

India- Pakistan war of 1971: A Sri Lankan Perspective

Wasana Nalawatta¹, Shalini Weeraratne²

Undergraduate, Faculty of Law, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University

#Shalini Weeraratne <shaliniweeraratne@gmail.com>

Abstract - The 1971 India- Pakistan war arose due to the East Pakistani's claim to be a separate nation. The war was one of the shortest battles in history, ending victoriously after 13 days of its commencement. West Pakistan who is the administrative dominant, attacked 11 Indian air bases and made India declare a war. Since the birth of Pakistan in 1947, it was separated into two parts as West Pakistan and East Pakistan by 1600km. Though they existed as one state, these two wings had conflicts due to language, culture, political power, production, etc. Nevertheless these struggles continued for decades, neither a war nor a separation occurred immediately. However these incidents made Bengalis ask for a separate state. Eventually the first Pakistani election triggered a conflict for separation. Parties to the incident were reinforced by international actors at each other's interest. The paper will provide a discussion on Sri Lanka's approach to this situation using her vital geostrategic location against India in order to balance the power within South Asia and to maintain the policies of non-alignment. Moreover the professionalism and diplomacy of the parties involved will be further discussed.

The objectives of the study are to identify the issues which led to the birth of Bangladesh, while giving attention to India's intervention and her military power. The paper will further address the way Mrs. Bandaranaike handled relations with conflicted parties and the rejoinders of that involvement. Information in this regard will be derived from secondary sources i.e. reference of text books, electronic data bases, journals, etc.

The paper will propose professional and diplomatic ways the parties acted to come to a settlement within India and Pakistan can be a lesson to current and future diplomats and government officials for a better professional integration in stressed situations.

Key words- Bangladesh, Indo- Pakistan War, Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh as a new nation was recognized on 16th December 1971, after months of struggle and brutal war for 13 days. Since the birth of Pakistan in 1947, two wings of it, namely West Pakistan and East Pakistan were

separated by India by 1600km. Although these two wings belonged to a single nation and shared the same religion, Islam, they had conflicts due to their cultural and linguistic disparities. Nevertheless, West Pakistan playing the role of the ruler, manipulated the civil service, diplomatic corps and armed forces while East Pakistan as the producer, accounted for 75% of all export earnings yet received 25% of all import earnings. (Reports of the Advisory Panels for the Fourth Five Year Plan, 1970) On the other hand, the East wing was not given a considerable political representation. In 1970 Pakistani election Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won majority of seats, the military leader of West Pakistan General Yahya Kahn planned to give the power to Ali Bhutto, instead of giving it to the victorious Awami League's leader Sheikh Mujbar Rahman. This incident aggrieved East Pakistanis and supporters of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman started to rebel against West Pakistan. The struggle was answered with military attacks and the Pakistani Army was accused of forming militia groups to do its bidding in East Pakistan. On March 1971 Sheikh Mujbar Rahman was arrested and taken to a secret location in West Pakistan. However before the arrest he has passed a hand written note of the declaration of independence which was circulated among people. Whether the expected result of arresting Rahman was to silence the East wing it turned to a reason for Bengalis to rebel against the West Pakistanis rule.

A. 1971 Third Indo- Pakistani War

When West Pakistan started man slaughtering, millions of people crossed the border and entered the India as refugees. This humanitarian crisis became an interest of India. Though never directly expressed, it was an opportunity for India to cut Pakistan down in size. Though international actors believed that the crisis could be settled by peaceful means and negotiations the final outcome became a war. A. K. Khandker, a senior minister in the Bangladeshi government and a former commander in the 1971 separatist group said, "India started providing weapons and training the rebels in May 1971 and stepped up to the program after signing the pact with the Soviet Union in August". (Jilani, 2011) This statement made by A. K. Khandker verifies that some of the refugees

approached to India were trained by Indian Army to send back to East Pakistan as guerrilla fighters. Moreover some of the officials of the Indian Army themselves were sent to East Pakistan to train separatist fighters. As India trained and aided, the fighters were more effective with their movements. Around November, 1971 India began to cross over East Pakistani territory. Aggrieved by the act of India, Pakistan reacted with launching air attacks on Indian bases on 3rd December, 1971 where the war officially commenced. Pakistanis attacks prompted India to declare war. India waited till November to nibble around East Pakistan so that winter snows close the Himalayan passes making Chinese intervention hard, as India thought Chinese intervention will become disadvantage for them.

India's air force attacked Pakistan air force and dominated the air within 48 hours. INS Vikrant (200 000ton) Air Craft carrier of Indian Navy made a total blockade within 48 hours. Chittagong and Karachi harbors war completely destroyed. Not a single vessel was able to put to sea from Chittagong. Even the Karachi town was rocketed and destroyed. Both Khulna and Nambla harbors and air fields were destroyed. World's biggest Air Craft carrier "Enterprise" (75 000 ton nuclear Air Craft carrier) was sent to Indian Ocean by USA as a symbolic action. UK sent "Eagle" air craft carrier, 26 planes sent by Jordan, China, Turkey and Indonesia also sent military support to Pakistan. UAE sent a half a squadron of fighter air crafts. US King Missile cruiser and a number of destroyers were sent to the Indian Ocean. However, unwavering political power by India and professionalism of their tri forces led India to fight with courage. Indian forces were ready to fight against Pakistan, standing between the Indian cities and American ships was Vikrant. Indian Eastern fleet lead by Vice Admiral Krishnam was ready to take on American 7th fleet. Russia was ready to defend India in a case of any external aggression. Finally with efforts of other international actors India was able to bring an end to the 1971 war with Pakistan. On 16th December 1971, Lieutenant General Ameer Abdulla Khan attached his signature to the instrument of surrender, in which counter signed by Lieutenant General Jatgeeth Sing (India-Bangladesh Army Commander).

B. Sri Lanka's Role

Then ruling government of Sri Lanka was "Sri Lanka Freedom Party" led by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. As the conflict proceeds India refused over-flight facilities from West Pakistan to East Pakistan. This became a reason for Sri Lanka to occupy the commanding position geo-strategically and as a base for defense

communication providing over-flight facilities, transit and refueling Pakistani air crafts and naval vessels. As an example, US naval vessel "Enterprise" was provided with the mentioned facilities by Sri Lanka. This movement can be recognized as a situation where Sri Lanka displayed the importance of its commanding position in the region though it reflected the significance of Sri Lanka's support in a regional conflict. While Sri Lanka was providing transit facilities to Pakistani air crafts, about 150 troops of Indian army were securing the Katunayaka Air Port from radical groups of internal struggle. Sri Lanka was aware the facilities so provided will be used against India. Sri Lanka insisted that weapons were never transported by those flights as they were known to be civilian air crafts. After getting the knowledge that inside the air crafts were military personals and arms Sri Lanka stopped support to any military sought of aircrafts from any country. Later Pakistani air planes carrying medical support was openly accepted by Sri Lanka.

Madam Bandaranaike's decision to support Pakistan was a perilous decision. Nonetheless, Madam Bandaranaike was an active member of the non- alignment movement, and her policies were on positive settlement and respecting the territorial integrity of Pakistan. This became another reason for her to support Pakistan, whereas as to retain the peace within the region. Sri Lanka was anxious about the role she played during the Bangladeshi insurgency. Sri Lanka was late in recognizing the independence struggle of Bangladesh. In addition Sri Lanka was more careful about the way she conducted relations with Dhaka. Apart from providing facilities Sri Lanka maintained a neutral position throughout the 13 days war.

Although India was much irritated by Sri Lanka serving Pakistan, it is said that no harm was occurred to the friendly relationships maintained by the parties of Sri Lanka and India. Because Sri Lanka did what she should do as a friendly nation. On the contrary Pakistan became grateful to Sri Lanka for the support given and latter Pakistan assisted and aided Sri Lanka during the years of internal struggle took place in Sri Lanka.

C. International Actors

Around April 1971, Field Marshal Yahya Khan was the mediator who negotiated secret ties between USA and Beijing, and in order to maintain the goodwill with Pakistan, USA had to back Pakistan. US did not have an actual intention to involve in a war, thereupon US advised India not to attack Pakistan. When Sino- Soviet relations became fragile as a result of the border issue, Sino- India

relations advanced. Thus, the Soviets wanted to curtail this relationship, which eventually led to the signing of the Friendship Treaty with India in 1971, though it was drafted two years earlier. Pakistan did not receive the expected level of support either from US or her reliable companion China, while India was aided by the Soviet Union on the terms of Friendship Treaty of 1971. In May, Madam Gandhi has written to US President Nixon about the flood of refugees burdening India. L K Jah, the Indian Ambassador to US had informed Henry Kissinger that due to the existing situation, India might have to send back these refugees as guerrillas to East Pakistan. President Nixon's response was if such a situation occurs they will cut economic aid to India. The US government suspected that India would support a Bengali insurgency and contribute to the emergence of independent Bangladesh. Therefore they encouraged China to advance towards India to intimidate India and assured that the US would protect them in case Soviets attacked China. Prime Minister Gandhi explained the growing humanitarian crisis, refugee problem and the Indian stand to the Western powers. The next day, after India declared war against Pakistan, George W. Bush, UN Ambassador to United Nations introduced a resolution in the Security Council calling for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Indian Armed Forces. However the resolution was vetoed by the Soviets. US discerned that the Pakistani Army would not be able to gain control over East Pakistan. Though a large number of ships and air crafts of allies of conflicted parties were present in the subcontinent, none of them wanted a confrontation between India and Pakistan. While ships such as US Enterprise and Tripoli were advancing towards India, Prime Minister Gandhi stood unshaken. The professionalism showed by Prime Minister Gandhi encouraged the military leaders. Even Soviets had only small ranged rockets (distance up to 300km). Therefore they had to take the risk of going near the enemy. They lifted the submarines and brought them to the surface so that it can be seen. Admiral Gordon, the commander of the carrier battle group of US has reported to the commander of the 7th fleet, "Sir, we are too late. There are Russian and UK submarines and a big collection of battleships". (Mahfuz, 2013)

Vikrant, together with Soviet war ships encircled Enterprise and Pakistani allied warships and blocked their way to Karachi, Chittagong and Dhaka. Although Pakistan and US expected China to attack Sikkim, until the last day China did not. Nevertheless Beijing feared that Soviets would launch an attack on them. As per the 9th clause of

the Indo- Soviet Friendship Treaty, "in the event of either party being subject to an attack or threat , there of the high contracting parties shall immediately enter into mutual consultations in order to remove such a threat and to take appropriate effective measures to ensure peace and security of their country". The original draft of the treaty did not contain such clause, hence it was included in order to prevent Chinese intervention in the Bangladeshi conflict. Additionally Soviets advanced their troops to the Sino-Soviet border as a precaution. The fundamental goal of US which was to protect West Pakistan was always a hidden part. During the 1960s some Tibetan youth were recruited by the Indian government and were trained in Uttar Pradesh under the command of an Indian General. Three weeks before the official commencement of the war this special frontier force of Tibetans were sent to East Pakistan to prepare the arrival of Indian army. With Bulgarian made assault rifles they entered Chittagong. They were able to neutralize a Pakistani brigade which was camped there. It helped the Indian troops to enter Dhaka.

II. CONCLUSION

After gaining independence as a sovereign state, Bangladesh had to face critical challenges in building as a secure nation. According to the Bangladeshi Government three million people were killed during the nine month of conflict. The brutality of the campaign of rape, murder and terror was ignored by the world community. The parties, who were not involved in this struggle, were either tortured or killed by the Pakistani Army. Not only villagers but university students and high class families were there. Majority of the Bengali women were raped. They either aborted their children or gave them away. Those women were rejected from their families and some were killed by their husbands. The effects of the conflict cannot merely be stated as war because and the mental and the physical damage caused. A "selected genocide" is more applicable. However mutilation of lives and property of Bengalis made them more vulnerable and affected in the reconstruction process. Not only Bangladesh, Pakistan as well had to face difficulties in rebuilding. After air attacks on Pakistani military bases and harbors, the Pakistani economy was almost shattered. The loss of East Pakistan, which played the role of producer in the Pakistani economy became a huge loss to Pakistan. Nonetheless it is difficult to assert that the two wings of Pakistani could have been governed by the same rule incessantly. Their unique geographical location is a stumbling block for peaceful governance. As a result it is

impractical for the two separate wings to exist under one government.

Although India and other international actors involved in the Bangladeshi Liberation movement for their own advantage, it is more of a paradox that if not for the professional integration of these states Bangladesh would not have been born. In the aftermath of the victory, India became the dominant regional military power. As a result, the balance of power between South Asia became unstable. India, the regional power started influencing the political situations of neighboring countries as incidents of this war displayed her military capability. India always acts in order to make sure that the policies of neighboring countries comply with the interests of India. Whenever it is inconsistent India finds a way to change that attitude. The 1971 war can be taken as a classic example to match this situation. Though recently India has said that she involved in the 1971 insurgency due to the humanitarian crisis and refugee crisis, the truth is, it became a fine opportunity for India to separate Pakistan into two pieces. Under all the justifications given India's intention to give power to a party who can be controlled according to India's whim and fancies was an evident fact. Since the birth of Bangladesh, India endeavored bringing up a pro-Indian Bangladeshi government. Madam Gandhi foreseeing the war together with military leaders prepared the context to protect her country while fighting with Pakistan at the same time. Similarly the Soviet Union was very effective and skillful to avoid a war in the Indian Ocean. Some of the largest and latest battleships of rivalries were anchored there. If a war persisted it could have destroyed the whole South Asia. Whereas for Sri Lanka, Madam Bandaranaike's only intention was to reach a firm solution for the crisis. She viewed assisting Pakistan is a healthier decision. Yet she was cautious of not providing military support for the Pakistanis. Therefore it could be concluded that she had a quite well-balanced policy so far regarding the Bangladeshi war.

In an era where there are hundreds of wars around the world professional integration in this crisis shows the way to avoid situations getting worse and making it easy to find solutions and resolve the problems. It is not acting according to the will of the powerful nations but through integrations a country can be secured and thousands of lives and resources can be saved therein.

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BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR



¹Author is an undergraduate of the Faculty of Law, of Sir John Kotelawala Defense University. Her research interests include Indo- Sri Lanka Relations, South Asian Studies, Law related to Bribery and Corruption. . She has completed her Higher Diploma in International Relations conducted by Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies.



²Author is an undergraduate of the Faculty of Law, of Sir John Kotelawala Defense University. Her research interests include South Asian Studies, International Law, Humanitarian Law, Intellectual Property Law and Constitutional law. . She has completed her Diploma in International Relations conducted by Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies.