

THE QUIET DIPLOMAT: HENRY KISSINGER, THE BENGALI GENOCIDE, AND THE ANATOMY OF CRISIS IN THE NIXON WHITE HOUSE, 1969–1971

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Henry Kissinger remains, for good reason, the object of much historical fascination. His biography traces the extraordinary ascent of a Jewish refugee from Nazi Bavaria to the west wing of the White House. Unlike most of his relatives, Kissinger—who fled to New York City in 1938—did not perish in a concentration camp. During the Second World War, he returned to the western front as an American infantryman, where he remained as a denazification officer until 1946. From 1969 to 1977, Kissinger served under the administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. First as National Security Advisor and then as Secretary of State, he shaped the outcomes of some of the most important events of the Cold War: the Paris Peace Accords, the Yom Kippur War, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, and the Helsinki Final Act. Above all, he spearheaded America’s opening to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which integrated the revolutionary regime into the international system and eased the eventual transition of power from radicals like Madame Mao to reformists like Deng Xiaoping.

For his critics, Kissinger represents everything wrong with U.S. foreign policy: its militarism, bravado, and emphasis on power politics over human rights. Journalist Anthony Lewis coined “the Kissinger Doctrine” as “an obsession with order and power at the expense of humanity.”¹ Similarly, historian Greg Grandin argues that Kissinger regarded moral principles as “negotiable and their application contingent on [the] political expediency” of his “quasi-covert warfare establishment.”² Critics cite his intervention in Indochina, Chile, Argentina, and many other parts of the world. In addition, Gary Bass argues that Nixon and Kissinger “bear responsibility for a significant complicity in the slaughter of the Bengalis” during the South Asia crisis of 1971.³ In his view, the White House—by remaining silent in the face of genocide and supporting West Pakistan against India—gave Islamabad tacit consent to commit mass atrocities. Bass also alleges that Nixon and Kissinger tarnished American credibility on matters of human rights, national self-determination, and democracy—values which had supposedly differentiated the United States

¹ Anthony Lewis, “The Kissinger Doctrine,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1975.

² Greg Grandin, *Kissinger’s Shadow: The Long Reach of America’s Most Controversial Statesman*, (New York: Henry Hold, 2015), 72, 12.

³ Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), xvi.

from its Soviet counterparts. This paper will address these central questions: To what extent is the Nixon White House morally culpable for the genocide in East Pakistan? Would alternative policies have alleviated Bengali suffering in any meaningful way? I will argue that Kissinger's policy of "quiet diplomacy" addressed the geopolitical and humanitarian dimensions of this crisis better than the alternative policy of public indignation. When examined in the full context of the Cold War and the limits of U.S. influence in South Asia, the White House's response—or lack thereof—was not inappropriate.

A New World Order

In his doctoral dissertation, Henry Kissinger observed that "men become myths, not by what they know, nor even by what they achieve, but by the tasks they set for themselves."⁴ When he took office as Nixon's National Security Advisor in January 1969, Kissinger set for himself the formidable task of transforming the practice of Cold War diplomacy. "History," he argued, has "placed me in a key position at a time when we are moving from the relics of the postwar period toward a new international structure."⁵ Kissinger criticized the naive idealism of those who were willing—in the words of President John F. Kennedy—to "pay any price [and] bear any burden" to contain Soviet Communism.⁶ Instead, he argued that "in the age of nuclear weapons, it need hardly be added that a relaxation of tensions must be the goal of everyone concerned with the survival of civilization."⁷ Mutual coexistence was necessary condition for survival. From the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (1958) to the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), nuclear brinkmanship by both U.S. and Soviet leaders pushed the world to the edge of destruction. Furthermore, the People's Republic of China—driven by Mao Zedong's radical ideology—stirred conflict to undermine U.S. interests in Asia. For example, during a territorial dispute in 1958 over islands in the Taiwan Strait, Chairman Mao declared:

The bombardment of [the island of Quemoy], frankly speaking, was our turn to create international tension for a purpose. We intended to teach the Americans a lesson. America had bullied us for many years, so now that we had a chance, why not give it a hard time?⁸

⁴ Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 322.

⁵ Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 246.

⁶ John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 204.

⁷ Henry A. Kissinger, "The Limitations of Diplomacy," *New Republic*, May 9, 1955.

⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, *On China*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 173.

Kissinger understood that day-to-day crisis management would leave the underlying issues of the Cold War unresolved. Therefore, after taking office, he announced that he would seek “to construct a new international settlement, which will be more stable, less crisis-conscious, and less depending on decisions in one capital.”⁹

The Sino-Soviet split presented Kissinger with an opportunity to implement a new grand strategy. Following Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953, Beijing challenged Moscow’s ideological monopoly, a conflict which culminated in battles at the Ussuri River in 1969. Kissinger realized that this hostility “served our purposes best if we maintained closer relations with each side than they did with each other. The rest could be left to the dynamic of events.”¹⁰ Improved relations with Beijing would incentivize greater concessions from insecure leaders in Moscow on the Vietnam War and nuclear disarmament. In addition, this method of triangular diplomacy would integrate the Soviet Union and China into a stable international system—one in which all members will have a vital interest in preserving. Kissinger argued that “to act consistently abroad, we must be able to generate coalitions of shared purposes.”¹¹ In other words, relationships with foreign adversaries should be based on common interests and peaceful coexistence, rather than zero-sum gamesmanship. However, after decades of mutual hostility, *détente*—the policy of easing relations—was more easily said than done. China, engulfed in the zealotry of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, was preoccupied with its own domestic upheaval. In addition, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 hindered the prospects of reconciliation. To compensate for these inherent difficulties, *détente* became the primary objective of Nixon and Kissinger’s foreign policy; all other considerations were secondary. Their priorities became apparent during the South Asia Crisis of 1971.

The Ghost of Partition

When Britain left the Indian subcontinent in 1947, it divided the former colony into two separate countries: a Hindu-dominated India and a Muslim-dominated Pakistan. During this process, the British government carved up the province of Bengal, giving the western half to India and the eastern half to Pakistan. One Indian diplomat described Pakistan as a “geographic monstrosity,” with its western half separated from its eastern half by a thousand

⁹ Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 200.

¹⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years*, (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1979), 712.

¹¹ Henry A. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 51-97.

miles of Indian territory.¹² West Pakistan controlled the country's political and military infrastructure, while East Pakistan remained poor and underdeveloped. To make matters worse, the religious similarities between East and West Pakistan dwarfed in comparison to their ethnic and linguistic differences. East Pakistan consisted primarily of ethnic Bengalis, while West Pakistan consisted primarily of Punjabis and Pashtuns who spoke Urdu. Archer Blood, the U.S. Consul General in Dacca from 1970 to 1971, described "the breakup of Pakistan [as] inevitable from the beginning."¹³

On November 13, 1970, a ferocious cyclone swept through East Pakistan. Tidal waves from the Bay of Bengal submerged the entire region. An estimated 200,000 people perished from the storm. Islamabad's pathetic response to this tragedy exacerbated Bengali resentment. The nationalist leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—widely known as Mujib—rallied the Bengali people to reject Islamabad's authority over East Pakistan. Mujib's "Awami League" campaigned for universal suffrage, separate currencies, independent militias, and political autonomy for East Pakistan. Blood described this radical platform as "a recipe for the dissolution of Pakistan."¹⁴ During the December election, the Bengali people voiced support for the Awami League, which captured 169 contested seats—out of 171—and constituted a majority in the National Assembly. Pakistani President Yahya Khan flew into Dacca to negotiate a new constitution. However, Mujib rejected any proposal short of complete autonomy—a demand that Yahya and other West Pakistani leaders would not accept.

Operation Searchlight

Following the collapse of the negotiations, East Pakistan fell into anarchy. Without military force, the central government had no power to stop the mass protests that erupted under Mujib's leadership. For President Yahya, the unity of Pakistan depended on his ability to suppress this movement. If he could not preserve his country by negotiation, he would attempt to do so by force. On March 6, 1971, Yahya proclaimed over the radio that:

Let me make it absolutely clear that no matter what happens [...], I will ensure complete and absolute integrity of Pakistan [...] I will not allow a handful of people to destroy the homeland of millions of innocent Pakistanis. It is the duty of the Pakistan Armed Forces to ensure the integrity, solitary and security of Pakistan, a duty in which they have

¹² Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 20.

¹³ Henry Precht, Interview with Archer K. Blood, *Foreign Affairs Oral History Project*, June 27, 1989, 60.

¹⁴ Precht, Interview with Archer K. Blood, 43.

never failed.¹⁵

Islamabad regarded the Awami League as a “bourgeois” party incapable of sustaining guerilla warfare. Since the Bengalis would “knuckle under” martial law, a military campaign would be swift and orderly.¹⁶ Due to these misperceptions, Yahya did not anticipate Bengali resistance and, thus, the genocidal effects of the operation.

On March 25, 1971, the Pakistani military, armed to the teeth with American weapons, launched “Operation Searchlight” and unleashed its soldiers onto the streets of Dacca. Archer Blood, crouched on the floor of his bedroom, heard “rhythmic firing which sounded like executions.”¹⁷ Another U.S. official recalled “bodies rotting in the fields,” which were “obviously left there as an example.”¹⁸ The military believed that student-activists in Dacca University were fermenting a violent rebellion from their dormitories. According to Blood, unarmed students and faculty were “either shot down in rooms or mowed down when they came out of [the] building in groups.” In the women’s dormitory, the “building [was] set ablaze and girls [were] machine-gunned as they fled the building.” In an attempt to erase potential evidence, the soldiers destroyed all academic records and buried the corpses in mass graves, which suggests that there was “a campaign underway to erase all traces [of the] current ‘troublemaking’ generation.”¹⁹ The violence that erupted in Dacca University spread throughout the city and eventually throughout East Pakistan.

Bengali resistance exacerbated the scale of military atrocities. On March 26, 1971, one day after the initial crackdown, the Awami League declared the independence of Bangladesh over the radio in Chittagong. In response, the military intensified the brutality of their “search-and-destroy” missions.²⁰ A foreigner in Chittagong observed that the military “systematically burned down the districts of the poor people, apparently because they felt they couldn’t search them thoroughly. They seemed to be enjoying killing and destroying everything.” “In the river,” he continued, “you could count four hundred bodies floating in one area.”²¹ The Bengalis organized a resistance campaign through

¹⁵ Richard Sisson and Leo Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh*, (Berkeley: UC Press, 1990), 99.

¹⁶ Sisson, *War and Secession*, 95.

¹⁷ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁹ Record Group 59, Subject Numeric File 1970-73, Pol and Def, Box 2530 (digitized in National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 79, ed. Sanjit Gandhi, *The National Security Archive* at George Washington University, Document 4).

²⁰ Rounaq Jahan, “Genocide In Bangladesh,” *A Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, ed. Totten, Samuel, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 299.

²¹ Sydney Schanberg, “Foreign Evacuees From East Pakistan Tell of Grim Fight,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1971.

the Mukti Bahini—a Bengali term for “freedom fighters.” These paramilitary forces, poorly armed and inadequately trained, resorted to guerilla tactics and sabotage. The military retaliated with brutal counterinsurgency campaigns, which often included the destruction of whole villages. In one instance, after defeating insurgents in the city of Kushtia, the military incinerated whatever was left in the area. Homes, stores, and all other buildings turned to ash. World Bank inspectors described the devastation as if it was “like the morning after a nuclear attack.”²² Many military officials felt little remorse for the destruction they left behind. One commander proclaimed that “when people start shooting, you shoot back. We killed them all. You don’t go around counting the bodies of your enemies, you throw them in the rivers and be done with it.”²³ The targeting of civilian populations and Hindu minorities constitutes crimes against humanity. Due to the intent and scope of this criminality, these atrocities likely rise to genocide.

Silence from Washington

On March 28, 1971, three days after the initial crackdown, Archer Blood delivered a telegram titled “Selective Genocide” to alert the U.S. State Department of the atrocities. He wrote that “we are mute and horrified witnesses to a reign of terror of the [Pakistani] military.” The authorities, he continued, “have a list of Awami League supporters whom they are systematically eliminating by seeking them out in their homes and shooting them down.” Blood urged the White House to “[express] our shock, at least privately to [the government of Pakistan], at this wave of terror directed against their own countrymen.”²⁴ Similarly, U.S. Ambassador to India Kenneth Keating asked President Nixon to “promptly, publicly, and prominently deplore” these atrocities, which would mitigate “United States vulnerability to damaging allegations of association with [a] reign of military terror.”²⁵ Other than a temporary hold on new military shipments to Pakistan, the White House remained mute. According to Nixon, “I wouldn’t put out a statement praising it, but we’re not going to condemn it either.”²⁶ Blood, in response to “the silence from Washington,” increased the force of his rhetoric.²⁷ On April 6, 1971, Blood delivered a telegram on behalf of the U.S. Consulate in Dacca, proclaiming:

²² “Excerpts From World Bank Group’s report on East Pakistan,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1971.

²³ The Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists, *The Events in East Pakistan, 1971: A Legal Study*, (Geneva: 1972), 36.

²⁴ Record Group 59, Subject Numeric File 1970-73, Pol and Def, Box 2530 (NSA 1).

²⁵ Record Group 59, Subject Numeric File 1970-73, Pol and Def, Box 2530 (NSA 3).

²⁶ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 64

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

Our government has failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government has failed to denounce atrocities [...] We, as professional public servants, express dissent with current policy and fervently hope that our true and lasting interests here can be defined and our policies redirected in order to salvage our nation's position as a moral leader of the free world.²⁸

The message eventually leaked to the press. Kissinger, furious at Blood for undermining White House policy, recalled “this maniac in Dacca” from his post and reassigned him to a desk job at the State Department.²⁹

The atrocities in East Pakistan could not have occurred at a worse time for the White House. Since their first days in office, Nixon and Kissinger attempted to establish diplomatic channels with the PRC. Kissinger reached out to Beijing through channels in Pakistan and Romania, but messages remained sparse and hollow. It was only until late 1970 that he achieved any meaningful progress. President Yahya Khan, an ally to both the United States and China, was an important intermediary between the two governments. Kissinger recalled that the “Chinese attached special value to the Pakistani channel” due to fears that the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu would leak intelligence to Moscow.³⁰ Once exchanges between the United States and China grew serious, Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai agreed that “for secrecy, it is essential that no other channel be used.” When Operation Searchlight began in March 1971, Yahya was still relaying messages between Kissinger and Zhou to organize a secret U.S. envoy to Beijing. After stories about these atrocities became public, Kissinger insisted that “Yahya must be kept afloat for six more months... The last thing we can afford now is to have the Pakistan government overthrown, given the other things we are doing.”³¹ For the White House, diplomatic relations with Pakistan were the means to a larger end.

In addition to Yahya’s importance as an intermediary between the United States and China, Pakistan was a strategic ally to Beijing. As a result, the atrocities in East Pakistan placed the Nixon White House in a serious geopolitical dilemma. According to Kissinger, China demanded “strategic reassurance” from the United States to “[ease] their nightmare of hostile encirclement.”³² During the prior decade, the Chinese fought border wars against the Soviet Union and India, two continental rivals. U.S. retaliation against Pakistan would exacerbate China’s fear of encirclement. In addition, the

²⁸ RG 59, SN 70-73 Pol and Def. From: Pol Pak-U.S. To: Pol 17-1 Pak-U.S. Box 2535 (NSA 8).

²⁹ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 117.

³⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 181.

³¹ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 148.

³² Kissinger, *White House Years*, 685.

question of PRC membership in the United Nations would determine the success of rapprochement. Kissinger believed that Beijing would regard pressure against Pakistan as an attempt to “split off a part of Pakistan in the name of self-determination,” which would set an unacceptable precedent “for Taiwan and Tibet in [Beijing’s] eyes.”³³ Thus, even if Yahya Khan was not the intermediary between the two powers, Kissinger would still have been hard pressed to denounce him. For the Nixon White House, the strategic importance of appeasing China paled in comparison to any humanitarian concerns for East Pakistan.

Quiet Diplomacy

In *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, Christopher Hitchens argues that Kissinger’s South Asia policy was an act of “deliberate collusion in mass murder” and “a means of preventing the emergence of Bangladesh as a self-determining state.”³⁴ This assessment fails under any close scrutiny of the documentary evidence. By late April 1971, Kissinger realized that Bengali autonomy would be inevitable. In a memo to Nixon, he wrote that this crisis was “a period of transition to greater East Pakistani autonomy and, perhaps, eventual independence. How prolonged and how violence this period is will depend heavily on the judgements made in East and West Pakistan.” He went as far as to declare that “there will someday be an independent Bangladesh.”³⁵ Rather than resist the inevitable, he advised Nixon to “make a serious effort to help Yahya end the war and establish an arrangement that could be transitional to East Pakistani autonomy.”³⁶ On another occasion, Kissinger stated that “we have no illusions that West Pakistan can hold East Pakistan and we have no interest in their doing so.”³⁷

Historian Srinath Raghavan presents a more sophisticated critique of Kissinger’s South Asia policy. He points to Islamabad’s liquidity crisis, caused by its expensive military campaign, as an opportunity for U.S. intervention. The World Bank and the IMF remained unwilling to alleviate Islamabad’s dire financial situation because they were unimpressed by Yahya’s reconstruction plan. Therefore, as Kissinger observed at the time, “U.S. economic support,

³³ Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Security Council Files, Indo-Pak War, Box 570 (NSA 19).

³⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, (New York: Verso, 2001), 48.

³⁵ LOC, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, Box CL 210, Nov 69–July 1971 (digitized in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XI, South Asia Crisis, 1971, eds. Louis J. Smith and Edward C. Keefer from the Department of State, Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2005, Document 112).

³⁶ NPMP, NSC Files, Country Files: Middle East, Box 625 (NSA 9).

³⁷ NPMP, NSC Files, Country Files: Middle East, Box 596. (NSA 13)

multiplied by U.S. leadership in the World Bank consortium of aid donors, remains crucial to West Pakistan. Neither Moscow nor Peking can duplicate this assistance.” Due to this outsized influence, Raghavan argues that:

Nixon and Kissinger’s unwillingness to use their economic leverage over Pakistan effectively reinforced Yahya’s intransigence. Had they made it clear that come October they would be unable to bail out Pakistan, the military regime might well have been stopped in its tracks.³⁸

This counterfactual, if true, suggests that an alternative approach may have shortened the genocide. However, this argument assumes that economic isolation would have moderated Islamabad’s military planning. In my view, desperation radicalizes genocidal regimes. Survival, after all, is the primary goal of any nation-state. It is more likely that an impending financial collapse would have prompted the military to escalate their atrocities in an attempt to expedite East Pakistan’s destruction. President Yahya’s mode of thinking gives weight to this alternative counterfactual. In April 1971, he told British Prime Minister Edward Heath that “it was sometimes necessary to take firm action to prevent more appalling bloodshed later on.”³⁹ For Yahya, the urgency of Pakistan’s short-term financial woes paled in comparison to dismemberment of his country. The appeasement of Bengali secessionists would destroy the legitimacy of his government and, perhaps more importantly, the honor of his homeland.

Rather than publicly confront the military regime, Kissinger believed that the White House should exploit Nixon’s close ties with Yahya to help Islamabad achieve a negotiated settlement with the Bengalis. On July 7, Kissinger told the Indian Foreign Minister that “the whole point of our policy has been to retain enough influence to urge creation of conditions that would permit the refugees to go back.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Nixon claimed that he “did not see any alternative to working with the present government to help it do the best it could with the situation.”⁴¹ On the issue of economic aid, Kissinger told Nixon on April 28 that “we would not withhold aid now for the sake of applying pressure. We would face that question only after giving the West Pakistanis every chance to negotiate a settlement in the face of the costs of not doing so.” However, the White House did not offer a blank check. Economic relief was contingent upon “Yahya [producing] an administration in East Pakistan that would have enough Bengali acceptance to win popular cooperation in restoring

³⁸ Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 100.

³⁹ Raghavan, *1971*, 164.

⁴⁰ NPMP, NSC Files, Haig Chron, Box 983 (NSA 14).

⁴¹ NPMP, NSC Files, NSC Files, Indo-Pak War, Box 578 (NSA 11).

essential services and preventing a further constitutional crisis...⁴² The White House hesitated to end economic aid because doing so would eliminate the incentive for Islamabad to find a political solution.

This approach to the crisis was not unreasonable. Public condemnation of the military atrocities would have diminished U.S. influence over the crisis, rendering West Pakistani concessions impossible. Despite Nixon's personal friendship with President Yahya, officials in Islamabad loathed the United States. The theory that the White House was conspiring with India to dissolve Pakistan was widespread in government and military circles.⁴³ Yahya would not have been able to appease the right-wing officials who were already skeptical of U.S. intentions, since, according to Kissinger, "he must answer to the dominant hardliners in his army."⁴⁴ In addition, humanitarian relief could not enter East Pakistan without permission from Islamabad. At the beginning of the crisis, Yahya rejected international humanitarian aid on the basis that the human suffering was "highly exaggerated, if not altogether tendentious."⁴⁵ In this sense, Yahya was holding Bengali civilians as hostage. Both the United Nations and the White House feared that his insecurities would trigger mass famine. As Kissinger pointed out at the time, "severing ties with the regime would make relief efforts impossible," especially since "the army just doesn't give a damn and isn't good at this kind of thing anyhow."⁴⁶ Finally, he understood that "the U.S. must retain influence over the West Pakistanis in order to resolve this crisis, because they don't have the political imagination to resolve it themselves." The regime was led by "loyal, blunt soldiers," he continued, but they have "a real intellectual problem in understanding why East Pakistan should not be part of West Pakistan."⁴⁷ This challenge was the crux of Kissinger's dilemma: to exert too much pressure would diminish U.S. influence over the situation and to exert too little pressure would prolong human suffering. As a result, Kissinger believed that quiet diplomacy—the policy of pressuring Yahya through private channels—would strike a balance between these two undesirable outcomes.⁴⁸

In addition to the delicate situation in West Pakistan, the political necessities of the Cold War placed strict limits on the scope of Kissinger's

⁴² NPMP, NSC Files, Box 625, Country Files, Middle East, Pakistan, Vol. IV, 1 Mar 71–15 May 71 (FRUS 36).

⁴³ Tillman Durdin, "In Pakistan, United States is Villain," *New York Times*, March 26, 1971.

⁴⁴ LOC, Kissinger Papers, Box CL 210, South Asia, Nov. 1969–July 1971 (FRUS 8).

⁴⁵ Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan: 1947-2000*, (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2001), 190.

⁴⁶ NPMP, NSC Files, Box H-112, SRG Minutes, Originals, 1971, (FRUS 111; 105)

⁴⁷ NPMP, NSC Files, Box H-112, SRG Minutes, Originals, 1971, (FRUS 105).

⁴⁸ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 865.

South Asia policy. Kissinger admitted that he was “torn between conflicting imperatives:” far-reaching geopolitical interests on one hand and humanitarian concerns on the other.⁴⁹ Due to the time-sensitive nature of Chinese rapprochement, Kissinger needed Yahya Khan’s immediate goodwill, which was contingent upon remaining silent. Once Kissinger returned from his secret trip to China in July 1971, the Pakistani channel was no longer necessary. Without the risk of terminating his communication with Beijing, Kissinger could exert more pressure on Islamabad. Through private channels, Nixon condemned Mujib’s secret trial and death sentence, insisting that killing him would “definitely and decisively affect virtually all assistance, humanitarian and economic,” to the regime—a threat which prevented Mujib’s execution.⁵⁰ In addition, the White House pressured the regime to cooperate with international organizations to deliver food and medical supplies. The United States also became the largest humanitarian donor in the world, delivering \$90 million to India and \$150 million to other international relief efforts.⁵¹ Despite efforts by the Mukti Bahini to sabotage the program, these contributions helped prevent widespread starvation. If the White House had severed relations with Islamabad and remained a bystander to mass famine, the scale of human suffering would have been more profound.

To be sure, while it may have averted famine for the upcoming winter, quiet diplomacy was less effective in other areas. In an attempt to stem the flow of refugees, Kissinger pressured Yahya to announce an amnesty for all Bengali citizens—except those under active prosecution, including Mujib—and the transfer of power over to a civilian governor. Yahya also promised to draft a new constitution and convene a new National Assembly by the end of the year. However, while these proclamations were steps in the right direction, they had little practical impact. Blood observed that these measures were “all too little and too late, as well as completely out of touch with reality in East Pakistan.”⁵² In addition, CIA reports confirmed that “any civilian government established in East Pakistan under the army’s aegis is likely to be more shadow than substance.”⁵³ Most importantly, these concessions failed to address the underlying issues. Due to the suffering that they endured, the Bengalis no longer demanded autonomy; they would accept nothing short of independence with Mujib as their new leader. Despite pressure from both India and the White House, Yahya Khan stubbornly insisted that “I am not going to talk to that

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 854.

⁵⁰ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 245.

⁵¹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 866.

⁵² Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 244.

⁵³ NPMP, NSC Files, Box 37, President’s Daily Briefs, Dec, 1–Dec. 16, 1971 (FRUS 247).

traitor!”⁵⁴ Similarly, the Bengalis would not accept any settlement that did not involve Mujib. By the fall of 1971, it was clear that this impasse required a military solution.

Cold War Battleground

The suffering produced by the Pakistani military was not confined to East Pakistan. The atrocities prompted an estimated ten million Bengalis to flood India’s eastern border. Despite financial support from the United States, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi quickly realized that her country could not sustain this mass exodus. The refugee camps along India’s borders were plagued by disease, malnutrition, and squalor. However, India’s position in the international system limited the scope of its response. Rather than ally with the United States, India proclaimed itself as a “non-aligned” spectator in the Cold War. Nixon was skeptical of Gandhi’s neutrality. According to Kissinger, “no one could speak for five minutes with Nixon without hearing of his profound distrust of Indian motives...”⁵⁵ From its inception, the White House’s South Asia policy was Nixon’s design. Kissinger only added strategic coherence to the president’s personal prejudices.

Since the start of the crisis, Gandhi considered military means to put an end to the outflow of refugees. She realized that India’s vast military superiority would decimate any Pakistani resistance. However, she feared the possibility that Beijing would retaliate against India for attacking a Chinese ally. Faced with a seemingly insurmountable challenge, Gandhi asked the Soviet Union for help. As a result, on August 9, 1971, the two countries signed the “Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation,” which stipulated the “sincere friendship, good neighborliness, and comprehensive cooperation” between the two powers.⁵⁶ To be sure, negotiations for this treaty began prior to the events in East Pakistan. However, the severity of India’s refugee crisis and the announcement of Nixon’s trip to China pushed both countries toward consensus. Many U.S. officials were not alarmed by the treaty. The Under Secretary of State wrote to Nixon that “the Treaty represents no substantial change in Indo-Soviet relations,” even though it demonstrated India’s “geo-political necessity [for] close relations with Moscow.”⁵⁷ Yet the White House regarded the treaty as another example of Soviet provocation. Kissinger insisted that “Moscow

⁵⁴ Kux, *The United States and Pakistan*, 197.

⁵⁵ William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998), 274.

⁵⁶ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 220.

⁵⁷ National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 21 INDIA–USSR (FRUS 116).

threw a lighted match into a powder keg.”⁵⁸ For Nixon, this treaty confirmed his long-standing suspicion that India was never truly non-aligned. In a phone call with Kissinger, the President proclaimed that “if they want to be dependent on the Russians, let them be, but when the chips are down India has shown that it is a Russian satellite.”⁵⁹ This crisis was no longer confined to the strategically unimportant region of South Asia. Soviet intervention turned this dispute into a proxy-conflict between three nuclear-armed states. The Indian military—now armed with Soviet tanks and weaponry—was in prime position to retaliate against Pakistan.

In the fall of 1971, the White House was busy making arrangements for President Nixon’s upcoming summits to Moscow and Beijing. Kissinger recalled that “our policy objective on the subcontinent was, quite simply, to avoid adding another complication to our agenda.”⁶⁰ Kissinger believed that a war in South Asia would risk nuclear brinkmanship between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, an outcome that the White House had worked so hard to avoid. In his imagination, India would invade West Pakistan after defeating the forces in East Pakistan and trigger a Chinese military response. To preserve the balance of power in Asia, the Soviet Union would invade China from the north. Threats of nuclear war lay at the end of this slippery slope. Under these circumstances, “we would be presented with excruciating choices if the Chinese were to attack India following an outbreak of Indo-Pakistani hostilities,” especially since Gandhi admitted that “the Soviets have promised to counterbalance any such action.”⁶¹ Kissinger told Nixon that “if the Russians get away with facing down the Chinese, and if the Indians get away with licking the Pakistanis... we may be looking right down the gun barrel.”⁶² Many of Kissinger’s critics argue, for good reason, that this logic exhibited the extremes of Cold War paranoia. Srinath Raghavan describes this potential conflict as a “war of illusions,” which makes Nixon and Kissinger seem “not as tough statesmen tilting toward their ally but as picaresque pair tilting at windmills.”⁶³ However, Kissinger did not believe that an Indian invasion would necessarily trigger a Soviet-Chinese war; it was only a possibility worth taking steps to prevent. Even if the resulting conflict did not reach nuclear proportions, any military struggle involving the United States, Soviet Union, and China would undermine international stability for decades. In a recent interview, Kissinger recalled that “the U.S. had to navigate between Soviet pressures; Indian

⁵⁸ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 867.

⁵⁹ NPMP, NSC Files, Country Files: Middle East, Box 643 (NSA 28).

⁶⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 848.

⁶¹ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 239; NPMP, NSC Files, Box 642, India/Pakistan Situation (FRUS 246).

⁶² Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 307.

⁶³ Raghavan, *1971*, 263.

objectives; Chinese suspicions; and Pakistani nationalism.”⁶⁴

As the prospects of a negotiated settlement between East and West Pakistan turned hopeless, Kissinger warned Nixon of “the inevitability of war,” “not necessarily because anyone wants it but because in the end they will not know how to avoid it.”⁶⁵ No amount of pressure, not even threats to end economic aid, would have deterred India from invading East Pakistan. On November 12, Kissinger stated that “the Pakistanis aren’t so stupid as to challenge Indian military now. If a war starts, it would have to be by India.”⁶⁶ By late November, frequent border skirmishes brought both countries to a tipping point. When war finally broke out on December 3, 1971, Kissinger was convinced that it was India that fired the first shot.

The Short War

In a hopeless attempt to preempt India’s invasion, the Pakistani military struck airfields in Northern India. Indira Gandhi was relieved to find out that the first attack was the result of “the adventurism of the Pakistan military machine.”⁶⁷ “Thank God, they’ve attacked us,” she proclaimed.⁶⁸ The Indian army, which was twice the size of the Pakistani army, launched an invasion into East Pakistan, which Gandhi immediately recognized as the independent nation of Bangladesh. The speed of India’s advance was remarkable. In less than a week, the Indian army captured half of East Pakistan. As the army marched through the desolate villages on their route to Dacca, the Bengalis welcomed Indian soldiers as liberators. The U.S. Consul in Dacca—Blood’s replacement—observed that the “noose is obviously getting tighter” for Islamabad.⁶⁹

While he was not surprised, Kissinger was still enraged. Prior to the war, the White House asked Indira Gandhi to refrain from military measures, at least until January 1972 to see if Yahya’s concessions would improve the situation in any meaningful way. On November 24, Kissinger explained that “it’s not outrageous to ask that Yahya be given four weeks to try to adjust the political situation in East Pakistan.”⁷⁰ To be sure, the situation would not have dramatically improved even if Gandhi had waited until January. Nevertheless, the White House believed that if the United States permitted the Indians to

⁶⁴ Jeffery Goldberg, “World Chaos and World Order: Conversations With Henry Kissinger,” *The Atlantic*, November 16, 2016.

⁶⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 860.

⁶⁶ NPMP, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files, Box H-115, WSAG Minutes (FRUS 183).

⁶⁷ NPMP, NSC Files, Box 755, Presidential Correspondence File, India, (FRUS 226).

⁶⁸ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 269.

⁶⁹ NPMP, NSC Files, Box 37, President’s Daily Briefs, Dec 1–Dec 16, 1971 (FRUS 247).

⁷⁰ NPMP, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files, Box H-115, WSAG Minutes (FRUS 198).

humiliate Pakistan, nations abroad would raise even more questions about the reach of American power. Kissinger warned Nixon that “if we collapse now, the Soviets won’t respect us for it; the Chinese will despise us and the other countries will draw their conclusions.”⁷¹ Convinced that the Soviet Union was encouraging Indian aggression, Kissinger described the war as “a Soviet-Indian naked power play to dismember a country.” Similarly, on December 6, Nixon wrote to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev accusing Moscow of “supporting the Indian Government’s open use of force against the independence and integrity of Pakistan...”⁷² While Nixon firmly oriented the United States behind Islamabad, he understood that public support for the regime would tarnish his credibility. As a result, Nixon directed Kissinger to facilitate a secret arms transfer from Jordan to Pakistan. Kissinger warned the president that this action was illegal, but Nixon, as per usual, did not care. On December 8, Kissinger told the Pakistani ambassador that “we are working very actively on getting military equipment to you, but for God’s sake don’t say anything to anybody!”⁷³ In addition to these illicit supplies, the United States worked with Beijing to pass a UN resolution calling India to withdraw. The Soviet Union vetoed each resolution to buy time for its ally.

As Indian troops marched toward Dacca, the liberation of East Pakistan was only a matter of time. However, the future of West Pakistan still remained in question. Since the start of the war, the Indians launched devastating airstrikes on West Pakistani cities. By December 8, they had penetrated fifteen miles into its interior.⁷⁴ The Joint Chiefs of Staff warned Kissinger that “when East Pakistan is gone, the Indians will transfer their divisions to West [Pakistan]... If the war continues to the end, the outcome for Pakistan is inevitable.”⁷⁵ Similarly, a CIA report stated that Gandhi would not end the war until she annexed the Southern region of Kashmir and diminished Pakistan’s military to the point that “Pakistan will never again be in a position to plan another invasion of India.”⁷⁶ This intel prompted Kissinger to conclude that “we have to prevent an Indian onslaught on West Pakistan, since the outcome will be

⁷¹ LOC, Kissinger Papers, Box 397, Telephone Conversations, Home File, Dec 1971 (FRUS 227).

⁷² NPMP, NSC Files, Box 497, President’s Trip Files, Dobrynin and Kissinger Notes (FRUS 236).

⁷³ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 297.

⁷⁴ LOC, Kissinger Papers, Box 397, Telephone Conversations, Home File, Dec 1971 (FRUS 223); NPMP, NSC Files, Box 642, Country Files, Middle East, India/Pakistan Situation. Secret (FRUS 246).

⁷⁵ NPMP, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files, Box H-115, WSAG Minutes (FRUS 255).

⁷⁶ NPMP, NSC Files, Box 642, Country Files, Middle East, India/Pakistan Situation (FRUS 246).

the same as in East Pakistan.”⁷⁷ Once the South Asia crisis developed into a contest of wills between the United States and Soviet Union, Islamabad enjoyed the unconditional support of the White House. Kissinger elaborated on this position when he told the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan that “in everything we do with Yahya, we cannot have it said that we stabbed Pakistan in the back.”⁷⁸

While Yahya Khan insisted that he would fight “to the last Muslim,” the Pakistani army surrendered to India on December 16, 1971.⁷⁹ Gandhi responded that “it is pointless in our view to continue the present conflict.”⁸⁰ To the present day, Kissinger remains convinced that he successfully deterred an Indian invasion toward Islamabad. While perhaps exaggerated, his fears were not idle. Nixon and Kissinger were justified in their distrust of Gandhi. During her visit to the White House in November 1971, Gandhi lied to Nixon by denying that her government was funding the Mukhi Bahini. Without the benefit of hindsight, the White House could not know with any certainty whether or not India would escalate the hostilities that were already occurring in West Pakistan.

The Long Peace

The Bengali genocide constitutes one of the most appalling events of the Cold War. From March 26 to December 16, 1971, the Pakistani army murdered anywhere from three hundred thousand to a million Bengalis. This reign of terror forced over ten million people to seek refuge in India, most of whom had yet to recover from the deadliest cyclone in recorded history. Due to their close relationship with the perpetrators, Nixon and Kissinger’s involvement in this genocide deserves strict scrutiny. However, a fair assessment of their moral culpability requires counterfactual speculation: Would alternative policies have improved the conditions in East Pakistan? How would these policies affect American standing with the other great powers? These questions, by nature, are impossible to answer. After all, as Kissinger once told journalist Oriana Fallaci, “the history of things that didn’t happen has never been written.”⁸¹

On the geopolitical issue, Gary Bass argues that “Kissinger’s policies [in South Asia] were not only morally flawed but also disastrous as Cold War strategy,” since it created “the conditions for Soviet-backed India to rip Pakistan in two—a strategic defeat for the United States and a strategic victory for the

⁷⁷ NPMP, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files, Box H-115, WSAG Minutes (FRUS 255).

⁷⁸ NPMP, NSC Files, Box 643, Country Files, Middle East, India/Pakistan December 1–10 (FRUS 265).

⁷⁹ NPMP, NSC Files, Box 37, President’s Daily Briefs, Dec 1–Dec 16, 1971 (FRUS 254).

⁸⁰ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 322.

⁸¹ Orianna Fallaci, *Interview with History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 42.

Soviet Union.”⁸² Not only does this analysis support the validity of Kissinger’s geopolitical tunnel-vision, it also fails to take into account the larger aims of his grand strategy. Kissinger understood that “no country can act wisely simultaneously in every part of the globe at every moment of time.”⁸³ Therefore, policymakers are forced to sacrifice interests in some regions to achieve more important long-term objectives. Kissinger believed that lasting stability between the United States and the Communist world depended on the success of Chinese rapprochement. If the White House failed to open China, the United States would have less leverage over Moscow and Hanoi in upcoming negotiations. More importantly, this policy would moderate Beijing’s foreign policy and lure China into the family of nations. The future of America’s fragile relationship with China also depended on how the White House dealt with allies, especially those who did not value Western conceptions of human rights. In the final analysis, détente greatly improved the prospects of peace between the United States and its rivals. In May 1972, Nixon and Brezhnev eased nuclear tensions by signing the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Two years later, Kissinger helped negotiate the Helsinki Accords, which further normalized relations between the Communist and Western blocs in Europe. In addition, China’s open hostility against the United States eventually transitioned into a state of mutual understanding. According to historian John Gaddis, the “long peace” that governed the Cold War required “the realization that great nations can have a stake, not just in the survival, but also the success and prosperity of their rivals.”⁸⁴ Therefore, the process of détente, which began with Richard Nixon and ended with Ronald Reagan, helped ensure the Cold War did not escalate into a hot one.

In his searing indictment, Christopher Hitchens describes quiet diplomacy as “the deliberate sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of Bengali civilians.”⁸⁵ However, Kissinger’s critics take for granted that public indignation would have alleviated Bengali suffering in any significant way. On the contrary, public attacks against the regime would have severed U.S. relations with Islamabad, eliminating all possibility of political concessions or famine relief. Furthermore, the extent to which such attacks would affect the conduct of the Pakistani military remains unclear. Even Archer Blood admitted that moral indignation “might have not dissuaded the Paks from continuing” their genocidal campaign.⁸⁶ This was due, in part, to the fact that President Yahya did not have absolute control of the events in East Pakistan. In November 1971,

⁸² “Henry Kissinger: Good or Evil?,” *Politico Magazine*, October 10, 2015.

⁸³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 277.

⁸⁴ John L. Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Element of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security* 10, no. 4, 142.

⁸⁵ Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, 42.

⁸⁶ Precht, Interview with Archer K. Blood, 60.

Maurice Williams, the deputy administrator of USAID, warned Kissinger that “the Pakistan army in East Pakistan is operating in many respects independent of the policies and direction of President Yahya.” As a result, the fate of the Bengalis “is in the hands of army commanders in the East who are not subject to foreign influence.”⁸⁷ Thus, even if Yahya was receptive to public criticism, it would not affect meaningful change because his military commanders were unmoved by American aspersions. Indignation may have exacerbated the military’s brutality by fueling conspiracy theories that the United States supported Bengali insurgents. Therefore, critics who argue that Kissinger did not do enough to prevent the atrocities must also consider the unintended consequences of doing more. Lastly, the choice that Kissinger confronted during this crisis was between the policy of détente and America’s Cold War credibility. He did not sacrifice Bengali lives in pursuit of his grand strategy, for the fate of East Pakistan was out of his control. Quiet diplomacy may have damaged America’s self-prescribed image as the defender of democratic self-determination, but it was the most prudent policy that Kissinger could have pursued under difficult circumstances.

While he conceded that American indignation may not have led to any practical consequences, Archer Blood insisted that this policy “would have positioned ourselves on the side of right and justice.”⁸⁸ However, diplomacy can rarely be measured in such terms. The challenge of foreign policy lies in the balancing of conflicting values: national security on one hand and moral credibility on the other. While these interests often compete for priority, one cannot survive without the other. Security without virtue lacks legitimacy; virtue without security lacks longevity. The difficulty of balancing these two goals is compounded by the fact that foreign policy seldom presents a choice between good and evil. In *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957), Kissinger argues that in order to participate on the world stage:

We must find the will to act and to run risks in a situation which permits only a choice among evils. [...] To deal with problems of such ambiguity presupposes above all a moral act: a willingness to run risks on partial knowledge and for a less than perfect application of one’s principles.⁸⁹

In the arena of international relations, especially during the Cold War, the lesser of two evils is rarely self-evident. Kissinger understood this dilemma from a young age, writing to his parents after the Second World War that “the real tragedies in life are not in choices between right and wrong. Only the most

⁸⁷ NPMP, NSC Files, Box 627, Country Files, Middle East, Pakistan, Vol. VIII, Nov–Dec 71 (FRUS 188).

⁸⁸ Precht, Interview with Archer K. Blood, 60.

⁸⁹ Niall Ferguson, “The Meaning of Kissinger,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 2015, 139-140.

callous of persons choose what they know to be wrong.” “Real dilemmas,” he concluded, “are difficulties of the soul, provoking agonies, which you in your world of black and white can’t even begin to comprehend.”⁹⁰ The burden of this dilemma rests on the shoulder of every statesperson. The tragic history of the Bengali genocide demonstrates that moral perfection requires engagement with an imperfect world. To effect meaningful progress abroad, the United States must, in many cases, temper its missionary zeal and face political realities. Failure to do so will, in the long run, undermine the principles that the country claims to represent. The true test of statecraft, therefore, lies in one’s ability to recognize and bridge what is desirable with what is possible—without losing sight of both.

⁹⁰ Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger: 1923-1968: The Idealist*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 203.