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The relationship between the United States and South Asia underwent dramatic changes during the Nixon and Ford administrations. Two key turning points during this period set U.S. policy on a course from which it did not fully veer until President George W. Bush's second term in office. The first of these was the East Pakistan/Bangladesh crisis of 1971, which culminated in the war between India and Pakistan. The second was the Indian nuclear test of 1974. The two electronic *FRUS* volumes under review are indispensable to understanding U.S. policy towards the subcontinent from 1969 to 1976. Although these volumes also cover policy towards the smaller countries in South Asia, particularly Afghanistan, they are largely devoted to relations with India and Pakistan. The volumes are particularly significant because the only *FRUS* volume published so far deals with the South Asian crisis of 1971.

The first of these, *E-7*, spans the period from 1969 to 1972. A considerable portion of the materials in this volume concerns the 1971 crisis. Together with the published volume on the crisis, it has already attracted the attention of scholars.¹ In some ways, the electronic volume is the more tantalizing one, for it includes transcripts of meetings and telephone conversations between President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry

¹ Robert McMahon, "The Danger of Geopolitical Fantasies: Nixon, Kissinger and the South Asia Crisis of 1971" in Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (eds.) *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 249-68; Gary Hess, "Grand Strategy and Regional Conflict: Nixon, Kissinger and the South Asia Crisis", *Diplomatic History* 31:5 (November 2007), 959-63; Geoffrey Warner, "Nixon, Kissinger and the breakup of Pakistan, 1971", *International Affairs* 81:5 (2005), 1097-1118.

Kissinger. Seen from such close quarters, it is clear that Nixon, and to a lesser extent Kissinger, harboured deep-seated biases against India and in favour of Pakistan. These conversations are replete with sneering references to Indians in general—“a slippery, treacherous people”, “insufferably arrogant”²—and Indira Gandhi in particular—“bitch” and “witch” [E-7, doc. 150]. The Pakistani military dictator, Yahya Khan, is proclaimed to be an “honourable” man faced with an impossible situation [E-7, doc. 146].

The availability of these materials is not an unalloyed blessing. It makes the interpretive task of the historian rather more complicated. There is an understandable tendency to accord much greater importance to such biases in explaining the Nixon White House’s policies towards the region. After all, which historian can resist such quotations? Yet, it is important to consider more closely the extent to which Nixon’s south Asia policy was driven by his ingrained prejudices. It has frequently been argued³ that they played a major and distorting role in his handling of the crisis. Biases apart, Nixon had an undeniable propensity for imagining slights and nursing grievances. Even so, it is difficult to disentangle the relative importance of such prejudices vis-à-vis other interests and easy to exaggerate it—especially when dealing with such uncongenial historical figures as Nixon and Kissinger. To arrive at a more balanced assessment, we need to ask counterfactual questions about what decisions might have been taken if these biases were the key driver and whether certain decisions would have been taken in the absence of concrete interests.

Consider the decision to resume arms supplies to Pakistan in 1970. During the 1965 war, the Johnson administration had imposed an embargo on the sale of lethal weapons to both Pakistan and India. No sooner had Nixon taken office than the Pakistani leadership began to make demands for a resumption of arms sales. A few months into his presidency, Nixon decided to use Pakistan as a conduit for the opening to China. It was during his visit to Pakistan in the summer of 1969 that Nixon requested President Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan to convey his desire for a new relationship to the Chinese. During this trip, the Pakistanis raised the issue of resuming arms sales. But Kissinger said no more than that “We want to avoid arms [sic] race. We are looking at military supply policy and will attempt to be sympathetic.” [E-7, doc. 32] Notwithstanding the president’s fondness for the Pakistanis,⁴ then, the administration was not rushing headlong to fulfil the latter’s wishes. Indeed, it is only after Yahya Khan began actively serving as a courier between Washington and Beijing that the administration allowed a limited ‘one time exception’ of sales of arms to Pakistan, which fell short of the original Pakistani wish-list. Until this point, in fact, the administration’s relationship with India was not bad. The Indian ambassador to the US

² *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, vol. XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2005) (hereafter *FRUS South Asia Crisis*), 264-67.

³ See the sources mentioned in footnote 1.

⁴ The sources in footnote 1, for example, establish this “fondness.”

reported that “The real problem [in U.S.-India relations] is not of differences but of indifference.”⁵

The U.S.-India relationship slid rapidly down the slope following the outbreak of the crisis. The story is well known. On 25 March 1971, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight. Yahya Khan had decided to use force to rein in the incipient independence movement in East Pakistan. The operation was not only aimed at the leadership of the Awami League which spearheaded the movement, but also at its bases of support amongst the populace. In the ensuing ruthless ‘pacification campaign’, hundreds of thousands fled their homes and crossed the border into India. In a couple of months’ time, the number of refugees counted in millions. The Pakistan Army sought to ‘disarm’ its Bengali units as well as the paramilitary forces in East Pakistan. Many of them put up a staunch resistance and soon looked across the border for help from India.

The documents now available allow for a more fine-grained interpretation of Nixon and Kissinger’s approach to the crisis. If there is an image that summarizes the received view of this approach, it is that of a “tilt” in favour of Pakistan.⁶ However, an excessive, not to say exclusive, focus on the “tilt” tends to obscure other aspects of U.S. policy during the crisis. In particular, it blurs the line between the different stages in which this policy evolved. In the early stages of the crisis, Nixon and Kissinger were keen to refrain from ‘squeezing’ Yahya.⁷ This was driven by three considerations. First, there was the need to avoid any damage to the China channel via Pakistan and to preserve ties with Yahya Khan. Second, they did not evince any sympathy for the massive military crackdown on East Pakistan. Human rights simply did not figure on their foreign policy agenda. Third, they believed, early on, that the use of force had worked: the Pakistan army had snuffed out the resistance.

It was only after Kissinger’s secret trip to China in July 1971 that a proper “tilt” towards Pakistan began. By this time, Pakistan’s importance as a conduit to China had ceased. But other considerations now came to the fore. To begin with, Kissinger believed that Zhou Enlai had told him that China intended to stand by Pakistan and that the Chinese would draw their conclusions about America’s credibility based on U.S. policy towards Pakistan

⁵ Ambassador L.K Jha to Foreign Minister Swaran Singh, Subject File 277, P.N. Haksar Papers (III Instalment), Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi.

⁶ Christopher Van Hollen, “The Tilt Policy Revisited: Nixon-Kissinger Geopolitics and South Asia”, *Asian Survey* 20:4 (April 1980), set the tone for much of the work that followed. Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Press, rev. ed. 1994), 295-322; William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998), 269-92; Jussi Hahnimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 154-84

⁷ Kissinger to Nixon, 28 April 1971, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, vol. XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2005), 95-97, and Nixon’s handwritten note in *ibid.*, 97, fn. 2.

during the crisis. If the Chinese thought that the administration was not supporting a country with which the U.S. had a formal alliance, the emerging Sino-American entente would be badly dented.⁸ Further, following the treaty between India and the Soviet Union in August 1971, Kissinger and Nixon regarded the crisis from the prism of superpower politics. They believed that if a Soviet stooge was allowed to humiliate an American ally, their reputation in the eyes of the Chinese would be irreparably damaged. Finally, they believed that if the USSR was allowed to get away with this in South Asia, it would be emboldened to stir the pot in other parts of the world, especially the Middle East. The “tilt”, then, did not really commence until the U.S. perceived much greater interests at stake in standing by Pakistan, though by the time the war began Nixon and Kissinger realised that East Pakistan was irretrievably gone and sought to preserve West Pakistan. Put differently, it was interests rather than biases or emotions that were in the driver’s seat during the latter part of the crisis. If anything, these emotions grew stronger as the interests at stake were perceived to be higher—and not the other way round.

Documents in this volume show in some detail how Nixon and Kissinger sought to demonstrate their resolve by bringing pressure to bear on Moscow; by arranging for the transfer of U.S. arms to Pakistan from Jordan; by urging the Chinese to make some military moves against India; and above all by dispatching an aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal at the height of the war. The last decision was justified then and subsequently by both Nixon and Kissinger on the grounds that they had intelligence that Prime Minister Gandhi was planning on moving against West Pakistan once military operations in the East were wrapped up. In fact, Nixon himself urged Kissinger to have this report leaked [E-7, doc. 177], so that the dispatch of the aircraft carrier would not be condemned by Congressional and public opinion at home. There is other evidence to suggest that Nixon and Kissinger were merely latching on to this piece of intelligence to justify a move that they anyway wanted to make. In fact, this volume reproduces an interesting intelligence report from a “reliable source” that shows that Mrs. Gandhi was not keen on attacking West Pakistan [E-7, doc. 187]. Not only were Nixon and Kissinger keen to goad the Chinese into action, but they were willing to risk the possibility that the Soviet Union might enter the fray, that there could be an armed confrontation between the USSR and China, and that they might have to intervene in support of China [E-7, doc. 177].

There is a delusional quality to these conversations. Unsurprisingly, most scholars who have worked through them have questioned the realism of the self-styled realists in the White House. But these need to be taken more seriously. For they show the grip on Nixon and Kissinger’s strategic thinking of the idea of reputation. The world in their view was tightly interconnected: U.S. action in one area of contention would automatically have consequences for how adversaries and allies evaluated its credibility in other areas of contention. The idea of reputation was by no means unique to them: think of the Johnson administration’s approach to Vietnam. But in this case, it led them to perceive interests in

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), 862, 876, 886

an area of the world where they had no intrinsic interests to risk a super-power confrontation.

The decision to send the aircraft carrier marked a major set-back to U.S.-India relations. Kissinger was quite blasé about its import. In the immediate aftermath of the war, he was telling Nixon that relations with India could soon be on the mend. Nixon, however, had little interest in commencing aid to India which had been cut-off during the war. Mrs. Gandhi, for her part, refused to request the resumption of aid. In fact, in May 1972, the Indian government asked the U.S. Agency for International Development personnel in India to leave the country [*E-8*, doc. 260]. In formal interactions, both governments expressed their desire to bring the relationship back to an even keel. This did happen in a transactional sense, but not in any substantive manner. Relations with Pakistan, too, remained at a low-ebb. President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto realized the need for continued economic and military aid from the US. But he also sought to diversify the sources of Pakistan's dependence on these matters. Besides, the crisis left a deep sense of disappointment with America—one that would not be overcome until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In May 1973, Nixon announced a reversion to the pre-1971 policy of sales of non-lethal weapons and of lethal ones under the one-time exception to Pakistan. This set off a predictable fire-storm in India. By the time President Ford fully removed the arms embargoes on both Pakistan and India in March 1975, the question of arms sales had reverted to its earlier status as the perennial irritant in U.S. policy towards South Asia. Of greater importance was the Indian nuclear test of May 1974. The test was, in part, the outcome of the aircraft carrier episode of 1971 and the ensuing insecurities of the Indian leadership. The tests marked a turning point in U.S.-India relations. Interestingly, Kissinger took a more relaxed view of the tests than the State Department (which he had earlier castigated as biased in favour of India) and ordered a "low-key" response [*E-8*, doc. 162]. His primary concern was the impact of the Indian tests on Pakistan. Indeed, Kissinger expended considerable effort in attempting to dissuade Pakistan from going down the nuclear route. More importantly, following the tests, Congressional opinion and the non-proliferation lobby in the U.S. turned against India. The liberals from the Democratic Party who had traditionally been the supporters of India were now ranged against it on the nuclear issue. This divide was deepened by Mrs. Gandhi's decision to suspend democratic rights by imposing an "Emergency" in India in 1975.

The volume dealing with this period is disappointing. The nuclear issue does not figure as prominently as it should have. In particular, the State Department's dealings with Congress and the non-proliferation groups are not covered. We can only hope that another volume is planned for publication covering the Ford administration's South Asia policy.

The last intelligence assessment prepared during the Ford presidency observed that the USSR was the largest arms supplier to India, and that China was the largest arms supplier to Pakistan. [*E-8*, doc. 240] This was exactly the situation that the Nixon administration found when it took office in 1969. Nevertheless, during the Nixon and Ford administrations the bases of U.S. policy towards South Asia had undergone far-reaching transformations.

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