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From Independence to International Recognition: Bangladesh's Diplomatic Struggle for Global Legitimacy, 1971–1974

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Abstract

Bangladesh achieved effective independence through war in December 1971, but sovereign control did not produce immediate or universal international acceptance. This paper examines how Bangladesh converted an electoral mandate, a wartime provisional government, territorial control, and bilateral diplomacy into broad recognition and United Nations membership between April 1971 and September 1974. It uses qualitative historical process tracing and triangulates official diplomatic correspondence, United Nations records, legal instruments, contemporary reporting, memoirs, and established scholarship. The analysis develops a recognition-diplomacy framework with four mechanisms: constitutional legitimation, diplomatic mobilisation, strategic acceptance, and institutional admission. The evidence shows that the Provisional Government of Bangladesh established a claim to lawful authority before victory, while diplomatic defections and transnational advocacy weakened Pakistan's internal-affairs narrative. After December 1971, recognition spread unevenly. India and Bhutan acted first; Soviet-bloc and several non-aligned states followed; Western recognition depended on territorial control, Indian troop withdrawal, humanitarian access, and relations with Pakistan and China. China's Security Council veto in August 1972 demonstrated that extensive bilateral recognition did not automatically produce membership in the principal institution of international society. Pakistan's recognition in February 1974 removed a central political obstacle, and Bangladesh entered the United Nations in September 1974. The paper argues that recognition was neither a purely legal response to objective statehood nor a simple reward granted by great powers. It was a negotiated historical process in which Bangladeshi agency interacted with geopolitical interests, regional reconciliation, and international institutional rules.

Keywords: Bangladesh, International recognition, Mujibnagar Government, United Nations, and Pakistan.

1. Introduction

The emergence of Bangladesh presents a central problem in diplomatic history: when does a successful national liberation movement become an internationally accepted state? Military victory and

effective territorial control are important, but they do not by themselves produce universal recognition, diplomatic relations, or membership in international organisations. Bangladesh illustrates this distinction clearly. The Pakistan Eastern Command surrendered

in Dhaka on 16 December 1971, yet Bangladesh did not enter the United Nations until 17 September 1974. The recognition problem began before victory. The Awami League had won 167 of the 169 National Assembly seats allocated to East Pakistan in Pakistan's 1970 election. This result gave the party an absolute majority in the 313-member National Assembly. President Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan's postponement of the assembly and the Pakistan Army's crackdown on 25 March 1971 transformed the constitutional crisis into an armed struggle. The Proclamation of Independence, adopted on 10 April and made effective from 26 March, converted the electoral representatives of East Pakistan into the Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh. The Provisional Government took its oath at Mujibnagar on 17 April (Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh, 1971; Jahan, 1972; Haque, 2023).

The new government claimed authority while its territory remained contested and its president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was imprisoned in West Pakistan. It had to direct resistance, manage relations with India, assist millions of refugees, communicate with foreign publics, and seek external recognition. These tasks were connected. Recognition could support access to aid, diplomatic representation, and international institutions. It could also weaken Pakistan's claim that the crisis was an internal rebellion (Islam, 2026).

This paper asks: How did Bangladesh convert wartime political legitimacy and effective independence into broad international recognition and United Nations membership between 1971 and 1974? Three subsidiary questions guide the analysis:

- How did the Provisional Government construct and communicate a credible claim to statehood?
- Why did recognition spread unevenly across regional, socialist, Western, and Muslim-majority states?
- How did Chinese opposition and Pakistan's delayed recognition affect Bangladesh's admission to the United Nations?

The paper argues that recognition developed through four connected mechanisms. Constitutional legitimation grounded the state's authority in the 1970 election and the Proclamation of Independence.

Diplomatic mobilisation communicated this authority through missions, defections, advocacy, and bilateral engagement. Strategic acceptance occurred when foreign governments judged recognition compatible with their interests and with regional stability. Institutional admission followed only after geopolitical opposition at the Security Council became manageable. Bangladesh therefore did not pass automatically from independence to membership in international society. Its leaders had to negotiate that passage.

Historiography, Research Gap, and Contribution

The historiography of 1971 has established the domestic and international causes of Bangladesh's emergence. Rounaq Jahan, (1972) explained Pakistan's failure of national integration. Richard Sisson and Leo Rose, (1990) reconstructed regional and international decision-making. Srinath Raghavan, (2013) situated the war within a multi-archival global history, while Gary Bass, (2013) examined U.S. policy, atrocities, and bureaucratic dissent. Scholarship on recognition provides a second body of literature. Legal and political studies debate whether recognition responds to effective statehood, constitutes statehood socially, or reflects the strategic interests of recognising governments. Grzybowski, (2017) uses Bangladesh to demonstrate the conceptual difficulty of separating objective statehood from recognition. O'Mahoney, (2017) shows how advocates of Bangladesh connected events to accepted international norms. Price, (2024) closely examines how U.S. officials combined normative arguments and geopolitical strategy when debating recognition during the East Pakistan crisis. Kartsonaki, (2024) places Bangladesh among the rare unilateral declarations of independence that achieved broad recognition.

This literature substantially advances understanding of U.S. policy, recognition norms, and wartime rhetoric. A narrower gap remains within the sources reviewed for this study. The full sequence from the Mujibnagar Government's pre-victory claim, through successive waves of bilateral recognition, to the 1972 Chinese veto, Pakistan's 1974 recognition, and final UN admission is often divided among war histories, legal studies, and accounts of early foreign policy. The result can obscure Bangladesh's own role across the whole sequence.

This paper makes a bounded contribution. It does not claim to reveal an unknown diplomatic event. It develops a mechanism-based historical explanation of how Bangladeshi actors moved through four distinct stages of international acceptance. It also separates recognition of statehood from establishment of diplomatic relations and admission to an international organisation. These acts can occur at different times and under different political conditions.

2. Methodology

Research design

The paper uses a qualitative historical case-study design and process tracing. The principal period runs from the Proclamation of Independence on 10 April 1971 to Bangladesh's admission to the United Nations on 17 September 1974. Earlier events are included when necessary to establish constitutional legitimacy. The unit of analysis is the decision or action that advanced, delayed, or conditioned Bangladesh's international acceptance. Sources were selected through a targeted, question-led procedure. A document was included if it met at least one of four criteria: it recorded a formal

recognition or admission decision; it documented Bangladeshi diplomatic activity; it revealed a government's reasons for recognising or withholding recognition; or it provided independent evidence about the authority and effectiveness of the emerging state. The primary-source base includes the Proclamation of Independence; U.S. diplomatic records published in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS); Security Council meeting and voting records; General Assembly resolutions; official recognition histories; and contemporary journalism. Major historical works and peer-reviewed scholarship supply interpretation and comparison.

Analytical procedure

The evidence was organised chronologically and coded under four themes: legal legitimacy, diplomatic action, recognising-state interests, and institutional outcome. Claims about motives were retained only when supported by an official record or by agreement between independent sources. Public declarations were treated as evidence of stated policy, not as complete proof of private motivation.

Evidence category	Main examples	Function in the analysis
Constitutional records	1970 electoral mandate; Proclamation of Independence	Establish the internal basis of authority
Diplomatic correspondence	FRUS telegrams and memoranda	Identify reasons for recognition or delay
UN records	Security Council veto records; Resolutions 351 and 3203	Trace institutional barriers and admission
Official bilateral histories	Bangladesh–Bhutan and U.S.–Bangladesh records	Verify recognition and diplomatic dates
Historical scholarship	Jahan, Sisson and Rose, Raghavan, Bass, Price	Test interpretation and place the case in wider debates

The method has limitations. U.S. and UN materials are more accessible than complete Bangladeshi, Chinese, Pakistani, Soviet, Arab, or African diplomatic archives. Published sources in English receive greater attention than Bengali-language records. This imbalance limits conclusions about confidential motivations outside Washington. The paper therefore makes comparative inferences cautiously.

A Recognition-Diplomacy Framework

Recognition is both a legal act and a political relationship. A community may possess territory, population, government, and external capacity, yet

other states still decide whether and when to acknowledge it. Recognition can also be withheld after effective statehood has become difficult to deny. Bangladesh demonstrates that international acceptance develops through several mechanisms rather than a single threshold.

Constitutional legitimization

Constitutional legitimization refers to the construction of lawful authority from an existing electoral or representative mandate. The Awami League's victory distinguished Bangladesh's claim from a movement based only on military control. The

Proclamation of Independence placed the new government within a legal sequence: election, denial of the mandate, military repression, declaration, and representative government.

Diplomatic mobilisation

Diplomatic mobilisation refers to efforts by the claimant state and its supporters to communicate authority, organise representation, obtain access to decision-makers, and secure recognition. Missions, diplomatic defections, public information, diaspora activity, and bilateral negotiations are central instruments.

Strategic acceptance

Strategic acceptance occurs when a foreign government concludes that recognition is consistent

with its interests, its interpretation of international norms, and its assessment of stability. Different governments can recognize the same state for different reasons. Recognition can acknowledge an irreversible reality, reduce regional tension, expand influence, facilitate aid, or align with an ally.

Institutional admission

Institutional admission is the conversion of widespread recognition into membership in an international organisation. It depends on institutional rules and the preferences of existing members. For the United Nations, a Security Council recommendation precedes General Assembly admission. A permanent member's veto can therefore delay admission despite broad bilateral recognition.

Stage	Principal question	Bangladesh evidence
Constitutional legitimisation	Who has the lawful right to represent the population?	1970 election and 10 April Proclamation
Diplomatic mobilisation	How is that claim communicated and organised externally?	Missions, defections, advocacy, bilateral contact
Strategic acceptance	When do other governments find recognition acceptable?	Recognition waves from December 1971 onward
Institutional admission	When does recognition become membership?	Chinese veto in 1972; UN admission in 1974

Constructing Authority during the Liberation War

Electoral mandate and the Proclamation of Independence

The Provisional Government's strongest political resource was the 1970 election. The Awami League's majority allowed its leaders to argue that the new state represented a democratic mandate that Pakistan's military government had refused to honour. The Proclamation of Independence converted this argument into a constitutional instrument. It declared Bangladesh sovereign, confirmed the earlier declaration of 26 March, and established offices and powers necessary for government (Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh, 1971). The proclamation served three external purposes. First, it identified an authority capable of speaking for Bangladesh. Second, it linked independence to representative legitimacy rather than conquest alone. Third, it indicated that the new authority intended to assume international duties. This legal language did not compel recognition, but

it strengthened the government's claim to continuity and responsibility.

Diplomatic missions and defections

The provisional administration operated principally from Indian territory but sought an identity separate from India. Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam and Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad directed the government while Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury represented the Bangladesh cause abroad. Bengali officials defected from Pakistani diplomatic missions and declared loyalty to Bangladesh. M. Hossain Ali's defection with Bengali staff at the Pakistan Deputy High Commission in Calcutta on 18 April 1971 became an early institutional break with Islamabad. Defections mattered because they transferred experienced personnel and symbolically contested Pakistan's claim to represent Bengalis internationally. Bangladesh representatives communicated with governments, parliamentarians, journalists, relief organisations, and expatriate communities. Their immediate objective was often political support and humanitarian assistance rather

than formal recognition, which most governments withheld while the military outcome remained uncertain.

Public advocacy and international legitimacy

Foreign reporting and transnational advocacy supported the recognition campaign without operating under the direct control of the provisional government. Reports by Simon Dring, Anthony Mascarenhas, and Sydney Schanberg challenged Pakistan's description of a limited internal security action. The Blood Telegram showed that U.S. diplomats in Dhaka also rejected the official policy of silence (Bass, 2013; U.S. Consulate General Dacca, 1971; Mohsin, 2024). The Concert for Bangladesh and international relief campaigns framed the crisis in humanitarian terms. Normative framing did not automatically change government policy. It widened the audience for Bangladesh's claim and raised the reputational cost of treating the conflict only as Pakistan's domestic affair. O'Mahoney (2017) describes this process as the construction of reality through legitimising arguments. In the Bangladesh case, democratic mandate, self-determination, mass displacement, and state violence became mutually reinforcing claims.

The First Recognition Wave

Bhutan and India

Bhutan and India recognised Bangladesh on 6 December 1971, before the surrender in Dhaka. Bangladesh's official diplomatic history identifies Bhutan as the first recognising state and records that the Bhutanese king sent a telegram of recognition that day (Embassy of Bangladesh in Bhutan, 2024). India announced recognition on the same date. The decisions had different diplomatic weight but shared an important effect. They broke the assumption that international recognition had to wait for Pakistan's consent or for the war's formal end. India's action also openly acknowledged the Bangladesh government as the political authority with which it was cooperating militarily. Recognition before final victory carried risks. Pakistani forces still held Dhaka, and the war with India had begun only days earlier. India's recognition was inseparable from its military and political commitment to Bangladesh. Bhutan's action had less material impact, but it demonstrated that a small state could exercise recognition policy independently and give early symbolic support.

Recognition after effective independence

Pakistan's surrender on 16 December transformed the recognition environment. Bangladesh now possessed an identifiable territory and an operating government. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's return in January 1972 strengthened political authority and reduced uncertainty about national leadership. Recognition then spread across socialist, non-aligned, Asian, and Western states. This sequence supports the importance of effectiveness but does not reduce recognition to a mechanical response. Governments still considered alliance relations, Pakistan's position, Indian military presence, and the wider Cold War. The Soviet Union recognised Bangladesh in January 1972. The United Kingdom recognised it on 4 February. Other European and Commonwealth governments acted within the expanding recognition wave.

The speed of recognition created a cumulative effect. Each decision made Bangladesh's statehood harder to contest and reduced the diplomatic cost for later recognisers. Yet cumulative recognition did not erase strategic calculation. The United States provides the clearest documented example.

The United States: From Wartime Opposition to Recognition

The Nixon administration's wartime policy had favoured Pakistan. Pakistan's role in the secret U.S.–China opening increased President Yahya Khan's strategic value. The administration also viewed India as close to the Soviet Union. These considerations limited U.S. support for Bangladesh during the conflict (Bass, 2013; Raghavan, 2013). After the war, U.S. diplomats reassessed the new state. A January 1972 telegram from Dhaka argued that Bangladesh met normal recognition criteria: it possessed a defined territory, an electorally mandated government, and broad popular support. The telegram also connected recognition to economic reconstruction, Western access, and Bangladesh's ability to avoid excessive dependence on India and the Soviet Union (U.S. Consulate General Dacca, 1972).

This document shows how legal, humanitarian, and strategic reasoning converged. Recognition could acknowledge effective and democratic statehood. It could also increase U.S. influence and support regional stability. Secretary of State William Rogers

recommended recognition once Indian troops had withdrawn. His March memorandum stated that more than forty states had already recognised Bangladesh and argued that delay could weaken the U.S. position (U.S. Department of State, 1972a).

The United States recognised Bangladesh on 4 April 1972 and proposed diplomatic relations at embassy level (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.; U.S. Department of State, 1972b). The timing followed battlefield reality, Mujib's return, widening recognition, and the withdrawal of Indian forces. It also allowed Washington to notify Pakistan and China. Price (2024) shows that U.S. recognition policy cannot be explained by norms or geopolitical interest alone. Officials used both. The broader sequence supports that conclusion. The United States recognised Bangladesh when recognition no longer threatened its central wartime objectives and when engagement offered new strategic and humanitarian benefits.

Recognition without United Nations Membership *The 1972 application and Chinese veto*

Broad bilateral recognition did not secure immediate UN admission. Under Article 4 of the UN Charter, admission requires a Security Council recommendation and a General Assembly decision. China therefore possessed the institutional power to block Bangladesh's application. On 25 August 1972, China cast its first Security Council veto against Bangladesh's admission. The veto concerned draft resolution S/10771 and occurred at the Council's 1660th meeting (United Nations, n.d.). China's position reflected its strategic partnership with Pakistan and its opposition to the regional outcome supported by India and the Soviet Union. Questions concerning prisoners of war and implementation of UN resolutions also formed part of the public diplomatic dispute. The veto illustrates a basic distinction. By 1972, Bangladesh could maintain bilateral relations with many states and participate in several international bodies, yet it remained outside the United Nations. Statehood, recognition, and membership overlapped but were not identical. Institutional rules allowed a single permanent member to delay collective admission.

Bangladesh's response

Bangladesh could not overcome the veto through legal argument alone. It needed a broader diplomatic settlement that reduced Chinese and Pakistani opposition. Its government expanded relations beyond India and the Soviet bloc, joined inter-national and regional organisations, and pursued acceptance among Muslim-majority and non-aligned states. This policy also served the wider objective of strategic autonomy. Bangladesh depended heavily on India after the war, but its leaders sought relations with Western donors, socialist states, neighbouring countries, and the Muslim world. Recognition diplomacy therefore became part of post-war state-building and economic reconstruction.

Pakistan's Recognition and the Road to Admission

Pakistan's position remained politically important even after most states had accepted Bangladesh. Its refusal to recognise the separation sustained disputes concerning prisoners of war, stranded populations, assets, and diplomatic normalisation. It also gave China a continuing reason to resist UN admission. Pakistan formally recognised Bangladesh on 22 February 1974, immediately before the Islamic Summit in Lahore. A contemporary U.S. diplomatic record described the decision as a major step in the normalisation of South Asian relations (U.S. Embassy Pakistan, 1974). Recognition allowed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to attend the summit and strengthened Bangladesh's relations with Muslim-majority states. Pakistan's recognition did not create Bangladesh's statehood. Bangladesh had exercised governmental authority and maintained extensive diplomatic relations for more than two years. Pakistan's action changed the international political environment. It removed the former parent state's formal objection and weakened the basis for continued institutional exclusion.

On 10 June 1974, the Security Council adopted Resolution 351 and recommended Bangladesh for membership. The General Assembly admitted Bangladesh through Resolution 3203 (XXIX) on 17 September 1974 (United Nations Security Council, 1974; United Nations General Assembly, 1974). The sequence completed the movement from contested authority to effective independence, broad bilateral recognition, regional reconciliation, and institutional admission.

Comparative Timeline of Recognition Diplomacy

Date	Event	Historical significance
10 April 1971	Proclamation of Independence adopted	Established the legal basis of the provisional state
17 April 1971	Provisional Government sworn in at Mujibnagar	Created an identifiable authority for war and diplomacy
18 April 1971	Bengali mission in Calcutta declared allegiance to Bangladesh	Began the institutional defection of diplomats
6 December 1971	Bhutan and India recognised Bangladesh	Broke diplomatic isolation before final victory
16 December 1971	Pakistani forces surrendered in Dhaka	Established effective territorial independence
January–February 1972	Recognition expanded across socialist, non-aligned, Commonwealth, and European states	Created cumulative international acceptance
4 April 1972	United States recognised Bangladesh	Marked a major Western policy reversal from wartime alignment
25 August 1972	China vetoed Bangladesh's UN application	Demonstrated the gap between bilateral recognition and institutional admission
22 February 1974	Pakistan recognised Bangladesh	Removed a central regional and political obstacle
10 June 1974	Security Council recommended admission	Ended the institutional blockage at Council level
17 September 1974	General Assembly admitted Bangladesh	Completed entry into the United Nations

3. Discussion

Recognition as a staged process

The evidence supports a staged rather than instantaneous account of recognition. Bangladesh established constitutional legitimacy in April 1971, gained limited diplomatic recognition in December, achieved widespread bilateral recognition during 1972, secured recognition from Pakistan in 1974, and then entered the United Nations. No single date captures the whole process. This staged account resolves an apparent contradiction in recognition theory. Effectiveness mattered greatly after the surrender, but it did not explain who claimed authority before victory or why some governments acted earlier than others. Norms mattered because the electoral mandate, self-determination, and evidence of repression made Bangladesh's claim intelligible and defensible. Strategy mattered because governments considered relations with India, Pakistan, China, the Soviet Union, and Western donors.

Bangladeshi agency

Accounts centred on India or the superpowers can understate Bangladeshi agency. India's military intervention was decisive for the war's conclusion,

but the Bangladesh government supplied a representative claim, organised external advocacy, absorbed diplomatic defectors, and pursued diversified relations after independence. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government did not control the decisions of recognising states. It shaped the information, legal arguments, relationships, and political options available to them. Bangladeshi agency was most visible in the transition from dependence to diversified diplomacy. The government required Indian support but also sought Western aid, socialist cooperation, non-aligned participation, and entry into the Muslim world. This strategy reduced the risk that recognition of Bangladesh would remain identified only with an Indo-Soviet victory.

The role of small and middle powers

Bhutan's early recognition complicates a great-power-only narrative. It had limited material capacity but high symbolic importance as the first recognising state. The later decisions of European, Commonwealth, Asian, socialist, and non-aligned governments created a cumulative recognition environment before the United States acted and long before Pakistan accepted the outcome. The case

therefore reveals two forms of power in recognition politics. Great powers and permanent Security Council members can accelerate or block institutional outcomes. Smaller states can initiate recognition, expand legitimacy, and change the diplomatic baseline through cumulative action.

The explanatory framework

The four mechanisms explain different parts of the outcome:

- Constitutional legitimation identified who could lawfully claim to represent Bangladesh.
- Diplomatic mobilisation converted internal legitimacy into external relationships and public arguments.
- Strategic acceptance explains why recognition spread at different speeds across states.
- Institutional admission explains why broad recognition still did not produce UN membership until geopolitical opposition declined.

The mechanisms interacted. Constitutional claims would have remained weak without effective authority and victory. Effective control did not guarantee admission without diplomacy. Recognition by many states did not defeat a Security Council veto. Pakistan's eventual recognition did not create statehood, but it changed the strategic conditions for collective admission.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has four limitations. First, its source base is uneven across countries. U.S. policy is documented more fully than confidential policy in China, Pakistan, Bhutan, the Soviet Union, or many non-aligned states. Second, the paper does not construct a complete country-by-country recognition dataset. Some published lists confuse recognition with the establishment of diplomatic relations. Third, evidence of Bangladeshi lobbying remains dispersed across memoirs, government publications, newspapers, and personal archives. Fourth, the study traces mechanisms but does not quantify the independent effect of each mechanism. Future research should build a verified dataset for every recognition decision between December 1971 and September 1974. It should record the decision date, diplomatic-relations date, stated rationale, alliance position, and UN vote. Bengali-language records from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, private papers of wartime diplomats, parliamentary debates, and

archives of non-aligned and Muslim-majority states could test and refine the framework.

4. Conclusion

Bangladesh's journey from liberation to international membership was a political and diplomatic process rather than an automatic consequence of battlefield victory. The 1970 electoral mandate and the Proclamation of Independence supplied constitutional legitimacy, while the Mujibnagar Government, diplomatic representatives, journalists, and international advocates communicated that legitimacy during the Liberation War. Bhutan and India's recognition on 6 December 1971 challenged diplomatic isolation, and Pakistan's surrender on 16 December created conditions for wider international acceptance. However, recognition decisions remained connected to the strategic interests of individual states. The United States recognised Bangladesh after reassessing regional stability, humanitarian concerns, Indian troop withdrawal, and future relations. China's 1972 veto demonstrated that broad bilateral recognition did not guarantee United Nations membership. Bangladesh continued diplomatic engagement with Western, socialist, non-aligned, and Muslim-majority states, which helped reduce international opposition. Pakistan's recognition in February 1974 removed a major political barrier, and Bangladesh gained United Nations membership in September 1974. The study concludes that international recognition resulted from the interaction of domestic legitimacy, effective governance, diplomatic mobilisation, and geopolitical negotiation. Bangladesh was an active participant in this process, shaping its external relations and transforming a wartime government into a recognised member of international society.

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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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