

Cold War Diplomacy & Emergence of Bangladesh

Bangladesh - a tiny landmass once known as East Pakistan and even today one would find it hard to familiarize any foreigner with poor knowledge on geography about its whereabouts if it was not for the reasons of peacekeeping, Cricket, micro-credit or readymade garments.

It has a fascinating history, especially during its independent war in 1971. Despite being a small South Asian nation, it tangled with nearly all the superpowers, making it worth exploring how power played out during that time.

Following the rising struggle for independence in East Pakistan and the influx of millions of refugees to Indian soil not only involved her with Bangladesh issue but also spawned the most complex international diplomacy encircling Bangladesh.

World War II (1939-1941) successfully crushed Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and imperial Japan and consequently transformed these nations into peaceful democracies of the modern world.

But the consequences of this war had a much deeper scare. The war generated a new sense among nations that their fates were interconnected.

Development of satellites and intercontinental nuclear missiles that further shrank the size of the planet; the Cold War redefined geopolitical realities and gave rise to the polarization of powers, insecurity and undying hostility.

Over the ruins and destructions of sixty million lives, two new global superpowers emerged. At the end of the war, the USA maintained its global supremacy both in military and economic terms.

Until 1949, it was the only country capable of producing nuclear weapons. The USSR, on the other hand, territorially enlarged covering one-sixth of the landmass of the planet and its ideological, economic and social models were replicated in rest of Europe assumed the status of only US rival.

Consequently, the world saw the inception of NATO (1949) and WARSHAW pact (1955-1991) led by the USA and USSR respectively.

The ROC was established in 1912, following the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty & it sought to modernize and unify China under a democratic and nationalist framework until 1949.

After USSR, the emergence of Mao Zedong in 1949(PRC), two communist regimes, both promoting the Marxist-Leninist ideology demonstrated enormous power in Asian region.

But, Mao's acknowledgement at the UN was a protracted process that only materialized with a shift in geopolitical dynamics, notably marked by the change in the U.S. stance towards China.

This shift was driven largely by China's split with USSR over several key issues.

Being one of the major contributor to the WW II & for fighting against the Japanese, the ROC led China became one of the five permanent members of the UN with veto power, further complicated matters.

The United States, a key ally of the ROC during the early years of the Cold War, used its veto power to prevent the admission of the PRC to the UN.

Bengali nationalism blossomed throughout the 1950s and 1960s; by then two superpowers had already started pursuing their interests following the partition of 1947.

Therefore, no objective discourse on superpower's role in 1971 war is possible without disconcerting highlights of geostrategic dynamics of that era.

The Eisenhower administration (1953-1961) continued Truman's (1945-1952) policy of containment, which called for the US to prevent the spread of communism to a new state.

US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (1953 - 1959) was upset with India for not joining in the crusade against communism. India argued that it didn't have any issue neither a common border with USSR.

Two hundred years of systematic British plunder reduced its 23% share of global GDP to only 3% as they left.

So, getting into a superpower rivalry was not India's priority instead it joined the non-aligned movement – an idea of which Jawaharlal Nehru himself was a proponent.

In such a perilous situation Pakistan ended up becoming US ally.

In 1954, the USA extended a massive supply of military hardware to Pakistan. There is a very amusing story about how Pakistan became the US's ally.

John Foster liked the idea that Pakistani leadership willing to join in the crusade against communism.

So, he signed Pakistan up as an ally of the South-East Asian Treaty Organization (established in 1954).

When he came back after signing the treaty political commentator Walter Lippmann confronted him in a party inquiring how did you sign up Pakistan for SEATO, but Pakistan is not in South Asia.

Foster turned around and said well you know the British had told me that the best fighters in Asia are the 'Gurkhas'.

So, I have signed up the Pakistanis as an ally. Lippmann looked at Foster and said that the Gurkhas are not Pakistanis.

Foster turned around and said, really, but they are Muslims, right? Lippmann replied no they are not Muslims either, Gurkhas are Hindus.

At the end without any sort of reconsideration of his analysis, he added it's good to have an ally than not to have one.

Surprisingly, until 1957, US had armed, equipped and paid the salary of five and a half divisions of Pakistan's military, in return; it had not sent a single soldier for any of the anti-communist ventures to name Korea, Indo-China etc.

Under pressure, Pakistanis only provided a listening post for conducting espionage over the Soviet Union using U-2 spy plane.

Sadly, on 1 May 1960, while Francis Gary Powers were piloting a flight over Russia was shot down that brought huge shame for the Eisenhower's administration?

Besides the USA, other nations were getting active here.

China's disenchantment with the Soviet Union began to emerge in the late 1950s and early 1960s, well before the peak of the Cold War tensions. The ideological and strategic differences between China and the Soviet Union contributed to this growing rift. Some key issues that led to the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations include:

Military Arms Sales to India: China critically viewed Russian sell of helicopters and transport air crafts to India, which were used to support its military posture astride the northern border with Tibet. This move by the Soviet Union was seen as prioritizing regional interests over solidarity with China & exacerbated tensions.

Ideological Differences: China and the Soviet Union had differing interpretations of Marxist-Leninist ideology, with accusations of deviation and betrayal.

Leadership Rivalry: Personal clashes between Mao Zedong (1949-1976) and Nikita Khrushchev (1953 to 1964) contributed to mutual distrust and ideological disputes.

Nuclear Weapons: Disagreements arose over the Soviet Union's reluctance to share nuclear technology with China, hindering China's nuclear ambitions.

Taiwan: The Soviet Union's willingness to improve relations with the U.S., a supporter of Taiwan, strained Sino-Soviet ties, leading to accusations of betrayal.

Border Disputes: Territorial disagreements, especially along the Sino-Soviet border, added to the overall tension between the two nations.

Korean War (1950-1953): Differences during the Korean War, including military command disputes and post-war reconstruction priorities, highlighted divergent interests.

Cuban Missile Crisis (16 Oct 1962 - 29 Oct 1962): China openly blamed Russia for causing the missile crisis-1962 in Cuba. China also saw the Soviet Union making decisions without consulting China, deepening mistrust and underscoring their strategic disconnect. Although, Russia undertook this to protect Cuba from further invasion after the CIA backed failed attack (1961) on its shore and partly to respond to US missiles deployment in Italy and Turkey.

These combined issues, marked by both geopolitical and ideological factors, culminated in the Sino-Soviet split, significantly impacting the dynamics of the global communist movement during the Cold War era.

After the breakup between the two communist giants, **President Brezhnev (1964-1982)** propounded **regional security architecture to isolate China.**

In 1950, Pakistan, strategically allied with China, opted not to join Taiwan in a move that demonstrated its solidarity with China.

This decision marked Pakistan as one of the first countries to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Meanwhile, **under these strategic circumstances, India leaned towards Russia** without making any formal commitments, resulting in increased Russian distrust of Pakistan.

During this period, General Ayub Khan assumed power in Pakistan, and his despotic one-man rule stirred discontent among politicians and the people of East Pakistan.

The situation escalated as the USA and the Soviet Union, **facing the brink of a nuclear disaster (1962)**, and China's growing global ambitions forced superpowers to reassess their geopolitical considerations.

Notably, China pursued an independent foreign policy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, diverging from the Soviet Union.

The Sino-Indian conflict of 1962 strained China's relationship with the USSR, which maintained a neutral stance, terming it a quarrel between China and India.

The Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 led to the US suspending ammunition supply to Pakistan, creating anti-US sentiment.

Assistance from China strengthened Pakistan's position, resulting in an uneasy equilibrium between India and China.

Because of its internal political situation specially over the leadership issue, & the Cultural Revolution, it avoided war, but vocally supported Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the USA and the Soviet Union engaged in Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (1969, 1979), considering restraints on key armaments, **while the US attitude towards China softened.**

Pakistan played a role in fostering US-China relations, crucially contributing to a turning point in their relationship.

The political movement in East Pakistan brought General Yahya Khan to power, leading to a military crackdown against Sheikh Mujib and the declaration of independence by Bangladesh in 1971.

The Soviet Union publicly condemned the Pakistani military's actions, aligning with India due to their close ties and shared interests.

The Sino-Indian War of 1962 and deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations elevated Moscow's significance to India, positioning it as a counterpoise to China.

As the dominant power in South Asia, India became crucial to Soviet interests, and the Bangladesh War reflected the power struggle between China and the Soviet Union.

The USA's role during the Bangladesh liberation war was complex and somewhat negative, with a Cold War strategy challenged by conflicts in Vietnam.

Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in 1971 further demoralized India, leaving it diplomatically humbled and strategically isolated.

India faced the potential emergence of a US-China-Pakistan alliance, posing a threat to its crucial interests. In response, India forged an agreement with the Soviet Union in August.

During this period, tensions peaked with the Bangladesh war as Indian naval commandos successfully destroyed numerous Pakistani ships in various river and seaports.

While these events unfolded, the US attempted to persuade India to halt its armed conflict and pursue a political resolution.

However, the US-backed Pakistan blamed India for the escalating hostilities and sought a UN-mediated ceasefire to save Pakistan.

Despite the human catastrophe in East Pakistan, Arab states, particularly members of the Arab League, prioritized saving the largest Muslim nation.

Surprisingly, Israel, a known adversary of Muslims, aimed to exploit the situation to divide Pakistan and supported India.

On December 4, 1971, Henry Kissinger reportedly stated in a White House strategy session that the UN exercise would likely be futile due to expected Soviet vetoes.

The US proposed resolutions, with or without Japanese cooperation, lacked substantial reference to a political settlement in East Pakistan.

The Soviet Union vetoed these resolutions, insisting that any ceasefire should include an acceptable political resolution for the East Pakistan issue.

This scenario provided an opportunity for joint Indo-Bangladesh forces to swiftly march into Dhaka and achieve victory.

In a last-ditch effort, the US Seventh Fleet's Task Force, dispatched to the Bay of Bengal, aimed to undermine the Indian offensive and divert the Indian Air Force and Navy.

However, the delay in the Task Force's arrival thwarted its intended impact.

As the Allied forces triumphantly entered Dhaka, a jubilant Bengali crowd emerged, celebrating their hard-won independence despite the heavy toll of millions of lives.