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Beyond Regional Borders: The Cold War, International Diplomacy, and the Global Geopolitics of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War

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Abstract

The Bangladesh Liberation War emerged from a constitutional crisis within Pakistan, but it developed within the wider strategic structure of the Cold War. This paper examines how the United States, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, India, Pakistan, and the Provisional Government of Bangladesh shaped the international course of the conflict. It uses qualitative process tracing and source triangulation across official diplomatic records, United Nations proceedings, treaties, memoirs, contemporary reporting, and established historical scholarship. The analysis identifies three mechanisms: strategic constraint, through which great-power priorities restricted policy choices; diplomatic shielding, through which alliances and vetoes changed the risks and timing of action; and legitimization, through which Bangladeshi political organisation, diplomatic dissent, journalism, and humanitarian advocacy challenged Pakistan's account of an internal crisis. The evidence shows that Cold War calculations constrained international responses and shaped the timing of diplomatic pressure. They did not create Bengali nationalism or determine the outcome by themselves. Bengali political mobilisation, armed resistance, the refugee crisis, and India's military intervention remained decisive. The paper contributes an integrated multi-level explanation that treats superpower strategy and Bangladeshi agency as interacting causes rather than competing narratives.

Keywords: Bangladesh liberation war, Indo-Soviet treaty, Cold war, Task Force 74, and Mukti Bahini.

1. Introduction

Pakistan's first general election, held in December 1970, produced a clear constitutional mandate. The Awami League won 167 of the 169 National Assembly seats allocated to East Pakistan and secured an absolute majority in the 313-member assembly. The result gave Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's party the legal authority to form the central government (Jahan, 1972; Sisson & Rose, 1990; Tawhid and Karim, 2021). Yet the transfer of power did not occur. President Agha Muhammad

Yahya Khan postponed the National Assembly session on 1 March 1971 amid conflict over the Awami League's Six-Point programme and opposition from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party.

The postponement triggered a mass non-cooperation movement in East Pakistan. On 7 March, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called for continued resistance and issued political instructions that placed much of the province under his effective authority. The Pakistan

Army launched Operation Searchlight on the night of 25 March. Its attacks on students, political activists, members of the security services, intellectuals, and civilians transformed the constitutional crisis into a war (Jahan, 1972; Mascarenhas, 1971; Raghavan, 2013). Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested and taken to West Pakistan. The declaration of independence issued in his name became the legal and political basis of the new state.

The violence produced a major humanitarian emergency. About ten million refugees entered India during 1971, while millions more were internally displaced. The refugee influx placed heavy financial and administrative pressure on West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, and Meghalaya. It also gave India a strong security and humanitarian basis for internationalising the crisis (Government of India, 1971; Raghavan, 2013).

The conflict became global because it intersected with three strategic developments. First, Pakistan served as the confidential channel between the Nixon administration and the People's Republic of China. Second, the Sino-Soviet split encouraged Beijing and Moscow to treat South Asia as part of their wider rivalry. Third, India sought Soviet political support and strategic protection as the risk of war increased. These connections turned the Bangladesh crisis into a significant test of Cold War diplomacy. This paper asks: How did the interaction of Cold War strategy, bureaucratic dissent, and Bangladeshi diplomatic agency shape the international response to the 1971 crisis and the conditions under which Bangladesh emerged? It argues that great-power politics affected diplomatic pressure, military risk, and the timing of international action. These forces did not replace the

agency of the Bengali nationalist movement, the Mukti Bahini, the Provisional Government of Bangladesh, or India.

2. Methodology

Research design and source selection

This study uses a qualitative historical case-study design. It applies process tracing to reconstruct the sequence between the postponement of Pakistan's National Assembly on 1 March 1971 and the surrender in Dhaka on 16 December 1971. A short post-war extension covers Bangladesh's admission to the United Nations in September 1974. The unit of analysis is the international policy response to key developments in the Bangladesh crisis.

Sources were selected through a targeted, question-led procedure rather than a systematic literature review. A document was included when it met at least one of four criteria: (1) it recorded a decision or assessment by a principal government; (2) it documented formal action at the United Nations; (3) it established the legal or institutional position of India, the Soviet Union, or Bangladesh; or (4) it supplied an independently reported contemporary account of violence, displacement, or diplomatic advocacy.

The main primary-source corpus comprises the U.S. Department of State's FRUS volume on the South Asia crisis, three Security Council meeting records, two General Assembly resolutions, the Indo-Soviet Treaty, the Proclamation of Independence, official Indian documentation, and selected contemporary newspaper reports. Memoirs and major historical studies provide corroboration and interpretive context.

Evidence group	Examples used	Analytical purpose
Diplomatic records	FRUS documents, including Telegram 1138	Identify U.S. objectives, internal disagreement, and crisis decisions
Multilateral records	Security Council meetings and General Assembly resolutions	Trace ceasefire diplomacy, vetoes, and membership decisions
Legal and policy instruments	Indo-Soviet Treaty; Proclamation of Independence	Establish formal commitments and claims to authority
Contemporary reporting	Dring, Mascarenhas, and Schanberg	Compare official narratives with external observation
Retrospective accounts	Blood, Kissinger, Jacob, and later histories	Reconstruct decision-making while checking retrospective bias

The analysis followed three steps. First, events were ordered chronologically. Second, documents were coded manually under four themes: strategic objectives, policy instruments, normative claims, and observed outcomes. Third, claims were compared across different source types. A causal inference was retained only when the sequence was consistent with primary records and supported by at least one independent historical account. This procedure cannot eliminate archival bias, but it reduces dependence on a single government's narrative.

Analytical framework

The paper applies two complementary approaches. Structural realism explains how states responded to

security threats, alliances, and shifts in the balance of power. It helps explain the United States' concern with China, Soviet support for India, Chinese support for Pakistan, and India's search for strategic protection (Waltz, 1979). Constructivist and normative analysis helps explain factors that material power alone cannot fully capture. Bengali national identity, democratic legitimacy, human-rights advocacy, diplomatic dissent, international journalism, and civil-society mobilization affected the language and political cost of foreign policy. The Blood Telegram and the Concert for Bangladesh are important examples. Together, the two approaches connect state strategy with political ideas and humanitarian pressure.

The paper operationalises this combined framework through three mechanisms:

Mechanism	Definition	Main evidence in this case
Strategic constraint	A wider geopolitical objective narrows the policy choices that leaders consider acceptable	Washington's protection of the Pakistan channel during the opening to China
Diplomatic shielding	An alignment reduces the external political or military risks faced by an actor	The Indo-Soviet Treaty and Soviet vetoes during December 1971
Legitimation	Political and communicative action changes whether an authority or claim is treated as credible	The Provisional Government, diplomatic defections, the Blood Telegram, media reports, and humanitarian advocacy

The framework does not assume that each mechanism had equal causal weight. It separates the origins of the conflict from the international conditions that influenced its course.

Research gap and contribution

The literature reviewed for this study contains strong accounts of Pakistan's constitutional breakdown, India-Pakistan military decision-making, superpower diplomacy, and U.S. bureaucratic dissent (Jahan, 1972; Sisson & Rose, 1990; Bass, 2013; Raghavan, 2013). These works also acknowledge Bengali resistance and the Provisional Government. Yet the main explanatory emphasis often remains divided between statecentred geopolitical history and accounts centred on nationalism, humanitarian advocacy, or moral dissent. This paper addresses that analytical separation. Its contribution is not the discovery of an unknown event. It offers a multi-level causal synthesis that connects superpower strategy, regional security, bureaucratic dissent, transnational communication, and Bangladeshi state-building within one mechanism-based framework. This

approach permits a more precise claim: superpower rivalry altered constraints and opportunities, while Bangladeshi actors converted electoral legitimacy and resistance into an international claim to statehood. The contribution is therefore conceptual and interpretive. It remains bounded by the available English-language and published source base.

Historiographical Context

Earlier studies often explained 1971 through Pakistan's constitutional failure, regional inequality, Bengali nationalism, and India-Pakistan rivalry (Jahan, 1972; Zaheer, 1994). This literature established the domestic causes of the conflict and challenged accounts that reduced the war to an external conspiracy. Later scholarship examined the international dimensions in greater depth. Sisson and Rose, (1990) connected decision-making in Islamabad, New Delhi, Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Raghavan, (2013) used multi-archival evidence to show that the conflict's course was contingent rather than inevitable. Bass, (2013) examined the moral conflict within the United States government and the Nixon administration's unwill-

lingness to confront Pakistan's military leadership. This paper builds on that literature but maintains a clear distinction between origin and international context. The political crisis originated in Pakistan's refusal to honour an electoral mandate and in the repression of the Bengali population. Cold War alignments then influenced how outside powers responded and how the regional war developed.

The Washington–Islamabad–Beijing Triangle *Pakistan and the opening to China*

In 1971, President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger sought a diplomatic opening to the People's Republic of China. The policy aimed to alter the global balance among Washington, Beijing, and Moscow. Yahya Khan acted as a confidential intermediary between the United States and Chinese leaders. Pakistan arranged Kissinger's secret journey from Islamabad to Beijing in July 1971, which prepared the way for Nixon's 1972 visit to China (Kissinger, 1979; U.S. Department of State, 2005). This channel increased Yahya Khan's value to the White House. FRUS records show that the administration feared that strong public pressure on Pakistan could damage both bilateral relations and the China initiative. The United States officially described the crisis as an internal Pakistani matter and avoided a direct public break with Yahya's government. Nixon and Kissinger also viewed India through the wider context of its close relationship with the Soviet Union (U.S. Department of State, 2005; Bass, 2013; Mohsin, 2024).

The term "tilt toward Pakistan" describes this policy orientation. It did not mean that every American institution supported Islamabad. Congress, journalists, humanitarian organisations, and many officials criticised the administration. The executive branch nevertheless preserved political support for Pakistan and explored indirect channels for military supplies after legal and political restrictions limited direct transfers (Bass, 2013; Raghavan, 2013).

The Blood Telegram and bureaucratic dissent

American diplomats in Dhaka disputed the administration's position. On 6 April 1971, the U.S. Consulate General sent a formal dissent telegram titled "Dissent From U.S. Policy Toward East Pakistan." The official document number was Telegram 1138, not "Cable 1189," as it is sometimes

incorrectly reported. The message criticised the United States for failing to condemn the suppression of democracy and atrocities against civilians (U.S. Consulate General Dacca, 1971). The telegram became known as the Blood Telegram because Archer K. Blood, the Consul General, supported and transmitted it. Twenty U.S. officials in Dhaka signed the dissent, and nine officers in Washington associated themselves with it. The message described the campaign against Bengalis as "selective genocide," a term used by the diplomats at the time. Historical analysis should distinguish this contemporary diplomatic characterization from later legal determinations under the Genocide Convention. The telegram demonstrates that U.S. policy was contested from within the government. It also shows the difference between field reporting and White House strategy. Blood's posting was later curtailed, and the administration did not adopt the policy recommended by the dissenting officers (Blood, 2002; Bass, 2013).

India, the Soviet Union, and Strategic Counter-balancing

India's security problem

India faced three connected pressures by mid-1971: the refugee burden, conflict along the border, and the possibility of war with Pakistan. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government supported the Mukti Bahini and conducted a sustained diplomatic campaign abroad. Indian planners also considered the risk that China might pressure India along the Himalayan frontier if war began with Pakistan (Raghavan, 2013; Sisson & Rose, 1990). India did not immediately launch a full military intervention. The government waited while it trained and supplied the Mukti Bahini, prepared the armed forces, sought international support, and allowed the monsoon to end. This sequence reflected military readiness and diplomatic calculation rather than a single pre-determined timetable.

The Indo-Soviet Treaty

India and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in New Delhi on 9 August 1971. Article IX required immediate consultations if either party faced an attack or threat and called for appropriate measures to protect peace and security (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 1971). The treaty did not create an automatic mutual-defence obligation comparable to a formal

military alliance. Its language required consultation, not automatic intervention. It still had substantial deterrent and diplomatic value. India gained greater confidence that Moscow would provide political support and would discourage Chinese military pressure. The Soviet Union strengthened its relationship with India at a time of intense rivalry with both China and the United States (Raghavan, 2013; Sisson & Rose, 1990). The agreement therefore represented strategic alignment without a complete abandonment of India's formal non-aligned identity. Article IV of the treaty explicitly recognised India's policy of non-alignment.

War and Diplomacy at the United Nations

Pakistan attacked Indian airfields in the west on 3 December 1971. India then formally entered the war on both eastern and western fronts. At the United Nations, the United States supported an immediate ceasefire and troop withdrawal. India and the Soviet Union argued that any settlement had to address the political causes of the conflict and the situation in East Pakistan. The Security Council considered several draft resolutions during December. The Soviet Union used its veto on 4, 5, and 13 December against drafts that it regarded as inadequate because they called for a ceasefire or withdrawal without an acceptable political settlement (United Nations Security Council, 1971a, 1971b, and 1971c). The General Assembly adopted Resolution 2793 (XXVI) on 7 December, which called for an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal, but General Assembly resolutions on such security matters were recommendatory rather than coercively enforceable (United Nations General Assembly, 1971). The Security Council vetoes prevented the Council from imposing a common position before Pakistani forces surrendered in Dhaka. It is reasonable to infer that this diplomatic delay benefited India and the Bangladesh forces. However, the claim that the vetoes alone "allowed" liberation overstates their causal role. The rapid military advance of the joint Indian and Bangladesh forces, the isolation of Pakistani forces in the east, and the collapse of their operational position were the immediate causes of surrender (Jacob, 1997; Sisson & Rose, 1990).

Naval Signalling in the Bay of Bengal

During the final phase of the war, the United States ordered a naval force built around the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *USS Enterprise* into the

Indian Ocean. The force was designated Task Force 74. Its movement signalled U.S. concern about the defeat of Pakistan and the possibility that India might expand its objectives in West Pakistan. The administration also discussed evacuation and contingency purposes (Kissinger, 1979; U.S. Department of State, 2005).

The deployment alarmed India and attracted Soviet attention. Soviet naval units monitored the American force in the Indian Ocean. Yet popular accounts often exaggerate this episode as a direct, face-to-face naval confrontation that independently stopped U.S. intervention. The available evidence supports a more cautious conclusion: both superpowers used naval movement as strategic signalling, but they did not engage in combat (Raghavan, 2013; Sisson & Rose, 1990). Task Force 74 did not reverse the military outcome. Pakistani forces in Dhaka surrendered on 16 December before the deployment could alter operations in East Pakistan. The episode remains important because it demonstrates how close the regional conflict came to the military assets of two nuclear superpowers.

The Provisional Government and Transnational Advocacy

Political and diplomatic organisation

The Proclamation of Independence was adopted on 10 April 1971 and made effective from 26 March. The Provisional Government of Bangladesh took its oath at Mujibnagar on 17 April. With Sheikh Mujibur Rahman imprisoned in West Pakistan, Syed Nazrul Islam served as Acting President and Tajuddin Ahmad as Prime Minister (Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh, 1971). The government gave institutional form to the independence movement. It coordinated the war effort, organized civil administration, managed relations with India, assisted refugees, and pursued international recognition. Bengali diplomats also defected from Pakistani missions and declared allegiance to Bangladesh.

The 18 April defection led by M. Hossain Ali at the Pakistan Deputy High Commission in Calcutta was a major symbolic and diplomatic success. These actions challenged Pakistan's claim that the conflict was merely an internal security operation. They presented Bangladesh as an organised political community with elected representatives, a govern-

ment, armed forces, territory under varying degrees of control, and a claim to international recognition.

Media, humanitarian advocacy, and public opinion

Foreign journalists helped document events that the Pakistan military attempted to conceal. Simon Dring reported on the March crackdown after evading the expulsion of foreign correspondents. Anthony Mascarenhas's article "Genocide," published in *The Sunday Times* on 13 June 1971, had a strong effect on international awareness. Other correspondents, including Sydney Schanberg, reported on refugees,

violence, and the war's political causes (Dring, 1971; Mascarenhas, 1971; Schanberg, 1971). Civil society also influenced public debate. Ravi Shankar and George Harrison organised the Concert for Bangladesh at Madison Square Garden on 1 August 1971. The event raised funds for UNICEF-administered relief and brought the humanitarian crisis to a large international audience. Public advocacy did not directly control state policy, but it increased the political cost of silence and preserved attention on civilian suffering.

Comparative Analysis of Major Actors

Actor	Main objective in 1971	Principal actions	Immediate outcome
United States	Protect the China opening and retain influence with Pakistan	Maintained the political tilt toward Pakistan; resisted punitive public pressure; deployed Task Force 74	Preserved the Beijing channel but damaged U.S. credibility among many Bangladeshis and Indians
Soviet Union	Support India and limit U.S. and Chinese influence	Signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty; vetoed Security Council drafts; provided diplomatic and military support to India	Strengthened its strategic position in India and supported a settlement favourable to Bangladesh
China	Support Pakistan and oppose Soviet influence	Backed Pakistan diplomatically; criticized India; later blocked Bangladesh's first UN membership application	Preserved its strategic partnership with Pakistan but could not prevent Bangladesh's independence
India	Address the refugee crisis and defeat the security threat in the east	Supported the Mukti Bahini; signed the Soviet treaty; entered the war after 3 December	Helped secure Pakistan's surrender in the east and the independence of Bangladesh
Pakistan	Preserve territorial unity and military rule	Refused the transfer of power; conducted Operation Searchlight; fought India and the Mukti Bahini	Lost East Pakistan and suffered military defeat
Provisional Government of Bangladesh	Establish sovereign statehood and international legitimacy	Directed resistance; conducted diplomacy; organized defections and public advocacy	Achieved effective independence and later broad international recognition

Strategic Aftermath

The surrender of Pakistani forces in Dhaka on 16 December 1971 transformed South Asia. Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign state, Pakistan lost its eastern wing, and India became the region's strongest conventional military power. The Simla Agreement of July 1972 created a bilateral framework for India–Pakistan relations and converted the ceasefire line in Jammu and Kashmir into the Line of Control. The war also influenced Pakistan's security policy. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto accelerated Pakistan's pursuit of a nuclear-weapons capability after the 1971 defeat. This development

later intensified the India–Pakistan security dilemma.

Bangladesh did not enter the United Nations immediately. China vetoed its first application on 25 August 1972. Pakistan recognised Bangladesh on 22 February 1974, before the Islamic Summit in Lahore (U.S. Embassy Pakistan, 1974; United Nations, n.d.). The Security Council recommended admission through Resolution 351 on 10 June 1974, and the General Assembly admitted Bangladesh on 17 September through Resolution 3203 (XXIX) (United Nations General Assembly, 1974; United Nations Security Council, 1974).

The post-war record shows that military victory and diplomatic recognition were separate processes. Bangladesh achieved effective statehood in December 1971, but full participation in international institutions required further negotiation among states that remained divided by Cold War alignments.

3. Discussion

The findings answer the research question through the three proposed mechanisms. Strategic constraint is clearest in U.S. policy. Pakistan's role in the opening to China made Yahya Khan unusually valuable to Nixon and Kissinger. This priority narrowed the policy options that the White House considered acceptable. It helps explain the gap between field reports from Dhaka and executive policy. The mechanism does not prove that the China initiative was the sole cause of the U.S. tilt. Nixon's distrust of India, alliance history, and concern about Soviet influence also mattered (Bass, 2013; Raghavan, 2013).

Diplomatic shielding operated through India's relationship with the Soviet Union. The August treaty did not guarantee automatic Soviet intervention. It provided consultation, political support, and deterrent value. Soviet vetoes then blocked Security Council agreement on an immediate ceasefire formula during critical days in December. These actions reduced diplomatic pressure on India, but they did not cause Pakistan's battlefield collapse. The joint campaign of the Mukti Bahini and Indian forces remained the immediate military determinant.

Legitimation operated through several actors rather than a single campaign. The Provisional Government grounded its authority in the 1970 electoral mandate and the Proclamation of Independence. Diplomatic defections demonstrated that Bengali state officials rejected Islamabad's authority. The Blood Telegram challenged the U.S. administration's internal-affairs framing. International reporting and humanitarian advocacy supplied public evidence of violence and displacement. These activities did not compel immediate recognition by every state. They made Pakistan's preferred description of the crisis harder to sustain. The combined framework clarifies the division of causal labour. Structural power shaped the risks, resources,

and diplomatic timing of the conflict. Normative and political agency shaped legitimacy and the interpretation of events. Neither level provides a sufficient explanation alone. The emergence of Bangladesh resulted from their interaction with Bengali resistance and India's decisive military intervention.

Scope conditions and limitations

Four limitations qualify the findings. First, the accessible primary-source corpus is uneven. U.S. and UN records are more readily available than complete Chinese, Soviet, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi diplomatic archives. Second, memoirs by senior participants contain retrospective interpretation and possible self-justification. Third, the paper uses a targeted historical source selection rather than a database-based systematic review, so it cannot claim exhaustive coverage of the literature. Fourth, it does not measure public opinion or estimate the independent effect of advocacy on government decisions.

These limitations restrict claims about private motives and comparative causal weight. Future research could test the three-mechanism framework with Bengali-language records, Soviet and Chinese archival materials, diplomatic correspondence from non-aligned states, and a coded dataset of recognition decisions between December 1971 and September 1974.

4. Conclusion

The Bangladesh Liberation War was both a national struggle and an international crisis shaped by domestic political demands and Cold War diplomacy. The denial of the 1970 electoral mandate and the military crackdown of March 1971 created the foundation of the conflict. The international response was influenced by competing strategic interests among the United States, China, the Soviet Union, India, and Pakistan. Washington prioritised its relationship with Pakistan because of the U.S.–China opening, while Beijing supported Pakistan within its rivalry with India and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union provided India with diplomatic support through the Indo-Soviet Treaty and Security Council actions. India combined humanitarian concerns, support for the Mukti Bahini, diplomacy, and military intervention. The Provisional Government of Bangladesh developed international

legitimacy through political organisation, diplomatic activities, media engagement, and humanitarian advocacy. The study concludes that Cold War geopolitics shaped the environment, timing, and risks of international action, but it did not replace Bengali political agency or determine the outcome alone. Bangladesh emerged through the interaction of popular resistance, political leadership, military developments, and international diplomatic conditions.

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6. Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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