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The Geopolitical Dimension of 21 November 1971 Celebrated as the Armed Forces Day of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The combined offensive of 21 November 1971 – now celebrated as Bangladesh's Armed Forces Day—marked India's first overt military engagement in support of Bangladesh's ongoing Liberation War, which was intensified following the attack. However, India opted for a 'strategic pause' until December 3. This paper explores India's compulsions for the pause, Pakistan's reactions, and the significance of the military offensive from Bangladesh's perspective through a geopolitical lens. Examining relevant official records of the United Nations, the Indian Lok Sabha and Bangladesh's provincial government, the paper finds that to draw international legitimacy, India opted for a strategic pause relegating her military intervention in the East as an 'insignificant prelude.' Pakistan's pre-emptive strike in the West on 3 December 1971 exposed her to further international obloquy as an 'aggressor' and 'initiator,' transforming the Liberation War into an 'Indo-Pak' war. From Bangladesh's perspective, the November offensive was not a 'precursor,' but a continuation, an inevitable merger of the two forces, while retaining Bangladesh's political authority and ownership of the war amidst a complex geopolitical context. The course followed by Bangladesh and India was guided by geopolitical considerations—exemplifying Clausewitz's maxim that war is an instrument of (geo)politics by other means.

Keywords: Bangladesh Liberation War; Indo-Pak War; Security Council; Armed Forces Day; Geopolitics; South Asia

Introduction

This paper explores the causes and consequences of the military offensive launched on 21 November 1971, celebrated as Armed Forces Day in Bangladesh, through the lens of geopolitics. The combined offensive

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marked the first overt military engagement of Indian troops crossing the international border in support of Bangladesh's ongoing Liberation War. Some historians maintain 21 November as the 'operative day' of the 'Indo-Pak' War—a departure from the largely held view of 3 December as the 'start date' of the same war, overshadowing Bangladesh's nine-month-long liberation war that commenced on 25 March 1971. Although Bangladeshi forces intensified their fight following the offensive, India opted for a 'strategic pause' till 3 December—the day on which Bangladesh's Liberation War transformed into the Indo-Pak War. The paper explores India's compulsions for the strategic pause, Pakistan's reactions, and the relevance of the military victory on 21 November from Bangladesh's perspective through the politics and international relations perspective. Beyond the insular and nationalistic descriptions based on conventional wisdom, the paper delves into the following seemingly trivial questions: (i) Why did India pause her overt military offensive in the East, initiated on 21 November 1971, and relegate her victory as an insignificant prelude? (ii) How did Pakistan react, and what were its geopolitical consequences? (iii) How should Bangladesh view and value the combined offensive of 21 November in the narrative of her liberation war?

Analyzing the official records of the United Nations, the Indian Lok Sabha, and the provincial government of Bangladesh, the paper adds new insights to the existing literature, challenging conventional wisdom. It concludes that to draw international legitimacy, India opted for a 'strategic pause' relegating her overt military action in the East, initiated on 21st November 1971, as an 'insignificant prelude' awaiting Pakistan to respond. Pakistan's pre-emptive strike in the Western sector on 3rd December transformed Bangladesh's liberation war into an Indo-Pak war. The paper analyzes the provincial government's directive of 22 November and argues that Bangladesh's quest for political independence and ownership of the war, amidst a complex and contested geopolitical context, guided her actions. From Bangladesh's perspective, the combined military offensive of 21st November was not a 'precursor,' but a continuation and an inevitable merger of the two forces that accelerated achieving the final victory. The provincial government was keen to retain the political independence, authority, and ownership of the war amidst complex geopolitical and regional dynamics. The course followed by Bangladesh and India was guided by geopolitical considerations—exemplifying Clausewitz's maxim that war is an instrument of (geo)politics by other means.

A Seemingly Trivial Question?

Only after the decision to celebrate 21 November as Armed Forces Day did it gain prominence in the official narrative, unlike other defining historical moments of Bangladesh's liberation war. The day commemorates the sacrifices made by the freedom fighters (*Mukti Bahini*) and allied forces during the 1971 liberation war. On this day in 1971, the members of the Army, Navy, and Air Force of Bangladesh Liberation Forces (BLF), along with the 'supporting forces, became 'fully operational' and 'launched a coordinated offensive against the Pakistani military' (Armed Forces Division, 2024; Hossain, 2018: 345). The combined offensive rattled the Pakistani president, prompting him to declare a state of emergency and reach out to the United Nations Secretary-General, seeking his 'personal' intervention to stave off a military defeat in the East (S/10410, 1971: 10-12). Thus, despite a belated recognition, 21st November 1971 remains consequential to any reader of the political and global history of Bangladesh's liberation war.

As alluded to before, some scholars maintain the 21st of November as the 'operative day' of the Indo-Pak war instead of the 3rd of December (Sisson & Rose, 1990; O'Mahoney, 2017). The war datasets, used mostly by the researchers of war studies, document 21st November and 3rd December 1971 as the dates of open Indo-Pak hostility. A summary of the key variables used in these datasets, such as the war type, parties/sides, initiators, and start/end dates of hostilities in the context of the 1971 Liberation War, is in Annex A. The Harvard Dataverse—the only global dataset where India is shown as the initiator of the war-codes of Bangladesh's liberation war as an 'interstate' war and documents 20 November and 17 December as the start and end dates of the War, respectively (Reiter, 2020). However, the Correlates of War (COW) dataset—another 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 2 December 1971 as the start and end dates, while COW's interstate war dataset lists 3 December 1971 as the start date of the Indo-Pak war (Dixon & Meredith 2016; Annex A). Therefore, the issue surrounding Armed Forces Day may not be straightforward or definitively resolved.

One of the most cited battles on Armed Forces Day was 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-Jessore highway. Supported

by the Indian Army's armored and infantry elements, the *Mukti Bahini* engaged the Pakistani forces in their fiercest battle to date at Garibpur.[1] The battle also saw the first aerial fight between the Air Forces of India and Pakistan on the Eastern Front.[2] The battle resulted in significant casualties and destruction on the Pakistani side and a decisive win by the Allied Forces.[3] Recalling the events of the battle, 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 trivial yet intuitive question arises: why did India limit its military's progress in the Battle of Garibpur and terminate the war prematurely? The question becomes even more inescapable when considering that the monsoon, which previously acted as a restraining factor for armored advancement, had already ended by that time. Indeed, as Major General Jacob—India's military commander in the Eastern theater—recalls informing General Manekshaw that: 'we [Indian troops in Eastern theater] could be ready earliest by 15 November. This would leave adequate time after the monsoon for the terrain to become passable' (Jacob, 1997: 20 and 119; Raghavan, 2013: 69). Second, the need to secure a treaty with the Soviet Union was already signed on 9 August 1971, ensuring the much-needed security guarantee in the event of a war with Pakistan (Peri, 2021).[4] Third, the onset of November also meant that the snowbound Himalayan passes would impede any military moves by China, another key military consideration in favor of India to continue her offensive. Thus, the seemingly trivial question as to why there was a sudden lull in the Indian offensive following the military victory of 21 November is staid but ineluctable. The answer to this question arguably lies in the realm of geopolitics— inextricably linked to the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

The Geopolitical Context: What Transpired at the UN Security Council?

The geopolitics of the Cold War had a distinctive impact on South Asia. The Security Council's debates and decisions[5] particularly evidenced this (see Table 1). The United States and China, the two P-5 (permanent five) members, insofar as their governments were concerned, had overtly opposed Bangladesh's war of liberation. From a Cold War perspective, the

United States believed that a unified Pakistan would better serve the developing Sino-U.S. relationship and contain the spread of communism. Other Western states also did not want to endorse the Indian intervention in Bangladesh for fear that it could incite similar situations in many other countries (Khan, 2021).

China viewed that 'Soviet socialist imperialism' was playing the 'most insidious role in South Asia' to further "control India and Bangladesh" and increase its "sphere of influence" in the Indian Ocean region (S/PV. 1660, 25 Aug 1972, p.9). Describing the Soviet Union as the 'new tsars who stop at nothing in doing evil' the Chinese Ambassador reiterated his government's firm support for Pakistan 'in their just struggle against foreign aggression' (S/PV 1615, 1971, December 15/16, p.2). India, although an active proponent of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), was apprehensive about its security in the event of a war with Pakistan and secured a treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in August 1971. China viewed the Indo-Soviet treaty as an 'aggressive military alliance', that had stripped off India's 'cloak of non-alliance.'[6] The Security Council became a 'concerned but helpless' observer, not just for the geopolitical powerplay but also for its inactions after the Pakistani massacre of the Bengalis on 25 March 1971, which continued till December (Nanda, 1972: 56-57; Choudhury, 1972).

Beyond the P-5, several small countries also viewed the Indo-Pak conflict as 'critical.' The fight for self-determination was ongoing in many parts of the world, most notably in the Middle East and Africa. Leveraging the expansion of the non-aligned presence in the Assembly, the small states carved out a space to operate as active, independent agents. Apart from the fifteen Security Council members.[7] Several non-Security Council members, like Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Cylon (Sri Lanka) India and Pakistan, also participated in the Security Council debates to voice their concerns.[8]

Table 1 Key Security Council Meetings on Bangladesh in December 1971		
Date (Meeting)	Resolution and Outcome	Vote (Yes – No –Abstention)
21 Dec 1971 (1621st Meeting)	A resolution demanding a 'durable cease-fire and cessation of all hostilities in all areas of conflict' S/RES/307 (1971) was *adopted*.	13-0-2 Abs: Poland, USSR
16 Dec 1971 (1616th and 1617th Meeting)	The issue was discussed but no draft Resolution was placed for voting. The Meeting Rose at 1:10 PM and 09:35 PM respectively.	Not applicable
15/16 Dec 1971 (1615th Meeting)	The issue was discussed but no draft Resolution was placed for voting. The Meeting Rose at 12:20 AM, on 16 December.	Not applicable
14/15 Dec 1971 (1614th Meeting)	The issue was discussed but no draft resolution was placed for voting. The Meeting Rose at 1:20 PM, on 15 December.	Not applicable
13 Dec 1971 (1613th Meeting)	Revised U.S. Draft resolution (S/10446/Rev.1) *vetoed* by USSR	11-2-2 No: *Poland, USSR* Abs: France, UK
12 Dec 1971 (1611th Meeting)	The issue was discussed but no resolution was placed for voting. Meeting Rose at 12:35 AM on 13 December.	Not Applicable
Dec 05, 1971 (1607th Meeting)	Six Power (Argentina, Burundi, Japan, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone and Somalia) Resolution 303(1971) *was adopted* to refer the issue to the UN General Assembly. The General Assembly *adopted* a (non-binding) Resolution for an immediate ceasefire (104–11–10).	11-0-4 Abs: France, Poland, USSR, UK
	Draft Resolution for a ceasefire (S/10423) (sponsored by Argentina, Belgium, Burundi, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone and Somalia) was *vetoed* by the USSR.	11-2-2 *No: Poland, USSR* Abs: France, UK
	Draft Resolution (S/10418) by USSR: Calling for Political Settlement to cease the hostility was *vetoed* by China.	2-1-12 Yes: Poland, USSR *No: China*
Dec 04, 1971 (1606th Meeting)	Draft resolution (S/10416) by the USA for an immediate ceasefire was *vetoed* by the USSR.	11-2-2 *No: Poland, USSR* Abs: France, UK
Source: Author's compilation from Security Council Documents: S/PV 1606 (1971, December 04); S/PV 1607 (1971, December 05), S/PV 1611 (1971, December 12), S/PV 1613 (1971, December 13), S/PV 1614 (1971, December 14/15), S/PV 1615 (1971, December 15/16), S/PV 1616 (1971, December 16), S/PV 1617 (1971, December 16), S/PV 1621 (1971, December 21).		

Exasperated by the deep divisions in the Security Council, the Saudi diplomat–widely regarded for his wisdom—succinctly stated: 'Resolutions without the collective will to act will bring us to naught. I believe that 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 and 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.' He advocated for an 'Asian solution, not a United Nations solution' (S/PV. 1607, 1971: 8-12).

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, 1971: 7-8). The Sri Lankan (Ceylon) ambassador viewed the Indo-Pak situation as a 'poignant tragedy in the history of the United Nations' leading to 'imminent disintegration of a country.' Speaking at the Council on 15 December 1971—on the eve of Pakistani surrender at Dhaka—the ambassador pleaded, 'We want a settlement that will prevent victory from being an embarrassment, defeat from being a humiliation, and peace from being an illusion.' (S/PV 1615, 1971: 3).

Be that as it may, military intervention across international boundaries remained unacceptable to many of the member states for fear that it might set an unhealthy precedent. Thus, most member states invoked the concepts of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and national independence, calling for a ceasefire. The exceptions were the Soviet Union and Poland—aligned with India—who repeatedly stressed the need for a political settlement of the crisis involving the elected representatives of East Pakistan. They viewed that calling for a ceasefire without correlating it with the attainment of a political settlement in East Pakistan would be inadequate and unrealistic.

Amidst the constant flux of a bipolar world, the geopolitical considerations prevailed. This compelled the warring state parties to project themselves as exercising maximum restraint and overtly using force only for defensive purposes to draw international legitimacy. Thus, India opted for a 'strategic pause' relegating her overt military action in the East, initiated on 21 November 1971, as an 'insignificant prelude' awaiting Pakistan to respond. 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 resulted in successive Soviet vetoes at the Security Council, giving precious little time for a swift military offensive. 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. The overt military operation, starting on 3 December 1971, facilitated 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).

The Indian Perspective: Insular but Reflective?

While border skirmishes and airspace violations between India and Pakistan were frequent and increasingly widespread over time, official debates did not accord equal importance to all incidents. Indian and Pakistani diplomats and politicians at the parliament and the United Nations have cited and debated the combined offensive of 21 November 1971 as one such military event. On 23 November, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then an opposition member at 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 defense 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, 1971a: 245-248).

On 24 November 1971, the Indian Prime Minister, while making a statement at the Lok Sabha on the 'declaration of emergency in Pakistan and the situation on the India-Pakistan Border,' described the military actions of 21 November. At the 1996th plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly, the Indian diplomat read out the same text two days later. The curated and insular statement included the reason and nature of the Indian military action at Boyra, the causality and destruction of Pakistani forces, and the future course of action by India. India claimed that the Pakistani infantry, supported by tanks and artillery, had launched 'an offensive on *Mukti Bahini*' who were holding a liberated area around Boyra—five miles from India's eastern border. 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 that took place 'inside Indian territory' and resulted in the shooting of three Pakistani Sabre jets and capturing two pilots. Her statement also 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, 1971a: 222-224; A/PV. 1996, 1971: 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*' by these incidents. She also informed the House that the troops have been instructed '*not to cross the border except in self-defence*.' Unlike Pakistan, which had declared a state of emergency a day after the Battle of Boyra, India refrained from taking similar steps 'unless Pakistan takes 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 insular and curated narrative about the military offensive of 21st November. At the 1606th United Nations Security Council meeting, Mr. Sen, the Indian Ambassador stated, 'I do not deny it [i.e. going into East Pakistan territory after 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). 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, which had ushered in a long spell of 'armed peace' between India and Pakistan and restored the territorial status quo, also stipulated against the use of force in resolving disputes between the two countries (Tashkent Declaration, 1966, January 10, Article I).[9] The Agreement reiterated adherence to the 'principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of each other'–the cornerstone of the international community's muted or vocal position during the Indo-Pak crisis (Nanda, 1972; Tashkent Declaration, 1966, January 10, Article III). India's decision to remain 'unruffled' and wait till Pakistan's 'aggressive action' was to project herself as a 'victim' and not an initiator of an Indo-Pak war. Such a position would be defensible by India and her allies at the United Nations.

Second, an overt military intervention by Pakistan in the Western Sector would have served as a solid justification for India to make full use of the Soviet protection guaranteed by the Indo-Soviet Treaty signed in August 1971. The Treaty assured not only Soviet military support to India but also a guarantee to 'immediately enter into mutual consultations,' in case of an attack 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 and Co-operation, 1971,

August 09). Air Marshal Koutakov's visit to Delhi on 28 October 1971 to negotiate the defense supplies needed by India further cemented the assurance of 'total support' from the Soviet Union (Raghavan, 2013, p.226). It was considered safe and prudent to launch a full-fledged military offensive only in response to Pakistan's 'further aggressive action', in order to secure 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.

Pakistani Reaction – Captive to her Military Doctrine?

Pakistan's view of 21 November 1971 was also marred with insularity and a propagandist tone, as evidenced by the official records of the Security Council and General 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, 1971: 10-12). Thus, most Pakistani historians portray 21 November as the 'operative date' of the 1971 Indo-Pak war.

Pakistan regarded the Indian military actions of 21st November as a 'blatant act of aggression.' The Pakistani representative at the UN 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, 1971: 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.

On the evening of 22 November 1971, the Chief of General Staff briefed the President, urging him to order the attack on India's Western front, in line with Pakistan's military doctrine of 'the defence of East Pakistan lies in West Pakistan (Rahman, 1972, p.69). The next day, the President wrote a letter to the Secretary-General seeking his 'personal initiative' to avert a 'catastrophe' and declared a state of emergency (S/10410, 1971, December 04, p. 12). However, the Security Council did not agree to meet based on the information available about the situation. Pakistan could adduce the

Council about the events of 21st November only after the full-scale war broke out in the subcontinent.[10] Pakistan's inability to internationalize India's military action of 21st November appears to have been borne out of a combination of factors.

First, at the onset of hostilities, Pakistan maintained that her internal crisis was 'outside the Security Council's concern.' Pakistan reminded the Council that it should be concerned with 'international peace, not with the internal peace and political life' of a member state. Refusing to be drawn into an Indian 'trap' that seeks to justify its interference and aggression by dwelling on Pakistan's internal crisis The Pakistani diplomat suggested that the Council should 'find the means to make India desist from its war of aggression' (S/PV. 1606, 1971: 10).

However, 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: 65; Raghavan 2018; Bass, 2013). In one of his letters to the Secretary-General, President Yahya had expressed Pakistan's willingness to accept 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, 1971: 40). Thus, Pakistan's efforts to internationalize the combined offensive of 21 November seeking intervention were too late and disingenuous.

Second, the responses from the Council members and the parties involved frustrated the Secretary-General. 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, 04 December 1971, p. 9). His letter to the Pakistani President on 29 November 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, 04 December 1971, p. 13).' The timing and texts of the Secretary-General's communications reflect that the United Nations' efforts continued to be inhibited by considerations of domestic jurisdiction and the inexorable course taken by both parties leading towards a full-scale Indo-Pak war.

Third, Pakistan's reaction to the Indian action on 21st November was guided by her military doctrine rather than an informed geopolitical assessment. The military leadership's view was that attacking India's Western Front would 'bring India to its knees'. On the eve of launching

the pre-emptive strike against Indian airfields in the Western front, the Pakistani Air Chief told his public relations officer 'Not to bother about conjuring up justification', boasting that 'success is the biggest justification' (Raghavan, 2013, p,234). However, the 'success', as hoped never came. Reflecting on Pakistan's course of action after the War, General Niazi contented that the 'Indians *would not have* started an all-out war in East Pakistan if the Western front had not been opened by Pakistan [as a response to the military offensive of 21st November 1971 in the East]' (Commission Report, 1972: 69, emphasis added).

At the regional level, Pakistan failed to secure alliance support despite being an active member of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the South Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), two military pacts aimed at providing Southeast Asia with collective defense.[11] Consequently, Pakistan shaded her attachment with the SEATO and CENTO in 1973 and 1979, respectively, as they were 'no longer useful' (The New York Times, 09 Nov 1972). However, consecutive Soviet vetoes nullified the alignment of most Council members with Pakistan's demand for an immediate ceasefire. Hindsight now establishes that the events of 21st November were profoundly consequential for Pakistan and not just a 'precursor' of a full-scale war as projected.

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. Both the President and Foreign Minister Bhutto, upon returning from their visit to Beijing in November 1971, made reference to this. The President also hinted at the possibility of war 'within ten days' in an impromptu remark at the Rawalpindi banquet honoring the visiting Chinese minister on 25 November 1971 (Department of States, 1972, February 02, p.11). It is now known that China assured Pakistan of military support, not intervention.

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 events of 21st November as a threat to international peace and security. Pakistan's (ineffective) alliances with SEATO and CENTO worked as an obstacle to garnering support from NAM, limiting her strategic autonomy and finally prioritizing the military doctrine over geopolitical considerations. In sum, Pakistan's pre-emptive strike on 03 December as a response to the Indian offensive of 21 November made her the initiator and aggressor, transforming Bangladesh's liberation war into an 'Indo-Pak' war. By placing military objectives over geopolitical considerations, Pakistan once again exposed herself 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 political and international level (Dhar, 2000).

Bangladesh Perspective – Inevitable merger and quest for political independence?

The making of the 21 of November was written in the walls of 25 March 1971—the day on which the Pakistan military unleashed Operation Searchlight on the innocent Bengalis. 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) were permitted to offer 'limited help' to the *Mukti Bahini* (Bass, 2013: 95-96). In April 1971, the Indian Army and the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) began training and equipping the Bengali freedom fighters to establish a 'tempo of guerrilla operation with a focus on demolition by small parties' within East Pakistan.

By July-September 1971, the guerrilla operation inside East Pakistan was well into motion, evident from the destruction, demolition, and casualty figures inflicted by the *Mukti Bahini* on the Pakistani forces (Figure 1). The mutinied troops of East Bengal regiments prevented the Pakistani army from securing control of large parts of East Pakistan, adding to the increasing size of the liberated area (Raghavan, 2018, 52). Meanwhile, the Kilo Flight[12] –embryo of today's Bangladesh Air Force—born on 28 September 1971 in Dimapur, Nagaland, became operational by the first week of November, ready to launch air attacks inside East Pakistan (Alam, 2021). However, the Indian high command postponed the Kilo Flight's D-Day of 28 November to launch their first attack on Chittagong fuel refinery storage until 03 December 1971, much to the dismay of the Indian troops in Boyra (Alam, 2021: 438).

The BLF fortnightly situation report (Hossain, 2018; Annex A) reveals that during the second half of November (15-30 November 1971), *Mukti Bahini* liberated or took complete control of a vast swath of land inside East Pakistan (see Table 2). The East Pakistan Governor sent a ceasefire proposal to senior United Nations officials in Dhaka on 10 November (Raghavan 2028, p.252), confirming the collapse of the Pakistan Army in the Eastern theatre well before 21st November. Indeed, from a Bangladeshi perspective, the military offensive on 21 November was not a 'precursor' of the 1971 Liberation War; it was a continuation and an inevitable merger of the two forces, driven by the urgency of a swift victory and the geopolitical considerations to draw international legitimacy.

On 22nd November, the provincial government issued its *first* top-secret *operational directive* defining 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].' Following an agreement with the General Officer Commanding, Eastern Command, BLF Commander-in-Chief MAG Osmani issued the directive to all BLF Commanders and the Indian Army Command.[14] The directive included instructions on command relationships, roles of 'supporting' and Bangladeshi Forces, allotment of troops, boundaries, logistics, civil administration of liberated areas, etc. (Sarwar, 2018, Appendix Z). The command placed the Bangladesh Formations/Sectors under the Supporting Forces, instructing the supporting forces to 'provide full logistic support' (Ibid, p.470). Such unique arrangements raise a few intuitive but trivial questions. Why did the operational directive specify Bangladesh as a 'host' country that was yet to be recognized by any states, including India? Why did the Indian troops receive the designation 'supporting forces'? What led the provincial government to place the main military element (i.e., the BLF) under the command of the supporting forces in a somewhat unorthodox military practice? Geopolitics provides a better explanation for these intuitive yet trivial questions.

First, it tends to suggest that the provincial government was keen to retain the ownership and authority of the liberation war amidst complex geopolitical and regional dynamics. There was a perception 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). Abdur Razzaq, a key figure in the 'nucleus' of Bangladesh's Liberation War, echoed the predicament of retaining ownership of the war in an interview.[15] Reiterating the BLF's commitment to fighting a long-drawn war, Razzaq predicted that, in the future, boasting of their swift military victory, India may claim the ownership of the war in the East as India's overt military intervention was necessary if not essential to achieve Bangladesh's independence (Kino-Eye Films Archive, 2021, June 28; time 1:02:00-1:06:03). This evidence tends to suggest that, from the inception, Bangladesh's military and political leadership was cautious and concerned about retaining her political independence and autonomy while receiving India's military help without the risk of 'becoming Bhutan.'

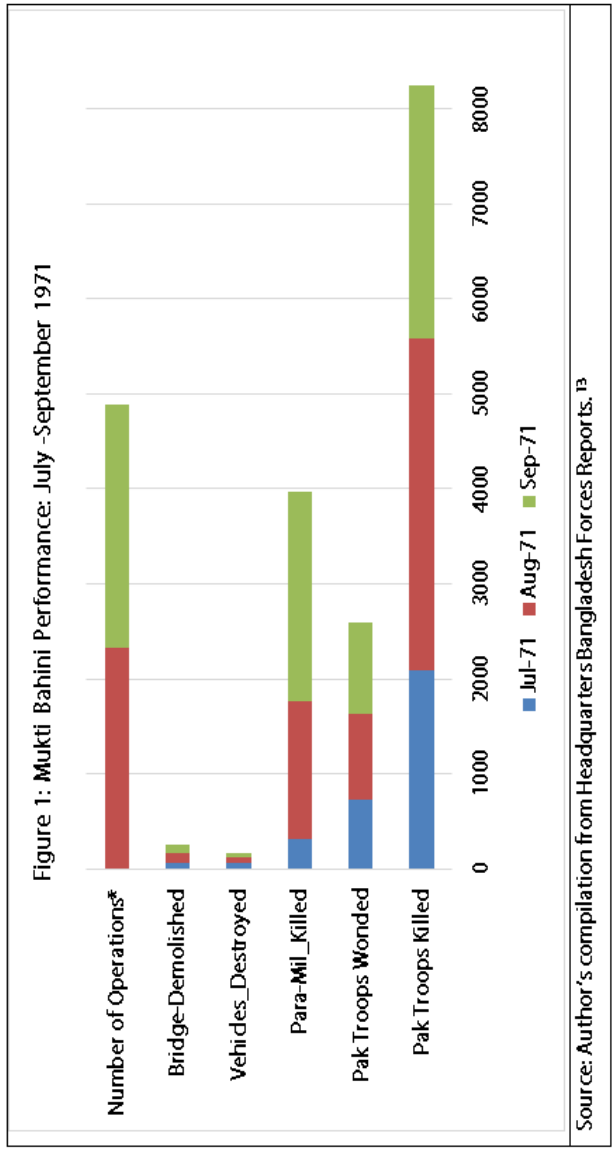


Figure 1: Mukti Bahini Performance: July -September 1971

Source: Author's compilation from Headquarters Bangladesh Forces Reports. [13]

Second, in hindsight, the labelling of the Indian troops as 'supporting forces' and Bangladesh as the 'host' country by the provincial government

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, Jagannath Ganj Ghat.
Domestic Air Flights	Closed
Fortnightly Summary of Mukti Bahini activities based on the reports reaching during the period between 15th - 30 November 1971 (Hossain, 2018: Annex W). Source: Author's Compilation from Bangladesh Forces HQ Press Release Dated 03 Dec 1971	

lends a layer of legitimacy to the Indian intervention in the East. India needed to demonstrate that the 'host' country 'invited' their troops to play a 'supporting' role inside East Pakistan. Such portrayal bolstered the argument that India's military intervention in the East was not a violation of the norm of non-aggression and self-determination of Bengalis to an increasingly impatient international audience. Indeed, once the war broke out, much to India's consternation, her key NAM allies like Marshal Tito (of Yugoslavia) and Nasser (of Egypt) were critical of Indian troops moving into East Pakistan and voted in favor of a General Assembly resolution demanding an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of troops, along with 104 member states (A/RES 2793 (XXVI, 1971; A/PV. 2003, 1971: 10-11).[16] Poland—a supportive nation to the cause of Bangladesh's independence—had an operative clause in her revised draft resolution of 15 December that read:

> 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 [Provincial government of Bangladesh] (S/10453/REV.l 1971).

The Security Council and General Assembly deliberations reflected the urgency of a swift victory and the immediate withdrawal of Indian troops from East Pakistan. Britain and France, fearing escalation, also impressed upon India through private channels to 'finish the job as quickly as possible' (Raghavan 2013: 259). Therefore, the geopolitical considerations necessitated the combined offensive of 21 November to expedite the pace of victory.

Third, the operational directive of 22 November also manifests the inevitable merger of the two kinds of battles fought by the BLF and the Indian military in 1971. 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 a General 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, 1971: 43. Emphasis added).

Despite their disparate motivations and causes, the liberation of Bangladesh inextricably linked both battles. Pakistan's attempt to separate her war of repression on the Eastern front from the war of aggression on the Western front was unsuccessful due to the persistent Soviet veto and Polish support at the Security Council, which prolonged and legitimized the war. The operational 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 were to set up 'civil administration in the liberated area' as per the directives of the Bangladesh government, attesting to the ownership and authority of the Bangladeshi leadership in the conduct of the war (Sarwar, 2018: 470-471).

Fourth, as a warring party, BLF was required to adhere to the laws of armed conflict. The concern to ensure 'full observation of the Geneva Conventions' by all warring parties intensified and was integral to almost all Security Council draft resolutions placed by Japan and Italy, France and the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the USA.[17] But Bangladesh's provincial government, proclaimed in April 1971, was neither recognized nor a signatory of the Geneva Convention. Despite strong arguments by the Soviet Union and Poland, Bangladesh's request to take part in the Council discussions to adduce the members on this issue was also not heeded.[18] Facing such a complex geopolitical reality, the provincial government needed to place its military arms under the 'supporting' Indian forces' command, issuing an operational directive of 22 November. The arrangement was not only an operational requirement but was also indicative of Bangladesh's commitment to comply with the laws of armed conflict as a warring party—essential in the making of a new state through armed struggle. Despite Pakistan's skepticism and cautious acceptance, the arrangement provided assurance and accountability of BLF to the international community.[19]

Overall, it appears that the provincial government is well-informed and cognizant of the geopolitical situation. The operational directive issued on 22nd November was not just a document to place the BLF under the command of the Indian military to launch a 'combined military offensive' as held by the conventional wisdom in extant literature. The tone and tenor of the directive attest to the fact that the provincial government was keen to retain the political independence, authority, and ownership of the war amidst complex geopolitical and regional dynamics.

Concluding Thoughts

Over the years, 21 November has become an important day in the national calendar of Bangladesh. The program and activities arranged each year by the Armed Forces on this day at the national and international levels offer a platform to commemorate the sacrifices of the freedom fighters and renew the togetherness amongst the three services. It also celebrates concordance in civil-military relations and the spirit of 1971. Apart from the national-level programs, the Bangladesh embassies and high commission and troops deployed in the United Nations peacekeeping mission abroad celebrate the day, showcasing our military professionalism, national culture, and heritage. Indeed, the retrospective importance of this day has been that it has become integral to nurturing and showcasing our shared national identity—rooted in the spirit of our historic Liberation War.

This paper, focusing on the geopolitical dimension, reveals that the warring parties needed to demonstrate maximum restraint and overtly use force only for defensive purposes to gain international legitimacy. 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, preventing it from being perceived as an active interventionist until provoked during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Thus, India opted for a 'strategic pause' relegating her overt military action in the East, initiated on 21 November 1971, as an 'insignificant prelude' awaiting Pakistan to respond. 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. India sequenced and guided its overt military actions with political justification to gain international legitimacy. From a Bangladeshi perspective, the combined offensive of 21 November 1971 was not a 'prelude' but a continuation of the war leading to the inevitable merger of the two types of battles, unprecedented in magnitude and ferocity. Geopolitical considerations also guided the military directive on 22 November. The directives reflect the provincial government's wisdom and quest for political independence and ownership of the war amidst a complex and contested geopolitical context. While welcoming the much-needed overt military assistance from India, the provincial government was mindful of maintaining the political and strategic autonomy of Bangladesh in the making. 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.

Notes

1. The Indian forces were 14 Punjab Battalion supported by PT-76 tanks from 45 Cavalry and *Mukti Bahini*. Pakistani side included an infantry-sized battalion supported by the 3rd Independent Armoured Squadron, equipped with M24 Chaffee light tanks and air support. See 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.
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 (Jacob. For an excellent commentary about the importance of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation (Peri, 2021).
5. The discussion about the Indo-Pak war was also held at several meetings of the United Nations General Assembly, Economic and Social Council, Third Committee of the General Assembly, Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities etc. However, it was only after 03 December that the Security Council deemed it fit to discuss the issue revealing the geopolitical dimensions (Nanda 1972, pp. 49-56).
6. A similar view was also expressed by the Albanian ambassador at the General Assembly debate describing the Indo-Soviet Treaty as an 'aggressive treaty aimed against the peace-loving countries of Asia', adding this country's condemnation for the 'warmongering policy of the imperialist Powers, a policy which seriously threatens peace and security in Asia and the world'. See A/PV. 2003. (1971, December 07, p.10).

7. Apart from the P-5 members, the non-permanent members of the Security Council included: Argentina, Belgium, Burundi, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Poland, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Syrian Arab Republic.
8. Mr. Swaran Singh (India) Mr. Z A. Bhutto/Mr. A. Shahi (Pakistan), Mr, R. Driss (Tunisia) and Mr. J. M. Baroody (Saudi Arabia) and Mr. H.S. Amerasinghe (Ceylon) took part in different security council meetings, by invitation without the rights to any vote.
9. Article I of the Tashkent Declaration reaffirm India and Pakistan's obligation under the UN Charter 'not to have recourse to force and to settle their disputes through peaceful means.'
10. At the security council meeting on 4 December 1971 – ten days after the Battle of Boyra – Pakistan apprised that her eastern province had been 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.
11. The Baghdad Pact later renamed CENTO included Iran, Iraq Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The SEATO members were Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the USA. Although Pakistan was a bulwark of the West against the spread of communism in South Asia, Pakistan's disenchantment with the alliance dates from 1965 when it also failed to secure meaningful support during the Indo-Pak war on Kashmir.
12. The Kilo Flight comprised one DC-3 aircraft, one Otter aircraft and one Alouette-III helicopter gifted by India. The Bengali aviators and airmen who defected from Pakistan Air Force and Pakistan International Airlines to join Bangladesh's liberation war made the flight operational with the help of the Indian Air Force.
13. 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, Annexe V).
14. A personal note attached at the end of the Directive for all wireless and couriers (in all capital letters) states that 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).
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 Swadhin Bangla Biplabi Parishad,

widely known as the 'nucleus' and the main proponent of Bangladesh's independence through armed struggle.

16. India along with 10 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 concern intensified as open hostilities ensued, evident from the texts of the draft resolutions S/10451, S/10455 of 13 December 1971 and S/10457 and S/104591971 of 15 December 1971.
18. The Soviet ambassador argued that it would be 'appropriate to hear not only the representatives of India and Pakistan but also the representatives of Bangla Desh.' The Polish representative stated that the documents received from Bangla Desh contains data that the Security Council will need 'to have the best picture of the situation' and to reach the 'best solution.' (S/PV 1606, 1971, December 04, pp.1-2).
19. Pakistan's cautious acceptance of this arrangement was evident from her Note verbale to the Secretary-General on 13 December 1971: '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*.' Pakistan circulated this Note Verbal in the Security Council and General Assembly (S/10452, 13 December 1971; and A/8587).

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Annex A

War-type, Parties, Initiators and Start/End Dates of 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh in Global War Datasets

War Data Set Name (Version)	Data Repository	Parties/ Sides	Initiator	Start Date	End Date	War Name & Remarks
Intra-State War Data (v5.1)	Correlates of War (COW)[b]	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 (v 4.0)	Correlates of War (COW)	Pakistan, India	Pakistan	03-12-1971	17-12-1971	The intra-State war transformed into the inter-State war (1)
Interstate War Data (v 1.2)	Harvard Dataverse[a]	India, Pakistan	India	20-11-1971	17-12-1971	Listed as Bangladesh1971 war
Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946-2019	Centre for Systemic Peace[c]	Bangladesh, Pakistan	-	1971	1971	Coded as Ethnic war (Bengali independence) with a magnitude of 6 - i.e. 'Extensive Warfare' (on a scale of 1-10)[d]
Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946-2019	Centre for Systemic Peace	Bangladesh, Pakistan	-	1971	1971	Coded as Interstate war, with a magnitude of 3 – i.e. 'Serious Political Violence' (on a scale of 1-10).
Armed Conflict Dataset, (v 24.1)	UCDP/PRIO[e]	Pakistan, *Muktibahini*	-	26-03-1971	16-12-1971	Coded as intrastate war with an intensity of 2 (at least 1,000 battle-related deaths/year).

[a] War Data. https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/cow-war/

[b] War Data https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/CZGAO2.

[c] War Data https://www.systemicpeace.org/warlist/warlist.htm.

[d] Coding Guidelines. https://www.systemicpeace.org/warlist/warcode.htm

[e] War Data and codebook. https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#armedconflict

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