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revisiting the geopolitical dimension of
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Liberation War*

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Islam Khan, M. Z. (2025) Strange pause after a decisive victory: revisiting the geopolitical dimension of November offensive during Bangladesh's Liberation War. National Defence College E-Journal, 5 (1). pp. 173-202. ISSN 2709-9016 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/124381/>

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Published version at: <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/412>

Publisher: National Defence College

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STRANGE PAUSE AFTER A DECISIVE VICTORY: REVISITING THE GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSION OF NOVEMBER OFFENSIVE DURING BANGLADESH'S LIBERATION WAR

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(Received: 06th April 2025; Accepted: 14th May 2025; Published: 30th June 2025)

Abstract: The coordinated offensive of 21 November 1971 marked India's first overt military intervention inside the East Pakistan, in support of the ongoing Liberation War of Bangladesh. Following the November offensive, Bangladeshi forces intensified their fight against Pakistani forces; however, India took a 'strange' pause till 03 December. This article explores the geopolitical significance of the November Offensive. It explains why India took the odd pause, how Pakistan reacted to it, and how significant was the November offensive from Bangladesh's perspective. Exploring the archival records of the United Nations, Indian Lok Sabha and Bangladesh Liberation War, the article argues that India opted for the odd pause to secure international legitimacy and relegated her November offensive in the East as an insignificant prelude. Pakistan's reaction-a pre-emptive air strike on Indian airfields in the Western Sector-transformed the Liberation War into an Indo-Pak war and exposed her as an initiator and aggressor. Unlike India, the November offensive was not a 'prelude' for Bangladesh but a continuation of the war and a merger of the two Forces; it exposed the wartime government to the geopolitics of an internationalised civil war. Consequently, the first Operational Directive issued by the Commander-in-Chief of Bangladesh Forces on 22 November, placed the two Forces under a unified command and, more importantly, lending a layer of legitimacy for both Forces while retaining the political authority and ownership of the War. Bangladesh and India were guided by geopolitical considerations-exemplifying Clausewitz's maxim that war is an instrument of (geo)politics by other means.

Keywords: 1971 Liberation War, Armed Force Day, Geopolitics, Indo-Pak War, Internationalised Civil War, Strategic Paus, United Nations

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the causes and consequences of the coordinated military offensive launched on 21 November 1971, celebrated as the Armed Forces Day in Bangladesh, through the lens of geopolitics. The November offensive marked the first overt military intervention of Indian troops crossing the international border, in support of the ongoing Liberation War of Bangladesh. Some historians maintain 21 November as the ‘D-Day’ of 1971 Indo-Pak war—a departure from the largely held view of 03 December as the ‘start date’ of the same war, overshadowing Bangladesh’s nine-month-long armed struggle that commenced on 25 March 1971. Bangladesh Liberation Forces (hereafter BLF) intensified their fight following the offensive. However, India chose to take a “strategic pause” till 03 December. The paper explores why India took the odd pause, how Pakistan reacted to it, and how significant was the November offensive from Bangladesh’s perspective through the lens of international politics. Amidst the flurry of descriptive and impressionistic narratives, this paper goes beyond the insular and nationalistic account to explore the geopolitical dimension of 1971 Liberation War by addressing three seemingly trivial but pertinent questions: (i) Why did India pause her well-coordinated November offensive and relegated her initial victory in the East as an insignificant prelude? (ii) How did Pakistan react to the November offensive and what were its geopolitical consequences? (iii) How consequential was the military offensive of 21st November—that transformed the 1971 Liberation War into an internationalized civil war—for Bangladesh’s wartime government to retain the ownership and political authority of the war?

Exploring the archival records from the United Nations, Indian Lok Sabha, and the Provisional Government of Bangladesh (hereafter PG), this research provides new insights into the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, challenging traditional views. The analysis concludes that India adopted a “strategic pause” to gain international legitimacy for its involvement, downplaying its military actions in the East as an “insignificant prelude” while waiting for a response from Pakistan (Khan, 2024). Pakistan’s pre-emptive strike on December 3 escalated the conflict into an Indo-Pak war, transforming Bangladesh’s liberation war into an internationalized Civil War. The PG’s operational directive, issued on November 22, reveals that Bangladesh was driven by a quest for political independence and ownership of the war amidst a complex and contested geopolitical ambit. Unlike India, the November offensive was not a ‘prelude’ for Bangladesh; It represented a necessary continuation of efforts toward final victory and the need to bring both Forces under a unified command, providing legitimacy of Indian involvement.

The strategies of both Bangladesh and India were shaped by geopolitical factors, exemplifying Clausewitz's idea that war is an extension of politics by other means.

A SEEMINGLY TRIVIAL QUESTION

Unlike the other defining days of Bangladesh's history, 21 November gained prominence in the national narrative only after it was designated as the Armed Forces Day during the presidency of Hussain Mohammad Ershad. The day commemorates the sacrifices made by the freedom fighters (Mukti Bahini) of the 1971 Liberation War. According to the official narrative, on this day in 1971, members of Army, Navy and Air Force of BLF, along with the "supporting" Forces became "fully operational" and "launched a coordinated offensive against the Pakistani army" (Armed Forces Division, 2024; Hossain, 2018, p.345). However, as discussed later in the paper, the evidence supporting this claim is weak—particularly in the context of Air and Naval forces. Nevertheless, the November offensive rattled the Pakistani leadership evidenced by its declaration of a state of emergency. To stave off a military defeat in the East, Pakistan reached out to the United Nations Secretary-General, seeking his "personal" intervention (Security Council, S/10410, pp.10-12). Despite a belated recognition marred with some historical inaccuracies, the November offensive appears to be consequential from a geopolitical perspective to any informed reader of Bangladesh's Liberation War.

As alluded to before, some scholars maintain 21 November as the "D-Day" of the 1971 Indo-Pak war (O'Mahoney, 2017; Sisson and Rose, 1990). The global war datasets, used by the researchers of war studies, document both 21 November and 03 December 1971, as the date of open Indo-Pak hostility (see annex A for details). The variations in coding the variables such as war type, initiators, start/end dates of hostilities etc. in these datasets for the 1971 Liberation War is interesting. For example, the Harvard Data verse is perhaps the only global dataset where India appears as the 'initiator' of the war; it codes Bangladesh's Liberation War as an 'interstate' war, noting 20 November and 17 December as the 'start' and 'end' date of the war respectively (Reiter, 2020). The Correlates of War (COW)—a widely used global war dataset—projects Pakistan as the 'initiator'. Coding it as a "civil war over local issues" the COW intra-state war dataset lists 25 March 1971 and 02 December 1971 as the 'start' and 'end' date while COW's interstate war dataset notes 03 December 1971 as the 'start' date of the Indo-Pak war (Dixon and Meredith 2016). These variations in coding in global war datasets suggest that the question relating to the 21st of November, celebrated as Armed Forces Day in Bangladesh, is perhaps neither trivial nor settled.

One of the most cited military operations of Armed Forces Day is the battle of Garibpur in Boyra, fought and won by the combined forces just 12 days before the full-scale war began. The Boyra salient-a bordering village inside the then East Pakistan territory-is at an important crossroads as it gave the Indian Army access to the Dhaka-Jashore highway. The Mukti Bahini, supported by the armoured and infantry elements of the Indian Army, were, for the first time, engaged in a fierce battle with the Pakistani forces at Garibpur.¹ The battle also saw the first aerial fight between the Indian and Pakistani air forces in the Eastern Front.² The Pakistani side suffered significant casualties and destruction while the combined forces had a decisive win.³ Recalling the events-Brigadier Balram Singh Mehta -then a Captain and the second in command (2IC) of the Indian 45 Cavalry Squadron, states: "If the [Indian] government had given us permission on that day [i.e. 22 November 1971], we would have driven up till Jessore [Bangladesh] and brought the war to an end." (Upmanyu, 2020, italics added).

A seemingly intuitive question that follows is: why did India restrain her military from continuing the advancement to end the war at an early date? The question appears even more ineluctable if viewed from the context that the operational predicament of monsoon being a restraining factor for armoured advancement was over by then (Raghavan, 2013, p.69).⁴ Major General Jacob-India's military commander in the Eastern theatre-recalls adducing General Manekshaw that: "we [Indian troops in the Eastern theatre] could be ready earliest by 15 November. This would leave adequate time after the monsoon for the terrain to become passable" (Jacob, 1997, p. 20 and 119). Second, prior to the November offensive, India signed a geopolitically consequential "Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation" with the Soviet Union (on 09 August 1971) securing her much-needed security guarantee in case of an open Indo-Pak war (Kapur, 1972; Peri, 2021). Third, the onset of November also meant that the snowed up Himalayan passes would block any military moves by China, another key strategic consideration

1 The Indian forces, including the 14 Punjab Battalion and PT-76 tanks from the 45 Cavalry, partnered with the Mukti Bahini. In comparison, the Pakistani side comprised an infantry-sized battalion supported by the 3rd Independent Armoured Squadron with M24 Chaffee tanks and air support. (Hossain, 2018, pp. 301-302).

2 The Pakistan Air Force element tasked to provide close air support was four Sabres from No 14. Squadron stationed in Dhaka. The Indian Air Force elements, tasked to intercept the PAF fighters were four Folland Gnat from No. 22 Squadron stationed at Dum Dum airfield in Calcutta. Ibid.

3 The causality and destruction on the Pakistani side was reported as 100 dead, 40 injured and 11 tanks destroyed. The Allied forces lost 19 lives, 44 wounded and two PT 76s. See Hossain, 2018, p.302. The Battle of Boyra is also described by Srinath Raghavan (2013, p. 232) as a clear indication of the War reaching a "new stage" consequent to which the "Indian troops were ordered to remain inside the captured territory all along the border."

4 In a cabinet meeting on 25 April 1971, the Indian Army chief apprised the Prime Minister that monsoon in East Bengal (April-September) would restrict the troop's movement as "the land would be marshy, and the rivers would become like oceans" suggesting launching military offensive after the monsoon.

in favour of India to continue her November offensive. Thus, the seemingly trivial question as to why there was a sudden lull in the Indian offensive following the decisive victory of 21st November appears solid and ineluctable. Answering to these questions entails exploring geopolitics of the Cold War era-inextricably linked to Bangladesh's Liberation War and emergence as an independent state.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF COLD WAR

The geopolitics of the Cold War had a distinctive impact on South Asia. This (Table 1) was particularly evidenced by the Security Council debates and (in) decisions.⁵ China and the United States - two P-5 members-insofar as their governments were concerned, had overtly opposed Bangladesh's independence. From a Cold War perspective, the United States viewed that an undivided Pakistan would better serve the developing Sino-U.S. relationship to contain the spread of communism. An open Indian intervention in Bangladesh was also not endorsed by other Western states for fear that 'it could incite similar situations,' simmering in many other parts of the world including Biafra in Nigeria (Khan, 2021; Nanda, 1972, pp. 56-57; Choudhury, 1972).

China viewed that "Soviet socialist imperialism" was playing the "most insidious role in South Asia" to further "control India and Bangla Desh" and increase its "sphere of influence" in the Indian Ocean region (S/PV. 1660, p.9). Labelling the Soviet Union as the "new tsars who stop at nothing in doing evil" the Chinese Ambassador at the United Nations reiterated his government's firm support for Pakistan "in their just struggle against foreign aggression" (S/PV 1615, p.2).

Amidst the compelling geopolitical situation in South Asia, taking side became fated for a "non-aligned" India, manifested by the defining Indo-Soviet Treaty. First, India was apprehensive about a military intervention by the extra-regional powers in the event of an open war with Pakistan and wanted to secure a security guarantee despite being an active proponent of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Second, Pakistan's membership of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1955, the shock of 1962 Chinese invasion, the 1965 Indo-Pak war over Kashmir-exposed India's vulnerability in the region within the context of Great Power politics. Third, the Indo-Soviet affinity during the Cold War was well-recognized. For

5 Bi-lateral discussions on the Indo-Pak situation were also held in key capitals like Washington, Bonn, Kremlin and Beijing. Discussions were held at the General Assembly and other relevant United Nations committees and commissions (i.e. Third Committee, Economic and Social Council, Human Rights Commission, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities etc.). However, the geopolitics became most revealing at the Security Council (Nanda, 1972, pp. 49-56)-

example, India refrained from condemning the Soviet Union when it moved to suppress the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring in 1968 at the Assembly. Thus, the Indo-Soviet Treaty, although hastened by the impending Indo-Pak war in the subcontinent, was built on years of Indo-Soviet friendship and geopolitical affinity-received coolly in Washington (Pant and Super, 2015. pp. 749-752; Kapur, 1972; Thomas 1979).

Table 1: Key Security Council Meetings on Bangladesh in December 1971
Meeting & outcome (Yes-No-Abs): 21 Dec (1621st Meeting)
Adopted a Resolution (S/RES/307) for a “durable cease-fire and cessation of all hostilities in all areas of conflict.” (13-0-2; Abs: Poland, USSR)
Meeting & outcome (Yes-No -Abs): 16 Dec (1616th & 1617th Meetings)
Discussed but no draft Resolution was placed for voting.
Meeting & outcome (Yes-No -Abs): 15/16 Dec (1615th Meeting)
Discussed but no draft Resolution was placed for voting.
Meeting & outcome (Yes-No -Abs): 14/15 Dec (1614th Meeting)
Discussed but no draft resolution was placed for voting.
Meeting & outcome (Yes-No -Abs): 13 Dec (1613th Meeting)
USSR vetoed the revised U.S. Draft resolution S/10446/Rev.1. (11-2-2; No: Poland, USSR. Abs: France, UK)
Meeting & outcome Vote (Yes-No -Abs): 12 Dec (1611th Meeting)
Discussed but no resolution was placed for voting.
Meeting & outcome Vote (Yes-No -Abs): 05 Dec (1607th Meeting)
Six Power (Argentina, Burundi, Japan, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone and Somalia) Resolution 303(1971) was adopted to refer the issue to the General Assembly. (11-0-4 (Abs: France, Poland, USSR, UK). The Assembly adopted a non-binding Resolution for an immediate ceasefire.
USSR vetoed draft Resolution (S/10423) for a ceasefire tabled by Argentina, Belgium, Burundi, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone and Somalia. (11-2-2; No: Poland, USSR. Abs: France, UK)
China vetoed the USSR draft Resolution (S/10418) calling for Political Settlement to cease the hostility. (2-1-12; No: China)
Meeting & outcome (Yes-No -Abs): 04 Dec 04 (1606th Meeting)
USSR vetoed the U.S. draft resolution (S/10416) calling for immediate ceasefire (11-2-2; No: Poland, USSR. Abs: France, UK)
<i>Source: Author's compilation of Security Council official records.</i>

China viewed the Indo-Soviet treaty as an “aggressive military alliance”, that had stripped off India’s “cloak of non-alliance.” Albania—that withdrew from the Warsaw Pact in 1968, primarily in response to the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia—also described the Indo-Soviet Treaty as an “aggressive” aimed against the peace-loving countries of Asia. The Albanian ambassador at the United Nations also condemned the “warmongering policy of the imperialist Powers, a policy which seriously threatens peace and security in Asia and the world and primarily against the People’s Republic of China and Pakistan.” (A/PV. 2003, p.10). Paired with the Soviet veto power in the Security Council, the Indo-Soviet treaty accorded India the military deterrence to engage in an open war with Pakistan. Consequently, the Security Council became a ‘concerned but helpless’ observer, not just for the geopolitical power play but also for its inactions after the Pakistani massacre of the Bengalis on 25 March 1971, which continued till December (Khan, 2024).

Beyond the P-5, several other states, including some non-Security Council members also viewed an open Indo-Pak conflict as “critical” for regional peace and security.⁶ Leveraging the expansion of the non-aligned presence in the Assembly, these states carved out a niche to operate as active, independent agents. Apart from the General Assembly, non-Security Council members like Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) also participated in the Council debates to voice their concerns.⁷

Exasperated by the deep divisions in the Council, the Saudi diplomat—widely regarded for his diplomatic wisdom—succinctly asserted: “Resolutions without the collective will to act will bring us to nought” because the ‘differences between the big Powers are strategic.’ He labelled the draft resolutions circulated as ‘autumn leaves being wafted in the Council’ with no effect. Advocating for an Asian solution, not a United Nations solution the ambassador suggested convening an immediate meeting of the Asian Chiefs of State to “pour oil on troubled waters: not to appeal, not to adjudicate, but to resort to Asian magnanimity to put an immediate end to the war with a solution that will be acceptable.” (S/PV. 1607, pp.8-12).

⁶ The non-permanent Security Council members included: Argentina, Belgium, Burundi, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Poland, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Syria.

⁷ Other diplomats who attended (by invitation and without the rights to vote) several Council meetings on the Indo-Pak agenda included: Mr. Svaran Singh (India) Mr. Z. A. Bhutto/Mr. A. Shabi (Pakistan), Mr. R. Driss (Tunisia), Mr. J. M. Baroodi (Saudi Arabia) and Mr. H.S. Amerasinghe (Ceylon).

The Tunisian diplomat described the Indo-Pak situation as a “veritable war-like situation” calling for its immediate end to respect the “unity and the territorial integrity of Pakistan” (S/PV.1607, pp.7-8). The Sri Lankan (Ceylon) ambassador labeled the same as a “poignant tragedy in the history of the United Nations” leading to “imminent disintegration of a country.” At the 1615th Security Council Meeting, held on the wee hours of 15 December 1971 when the Pakistani troops were preparing to surrender at Dhaka, Mr. Amerasinghe, Sri Lankan Ambassador to the United Nation, pleaded to the Council members for a settlement that will “prevent victory from being an embarrassment, defeat from being a humiliation, and peace from being an illusion.” He also suggested that any solution should provide a sure and stable foundation for “lasting peace and harmony between those who are brothers and must always remain so” (S/PV 1615, p.3).

Be that as it may, military intervention remained unacceptable to many of the member states advocating a ceasefire. They feared military interventionism would set an unhealthy precedent undermining the concepts of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and national independence enshrined in the United Nations Charter. The exceptions were the Soviet Union and Poland-aligned with India-who repeatedly stressed the need for a political settlement of the crisis. They rightly viewed that a ceasefire without correlating it with a negotiated political settlement involving the elected representatives of East Pakistan would be unrealistic, inadequate and cannot bring lasting peace.

Amidst the constant flux of a bipolar world, geopolitical consideration prevailed. Geopolitics compelled the warring states to project themselves as exercising maximum restraint and overtly using force only for defensive purposes to secure international legitimacy. Thus, India's strange pause after 21st November and designating the November offensive in the East as an “insignificant prelude” was a geopolitical necessity. Pakistan's pre-emptive air attack in the Western sector exposed her to further international obloquy and truly transformed Bangladesh's Liberation War into an Indo-Pak war.

The juxtaposed position of the two superpowers ended hope for any ‘Asian solution’ codified in a binding Security Council resolution espoused by the Saudi Ambassador. The successive Soviet vetoes at the Council gave precious little time for a swift military victory. The lack of unanimity amongst the P-5 of the Security Council finally resulted in referring the issue of ceasefire to the General Assembly-where any resolution passed was inconsequential and non-binding. India's full-scale intervention starting on 03 December 1971 expedited

the birth of Bangladesh, making it the ‘only example of forcibly creating a new state propelled by an ethnic-linguistic movement in the Cold War era’ (Khan, 2021, p.237).

INDIAN PERSPECTIVE: INSULAR BUT REFLECTIVE

Although the border skirmishes and airspace violations between India and Pakistan were frequent and became more widespread over time, not all were credited with equal importance in official debates. The military offensive of 21 November 1971 is one such operations credited to have been cited and debated by the Indian and Pakistani diplomats and politicians at the parliament and the United Nations. On 23 November, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then an opposition member at Indian Lok Sabha, requested a government statement regarding the Boyra incident. Citing the media reports, Samar Guha, a West Bengal parliamentarian, also mentioned the “tank battle in Jessore” and reports of the “number of Indians captured” by the Pakistanis. In response, the defence minister confirmed the “shooting down of three intruding Pakistani aircraft near Boyra.” Downplaying the magnitude and significance of the military offensive, the Minister emphasized that India is not in a state of “undeclared war” or a “state of hostilities” with Pakistan, adding that Pakistan is trying to “internationalise the war” (Lok Sabha, 1971, 22 November, pp. 245-248, *italics added*.).

The Indian Prime Minister’s curated statement-delivered on 24 November-at the Lok Sabha on the “declaration of emergency in Pakistan and the situation on the India-Pakistan border,” also described the military actions of 21 November. Two days later, the same text was read out by the Indian diplomat at the 1996th Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly. The curated and insular statement included the reason and nature of the Indian military action at Boyra, the causality and destructions of Pakistani forces and the future course of action. India claimed that the Pakistan military had launched “an offensive” on Mukti Bahini who were protecting a Boyra-a liberated bordering village inside East Pakistan. The artillery shells fired by the Pakistan military, falling inside Indian territory had wounded a few Indian soldiers and had threatened the defensive position held by the Indian army. This prompted the ‘local military commander’ to take ‘appropriate action to repulse the Pakistani attack.’ The Prime Minister also mentioned the air battle which took place ‘inside Indian territory’ and resulted in the shooting of three Pakistani Sabre jets and capturing two pilots. Her statement included a response to the Pakistani President’s Eid message and a summary of the ‘wanton’ violation

of Indian airspace and shelling by Pakistan (Lok Sabha, November 24, 1971, pp.222-24; A/PV. 1996, pp.18-19).

The Indian Prime Minister described these incidents as 'purely local' suggesting that India does not want to 'escalate the situation,' and will remain 'unruffled'. She also informed the House that the troops have been instructed "not to cross the border except in self-defence." Unlike Pakistan's decision of declaring a state of emergency, immediately after the battle of Boyra, India opted to wait for Pakistan taking "further aggressive action." Ten days later, Pakistan's pre-emptive air strike against Indian airfields in the Western sector, prompted India to declare a state of emergency and the full-scale war ensued.

When the debate moved to the Security Council, India maintained a similar curated narrative about her military offensive of 21st November. At the 1606th Security Council meeting, Mr. Sen, the Indian Ambassador stated, "I do not deny it [i.e. going into East Pakistan territory on 21 November]." Stating India's compulsions, he added that the Pakistani military had "started shelling our civilian villages... after having killed their own people [Bengalis] they now turn their guns on us [Indians]" and "we did this because we had no option." (S/PV 1606, p.15). From a geopolitical perspective, several conclusions emerge from India's insular and curated narrative.

First, to draw international legitimacy India, on its part, remained keen to project herself as a party exercising maximum restraint to address the East Pakistan crisis. The Tashkent Agreement-signed after the Indo-Pak War of 1965-had ushered in a long spell of 'armed peace' in South Asia. Anchored in the principles of United Nations Charter, the Agreement restored the territorial status quo and stipulated against the use of force in resolving Indo-Pak disputes (Tashkent Declaration, 1966, January 10, Article I).⁸ It also reiterated adherence to the 'principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of each other'-the cornerstone of the global community's muted or vocal position during the Indo-Pak crisis (Ibid, Article III; Nanda, 1972). Thus India's "strategic pause" was perhaps necessary to adduce to the international community as a party exercising maximum restraint.

Second, Pakistan's overt military intervention on 03 December served as a solid justification for India to make full use of the protection guaranteed by the Indo-Soviet Treaty. Apart from the Soviet military support to India the Treaty assured to "immediately enter into mutual consultations," in case of an attack

⁸ Article I of the Tashkent Declaration reaffirmed India and Pakistan's commitment "not to have recourse to force and to settle their disputes through peaceful means" aligned with the United Nations Charter.

or a threat of attack on India, to “remove such threat and to take appropriate effective measures.” The Treaty also provided a safeguard against supplying any Soviet military support to Pakistan in the event of a conflict (Treaty of Peace, Friendship & Co-operation, 1971, Article IX, X). Air Marshal Koutakov’s visit to Delhi on 28 October 1971 to negotiate the defence supplies needed by India further cemented the Soviet assurance of ‘total support’ (Raghavan, 2013, p.226). Launching a full-fledged military offensive only as a response to Pakistan’s ‘further aggressive action’ ensured securing the full range of Soviet support and international legitimacy (Kamal, 2010). Thus, relegating the decisive victory at the battle of Boyra as ‘purely local’, resulting from a ‘defensive action’ and initiated by the ‘local’ military commander was insular but reflective, attesting to the primacy of geopolitics in the conduct of war.

Third, and perhaps the most enduring geopolitical lesson from an Indian perspective is how a regional actor can shape and settle a security issue in its immediate neighbourhood limiting the interference of external actors. The Soviet deterrence, paired with the vetoes in Security Council broadly insulated India from the geopolitical pressure to make her military move against Pakistan. India’s decision to relegate the November offensive in the East and wait till Pakistan’s overt military action in the Western Sector was to project herself as a ‘victim’ and not an initiator of the war. Such a position was defensible by India and her crucial allies in the Council. With firm military preparation and support by the BLF, any aggressive posturing by the external powers was almost destined to be met with a swift Allied offensive to capture Dhaka to seal the victory. Such realities perhaps explain as to why the titling and posturing of Pakistan’s key ally-the United States-appeared to be ‘picaresque’ and tilting at ‘windmills’ (Raghavan, 2013, p. 263). Trading cautiously and strategically, India was able to isolate the issue as a bi-lateral one instead of requiring multi-lateral intervention. India’s success of keeping the ‘high politics of the region on a bilateral basis’ continues to remain her foreign policy strategy even today (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp.102-3).

PAKISTANI PERSPECTIVE: CAPTIVE TO MILITARY STRATEGY

Most Pakistani historians consider 21st November as the ‘operative date’ of the 1971 Indo-Pak war. However, Pakistan’s narrative of the November offensive is also marred with insularity and propagandist tone-evidenced by the official records of the Council and Assembly meetings. On 23 November, the Pakistani president

wrote to the Secretary-General describing the military situation. Calling it as 'grave' and 'urgent', the President reported that the Indian military had mounted a 'large scale attack' on various parts of East Pakistan, penetrating several miles inside Pakistan in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Maulvi Bazaar, Burangamari, Boyra, and Belonia (S/10410, pp.10-12).

Pakistan labelled the Indian military actions of 21st November as a 'blatant act of aggression'. The Pakistani representative at the United Nation emphatically stated, "Take any definition of aggression, take any statement of the Indian position on what constitutes aggression, and by their very words they have committed aggression against Pakistan." (A/PV.1996, pp. 16-17). According to Pakistan, India's military action was aimed at establishing 'control of the territory by the 'secessionist groups' (i.e. Mukti Bahini) inside East Pakistan territory to claim that the 'rebel government now has a territory and a population' to pave the way for their recognition.

In a war-time situational briefing on 22 November 1971, Pakistan's Chief of General Staff urged the President to order the attack on India's Western front-aligned with country's military doctrine. Pakistan's military doctrine stipulated that "the defence of East Pakistan lies in West Pakistan" (Commission Report, 1972, p.69). The next day, the President declared a state of emergency and wrote a letter to the Secretary-General seeking his 'personal initiative' to avert a 'catastrophe' and convene a Security Council meeting (S/10410, p. 12). However, the Security Council did not consider that the situation was compelling to convene a meeting. Pakistan could adduce the Council about the events of 21st November only after the full-scale war broke out in the subcontinent.⁹ Pakistan's inability to internationalise the November offensive appears to have borne out of a combination of factors.

First, at the onset of hostilities-particularly after Pakistan military's crackdown of the innocent Bengali civilians, Pakistan maintained that East Pakistan crisis was 'outside the Security Council's concern.' The Pakistani Ambassador at the United Nation repeatedly reminded the Council that the Council should be concerned with "international peace, not with the internal peace and political life" of a member state. Pakistan refused to be drawn into an Indian 'trap' suggesting that the Council should "find the means to make India desist from its war of aggression" (S/PV. 1606, p10). Pakistan's initial reticence to external involvement proved costly for her when it became necessary.

9 On 4 December 1971-Pakistan adduced the Security Council that her Eastern front was under "a massive attack...since 21 November, by India's regular troops, tanks and aircraft" along with the claims of Indian land forces incursion in the Western front. (See S/PV. 1606, 1971, December 04, pp. 7-10).

As the specter of a full-scale war loomed large and became inevitable after the fiercest clash of 21st November, the Pakistani leadership started making frantic efforts to draw regional and international actors to intervene and support (Nanda, 1972, p. 65; Raghavan 2018; Bass, 2013). In one of his letters to the Secretary-General, President Yahya proposed to deploy United Nations observers on its side of East Pakistan—a shift from his previous proposal to deploy the observers on both sides of the border, rejected by the Indians (A/PV. 2003, p.40).¹⁰ Pakistan's efforts to internationalise the military offensive of 21st November seeking intervention was too late and futile.

Second, the Secretary-General was frustrated by the responses of the Council members and the parties involved. On 22 November, he wrote to the Indian Prime Minister: "... much to my regret, there does not seem to be a basis for the exercise of the Secretary-General's good offices in this infinitely serious and complicated problem" (S/10410, p. 9). His frustration was also evident from his letter to the Pakistani President on 29 November, which concluded that: "I have gone, for the moment, as far as my authority under the Charter permits me, usefully and meaningfully, to go in the present circumstances (S/10410, p. 13)." The timing and texts of the Secretary-General's communications with the warring parties reflect that the United Nations' efforts were inhibited not just by the great power rivalry but also the domestic jurisdiction and the inexorable course taken by both parties leading towards a full-scale Indo-Pak war.

Third, Pakistan's reaction to the November offensive was guided by her military strategy rather than geopolitical assessment. The view that a decisive attack in the Western sector would 'bring India to its knees' prevailed over the larger question of its effect on drawing international legitimacy of the War. On the eve of launching the pre-emptive strike on Indian airfields in the Western front, the Pakistani Air Chief reportedly told his public relations officer 'Not to bother about conjuring up justification', boasting that 'success is the biggest justification' (Raghavan, 2013, p.234). Reflecting on Pakistan's conduct of the 1971 War, General Niazi noted that the "Indians would not have started an all-out war in East Pakistan if the Western front had not been opened by Pakistan [in response to the November offensive in the East]." (Commission Report, p.69, italics added).

At the regional level, Pakistan failed to secure alliance support despite being an active member of the CENTO and SEATO, two military pacts for providing

¹⁰ Apart from the Assembly debates, India opposed the idea to station United Nations observers on their soil during Prime Minister India Gandhi's visit to western capitals including West Germany to isolate the Bangladesh crisis from extra-regional involvement including the possibility of an Atlantic entente (Raghavan 2013, p. 231).

Collective Defence.¹¹ Pakistan was a key ally of the West to limit the spread of communism in South Asia. However, Pakistan's disenchantment with the alliance dates from 1965 when it failed to secure meaningful support during the Indo-Pak war on Kashmir. Consequently, Pakistan shaded her attachment with the SEATO and CENTO in 1973 and 1979 respectively as they were "no longer useful" (New York Times, 09 Nov 1972). In contrast to India, Pakistan maintained a strategy of formally entering regional alliances and strong bi-lateral relationship with key powers like the United States, China and Saudi Arabia. Although Pakistan's alliance-based strategy did not yield much meaningful support for her in 1971, it nevertheless kept India regionally tied with a Pakistan centric threat perception, feeding India's military strategy, deployment and procurement, even today.

Buoyed by their newfound role as a conduit to the budding US-China relationship, Pakistan hoped for Chinese intervention in case of a full-scale Indo-Pak war. Reference to this effect was made by the President as well as the foreign minister Bhutto, on returning from his visit to Beijing in November 1971. The likelihood of an Indo-Pak war 'within ten days' was mentioned by the President in an impromptu remark following a state banquet honouring the visiting Chinese minister on 25 November 1971 (Department of States, 1972, February 02, p.11). It is now known that the Chinese assurance to Pakistan was that of military supply and support and not of intervention. Nonetheless, most of the Council members were aligned with Pakistan's demand for an immediate ceasefire, only to be nullified by consecutive Soviet vetoes.

Hindsight now establishes that the November offensive was profoundly consequential for Pakistan but not for the international community. The fact that the Security Council did not meet until after Pakistan's pre-emptive strike, would imply that the Council did not see the November offensive as a serious threat to regional security. Pakistan's record of massacring innocent Bengali that pervaded the international media and her initial reticence to any external intervention restricted her ability to garner international support. The (ineffective) alliances with SEATO and CENTO also worked as an obstacle to garnering support from NAM, limiting Pakistan's strategic autonomy (Dhar, 2000) and finally prioritizing the military strategy over geopolitical considerations. The pre-emptive strike in the Western sector made Pakistan the initiator and aggressor. It also transformed The Liberation War of Bangladesh into an Indo-Pak war. By placing military objectives over geopolitical considerations, Pakistan once again exposed herself

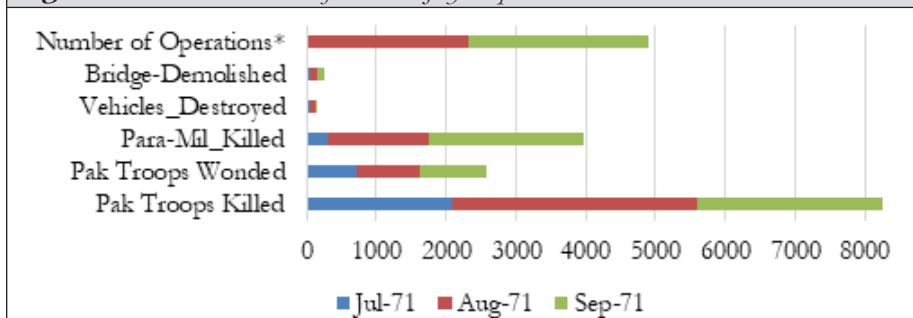
¹¹ The Baghdad Pact, later called CENTO, included Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the UK. SEATO comprised Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the UK, and the U.S.A.

to international obloquy and allowed her counterpart to claim, ‘it was not India which declared or started war’. In other words, Pakistan helped the Indian cause at the geopolitical level.

BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE: QUEST TO RETAIN POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND OWNERSHIP

The making of 21 November was written in the walls of 25 March 1971-the day on which the Pakistan military unleashed “Operation Searchlight” on the unarmed Bengali civilians. Overcoming the initial shock many Bengalis, with the material assistance and a sanctuary in India, took up arms to fight for independence. As early as 29 March 1971, the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) started offering ‘limited help’ to the Mukti Bahini. By April 1971 the Indian Army and the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) began training and equipping the Mukti Bahini to set up the “tempo of guerrilla operation with a focus on demolition by small parties” inside East Pakistan (Bass, 2013, pp.95-96).

Figure 1: Mukti Bahini Performance: July -September 1971



Source: Author's Compilation from Headquarters Bangladesh Forces Reports

By July-September 1971, the guerrilla operation inside East Pakistan was well into motion. The destruction, demolition and casualties inflicted by the Mukti Bahini on the Pakistani forces (Figure 1) continue to increase, adding to the increasing size of the liberated area within East Pakistan.¹² The mutinied troops of East Bengal regiments helped organise the BLF and prevented the Pakistani army from securing control of large parts of East Pakistan (Raghavan, 2018, p.52). The BLF fortnightly situation report reveals that before the Indian overt involvement,

¹² The data is from the “on Mukti Bahini Activities and Performance, (during the period: last week of June-1st Week of October 71)” Headquarters Bangladesh Forces (Hossain, 2018, Appendix V).

Mukti Bahini had liberated or taken complete control of a vast swath of land inside East Pakistan (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mukti Bahini activities between 15 Nov-30 Nov 1971	
Operations/Activities	Outcome
Areas Liberated	Large areas of Sylhet, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Tangail, Jessore, Khulna, Barisal and Chittagong districts.
Areas under Complete Control of Mukti Bahini	Most of the northern part of Dinajpur, Rangpur and Sylhet. Almost the whole of Tangail district and Kishoreganj Sub-division. Extensive areas of Barisal and Faridpur. Western Part of Khulna and Jessore Fatik Chari, Patia, Anwara, Raojan and Hatia thana and Northeastern Part of Noakhali
Demolished/Damaged / Destroyed	40 strategic roads and railway bridges. Trains carrying enemy troops derailed in 4 different places. 28 Enemy Vehicles.
Sunk	Seven Ships, six Coasters, six Barges, Five Steamers, and a few enemy Gun boats.
Sea Ports Paralyzed	Chalna and Chittagong.
River Ports/ Ferry Ghats disrupted	Chandpur, Narayanganj, Bahadurabad Ghat, Jagannathganj Ghat.
Domestic Air Flights	Closed
<i>Source: Author's Compilation from Bangladesh Forces HQ Press Release Dated 03 Dec 1971 (Hossain, 2018, Appendix W)</i>	

By the first week of November, the Kilo Flight¹³-the air arm of BLF-became fully operational to launch air attacks (Alam, 2021). However, much like the dismay of the Indian troops of the 45 Cavalry in Boyra, the Kilo Flight's planned D-Day of 28 November to launch their first air attack on the Chittagong fuel refinery inside Esat Pakistan was postponed until 03 December 1971 by the Indian high command (Alam, 2021, p.438). The decamped Bengali naval commandoes and submariners of the Pakistan Navy conducted "Operation Jackpot" on 15 August 1971 destroying twenty-six ships carrying food and oil from different countries,

¹³ Kilo Flight, the precursor to the Bangladesh Air Force, was established on September 28, 1971, in Dimapur, India. It included a DC-3, an Otter, and an Alouette-III helicopter. Bengali airmen who defected from the Pakistan Air Force and Pakistan International Airlines, along with support from the Indian Air Force, made the flight operational during the liberation war.

including arms-laden ships from Pakistan, blocking the ports to stop Pakistan's logistics supply (Banglapedia, 2021, Mahfuz, 2023). The ceasefire proposal sent to the senior United Nations officials at Dhaka by the East Pakistan Governor on 10 November also attests to the fact that the Pakistan Army in the Eastern theatre was collapsing well before the November offensive (Raghavan 2028, p.252).

Thus, from a Bangladesh perspective, the November offensive was neither a 'precursor' of the War nor the day on which all three BLF elements became 'fully operational' to launch a coordinated offensive as held by the conventional narrative. Instead, it was a continuation and an inevitable merger of the two Forces, driven by geopolitical considerations and the urgency of a swift victory.

Nevertheless, the November offensive exposed the war-time PG to the complexities of an internationalised civil war. The PG, for the first time, was formally exposed to the challenges of retaining political authority and ownership of the War. This little-known and much less analyzed Operational Directive of 22nd November is perhaps one of the most consequential and authoritative war-time documents of Bangladesh's Liberation War. It defined, for the first time, the "Relative Roles of Bangladesh Forces in Relation to Supporting Forces [India] in the Event of War between the Host Country [Bangladesh] and the Enemy [Pakistan]" (Sarwar, 2018, Appendix Z). The Directive touched off the tocsin at the military-strategic level-capturing Bangladesh's wartime leadership's quest to retain the authority and ownership of the War and the command relationship of the two Forces.

The Directive-issued by the BLF Commander-in-Chief MAG Osmani following an agreement with the General Officer Commanding, Eastern Command-was sent to all BLF Commanders and the Indian Army Command.¹⁴ It defined the command relationship, roles of "Supporting" and Bangladesh Forces, allotment of troops, boundaries, logistics, civil administration of liberated areas etc. Bangladesh Forces were placed under the Supporting Indian Forces' command, requiring the latter to "provide full logistic support" (Ibid, p.470).

The unique arrangements outlined in the Directives raise a few intuitive questions. Why did the Directive designate Bangladesh as a "host country" which was yet to be recognised by any states including India? Why were the Indian troops called "Supporting Forces"? Why were the host country's forces placed under the Supporting forces command-an unorthodox military practice? These intuitive questions can be better explained through the lens of geopolitics.

14 A note at the end of the Directive for wireless and couriers states it was issued based on an agreement between the Commander-in-Chief of Bangladesh forces and the GOC-in-C of India's Eastern Command (Sarwar, 2018, p. 474).

First, geopolitics can affect political authority and ownership in internationalised civil conflicts. The 22 November Directive tended to suggest that the PG was apprehensive about losing its ownership and authority of the War amidst a complex geopolitical context. A perception prevailed that if India succeeds in helping to create Bangladesh, then “East Pakistan will become a Bhutan and West Pakistan will become a Nepal. And India with Soviet help would be free to turn its energies elsewhere” (Henry Kissinger quoted in Raghavan, 2018, p. 284).

Bangladesh's first Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed realized the complex motives of external actors and the necessity to retain the ownership of the War. In one of his wartime addresses to the nation, he asserted: “Bengalis undoubtedly rely on their own power ...but there is satisfaction to be derived from the signs of support from quarters where before there was only caution.” (Ministry of Liberation War, 2004a, p.215, italics added). The necessity to retain ownership of the War, after India's military involvement became even more ineluctable.

Abdur Razzaq, a key figure of the “nucleus” of Bangladesh's freedom struggle also echoed a similar view.¹⁵ Reaffirming Mukti Bahini's vow to fight a prolonged war, Razzaq however predicted that, India, boasting her direct involvement, may claim the ownership of our Liberation War in future. He viewed that the intervention by the regular Indian forces was necessary but not essential to win Bangladesh's independence (Kino-Eye Films Archive, 2021, June 28).

Ironically, Razzaq's prediction came to fruition. On 16 December 2024-54th Victory Day of Bangladesh-the Indian Prime Minister wrote: “Today we honour the courage and sacrifices of the brave soldiers who contributed to India's historic victory in 1971” in his official X handle (formerly Twitter). Bangladeshi polity including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) reacted sharply. The tweet was viewed as a distortion of history, seemingly disregarding Bangladesh's ownership of the 1971 Liberation War. Highlighting the “fact in history” from the books authored by Indian writers, Bangladesh's MoFA in its official Facebook page wrote “We celebrate our glorious Victory in 1971; we celebrate the Truth” (Khan, 2025; MoFA, Dec 18, 2024, italic added).

Major Rafiqul Islam, a decorated freedom fighter and Sector Commander, also shares an insightful account of the command dynamics between the Indian and Bangladeshi forces during the 1971 Liberation War. He recalls a conference held

¹⁵ *Abdur Razzaq, (1942-2011) was a Bangladeshi politician and frontline organiser of the war of liberation. He was one of the three members of the core committee of Svadhin Bangla Biplabi Parishad, widely known as the 'nucleus' and the main proponent of Bangladesh's independence through armed struggle.*

at the Indian 181 Brigade Headquarters on November 20, 1971, where it was decided that Indian officers could be loaned to command Bangladeshi troops in extreme emergencies. Despite this provision, Maj Rafique notes that they did not require to 'loan' Indian officers and were able to continue their fight with the officers and Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) available to them. This arrangement of conditional offer to borrow Indian officers highlights the collaborative yet independent nature of the relationship between the two forces after the November offensive (Ministry of Liberation War, 2004, p. 66-67).

The evidence suggests that the wartime leadership in Bangladesh was careful to maintain control and ownership of the conflict while accepting India's assistance, mindful of the risks associated with "becoming Bhutan."

Second, by labeling Bangladesh as the 'host country' and the Indian troops as 'Supporting Forces,' they added a layer of legitimacy to the Allied intervention. This narrative was essential in portraying that the Indian forces were officially invited by the host nation to play a supportive role in East Pakistan. Such framing was beneficial in asserting that the Allied intervention did not violate the principle of non-aggression, as it aligned with the Bengalis' right to self-determination, addressing the concerns of an increasingly restless international community.

Once the war erupted, key allies of India within the Non-Aligned Movement, such as Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia and President Naser of Egypt, expressed strong reservation regarding India's military intervention in East Pakistan. In a surprising turn of events, both of these pivotal allies, alongside 104 member states, united in voting for an Assembly resolution that called for an immediate cease-fire and the withdrawal of troops (A/RES 2793 (XXVI) and A/PV. 2003, p. 10-11).¹⁶ It was a moment of unexpected dismay for India when the operative clause of the Polish revised draft resolution presented at the Security Council on December 14—just two days prior to the surrender of Pakistani forces in Dhaka—stated:¹⁷

"...The Indian armed forces will be withdrawn from East Pakistan. Such withdrawal of troops will begin upon consultations with the newly established authorities organized as a result of the transfer of power to the lawfully elected representatives of the people." (S/10453/REV.I).

¹⁶ India along with ten other countries including the USSR, Poland and Bhutan voted against it while the United Kingdom, France and Nepal along with seven other countries abstained from voting in this non-binding General Assembly Resolution.

¹⁷ The Polish draft resolution (S/10453), first presented on 14 December, was followed by a revised version (S/10453 Rev-1) on 15 December, which notably omitted the reference to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the head of the "lawfully elected representatives of the people." However, neither resolution was brought to a vote, but reflects the shifting mood of the India's allies.

The urgency for a quick victory and immediate withdrawal of Indian troops from East Pakistan was clear in the discussions at the Council and Assembly. Concerned about escalation, Britain and France urged India through private channels to “finish the job quickly” (Raghavan 2028, p. 259) and proposed a draft resolution for an “immediate and durable cease-fire” along with “disengagement leading to withdrawal” of troops (S/10455). Geopolitical factors necessitated hastening the victory, resulting in the merging of the two forces.

Third, the 22 November Operational Directive also manifests the inevitable merger of the two kinds of battles triggered by Pakistani aggression in the West and repression in the East. Compared to the Western Sector, the BLF and Indian forces pitted against the Pakistani forces in the East were fighting a different kind of battle, tersely put by the Indian diplomat at the Assembly debate:

“...there are two kinds of battle that are going on [in the subcontinent]. There is a battle between Indian soldiers and Pakistani soldiers brought about by Pakistani aggression, and a battle between the Mukti Bahini and Pakistan soldiers brought about by Pakistani repression (A/PV. 2003, p.43, italics added).”

Notwithstanding their differences in motivation and causes, both battles were inextricably linked to liberating Bangladesh. Pakistan's effort to untangle her war of repression on the Eastern front from the war of aggression on the Western front failed due to the consistent Soviet vetoes. The PG's Directive instructed the BLF to be in the “van of the final stage of liberation” to secure cities and important towns regarded as “vital political and psychological consideration.” The BLF was explicitly tasked to set up “civil administration in the liberated area” as per the orders of the PG, attesting to Bangladesh's war-time leadership's quest to retain ownership and authority in the conduct and outcome of the Liberation War.

Fourth, the demand for “full observation” of the Geneva Conventions by all warring parties intensified once the open hostilities ensued.¹⁸ But the PG-proclaimed in April 1971-was not a recognised state entity or a signatory of the Geneva Convention. The PG's request to take part in the Council discussions to adduce the members was not heeded despite strong arguments by the Soviet Union and Poland. A letter from PG's special envoy, Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, to the Security Council President was circulated to the Council members (S/10415). Leveraging that letter, the Soviet ambassador argued that it

¹⁸ Almost all Security Council draft resolutions tabled by Japan and Italy, France and the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the USA (S/10451, S/10455 of 13 December 1971 and S/10457 and S/10459 of 15 December 1971) urged the observance of the Geneva Conventions.

would be “appropriate to hear not only the representatives of India and Pakistan but also the representatives of Bangla Desh.” The Polish ambassador added that the documents received from Bangladesh contain data that the Security Council will need “to have the best picture of the situation” to reach the “best solution.” (S/PV 1606, pp.1-2). Despite such requests, the Council’s rules of procedure did not allow Bangladesh to participate in the discussions. The geopolitical reality presumably necessitated the PG placing the BLF under the “supporting” Indian forces to provide a semblance of adherence to the Geneva Conventions.

Such command arrangement was not only an operational necessity but was also a legal obligation of the warring party of a new state in the making through armed struggle. The arrangement provided a layer of legitimacy and accountability of the BLF to the eyes of the global community. Pakistan’s cautious acceptance of this command arrangement was evident from her note verbale of 13 December 1971, circulated to the Council and Assembly. Reminding India of her responsibility as the “detaining power” of the Pakistani prisoner of War (POWs) under Article 12 of the Convention, the diplomatic note read: “Lest the Government of India be tempted, at some stage, to take the plea that it cannot be held responsible for the acts of the Mukti Bahini, the Permanent Representative of Pakistan wishes to state that such an excuse will not hold as the Mukti Bahini is officially under the authority of India’s Army Commanders.” (S/10452, and A/8587, italics added).

In sum, the utility functions of the 22 November Operational Directive were underpinned by the normative commitments of a soon-to-become state, aligned with the concerns of the global community. Informed by the geopolitical situation, the PG issued the Directive, not in order to bring the two Forces under a unified command to launch a coordinated offensive, as held by the conventional wisdom, but also to lend the much-needed legitimacy for both the Forces engaged in an internationalised civil war. The tone and tenor of the Operational Directive indicate that Bangladesh’s war-time leadership was keen to retain the political authority and ownership of the War, navigating the complex geopolitical and regional dynamics.

CONCLUSION

The strange pause after the November offensive in the 1971 Liberation War was a complex and consequential decision-contributing to a delayed victory and more human cost at the expense of garnering international legitimacy. Focusing on the geopolitics, this paper reveals that, to draw international legitimacy, the warring

parties had to be seen as exercising maximum restraint and overtly using force only for defensive purposes. Despite significant covert engagements and unofficial support to the BLF, the geopolitical constraints and international norms imposed considerable restraint and hesitation on the Indian government to be seen as an active interventionist till provoked during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Thus, India took a “strategic pause” relegating her overt military action in the East, initiated on 21 November 1971, as an “insignificant prelude” awaiting Pakistan to respond. India’s strange but strategic “pause” after the November offensive, paired with her defining alliance with the Soviet Union in August 1971, allowed her to keep the region insulated from the high politics of extra-regional powers—a strategy that continues to undergird her foreign policy strategy.

Pakistan’s pre-emptive air attack in the Western sector exposed her to further international obloquy and truly transformed Bangladesh’s Liberation War into an “Indo-Pak” war. Pakistan’s initial reticence to external involvement and the track record of massacring innocent Bengali civilians since 25 March 1971 proved costly. Consequently, Pakistan failed to internationalize the conflict after India’s November offensive to garner meaningful international support when it became necessary. While India’s overt military actions—including the pause after the November offensive—appear to have been carefully planned and guided by geopolitics, Pakistan’s conduct of the war appears to be impulsive and dictated by her military strategy, relegating the geopolitics in the sideline.

From Bangladesh’s perspective, the making of the November offensive was written on the walls of 25 March 1971. The November Offensive was not a ‘prelude’ but a continuation of Bangladesh’s Liberation War. It led to the inevitable merger of the two Forces, fighting an internationalised civil war, with renewed intensity and ferocity. The geopolitical situation dictated the PG to issue the most consequential wartime Operational Directive to bring the two Forces under a unified command. The Directive provided the much-needed layer of legitimacy to both the Forces engaged in an internationalised civil war. The Directive reflects the wartime government’s wisdom and quest to retain the political authority and ownership of the War amidst a complex and dynamic geopolitical context. While welcoming the much-needed overt military assistance from India, the wartime PG was mindful of maintaining the political and strategic autonomy of Bangladesh, not just during the conduct of the war but also in a liberated Bangladesh. Indeed, the course followed by Bangladesh and India appears to be guided by geopolitical considerations—exemplifying Clausewitz’s maxim that war is an instrument of (geo)politics by other means.

Annex A: War-type, Parties, Initiators and Start/End Dates of 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh in Global War Datasets						
War Data Set Name	Data Repository	Parties/Sides	Initiator	Start Date	End Date	War Name & Remarks
Intra-State War Data (v5.1)	Correlates of War (COW)	Pakistan, Bengalis	Pakistan	25-03-1971	02-12-1971	Coded as 'Civil war over local issues (5)', transformed into Inter-state war (1)
Inter-State War Data (v4.0)	Correlates of War (COW)	Pakistan, India	Pakistan	03-12-1971	17-12-1971	Intra-State war transformed into the Inter-State war (1)
Interstate War Data (v1.2)	Harvard Dataverse	India, Pakistan	India	20-11-1971	17-12-1971	Listed as Bangladesh 1971 war
Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946-2019	Centre for Systemic Peace	Bangladesh, Pakistan	-	1971	1971	Coded as Ethnic war (Bengali independence); Magnitude 6 on a scale of 1-10 (Extensive Warfare)
Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946-2019	Centre for Systemic Peace	Bangladesh, Pakistan	-	1971	1971	Coded as Interstate war; Magnitude 3 on a scale of 1-10 (Serious Political Violence).
Armed Conflict Dataset, (v24.1)	UCDP/PRIO	Pakistan, Muktibahini	-	26-03-1971	16-12-1971	Coded as intrastate war; Intensity 2 (at least 1,000 battle-related deaths/year).
<i>Sources: Author's Compilation from the Global War Datasets. See Sarkees et.al. (2010), Marshall (2020, 2020a), Davies, et. al (2024)</i>						

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