Perspectives on the Political Situation in the Subcontinent, 1965-1973: A Pakistani View from American Archives

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This massive compendium, published in Karachi by Oxford University Press (Pakistan), contains a rich set of nearly three hundred primary documents selected from recently declassified papers dating from 1965 to 1973 that are presently housed in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in the Archives II facility in College Park, Maryland. The materials in The American Papers were selected and compiled by Roedad Khan, a former senior Pakistani civil servant. The volume contains secret and confidential documents obtained from the files of the American State and Defense departments and include dispatches (telegrams, memoranda of conversations, and confidential letters) sent to the State Department of the United States, in the main, by the United States Embassy in Pakistan. These dispatches were prepared by U.S. Ambassadors and other senior American diplomats located in Islamabad, Karachi, Dhaka, and Delhi. Also incorporated are the minutes of some meetings held at the State Department in Washington, DC.


The papers selected for inclusion in this volume focus on the 1965 war, the East Pakistan crisis of 1971, the breakup of Pakistan, and the initial two years of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s rule. These documents concern the policies and perceptions of the United States government on political and social activities in the Indian Subcontinent from 1965 to 1973, a period of monumental historical importance. The reports also document or summarize the positions held by Presidents, Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, and senior diplomats in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India as seen through American eyes. The events during this era continue to have repercussions even today in terms of national and international significance, and will assist Westerners in understanding the regional sociopolitical, religious, economic, and military implications of American policy. In addition, the documents are of great importance to scholars, historians, political scientists, and specialists in international relations, as well as to the general public, primarily in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, but also to individuals now residing in Western Europe and North America whose families trace their ancestries to the Indian Subcontinent. It is important to note that papers dating to this era on the topics cited above are held by the governments of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India have not yet been made available to the public, so that there is a dependency on Western sources for information. Therefore, The Ameri-
Roedad Khan writes that the documents in The American Papers were selected and compiled “in 1998 in the course of several visits, spread over the period of one year, although the volume’s "Introduction" by Ambassador Jamsheed Marker states that they were obtained "during the fall of 1998" by Roedad Khan during a period of "enforced medical confinement." Nowhere is it stated if Roedad Khan had financial assistance from the publisher or any other source. The reader is left to assume that while Roedad Khan had the time to locate, select, and arrange these materials because of his surgical convalescence, he apparently also had the financial resources available personally or provided to him to copy the documents – not an unsubstantial task if one knows NARA’s Archives II and the regulations involving document reproduction (photocopying, scanning, and microfilming). Your reviewer wonders what role(s) the publisher played in the preparation of the documents for publishing. Were these materials scanned electronically from photocopies, re-keyed from copies by a word processing staff at Oxford University Press (Pakistan), or re-keyed with funds provided by the press or the printer, New Sketch Graphics, Karachi. I mention these issues because neither the compiler nor the author of the "Introduction" state any criteria for the selection of these documents and, hence, the exclusion of others. I shall consider subsequently the possible of a pro-Pakistani biased selection of documents versus a Bangladeshi perspective.

Marker’s "Introduction" contains three caveats. The initial caveat is that these documents relate, in the main, to the bilateral context of Pakistani-United States relations and do not provide depth of coverage in multilateral (United Nations) activities or issues concerning Pakistan and third countries, notably India. A second caveat is that the most sensitive of the documents retain their classified status and are likely to remain so for some time. Therefore, the entire corpus of diplomatic documents would not have been available for Mr. Khan’s review. The third caveat is that the vast majority of the documents selected emanated from “the field” and was transmitted to the State Department via American embassies and consulates, so that the traffic was largely unidirectional. As a result there are few documents that reflect the instructions sent from the State Department in Washington to the Ambassadors, nor are there many documents on the decision-making process in Washington that produced the instructions that are transmitted to the diplomats in the embassies.

In 1965, the major issues considered are political and military actions related to the Rann of Kutch and to Kashmir. Notably, the American arms embargo on the Subcontinent was hurting Pakistan more than India. Ayub Khan’s desperate attempts to retain Pakistan’s alliance with the United States are documented, and Bhutto figures prominently in the dispatches, prefiguring the emerging Ayub and Bhutto rift. Marker comments on Bhutto’s erratic behavior, histrionics, and Machiavellian streaks (p. xxx). The United States views the Indo-Pakistani conflict as damaging to the American policy of containing communism. In sum, the selected dispatches document a tense political atmosphere and growing militarism.

Mr. Khan’s selections for 1966 include numerous papers related to the Tashkent Declaration, the roles of the Soviet Union and the United States, and American concerns. Both Indian and Pakistani delegates faced problems of "selling" the Tashkent Declaration to their governments, primarily because of a lack of resolution of the Kashmir question. Military plots to assassinate Ayub are detailed, as is Ayub’s visit to Washington. In the interim, East Pakistan maintained an indifference to the Declaration. Several American documents (short-, medium- and long-term plans) provide insights into alternative U.S. strategies, and Pakistan expressed initial concerns about India’s growing nuclear programs.

For 1967, Mr. Khan selected ten documents. Alleged Ayub assassination plots, plans for an East Pakistan coup d’etat, Memoranda of Conversations with Bhutto and other politicians, and a letter from Ambassador Locke addresses the problem of maintaining a balance between India and Pakistan, and preventing Pakistan’s “drift” towards China. In 1968, there are reports of the arrest of Mujibir Rehman and Bhutto, the American concern about the Government of Pakistan creating a martyr in imprisoning Mujib, and the deteriorating political situation in East Pakistan. Mr. Khan’s 1969 selections contain few accounts of events in Pakistan, but there are sets of telegrams which vaguely suggest CIA connections and refer to “the Yahya documents.” Among the major topics are the American Embassy’s annual report, “Current Pakistani Scene – Comments,” with assessments from Dacca, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Islamabad; Memoranda of Conversations between Sher Ali and Secretary of State Rogers, and the latter’s concern about American-Indian-Pakistani relations in the light of emerging United States-China relations.

For 1970, Mr. Khan selected reports that document
the cataclysmic events leading to the separation of East Pakistan. Ambassador Marker remarks on Mujib’s “gar- rulous ego” (xxxv) and comments in detail on Secretary of State Rogers’s Memorandum for the President (February) in which the greater importance of India, Pakistan’s unhappiness, and the foreign policy non-alignment of Pakistan and India are discussed. Other papers relate the Nixon-Yahya Khan discussions about limited arms supplies, free and fair elections in Yahya Khan’s Pakistan, the domestic Pakistani political picture, the Awami League in East Pakistan, Bhutto’s PPP (Pakistan People’s Party) and his anti-American rhetoric, Mujibur Rehman’s “Six Points” demands, character profiles and assessments of Mujib and Bhutto, and Yahya Khan’s visit to the People’s Republic of China and the interest that China expressed in securing United Nations membership.

The crucial year of 1971 includes materials on political dissatisfaction, external political provocation, fervent political activities, evolving sociopolitical patterns, and the military crackdown in East Pakistan in March. A May Memorandum to the President warns of a “possible Indo-Pakistan War.” Notably, there are no records for the period that covers the actual military operations in East Pakistan, including Indian military intervention, and the subsequent Indo-Pakistan war. Special Action Group memoranda, numerous conversations with political and military leaders, speculations about a United Nations role in the “East Pakistan problem,” increasing tensions, mediations efforts by the Ceylon Prime Minister, and papers commenting on the speed at which Bhutto solidified his power after assuming control are included. There are detailed quarterly assessment telegrams that reveal American errors and miscalculations, including, for example, the surprise of the PPP-Bhutto success in the general election. Course of action memoranda, in depth evaluations of Bhutto and his actions with Yahya Khan, Memoranda for the President (26 May), anxieties about a Subcontinent war, measures taken in the United Nations to resolve conflicts, and Indira Gandhi’s “long, rambling” letter (p. xxxix) to President Nixon are among the papers. There is an absence of materials on the secret visit of Henry Kissinger to Peking (Beijing) in July 1971 because there were communications on this matter between the State Department and the American Embassy in Pakistan. Ambassador Marker writes that “two of the principal characters, Bhutto and Mujib, megalomaniacal political opponents each ruthlessly impelled by their singular quest for power, are generally regarded as the principal protagonists who chose to clash rather than compromise” (p. xi), and notes their violent deaths — akin to a Greek tragedy.

For 1972, the papers include Bhutto’s attempts to restore hope and pride to a demoralized nation, his moves to strengthen American-Pakistan ties. The dismissals of senior military officers, the arrests of army officers accused of plotting a coup, America’s strong support for Pakistan’s economic development, the unconditional release of Mujibur Rehman, and the official American position of “watchful reserve” are among the contents of these dispatches. The internal situation in Pakistan is the subject of several documents, and the State Department’s (undated) telegram to the Embassy in New Delhi (repeated to the Embassy in Islamabad and Consulate General in Dacca) involving the withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh are among other reports. The role of China as a firm supporter of Pakistan and China’s Security Council veto on the admission of Bangladesh to the United Nations are reported.

Lastly, for 1973, the activities of President Bhutto, his capabilities and inadequacies, Pakistani foreign policy changes, the adoption of the constitution, the shipment of Soviet-made weapons to the Iraqi Embassy in Islamabad (a Soviet-Indian conspiracy?), and divergent American and Pakistan views on security threat perceptions are considered. The papers end with the documents concerning the appointment of Sahabzada Yaqub Khan as Pakistan’s Ambassador to the United States.

Unfortunately, this massive tome — already in a second impression 2000 – has been printed on acidic paper rather than buffered or alkaline paper and, therefore, would not conform to the ANSI/NISO Standard Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper). In a few short years it will become embrittled and be a candidate for preservation microfilming. There is one notable typo (p. xiv, line 16): the year cited as 1977 should be 1971. There are several unanswered questions that should be addressed. The criteria for the selection of the documents are not stated, nor are the NARA record groups identified, which would be standard archival practice and proper historical research, even though Roedad Khan mentions that these were “unorganized materials” (p. xxiv). I would be interested in Dr. Milton Gustafen’s reaction (he is Senior Specialist, Civilian Record Textual Archives Services Division at NARA) who introduced Khan to the archives (p. xxxv). This might suggest a potential bias in Mr. Khan’s selection of documents, but the major issue is what American documents yet remain classified. Does the volume represent a full and unbiased account of this significant era in the history of the Subcontinent?
Roedad Khan is, of course, a born and bred Pakistani and selected documents with that perspective in mind. Therefore, I would like to present the Bangladeshi perspective for balance. Enayetur Rahim, a Georgetown University (Washington, DC) history professor who also holds a doctorate from Georgetown University, has written extensively on Bengal and Bangladesh (for example 1981, 1986), and edited three volumes of the fortnightly reports of the Governor of Bengal to the Viceroy and Governor-General of India and their replies (Rahim and Rahim 1996-1999), and edited a collection of selected papers from the 1996 Georgetown University Bengal Studies Conference (Rahim and Schwarz 1998).

Dr. Rahim’s objective is to prepare a comprehensive assessment of White House policy in the Bangladesh conflict. This is, of course, the period during which Henry Kissinger was quietly visiting the People’s Republic of China (PPC) and used Pakistan as a stepping stone in the negotiations leading to the United States diplomatic recognition of the PPC. The Nixon administration supported Pakistan during the 1971 war in order to protect this conduit between Washington-Islamabad-Beijing, and at the same time the White House while proclaiming “neutrality” in the conflict was pro-Pakistan (Yahya Khan) and anti-India (Indira Gandhi). Rahim’s would be the first scholarly research on the role of the United States in the Bangladesh Liberation War. He has assembled 170 relevant documents and prepared 14 accompanying essays placing these documents in historical context. In this research he has examined the quality and relevance of these documents, and presented the initial result of his research at the Bengal Studies Conference in May 1999, but his White House Documents and the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971 containing the documents and essays is due to be published later this year.

Pakistan’s foreign relations, government, and politics are characterized by Bindra (1988), R.A.F. Khan (1992), and Singh (1970), while the Pakistani perspective of the 1971 revolution is described by Husain (1996). There are a number of volumes on the history of Bangladesh (A.A. Khan 1996; Nicholas and Oldenberg 1972; Zaheer 1994) and Bangladeshi foreign relations (Matin 1990 and Siddiqui 1995). The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 is reviewed adequately by Costa (1972) and Zaheer (1994), but probably the best single volume on the 1971 revolution and secession is Sisson and Rose 1990. India’s foreign relations and role in the 1971 event are seen in Ghosh (1979) and Matin (1990), while Hossain (1978) elaborates Indian-Bangladeshi foreign relations, and Rahman (1984) elucidates foreign relations and the roles of the US, India, and China in the conflict. Much has been written about to 10 million displaced persons and the one million casualties as the result of genocide and atrocities (Chaudhuri 1972; Hossain 1983; Mascarenhas 1996; and Faust and Blaustein 1973). A web site also documents these events, “Liberation War Museum Online: Bangladesh” (http://www.liberationmuseum.org/). Useful specialized studies include a military assessment and study Indo-Pakistani relations (Tellis 1997), United States-Indian relations (Kux 1992, Thornton 1992, Van Hollen 1998), and United States-Bangladesh relations (Hossain 1983).

Nonetheless, I await the publication of White House Documents and the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971 by professional historian Enayetur Rahim which will provide selection criteria for these documents and analysis of the nine-month Liberation War from the Bangladeshi perspective. It will be interesting to see which documents appear in Dr. Rahim’s volume and in Mr. Khan’s compilation.

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