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Tilting at Windmills: The Flawed U.S. Policy toward the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War

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Abstract

This article examines decision-making mistakes made by U.S. president Nixon and national security advisor Kissinger during the 1971 India-Pakistan crisis and war. It shows that Nixon and Kissinger routinely demonstrated psychological biases that led them to overestimate the likelihood of West Pakistani victory against Bengali rebels as well as the importance of the crisis to broader U.S. policy. The evidence fails to support Nixon and Kissinger's own framing of the 1971 crisis as a contest between cool-headed realpolitik and idealistic humanitarianism, and instead shows that Kissinger and Nixon's policy decisions harmed their stated goals because of repeated decision-making errors.

Keywords: Nixon, Kissinger, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sino-U.S. relations, 1971 India-Pakistan War, Biafra, motivated biases, availability heuristic

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How much damage can a president and his national security advisor do? How well can cabinet officials, the U.S. bureaucracy, and other branches of government contain a White House committed to a foreign policy course? The evidence from U.S. policy toward the 1971 East Pakistan crisis suggests that the president and his closest advisors can do quite a bit of damage, even if they pursue a policy at odds with the instincts of most of the rest of the government. That case also demonstrates one important mechanism through which power concentration can lead to harmful policy. Namely, when only a few individuals are responsible for major policy decisions, their unique biases are likely to go unchecked, making it difficult for them to respond to the world as it is rather than the world as they fear it to be.

Cataloguing these errors is important. Power oscillates in the U.S. system between concentration in the hands of the president and shared governance with other centres of power. When power is concentrated, the types of mistakes Nixon and Kissinger made propagate outward as U.S. policy, rather than remain as the mistaken beliefs of powerful individuals. If there is any chance of avoiding such pitfalls in the future, it is important to identify and acknowledge when and how decision-makers have erred in the past.

This article proceeds by, first, outlining the types of biases to which leaders might be subject, and delineating criteria to ascertain when such biases are apparent in the historical record. Then, it reviews three inter-related and flawed judgments Kissinger and Nixon made during the 1971 crisis: that the West Pakistan military could succeed in quelling the insurgency in East Pakistan, that U.S. policy toward Pakistan was important for Nixon's China initiative, and that China would intervene militarily to help Pakistan following Indian intervention. In each of these, the evidence is

overwhelming that Nixon and Kissinger's biases led them to pursue dangerous and ineffective policies.

Motivated and Unmotivated Biases

Psychologists typically distinguish between motivated and unmotivated biases. Unmotivated biases include drawing from evidence easily available to the observer—such as a recent experience—rather than accounting for a fuller, more representative range of experiences.¹ In addition to such shortcuts like this availability heuristic, individuals are prone to confirmation bias, where they attempt to situate new information or events in the context of pre-existing beliefs about how the world works.² Seeing what they expect, policymakers will prematurely conclude that enough information is available to chart a course of action, instead of waiting to see how events unfold. At the same time, confirmation bias diminishes the importance of discrepant information, meaning 'policymakers will proceed a long way down a blind alley before realizing that something is wrong'.³

Alongside these unmotivated deviations from rationality can be motivated biases: 'a tendency to form and hold beliefs that serve the individual's needs and desires'.⁴ Policymakers, for instance, face 'strong psychological pressures to perceive that the threats they face can be overcome.' They may conclude that 'others will allow the state's policy to succeed,' with hope replacing cold calculation of others' interests.⁵ They 'attempt to be rational and to construct a justification of their desired conclusion that would persuade a dispassionate observer,' argues Ziva Kunda. Kunda cautions, however, that this is only the 'illusion of objectivity.' Motivated reasoners are engaged in

¹ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, 'Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability,' *Cognitive Psychology* 5 (1973), 207.

² James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1994), 9.

³ Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1981), 105.

⁴ Arie Kruglanski and Icek Ajzen, 'Bias and Error in Human Judgment,' *European Journal of Social Psychology* 13/1 (1983), 4.

⁵ Jervis, 'Perceiving and Coping with Threat,' in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1985), 26-7.

'biased search through memory' to 'seek out instances' in which an outcome consistent with their goals took place.⁶

Combined, such biases can powerfully inhibit leaders from recognizing reality. Errors can compound because unrepresentative examples are used for purposes of analogical reasoning to extrapolate future behaviour and interpolate present unknowns.⁷ These tendencies can be mitigated if decision-making processes involve enough people that distinct worldviews and pre-existing beliefs lead to biases that countervail rather than reinforce one another.

This article utilizes two criteria to assess the presence of bias. First, did multiple observers with different motivations and worldviews reach similar conclusions based on similar evidence? If so, this is evidence against the presence of bias. This first criteria uses the behaviour and assessments of contemporary actors as a yardstick against which to identify anomalous behaviour. Second, the availability of historical evidence permits comparison of actions taken to what a hypothetical objective observer might do.⁸ It is impossible to completely recreate the information available to an historical figure, but a close approximation is possible, especially for the Nixon administration given the widespread use of audio-recording of phone calls and meetings. The divergence between the course that seems wise based on the evidence available to decisionmakers and the course they actually selected is a proxy measure for the presence and scale of bias.

Wishful Thinking about Pakistan's Prospects Based on Dubious Comparisons

After over a decade of martial rule, democratic elections finally took place in Pakistan on December 7, 1970. Mujibur Rahman's Awami League secured 160 out of 162 possible seats in East

⁶ Kunda, 'The Case for Motivated Reasoning,' *Psychological Bulletin* 108/3 (1990), 480-98.

⁷ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1995).

⁸ Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, 'Hawkish Biases,' in *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11*, eds. Trevor Thrall and Jane Cramer (New York: Routledge 2009), 79-96.

Pakistan while Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party won 83 of 138 possible seats in West Pakistan.⁹ The elections hurled Pakistan into political crisis. Bhutto refused to participate in the National Assembly unless a power-sharing arrangement could be devised. Military dictator Yahya Khan chose to postpone the legislative gathering indefinitely in February 1971, and ultimately opted to launch a brutal crackdown on East Pakistan on 25 March 1971.¹⁰

Immediately after the election results, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research worried that failure in post-election negotiations 'could well' lead to Bengali 'secession.'¹¹ In early February, the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan assessed 'recent and anticipated developments make continued unity doubtful over the long run and that we can do little to prevent a breakup.'¹² On 22 February, Kissinger wrote to Nixon, 'A realistic assessment would seem to recognize that there is very little material left in the fabric of the unity of Pakistan.'¹³ On 3 March, the Department informed Kissinger, 'Our Consulate General in Dacca estimates the chances of continued unity in Pakistan to be near zero.'¹⁴ Internally, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Joseph Sisco briefed Secretary William Rogers that both State Department Headquarters staff as well as the Embassy in Islamabad assessed that the Pakistan Army did not have 'sufficient strength to suppress Bengali agitation or counteract a secessionist move for any extended period....'¹⁵ Given the poor prospects of military intervention, an interagency group tasked with offering policy responses

⁹ Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of Calif. Press 1991), 31-33.

¹⁰ Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 2013), 34-42.

¹¹ Intelligence Brief INRB-217 from the Director of Intelligence and Research (Cline) to Secretary of State Rogers, Washington, 8 Dec. 1970, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 104.

¹² Telegram 944 from the Embassy in Pakistan to the Department of State, 1 Feb. 1971, 1235Z, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 109; Airgram from AmEmbassy Islamabad to the Department of State, 2 Feb. 1971, in *The American Papers* [hereafter, *TAP*]: *Secret and Confidential India-Pakistan-Bangladesh Documents, 1965-1973*, ed. Roedad Khan (New York: Oxford UP 1999), 473.

¹³ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 22 Feb. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 118.

¹⁴ Memorandum from the Department of State for Mr. Henry A. Kissinger, the White House, 2 Mar. 1971, in *TAP*, ed. Khan, 497.

¹⁵ Briefing Memorandum from Joseph J. Sisco to the Secretary of State, [5 Mar. 1971], in *TAP*, ed. Khan, 499.

to various Pakistan contingencies judged Pakistan military intervention would be 'irrational' given that such a course would be 'futile' and 'could provoke' an India-Pakistan war.¹⁶ More senior officials concurred with that assessment a few days later. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson told a Kissinger-chaired meeting on 6 March, "The judgement of all of us is that with the number of troops available to Yahya (a total of 20,000, with 12,000 combat troops) and a hostile East Pakistan population of 75 million, the result would be a blood-bath with no hope of West Pakistan reestablishing control over East Pakistan."¹⁷

Contrary to this analysis, Kissinger encouraged Nixon to wait before changing U.S. policy. He wrote on 26 March, 'It is probably a bit too early' to decide 'whether to approach Yahya, urging him to end the bloodshed... because we do not yet know whether calm will be restored in the East or whether the pattern of violence will continue and broaden.'¹⁸ Later that same day in a senior interagency meeting, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Christopher Van Hollen expressed his expectation of sustained, organized resistance. In response, Kissinger assessed, 'Then the prognosis is for civil war resulting eventually in independence or for independence fairly quickly.' Nevertheless, Kissinger informed the group of the President's preference: 'He doesn't want to be in the position where he can be accused of having encouraged the split-up of Pakistan. He does not favour a very active policy. This probably means that we would not undertake to warn Yahya against a civil war.'¹⁹

A long civil war that ultimately concluded in defeat for Pakistan would be injurious to U.S. interests. For a while, Nixon and Kissinger came to believe that unhappy outcome might not occur.

¹⁶ Memorandum from the Staff Secretary of the National Security Council (Davis) to the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Packard), Washington, 3 Mar. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 123.

¹⁷ Minutes of Senior Review Group Meeting, Washington, 6 Mar. 1971, 11:40am-12:20pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, *South Asia Crisis, 1971*, doc. 6.

¹⁸ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 26 Mar. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 10.

¹⁹ Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, 26 Mar. 1971, 3:03-3:32pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 11.

On 28 March, when the Central Intelligence Agency's *President's Daily Brief* reported, 'High-ranking Pakistani military officers are now claiming to U.S. officials that the armed forces are rapidly reestablishing control over East Pakistan,' the item also cautioned, 'The military situation remains confused, however....'²⁰ That same day, Kissinger's staff wrote to him, 'the situation in East Pakistan appears to have taken another turn for the worse.'²¹ Kissinger did not present a cautious picture when he updated Nixon by phone that same day: 'Apparently Yahya has gotten control of East Pakistan.... [A]ll the experts were saying that 30,000 people can't get control of 75 million. Well, this may still turn out to be true but as of this moment it seems to be quiet.' Nixon replied, '[H]ell, when you look over the history of nations 30,000 well-disciplined people can take 75 million any time'.²²

Kissinger's motivated bias is evident not only in his omission of any lingering 'confusion' noted by the CIA or evidence of a 'turn for the worse' offered by his own staff, but also in his willingness to ignore the CIA's analysis from just one day prior, when they reported 'the army's ability to re-establish central government authority in East Pakistan remains in doubt.' On 29 March, they emphasized that 'complete news censorship, the forced evacuation from Dacca of Western newsmen, and a breakdown of communications with the interior have combined to make the situation in the rest of East Pakistan [outside of Dacca] extremely unclear.' On 30 March, they assessed, 'It appears that disorder continues in much of the province, and even if government claims of holding cities are true, it is unlikely that the military yet controls the countryside.'²³

²⁰ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *The President's Daily Brief* [PDB], 28 Mar. 1971.

²¹ Memorandum from Samuel Hoskinson of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, 28 Mar. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 13.

²² Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and His Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), San Clemente, California, 29 Mar. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 14. *FRUS* lists the phone call as taking place on 29 March, but says that the tape recording from which the transcript was prepared was 'brought in' on that date. The conversation likely occurred on the day prior.

²³ CIA, *PDB*, 27 Mar. 1971; CIA, *PDB*, 29 Mar. 1971; CIA, *PDB*, 30 Mar. 1971.

When he updated Nixon on 30 March, Kissinger was more pessimistic. ‘In Pakistan it continues, but there isn't a whole lot we can do about it,’ he told Nixon. ‘We should just stay out,’ Nixon explained. ‘Like in Biafra, what the hell can we do?’ Kissinger concurred, and Nixon continued, ‘I don't like it, but I didn't like shooting starving Biafrans either.’ After lamenting the weak ‘nerves’ of U.S. diplomats, Nixon reemphasized, ‘It's just like Biafra. The main thing to do is to keep cool and not do anything. There's nothing in it for us either way.’²⁴

Biafra was both an available example—a case that Nixon and Kissinger both experienced directly in the months prior to the East Pakistan crisis—but also an appealing analogy that Nixon and Kissinger had motivations to reference. Years later, in his memoirs, Kissinger compared the 1971 war to three other conflicts: the U.S. Civil War, the attempt by Katanga to secede from the Congo, and Nigeria's Biafran war. This is an odd trio, selected from the well-over 200 intrastate conflicts between 1800 and 1970. These examples demonstrated ‘[a]lmost all nations will fight for their unity, even if sentiment in the disaffected area is overwhelmingly for secession.’ The other commonality of this trio, that Kissinger left unstated, was that in each of them the state defeated the separatist insurgency.²⁵

Biafra was an appealing example, because the central government regained control of a breakaway province, but also because it demonstrated that outside intervention was unnecessary. As a presidential candidate in 1968, Nixon had argued for U.S. intervention to provide humanitarian relief.²⁶ As the situation worsened in early 1970, the White House again considered U.S. intervention. The British government and the State Department counselled inaction. Despite White House

²⁴ Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and His Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), San Clemente, California, 30 Mar. 1971, 9:35 a.m., *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 15.

²⁵ Kissinger, *The White House Years* [hereafter *WHY*] (Boston: Little, Brown 1979), 852; Jeffrey S. Dixon and Meredith Reid Sarkees, *A Guide to Intra-State Wars: An Examination of Civil, Regional, and Intergovernmental Wars, 1816-2014*, rev. ed. (Washington: CQ Press 2015).

²⁶ Memorandum from Richard V. Allen of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, 13 Feb. 1969, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-5, pt. 1, *Documents on Sub-Saharan Africa, 1969-1972*, doc. 39.

instincts, no U.S. intervention occurred, overcome by the speedy re-establishment of Nigerian control over the province. As Kissinger reflected, Nigerian troops ‘snuffed out Biafran ‘independence.’” In retrospect, Kissinger argued, those who opposed intervention ‘were undoubtedly right.’²⁷

While an available and appealing example, Biafra was incomparable to the East Pakistan case, other than a few surface commonalities. Nixon himself would concede to ‘great differences’ between the two conflicts, even as he invoked Biafra as an example to be followed in the 1971 crisis.²⁸ The Nigerian federal military government always oversaw a population considerably larger than that of the Biafran breakaway state. By the time Nixon took office, they governed 47 million people compared to 4 to 6 million under Biafran separatist rule.²⁹ In contrast, East Pakistan had more people than West Pakistan. In the Biafran conflict, the Nigerian military operated from territory contiguous with the Biafran breakaway region, and could do so without needing to traverse around or over a hostile power, as Pakistan had to do with India.

Motivated biases combined with analogical reasoning appear to have led Kissinger and Nixon to greater optimism than their government colleagues and subordinates that did not share those motivations and experiences. On 8 April, the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad assessed in a telegram forwarded to Kissinger that even ‘if resistance crumbles,’ ‘over [the] long run, Embassy continues believe West Pak[istani]s will be unable to maintain their hold over East Pakistan.’³⁰ On 9 April, in an interagency meeting, Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, concurred with Assistant Secretary Sisco’s assessment that the ‘military picture may be inconclusive for some time.’ Sisco emphasized, however, that the muddled military picture did not alter his

²⁷ Kissinger, *WHY*, 416-417.

²⁸ Memorandum for the Record, Washington, 11 Aug. 1971, 3:15-3:47pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 121.

²⁹ Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 28 Jan. 1969, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-5, pt. 1, doc. 25.

³⁰ Telegram from the Embassy in Pakistan to the Department of State, Islamabad, 8 Apr. 1971, 1105Z, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 22.

assessment that 'East Pakistan will end in some form of separatism.' Kissinger questioned, perhaps looking for a bureaucratic ally in the room, 'Is there anyone that believes West Pakistan can reestablish complete control over the country?' The minutes record, 'No one disagreed with the analysis.'³¹ On 12 April 1971, the intelligence community concurred in an estimate forwarded to Kissinger: 'The prospects are poor that the 30,000-odd West Pakistani troops can substantially improve their position, much less reassert control over 75 million rebellious Bengalis.'³²

Kissinger came away unconvinced. On 16 April, he told the Indian ambassador, 'All our experts in the Pentagon and elsewhere were dead sure that West Pakistani military forces could not overpower the people of East Bengal, but it seems they have done so. What options do we now have?'³³ Nor was this assessment merely a bluff for foreign ears. Internally, Kissinger skirmished with the State Department on 19 April. John Irwin, Under Secretary of State, argued that West Pakistani occupation of the east was too expensive to be tenable, even if there was military progress in population centres. Kissinger countered, 'We've seen no evidence of any effective opposition.' Van Hollen, who headed State's South Asia section, responded, 'You can't go by bus between Dacca and Chittagong. The railroad is not running. The East Pakistan government is simply not operating.' Kissinger changed topics.³⁴

Kissinger's factual fight was intimately associated with U.S. policy responses. Internally for weeks, the State Department had argued that the prospects for the success of West Pakistani military intervention were so low that the emergence of an independent East Pakistan was a near certainty. As a result, the United States should attempt to dissuade West Pakistan from that course of action and, if military intervention were to occur, to disassociate itself from an intervention that would fail

³¹ Minutes of Senior Review Group Meeting, Washington, 9 Apr. 1971, 11:15am-12:15pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 23.

³² Special National Intelligence Estimate 32-71, Washington, 12 Apr. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 131.

³³ Quoted in Raghavan, *1971*, 90.

³⁴ Minutes of Senior Review Group Meeting, Washington, 19 Apr. 1971, 3:10-4:10pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 23.

and could tarnish the United States in the eyes of India and an eventually independent East Pakistan. Kissinger, with Nixon's backing, refused to acknowledge this reality.

Without them, it seems probable that the State Department preference for sanctions and more honest private criticisms would have become U.S. policy. Whether that would have altered Yahya's course is unknown. Srinath Raghavan concludes, 'If the Nixon administration had used its economic leverage on Pakistan in late April to early May 1971 and had clearly indicated to the Pakistani regime that it would soon be on the brink of pauperdom, it is highly probable that Yahya and his colleagues would have been forced to negotiate with Mujib....'³⁵ This may have only delayed Pakistan's dissolution by a few years, but a confederal Pakistan would have been more likely to end peacefully and less likely to end in a humiliating defeat for the Pakistan Army.

Overemphasizing Pakistan's Role in Triangular Diplomacy

If motivated biases played a role in Nixon and Kissinger's stubbornness, why were they so motivated? The answer partly lies in a pre-existing fondness Nixon held for Pakistan dating back to his visit to Karachi in 1953 as Eisenhower's vice president, and a corresponding dislike for India from a visit to New Delhi on that same trip.³⁶ That generalized affinity was amplified exponentially as a result of Nixon and Kissinger's overestimation of Pakistan's importance in their effort to improve relations with the People's Republic of China, which accelerated in late spring 1971. Even as the odds of Pakistani success in the east stayed low, Nixon and Kissinger convinced themselves they had to support Yahya's policy because of this perceived outsized Pakistani role.

The evidence is considerable that Pakistan played an important, but by no means crucial, role in Nixon's China opening. Beginning in August 1969, Nixon separately asked Yahya and Romanian

³⁵ Raghavan, 1971, 266-7.

³⁶ Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP 2001), 60-61.

leader Nicolae Ceausescu to act as intermediaries with Beijing.³⁷ Nixon's efforts were not limited to Pakistan or Romania, nor did China ever show a strong preference for these channels alone.

Discussions in Warsaw, host city for official Sino-U.S. discussions since 1958, resumed in January 1970. There the United States first proposed and China accepted the idea that talks might be held at a level higher than ambassador 'or [in] any other channel.'³⁸ U.S. diplomatic feelers to Chinese diplomats in distant places, such as Kabul, also indicated China's willingness to talk anywhere.³⁹

The initial progress in talks stalled because of the U.S. decision to intervene in Cambodia in April 1970. Once official talks became stuck, Kissinger attempted alternative routes. Over several months, he used multiple interlocutors in an attempt to open a channel with the Chinese Embassy in Paris.⁴⁰ In October, Nixon went back to the Pakistani and Romanian channels. He told Yahya that it was 'essential that the U.S. have a dialogue with China,' and asked him to convey that the United States would readily send a senior diplomat or politician to Beijing to 'establish links secretly.' Nixon passed a similar message through Romania the following day, noting U.S. willingness to hold talks in other channels if China preferred.⁴¹

On 9 December 1970, Washington finally received a positive signal after months of Chinese silence. Yahya informed the Pakistani ambassador in Washington that Beijing was willing to accept a special envoy from President Nixon in Beijing. That response included a codicil that Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, had remarked, 'We have had messages from the United States from different sources in the past but this is the first time that the proposal has come from a Head, through a

³⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 28 Aug. 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, vol. 17, *China*, 1969-1972, doc. 28; Memorandum of Conversation, Bucharest, 2 Aug. 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, vol. 29, *Eastern Europe; Eastern Mediterranean*, doc. 183.

³⁸ Chris Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point: Nixon and China, 1969-1972* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP 2012), 38-45.

³⁹ Backchannel Message from the Ambassador to Afghanistan (Neumann) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Kabul, 13 Jan. 1970, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, vol. 16, doc. 60.

⁴⁰ Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 54-6; Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 14 Sept. 1970, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, vol. 17, doc. 89; Memorandum of Conversation, Paris, 27 Sept. 1970, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, vol. 17, doc. 90.

⁴¹ Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 56-7.

Head, to a Head. The United States knows that Pakistan is a great friend of China and therefore we attach importance to the message.⁴² Kissinger promptly drafted and received Nixon's permission to respond. On 16 December, Kissinger gave the Pakistani ambassador a note for Zhou that expressed U.S. interest in a preliminary meeting to discuss arranging higher-level discussions.⁴³

In January 1971, Romania, too, reported of Chinese willingness to host a special envoy. As Kissinger noted contemporaneously, the message the Chinese sent through Romania was 'almost the same' as that sent through the Pakistanis, with the 'entirely novel and startling' exception that Zhou appeared to suggest in the Romanian channel that Nixon himself should visit Beijing.⁴⁴ Based on declassified Romanian and other documents, it now appears that Zhou may have given the Romanians the message for Nixon a few days prior to his passage of that same message to the Pakistanis, but for unknown reasons the Romanians delayed delivery of Zhou's reply longer than the Pakistanis delayed in their delivery.⁴⁵

In his memoirs, Kissinger reports the president and he had a 'slight preference' for the Pakistani channel because of concerns that 'it would be difficult for Bucharest to avoid briefing Moscow.' They demonstrated this preference by giving the Romanian ambassador in Washington the exact message they had given Pakistan in mid-December, but conveying the message orally rather than including a written copy as they had with the Pakistanis.⁴⁶ Whether this too-clever-by-half signal was noticed by the Chinese is not known. Also in January, Kissinger received word back

⁴² Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, undated, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 99.

⁴³ Record of Discussion between the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and the Pakistani Ambassador to the United States (Hilaly), Washington, 16 Dec. 1970, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 100.

⁴⁴ Kissinger, *WHY*, 703; Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 60-63; Editorial Note, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, *China, 1969-1972*, doc. 94; Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 12 Jan. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 102.

⁴⁵ Mircea Munteanu, 'Romania and the Sino-American Rapprochement, 1969-1971: New Evidence from the Bucharest Archives,' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 16 (2007/2008): 407. On reasons for slow Pakistani delivery see Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 61.

⁴⁶ Kissinger, *WHY*, 704.

from the Chinese ambassador in Paris, who had told a contact of Kissinger that an earlier U.S. message sent through Paris had been received by Beijing, though the Chinese ambassador offered no further comment.⁴⁷

Kissinger's behaviour suggests that it truly was a 'slight' preference for the Pakistan channel. In February, the Chinese deputy foreign minister Qiao Guanhua asked the Norwegian ambassador in Beijing to pass along a message to Washington that 'the Chinese and the Americans nevertheless must sooner or later sit down and straighten out our relationships,' while Qiao simultaneously floated the idea of meeting Kissinger to do so. In his assessment to Nixon, Kissinger assessed Qiao approached Norway 'on the grounds of Norwegian friendship and reliability—others such as the Pakistanis might not fit as well.'⁴⁸

In April, Nixon asked Kissinger if Romania was 'our best contact' with China. Kissinger initially demurred, but ultimately conceded that Romania might be 'better than Pakistan right now,' while also assuring the President that Romania could pass a message securely.⁴⁹ Nixon's desire to appear 'cool and aloof' apparently stopped him from passing a new message through Romania at the time, but eight days later the White House decided to use the Paris channel to try and get a message to China.⁵⁰ Before this path could be explored, Pakistan's ambassador in Washington informed Kissinger he had a reply from Zhou.

⁴⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 25 May 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 128.

⁴⁸ Memorandum from the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 10 Feb. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 104.

⁴⁹ Phone conversation between President Nixon and Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 18 Apr. 1971, 10:23-10:35am, http://nixon tapes.org/hak/1971-04-18_Nixon_001-145.mp3; Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 69. Kissinger focuses on the mechanics ('a courier') of how the message would be passed, but was responding to a direct query from Nixon and could have easily suggested that Romania could not be trusted to maintain a secret.

⁵⁰ Kissinger, *WHY*, 713; Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 69; Letter from the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the Defense Attaché in France (Walters), Washington, 27 Apr. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 119.

The Chinese reaffirmed their willingness to host a U.S. envoy.⁵¹ On 10 May, Nixon sent his formal reply, in which he stressed the importance of the Pakistan channel, something the Chinese had not. 'For secrecy, it is essential that no other channel be used,' the Americans wrote.⁵² The Chinese, in their response of 29 May, saw little need for secrecy, and suggested that Kissinger simply travel to Beijing 'in an open capacity,' but they agreed to secrecy if the Americans so desired.⁵³ Kissinger's preference for secrecy meant that he would manufacture an excuse to travel overtly to Pakistan in July, and then onward to Beijing covertly from there.

Pakistan played an important, but far from irreplaceable role, in Nixon's China initiative. Nixon and Kissinger's subsequent behaviour would still be understandable if China emphasized Pakistan's strategic importance, no matter what role it played in backchannel diplomacy. Instead, China signalled a preference for Pakistan's continued unity, but at no point did it indicate that preference took precedence over the strategic logic that motivated Sino-U.S. rapprochement.

By that summer, Nixon and Kissinger were increasingly concerned that West Pakistan's position in the East was growing untenable—a position most of the rest of the U.S. government had reached months earlier. Consultations with the U.S. ambassador to India in June 1971 detailing the scope of the refugee crisis generated by West Pakistan's crackdown shook Nixon. Ambassador Keating had stressed to the president that he and the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan were both convinced that 'the old Pakistan was through.' Nixon privately confided to Kissinger after the meeting of his doubts about Yahya's political survival: 'I don't know, Henry, it just may be that the poor son-of-a-bitch can't survive.' The scale of the crisis was putting immense pressure on the Indian government to intervene militarily to stop the flow of refugees. Nevertheless, Kissinger

⁵¹ Message from the Premier of the People's Republic of China to President Nixon, Beijing, 21 Apr. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 118. The message was delivered on 27 April to the White House.

⁵² Message from the Government of the United States to the Government of the People's Republic of China, Washington, 10 May 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 125.

⁵³ Message from the Premier of the People's Republic of China Chou En-lai to President Nixon, Beijing, 29 May 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 130.

instinctively feared that U.S. pressure on Yahya might scuttle the China initiative, even as the national security advisor explained to Nixon that he would try to create a separate channel that could endure in the event of Yahya's downfall.⁵⁴

Kissinger had a chance to assess Pakistan's importance to the China initiative in his momentous secret visit to Beijing in July 1971. During that visit, Kissinger had at least seventeen hours of discussions with Chinese leaders. His Chinese interlocutors, principally Zhou, showed surprising clarity when they wanted to convey their interests or articulate redlines, especially pertaining to Taiwan. Their concern about Pakistan was displayed in much milder language. On the second day of talks, Zhou expressed concern about Indian subversion. Kissinger went out of his way to stress that the United States was not 'cooperating with this.' Later in the session, Zhou returned to the topic, 'We... support the stand of Pakistan. This is known to the world. If [the Indians] are bent on provoking the situation, then we cannot sit idly by.' Zhou acknowledged what Kissinger had told him earlier. 'You said you were pressing India not to provoke a disturbance, and we also believe that you would like to improve your relations with Pakistan. I believe that you probably did say to India what you told us. We also support your opinion, that is advise India not to provoke such a disturbance, because President Yahya Khan is most concerned about the situation.'⁵⁵

In his memoirs, Kissinger says that later that evening on the second day, Zhou 'ruminated' on the future of India, trying to convey that 'there was a great danger' of India acting as an aggressor in 1971 as it had in 1962. This interpretation is simply not present in Kissinger's own memorandum summarizing the discussion. Instead, it appears Zhou's goal was to convince Kissinger that China was not the aggressor in the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clashes, just as it had not been the aggressor in

⁵⁴ Conversation among President Nixon, his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), and the Ambassador to India (Keating), Washington, 15 June 1971, 5:13–5:40pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 137.

⁵⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, 10 July 1971, 12:10pm–6pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 140.

its 1962 conflict with India. In other words, Zhou was trying to make a point about China, not India, and certainly not Pakistan (which was unmentioned).⁵⁶

On the third and final day of the talks, Zhou and Kissinger agreed to utilize the Paris channel for important messages but to ‘exchange some communications through [Yahya] for politeness,’ albeit ‘nothing substantive.’ Zhou explained that there was a saying in China, that ‘one shouldn’t break the bridge after crossing it.’ Kissinger’s next stop was Pakistan. As Zhou concluded the session, he asked Kissinger to pass along a message to Yahya, ‘If India commits aggression, we will support Pakistan. You are also against that.’ Kissinger concurred, ‘We will oppose that, but we cannot take military measures.’ Zhou sympathized, ‘You are too far away. But you have strength to persuade India. You can speak to both sides.’ Kissinger agreed to ‘do our best.’⁵⁷

Based on these exchanges, Kissinger came to conclude that were the United States ‘to gang up on Pakistan... [it] would jeopardize the China initiative.’⁵⁸ The scarcity of evidence does not correlate to the firmness of Kissinger’s conclusion. Moreover, there was virtually no other evidence from intelligence or diplomatic reporting of such an interpretation. The evidence instead suggests that Nixon and Kissinger were preoccupied with China, and began to see everything as deeply interconnected with that initiative. Pakistan’s non-trivial, but ultimately secondary, role became exaggerated in importance. Zhou’s sincere, but modest statements of support for Pakistan, became clear and inviolable redlines in Nixon and Kissinger’s eyes.

Holier than Mao

⁵⁶ Kissinger, *WHY*, 751; Memorandum of Conversation, Beijing, 10 July 1971, 11:20-11:50pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 141.

⁵⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, 11 July 1971, 10:35am-11:55am, vol. 17, doc. 143.

⁵⁸ Memorandum for the President from Henry A. Kissinger, 14 July 1971, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-40.pdf>; Kissinger, *The WHY*, 862.

As the East Pakistan crisis worsened in the late summer and fall of 1971, the White House—almost alone among U.S. and international observers—came to believe that the only way to preserve U.S. credibility in the eyes of Beijing was to encourage a Sino-Indian conflict even if that meant a greater likelihood of U.S.-Soviet war. They came to believe this despite widespread indications that China was hesitant to intervene on Pakistan's behalf and had signalled that reluctance to Pakistan. They were trapped in confirmation bias—seeing the world that they expected to see rather than the one before their eyes—and their misguided actions imperilled U.S. interests.

In his memoirs, Kissinger writes that, in mid-July, he 'returned to Washington with a premonition of disaster.' India 'would almost certainly attack Pakistan shortly after the monsoon ended.'⁵⁹ In such an eventuality, Kissinger told the National Security Council on 16 July, 'the Chinese would come in.' This would be disastrous, he explained. 'If there is an international war and China does get involved, everything we have done [with China] will go down the drain.' This echoed the president's own thinking that 'the situation in South Asia' carried 'enormous risks' for the China initiative.⁶⁰

In this context, Kissinger secretly told the Indian ambassador on 17 July, in a meeting with no other U.S. officials present, that in the event of a war where China intervened on Pakistan's side, 'We would be unable to help you against China.'⁶¹ On 19 July, he apparently decided to similarly warn the Soviet ambassador to the United States that 'a war between India and Pakistan could not be localized in East Pakistan and might not be confined to the subcontinent.'⁶²

Kissinger's calculations in making these twin threats remain unclear. CIA correspondence with Kissinger after their sources learned of the threat suggests the CIA at least did not know

⁵⁹ Kissinger, *WHY*, 862.

⁶⁰ Memorandum for the Record, San Clemente, California, 16 July 1971, 10:57am-12:06pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 103.

⁶¹ Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1983), 451-2.

⁶² Minutes of a Senior Review Group Meeting, Washington, 23 July 1971, 4:10-5:30pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 105, fn. 3.

Kissinger had made it.⁶³ Weeks later, once Indian inquiries about the threat began appearing in diplomatic channels, Kissinger's deputy, Alexander Haig, went so far as to tell the State Department that Kissinger 'did not make such a statement.'⁶⁴ Writing before declassified documents were available, but after interviewing several U.S. participants and Indian diplomats, journalist Seymour Hersh concluded that Kissinger and Nixon 'were deliberately deceiving their government in an attempt to create the conditions that they thought existed.'⁶⁵

Whatever Kissinger's intent, India and the Soviet Union did not remain passive. Kissinger was not the only one with a card to play. Since early 1969, the Soviet Union had indicated its interest in 'some kind of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation' with India.⁶⁶ For years, India demurred. Then, in early April 1971, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai wrote to Yahya in a letter of support released to the public on 12 April. In it, Zhou assured, 'should Indian expansionists dare to launch aggression against Pakistan, [the] Chinese government and people will, as always, firmly support [the] Pakistan government and people in their just struggle to safeguard state sovereignty and national independence.'⁶⁷ On 29 April, Indian ambassador D. P. Dhar wrote to the Indian Prime Minister's office, arguing the 'blatant and aggressive statements emanating from China' were exactly the sorts of situations that had lead Indian diplomats to consider a formal Indo-Soviet agreement in the first place.⁶⁸ Kissinger's comments only further heightened Indian concerns. Foreign Secretary T. N. Kaul wrote to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 3 August that Kissinger's comment 'changed the

⁶³ Memorandum from Director of Central Intelligence Helms to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, 29 July 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 110.

⁶⁴ Memorandum from Harold Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, 7 Sept. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 143, fn. 6.

⁶⁵ Hersh, *Price of Power*, 453.

⁶⁶ Quoted Raghavan, 1971, 110.

⁶⁷ Telegram 520 from AmEmbassy Islamabad to the Department of State, 13 Apr. 1971, in *TAP*, ed. Khan, 531.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Raghavan, 1971, 121.

whole perspective in which the Soviet proposal has to be considered.⁶⁹ Dhar was now tasked with finalizing an Indo-Soviet agreement that he assessed would ‘invite big jealousies.’⁷⁰

In his memoirs, Kissinger writes that the Indo-Soviet treaty announced on 9 August ‘was bound to eliminate’ India’s fears of Soviet reliability and Chinese intervention, meaning ‘it therefore objectively increased the danger of war.’⁷¹ His contemporary analysis was less categorical. He emphasized to Nixon on 24 August, ‘Whether or not the treaty would deter the Chinese in a crunch, however, is another matter.’⁷²

By then, Kissinger had ample reason to believe China would not intervene. On 17 August, Kissinger learned from both the CIA and the Joint Chiefs that China had not reinforced along the Sino-Indian frontier, that it would be difficult for them to do so, and that U.S. intelligence ‘would know ahead of time’ of Chinese moves.⁷³ They would repeat that assessment in September and October.⁷⁴ For its part, the State Department evaluated likely Chinese actions in the event of an Indo-Pakistani war and concluded that while it was likely China would provoke incidents along the Sino-Indian border, a limited invasion in disputed regions or an ‘invasion on several fronts’ was unlikely.⁷⁵ The CIA concluded on 12 November, ‘China was not likely to help Pakistan very actively if it came to war.’⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Quoted in Raghavan, *1971*, 127.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Gary Bass, *The Blood Telegram* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2013), 219.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger to President Nixon, Washington, 24 Aug. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 132.

⁷³ Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, 17 Aug. 1971, 4:35-5:05pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 126.

⁷⁴ Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, 8 Sept. 1971, 3:07-4:25pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 144.

⁷⁵ Analytical Summary Prepared by the National Security Council Staff, Washington, 7 Oct. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 158; Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, 7 Oct. 1971, 3:10-3:50pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 159.

⁷⁶ Minutes of Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, 12 Nov. 1971, 11:09am-noon, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 183.

By mid-November, the prospect of war was evident. The CIA was not speculating about China's actions in the event of an unlikely scenario. As early as mid-October, the Indian Army had authorized shallow offensive operations up to ten miles into East Pakistan. Additional offensive operations in mid-November focused on the Jessore district adjacent to the India border.⁷⁷ This escalation was contemporaneously documented in CIA reporting as well as repeated front-page stories in *The New York Times*.⁷⁸

By early December, Kissinger became convinced that Chinese intervention was possible, if not probable. What explains his belief, contrary to the bulk of U.S. government assessments? It does not appear to be the numerous overt and backchannel conversations he had with the Chinese in Paris and Beijing. While Huang Chen, China's ambassador to France, and Zhou Enlai expressed frustration and annoyance with India, they did not indicate any intent to intervene in the East Pakistan crisis.⁷⁹ In fact, Zhou avoided discussing India when Kissinger raised it in October.⁸⁰ Separately, Zhou's stated his desire to avoid that India 'feel' that the United States and China 'are working together to threaten her' as he and Kissinger negotiated the text of what would ultimately become the Shanghai Communiqué.⁸¹ Nor did Zhou's lack of interest escape Kissinger's notice at the time. In a memo to Nixon, Kissinger wrote, the India-Pakistan crisis 'surprisingly consumed much less time than I expected, and while China clearly stands behind Pakistan, I detected less passion and more caution from [Zhou] than I had in July....'⁸² Almost simultaneous with Kissinger's

⁷⁷ Raghavan, *1971*, 231-2.

⁷⁸ See, e.g., CIA, *PDB*, 6 Nov. 1971; CIA, *PDB*, 12 Nov. 1971; *New York Times*, 8, 12, and 24 Nov. 1971.

⁷⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, Paris, 16 Aug. 1971, 9:05-10:45am, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, *Documents on China, 1969-1972*, doc. 17; Memorandum of Conversation, Paris, 13 Sept. 1971, 8:45-10:40am, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, doc. 19; Memorandum of Conversation, Beijing, 24 Oct. 1971, 10:28am-1:55pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, doc. 51.

⁸⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, Beijing, 22 Oct. 1971, 4:15-8:28pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, doc. 44; Message from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), Beijing, 24 Oct. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, doc. 50; Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 139-40.

⁸¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Beijing, 25 Oct. 1971, 9:50-11:40pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, doc. 54.

⁸² Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, Nov. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 164.

discussions with Zhou, the CIA identified signs that, if anything, China might be considering improving relations with India, despite the ongoing crisis.⁸³

With Zhou dodging the topic in October, Kissinger decided to ask in writing. Through Paris, the United States asked for ‘the Chinese side’s views on the situation in South Asia’ in a message on 15 November.⁸⁴ On 20 November, China responded. ‘Should Pakistan be subjected to aggression by India, China will support the Pakistan Government and people in their just struggle. China already made public its above stand during the visit of the Pakistan Delegation to China. China has also agreed to continue to provide military assistance.’ For its part, the Chinese government ‘hoped that the United States will exert its influence to prevent the further deterioration of the situation through persuasion.’⁸⁵

Nixon and Kissinger would come to interpret this Chinese ‘hope’ for U.S. ‘influence’ expansively, even though Chinese diplomats elected to emphasize ‘persuasion’ in their private message rather than any number of other means. Kissinger kept pressing. On 23 November, the same day that Yahya Khan declared a ‘state of emergency’ due to heavy fighting along the India-East Pakistan frontier, Kissinger asked Huang Hua about the expanding India-Pakistan crisis. Huang referred Kissinger to the speech made during the visit of the Pakistani delegation to Beijing, the same speech referenced by Zhou in the backchannel message. ‘Within that speech is contained our basic position.’ Kissinger said he had seen excerpts, but requested that his staff to ‘get the text.’⁸⁶

The excerpts he may have seen could have come in the CIA’s *President’s Daily Brief* of 9 November, which emphasized that China’s pledges of support in the speech were vague and gave

⁸³ CIA, *PDB*, 23 Oct. 1971.

⁸⁴ Instructions to the Military Attaché at the Embassy in France (Walters), Washington, undated, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, doc. 59.

⁸⁵ Message from the Government of the People’s Republic of China to the Government of the United States, [20 Nov. 1971.] *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, doc. 64.

⁸⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, New York, 23 Nov. 1971, 10-11:55pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, doc. 68.

Beijing ‘considerable freedom of manoeuvre.’⁸⁷ Or perhaps Kissinger read the longer item in the CIA’s *Central Intelligence Bulletin* that same day, which emphasized that the Pakistani delegation ‘got somewhat less... than they had hoped for’ in the public remarks.⁸⁸

Nor were these the only signs in November and early December that pointed to Chinese inaction. Assistant Secretary of State Sisco concluded on the morning of 24 November, ‘We won’t become involved [militarily], and I don’t think the Russians or Chinese will either.’⁸⁹ That was before Sisco saw the French ambassador to the United States that same day, who relayed that in French conversations with the Chinese deputy foreign minister that the Chinese had said they had ‘told [the] Pakistanis to keep quiet and [the Chinese] think they will.’⁹⁰ The French took this to mean that China had advised moderation. The U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission in Pakistan, following conversations with Bhutto in the first week of December, assessed ‘that Chinese had in fact avoided committing themselves to Paks as much as GOP would have liked in this regard,’ an assessment cabled to Washington.⁹¹

The CIA, the State Department, and the French all concluded China would not intervene. As the war officially began on 3 December, Kissinger waived. With an Indian ground movement toward the large East Pakistan town of Jessore in the first week of December, the possibility that India might announce an independent Bangladesh from newly seized territory made the urgency of Chinese intervention even greater, and their inaction all the more frustrating.⁹² Kissinger argued in a National Security Council meeting on 6 December that India had waited until ‘the passes from

⁸⁷ CIA, *PDB*, 9 Nov. 1971.

⁸⁸ Directorate of Intelligence, CIA, *Central Intelligence Bulletin*, 9 Nov. 1971.

⁸⁹ Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, 24 Nov. 1971, 9:29-10:05am, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 198.

⁹⁰ Telegram from Department of State to AmEmbassy Paris, [24 Nov. 1971?], in *TAP*, ed. Khan, 725.

⁹¹ Telegram 634 from Department of State to U.S. Mission NATO, 9 Dec. 1971, in *TAP*, ed. Khan, 740. This telegram repeated one from Islamabad regarding a December 7 conversation.

⁹² Lt. Gen. Robert Cushman, deputy director of the CIA, speculated about Jessore become capital of an independent Bangladesh on 1 Dec. Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, 1 Dec. 1971, 4:17-4:50pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 213.

China were closed with snow' before intervening militarily, preventing Chinese action even if Beijing desired it.⁹³ When he told Nixon later that same day that the 'weather is against' Chinese intervention, Nixon countered. The fact that no one expected it would make intervention all the more surprising. He offered an historical example, 'The Chinese... when they came across the Yalu, we thought they were a bunch of goddamn fools in the heart of the winter, but they did it.' The president's historical analogy did little justice to the wide geographic differences between the Sino-Korean and Sino-Indian borders. Nevertheless, Nixon was adamant because he was 'convinced that if the Chinese start moving the Indians will be petrified.'⁹⁴

Having briefly doubted, Kissinger now became a zealous convert to the possibility of Chinese action. On 7 December, the day after Nixon's Yalu analogy, the CIA reported that the Soviets had warned Indira Gandhi that the Chinese could still 'rattle the sword' in disputed areas, while also assuring her that the Soviet Union would counterbalance any such Chinese move.⁹⁵ Kissinger summarized that report, along with a new review of China's military position along the border. That new review largely retained the months-long analytic conclusion 'that the Chinese are not militarily prepared for major and sustained involvement in the Indo-Pak war,' though they 'retain the option of a smaller scale effort....'⁹⁶ This was not substantially different than the State Department assessment presented to Kissinger on 7 October.

On 8 December, Nixon showed doubts. In a phone call with former Speaker of the House John McCormick, he explained, 'Right now [the Chinese] can't do anything.... This thing came to a

⁹³ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, Washington, 6 Dec. 1971, 1:30-3:30pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 237.

⁹⁴ Conversation between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, 6 Dec. 1971, 6:14-6:38pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 162.

⁹⁵ TDCS-314/12990-71, Central Intelligence Agency Intelligence Information Cable, Washington, 7 Dec. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 246.

⁹⁶ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 8 Dec. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 247.

head at a time weather-wise when those great mountain passes coming down over the Himalaya mountains are all covered with snow, so the Chinese couldn't move on India if they wanted to.⁹⁷

Two hours later, the President and Kissinger were joined by Attorney General John Mitchell as they considered U.S. options. Kissinger proposed a message to China, 'If you are ever going to move this is the time.' Nixon ignored his own analysis to McCormick hours earlier, and returned to his prior stance: 'the Chinese have got to move to that damn border. The Indians have got to get a little scared.' Mitchell asked, 'What's the prospect of the Chinese moving?' 'None,' Nixon said. 'You told me none, Henry, yesterday. Remember?' Kissinger now discarded his scepticism. 'I'm not so sure there's none, Mr. President. Because they know that this is a dress rehearsal of what may happen to them.' He continued, 'It is not inconceivable to me that the Chinese will start a little diversion—not a huge one—but enough to keep the Indians from moving too many troops west.'⁹⁸

Later that night, Nixon and Kissinger spoke again. Nixon speculated that the Chinese 'might move a little if they thought we were going to play.' If they did, 'Boy, I tell you a movement of even some Chinese toward that border could scare those goddamn Indians to death.'⁹⁹ In their deliberations, Nixon and Kissinger seemingly ignored the stream of intelligence reporting, which Kissinger had highlighted for Nixon that same day, which suggested that Gandhi was very much aware of the possibility of some Chinese move. If this scared her to death, these well-placed sources had not passed along that fear.

Nixon and Kissinger proceeded anyway. When they had doubts, one would bolster the other and continue down a path of almost guaranteed failure. On 9 December, Nixon acknowledged to Kissinger the seeming futility of their actions. '[L]ook at what the realities are.... The partition of

⁹⁷ Quoted in Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 157.

⁹⁸ Conversation among President Nixon, his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), and Attorney General Mitchell, Washington, 8 Dec. 1971, 4:20-5:01pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 165.

⁹⁹ Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, 8 Dec. 1971, 8:03–8:12 pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 166.

Pakistan is a fact.’ The East Pakistanis were welcoming Indian troops. In such a circumstance, Nixon asked, why were they ‘going through this agony?’ Kissinger now had answers for Nixon. ‘to prevent the West Pakistan army from being destroyed..., to maintain our Chinese arm..., to prevent a complete collapse of the world’s psychological balance of power...’ Nixon was seemingly convinced. Perhaps moving an aircraft carrier, the *USS Enterprise*, into the Indian Ocean would demonstrate U.S. resolve, and might entice Chinese intervention.¹⁰⁰ The same day, the Défense Intelligence Agency sent its analysis to the White House that only ‘small-scale’ Chinese action was probable given the disposition of Chinese forces and Beijing’s fear of ‘Soviet retaliatory moves.’¹⁰¹ Also that day the State Department’s intelligence arm concluded Chinese action was unlikely.¹⁰²

Nixon and Kissinger had to convince themselves that limited Chinese moves would scare India sufficiently to impel a ceasefire. The next day, 10 December, Nixon asked Kissinger, ‘These Indians are cowards, right?’ Kissinger agreed, but acknowledged that they were cowards ‘with Russian backing.’¹⁰³ That same day, U.S. clandestine reporting stated that Prime Minister Gandhi now had ‘some indications’ the Chinese might create border incidents in the East, though Kissinger accurately noted in his summary to the president that the United States had ‘no evidence that the Chinese are actually planning such actions.’¹⁰⁴

Kissinger went to New York to try and convince the Chinese, through their mission at the United Nations, to move. He told Huang Hua that the United States would provide intelligence on Soviet forces and offered the President’s assurance that ‘if [China] took measures to protect its

¹⁰⁰ Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, 9 Dec. 1971, 12:44–1:27pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 168.

¹⁰¹ DIA, ‘Communist China’s Capability to Support Pakistan,’ White House Situation Room, Washington, 9 Dec. 1971, 3:11pm, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB79/BE7935.pdf>.

¹⁰² Tudda, *A Cold War Turning Point*, 157-8.

¹⁰³ Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, 10 Dec. 1971, 10:51–11:12am, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 172.

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 10 Dec. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 267.

security, the U.S. would oppose efforts of others to interfere with the People's Republic.' Kissinger was explicit. 'When I asked for this meeting, I did so to suggest Chinese military help, to be quite honest....'¹⁰⁵

Huang gave no indications that China might move, but the next day Kissinger told the president, 'I am pretty sure the Chinese are going to do something and I think that we'll soon see. I may be mistaken—we have no clear intelligence evidence though at this point.'¹⁰⁶ Later that day he spoke with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had come to New York to argue Pakistan's case at the United Nations. Bhutto reported the Chinese had said they were willing to 'do something,' but they had 'doubts' about the United States. Bhutto's language over a non-secure line was imprecise, and it was by no means clear whether the Chinese 'something' pertained to UN diplomatic manoeuvring or troop moves. Pakistani diplomat Iqbal Akhund, who was in New York with Bhutto, concluded in his memoirs, 'I do not believe that Bhutto had any illusions that the Chinese would, or could, intervene effectively at that stage.'¹⁰⁷

By 12 December, the following day, Nixon and Kissinger's frustration was beginning to show. Kissinger told the President that the previous night, when he spoke to Bhutto, he told the Pakistani politician, 'I don't want to hear one more word from the Chinese.... If they want to talk they should move some troops. Until they've done it, we don't want to hear one more word.' While this recounting was a wildly inaccurate depiction of Kissinger's request for Bhutto to 'make clear to the Chinese that we have been strong supporters,' it does appear to represent Kissinger's real irritation with Chinese inaction.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between President Nixon and his Advisor for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 11 Dec. 1971, 3pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 277.

¹⁰⁷ Iqbal Akhund, *Memoirs of a Bystander: A Life in Diplomacy* (Karachi: Oxford UP 1997), 200-1.

¹⁰⁸ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and Deputy Prime Minister Bhutto, 11 Dec. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 11, doc. 280; also see Transcript of Telephone Conversation among the Deputy Prime Minister of Pakistan (Bhutto), the Pakistani Ambassador (Raza), and the

Within minutes of Kissinger's recounting, Nixon and Kissinger were interrupted by Haig, Kissinger's deputy, who informed them, 'The Chinese want to meet on an urgent basis.' Kissinger's doubts disappeared, 'They're going to move. No question, they're going to move.' As the assembled men thought about what the Chinese might say in the meeting, they only then worried about the consequences of an actual Chinese military intervention: the very course of action they had been seeking for a week.

Nixon asked, 'So what do we do if the Soviets move against them? Start lobbing nuclear weapons in, is that what you mean?' As he spoke, Kissinger realized the gravity of the situation. 'Well, if the Soviets move against them in these conditions and succeed, that will be the final showdown... If they succeed, we'll be finished.' He thought for a moment. 'Then we better call [the Chinese] off.' Kissinger then refuted himself, 'I think we can't call them off, frankly.' Haig now interjected, 'I think that you call them off if you don't give them some assurances. But the price you pay for that [is] almost as bad....' Kissinger completed the thought, '[I]f we call them off, I think our China initiative is pretty well down the drain.' Nixon agreed. Later, Kissinger returned to this theme, increasingly pessimistic, 'If the outcome of this is that Pakistan is swallowed by India, China is destroyed, defeated, humiliated by the Soviet Union, it will be a change in the world balance of power of such magnitude... That the security of the United States may be forever, certainly for decades....'

Nixon started to walk back, 'The fact of the matter is I'd put [it] in more Armageddon terms... when I say that the Chinese move and the Soviets threaten and then we start lobbing nuclear weapons. That isn't what happens.... What happens is we then do have a hotline to the Soviets and we finally just say now what goes on here?' Kissinger was less sure, and wanted to think

President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 11 Dec. 1971, 7:28pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 175.

more of concrete U.S. actions. 'We don't have to lob nuclear weapons. We have to go on alert.... We have to put forces in. We may have to give [the Chinese] bombing assistance.' Now Nixon considered the upside of a multisided great power war, 'One thing we can do which you forgot, we clean up Vietnam at about that point.' Kissinger was quick to agree, 'We clean up Vietnam. I mean, at that point, we give an ultimatum to Hanoi. Blockade Haiphong.... Now that will hurt China too, but we can't worry about that at that point.' The whole point of the war was to show China that the United States was a credible partner, but once the actual war got underway apparently different logics would prevail. Nixon walked back from the brink again, 'Well, we're talking about a lot of ifs. Russia and China aren't going to go to war.' Kissinger cautioned that he still thought it was possible.¹⁰⁹

Having contemplated Armageddon with his bosses, Haig was sent to New York to learn what the Chinese wanted. There, rather than reveal plans for a forthcoming invasion of India, Ambassador Huang outlined a strategy to pursue in the Security Council.¹¹⁰ Kissinger had asked in explicit terms for China to intervene militarily to help Pakistan, and China had responded with anodyne proposals for diplomatic manoeuvres in New York. Nixon and Kissinger's confirmation bias—spun out to such an extreme as to become a fantasy involving China and World War III—finally met evidence it could not ignore. China would not intervene.

Conclusion

Given their conviction that a forceful U.S. response was necessary to salvage the China initiative and, later, that China would intervene and might shape the course of the Indo-Pakistani

¹⁰⁹ Conversation among President Nixon, his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), and his Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), Washington, 12 Dec. 1971, 8:45-9:42am, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 177.

¹¹⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, New York, 12 Dec. 1971, 3:50-4:20pm, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. 17, doc. 177.

conflict, Nixon and Kissinger had engineered a superpower crisis and came close to inciting a Sino-Soviet war. It likely had no effect on the outcome. West Pakistani forces surrendered in Dhaka on December 16. At most U.S. policy might have limited Indian military actions against West Pakistan following the ‘liberation’ of a new Bangladesh. The evidence of Indian intent to endanger West Pakistan was always thin, and even if it intended to smash the Pakistan Army in the west, ‘it is doubtful that India will (or that it can) impose such a total defeat on Pakistan,’ the CIA assessed late in the war.¹¹¹

The policy was not merely ineffective and misguided but costly. For months, the State Department feared U.S. policy would accomplish little but to alienate India. It lived up to those fears. Nixon and Kissinger’s bizarre decision to send the U.S. aircraft carrier, *Enterprise*, into the Indian Ocean to assure China and ‘scare’ India accomplished little. The carrier, which likely sailed with tactical nuclear weapons, did offer a cautionary tale of U.S. willingness to attempt coercion against India. K. Subramanyam, a former senior Indian defence official, was one of many Indians to make the argument that ‘had India possessed nuclear weapons the *Enterprise* would not have steamed into the Bay of Bengal during the Indian-Pakistan war in what appeared from New Delhi to constitute atomic gunboat diplomacy.’¹¹² State’s Van Hollen, who participated in most of the interagency deliberations on the crisis, concluded subsequently, ‘It may have tipped the scales toward India’s decision to explode a nuclear device in May 1974.’¹¹³ More recently, during India’s 1998 nuclear tests, the *Enterprise* was mentioned again. Brajesh Mishra, India’s national security advisor, stated, ‘We had a certain threat scenario then and decided what we needed generally—Pakistan, China, and we don’t want the *USS Enterprise* coming again.’¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, 9 Dec. 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, doc. 170.

¹¹² Subramanyam quoted in Van Hollen, ‘The Tilt Policy Revisited: Nixon-Kissinger Geopolitics and South Asia,’ *Asian Survey* 20/4 (1980), 360.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 359-60.

¹¹⁴ Bharat Karnad, *India’s Nuclear Policy* (Westport, CT: Praeger 2008), 89.

The episode also left lingering bitterness in the Soviet Union, a resentment that would manifest in less Soviet benefit of the doubt as détente began to fray. Soviet official Georgi Arbatov recalls Leonid Brezhnev reacting ‘very emotionally’ in the mid-1970s when U.S. actions in the East Pakistan crisis were mentioned in the course of Soviet deliberations on what to do in Angola.¹¹⁵ Historian Keith L. Nelson would argue later that U.S. behaviour in this period was baffling to the Soviets. Kissinger and Nixon believed themselves to be in an ‘autumn of crises,’ which Moscow found to be ‘a season of perplexity.’¹¹⁶

Moscow’s confusion arose from the fact that Kissinger and Nixon behaved irrationally, as a result of motivated and unmotivated biases accentuated by Kissinger and Nixon’s extreme worldview. Their decisions—especially with regard to assessing the chance of West Pakistan success in the East, Pakistan’s importance to China, and the likelihood of Chinese military intervention—do not appear any better even with considerable knowledge of the information available to them and their thinking in deliberations at the time. The evidence of bias is present not just in comparing their actions to what a hypothetical objective observer might do, but also in the abundant evidence that many other informed actors with differing worldviews interpreted the same evidence in ways that conform much more closely to the empirical reality now apparent with the advantage of hindsight. If most actors made mistakes similar to Kissinger and Nixon than evidence of the import of their biases is reduced. The opposite, such as occurred in 1971, demonstrates the power of the biases held by the two American leaders. Their decisions, biased and illogical even based on the limited information available at the time, appear even worse in light of the full range of evidence now available from Chinese, Pakistani, Indian, and other sources.

¹¹⁵ Arbatov, *The System: An Insider’s Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Times Books 1992), 195.

¹¹⁶ Nelson, *The Making of Détente: Soviet-American Relations in the Shadow of Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1995), 132.

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