in a range of factors. India’s non-aligned status, and its posturing on global issues – including Vietnam and the Middle East – in ways unfriendly to American interests had long irritated Washington and contrasted with Pakistan’s ready alignment with the United States, including through The Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

This unease was compounded by India’s apparent closeness to the Soviet Union, especially after November 1969 when Indira Gandhi’s government retained office with the support of the pro-Moscow Communist Party of India (CPI). American aid to India remained substantial, but Washington was frustrated by the failure of this aid to deliver influence in Delhi, especially in regard to India’s socialist and autarchic economic policies which, with their bias to state-owned or

state-managed industries of the Soviet kind, offered little opportunity for American business competitors.

On India's side, a general disposition to dislike US Cold War policies was compounded by the perception of American bias towards Pakistan, and disappointment that this should be so given that India had remained a democracy while Pakistan had long since strayed into military rule. India had also been disappointed by Washington's less than fulsome support during the Sino-Indian War of 1962 (a matter about which more was to be learned later). Concerns about US policy were sharpened when in October 1970 the Nixon administration announced the sale of six F-104 aircraft and other military equipment to Pakistan in a one-off exception to the embargo on arms sales to Pakistan and India which had been imposed after their 1965 war.

Policy specifics apart, Indian and American leaders, with the exception of a brief period during the Kennedy administration, had seldom felt comfortable with each other. For Indians, American leaders were overbearing. Americans in turn found Prime Minister Nehru distant and sanctimonious – “suffocatingly self-righteous”, said then Vice President Nixon after he met Prime Minister Nehru in 1953¹⁶ – and they were suspicious of his successors' closeness to Moscow.

The personal factor became increasingly evident as the crisis unfolded through 1971: the Nixon tapes are redolent with his acerbic and often crude references to India and its leaders. Prime Minister Gandhi was described on occasions as an “old bitch” and an “old witch”, and Indians generally were said to be “a slippery, treacherous people.” On one occasion Nixon remarked that Indians are “such bastards... they need a mass famine,” and on another, after noting that India's population had reached 550 million, he wondered “why the hell anyone would reproduce in that damn country.”¹⁷

Again, the contrast with American attitudes to Pakistan's leaders, including Presidents Ayub and Yahya, was striking. Yahya, said Nixon, “is a thoroughly decent and reasonable man ... an honourable man in an impossible situation,” and on three occasions as the crisis evolved

he and Kissinger alluded to Abraham Lincoln in terms that suggested they saw Yahya in the same light, standing tall for his nation amidst a civil war.¹⁸

While Yahya felt the United States was the only country that had “shown real understanding” of Pakistan’s position,¹⁹ in fact Washington’s response to developments in East Pakistan as they unfolded in early 1971 was both conflicted and hesitant. It was also at times, at least in some quarters in Washington, ill-informed.

A National Security Council study completed in mid-February 1971 concluded that “the division of Pakistan would not suit American interests”, but that an East Pakistani declaration of independence was “very unlikely”. Intervention by the Pakistan Army was also considered unlikely, though in the event of such an intervention the United States would have an interest in avoiding violence and checking its escalation; to this end, the study concluded, America’s aid program “should give us considerable leverage.”²⁰

A month later, in early March, with the increasing likelihood that Yahya would use force, Kissinger, as national security adviser, contended that any attempt to dissuade him from this course would “almost certainly be self-defeating.” The State Department and CIA then agreed that there was a “massive case for inaction,” and on 26 March officials considered that the United States should “continue its policy of non-involvement.” Three days later, Kissinger advised Nixon that the military crackdown appeared to have worked, a view he reiterated to the Indian ambassador in Washington on 18 April.²¹

While advocating “inaction”, it is nevertheless evident that the State Department had a clear view of the long-term prospects. On 9 April, State told an inter-agency meeting that the situation in East Pakistan “will end in some form of separatism”, and four days later Secretary of State Rogers told Nixon that the time had come to “re-examine our basic stance towards Pakistan.” Aware that American-supplied arms were being used in East Pakistan, State also argued that delivery of a proposed new package of arms should be postponed. Kissinger was

reportedly enraged by this advice, attributing it to what he claimed was the department's "traditional Indian bias", asserting that "West Pakistani superiority seems evident."²²

The Blood Telegram

The US Embassy in New Delhi advocated for a better understanding of India's position, while the Consulate General in Dhaka reported robustly on what it was seeing on the ground in East Pakistan. Indeed, within a few days of the beginning of Operation Searchlight, the Consul General Archer Blood, labelled the Pakistan Army's actions "selective genocide", and questioned the "continued advisability" of the US Government's posture. This report was supported by the US Ambassador in New Delhi Kenneth Keating, a former Republican senator for New York state.

On 6 April, Blood authorised a cable agreed to by all US Foreign Service personnel in Dhaka titled "Dissent from U.S. Policy Towards East Pakistan". Now famously remembered as the "Blood Telegram", it contended that the administration "had evidenced what many will consider moral bankruptcy" in dealing with a conflict "in which unfortunately the overworked term genocide is applicable." In forthright terms, Blood voiced his team's concern that American-supplied military equipment had been used by the Pakistan Army in its bloody crackdown.

In its contents the Blood Telegram was no starker than Blood's earlier assertion that the United States was ignoring "selective genocide". But the use of the "dissenting advice" mechanism was rare and in itself bound to attract greater interest. Blood's advice, frank as it was, and the means by which it was conveyed, were predictably unwelcome in the White House; Blood was withdrawn from Dhaka in early June and effectively stymied for the remainder of his career.^{23*}

* Kissinger referred to him on one occasion as "this maniac in Dacca". (Gary Bass, *The Blood Telegram* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 117, quoting Nixon tapes.)

On 2 May, any lingering doubts about Nixon's position were resolved when he annotated on a minute from Kissinger, "To all hands. Don't [underlined three times] squeeze Yahya at this time."²⁴ A month later he specifically ruled out the use of the leverage available to Washington through the IMF to bring pressure to bear on Pakistan.²⁵

International Public Opinion: The "Concert for Bangladesh"

In the meantime, international media and public opinion became increasingly influential. The press had taken a close interest in the crisis from its beginning, inspired in part by the Pakistan authorities' clumsy handling of the journalists whom it removed from Dhaka on 26 March. Prominent among these was Sydney Schanberg of the *New York Times*, who relocated to Calcutta and over the next eight months reported assiduously on what he saw and heard in and around the refugee camps.

Media attention stepped up significantly in June when the London *Sunday Times* published a detailed 5,000-word centrefold report on the situation in East Pakistan. Written by a Pakistani journalist – a Christian – who had visited East Pakistan as a guest of the Pakistan Government, been shocked by what he had seen, and then fled to Europe to release his story, the report focused particularly on the plight of the Hindu community. Headlined "genocide", it contended that the Pakistan Government was "pushing through its own 'final solution' of the East Bengal problem."²⁶

As the media elsewhere took up the story afresh, international journalists increasingly found their way into East Pakistan resulting, in the words of one, in an "endless spate" of "details of a bloodbath more methodical, planned and endlessly ruthless than in any in modern times since the Nazis".²⁷

Many NGOs had a presence in the subcontinent as well, including in East Pakistan where Oxfam and others had become established after the floods and the cyclone of late 1970. There was also a significant Bengali diaspora, especially in the United Kingdom. Together, they ensured that the events in East Pakistan remained in public view.



*Aug. 08, 1971 - Concert for Bangladesh in Madison Square Garden.
L To R: Ringo Starr, George Harrison, Bob Dylan.
Image supplied courtesy of Keystone Press.*

By mid-year the East Pakistan tragedy had come to the attention of many activists who had been involved in protest movements during the sixties. Their talismanic achievement was the Concert for Bangladesh. First proposed to George Harrison by Ravi Shankar in May, the concert came together at Madison Square Garden on 1 August and featured not only Harrison and Ringo Starr but also Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Billy Preston and others from the Woodstock anti-Vietnam culture.* Joan Baez and Allen Ginsberg too took up the cause. Thus, it was that, as Raghavan puts it, “for a few months in 1971, Bangladesh seemed to distil all the hopes and fears of the Swinging Sixties”, and audiences were in no doubt that “the Bangladesh crisis was a political as well as humanitarian tragedy.”²⁸

Over time, Western governments became more responsive to domestic interest as the refugee flow continued. In the meantime, through June and into July, nothing seemed likely to break the

* There were in fact two concerts – one at 2.00 pm and the other at 8.00 pm. Together they raised some US \$250,000. The Beatles had of course split by then.

deadlock. Mrs Gandhi had little choice but to wait and cope, along the way comforted with a reminder from one of her principal advisers of Napoleon's pithy aphorism: "never interrupt an enemy while he is making a mistake."²⁹

PART II

A REGIONAL CRISIS GOES GLOBAL: JULY 1971- DECEMBER 1971

The issues underlying the evolving crisis had had their origins within the region and come July might still have been resolved at that level. Yet a critical question remained: why was the United States not using the leverage available to it to bring President Yahya Khan to a political solution in East Pakistan?

The answer came with the announcement on 15 July of the breakthrough in Sino-American relations: Kissinger had visited Beijing, and in the preceding months Pakistan – indeed, Yahya Khan himself – had played a crucial role in facilitating the visit. Welcome as it was in large parts of the international community, this remarkable breakthrough also set in train a process which saw the East Pakistan crisis transition from one of regional significance to one in which the Nixon administration was prepared to involve China and to risk conflict with the Soviet Union.

Following a brief visit to India on 8 and 9 June,^{*} Kissinger had gone on to Pakistan and from there, feigning a day off for illness, had flown in secrecy to Beijing to meet the Chinese leadership and thus to begin the process of building a new US-China relationship of enormous strategic consequence.

As unexpected and dramatic as this was in a global strategic context, it was hardly less significant for the affairs of the subcontinent.

The United States had begun in the late 1960s to recognise the potential importance of its relationship with China. In the context of the times, this could only be to India's disadvantage, a disadvantage

^{*} Kissinger's visit to New Delhi did not go particularly well; it coincided with the disclosure by the *New York Times* that two ship-loads of the arms approved in October 1970 were *en route* to Pakistan, and predictably he faced feisty media in New Delhi as well as a frosty official reception.

which became painfully evident when Kissinger's visit to Beijing and Pakistan's role in facilitating it became known. The visit had in fact been carefully planned, through direct and at times hand-written contact with Yahya Khan, over a long period during which Nixon and Kissinger were in effect hostage to the Pakistani leader.

Both Washington and Islamabad knew this: Pakistan's ambassador in Washington wrote at the time that "we will be placing Nixon under an obligation to us at this particularly delicate moment in our national life." Kissinger in turn assured him that Nixon would continue to see to it that "the United States Government does nothing to embarrass President Yahya's Government." It was in this context that on 2 May Nixon had annotated "Don't squeeze Yahya", and that Kissinger had remarked to him in early May that Yahya "must be kept afloat for six more months".³⁰

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the White House's support for Pakistan was only the product of Yahya's role in setting up Kissinger's secret visit to Washington. Bass argues that the United States had been looking for some time at possible channels of communication with the Chinese leadership and only decided in favour of the Pakistan/Yahya channel on about 21 April.³¹ While Kissinger, in his 1979 memoir *White House Years*, claimed that Pakistan was in fact the only available channel to China, he also contended that America's Pakistan policy was "correct on its merits, above and beyond the China connection".³²

At all events, the success of Kissinger's visit to Beijing did not free Washington from what it saw as its bonds of obligation to Yahya. The sense of commitment to him remained strong in the White House at least. Moreover, in their new-found relationship with China, Nixon and Kissinger probably judged that they were even better placed to maintain the policy they had maintained to date. As the year went on, what became known as the US "tilt" to Pakistan seemed to consolidate.

The term “White House” is often used in foreign policy commentary to embrace the institutions within the president’s direct authority, in particular the National Security Council. In this case, American policy was determined personally by the president and his national security adviser. Kissinger makes clear his strong differences with Secretary of State Rogers and records that “On no issue – except perhaps Cambodia – was the split between the White House and departments so profound as on the India-Pakistan crisis of 1971...The issue hinged on the geo-political perspective of the White House as against the regional perspective of the State Department.”³³

Varying degrees of dissent or doubt were evident among Kissinger’s own senior staff, including Harold Saunders and Sam Hoskinson, both experienced in subcontinent affairs, but their concerns were easily dismissed by Kissinger. Ambassador Keating called on Nixon in the White House during a visit to Washington on 15 June, but courageous as he was in arguing that this was a time “when good principles make good policy”, his views (and he personally) were derided, and Nixon later described him as a “traitor”.³⁴

American domestic politics had meanwhile begun to play a part. As Nixon saw it, the critics of his handling of Vietnam had moved on seamlessly to the East Pakistan issue. His paranoia was compounded when Edmund Muskie, Hubert Humphrey and Edward Kennedy emerged as champions of the Bengalis and Congress came increasingly to question his policies.

Kennedy’s involvement in particular provoked Nixon. Blood’s “selective genocide” cable had been leaked, and Kennedy made good use of it, summoning Blood to appear before a Senate committee on his return to Washington. Then in early August Kennedy visited India, touring the refugee camps in West Bengal and Tripura with a large media contingent. As a result of this and other public pressure, American aid to the refugees was increased significantly. Indeed it continued to grow, eventually exceeding that of all other donors.

And so, as the crisis deepened, the roles of the president and his national security adviser became more personal and impassioned. Raghavan's description of "a picaresque couple tilting at windmills"³⁵ evokes colourfully the image of Nixon and Kissinger, cloistered in the Oval Office, choosing selectively from the information and advice reaching them, and taking decisions which not only went in the face of public and Congressional opinion, but in critical instances proved mistaken. Ironically, not the least of these related to China, whose role in shaping Washington's policies had been so critical, but whose willingness to step in to support Pakistan in the event of conflict with India they badly miscalculated.

The Soviet Union and China: An Eye on Each Other

The Soviet and Chinese positions were important but, at the outset at least, nowhere near as complex as that of the United States.

China's leaders responded cautiously to a Pakistani delegation which visited Beijing on 9 April, warning Pakistan to "brace itself for outside interference" but adding that Pakistan needed to take political action alongside its military operations. Soon after, Premier Zhou Enlai wrote to President Yahya Khan emphasising the importance of the unity of Pakistan and its people, deploring India's "gross interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan" but then cautioning – with unabashed irony – that "the question of East Pakistan should be settled according to the wishes of the people of East Pakistan."^{*} Thereafter China – in the throes of its cultural revolution and anxious about the tensions on its borders with the Soviet Union – mostly stood back from the unfolding crisis, though its mere presence on the international chessboard was to prove a critical factor in the way the crisis played out.

Soviet policy was carefully judged, seeming in the early months at least to be equivocal. In early April, following an oral message of

* The Pakistan Government, in releasing the text of Zhou's letter, redacted the last sentence, but it found its way out through the Hong Kong-published *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

restraint to President Yahya, President Podgorny wrote to him to express “great alarm” at events in East Pakistan and to urge “urgent measures to stop the bloodshed and repression”³⁶ Thenceforth, Moscow kept a wary eye on both its regional and its wider interests, all the while cultivating India assiduously, a process which bore rich fruit with the announcement on 9 August 1971 of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation.

The Indo-Soviet Treaty

If Kissinger’s visit to Beijing had come as a bombshell, in the subcontinent at least the treaty made as big a splash. It was seen immediately as a reaction to Kissinger’s visit to Beijing and in a short-term sense it was. But it wasn’t just Kissinger’s visit that triggered Indian concern.

A treaty between India and the Soviet Union had in fact been under consideration as a friendship and cooperation agreement, without a security component, since 1969. When the idea had been put to her then, Prime Minister Gandhi had been ambivalent. On the one hand, Indian leaders had become concerned about Moscow’s seeming interest in growing its relationship with Pakistan, reflected for instance in the 1968 sale of arms, albeit in small amounts, and thought that a treaty might help recover the exclusivity in South Asian terms of India’s relationship with the Soviet Union. Domestically, it would help shore up CPI support for her minority government.

But a treaty with the Soviet Union would also put relations with the United States at further risk and irritate China needlessly. It would be seen to be a move away from Mrs Gandhi’s father’s cherished non-alignment, and on these and other grounds would discomfort conservative elements in her Party. As she hesitated, her Foreign Secretary Triloki Nath Kaul, and India’s Ambassador in Moscow DP Dhar, took the opportunity of the evolving crisis to reprise the proposal in April 1971 and argued for the inclusion of a specific reference to mutual security. But still Mrs Gandhi was not convinced.

Kissinger's visit to Beijing in July restimulated the proponents of the treaty. Even more significantly though, on 17 July Kissinger, on his return from China, had told the Indian Ambassador in Washington, LK Jha, that if war broke out between India and Pakistan and China became involved on Pakistan's side, "we would be unable to help you against China."³⁷ India's surprise was the greater because, only eight days earlier, Kissinger, in his talks in New Delhi *en route* to Pakistan (and China), had told Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram that while he thought it "highly unlikely" that China would "start something, ...we would take a grave view of any Chinese move against India."³⁸

In this new context Mrs Gandhi accepted the case for a treaty and its conclusion was hastened. Foreign Minister Gromyko arrived in New Delhi on 8 August, and the treaty was signed the following day. It was of course the new reference to mutual security that attracted most attention. Article IX read, "In the event of either Party being subject to an attack, or threat thereof, the High Contracting Parties shall immediately enter into mutual consultations in order to remove threat and to take appropriate effective measures to ensure peace and security in their countries." The treaty was to have a twenty-year life.

The End Game: A "classic dialogue of the deaf"

Through August to November the flow of refugees into India continued and with it pressure on Mrs Gandhi to act. The refugee numbers swelled by November to above nine million in hundreds of camps, and illness increased: six thousand people were reported to have died of cholera in September alone³⁹. By the White House's estimate, it would cost India between \$US700 million and one billion dollars a year to run the camps, and as aid flows met only a small part of this, there was a discernible impact not only in the border states but also on India's national economy and the government's national accounts.⁴⁰



*An East Pakistan refugee group leaves Meherpur seeking safety in India April 19, 1971. The refugees had to seek safety after Bangladesh rebels were forced to retreat by Pakistani government troops.
Image supplied courtesy of Associated Press/AAP Image.*

For their part, the Pakistani forces in East Bengal fought on but were increasingly bogged down by the insurgency which was benefiting from growing Indian support. DP Dhar, in his role as coordinator of India's crisis management, proved adept at managing the relationships with both the government-in-exile and the newly renamed "Mukti Bahini"* . With the refugee situation worsening, India was becoming more desperate. And with its army now better prepared, the monsoon season over, its back covered by the Soviet treaty, and world – or at least Western – opinion rendered more sympathetic by continuing popular outrage at the consequences of Pakistan's actions, it was also increasingly emboldened.

As the supply of arms and munitions to the Mukti Bahini was stepped up, the Indian Army escalated its own efforts. Indian forces fired artillery across the border initially to protect fleeing refugees and then

* Mukti Fauj translates as "Liberation Army"; Mukti Bahini as "Liberation Force."

to take out Pakistani batteries. They began to cross the border to clear enclaves the Mukti could hold and to which refugees could be encouraged to return and then seized and held salients across the border. Pakistani forces counterattacked in some of these cases; on 19 November three Pakistani aircraft were shot down, and there was another significant incident on 21 November.

The Soviet Union maintained an essentially cautious position through the first two months after concluding its treaty with India, arguing for restraint on India's part while pressing Pakistan to reach a political settlement with leaders in East Pakistan. But following a visit to Moscow by the Pakistani foreign secretary and then a meeting between Presidents Podgorny and Yahya in the margins of the Shah of Iran's festivities at Persepolis in early October, Moscow, as Raghavan puts it, concluded that "Yahya was unwilling to work towards any reasonable solution, and decided to throw its weight behind India."⁴¹

Prime Minister Gandhi toured Western Europe and Washington in late October and early November 1971 to argue the urgency of her case but received little support for her demand for greater pressure to be put on Pakistan. In Washington, her discussion with Nixon and Kissinger was later described by Kissinger as "a classic dialogue of the deaf."⁴²

Along the way, Yahya Khan had begun as early as July 1971 to consider a proposal for by-elections for the seats of the many jailed or exiled Awami League members with a view to creating a new Bengali leadership with whom he could negotiate. He was encouraged in this by the United States, and indeed, to India's irritation, the US State Department had begun working through the foreign minister of the Bangladeshi government-in-exile, Khandokar Mostaq Ahmed, to try to find a way ahead.*

* Such was India's annoyance that Durga Prasad Dhar prevailed on the government-in-exile to replace Khandokar as "foreign minister".



Armed East Pakistan rebels head for the battle front by pedicab, in Jessore, East Pakistan, April 2, 1971. The town, near the border with India, was the scene of fierce fighting between rebels and Pakistan Army forces.
Image supplied courtesy of Associated Press/AAP Image.

Observers, then and later, considered that discussions of this kind were not likely to succeed, as the selected East Pakistanis were not considered credible, and anyway Mujib, who had been put on trial for treason and threatened with execution, remained critical to any resolution and Yahya was adamant that he could not be part of any settlement. But the proposal did give Yahya a fig leaf. Together with his acceptance in principle of an American proposal in November for both parties to withdraw their troops from the East Pakistan border, it enabled friends of Pakistan, including Kissinger, to claim that India had jeopardised a genuine prospect for avoiding war. Indeed, Kissinger claimed in his memoir that these negotiations would have led to a settlement by the end of December had India not been so intent on going to war.⁴³

Meanwhile, as the conflict in the east escalated into undeclared war, Indian and Pakistani forces lined up on the western front. It was only a matter of time before the war went formal.

The War: 3 to 17 December: “Exactly what one had expected”

While in these circumstances the question of which side started the war is moot, it is clear what triggered its formal declaration. On the evening of 3 December, Pakistan Air Force jets attacked three Indian airfields in Punjab. Early on 4 December, India declared war and its forces attacked on both fronts. DP Dhar was reported to have said “the fool has done exactly what one had expected.”⁴⁴ And not a moment too soon from India’s point of view: it is now known that if Pakistan had not gone on 3 December, India would have moved on 4 December to take advantage of the full moon.⁴⁵

Yahya’s motives in attacking in the west are not clear. He may well have been trying to alleviate the pressure in the east; he may have felt that Pakistan’s *amour-propre* required it; or, as some Indians still believe, he may have judged that broadening the war to the west offered the best chance of engaging the United States on his side.

On both sides, but especially India’s, the operations showed the benefit of many months of planning. India had the advantage of mobility, air and sea supremacy, and of course simpler supply lines on the eastern front. Although some of India’s planning was creative – notably the seaborne assaults on Karachi’s airport and fuel dumps at the outset of the war – its planning in East Pakistan was surprisingly cautious and did not initially include the capture of Dhaka. Its commander on the ground, Major General Jacob-Farj-Rafael Jacob*, had however always thought this would be achievable, and by early

* Whether by design or accident India’s chain of command was peculiarly ecumenical. The Chief, General Manekshaw was a Parsi; Eastern Command was headed by Lt Gen Aurora Singh, a Sikh, as was the Corps Headquarters established in Tripura; and ‘Jackie’ Jacob was described by an Australian diplomat as “the only Jewish general east of the Jordan”.

on 15 December his forces were within reach of Dhaka. Along the way, on 6 December, India recognised the Government of Bangladesh.

The advance of India's forces might have been halted on 14 December by a UN Security Council Resolution which called for an immediate ceasefire. Reflecting a good return on India's investment in the treaty of 9 August, two earlier Security Council Resolutions to the same effect had been vetoed by the Soviet Union (with the UK and France abstaining). On this occasion, however, the resolution had been introduced by Poland and was assumed to have Moscow's imprimatur (reflecting, as Kissinger saw it, a response to the pressure Washington was by then applying).

But Bhutto, whom Yahya had brought into his government and made deputy prime minister and foreign minister, came to India's aid, tearing up the draft resolution and storming out of the Security Council meeting. Whatever Yahya and his beleaguered troops on the ground thought of this, Bhutto's own motives were clear: to ensure the final humiliation of his country's armed forces, and thus open the way for himself to the national leadership. In Raghavan's words, "Bhutto seems to have concluded that the new Pakistan must be built on the ash heap of the army's decisive defeat."⁴⁶

General Jacob seized the moment and closed in on Dhaka. Facing the destruction of his army in East Pakistan, Yahya accepted the decision of his commander, Lieutenant General Niazi, to surrender to Jacob on 16 December. Some 93,000 Pakistani personnel became prisoners of war. In the meantime, Indian troops had occupied some 13,000 square kilometres of West Pakistan in Sindh and Punjab and had made significant incursions across the former ceasefire line in Kashmir. On 17 December, India offered a ceasefire in the west which Yahya accepted. In the east, the refugees then began to return.

The US Intervenes: "An essentially geo-political point of view"

By that time the United States had brought itself into play in very direct ways. First, Nixon cut off non-project aid to India. He and Kissinger then arranged for US fighter aircraft previously sold to Iran

to be transferred to Jordan which then passed them to Pakistan. This attempt to circumvent Congress's embargo on arms sales to either side was considered, when it was discovered later, to be illegal, as indeed the State Department had advised the White House it would be (advice Kissinger had dismissed as "doctrinaire").⁴⁷

Then, as we now know*, on 10 December Kissinger approached the Chinese ambassador to the UN in New York to ask that Chinese forces undertake manoeuvres in the Himalayas to distract India. The Chinese response, when it came on 12 December, was cleverly couched, but negative.

Significantly, this was not the response Kissinger had expected or had foreshadowed to Nixon. His misreading of the Chinese in fact contrasted with Mrs Gandhi's assessment: notwithstanding her earlier concerns, West German Government records show that in mid-November she had told the West German foreign minister that "she was not apprehensive of Chinese pressure on the borders of India, as China was occupied with its own internal problems."⁴⁸ †

India was not to know until sometime later of Kissinger's approach to the Chinese, but it did decidedly notice a second US intervention. On 12 December, to the astonishment of the Indian Government and most observers, the *USS Enterprise* and its task force sailed into the Bay of Bengal. The deployment, which Nixon had ordered on 10 December, was said at first to be intended to position US forces to be able to rescue those Americans remaining in East Pakistan if necessary. But as Kissinger states frankly in his memoir, America's intentions went well beyond this. The purpose of the deployment, he wrote in 1979, was "ostensibly for the evacuation of Americans but in reality to give emphasis to our warnings [to India] against an attack on

* See p27 below.

† Lin Biao had died in an air crash in Mongolia in September while fleeing China after an unsuccessful challenge to Mao, but Chinese politics remained on edge: a factor which the White House had apparently not taken into account.

West Pakistan... We also wanted forces in place in case the Soviet Union pressured China.”⁴⁹

This was in fact the nub of what had become the White House’s position. Nixon and Kissinger had believed for some time that India intended to use the war to finish Pakistan and in effect to reverse the Partition of 1947, or to at least seize Azad Kashmir, the Pakistan-held part of Kashmir.

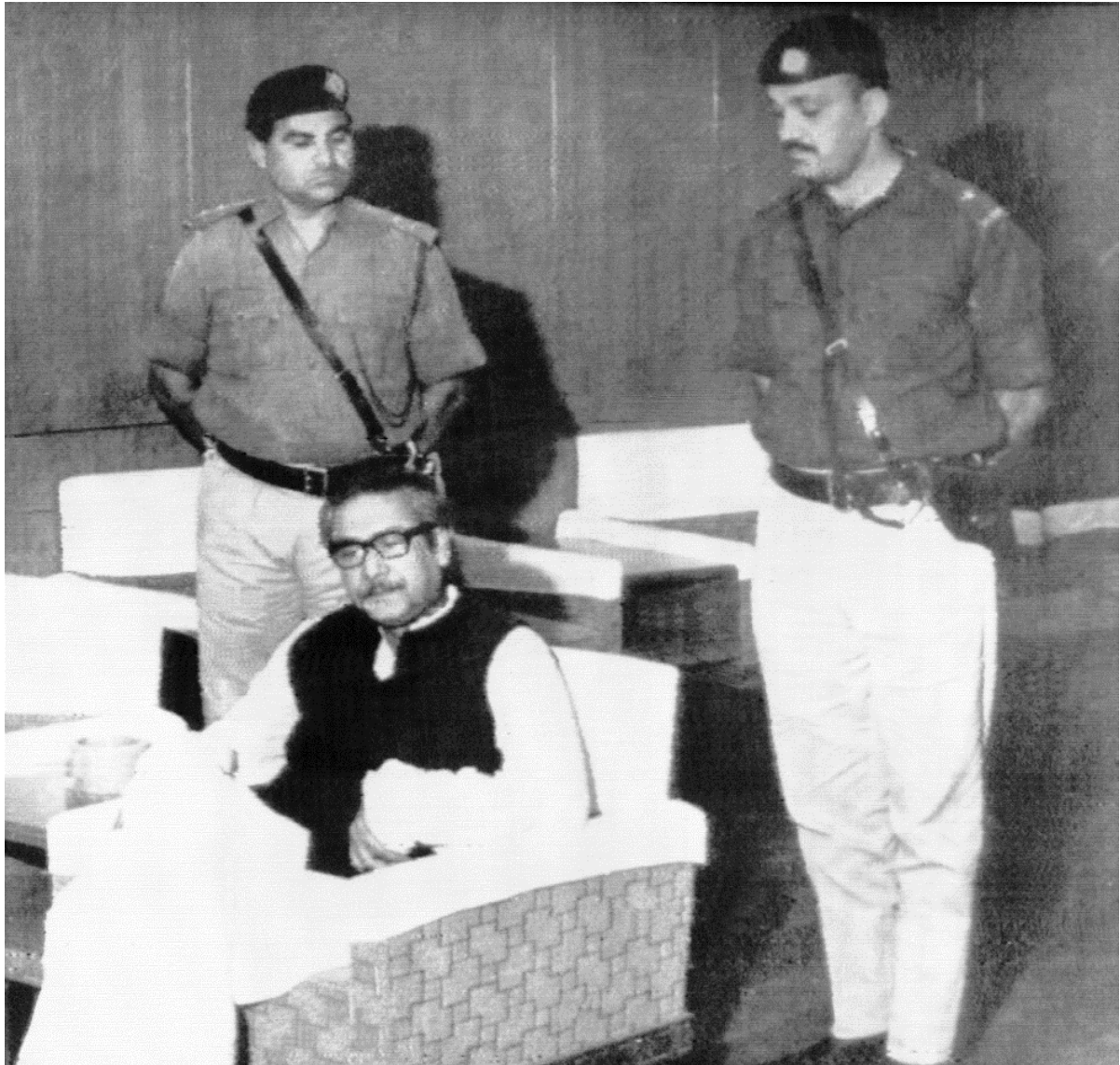
This belief was reinforced by intelligence received on 7 December “to the effect”, in Kissinger’s words, “that Prime Minister Gandhi was determined to reduce even West Pakistan to impotence...and, after ‘liberating’ East Pakistan, would proceed with the ‘liberation’ of ... the Pakistani part of Kashmir – and continue fighting until the Pakistani army and air force were wiped out.”⁵⁰ * “There was no question of ‘saving’ East Pakistan,” he said, “we strove to protect West Pakistan.”⁵¹

Also, it seems that Nixon and Kissinger had become obsessed with the notion that it was essential for America’s standing with China to be seen to be standing by its ally. As Raghavan puts it, “Nixon and Kissinger believed that if they allowed India to humiliate Pakistan, their reputation in the eyes of China would suffer irreparable damage.”⁵²

Beyond the defence of West Pakistan, Kissinger by this time was in full geopolitical mode. By “geopolitical” he meant “an approach that pays attention to the requirements of equilibrium”. As he saw it, that equilibrium was at risk: “The naked recourse to force by a partner of

* In his 1979 memoir, Kissinger described the source of this single line of intelligence as one “whose reliability we had never had any reason to doubt and which I do not question today”. (Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1979), p901.)

PN Dhar, by then the head of the Prime Minister’s secretariat, claims in his memoir that the source of this intelligence was in fact Morarji Desai, Mrs Gandhi’s main political opponent: who of course stood to gain from limiting Mrs Gandhi’s success. (Prithni Dhar, *Indira Gandhi, The ‘Emergency’ and Indian Democracy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.))



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, foreground, leader of the East Pakistan insurgents, being held in police custody at Karachi Airport, April 10, 1971.

Image supplied courtesy of Associated Press/AAP Image.

the Soviet Union and buttressed by Soviet assurances threatened the very structure of international order”.⁵³ It was important now, as he put it to Nixon, “to prevent a collapse of the world’s psychological balance of power.”⁵⁴ Thus, as he wrote later, he and Nixon made “the first decision to risk war in a triangular Soviet-China-American relationship”.⁵⁵

On receiving the news of the *Enterprise* deployment, DP Dhar had flown immediately to Moscow, returning with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily Kuznetsov, who remained in New Delhi until after the

war. Washington had signalled to Moscow, including through the first use of the White House-Kremlin hotline, that (as Kissinger put it) “if the Soviet Union threatened China we would not stand idly by,”⁵⁶ and that Nixon’s imminent visit to Moscow for a US-Soviet summit, to which the Soviet regime attached great importance, was in jeopardy because of developments in the subcontinent. Formal communication with Moscow was supplemented through the media, notably a background briefing Kissinger gave while travelling with Nixon on *Air Force One* on 14 December.

Kissinger interpreted Kuznetsov’s presence in New Delhi as evidence that Moscow understood the need to restrain India. He thus considered that India’s ceasefire offer of 17 December “was a reluctant decision resulting from Soviet pressure, which in turn grew out of American insistence, including the fleet movement and the willingness to risk the summit”.⁵⁷

Whatever Indian nationalists might have been saying publicly at the time, there is scant evidence that the elimination of Pakistan was in fact the Indian Government’s objective. Neither the State Department nor the Pentagon shared this assessment. Moreover, it flew in the face of the considerable efforts Indian leaders had made in anticipation of the conflict to assure the United States and others that in the event of war its objectives would be limited to the east.⁵⁸

Thus, while Kissinger’s assessment of how China would respond was mistaken, the judgement on which he and Nixon were seemingly willing to risk conflict with the world’s other super power was at the very least contentious.

Reflections and Reverberations: India’s Asian “Gaullism”

In his 1979 memoir Kissinger complained that his “essentially geopolitical point of view found no understanding among those who conducted the public discourse on foreign policy in our country.”⁵⁹ His lament directs attention of course to one of the underlying questions about the crisis. Did it have to be treated from a “geopolitical point of view”? Was it necessary, in the latter months of the saga, to move to

what theorists might describe as a “totalising framework”? Would it not have been sufficient – and safer for the world – to allow it to play out as a regional issue?

This is not an original question about the Nixon-Kissinger era. James Curran, in his *Unholy Fury: Whitlam and Nixon at War*, refers to the pair’s “rigidly bipolar” view of the world, and quotes the historian Barbara Keys as saying that “local conditions around the globe ... were viewed, and misconstrued, within the framework of superpower relations”⁶⁰.

As to India, Washington’s tilt to Pakistan, its ruthless geopolitical approach to its interests in South Asia and its rapprochement with China, were painful reminders that realpolitik at the global level was a tough game for which India was ill-equipped. And India’s failure to win international support when it saw its national interests under threat, coming after its experience during the Sino-Indian war less than a decade earlier, was a salutary reminder of how lonely their place in the world could be.

Two things followed: a fresh appraisal of India’s need for a nuclear weapons capability, and a deeper level of distrust for the United States in India which was evident until the first decade of the next century.

PN Dhar, who served as the head of the prime minister’s secretariat from 1971 to 1977, asserts bluntly in his memoir, published in 2000, that “the American decision [to deploy the *Enterprise*] led to an acceleration of India’s nuclear programme and eventually to the testing of a nuclear device in 1974.”⁶¹

Bass cites PN Dhar and another Indian source on this point but expresses scepticism about it. He notes that “India was ... debating its nuclear options before the Bangladesh crisis” and says “it is not clear when [Mrs Gandhi] decided to authorize building the device, with some sources placing that before the *Enterprise*’s visit to the Bay of Bengal”.⁶²

Yet the decision need not be tied to the *Enterprise* deployment alone. Placed in the wider context of the crisis, it arguably had a deeper strategic context. Faced with an enormous challenge not of its own making, India had found little or no support from the UN, NAM or the Commonwealth, and with Washington at best unhelpful and at worst hostile and China lining up with both the United States and Pakistan, India considered it had no choice but to consolidate its alignment with the Soviet Union.

But while the Indo-Soviet treaty served its purpose in the short-term, it had led India away from its proud preference for strategic independence. As the crisis passed many within India's political elite grew uncomfortable with the idea of long-term dependence on the Soviet Union, not only because they considered India moved away from its special attachment to non-alignment, but also because in so many ways their natural affinities were still more with the United States.*

If then India was to regain its cherished strategic independence, it needed – like France – to acquire its own nuclear weapons. In this context the *Enterprise* deployment was not in itself a trigger, but rather one more factor in a process that had probably been in play for much of 1971. And so, it was arguably in pursuit of what might be styled as “Asian Gaullism” that the Indian Government accelerated its nuclear program and detonated its first test devices in 1974.

As a consequence, Pakistan – with China's ready assistance – in turn either embarked on or accelerated its own development of nuclear weapons, leading thus to the fraught and highly risky nuclear standoff which persists to this day, and to the proliferation, through Pakistan, of nuclear capabilities to North Korea, Iran and Libya.

It is the case of course that in the absence of a lasting settlement on the subcontinent both India and Pakistan would very likely have

* In a conversation in October 2016, Srinath Raghavan told the author that since writing *1971* he had seen archived documents which confirmed that there had been ‘considerable qualms’ within the Indian Government about the treaty.

acquired nuclear weapons capabilities at some time. But the way the 1971 crisis unfolded and ended hastened their nuclearisation, and as well ensured that any lasting settlement was even further into the future.

The crisis also hardened India's attitude to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Mrs Gandhi's government had deliberated on the treaty before the East Pakistan crisis and, while deciding not to sign, had apparently not ruled it out entirely. But the events of late 1971 ended any chance of India's accession to the treaty.

Lasting Scars

While this is not a situation that Washington could have been expected to foresee, India's deepening mistrust of American policies might have been anticipated. This mistrust was compounded by disclosures in the very frank memoir Kissinger published in 1979. In it, he recorded the approach (noted above) which he had made to the Chinese in December 1971, suggesting that the PLA undertake manoeuvres in the Himalayas to distract India.

The subsequent discovery of a significant contact between the United States and China in the lead up to the Sino-Indian War of 1962 added to India's concerns. In a memoir published in Beijing in 1985, Wang Bingan, who had been China's ambassador in Warsaw in 1962, recorded that in an exchange he had initiated with his American counterpart in June of that year, the US administration had assured the Chinese Government that the United States would not "under present circumstances" take advantage of India-China border tensions to encourage a Taiwanese attack on the mainland.

Wang Bingan says in his memoir that he was "extremely" relieved by this advice, which he claims played a "very big role" in China's decision making.⁶³ In a public lecture in 2012, the distinguished former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, put it in very similar terms: Washington's "categorical assurance," he said, "played a big role in [China's] decision to go to war with India."⁶⁴ What was unsettling about this discovery – probably soon after Wang's memoir was

published – is that the 1962 war had until then been regarded as a relatively good period in Sino-Indian relations: President Kennedy's White House had been sympathetic, and the United States had provided some valued assistance with aircraft and munitions.

While it is uncertain when the Indian policy elite learned of these two exchanges, it is reasonable to assume that it was not much later than the publication of the Kissinger and Wang memoirs, that is, 1979 and 1985 respectively; at all events, the fact that they were referred to so pointedly by Shyam Saran in his 2012 speech suggests that New Delhi continued even then to be conscious of these scars.*

So, while relations between India and the United States eventually regained their equilibrium, returning as Kissinger put it to their “never-neverland” status, there was lasting distrust in New Delhi. Thus, when the Cold War ended and the United States, concerned to offset the rise of China with stronger relationships elsewhere in Asia, turned to India in search of a more strategic partnership, it was met with reserve. India's determinedly independent, neo-Gaullist approach to its interests may well have ensured this anyway, but its longstanding distrust of the United States, founded in the experience of the sixties and early seventies, helped ensure it.

It took the challenges implied by the rise of China, and within India the passing of the old Congress and the advent of a different generation of leadership under Narendra Modi, before Indo-American relations were able to move into a more constructive mode. As *The Economist* has put it, “with regional stars realigning, India has grown less prickly and America less smug.”

* The exchange in Warsaw in 1962 was described in Ambassador Wang Bing'an's memoir, which was published in 1985; the incident is also canvassed in a chapter by John Garver in Alastair Johnston and Robert Ross, eds. *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. As noted, the 1971 exchange was referred to in Kissinger's memoir, published in 1979.

Pakistan: “We can’t forget ‘71”⁶⁵

Nor were the lasting consequences of the 1971 crisis for American interests limited to India. There were repercussions for the United States in Pakistan, where many Pakistanis were disappointed that the country they had seen as an ally had not intervened more effectively on their behalf and remained resentful about the way they believe their country was treated in 1971. Others have noted that it was not the separation of East Pakistan from the West that hurt as much as the manner of its happening. This, in the recent account of Najam Sethi, a liberal Pakistani journalist, contributed to “the rise of dangerous sub-nationalisms and separatisms in what remains of Pakistan”.⁶⁶

Further, Bhutto never quite cleared his name from the debacle of East Pakistan’s loss, for which he blamed the Pakistan Army. He talked of Pakistan turning its back on South Asia, looking westwards to the Islamic world, and to its facing north to China. The view that Pakistan, in its rump state, should now turn its back on South Asia and see itself more as part of Islamic West Asia was commonly held by observers, and writers began to talk up the rediscovery of “Indus man”. Few at the time questioned whether this was desirable for Pakistan or the region.

In the event, the coup which displaced Bhutto in 1977 was led by General Zia-al-Huq, the most Islamist of all Pakistan’s leaders whose rule led to the progressive “greening” of Pakistan. Steve Coll, in his highly regarded *Ghost Wars*, records that Zia’s successor, General Pervez Musharraf, as a young officer had been greatly angered by Pakistan’s defeat in 1971. Coll suggests that the religious-inspired Taliban was encouraged and supported by Musharraf as a force for use against India in Kashmir, where conventional Pakistani forces had failed.⁶⁷

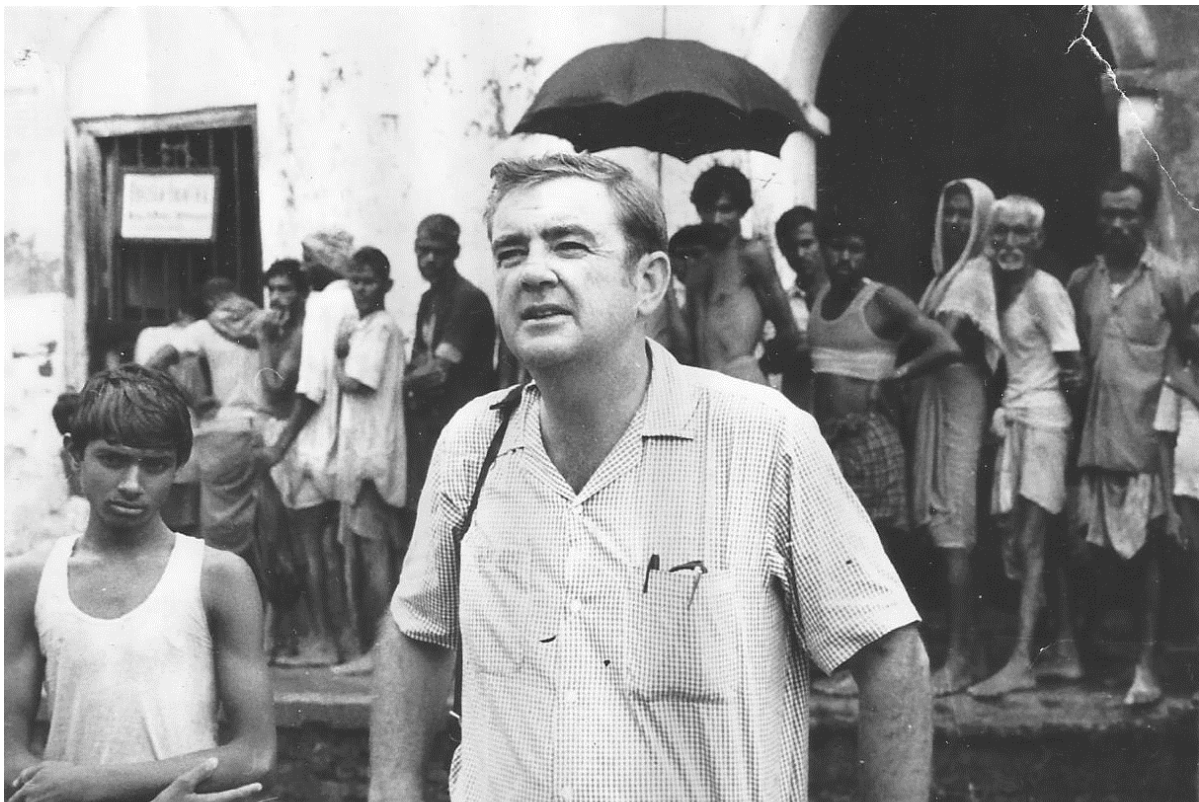
A tantalising footnote to these reminders of the bitter memories in Pakistan is offered in Steve Coll’s 2018 publication *Directorate S: The C.I.A and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Coll

writes that when Pakistani-based terrorist cells “surveyed diverse targets [in India]” before deciding on their attack on Mumbai in 2008, they considered “an extravagant attack on the Indian Military Academy at Dehradun,” one objective of which would be to “recover the pistol surrendered by Pakistan’s commanding general [Lt Gen Niazi] at the end of the 1971 war.”⁶⁸

PART III
UNTOLD HISTORY:
AN INDEPENDENT AUSTRALIAN POLICY

26 March, 1971: In the late afternoon Don Hook, the Australian Broadcasting Commission's New Delhi-based South Asia correspondent, is talking to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at his home in Dhaka when news comes that the army will shortly be coming for Mujib. Hook departs by a back door; a veteran in his field having reported on Indochina and Papua New Guinea for 20 years, he had taken the iconic photograph of Mujib, from behind, addressing a million Bengalis at Dhaka Racecourse on 7 March.

Driving back into Dhaka, Hook calls by the university. All is quiet, his contacts nowhere to be seen: the army has been there already, only bodies are to be found. Back at the Intercontinental Hotel, after a short sleep interrupted by gunfire and explosions in the adjoining streets, he



*ABC Correspondent Don Hook with Bengali refugees, Calcutta, 1971.
Image supplied courtesy of Don Hook.*

is invited to a press conference at Dhaka Airport. Escorted there, he finds all the other foreign correspondents waiting; they are placed on a Pakistani aircraft and flown out to Karachi, via Colombo (where The New York Times's Sydney Schanberg unsuccessfully seeks political asylum).

Hook's reception at Karachi airport is unfriendly as the army seize his notebooks, maps and several precious rolls of film taken by the legendary ABC cameraman, Willie Phua, of the brutality of the Pakistan Army in Dhaka's streets. A day later Hook is released and placed on an Air France flight to New Delhi.

Back at the Intercontinental, Peter Rodgers, third secretary at the Australian Deputy High Commission, had been awakened by the sound of gunfire. He has been in Dhaka for a month as the Department of Foreign Affairs, anticipating the crisis, enhanced its presence in East Pakistan. This is his first overseas assignment.

Looking down from his hotel window, Rodgers is stunned to see Pakistani soldiers shooting up a newspaper office across the street, and then setting fire to the building. Later that day in the ruins he sees the charred bodies of a least a dozen people, presumably staff of the newspaper. The incident is reported in a cable to Canberra. None who read it fail to be shocked. From an early point in the crisis the Australian Government thus has firsthand advice of the depredations that have been unleashed.⁶⁹

My own experiences of the early days of the crisis are not as direct or vivid as those of Don Hook or Peter Rodgers, but the Australian High Commission in New Delhi, my home from 1970 to 1973, nevertheless proves a privileged vantage point from which to view the tumultuous events of 1971. It was also incidentally the first haven for Bengali officers of the adjoining Pakistan High Commission who, after months of harassment, began literally to jump the wall in about August 1971.

From an early stage, the Australian Government showed a realistic appreciation of the situation in the subcontinent as it unfolded in late 1970 and early 1971. An assessment prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in early March 1971 concluded that the division of Pakistan into two states was “nigh inevitable,” though the prospects for an independent Bangladesh were not considered bright. The paper also noted the challenges that the emergence of a new, impoverished nation of 70 million people in South East Asia would pose for Australia, as well as for Japan, the wealthiest countries in the region.⁷⁰

In April 1971 Prime Minister William McMahon wrote to President Yahya Khan, urging him to consider releasing the Awami League leaders as a step towards a political solution. McMahon also wrote to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi assuring her that he was seized of the gravity of the refugee problem and making the point that “the transfer of power to elected representatives of the people offers the best hope of progress towards a solution.”⁷¹

Government statements reflected this concern about Pakistan’s disregard of the election outcome, and about the impact of the outflow of refugees.

Siddhartha Shankar Ray, a senior cabinet minister close to the prime minister and himself a West Bengali, visited Australia in June as one of a number of envoys sent abroad to explain India’s position. He was well received, made a good impression, and helped consolidate the case for more humanitarian aid. On his return to New Delhi, he noted the evident sympathy in the Australian community for India’s position. Foreign Minister Leslie Bury remarked to him “you are in a hell of a jam”; for the beleaguered Indian Government, this idiomatically expressed judgement was taken, rightly, to reflect understanding and even sympathy.⁷²

The crisis attracted strong parliamentary and media interest in Australia, as abroad. Kim Beazley senior, a leading figure in the opposition Labor Party, visited India and East Pakistan and spoke on

the issues in parliament and publicly. The *ABC* had covered the crisis in detail from an early stage, with its South Asia correspondent, Don Hook, active in New Delhi, along the borders and in occasional visits to Dhaka. *Four Corners* had also run in-depth pieces on it, and Gerald Stone had done thoughtful interviews with Prime Minister Gandhi and Zulfikur Ali Bhutto which had attracted interest in Australia and beyond. Other Australian correspondents, including the foreign editor of *The Australian*, drifted in and out of the region, some visiting from Vietnam. And of course the international mood as reflected in the Concert for Bangladesh on 1 August carried through to the Australian media and public opinion.

The Role of the Diplomats

Australia was well served during this period by its High Commissions in New Delhi and Islamabad, headed respectively by Patrick Shaw and Francis Stuart, both senior and very experienced diplomats; and by small but professional Deputy High Commissions in Dhaka, headed by Jim Allen, and in Calcutta by Doug Sturkey. Allen's parents had been missionaries in Bengal before the Second World War; he was born in Noakhali and spoke Bengali, and had been secretary to Richard Casey during Casey's time as Governor of Bengal from 1944 to 1946.

From the outset, Patrick Shaw in New Delhi emphasised India's concerns about the refugee inflow and the political and economic challenges it engendered. Drawing on his access to Indian ministers and officials, he also reported on the Indian Government's disappointment with UN and NAM responses to the crisis, and – reflecting his close contact with the US ambassador – on India's concerns about American policies.

Shaw advocated busily for Australian aid to help India cope with the refugees. An amount of \$500,000 was announced on 27 May, followed by another \$500,000 on 8 June. Following a visit to refugee camps in West Bengal in July, and the experience of others of us elsewhere, Shaw reported that the Australian-provided poly-fabric was being well used as shelter and that this, and the medical supplies being delivered,



Dacca family fleeing the city with their staff and luggage piled on an oxcart on the way to the countryside March 29, 1971. Image supplied courtesy of Associated Press/AAP Image.

had been welcomed by Indian authorities on the ground, but that our aid to date had amounted to less than two per cent of all international aid. He urged another aid tranche, which was forthcoming. Shaw reported that “Australia’s timely refugee assistance has been greatly appreciated... Apart from its humanitarian aspect... our contribution has had favourable impact on Indo-Australian relations generally, out of all proportion to its magnitude.” He noted that the fact that the supplies had been delivered directly (by RAAF C-130 aircraft) had added much to its value and to the Indian Government’s appreciation of it.^{73*}

From Islamabad, Francis Stuart shared the department’s judgement about the likely demise of Pakistan and the poor prospects for an independent state in East Pakistan. On 8 April he reported that “the

* The RAAF undertook seven C-130 relief supply flights directly into India, most to Calcutta but one at least to Agartala, on 24 or 25 June. In addition, one flight came from Butterworth to assist the repair of an aircraft which became unserviceable in Calcutta. The last of them flew into Calcutta in late August. QANTAS aircraft were also used to carry relief supplies.

evidence of the last month has confirmed [Canberra's] view that the present state of Pakistan will split into two... the Army will almost certainly be forced to withdraw itself from the East Wing".⁷⁴ This of course was a sound judgement: shared in Canberra, but different at that time from the view held in Washington, at least in the White House.

But Stuart was gloomy about the viability of a successor state, and this remained a theme in his reporting as the crisis unfolded. He reported on 15 July that "I see diminished prospects of East Bengal being able to rule itself under any arrangements," a view which was apparently consistent with the assessment of Australian intelligence agencies.⁷⁵

Shaw and Stuart met to exchange assessments on three occasions during the crisis. After their second meeting, in Islamabad on 22 July, they reported that "it is our judgement that the Pakistan Government will be unlikely to maintain its control over East Pakistan for very long ... In the long term, the Pakistan Government will have to abandon East Pakistan, and perhaps to its advantage".⁷⁶

But as 1971 progressed, Shaw and Stuart developed different perspectives on some key issues. The events of July and August – Kissinger's visit to China and the Indo-Soviet Treaty – took Australia's diplomatic missions (and most others) by surprise.

In New Delhi, the High Commission had been aware that an agreement of some sort had been under discussion with Moscow for some time. But they did not know that the negotiations had come to embrace a mutual security component. Nor of course was the High Commission aware of the conversation between India's ambassador in Washington, Lakshmi Kant Jha, and Kissinger on 17 July in which Kissinger, seemingly contradicting earlier advice, had said that in the event that China became involved in a conflict between India and Pakistan, India could not expect support from the United States.

Shaw wrote sympathetically to Canberra about the treaty's context, pointing out that India maintained a deep anger toward the United States for not cutting off military supplies to Pakistan. He reported to

the minister that “in certain places, particularly Articles VIII, IX and X, the document bears the signs of hasty drafting.” He said the “immediate effect of the [treaty] was to relieve internal pressure on the Indian Government... Mrs Gandhi showed that India had a powerful friend in a time of need. The security articles ...were taken as a warning to Pakistan”.⁷⁷

Shaw and Stuart disagreed on the treaty’s impact. Shaw contended that the “effect of the Treaty had been to reduce the possibility of war”. But Stuart felt that with India’s confidence now restored, it was more likely. In the end this difference was essentially one about the timing of any conflict. As Shaw put it, Mrs Gandhi has been able to “buy time in which to consider what she can do to relieve the financial burden on India and the political pressure on herself”.⁷⁸ (As the distinguished historian Margaret MacMillan wrote in discussing the treaties concluded between the European powers in the years before WW1: as “so often in international relations ... what is defensive from one perspective may appear a threat from another.”⁷⁹

Most fundamentally, Shaw and Stuart also differed over India’s motives and ambitions. Stuart – who had served in New Delhi earlier in his career – considered that India was pursuing a long-held strategic ambition to dismember Pakistan, so weakening it as a state and placing India in a situation of supremacy in the subcontinent. He felt strongly that it was all part of India’s aspiration for great power status.

From New Delhi, Shaw was aware of India’s growing support for the Mukti Bahini and its cross-border operations. But he nevertheless rejected the notion that India’s aspirations went beyond resolving the situation in the east. He saw no evidence within the government of any more ambitious agenda. He was aware of what Indian hawks and jingoists were saying, but did not consider these views to represent mainstream Indian opinion, and took at face value the assurances of Indian Government spokesmen about India’s limited objectives. Shaw's opinion was supported by, among others, James Plimsoll, who had been Australia’s high commissioner in India from 1962 to 1965,

secretary of DEA from 1965 to 1970, and, in 1971, was ambassador to the United States.

Prime Ministers McMahon and Gandhi met in Washington on 4 November 1971 while on respective official visits. McMahon told Mrs Gandhi he was concerned that the United States did not understand what was happening, and that the administration did not sufficiently appreciate that the basic problem was within East Bengal, not between India and Pakistan. He told her he would write to Yahya again, expecting, he said, that his “message might have added weight coming from Washington”.⁸⁰

In this letter to Yahya – his fourth* – McMahon again urged a “political settlement based upon negotiation with the Awami League and its leaders, particularly Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.”⁸¹ In this, he was reflecting advice from Foreign Minister Nigel Bowen and his department, and from Jim Allen in Dhaka, which consistently emphasised that the “release of Mujib” was the key to resolving the crisis.

Following the declaration of war on 4 December after the Pakistan Air Force attacks in the west the previous evening, Foreign Minister Bowen said in a formal statement that Australia “deeply regrets that events in the Indian subcontinent have led to full-scale warfare between India and Pakistan.” Australia, he said, regretted that its “repeated efforts to try to influence the leaders of Pakistan and India in the direction of reaching a political settlement... have been unsuccessful...Our view is that the first requirement is an agreed ceasefire with a disengagement and withdrawal of opposing forces. This must be accompanied by a political settlement directed towards removing the underlying causes of conflict. Meanwhile, Australia’s position, as a friend of both Pakistan and India, will continue to be that of a neutral.”⁸²

* The official record indicates four, but McMahon told Mrs Gandhi it would be his fifth.

Staff and families of Australia's Deputy High Commission in Karachi were evacuated on 8 December, after the Indian Armed Forces agreed to an Australian request through the High Commission in New Delhi for a temporary halt in the bombardment of Karachi airport to allow a Qantas aircraft to land and fly out 154 Australian and other foreign citizens. Families of Australian staff in Islamabad moved up to Kabul early in the war, and all but Allen and his wife, Marion, and one staff member were evacuated from Dhaka to Singapore. There were no evacuations from Australian missions in India.

Shaw was unconcerned by Pakistani threats to slice through to New Delhi with an armoured blitzkrieg. He was confident that India's war aims were limited and that the war would be over within in two weeks. Once again, there was disagreement with Stuart who contended on 6 December that "Pakistan has been the victim of calculated and graduated aggression". India, Stuart argued, would probably ensure the "complete annihilation ...of the Pakistan Army [in Bangladesh]" and "then turn its forces to the West and seek to destroy Pakistan's Western Army".⁸³ This judgement was consistent with that of the White House.

Australia was not a member of the UN Security Council at the time and so did not have to take a position on the December resolutions. When the matter was referred to the General Assembly on 8 December, Australia supported a resolution which called for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of troops. The resolution was adopted by a vote of 104 to 11, with ten (including the UK and France) abstaining. In response to Indian expressions of regret about Australia's vote, which was seen to be inconsistent with our earlier more sympathetic positions, it was explained simply that it was not possible to avoid supporting a call for a ceasefire in a war.

"Not Just Any Ship"

14 December, 1971: I answer the phone in my High Commission office to hear the stentorian but furry tones of Peter Hastings: "The Yanks

have gone nuts! They've sent in the bloody Enterprise! Not just any ship – the 'Big E'! We'll all be nuked!"

Hastings, The Sydney Morning Herald's veteran foreign editor, is in New Delhi covering what he has assumed is an intraregional scrap. His more measured report in the Herald on 15 December reflects a busy day among the diplomats in Chanakyapuri: "Some foreign missions," he writes, "are strongly convinced that President Nixon has threatened US intervention ... unless India accedes to the UN call for a ceasefire and troop withdrawal... those who are convinced that Mr Nixon has threatened US intervention are unwilling or unable to say what this threatened action is and under what circumstance."⁸⁴

Suddenly the crisis has gone global. And while the High Commission does not share Hastings' initially apocalyptic tone, we are surprised and a little concerned about what direction the war might now take and begin to wonder whether our World War II-like contingency preparations – papered-over windows, buckets of sand and water in every room, makeshift air-raid shelters under dining room tables – will be adequate. Nor can our friends in the US Embassy across the road shed light on what it is all about.

President Nixon had ordered the *Enterprise* battle group to the Bay of Bengal on 10 December, and it was revealed by the *New York Times* on 12 December (the news reaching New Delhi on 13 December).

While it did not comment publicly, the Australian Government was taken by surprise.* A cable sent to Ambassador Plimsoll in Washington

* On 7 January 1972, in response to a media report of an American decision to maintain a task force in the Indian Ocean, Nigel Bowen stated that, "We have no official confirmation yet of this apparent announcement...but a development of this kind would be consistent with American objectives as the Government knows them and we should naturally welcome it." This statement was not related to the *Enterprise* deployment three weeks earlier, which the foreign minister and his department clearly saw in a different context. Rather, it reflected Australia's persistent concerns, canvassed for instance during Prime Minister McMahon's visit to Washington in November 1971, about the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean.



August 08, 1971 – Recognise Bangladesh Rally in Trafalgar Square.
Image supplied courtesy of Keystone Press.

on 15 December instructed him to seek advice about the decision (among other matters).⁸⁵ The senior State Department official to whom Plimsoll spoke told him that decisions were being made elsewhere (meaning the White House, Plimsoll noted) and that he could throw little light on the deployment other than to note that it might be part of a contingency plan for the evacuation of Americans. * Plimsoll reported no reference to the far more significant geopolitical dimensions to the crisis that had driven Nixon and Kissinger.

Of particular note was Foreign Affairs Secretary Keith Waller's record of the view of Foreign Minister Bowen, who commented on 16 December that "if the presence of the Seventh Fleet in the Bay of

* The cable to Plimsoll had also asked him to follow up reports from New Delhi "about [the US] invoking treaty obligations with Pakistan if India seized territory in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir." In fact, as Kissinger was reportedly surprised to learn, the US did not have any treaty obligations to Pakistan – SEATO and CENTO did not apply.

Bengal was purely humanitarian, then it was clearly excessive. If it were gun-boat diplomacy, it was deplorable".⁸⁶ In a subsequent letter to the deputy high commissioner in London, Waller – a former ambassador to the United States, and generally measured in his language – recorded his view that the Americans had "behaved with egregious stupidity, especially so far as the last gesture of sending half the Seventh Fleet to the Indian Ocean".⁸⁷

Within days of the war ending, Bowen began to review the events and to think ahead. On 20 December, he cabled Shaw and Stuart to say that he had "concerns about the isolation of India from many of her traditional friends, and in particular the breach with the United States," and sought their views. "Can we build on [our positions to date] and our aid to refugees to reinforce in Indian minds the picture of a friendly and understanding country?" he asked. Shaw thought we could, and so did Plimsoll, but Stuart was "sceptical of Australian ability to bring India back [sic] to the West".⁸⁸

Later, in January, Bowen asked Waller's advice on whether Australia "should not in present circumstances be thinking of some new initiative with the Indians, such as proposing a treaty of friendship." Waller's view – with which First Assistant Secretary David Anderson quickly concurred – was that "we should let matters rest for the time being, as such a gesture would be somewhat contrived".⁸⁹ The matter was taken no further.

Recognition of Bangladesh

Shaw, Allen and Plimsoll advocated early recognition of the new state, both to capitalise on the goodwill Australia had attracted by its policies, and to help ensure that the field in Dhaka was not left to the East Europeans and other communist governments. Stuart was concerned about how Pakistan might react, and anyway remained sceptical about the new state, describing Bangladesh as "a hopeless case."⁹⁰ He had earlier predicted that it "will be well on the way to becoming a communist-dominate [sic] trouble spot and [will] add to our South East Asian worries"⁹¹.

The government addressed the question of recognition soon after Mujib returned to Dhaka.* Waller told Anderson on 11 January that he thought Australia should recognise Bangladesh “fairly soon” and was prepared to take a “bit of a risk” on it. He said he had already had some pressure on the matter from Prime Minister McMahon, though the minister (Bowen) was not attracted to the idea of precipitate recognition.⁹²

On 14 January, McMahon told Waller he was not unduly perturbed by the possibility that Pakistan might cut off diplomatic relations if Australia recognised Bangladesh (as it had with a number of East European early movers). “We have done a lot already. These people will be important to us in the future,” he said.⁹³ Nor, apparently, was he concerned by advice from the British that Kissinger had warned their ambassador in Washington that it would be “premature” to recognise Bangladesh before the president’s visit to Beijing (scheduled for May), and would be “taken amiss.”⁹⁴

In the event, Australia announced its recognition of Bangladesh on 31 January 1972, a couple of weeks later than first contemplated. It was delayed by the desire to move in company with “like-minded”. The United Kingdom and others were canvassed – in what now would be described as an “activist middle-power” diplomatic initiative – but for various reasons they all delayed and so Australia moved with only New Zealand and Fiji to become the ninth, and first non-eastern bloc, government to recognise the new state.

The announcement was applauded in Australia. Amidst favourable editorial comment, *The Canberra Times* stood out: the recognition of Bangladesh, it said, was “possibly the most significant exercise undertaken by this country since it befriended Indonesia in 1945 ... Australia, by its early recognition, has enlivened its reputation as an independent participant in the affairs of the region.”⁹⁵

* Don Hook recalls that Jim Allen was among the first people Mujib greeted on his arrival back in Dhaka airport: embracing him warmly and thanking him.

Australia's recognition was of course welcomed in Dhaka and New Delhi, and also by South East Asian governments which recognised the importance of Canberra's independent view of a regional issue.

Australian Policy: An Analysis

While Canberra's policy responses in the early days of the crisis might have been spontaneous, by the end of 1971 they had become quite deliberate. Australia's position was distinctive among usually "like-minded" governments. Early in the crisis, in light particularly of the tone and content of McMahon's correspondence, a British official had remarked that the Australian position "went rather further than anything we had said to the Pakistanis".⁹⁶ Raghavan notes the more cautious approaches of, among others, the UK and Canada, each of whom was more reluctant to come out against Pakistan, lest they risked the effective use of the leverage they believed they had in Islamabad.*

In short, two strands of Australian policy had emerged quite early: acceptance of the reality that East Pakistan was finished, and well-founded humanitarian concern. Realpolitik and moral right don't always coincide, but on this occasion, for Australia, they did. Although there were occasional criticisms of India, and the traditional line about the need to balance the relationship between the two countries was not formally repudiated, in the broad our position was more sympathetic to India than those of most other Western governments. Future high commissioners would note how it was a position remembered and respected in New Delhi in the decades that followed, albeit other issues – in particular, ironically, that of India's nuclear tests – arose to affect the relationship more seriously over the following three decades.

As the crisis unfolded, the nature of Australia's policy interests broadened. Concern about India's potential isolation and the

* At a 2015 conference on Australia/India relations, it was remarked that, contrary to what has come to be expected in more recent times, on this issue Canada was closer to the US and Australia more distant.

determination to recognise Bangladesh early in order not to leave the field to communist governments reflected a mature sense of the sort of role Bowen, at least, saw for Australia in the world. His pride in this was evident when he told Parliament in May 1972 that “Australia took not simply an active interest but a positive role, in some respects a leading role.”⁹⁷

New Delhi’s appreciation of Australia’s position was evident in the access that continued to be available to the high commissioner and visiting Australians, and was reflected particularly when Bowen visited India in May and was warmly received by Indian Minister of External Affairs Swaran Singh.

Nor did Australia’s activism on behalf of Bangladesh end with the McMahon government. Australia’s first Ambassador to the People’s Republic of China Stephen FitzGerald, records in his memoir that in his first meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai after taking up duty in Beijing in early 1973, he “explain[ed] Australia’s recognition of Bangladesh and urges China to do the same.” Zhou, he says, “repli[ed] that China will refuse to recognise Bangladesh while it fails to carry out two UN resolutions on the repatriation to Pakistan of POWs”. FitzGerald records that a Chinese vice minister later asked why Bangladesh had aroused such interest in Australia, and that when Prime Minister Whitlam visited China in October 1973, Bangladesh was one of only two issues on which there were “sharp disagreements”.⁹⁸

In short, Australian policy in response to the events of 1971 placed Canberra at odds with both Washington and Beijing.

Australian and US Policies: “Markedly Divergent”

Australia’s policy responses through this crisis were different from those of the United States from the outset. This was acknowledged explicitly by Foreign Minister Bowen when he said, in a letter to US Secretary of State Rogers, on 22 December: “I have noticed that during the past few weeks differences have developed between American and Australian policies in relation to the present crisis on the Indian sub-continent.” In strong language that seemed to capture Australian

policy thinking rather better than those used in DFA's cable to Shaw and Stuart two days earlier (see below), Bowen went on:

I know you feel that attempts being made by the United States to produce a political settlement were wrecked by India... it cannot be overlooked that the Government of Pakistan by its repressive actions in East Pakistan caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of its own citizens and the flight into India of about 10 million more. Pakistan's military regime by many acts of brutality created a situation which was intolerable for its own people. It was Pakistan that mounted the pre-emptive air attack on India.⁹⁹

Plimsoll took the letter to Rogers, who pointed out that the United States, as a matter of principle, was opposed to breaking up states. Plimsoll responded that sometimes states do nevertheless break up, and in this case "the people had broken away and this had to be recognised".¹⁰⁰ Again, Rogers did not allude to the global or geopolitical context in which Kissinger had come to see the crisis. Later, in his embassy's *Annual Review* for 1971-72, Plimsoll reported that the East Pakistan issue was "the only issue on which Australian and US policies have diverged markedly."¹⁰¹

Three questions arise. Did the United States notice or care about these differences between its positions and those of its ally? Did Australia influence the United States in any way, or attempt to? And why were the positions of these two allies so different?

On the first question, the differences would have been noted within the State Department and would have been referred to in the briefing prepared for Nixon's meeting with McMahon on 4 December (though in the event the matter was apparently not raised in that meeting). But overall, as matters relevant to the security relationship between the two countries were not considered to be in play, the reality is that Canberra's position did not matter much to the Nixon administration. Indeed, Kissinger notes in his memoir that "the President would be



Once we've worked out how to recognise them, let's try it out on China!"

Stewart McCrae for the Courier Mail, supplied courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

reluctant to confront Yahya, but ... the White House would not object to other countries' efforts to dissuade him from using force".¹⁰²

As to whether Canberra sought to influence Washington, it is easy to think that any advocacy would have been ineffectual given that policy was being made in the White House, where the attitudes of the president and his national security adviser were firmly entrenched. Plimsoll did, however, try.

Jeremy Hearder, in his biography of Plimsoll, records that, in an oral history recorded in 1981, Plimsoll had said he spoke to Secretary of State Rogers and other officials "to try to hold them back from any violent support for Pakistan", though he could not be sure that his message was getting through to the White House. Plimsoll may have

been referring here to an occasion on which, he told his staff, he had received a personal message from Mrs Gandhi asking him to intercede with Kissinger to try to persuade him to a more balanced view of India's position.¹⁰³

Yet Hearder also adduces some tantalising evidence that Plimsoll's modesty at the time might have been misplaced. He notes that Plimsoll said in his 1981 oral history that, at a function at the White House in 1973, the president had said to another guest that Plimsoll had been "of great value to us in recent troubles in India and Bangladesh." And Nixon told Plimsoll on another occasion that "I will never forget what you did for us on Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. I will always be grateful. We owe you a great deal."

In recording this later, Plimsoll said he was unsure what the president was referring to, but he speculated that if the United States had been contemplating some sort of military intervention in support of Pakistan, then "what I had been saying to people may have held them back."¹⁰⁴ *

Why The Difference?

The remaining question then is this: why were the Australian and US positions so different on an issue where they might otherwise have been seen to have shared interests? The question is especially pertinent given that this was a conservative (Liberal/Country Party) coalition, the direct successor to one on whose behalf Prime Minister Harold Holt had famously said that Australia was "all the way with LBJ". It is all the more intriguing because Australia was still engaged in Vietnam alongside the United States. There are three plausible explanations.

* In advocating constraint on the part of a powerful ally, it can be said that Plimsoll had undertaken precisely that diplomatic role which Denis Stairs subsequently endorsed in his salutary work on the *Diplomacy of Constraint: Canada, the Korean War and the United States*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1974.

1. Unaligned interests

The first and most evident explanation is that the two countries' interests were not the same. From the outset, American interests were shaped in good part by the impending rapprochement with China and Kissinger's planned visit to Beijing, of which the Australian Government knew nothing until two hours before it was announced. And later, as the crisis reached its denouement, the eyes of the White House were very much on what Nixon and Kissinger saw as the geopolitical stakes. The Australian Government did not see things or operate at that level, and indeed may not have agreed that so much needed to be at stake.

In short, Australia's view of the issues was simpler and less cluttered (including by personal perceptions) than that of the United States, probably more akin to what Kissinger had identified as the regional view taken by the State Department. As a result it was easier for Australia to base its positions on judgements about the moral issues and South Asian realpolitik than to take contrary positions.

2. Impact of the diplomatic voice

Yet there seems to have been more to it than this. Australian policy in regard to the subcontinent since 1947, frequently articulated and argued for by the Department of Foreign Affairs, had been to try to maintain a balance between India and Pakistan: to treat each the same. This hyphenation had had its origins in the need to ensure neutrality on the Kashmir dispute, but it had come to pervade all areas of Australian interest in the two countries. While at the highest levels there was more sympathy for India, within the department at least the inclination was still to apply the template with apparently little consideration of the merits of the issues in play in 1971.

In August, First Assistant Secretary David Anderson had advised Foreign Minister Bowen that "our first concern is a reluctance to adopt a position which either openly or by implication would appear hostile to Pakistan". And as late as 17 September, Peter Henderson, the

assistant secretary responsible for South Asia, told the Indian high commissioner – who had called to thank Australia for its aid to the refugees and to request Australia to again urge Pakistan to seek a political settlement in the East – that: “We should be careful to remember that in the context of exerting political pressure, there was a delicate balance to be struck; we needed to maintain a position in which we were listened to by both parties.”¹⁰⁵

The post-war cable of 20 December in which Bowen had sought the views of Shaw and Stuart again reflects the “delicate balance” theme. Presumably drafted in the department, it took care to distribute blame in an even-handed way, noting at the outset that “both sides have made serious mistakes. Pakistan by its brutal military regime in the East... and the pre-emptive strike on 3rd December... [while] India by its flagrant support for the Mukti Bahini contravened UN Resolutions she herself had helped to draft, and seriously jeopardised international attempts to produce a reasonable political settlement”. (As suggested above, it is interesting to compare these words with those used in Bowen’s letter to Secretary Rogers just two days later.)

At this level then, the commitment to balance or even-handedness seems to have been firmly embedded. At the same time, however, more senior officials, including at the permanent head level, had been thinking more broadly about Australia’s interests in the subcontinent. Keith Waller said after his retirement that, in coming to the office of secretary of DFA in 1970, one of his three main objectives had been to “change the emphasis in our attitude to India and Pakistan”, where, he said, we had been “quite unrealistic” in favouring Pakistan over India.¹⁰⁶

Arthur Tange, one of Waller’s predecessors in DFA, who was by now secretary of the Defence Department and had served as high commissioner in New Delhi, had told Minister for External Affairs Paul Hasluck in 1966 that the “delicate balance” approach had had a “stifling effect on the development of policies to further our interests”. Tange criticised what he called “the over-simplified

concept of parity... the two countries are not equal.”^{107*} Plimsoll, Waller’s predecessor and now ambassador in Washington, held very similar views.¹⁰⁸ And of course Shaw became a vocal and respected advocate from New Delhi of the need to deal with the present issue on its merits and not through the prism of balance.[†]

It may be then that these – the real mandarins at the time – were the people whose views had most influence with the prime minister and his foreign ministers. McMahon had been foreign minister; he was known for his tendency to simplify issues and was certainly responsive to media and public interest. Leslie Bury, foreign minister from March to August 1971, was not particularly effective but did listen to Waller and read the cables during his brief spell in office. Nigel Bowen, who succeeded Bury in August, was not noted for flair, but he was a thoughtful and thorough man – “a hard and methodical worker,” according to Waller¹⁰⁹ – who approached issues with an open mind and with compassion.

None of these had any investment in the notion of balancing relations between India and Pakistan. While taking conventional advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs, they are likely to have approached the events that followed the Pakistani crackdown as a new issue in its own right, and to have seen both the realpolitik and the moral considerations of the day without the baggage of policy history: or the complexities that influenced the positions of other governments.

* With considerable prescience, Tange's parting advice to his successor as high commissioner, Patrick Shaw, in 1970 had been not "to echo the American point of view ... [it] destroys respect for Australia as an independent nation". (Meg Gurry, *Australia and India: Mapping the Journey 1944-2014* (Melbourne: University Press/Australia India Institute, 2015), 77.

† This was also the view of most of those who served as Australian High Commissioner in New Delhi, including Peter Heydon, who became secretary of the Immigration Department but died in May 1971 as the crisis was playing out.

3. *The Prime Minister's Call?*

There may also have been a third factor shaping Australia's policies. Customarily in Australia the prime minister of the day "owns" the relationship with the United States, and that seems to have been the case for McMahon's three Liberal Party predecessors.* That being so, it might have been expected that the prime minister would have been sensitive to Washington's positions, and concerned not to let Australian policy get too far from them. But McMahon himself was quite active on the issue, for instance in writing – as we have seen – to Yahya four times in fairly forthright terms, meeting with Mrs Gandhi in Washington when their visits coincided in November, and then pressing for early recognition of Bangladesh.

In this, McMahon may have been moved by no more than his own appreciation of the situation and what he was hearing from his most senior officials. But there is likely to have been another consideration. McMahon was not reputed as a strategic thinker, but he was shrewd, media-sensitive and, according to his contemporaries, not inclined to let loyalty get in the way of his own interests. Having been embarrassed by Nixon's sudden move to engage China, and with Vietnam looming as a toxic issue in the election due in 1972, he may well have judged it useful to maintain some distance from Washington on the South Asian issue.

Also, McMahon seems to have been feeling some pressure from the Labor opposition, led by Gough Whitlam who was vocal about the need for Australia to adopt a more independent foreign policy. On the eve of his visit to Washington in November 1971, McMahon was reported to be "at pains to stress that he would not relegate Australia to the status of 'echo or satellite' of the United States,"¹¹⁰ and it is

* Indeed, when John Gorton became Prime Minister following Harold Holt's disappearance, Waller, then ambassador in Washington, asked his minister Paul Hasluck, whether he should step aside to allow Gorton to appoint his own person to the job. (Geoffrey Balton, *Paul Hasluck: A Life* (Crawley: University of Western Australia, 2014.))

possible that he saw the crisis in the subcontinent as an opportunity to give some substance to this position.

Consistent with this, following McMahon's visit to Washington and his meeting with Mrs Gandhi, one of the travelling press party, John Stubbs, presumably reflecting on a briefing from either McMahon, himself or a senior advisor, wrote:

Mrs Indira Gandhi found a new and active ally in Washington last week. Not President Nixon, who made no concessions to her case against Pakistan. The Indian Prime Minister's ally is Mr McMahon, who is expected to argue in [his forthcoming visit to] London that international pressure should be applied to Pakistan.

[Mr McMahon] appears to have taken a calculated position that runs counter to his Government's strongly maintained policy of non-interference in the politics of other countries... On most topics he seems determined to adopt new and more independent approach than Australian Prime Ministers [visiting London] have done in the past.¹¹¹

The superficial nature of this posturing on McMahon's part was of course evident in the fact that he used his visits to Washington and London to seek closer engagement with both governments in response to what he saw as the danger of the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean, among other things. The day after Australia announced its recognition of Bangladesh, McMahon wrote to Yahya Khan again saying that "Our recognition in no way detracts from the importance we attach to our friendship with Pakistan," and expressing the "hope that good relations would continue."¹¹² But in a short-term sense, it had suited McMahon well for Australia to take positions on the India-Pakistan issue which differed from those of the United States.

In reflecting on Australia-US relations during this crisis, it is also worth noting that there is no indication in the available archival records or commentaries on this crisis to suggest that the McMahon government

was consulted or advised about what Kissinger described as a “decision to risk war,” or was even aware of the “decision,” notwithstanding that the US facilities in Australia would have played a part in any US-Soviet conflict.

PART IV

REFLECTIONS AND REVERBERATIONS

1985: Following a promotion in the Department of Foreign Affairs, I attend the obligatory week-long management course which is intended to prepare me for the level to which I have been elevated. Each course participant is required to do a project on an issue relevant to their department. The new secretary, Dr Stuart Harris, who had come to the department from The Australian National University, believed that dissent within the department about Vietnam policy in the sixties and early seventies had not been sufficiently heard, and wanted to ensure that dissent of this kind, from whatever level, would be properly considered in the management of future policy issues. Conscious of this, I decide that my project would be the creation of a “policy dissent mechanism”. Harris likes the proposal, and the progressive Chairman of the Public Service Board Dr Peter Wilenski, hears of it and, himself the product of the pre-Vietnam generation in External Affairs, also likes it. The birth of this imaginative piece of policy machinery is thus promulgated through a departmental “administrative circular”. In the event, the mechanism is very little used, handling, as I recall, only one case (an eccentric one at that) while it quietly withered.

Incongruities and Ironies

The East Pakistan-Bangladesh crisis and its aftermath were laced through with incongruity. The greatest of these was the fact that the autocratic, communist Soviet Union supported democratic India and urged Pakistan to respect the will of its elected representatives, while democratic United States supported Pakistan’s military regime. For some at least, there are lessons here about the role of values in foreign policy when harder interests are engaged.

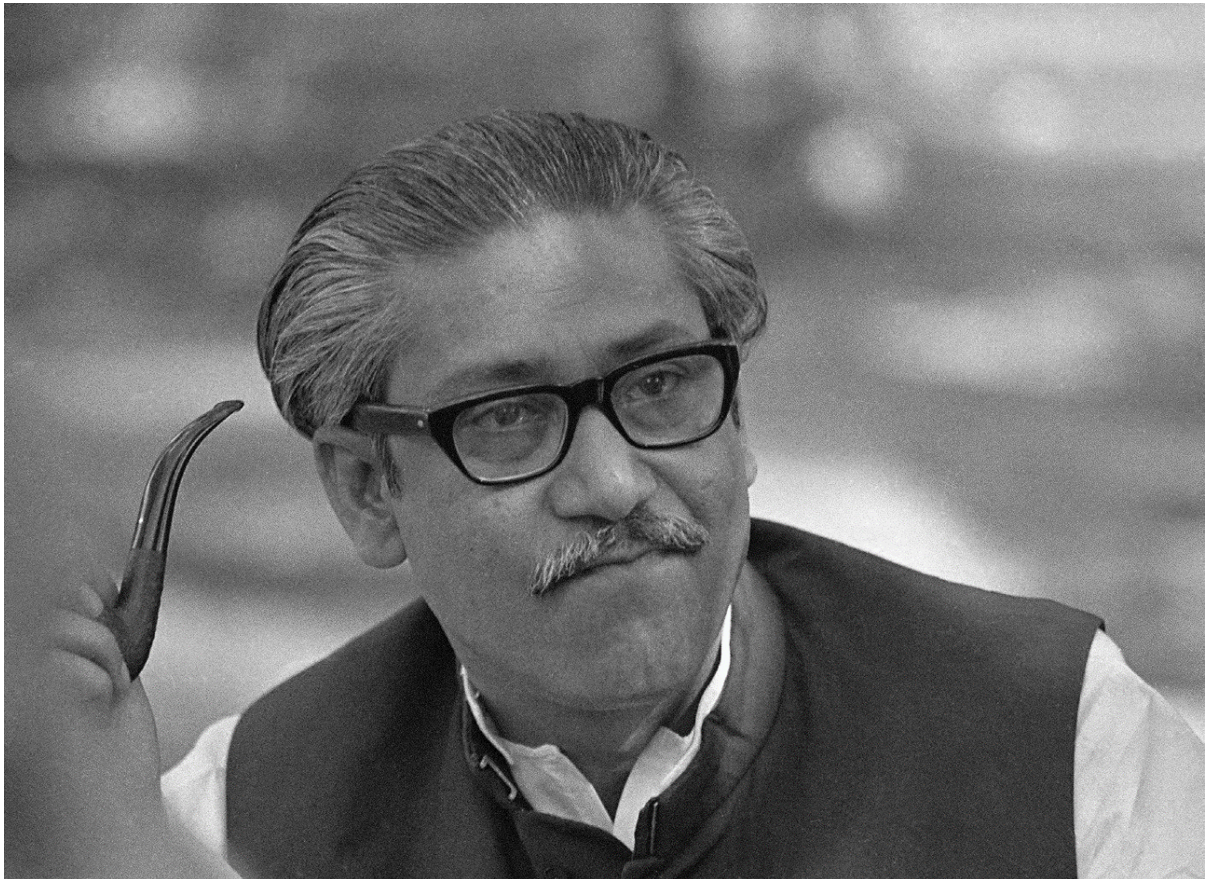
Irony is evident, too. At the strategic level, the United States is now more concerned than ever about the stability of Pakistan as it faces challenges from Islamic forces whose influence grew after the fall of

Bhutto's regime in 1977. Increasingly uneasy about the relationship between Pakistan and China which it had used so adroitly in 1971, and in response to the rise of China, the US has been courting India as a counterweight or balance to China in Asia.

India is even more concerned about China's relationship with Pakistan and is especially wary of the extension of Beijing's "One Belt-One Road" strategy into Pakistan. India continues too to be concerned about America's continued close relationship with Pakistan. Yet now, four decades on, with the rise of China, the passing of the post-independence Congress-influenced generation and the advent of the Modi government, India has found common ground with the United States and worked its way past the reservations fostered by US policies of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Soviet Union meanwhile died in the year the Indo-Soviet Treaty expired, though the treaty had ceased to have any meaning long before then. Mrs Gandhi, unhappy about the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, declined to visit Moscow in 1971 to celebrate its tenth anniversary; any remaining chance of the treaty's renewal in 1991 was formally ruled out by President Yeltsin,¹¹³ though by then there was no chance of India wanting to extend it anyway.

The ironies have compounded in other ways, too. At the level of international norms, India could not have won international support for any kind of humanitarian intervention in 1971, but when the concept of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) was developed by the International Convention on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001, the Pakistan Government's brutal intervention in East Pakistan was one of the cases on which it based its ground-breaking work. Indeed, former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, as co-chair of the ICISS, wrote later that "[India's] intervention was ostensibly (and not entirely incredibly) a self-defence response to a pre-emptive air strike by Pakistan; but, in fact, the action was taken primarily to ensure that mass murder and displacement, especially of the Hindu population, would not continue."¹¹⁴



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman pictured in Dacca, Bangladesh, March 3, 1971. Photo by Michel Laurent for the Associated Press, supplied by AAP Images.

“R2P” was subsequently endorsed by the UN General Assembly in its World Summit Outcome document in 2005. We can only speculate about what Washington’s position might have been had “R2P” been an internationally endorsed concept in 1971.

Finally, irony of a tragic kind extended as well to the *dramatis personae*. Of the four key players in the saga in the subcontinent, three died violently. Only Yahya Khan, who had instigated it all by calling an election whose result he could not manage, died in his own bed. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto replaced Yahya as president on 20 December 1971, then in 1973 became prime minister; displaced by a vengeful military leadership in a coup in 1979, he was then put on trial and executed. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became prime minister and then president of Bangladesh, but in 1975 was assassinated in a coup from which Khondakar Mostaq Ahmed, the foreign minister of the Bangladeshi government-in-exile through whom the United States

had sought to establish an alternative channel to the Bengali leadership in 1971, emerged as president. Indira Gandhi, who lost office in 1977 and was re-elected in 1980, was assassinated by Sikh nationalists in 1984.

Diplomatic Lessons

Reflection on the events of 1971 suggests a number of lessons for diplomacy, in particular for Australia.

The history of the 1971 crisis and the differing policy responses to it underline an overarching policy lesson of the “keep it simple” kind. Australian policy was framed in an uncomplicated context: rarely in international affairs do morality and realpolitik coincide as easily as they did in this case. As well, for Australia the crisis was seen as a regional issue of a kind best resolved among the countries immediately concerned. American policy by contrast was more complex: it brought into play interests external to the immediate issue which cut across the values and interests which the United States might otherwise have pursued in the subcontinent; and in the White House at least the crisis was quickly placed in a geo-political framework, which greatly complicated its handling and raised the stakes very significantly.

A second lesson is about the Australia-US relationship: it is possible to shape Australian policy on the basis of our own understandings and judgements and to differ from Washington without exciting a diplomatic crisis in the alliance relationship. Washington’s apparent lack of interest in our views is a reminder that the United States doesn’t always care if we differ. At the same time, however we evaluate the evidence of Plimsoll’s influence on American policy, the least that can be said of it is that his efforts were respected. In historical terms, his endeavours are a reminder that there can be a role for Australia: as a respected ally of the United States; in urging constraint on the use of its power; or “speaking truth to power”, in the modern argot.

Third, there is a lesson about the role of diplomatic and consular missions. Throughout this crisis, Australia's missions in South Asia, and indeed those in other capitals, not only reported fulsomely on the events as they unfolded but also stimulated robust debate about Australian policy and participated actively in it. For those looking for lessons that might be relevant today, this is an important one: overseas missions can be critical not just in informing government and advocating Australia's interests, but also in contributing to the development of sound – and authentic – policy.

Significantly, Australia had a mission on the ground in Dhaka led by a diplomat who understood the mood and politics of East Pakistan and reported frankly on the events of the year as he saw them. This contrasts with, for example, the situation in East Timor in 1974, from which the Australian Government withdrew its consular mission in 1971 and was thus less well informed about the situation on the ground in the province leading up to the Indonesian invasion.

The role of Australia's missions was of course made easier by the more open policy framework within which they worked. The US Consulate in Dhaka was presumably at least as well informed as its Australian counterpart and certainly spoke plainly to Washington, but it was operating in a constrained policy framework. This was the context in which, amidst the chaos in East Bengal in April 1971, and with White House-led policy trending in ways that made it inconvenient to recognise the awfulness of what the Pakistan Army was doing, Consul General Archer Blood signed off on his "policy dissent" telegram, and his career. For diplomats to conclude that challenging policy is fatal to their careers would be very much the wrong lesson to draw from the 1971 crisis!

The final lesson in all of this might well be about the importance of policymakers knowing their history: the more we educate ourselves

about the past, the more easily we can make sense of the present and thus manage its challenges.*

Nor does the process of historic discovery necessarily have an end – had the accounts of Nixon and Kissinger been the end of the story, understanding of American policy might have been different – but the opening of Washington’s archives has shed further light on the perfidy of the White House in 1971. Access to Canberra’s well-maintained archives has shed a better light on Australian policy and, in doing so, served a useful purpose in itself.

Four Decades On

As Australia’s mandarins had rightly foreseen, in the long-term India was always likely to be a more significant player in world affairs than Pakistan, and its relative importance grew as a result of the vivisection of Pakistan. In the short-term though, while Australia’s sympathetic position was well remembered in New Delhi for some time, the Australia-India relationship benefited little from the new promise it had briefly shown in 1971-72.

It was not until after the Cold War had ended and a process of economic reform began that India was able to begin to translate its importance onto a wider international canvass. Forty years after the 1971 crisis, with India having been through another round of nuclear tests, with the rise of China suggesting a new level of shared, and with India’s economic reforms beginning to show real returns, the Australia-India relationship began to realise the potential that wiser heads had foreseen in 1971.

Epilogue: Bangladesh

Meanwhile, the scars of 1971 remain evident on the South Asian body-politic, and the politics of Bangladesh in particular are riven with tragic

* Coincidentally, Australian journalist Laura Tingle published a thoughtful essay in 2016 arguing that a significant factor in the weakness of recent Australian governments has been “political amnesia”: a failure to know and learn from the past.

reminders of events of 46 years ago. The political parties which emerged in this turbulent democracy were defined originally by the country's early history after independence. One major party – the Awami League – is led by Mujibur Rahman's daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the other, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, by Sheikh Khaleda Zia, the widow of General Ziaur Rahman, who succeeded Mujib after the coup in which he was assassinated in 1975 (and was himself assassinated in 1981). Both Hasina and Zia have served periods as prime minister, but neither can let go of their personal history.

Thus, in 2009, Sheikh Hasina's newly re-elected government tried and executed nine military officers for their parts in Mujib's 1975 assassination. And in 2010, her government established two International Crimes Tribunals to prosecute crimes committed by Pakistan military personnel and others – including Bangladeshis – during the 1971 civil war. As a result of the tribunals' trials, at least 26 people have been convicted on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity, and four Bangladeshi nationals have been executed, including a member of Sheikh Zia's party.

As well as these personally vengeful touch points, the issue of how many Bengalis died in 1971 has if anything grown in importance in the poisonous political discourse. As the *New York Times* has put it, the belief that there were three million victims of the 1971 genocide is “totemic” and a “foundational element” for the ruling Awami League. In 2016, the Bangladesh Law Commission opened consultation on a draft law called the Liberation War Denial Crimes Act. The proposed law would outlaw any “inaccurate” representation of the civil war's history, and as reported would almost certainly be used to prosecute anyone who questioned the three million figure.¹¹⁵

Increasingly, connections to 1971 go beyond personal party politics. Those executed since 2010 have also included members of Jamaat-e-Islami, a party which because of its commitment to Islam is seen to be closer to Pakistan. Thus, through a linkage to 1971, the modern politics of Islam has come to provide another overlay in the machinations of the political elites in this struggling nation.

SOURCES

This essay had its origins in a Tiffin Talk' I did for the Australia-India Institute in 2013 and was stimulated by a subsequent reading of two recent publications on the events of 1971, namely, Gary J Bass's *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide*, and Srinath Raghavan's *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*. Because they break new ground, I have drawn heavily on them as sources of commentary and for their references to primary sources, not all of which were readily accessible to me.

Similarly, Jeremy Hearder's biography, *Jim Plim: Ambassador Extraordinary*, offers both new material and secondary access to primary sources – interviews with former public servants and to the records and oral history of Sir James Plimsoll – on which I have drawn.

In addition to these and other sources, cited below, I also talked to a number of Australians who were around at the time, including: Don Hook (*ABC South Asia* correspondent at the time of these events); Kim Jones (chief of staff to Prime Minister McMahon until April 1971); Peter Rodgers (third secretary at the Australian high commission, Dhaka in 1971), Doug Sturkey (deputy high commissioner, Calcutta in 1970-72); and Mack Williams (counsellor, Australian Embassy Washington through 1971). I also had the opportunity, during a visit to New Delhi in March 2016, to talk again to the former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran.

The documents from the National Archives of Australia to which I refer below were accessed by Dr Meg Gurry, who drew on them for her excellent *Australia and India: Mapping the Journey 1944-2014* and other research and passed them on to me. For this and other help, and especially for asking the critical "Why?" question about the difference between Australian and American policies, I remain very grateful to her.

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¹⁴ Loshak, *Pakistan Crisis*, 133.

¹⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 849.

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⁷⁹ Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace* (London: Profile Books, 2013), 546.

⁸⁰ Cable, Washington to DFA, 6/11/1971, cable, Prime Minister to DFA, NAA: A1838 169/10/1 Part 19.

⁸¹ Letter, McMahon to Yahya Khan, 4 November 1971, NAA: A 1838, 169/10/1 part 19.

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- ⁸² Press Statement, Foreign Minister Bowen, 7 December 1971, *Current Notes on International Affairs*, Vol. 42, 629.
- ⁸³ Cable, Stuart to DFA, 6 December 1971, NAA: A1838, 169/10/1 part 20.
- ⁸⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 1971.
- ⁸⁵ Cable, DFA to Plimsoll, 15 December 1971, NAA: A1838, 169/10/1 part 20.
- ^{xl} Waller to Anderson, 16 December 1971, NAA: A1838, 169/10/1 part 20.
- ⁸⁷ Waller to Pritchett, DHC, London, 22 December 1791, NAA: A1838, 144/10/1 part 2.
- ⁸⁸ Cable exchange, Bowen- Shaw-Stuart, 20/21 December 1971, NAA: A1838, 169/10/1 part 20.
- ⁸⁹ Minute, Waller to Anderson, 11 January 1972, NAA: A 1838, 169/10/1 part 20.
- ⁹⁰ Cable, Stuart to Minister, 21 December 1971, NAA: A1838, 199/10/1 part 20.
- ⁹¹ Cable, Stuart to DFA, 6 December 1971, NAA: A1838, 169/10/1 part 20.
- ⁹² Waller to Anderson, 11 January 1972, NAA: A1838, 144/10/1 part 2.
- ⁹³ Waller, record of a telephone conversation with McMahon, 14 January 1972, NAA: A1838, 144/10/1 part 2.
- ⁹⁴ Cable, AHC London to DFA, 10 January 1972, NAA: A1838, 144/10/1 part 2.
- ⁹⁵ *The Canberra Times*, 1 February 1972.
- ⁹⁶ Raghavan, *A Global History*, 171.
- ⁹⁷ Hansard, 9 May 1972.
- ⁹⁸ Stephen FitzGerald, *Comrade Ambassador: Whitlam's Beijing Envoy* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015), 100-02, 111.
- ⁹⁹ Bowen to Rogers, 22 December 1971, NAA: A1838, 144/10/1 part 1.
- ¹⁰⁰ Plimsoll to DFA, 22 December 1971, NAA: A 1838, 144/10/1 part 1.
- ¹⁰¹ Jeremy Hearder, *Jim Plim: Ambassador Extraordinary* (Ballarat: Connor Court, 2015), 235.
- ¹⁰² Kissinger, *White House Years*, 852.
- ¹⁰³ Hearder, *Jim Plim*, 235.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁵ Record of Conversation, 17 September 1971, NAA: A 1838, 169/10/1 part 19, quoted in Meg Gurry, "A Delicate Balance: Australia's 'Tilt' to Pakistan and its Impact on Australia-India Relations", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 72 (April 2013): 14-156, 141. Gurry argues in this thoughtful article that Australia had in fact 'tilted' to Pakistan over the years and was perceived in India to have done so.
- ¹⁰⁶ Keith Waller, *A Diplomatic Life: Some Memories* (Nathan: Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, 1990), 45.
- ¹⁰⁷ Gurry, *A Delicate Balance*, 90-91.
- ¹⁰⁸ See e.g. *ibid.*, 88; Hearder, *Jim Plim*, 234.

¹⁰⁹ Gurry, *A Delicate Balance*, 96.

¹¹⁰ Curran, *Unholy Fury*, 109, quoting the *Melbourne Herald*, 4 November 1971.

¹¹¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 1971, by-line John Stubbs.

¹¹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 1972.

¹¹³ Conversation with Shyam Saran, 2 March 2015.

¹¹⁴ Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 23.

¹¹⁵ *New York Times*, 5 April 2016.