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The U.S., the Indian-Pakistani War and the Middle East

By Shlomo Slonim

The implications of the Indian-Pakistani War are now being carefully examined the world over and not least of all in the Middle East. One clear lesson highlighted by the conflict is the fact that the United Nations is incapable of serving an independent and effective role in the maintenance of international peace and security. This is, of course, a lesson which has been demonstrated on numerous occasions and most notably during the critical months of May and June of 1967. However, in an era when certain statesmen still cling to the belief that international guarantees under the aegis of the U.N. represent a substitute for secure and recognized boundaries mutually agreed upon by the respective parties, it is instructive to be reminded how readily the United Nations can be stymied by the deliberate action, or inaction, of a single Power. From recent comments by Presidential adviser Henry Kissinger, it would appear that the moral is not entirely lost on the American administration.

But the Indian-Pakistani War, or more particularly, the conduct of the major Powers in relation to that conflict, has also raised questions regarding the likely outcome of any possible confrontation in the Middle East. For there is a manifest parallel between the great Power constellation in the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. It is something the Russian commitment to Egypt is both more substantive and extensive than its pledge to India ever was; while the American commitment to Israel is far more tenuous than the formal alliance maintained with Pakistan. Thus the inability or unwillingness of the United States to rise to the challenge and react with anything more than moral condemnation of India’s action, raises the question whether this marks the limit of any United States response to Soviet expansionist tactics in the future. One Israeli scholar, in the light of the United States record in the Indian-Pakistani War, has gone so far as to state: “No great Power confrontation in the Middle East is possible. It takes two sides to make a confrontation and the Americans will never move. The United States, is in constant retreat. Its conduct in the Indian-Pakistani War only confirms the conviction that isolationism is fast dominating American thought and ac-
tion.” In the view of this Israeli authority, the conflict also demonstrated that the Soviets are very little concerned with the threat from China. For in the crunch, China revealed itself to be a paper tiger. [Ma’ariv, Dec. 24, 1971.]

This set of conclusions arises from an inaccurate assessment of the nature of great Power involvement in the Indian subcontinent and from a false analogy between that region and the Middle East. To assume the impossibility of Great Power confrontation in the Middle East because none materialized in the Indian subcontinent, is to fail to appreciate that none was expected there in the first place (at least between the Soviet Union and the United States). In that area the United States had neither special interests nor a concentration of power. In the Middle East it has vital interests and it has an assemblage of power to protect those interests—and this is the entire difference with regard to the nature of any possible American response. The Indian-Pakistani War was no Cuban Missile Crisis in reverse.

Thus, both India and Pakistan have been steady recipients of American aid. When the crisis in East Pakistan erupted in the Spring of 1971 the United States hoped that the question of self-determination could be resolved by granting East Pakistan a considerable measure of autonomy. Naturally enough the United States did not look with favor upon the possible dismemberment of an ally, and consequently was sharply opposed to Indian intervention in the dispute. However, the repressive action of the Pakistani army added a new dimension to the issue of self-determination—and after that there was no turning back for Bangla Desh. (Not a few Americans, including Senators Kennedy and Church, charged the Pakistanis with committing genocide.) Indian intervention only gave the coup de grace to an already impossible situation. Very few people entertained the belief that East Pakistan would have returned to the fold even in the absence of Indian action. The charge of aggression leveled by the White House against India was little more than a sop for an ally whom the United States could not, and would not, try to help. It was also, to a certain extent, designed to ensure that West Pakistan did not fall victim to Indian action. The same holds true for the westward movement of the Seventh Fleet which, under the circumstances, was a totally ineffectual gesture. For the United States never entertained any serious thought of intervening. Pakistan was not a victim of Communist aggression—indeed it was allied with Communist China. It was a victim of regional animosity and even more of its own folly. American was under no obligation to intervene nor was it in any position to act. This was the salient feature of America’s stand throughout. Consequently, it can not be said that United States prestige suffered a major setback. For the fact is

In considering past United States policy on the Indian subcontinent it is important to note that the United States steadily sought to adhere to a policy of neutrality in the controversy between India and Pakistan. The fundamental aim of the United States in that part of the world was the creation of a defense network as a bar to Communist expansion. The United States did not succeed in persuading India to join this network; it did, however, prevail upon Pakistan to join CENTO and later SEATO. But these military ties with Pakistan did not alter the neutral stance of the United States on the question of Indian-Pakistani relations. And in 1962 President Kennedy did not refrain from aiding India when it was the victim of Chinese action.
that its prestige was never really tested in Bangla Desh in any direct sense.

Soviet policy in the Indian-Pakistan crisis, it is clear, was designed to gain India as a committed ally in any possible confrontation with China. It was part of the new Soviet policy (since 1968) of attempting to build a string of alliances in Asia against China. (If the Soviet Union actually regards China as a paper tiger then it is indeed strange that it has so actively sought to build new alliances against it. Moreover, the assignment of tens of army divisions to guard its border against that "paper tiger" would hardly be warranted!) Abandoning its Tashkent policy of 1965–1966, where it dealt even-handedly between India and Pakistan in arranging peace, the Soviet Union decided this time to come down solidly on the Indian side. This new move was both stimulated and helped by a coincidental set of circumstances. The first circumstance, of course, was the tension between India and Pakistan over the issue of East Pakistan which the Soviet Union could usefully exploit. The price paid has been Pakistan's friendship; but to the Soviet leaders, this, in the present scale of values, is an expendable commodity. The second circumstance was Kissinger's visit to Peking in July 1971. This initiation of ties between the United States and China gave the Soviet Union added incentive to take sides on the Indian subcontinent. For in effect, President Nixon's projected visit to Peking, produced, or gave recognition to, a realignment of power in the global arena, converting it from a two-ring to a three-ring circus. It was now a new ball game, with the distinct possibility that the United States could link up with China against the Soviet Union. From the American standpoint, of course, its moves were intended to serve America's self-interest and were not directed against the Soviet Union. For the United States had come to the conclusion that the road to peace in Vietnam led through Peking more than through Moscow, and it was with this long range aim in view that the United States reoriented its China policy.

But regardless of American intentions this reorientation shattered Soviet equanimity and produced a diplomatic offensive of no small proportion. Soviet leaders Kosygin and Brezhnev began to move in all directions at once—India, Canada, France and Scandinavia. This new policy represented an attempt to consolidate ties with States (and particularly neighboring States) whose decisions could have a bearing upon the new realignment of forces in the world arena. The Soviet reaction to the link between the United States and China can only be compared to their reaction to the rise of Hitler to power in Germany in 1933 which set off a train of diplomatic ventures which the Soviet Union had scorned for years before. Russian then entered the League of Nations, established diplomatic ties with the United States and moved to join France and other European States in a military alliance. The year 1933 marked the opening of a new era in Soviet foreign policy; the same is true of 1971.

The outcome of the Soviet diplomatic initiative in Asia was the signing of the twenty-year Soviet-Indian Friendship Treaty in August 1971. This provided India with the necessary insurance against possible Chinese intervention and, in effect, converted the Indian subcontinent into a stage with four main actors—India, Pakistan, Russia and China. Each of the four possessed direct interests in the area and moreover, commanded a military presence there. But in contrast, the United States, no more than the United Kingdom or France was actively engaged in
the controversy; hence, India's victory cannot possibly be regarded as a success of the Soviet Union vis-a-vis the United States, for the latter was never a party to the confrontation. If the United States has suffered any decline in prestige, this is as a result of its moral condemnation of India and its failure to adopt a totally neutral policy throughout the conflict as did the United Kingdom and France. To the extent that this conflict ranked as a Soviet achievement it was attained, not at the expense of the United States, but of China which alone was in a position to react.

The Middle Eastern theatre is far different in terms of its component elements from the Indian subcontinent. Besides the presence of Israel, which today ranks as no small element in American strategic thinking with regard to the Middle East, the United States has tremendous oil investments in this area. These oil resources constitute a vital element in the functioning of Western industry. The United States could not tolerate Soviet control of this essential commodity. Nor could the United States idly watch this area with its vital strategic links, including the Suez Canal, come under exclusive Soviet control were the latter ever to intervene directly in the area. (This the Soviet Union did not do also in the Indian subcontinent. In fact, immediately upon the outbreak of war the Russians announced that they would stay out of the conflict and called upon all other Powers to do likewise.) Any Soviet domination of the Middle East could not but have dire implications for Turkey and the entire NATO defense network in southeastern Europe. American interests in this area—both economic and strategic—are thus vitally engaged as they were not engaged in the Indian subcontinent.

The United States, it is true, is entering the 1970's in a mood of reaction to the events in Vietnam. If it is correct to say that the expansion of United States involvement in global affairs, begun in the 1940's, reached its peak in the 1960's, then the present decade will be marked by an inward or reverse tide. But this does not mean that the United States will suddenly stick its head in the sand and become oblivious to all realities. The over-expansion of the past can be expected to produce considerable caution, and even a measure of retraction—something which is only now getting underway. But there are limits to this. No American Administration is today free to indulge in the luxury of the isolationism that was rampant in the 1920's and 1930's.

Fortunately, the Soviet Union is also not free to disregard the realities of the power situation in the Middle East. Neither the Arabs nor the Russians can entertain the illusion that the Middle East can be an area dominated by a single super-Power—the Soviet Union. Nor is there any indication that they equate the Middle East to the Indian subcontinent. It would appear, on the contrary, that the events there seriously derailed any plans which President Sadat of Egypt may have had for an immediate opening of hostilities—at least to the extent that such action was dependent upon Russian support. If Sadat's previous circumspection was induced by Soviet reluctance to face up to the possibility of a direct confrontation with the United States, then the creation of an additional point of confrontation between China and the Soviet Union in South Asia can only have strengthened that Soviet reluctance. The Soviet Union is obviously not keen to be faced with two critical fronts simultaneously—the Middle East, with its potential for United States involvement, and India, with its potential for Chinese involvement. As Khrushchev is once alleged to have told...
Chairman Mao, "The United States may indeed be a paper tiger but it has nuclear teeth." Even the Soviet Union cannot be eager to become involved at the same time with two "paper tigers" with nuclear teeth.

The Indian-Pakistan War has obvious implications for the Middle East, but they are not necessarily negative so far as Israel is concerned. Israel may not possess a formal pact with the United States (as does Pakistan); but if recent events have heightened the identity of interest between the United States and Israel, then the latter's security must be regarded as substantially enhanced. For it is identity of interest and not formal treaties which determines the foreign policy of a nation, as the Indian-Pakistan War has shown.

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