



Why Yahya wasn't squeezed

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Was it a mere coincidence that the day India was mourning the passing away of Lt Gen JS Aurora, the hero of the 1971 Bangladesh War, the US State Department released Volume XI of the Foreign Relations of the United States consecrated to the "South Crisis, 1971"? This 929-page document regroups a few papers which had already been "declassified" such as the minutes of Henry Kissinger's secret visits to China in July and October 1971, as also scores of freshly "declassified" material, for the first time.

Their publication throws light on a less known angle: The role of the nascent friendship between the US and China in the conflict. It provides a fresh piece in the puzzle of history in addition to the Justice Hamoodur Rahman's Report (ordered by the Government of Pakistan), the "restricted" Indian Official History and diverse biographies of retired generals.

An interesting aspect of the Hamoodur Rahman Report was the analysis of the Pakistani defeat. It points out that a large number of senior Army officers lost the will to fight "due to corruption... lust for wine and women and greed for lands and houses". While the Indian report spends more time scrutinising the military aspects of the war, the new-found closeness between Washington and Beijing and the involvement of the Pakistan President as a secret facilitator is highlighted in American records.

The first US documents deal with the background to the conflict. Nixon's position was clear, "We should just stay out - like in Biafra, what the hell can we do?" But everybody did not agree with him. In a telegram sent on March 28, 1971, the American staff of the US Consulate in Dacca complained: "We,

as professional public servants, express our 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."

Then President Nixon was informed that "Dacca consulate is in open rebellion", he retorted: "The people who bitch about Vietnam bitch about it because we intervened in what they say is a civil war. Now some of the same b.....s want us to intervene here - both civil wars." However, many in Washington believed that India was bound to support Mujibur Rahman; the CIA had reported: "India would foster and support Bengali insurgency and contribute to the likelihood that an independent Bangladesh would emerge from the developing conflict."

Here began the Chinese saga. In a tightly guarded secret, Nixon had started contacting Beijing. The "postman" was Yahya Khan. When on April 28, 1971, Kissinger sent a Note defining US policy options towards Pakistan, Nixon replied in a handwritten note: "To all hands. Don't squeeze Yahya at this time." The Field Marshall was not to be squeezed because he was in the process of arranging Kissinger's first secret trip to China. A week later Farland, the US Ambassador to Pakistan, was told that Kissinger was to disappear for two days during an official visit to Pakistan in order to arrange the details of a visit by Nixon in 1972. The events of the following months and the US policy should be seen in this perspective.

In May, Indira Gandhi wrote to Nixon about the "carnage in East Bengal" and the influx of refugees burdening India. A few days later, when the President told Kissinger "the goddamn Indians" were preparing for another war, the latter retorted "they are the most aggressive goddamn people around." During the second week of July, Kissinger went to Beijing where he was told by Zhou Enlai: "If they (the Indians) are bent on provoking such a situation, then we cannot sit idly by." Kissinger answered that Zhou should know that the US

sympathies too lay with Pakistan.

On his return, during a meeting of the National Security Council, Nixon continued his India bashing: The Indians are "a slippery, treacherous people". On August 9 India and the Soviet Union signed a treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation. It shocked Washington which saw a deliberate collusion between Delhi and Moscow.

When Nixon met Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko on September 29 in Washington, the US President urged the Soviet Union to discourage India from starting a war. But Gromyko believed that Pakistan was the country that needed to be restrained. During the following months, the situation deteriorated and many more refugees came to India. The Indian Prime Minister decided to tour the Western capitals to explain the Indian stand. On November 4, she met Nixon in Washington, who asked her to withdraw her troops. Indira remained firm: She was not even ready to accept a mutual withdrawal. When Nixon and Kissinger assessed the situation, the NSA said: "The Indians are b.....s anyway. They are plotting a war."

On December 3, the Pakistan Air Force launched an attack on Indian airfields. It was the beginning of the war. The next day, US Ambassador George Bush (Sr) introduced a resolution in the UN Security Council calling for a cease-fire and the withdrawal of armed forces by India and Pakistan. It was vetoed by the Soviet Union. The following week saw mounting pressure from the Nixon-Kissinger duo on the Soviets to get India to withdraw, but to no avail.

A CIA reports of a briefing from the Indian Prime Minister, who supposedly told her audience that she would not succumb to US pressure until "the liberation of Bangladesh; the incorporation into India of the southern part of Azad Kashmir and, finally [the destruction] of Pakistani military striking power". The intelligence report added, "She hopes the Chinese do not intervene physically in the North." To Kissinger, it was clear that Mrs Gandhi wanted the end of Pakistan as a state.

On December 9, when the CIA Director warned the President that "East Pakistan was crumbling", Nixon decided to send the carrier Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal to threaten India. He also continued to exert pressure on the Soviet Union, "Are short-term gains for India worth jeopardising Soviet relations with the US?" he warned the Soviets. At the same time, Nixon instructed Kissinger to ask the Chinese to move some troops toward the Indian frontier. This was conveyed to Huang Hua, China's Permanent Representative to the UN. The NSA explained that the US would be prepared for a military confrontation with the Soviet Union if the latter attacked China.

In Washington, Nixon analysed the situation: "If the Russians get away with facing down the Chinese and the Indians get away with licking the Pakistanis... we may be looking down the gun barrel." Nixon, however, was not sure about China. Did they really intend to start a military action against India? Finally, on December 16, Lt Gen SK Niazi surrendered to Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora, the Indian Army Commander. Nixon and Kissinger congratulated themselves for achieving their fundamental goal: The preservation of West Pakistan. They were also happy for having "scared the pants off the Russians".

The release of this volume is a tribute to the courage of Lt Gen JS Aurora and his men who, despite heavy odds and the might of the US against them, managed to free Bangladesh from the clutches of Pakistan. Some aspects are still missing to complete the puzzle, particularly the secret operations involving the Tibetan commandos of the Special Frontier Forces in the Chittagong Hills and Beijing's involvement from the Chinese perspective. Like the Henderson Brookes Report of the 1962 War, it may take a few more decades (or even centuries!) to see light of day.