

## Explaining 1971

India liberated Bangladesh in 1971. The Bangladesh freedom fighters were no match militarily for the Pakistan army and there was enough residual support for the idea of Pakistan in its eastern wing to preclude a clear-cut separation of the two wings. India's intervention was altruistic only in small part. It was primarily based on realpolitik.

First, the Bengali uprising provided India with the "opportunity of the century", to quote India's leading strategic thinker, the late K. Subrahmanyam, to break up Pakistan and thus eliminate the threat of a two-front war in any future confrontation. Although the eastern front remained largely inactive in 1965, it tied down substantial military resources that could have been deployed to greater effect in the western theatre.

Second, Indian decision-makers concluded that even if the new country in the east would not be an "eternal ally", it could never pose the kind of threat that 'East Pakistan' posed to Indian security. At worst, it might turn out to be a thorn in India's flesh; but India was used to such a relationship with several of its smaller neighbours.

Third, New Delhi concluded that if Bangladesh became independent without Indian help, it would bear a serious grudge against the latter. India had strongly encouraged the Bengali movement for autonomy through its propaganda and clandestine financial support. To allow the Pakistani military to decimate the Bengali elite would have been viewed as a serious breach of trust by the Awami League leadership, potentially turning it into India's bitter enemy.

Fourth, New Delhi recognised that a drawn-out civil war in East Pakistan would radicalise the Bengali population. This could lead to the side-lining of the pro-India Awami League and shift the leadership of the movement to left-wing pro-China parties such as the Bhashani-led National Awami Party and the Communist Party. Guerrilla warfare, inspired by Maoist ideology, would then become a likely prospect. This was anathema to New Delhi especially in the context of the Naxalite movement which was then raging in eastern India. A Maoist-inspired guerrilla movement in East Pakistan would have provided the Naxalites with aid and succour and seriously destabilised West Bengal and the surrounding region.

The plight of the ten million refugees did have an impact on the Indian government. But, it was the economic and political rather than the humanitarian aspect of the refugee problem that was important to New Delhi. India could not indefinitely bear the economic burden of such a huge refugee population without severe damage to its own economy.

Moreover, by July-August 1971, 90% of the refugees were Hindus concentrated in the border districts of West Bengal with large Muslim populations. Consequently, there was danger of serious communal strife if IndiaNew Delhi did not act quickly to ensure their return.

The campaign of 1971 was brilliantly conceived and deftly executed. It achieved India's strategic objectives while still maintaining a humanitarian veneer for both domestic and international consumption.

Mohammed Ayoob is University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University, and Senior Fellow, Center for Global Policy, Washington DC

The India-Japan economic relationship remains underwhelming in relation to strategic ties

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