

## The Indian Subcontinent as a Cold War Playing Field: German-German / Indian Relations in the 1971 Bangladesh War

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As the old adage goes, the Cold War was an epoch that lasted "from Yalta to Malta." It references the Yalta Conference in February 1945 and the US-Soviet summit aboard two warships off the island of Malta in early December 1989, when George H.W. Bush and Mikhail S. Gorbachev declared the bipolar confrontation to be officially over. If we accept these two dates as the starting and final whistles, then the year 1971 would approximately mark the Cold War's halftime. My research project looks into what positions the two German states took toward the conflict in Bangladesh, which began exactly in that year.

For both Germanies, alongside India and Pakistan, 1971 and 1972 were a watershed. Through the new Ostpolitik of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr, the FRG and GDR had finally found a means of coexisting. East Germany was no longer merely the "phenomenon in the East" as Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger had called it just a few years earlier. It was officially recognized by the Federal Republic, and in 1973 both German states became full members of the United Nations.



In the Indian subcontinent, meanwhile, an additional division of states was taking place. In 1947, the British colony of India was granted independence, divided roughly along religious settlement frontiers. The majority Muslim provinces along the Indus in the west and in the Ganges Delta in the east became Pakistan, while the larger majority Hindu territory in between came together in the Indian Union. Soon, however, cultural and economic disparities emerged between the western and eastern territories of Pakistan. The country's more populous eastern part felt increasingly exploited and denied its Bengali cultural identity. Their shared religion, Islam, no longer sufficed as a glue to hold together the two separate territorial sections. India stoked this conflict afflicting its arch rival, at first propagandistically as it grew into a veritable civil war in 1971, and then more and more overtly militarily. Finally, in December 1971, India declared war on Pakistan and swept to victory in only two weeks. East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh.

1971 also saw a far-reaching realignment of the super powers that would greatly influence the conflict in South Asia, if not inter-German détente. In previous years the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China had become increasingly alienated ideologically, even engaging in occasional border clashes, such as at the Ussuri River. Beijing still allowed Moscow to support the North Vietnamese in their fight against South Vietnam (and thus its US backers), for whom the conflict in Southeast Asia was becoming more and more of a quagmire. Domestic pressure on Nixon and Kissinger to end the bloody and morally dubious Vietnam War was enormous. The two saw a possible solution in a rapprochement with China, which they hoped would then cut off Soviet



assistance to North Vietnam. And for the US, the key to Beijing was to be found in their joint ally, Pakistan.

In late 1970 - early 1971, the Pakistani government indeed proved to be a reliable broker in rekindling US-Chinese ties. Yet the Pakistanis demanded a price, namely Washington's support for both their brutal treatment of East Pakistan and against their archenemy next door, India. Pressured by this US-Pakistani collusion with Beijing, India – previously a non-aligned state – signed the "Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation" with the Soviet Union on 9 August 1971.

As such, in December 1971, the East Pakistan conflict, which would become the Third Indo-Pakistani War, pitted the East Pakistani liberation fighters, India, and the Soviet Union in one camp against the Pakistani central government, the United States, and the People's Republic of China in the other. Intent on demonstrating its reliability to its newly won friends in Beijing, the US sent an aircraft carrier group to the Bay of Bengal, following the outbreak of hostilities, chiefly to deter the Indian side. The Soviets soon replied by dispatching several nuclear submarines south from Vladivostok.

The situation is clear: The 1971 war in Bangladesh was not just a potentially explosive moment in a conflict between three nuclear powers, but also marked a major turning point in the Cold War.

In the Bangladesh War, East and West Germany very much pursued their own interests, which differed significantly from those of their respective



patrons in Washington and Moscow. During the tenure of Chancellor Willy Brandt, West German foreign policy was marked by an emphasis on Ostpolitik and détente, while East Germany continued to seek international recognition. As a recognized leader of the non-aligned movement, India played a special part in these efforts. In hopes of undermining West Germany's Hallstein Doctrine, East Berlin committed clearly and unconditionally to the Indian side. In mid-January 1972, it also became one of the first to officially recognize the nascent state of Bangladesh. Through the Indo-Soviet pact the East Germans saw themselves a natural ally of India, yet refrained from taking any major steps without Moscow's blessing. The Soviet Union had far less interest in seeing the conflict – originally a purely domestic Pakistani affair – escalate internationally. Moscow would have acted only in the unlikely case of a US intervention.

The West Germans faced a comparable situation, given their ties to the United States. On the one hand, unlike the US, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Willy Brandt was unable to accept the Pakistani army's massacres of the eastern Bengali population. Bonn therefore imposed an arms embargo on both Pakistan and India. This move combined idealism with realism: In the summer of 1971, Indira Gandhi had threatened to immediately recognize the GDR if even one West German tank was spotted in Bangladesh. The West Germans yielded, and India waited until 8 October 1972 to recognize East Germany, months after the Bangladesh War had ended. On the other hand, Brandt could not dare to openly oppose the US line, given his dependence on American support for his Ostpolitik.



For both West and East Germany, the Bangladesh War partially negated the logic of the Cold War and the roles it had assigned them. This, in a nutshell, is the argument of my research project. The South Asia policies of both German states countered and conditioned one another in the Bangladesh War to such an extent that in some respects they punctured the bipolarity of the Cold War. Bonn and East Berlin pursued their own thoroughly national interests in Bangladesh, which differed clearly from those of their foreign policy role models on either side of the Iron Curtain. To substantiate this argument, my dissertation project contrasts the rapprochement between the two Germanies with the growing alienation of India and Pakistan at a time in which the world was watching South Asia with a greater interest than ever before. Since 1971, never again has India attained a comparable significance on the global political stage.

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