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DACCA, DELHI AND THE POWERS

From the perspective of Bangladesh, the Moscow-Beijing-Washington triangle is not the most important factor affecting its external relations, even though the triangular relationship impinges, directly or indirectly, on almost every aspect of the new nation's existence. The overwhelmingly crucial factor in Bangladesh's view of the world is its relationship with India. This concern is followed closely by the attitudes and activities of the oil-rich Muslim nations and international development agencies. The possibility of securing crucial inputs of desperately-needed capital and technology from the developed countries is the major source of hope for the future. Thus, a combination of intense nationalism and bitterness in the wake of the 1971 civil war, an almost paranoid fear of being re-colonised by India, plus rapidly changing international alignments as they relate to Bangladesh—all of these have created an extremely complex environment, in which the big powers are still experimenting with various kinds of adjustments.

The three triangular powers have always had interests in the area that is now Bangladesh, although these interests have usually been less direct and less salient than elsewhere. The nature and intensity of big power inter-

ests have also changed over time. During the Cold War period the attention of foreign policy-makers in Washington, Moscow and Beijing was focussed on the rivalry and competition between India and Pakistan, at a time when Bangladesh was still part of Pakistan. Between 1954 and 1970 the United States provided almost \$4.8 billion in military and economic assistance to Pakistan and more than \$10 billion, primarily in food-grain, to India.¹ Similarly, beginning with the Tashkent agreement in January 1966, when the Soviets played a major role in bringing about the termination of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, Moscow engaged in a serious but unsuccessful effort to gain influence in Pakistan. Soviet courtship of India started more than a decade before Tashkent and has been much more elaborate and successful than that of either the Americans or the Chinese. In the case of China, the 1962 Sino-Indian war and subsequent rift between Delhi and Beijing has produced strong Sino-Pakistan military ties.

The creation of Bangladesh in 1971—after the only successful civil war of this century—brought a fundamental realignment of big power interests and a major shift in the state structure of the Subcontinent

1. For an analysis of American aid to Pakistan, see Ataur Rahman, *Pakistan and America: Dependency Relations* (New Delhi: Young Asia Publishers, 1981). An historical analysis of the Moscow-Beijing-Washington triangle as it relates to Bangladesh is provided in G. W. Chowdhury, *India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Major Powers: Politics of a Divided Subcontinent* (New York: The Free Press, 1974).

itself.² While Pakistan before 1971 had consisted of two wings with one on either side of India, it has now been relegated to a population size which is less than half of its former self and about a tenth that of India. Pakistan has also been left with diminished military capabilities and a small economic base. For the first time since independence in 1947, India clearly gained a position of predominance in South Asia in 1971. On the other hand, the smaller nations Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have also acquired new significance. Whereas before 1971 the big powers could neglect the smaller nations in their preoccupation with the Indo-Pakistan rivalry they have since increasingly come to view the smaller nations as useful independent entities, where long-term big power interests might be promoted through the establishment of fairly extensive bilateral diplomatic relationships, trade, economic development assistance, and political penetration.

Because of enhanced opportunities for big power "divide and influence" policies since 1971, the stability of India, Pakistan and the entire Subcontinent has become increasingly dependent on the evolution of lasting cooperative relationships between the bigger and smaller South Asian nations. Since 1971, India has often seemed

2. The Significance of the Bangladesh war is traced out in Robert Jackson, *South Asian Crisis: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, A Political and Historical Analysis of the 1971 War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975). An Indian perspective is provided in Shri Ram Sharma, *Bangladesh Crisis: A Crucial Issue in Indian Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Young Asia Publications, 1978). See also Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and its Aftermath* (Dacca: Bangladesh Books International, 1981).

uncomfortable in its new role as the predominant power in the Subcontinent, and there has been an nagging fear on the part of the small countries that India might itself become "hegemonistic". Since India does not have sufficient resources to promote cooperative regional economic relationship through its own surplus, it must tolerate, and even depend on, economic assistance and trade with a variety of nations from around the world.³ This factor, particularly when coupled with the strategic interests of the big powers in the Indian Ocean, the growing influence and interests of the OPEC nations in the Islamic world, and the rising expectations and capabilities of Asian nations in general, has provided much of the impetus for big power entry and competition in South Asia in recent years.

Changing American Interests

America's relations with Bangladesh got off to a terrible start because of the U.S. "tilt" towards Pakistan during the 1971 war.⁴ The failure of the Nixon administration to condemn Pakistani military excesses in Bangladesh, while simultaneously supporting the military dictatorship of Yahya Khan, led to an almost complete and total erosion of U.S. credibility in the eyes of many Bangladesh leaders. When Washington ordered

3. India's position as a regional power is probed in Myron Weiner, "Critical Choices for India and America", in *Southern Asia: The Politics of Poverty and Peace*, ed. Donald C. Hellman (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books 1976), see especially pp. 74 ff.
4. An excellent analysis of the international aspects of the 1971 war is A. M. A. Muhith, *Bangladesh: Emergence of a Nation* (Dacca: Bangladesh Books International, 1978).

a Task Force of the Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal as a final show of support for Pakistan in 1971, Bangladeshis, along with much of the rest of the world, looked on in disbelief. The American delay in recognizing Bangladesh, for more than a year after its declaration of independence, was further cause of bitterness and resentment.

U.S.—Bangladesh relations began to improve in late 1972, in part because of several U.S. diplomatic admissions that its 1971 behavior had been “a mistake” but primarily because of Bangladesh’s own initiatives. It had no alternative to the United States for the large amounts of economic assistance and relief aid which were so desperately needed. Washington announced its recognition of Bangladesh on April 4, 1972 and the U.S. Senate immediately voted the full \$100 million in economic aid that Bangladesh had previously requested. Between 1972 and 1981, a total of \$1.7 billion in economic and humanitarian assistance has been provided by the U.S. on a bilateral basis to Bangladesh, including 5 million tons (\$865 million worth) of food under PL480 and through CARE, \$290 million in fertilizer imports, \$258 million for postwar rehabilitation and relief, \$78 million for rural electrification, \$60 million for population control and health programmes, and the rest for agricultural research, small-scale irrigation, rural credit, and a wide variety of smaller projects. In addition, the U.S. has contributed substantially to a variety of multilateral aid programmes. Most estimates suggest that somewhere between a third and a half of the billion-dollar-plus

yearly average of total international aid that has been going into Bangladesh since 1972 has come from the United States.⁵

During the first four years of Bangladesh's independent existence, American policy-makers expressed considerable frustration with the Bangladesh government. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who ruled as Prime Minister and President until he was killed in a coup on August 15, 1975 presided over a regime that was miserably corrupt, increasingly authoritarian, and decidedly predisposed towards India and the Soviet Union, the two nations that had contributed most to Bangladesh's independence. American policy-makers regarded Bangladesh as a "low priority" area and perceived their influence to be limited. They were also afraid that international relief assistance in general would get a poor reputation from the corrupt excesses of Mujib's associates.⁶

Following the August 1975 coup, U.S. relationships with the major successor regimes to Mujib have been increasingly close.⁷ President Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed, who succeeded Mujib and ruled until he was

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5. See, for example, *Bangladesh: Current Trends and Development Issues: A World Bank Country Study* (Washington: South Asia Regional Office, The World Bank, 1978).
 6. See Eric Criffel, "East Pakistan/Bangladesh" in *Civil Wars and the Politics of international Relief*, ed. Morris Davis (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), pp. 25-35. See also Marcus Franda, "Aid Dependence and the Many Futures of Bangladesh", AUFS Fieldstaff Reports, South Asia Series, XVI: 12 (October 1972).
 7. Mrs. Gandhi and the Communist Party of India alleged that the CIA was behind the coup. See, for example, *The Statesman* (Calcutta), September 28, 1975. A Study which analyses such claims is Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh The Unfinished Revolution* (London: Zed Press, 1979), pp. 130 and 148.

ousted in a coup on November 3, 1975, was known to be warmly pro-American and a staunch believer in free enterprise economies. Mushtaque's initiatives during his short stay in office, which included a mending of fences with Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia, were welcomed by American policy-makers. With the advent of Ziaur Rahman who came to power initially in Bangladesh's third successful coup, on November 7, 1975, the U.S. became almost ebullient about the directions of political and economic affairs in Dacca, but this mood was dampened considerably with the assassination of Ziaur Rahman on May 30, 1981.

While Ziaur Rahman argued that he was pursuing a "balanced relationship with all major powers, he had steadily moved Bangladesh closer to the United States, China and the Arabs. At the same-time, he had become increasingly distrustful of the Soviet Union and India. He invited the multinationals into Bangladesh on very favorable terms, gave written guarantees that there would be no new nationalization, and travelled widely the Western and OPEC worlds in search of economic aid. In his speeches and in private conversations, Zia said that he was pursuing a form of socialism, but he also stated emphatically that "we cannot do the way they do in Russia—it is not acceptable—we can't do it—conditions are different here",⁸ when reacting to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 and throughout 1980,

8. The quote is from Marcus Franda, "Bangladesh Nationalism and Ziaur Rahman's Presidency", *AUFS Fieldstaff Reports*, 1981/No. 8 Asia, Part II: International Entanglements, p. 9.

Zia's government refused to take that kind of equivocal stance assumed by India but instead issued clear statements calling for "immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan."

In response to pressures from the United States, Zia's government agreed to move toward an open market system for distribution of foodgrain and a "privatization" of industry and commerce. Zia himself was critical of the West for not providing more aid (he would like to have doubled the \$1.6 billion provided in the last year of his regime) but he was never critical of the U.S. otherwise. Neither Zia's Bangladesh National Party (BNP) nor any of the major opposition parties believe that it is possible to rid Bangladesh of its dependence on foreign aid, but many of them would like to receive resource transfers without a large foreign presence in the country. Zia himself occasionally lashed out at what he called "foreignism," "but he always made it clear that he equated only India and the Soviets with "foreignism" and not the Western and not the western aid donors.

The large foreign presence in Bangladesh, which is clustered around the aid-giving agencies and dominated by the Americans, has created an unprecedented enclave pattern of development, and has increased aid dependence. Every available study also shows that the gap between rich and poor has continued to widen throughout the first decade of Bangladesh's independent existence. This has troubling to Bangladeshis and Western aid donors because of its long-range implications for potential political instability and economic disruption.

Thus far, however, opposition parties have been unable to mobilize the resentment of the poor against foreign enclave. Zia's BNP picked up considerable support from urban elites, who benefitted from the enclave style of development. While Zia did make some miniscule gains in creating rural institutions that could effectively mobilize rural elites, leaders of the major parties of Bangladesh—the Awami League, the Democratic-League of Mustaque Ahmed, the Muslim League, the Communist Party of Bangladesh, and a series of small Marxist-left parties—all have been remarkably unsuccessful in their attempts to mobilize the poorer classes. The euphoria of the liberation war years, when political mobilization of the poor was possible, has given way to considerable demoralization, as poverty of the most degrading kind has spread. There has also been a marked disenchantment with violence, in response to the civil war, three successful coups, several other abortive coups, and the recent death of Ziaur Rahman in a hail of bullets.

Since Bangladesh is located in an unessential "back-water" of the Indian Ocean, with no deepwater port and no known riches other than some reserves of natural gas, the country is not of strategic importance to the U.S. Nonetheless, Bangladesh could have some impact on world affairs in the manner of Afghanistan that is, if the Soviet or the Indians or the Chinese were to become heavily involved. The massive migration of 9.7 million Bangladesh refugees to India in 1971 could be repeated if economic and political conditions were to deteriorate to the depths of the last days of a united

Pakistan, and this, in and of itself, could result in Indian intervention, which in turn might draw in Superpowers in proxy-like actions on behalf of one or another of several South Asian protagonists. As Mizanur Rahman Shelly has pointed out, "...no government in Washington is likely to watch mutely the process of an unwilling Bangladesh slipping helplessly into the Soviet or the Indian fold".⁹

Barring such political deterioration, America's principal interest in Bangladesh is likely to remain professedly humanitarian, with a fairly large-scale aid program being structured in response to the considerable support generated for Bangladesh among private charities and by the media in the United States. As in other countries with large aid programs, Bangladesh has a small but influential constituency of American producers, manufacturers, shippers, middlemen, and consulting firms, who personally benefit by supplying wheat, milk powder, construction materials, vehicles, technological advice, or other items, usually through "tied aid" arrangements stipulated by the U.S. Congress. Meanwhile, domestic instability and a lack of resources have discouraged American multinationals and other investors from entering the Bangladesh market, while U.S. companies are unlikely to find reason to enter into arms sales in Bangladesh on any large scale. The upshot of all of this is that Bangladesh will most likely continue to be for most Americans what it has been during the last few years--i.e. a heartland of

9. Mizanur Rahman Shelly, *Emergence of a New Nation in a Multi-Polar World Bangladesh* (Dacca: University Press Limited, 1979), p. 126.

the Third or Fourth world with basic problems of human and national survival and development.

Chinese Goals and Interests

The Bangladesh liberation war of 1971 posed serious problems for China because it pitted Mao's traditional revolutionary ideology against important diplomatic ties with Pakistan. Chinese ideologues had strived assiduously, before 1971, to cast their country in the mould of mentor to all national revolutionary liberation movements, and this ideological appeal had met with warm receptivity in East Bengal, particularly among younger people and students, throughout the Pakistan period. Before 1971, pro-Chinese elements dominated the leftist parties of East Pakistan, with many pro-Chinese leaders playing significant roles in the independence movement and civil war.¹⁰

Because Beijing fully supported Pakistan during the liberation period, China's revolutionary image received important setbacks. Further reverses came in the years following the liberation, when the People's Republic used its first and most unpopular Security Council veto against the entry of Bangladesh into the United Nations and refused to recognize the newly independent nation. These actions resulted in considerable demoralization among Bangladeshi Maoists, as China increasingly lost respect and credibility among the general Bangladesh populace. Consequently, the steady growth in the numbers and influence of Maoists which had characterized the 1960s in East Pa-

10 Talukder Maniruzzaman, *Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh* (Dacca: Bangladesh Books International, 1975).

kistan, gave way to bitter and vicious factionalism among radical Bangladesh leftists after independence. This internal struggle has not yet ended.

Although Beijing was aware of such costs, its primary concerns in 1971 were the strategic and security implications of the new political balance in the Subcontinent after 1971. Chinese leaders questioned the extent to which the new nation of Bangladesh could survive as an independent and viable political unit in South Asia, being heavily dependent for its creation on India and the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Chinese were (and still are) concerned about Soviet intrusions into the Gulf region and the Indian Ocean. They tend to see Pakistan as a key country in balancing off Indian and Soviet designs for hegemony in that most important part of the world. Both the 1969 Soviet proposal for a "Collective Security System" in Asia and the August 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship had produced fears in China that the USSR might seize the opportunity of Pakistan's division into two parts to gain control over the Subcontinent and the Indian Ocean region. This was perceived to be part of a larger design of eventual encirclement of China.

Some Chinese were also worried that India and Bangladesh together might collude with Soviet "social imperialism" to engage in subversive activities detrimental to Chinese interests in Burma, or even in some of the more tenuously controlled border regions of China (Tibet, Singkiang and Yunan).¹¹ Like many other nations of the

11. Sheldon W. Simon, "China, the Soviet Union and the Subcontinental Balance" *Asian Survey*, XIII:7 (July 1973), p. 657.

world, the People's Republic was undoubtedly concerned that dismemberment of Pakistan on the "nationality question" might set precedent which could eventually be used against central authority in China's multi-national environment. The fact that China's two largest enemies and neighbors had conspired to dismember friendly Pakistan was of greater significance to China than the appeal of nationalism and revolution in East Bengal.

Although China eventually withdrew its Security Council veto in 1974 (thereby allowing Bangladesh to become a formal member of the United Nations) relationships between Beijing and Dacca remained cool until the overthrow of Mujibur Rahman's government in August 1975. This was so, even though Mujib had carefully avoided criticism of China throughout his 43 months in office. Mujib's occasional expressions of high regard for Chinese leadership were clearly designed to mollify Beijing. Attempts were made through K.M. Kaiser—a Bangladeshi who had previously been a highly successful Pakistani Ambassador to Beijing—to establish formal diplomatic relations. Mujib even went so far as to state publicly in Japan in October 1973 that he desired relations with "our great neighbor (China)", but then added: "we have our self-respect, we are not going to beg."¹²

Mujib's overthrow in August 1975 was viewed by the Chinese as "an embarrassment for India and the Soviet Union." China almost immediately recognized

12. See *Japan Times*, October 24, 1973,

Mujib's successor regime, and, in October 1975, agreed to exchange ambassadors. Chinese radio has since described Mujib's assassination as "the unbolting of the domestic politics of Bangladesh, which swung right over onto an anti-Indian axis."¹³ China's subsequent enthusiastic backing of Bangladesh since the death of Mujib is consistent with its traditional role as a supporter of the smaller South Asian states against India. The Chinese have frequently described Indian actions in the small Himalayan nations and Indian states—Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Kashmir—as those of "a big nation bullying small nations." Beijing has in the past supported the "right to self-determination in Kashmir", has accused India of "imperialism" and "expansionism" in Sikkim, and has supplied arms and training to Naga rebels in the Indian northeast. The border disputes between India and China, which offered the pretext for the Sino-Indian War in 1962, are still unresolved. Chinese distrust of India, and its view that Indian leadership is "in the Soviet grip", still persists.

Nevertheless, there seems to be some sentiment in Beijing for a normalization of relationship with India, and considerable recognition of the extent to which Delhi's role in world affairs is crucial to the stability of South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. India and China have had serious disagreements on Kampuchea and Afghanistan, with Beijing supplying arms against Soviet-backed governments in both instances while New Delhi has either equi-

13. The quotes in this paragraph are from *The Peking Review*, October 1975, p. 5, as quoted in Shelly. p. 107.

vocated or supported Soviet interests. Despite these differences, and despite Beijing's unwavering diplomatic support of Islamabad, China has occasionally tried to prod Pakistan to improve its relations with India and has even pursued some "normalization" efforts of its own with Indian representatives, presumably on the assumption that a Sino-Indian denouement might "reduce Soviet influence in the region and also reduce tensions between India and Pakistan, thereby letting Pakistan play a larger role in Gulf Security".¹⁴

Barring the imposition of an Afghan-style Soviet—or India-backed regime in Bangladesh, which seems highly improbable, Sino-Bangladesh ties will almost certainly grow stronger in the next few years. Since 1975, Beijing has supported Dacca verbally in all of its many disputes with New Delhi, including most prominently the question of the sharing of waters of the Ganges and Brahmaputra river systems.

Indian negotiators have consistently argued that the development of these enormous rivers should be carried out exclusively on a bilateral basis, while Bangladesh has wanted to intimately involve Nepal, China, the World Bank and a number of international agencies. The rationale behind the Indian position is that a multilateral "Mekong Delta-approach" will disadvantage Indian engineers and threaten Indian control of projects affecting India's two largest river networks. Bangladeshi negotiators have consistently pointed out the technological advan-

14. John Stokes, "China's New Role in Southern Asia," *The Observer*, (London) December 28, 1980.

tages to be gained by involving Nepal and China in development plans, since the Ganges is fed so mightily by the rivers originating in the Himalayas of Nepal and Tibet while the Brahmaputra originates in Tibet and flows extensively through China before emptying into Bangladesh through the Indian northeast.

After January 1977, when he first visited Beijing, Ziaur Rahman steadily extended Dacca's ties with the Chinese. The first formal negotiations regarding economic assistance from the People's Republic were made in Dacca in April 1976, and these quickly led to the January 1977 Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation. In March 1978, the Chinese agreed to provide an interest-free loan of Taka 850 million (\$58.3 million)—payable over 10 years, with a 12-year grace period—for the purpose of building a Urea factory and a water conservancy plant in Bangladesh. Some commodity agreements were also concluded in 1978, along with a five-year Scientific and Technological Treaty and a Shipping Agreement. The People's Republic has assisted Bangladesh in several flood control schemes and in establishing small-scale industries; Chinese assistance is presently being negotiated in the fields of road-building, agricultural, and rural electrification.

Trade relations are viewed by both countries as being potentially more significant than aid, and especially if ways can be found for China to buy large quantities of surplus Bangladesh jute. The first annual Barter Trade Agreement, which was signed on January 4, 1977, provided for a trade of only \$20 million each way, but this

has steadily expanded. In July 1979, the two countries concluded a five-year agreement envisaging an exchange of goods worth more than \$500 million. The Chinese Prime Minister, Mr. Zhao Ziyang, visited Dacca for two days in early June 1981, but the assassination of Ziaur Rahman intervened between the planning of the visit and its actual occurrence, with the result that nothing substantial could be concluded during the period of mourning.

Zia's second trip to Beijing in July 1980 produced a number of cultural agreements and established China as the principal arms supplier to Bangladesh. China had previously built the largest arms and ammunition factory in Bangladesh (at Joydebpur, just outside Dacca), and had taken over maintenance of Bangladesh's Soviet-built MIGS (which Moscow refused to service after the overthrow of Mujib). As a result of Zia's 1980 visit, China has now agreed to provide the Bangladesh Air Force with aircraft, tanks and other military equipment. During Ziaur Rahman's 5½ years in power, Bangladesh and Chinese military officers participated in a number of joint training programs, in both countries.

Bangladesh and the Soviets

The creation of Bangladesh has often been regarded as a significant victory for Soviet diplomacy. Soviet leaders were initially not anxious to support the independence of Bangladesh and the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971, but the importance of India in their foreign policy calculations gradually pushed them in these directions. Beginning on April 2, 1971—a week after

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the Pakistani military crackdown—the USSR began to appeal to President Yahya Khan to stop the “bloodshed” and “repression” of East Pakistan, and to “turn to methods of peaceful political settlement.” Despite such verbal support, however, the Soviets pursued a policy of utmost circumspection throughout 1971, endorsing Bangladesh independence only when it became clear (in November) that war between India and Pakistan was inevitable. The most important aspects of Soviet support in 1971 were its defense of the Indian and Bangladesh positions in the United Nations and its solid diplomatic backing of New Delhi, culminating in the August 1971 Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty.

Moscow was the first big power to formally recognize Bangladesh, and the USSR was the first country outside the subcontinent that Mujibur Rahman chose to visit after the liberation. Yet, relations between Moscow and Dacca have never been euphoric. While Mujib was in power he was always non-committal about Brezhnev's “Asian Collective Security” scheme, and there were differences between Mujib and the USSR when the Soviet navy overstayed its welcome in Chittagong in the years 1972-1974 (the Soviets had argued that they needed more time than most Bangladeshis thought necessary to clear the port of the mines and ships left over from the 1971 war). When Mushtaque Ahmed succeeded Mujib in 1975, and began to court China and Pakistan at the expense of India, Soviet analysts openly wondered whether “forces hostile to the aspirations of the Bangladesh people

now exert an influence on future developments."¹⁵

Once Ziaur Rahman came to power, relations between Moscow and Dacca became cool but diplomatically correct. Zia made it known that he was not going to depend on the Soviets for aid or trade, and also made known his fear of the possibility of Soviet or Indian intervention in Bangladesh's volatile politics. In 1980, Zia's government arrested a prominent member of the pro-Moscow Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Mohammad Farhad, who publicly discussed (and some say advocated) an Afghan-style Soviet intervention for Bangladesh. Zia also publicly condemned what he called BAKSHALITES, a term that referred to the followers of Mujib's one-party, family-centered regime (the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League, or BAKSHAL). Zia alleged that Mujib had tried to impose this party on Bangladesh with the backing of India and the Soviet Union. In December 1980, for example, Zia said that the BAKSHALITES were "pursuing a politics of weapons . . . supported by foreign funds, and he offered to "bear the passage money . . . if the BAKSHALITES want to migrate to the land of their foreign masters."¹⁶

The Soviets have been bothered by the increasing rapport between Bangladesh and China, by Zia's close relationships with Pakistan and the Arabs, and by the rapid decline of Indo-Soviet influence in Bangladesh.

15. *New York Times*, August 27, 1975.

16. Quoted in the government-owned newspaper *Bangladesh Observer*, November 25, 1980, p. 1.

Pravda has constantly implored the people of Bangladesh to "rebuff right wing and leftist forces", and has warned that "many years of struggle and state independence would suffer badly" if they failed to do so. In contrast to the Chinese, the Soviets have avoided taking public positions on matters of dispute between New Delhi and Dacca, but many Bangladeshis tend to believe that the USSR is behind India's hard line on Subcontinental bilateral issues.

Economic relations between the USSR and Bangladesh have been beset with problems since the inception of the new nation. The belief has been widespread within Bangladesh that the Soviet Union would not be able to meet the country's massive aid requirements. Indeed, Mujib and his government formulated a First Five-Year Plan that projected the achievement of socialist goals through a Western-style parliamentary system, under the financial auspices of an Aid Club of Western donors clustered around the World Bank. During Mujib's regime, the Soviets promised about \$ 230 million in aid, with \$ 200 million of it being loans and the remaining \$ 30 million grants. These agreements, however, have not always been implemented. Therefore, the actual amount of aid disbursed by the USSR is often considerably less than the amounts indicated in official statements.

Trade between the two countries has grown modestly, to something like \$ 20-\$ 25 million in imports and a similar amount in exports each year, despite initial projections of a trade of at least 10 times that amount. Trade volumes have not lived up to mutual expectations for a variety of reasons, including failures on the part of Bang-

ladesh to deliver goods in which the Soviets were interested, breakdowns and bottlenecks in the delivery of Soviet equipment, and delays in the scheduled output of Soviet factories. Perhaps most of the disappointments between the two countries in the trade field, however, have stemmed from an unwillingness on the part of Bangladesh to commit themselves to the construction of mutually planned projects.¹⁷

Many trade problems stem from widespread feelings in Bangladesh that it is being disadvantaged by Soviet barter arrangements. Dacca has accused Moscow of charging higher prices for Russian commodities under barter than would be possible to procure on open international markets. Bangladesh trade officials have also complained that they have had to make cash purchases from the Soviet Union which have been outside the scope of the barter arrangements, while the Soviets have not had to engage in reciprocal cash purchases from Bangladesh. In all trade transactions, Soviet banks have imposed heavy charges for advising, issuing and negotiating letters of credit, with the burden of such excessive charges passed on to Bangladesh importers and exporters.

In this atmosphere, it is not surprising that most Bangladeshis perceive matters of cultural penetration to be of greater significance to the Soviet Union than either aid or trade relationships. While Mujib was alive, the Soviets did supply a squadron of MIG fighter planes

17. Bhabani Sen Gupta, *The USSR in Asia: An Interperceptual Study of Soviet-Asian Relations* (New Delhi: Young Asia Publications, 1980), p. 201.

and trained some Bangladesh Air Force pilots, and it also offered limited help in the fields of irrigation, flood control, oil exploration and communications. But the Soviets did not have the large amounts of funds available for doing something striking in Bangladesh. They also seemed apprehensive about a large physical presence in Dacca, which might have been seen by the rest of the world as an attempt to bring Bangladesh under Soviet influence, if not control. As Bhabani Sen Gupta has pointed out, this "would not have been liked even by India, which regarded the new nation as within its natural orbit of influence."¹⁸

Domestic Politics and the Triangle

One of the most important features of the Moscow Beijing-Washington triangle for Bangladesh stems from the fact that all three members of the triangle have domestic constituencies in Bangladesh. The Soviet Union has close ties with the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and the National Awami Party of Muzzafar Ahmed (NAP-M). It also has considerable support within the Jatiya Samajtrantik Dal (JSD) and in the dominant wing of the Awami League, the successor party of Mujibur Rahman. Until 1970, Moscow regarded the Awami League (AL) as a bourgeois "centrist" party, but, in the crucible of the liberation struggle Moscow was gradually drawn closer to AL leaders. Today it views the AL and other pro-Moscow parties as "democratic and

18. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

national patriotic forces" who "desire friendship with the Soviet Union."

The CPB, NAP-M and JSD have consistently done poorly in national elections. They currently have 0, 1 and 7 seats respectively, in a Parliament of 300 representatives. On the other hand, the AL is now unquestionably the largest and most important opposition party in the country. Although it has only 40 seats in Parliament and won only 25 per cent of the vote in the 1977 Parliamentary elections, its organization in the countryside is quite extensive. The CPB, NAP-M and Awami League were drawn close together in 1975 when they jointly supported Mujib's new BAKSHAL political model, a scheme that ultimately proved disastrous for them as well as the Soviet when Mujib was assassinated.

Since 1975, the most significant feature of Soviet influence in Bangladesh has been the extent of its cultural penetration. The USSR has one of the largest cultural wings of all of the Embassies in Dacca, and influence is also exercised through a number of bilateral "friendship societies" scattered throughout the country. There is a clear attempt on the part of pro-Soviet intellectuals and members of the political elite to band together in factional alliances to gain positions and promotions, or to prevent non-faction members from making such gains. In many cases, pro-Moscow and pro-Indian factional members will work together—in the universities, in cultural organizations and in the bureaucracy—to promote other mutual interests as well.

The Chinese do not have a large cultural presence. They appear to have given up the kind of clandestine support that Mao used to occasionally render to leftists of his persuasion. Nonetheless, there are a number of pockets of pro-Chinese support within Bangladesh. The major pro-Chinese figure of the pre-liberation period, Maulana Bhashani, passed away in 1977, leaving Mohammad Toaha as the doyen of the pro-Chinese leftists in Bangladesh. However, Toaha has not been able to effect the left unity that he aspires to, nor has he been able to mobilize large numbers of people behind a pro-Chinese platform. Most of the leaders from Bhashani's party (NAP-B) have joined Zia's ruling BNP. The exceptions have been four smaller pro-Chinese splinter parties—Jagmoi, the Gana Front, the United People's party (U.P.P.) and the remnants of Bhashani's NAP—which have recently agreed to merge into a single larger party to be called the "Democratic Party," with Nurul Huda Mirza as its Chairman. The most promising of all pro-Chinese parties is the Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (BSD), a faction which split from the JSD on ideological grounds in late 1980.

Chinese influence in Bangladesh is facilitated by a number of factors. Within the bureaucracy, many senior officers have had long associations with the People's Republic, dating back to the old Pakistan days. The armed forces have also had a continuity of experience with Chinese military hardware and training, and there is still considerable enthusiasm among diverse strands of the Bangladesh population for various notions of a

“Chinese model” of development. There is a Chinese-Bangladesh Friendship Society led by Mirza Gholam Hafiz, the Speaker of Parliament and the second man in line for constitutional succession to the Presidency. The indigenous Chinese community in Bangladesh, which numbers somewhere around 20,000, is not from the mainland and is not wealthy. It consists of people who have been in Bangladesh for two or more generations, with most of them having come from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia during World War II.

Primarily because of the massive aid effort, the Bangladesh domestic elite has acquired fairly extensive ties with the United States. Large numbers of senior officials, professors, journalists, army officers, and even politicians have been trained in the U.S. or have visited the U.S. under programs that have influenced their thinking and life-styles. A glance at the newspapers, magazines or television stations in Dacca would be enough to show that the entire society continues to draw nourishment from the intellectual and cultural pabulum of the west, and again, especially from the United States. Ziaur Rahman and all of his Cabinet Ministers and leading bureaucrats used the language, jargon and concepts of the international development establishment, as do the leaders of the present government. These are increasingly penetrating into schools and colleges, businesses and bureaucracies, the police force and the army.

The major pro- U.S. party in Bangladesh is unquestionably the ruling BNP. Although it has a small fac-

tion that would like to pursue a more balanced stance between the U.S. and USSR, the bulk of the party (like Zia) appears to be unreservedly pro-American. Zia himself found it easy to get along with Americans, since he enthusiastically shared their belief in hard work and the power of positive thinking as fundamental values and was also convinced of the efficacy of U. S. aid, trade and investment. Likewise, the Democratic League of Mush-taque Ahmed, most Islamic parties, a faction of the Awami League, and a number of smaller political groups also tend to be pro-American and pro-Chinese, or at least so anti-Soviet as to be considered pro-American and pro-Chinese.

Relations with India

Having discussed the relationships between the three big powers and Bangladesh, it is now essential to include a discussion of Indo-Bangladesh relations, if only because they provide the principal dynamic for triangular involvement. Indeed, the major shifts in the stances of the Big Powers which have occurred since 1971 are related to one of the most dramatic of all events that have happened in South Asia in the last three decades, i.e. the breathtaking turnabout from warmth and friendship to bitterness and hostility in Indo-Bangladesh relations after the August 1975 coup. Prior to 1975, Mujib and the Awami League had been the favorite of the Indians. They had worked intimately with the Indian military during the year of the liberation struggle and cooperated in the repatriation of

the 9.7 million Bangladesh refugees that went to India in 1971. Once the Awami League was installed in office in 1972, they adopted institutions very much like India's, including a Parliamentary democracy, a "socialistic pattern of society" a mixed economy, and secularism.

Some problems surfaced immediately in 1972, when the Bangladesh elite began to question India's real motives for splitting Pakistan into two parts. There was widespread resentment in Bangladesh when the Indian military stayed on until April 1972 and reportedly carried off Pakistan military hardware worth \$500 million.²⁰ Resentment was additionally fed by the shoddiness of Indian goods received by Bangladesh and the unreliability of Indian trading practices; the decision immediately after independence to devalue the Taka at the request of India; and the introduction of a border trade system that encouraged smuggling into India. The issues became so sensitive and volatile that they figured in the 1974 Indo-Bangladesh summit meeting between Mujib and Indira Gandhi, and eventually led Mujib to attempt his one-party BAKSHAL scheme.

The sharp downturn in Indo-Bangladesh relations occurred in late 1975, when India decided to give political refuge to many of the Awami Leaguers who had fled to India during the period of the three coups. At this time Zia's government accused India of assisting the Aw-

19. M. Rashiduzzaman, "Changing Political Patterns in Bangladesh: Internal Constraints and External Fears", in *Politics and Bureaucracy in New Nation: Bangladesh*, ed. Mohammad Mohabbat Khan and Habib Mohammad Zafarullah (Dacca: Center for Administrative Studies, 1980), p. 193.

ami League guerrillas in their attacks on several border outposts.²¹ Indo-Bangladesh relations improved temporarily under the Janata government, which came to power after the March 1977 General Elections. However, since the return of Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister in January 1980, relationships have been sensitive and uncertain. The conviction has been growing in Bangladesh that the Indian government tends to be unreasonably assertive towards its smaller neighbors.

Indo-Bangladesh relations have been seriously damaged by the inability of diplomats from the two countries to resolve a number of serious conflicts that have persisted over the past decade. Repeated failures to reach workable trade agreements, for instance, indicate the extent to which the two nations are competitors. Most of Bangladesh's exportable commodities—tea, hides and skins, and betel leaves—are also present in India in abundance, which means that India has no interest in importing them. India would like to buy raw jute, rice, fish and vegetables, but Bangladesh cannot export these to India without harming its own jute industry and drastically curtailing its already meager food consumption. Similarly, Bangladesh would like a steady flow of raw cotton for its textile industry, but it has found that India is unable to meet its demands.

Other unresolved issues include first, a dispute about the use of the Farakka barrage, built by India on the Bangladesh border during the Pakistan days for the purpose of flushing out the silt that had accumulated in the

20. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Hooghly river and had rendered Calcutta port inaccessible to large ships. India claims it needs most of the water diverted by the Farakka barrage in order to continue de-silting operations; Bangladesh claims that diversion of the water by India is causing irreparable damage from salinity to land in Bangladesh while depriving Bangladeshis of valuable water needed for irrigation and other purposes. Second there has been a failure to reach satisfactory agreements to demarcate and police the Indo-Bangladesh land boundary. This is increasingly a subject of conflict because land rights and ownership patterns of nationals on either side tend to change as rivers shift their course. Third, there has been an inability to demarcate the Indo-Bangladesh maritime boundary, which has exacerbated conflicts over rights to offshore oil and natural gas, fishing, and other ocean wealth.

Finally, an old issue that seriously deteriorated in 1980 involves the large numbers of Bangladeshis who have migrated to Assam, in India, over the past few decades, and who are now considered "foreigners" by the Assamese. Responding to massive violence on the "anti-foreigner" issue, Prime Minister Gandhi tried to pacify the Assamese in late 1980 by stating in Parliament that any Bangladeshi "detected as a foreigner in Assam... will have to go back to Bangladesh, unless they can go to some other country." But this statement ran directly counter to Ziaur Rahman's contention—also prompted by enormous domestic pressures—that "there are no Bangladeshi refugees in India any more. There is no question of our taking any people back. It is an internal pro-

blem of the government of India."²² Animosities arising initially from the migration to Assam have been fed by other related issues, such as the resentment in India against Zia's conscious policy of settling Bengali Muslims in the Chittagong Hill Tracts near the Assam border. Zia's encouragement of Bengali migration to the Hill Tracts produced a series of uprisings against his government by the Chittagong tribals. The tribal grievances, in turn, have been supported by India.²³

Conclusions

Geopolitical realities and the abysmal poverty of Bangladesh are the principal constraints the nation's leaders have to take into consideration when formulating security and foreign policies. Bangladeshis perceive that it is beyond their capabilities to pursue an active, assertive and autonomous security of their own. The low level of technological development, a dearth of natural resources, economic backwardness, and heavy dependence on foreign aid, all make it impossible for Bangladesh to muster a defense effort that could meet all possible external contingencies through military means. Bangladesh's larger and more powerful neighbor, India, would not approve of a significant increase in Bangladesh's military capabilities, either through a policy of military alignment or military assistance from another Big

21. The quote is from the *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi) August 29, 1980.

22. For details see Kazi Montu, "Tribal Insurgency in Chittagong Hill Tracts," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), XV: 36 (September 6, 1980), pp. 1510-1512. See also Urmula Phadnis, "Woes of Tribals in Bangladesh", *Times of India* (Bombay), January 5, 1981,

Power. Even assuming that Bangladesh could resist the pressures of India and proceed to build up its defense capabilities, it would still be inconceivable for Bangladesh to safeguard its territorial integrity against a sustained Indian military offensive.

The inability of Bangladesh to become economically self-sufficient, together with its terribly restricted power position vis-a-vis India, significantly affects its security environment. Possibilities for Big Power penetration are, therefore, considerable. Given the volatility of Bangladesh politics, the intensity and depth of Indo-Bangladesh difference, and Bangladesh's economic vulnerability, it is difficult to envisage extensive period in the future when the Big Powers would not be tempted to at least probe Bangladesh's internal affairs. Precisely how they would prefer to proceed will depend, almost exclusively, on what happens in other parts of the subcontinent, in the Indian Ocean, and in the Persian Gulf. Ziaur Rahman used to speak of Bangladesh as a non-aligned nation that could be a potential "bridge" between the subcontinent and Southeast Asia, and perhaps simultaneously, a "bridge" between the Arabs and Muslim Asia. All of the factor listed above indicate, however, that Bangladesh would be, at best, a weak bridge.

It was with these constraints in mind that President Ziaur Rahman evolved a concept of "Bangladeshi nationalism" which included a great deal of internationalism that was not directed too aggressively at India.²⁴ Zia's

23. For a full explication of Zia's concept of Bangladeshi nationalism see Franda, "Bangladesh Nationalism and Ziaur Rahman's Presidency", *op. cit.*

Bangladeshi nationalism emphasized self-reliance in economic development and military preparedness against foreign aggression through total mobilization of the people and a judicious use of nationalism symbols that could produce a sense of unity and political solidarity. Zia's supporters reasoned that mobilization of the people behind nationalist slogans might act as a deterrent against potential threats from India. Zia himself tried to avoid saying anything nasty about India in public, in an effort to maintain a "balanced" foreign policy and to prevent Bangladeshi nationalism from degenerating into the kind of xenophobia that could have destroyed his regime and any semblance of stability. Zia and his government were too vulnerable to do otherwise. A withdrawal or cutback of Western aid would be economically disastrous, and Zia was well aware that Indian leaders could topple Governments in Bangladesh if they were determined to do so, even though they would have to pay an enormous political price were they to attempt such a course. The present government in Bangladesh would like to pursue Zia's policies and has said that it will do so, but most observers have reservation about the capabilities of any successor government in the absence of some one with Zia's charisma, vigour and will.

To offset security weaknesses and to promote desperately needed economic development, Bangladesh's efforts are being directed towards projecting a new international identity through the United Nations system and other international forums like the Non-aligned movement and Islamic summits. In this context, it

might be considered fortunate that Dacca is not perceived to be strategically located, at least for the present, for this renders direct big power penetration into Bangladesh unlikely. However, several problems could significantly affect Bangladesh's security environment in the future. Increases in the scope and intensity of big power rivalries in the Indian Ocean region, with India as a major area of disturbance, could change the present military balance on the subcontinent. External pressures in such a situation, particularly from India, might activate forces that could profoundly affect the politico-economic security and stability of Bangladesh.