

[Home](#) > [Opinion](#) > Pakistan lost the 1971 war, but its project of Islamist violence won...

Opinion

Advertisement

# Pakistan lost the 1971 war, but its project of Islamist violence won the larger conflict

**C. CHRISTINE FAIR** 14 December, 2021 10:32 am IST

*Lt Gen Niazi signing the Instrument of Surrender beside Lt Gen Aurora, Dhaka | Commons*

**F**ifty years ago, on 16 December 1971, Lieutenant-General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, the Commander of the Pakistan Eastern Command, signed the Instrument of Surrender at Ramna Race Course in Dacca, which was signed and accepted by Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of India's Eastern Command. Pakistan's surrender terminated the military dimension of the conflict, also known as the India-Pakistan War of 1971. Oddly, while there are some biographical accounts, which are often blatantly self-serving, there are relatively few empirically robust accounts of this conflict, most of which focus upon the visible dimension of the war: between Pakistan and India. The moniker elides and even eclipses several distinct wars that culminated in Pakistan's surrender.

These other battles continue to cast shadows over the region that are as long as—if not longer—than those of the 1971 conflict between Pakistan and India. Pakistan learned the most dangerous lessons of the war. It concluded that repressing and exploiting disgruntled minorities is a viable tool of domestic statecraft while proxy war is an effective tool of foreign policy. Bangladesh has not become a viable secular democracy and appears ever less likely to do so. And India, despite decisively defeating Pakistan, was never able to build upon that victory to impose a settlement of the Kashmir issue in line with Delhi's equities while continuing to wrestle with fundamental questions about defence reforms and modernisation. In retrospect,



while it may have lost that particular battle in D  
Pakistan and its project of Islamist violence seem  
enduring war.

Advertisement

**'Have 50 nations got it wrong?' Delhi HC asks as it look**

Delhi High Court, hearing petitions challenging exception to mar

Advertisement

**Also read:** *Govt and military owe India an authentic history of the 1971 Bangladesh War. Rest is mythology*

## The wars

The first was a domestic conflict between Pakistan's ethnic majority Bengalis, who dominated East Pakistan, and the ruling elite in West Pakistan. This conflict was apparent as early as 1952 when Bengalis began mobilising to force the State to recognise Bengali as a national language. On 21-22 February that year, the Pakistani armed forces murdered several students as well as numerous others in indiscriminate fire. This internal conflict precipitously expanded after the ruling junta of General Yahya Khan refused to convene Parliament following the 1970 elections in which the East Pakistan-based Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, decisively defeated Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples' Party.

The consequences of these elections were monumental because the victors were tasked with writing Pakistan's third constitution. Mujibur Rahman's party, under the banner of the Six Point Agenda, had long advocated for greater federalism; separate convertible currencies; fiscal responsibility to be delegated to the federating units; as well as the right to maintain a separate militia. Each of these demands came in response to the west's cultural, economic, and linguistic oppression; exclusion from the military and bureaucracy; as well as consistent and calibrated efforts to deprive Bengalis of their legitimate share of political power. The political elites in the West, spearheaded by General Yahya and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, wanted a strong federal government and found the Awami League's Six-Point Agenda to be a thinly veiled demand for outright cessation.



Advertisement

**'Have 50 nations got it wrong?' Delhi HC asks as it look**

Delhi High Court, hearing petitions challenging exception to mar

Despite winning too few seats to veto any constitution offered by the Awami League, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto refused to let his party participate in any convening of Parliament and made absurd demands for a power-sharing agreement. After Mujibur Rahman refused to cede and insisted upon the Awami League's right to form the government, General Yahya Khan commenced Operation Searchlight, which was a brutal and thuggish military operation to disarm the Bengalis.

As refugees began fleeing into India, the second phase of the war began: a proxy war between India and Pakistan. With the monsoon looming, India had few military operations at hand. Given the riverine terrain of Bangladesh, any military operation had to wait until the monsoon was over. To ensure that China would not intervene on its client's behalf, India would have to wait until winter when snow would preclude Chinese movements through the mountain passes. In addition to these meteorological and geographical constraints, India was ill-equipped to undertake military action in the spring of 1971. India used the summer to reposition forces from the west to the east and construct necessary infrastructure to support military operations while seeking diplomatic support from Russia and imploring the United States to counsel Pakistan to end what was clearly ethnic cleansing in East Pakistan.

US President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, were unmoved by India's requests even though the United States did provide a significant amount of aid to subsidise in some measure the enormous and growing cost of caring for the refugees who continued to pour into India. Initially, while the refugees were both Hindu and Muslim, it increasingly became clear from West Pakistani forces' violent actions that most of the refugees were Hindu Bengalis. At Independence, about one in four Pakistanis were non-Muslim minorities, most of whom were Bengali Hindus in East Pakistan.

Advertisement

The Nixon administration was unconcerned about the mounting atrocities because it was commencing an unprecedented diplomatic overture to China, and it chose Yahya Khan to be its mediator. Despite popular opinion, the Nixon administration had two other Europe-based alternatives to Yahya Khan. Journalist-turned-scholar Gary Bass makes a compelling case that Nixon chose Yahya both because he and Kissinger had a deep personal affection for him – and even compared him to General Ulysses Grant of the American Civil War – and because they had a personal, visceral, and deeply misogynistic hatred for India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. However, even after Nixon had secured a personal connection to China and no longer needed Yahya's intercession, Nixon refused to make the slightest appeal to Yahya to cease what Archer Blood, the American Counsel in Dhaka, and other dissenting US State Department officials described as a "genocide." The Nixon administration even



beseched China to feign intervention in the hope of ending the war in the war.

Advertisement

**'Have 50 nations got it wrong?' Delhi HC asks as it looks at 1971 war**

Delhi High Court, hearing petitions challenging exception to marriage laws

As India prepared for the larger war, the proxy war continued and intensified. Throughout the summer it trained and equipped the Bengali Resistance while also mentoring the shamolic, disorganised, and ineffective Bengali political elites. As India supported this rag-tag collection of non-state actors to challenge Pakistan's formidable armed forces, Pakistan too worked through a number of Islamist militant organisations, including the notoriously violent student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami. By the end of the summer, India was providing artillery support to Bengali insurgents who battled Pakistani State and non-state combatants. East Pakistan became a killing field.

While it is unpopular to say so, the Bengalis, in and out of the resistance, also victimised non-Bengali and even Bengali "collaborationist" non-combatants in the East. This renders any actual assessment of the war's non-combatant casualties impossible with extant data, which is deeply problematic. Pakistanis wish to undercount the atrocities. Bangladeshis wish to over-count them. India, for its part, does not declassify documents pertaining to the war at all. While one may disagree with some of Sarmila Bose's conclusions in her book, *Dead Reckoning*, her critique of extant data and analytical methodologies are insightful.

Advertisement

The third conventional war officially commenced on 3 December when Pakistan's Air Force conducted preemptive strikes on forward Indian airbases and radar installations. This, too, was a formality given the growing intensity of the proxy war before the official onset of the bilateral confrontation.

When the war ended on 16 December 1971, Pakistan was vivisected with East Pakistan emerging as an independent Bangladesh. Some 93,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered to the Indian Armed Forces and were taken to India as POWs. Pakistan lost more than half of its population and about 15 percent of its territory. However, 61 percent of the 54,500 square miles (1,41,154 sq km) of land lost in the East was arable, in contrast to a meagre 21 percent of the 310,000 square miles (8,02,896 sq km) it retained. All said and done, the Pakistan Army was reviled for losing the East, which allowed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to ruthlessly rule the west until General Zia-ul-Haq ousted him in a coup in July 1977.

**Also read:** *Indira Gandhi convinced world before 1971. She and Manekshaw both knew timing was key*

## Who won the Forever War?

India successfully snatched defeat from the jaws of victory when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi signed the July 1972 Simla Agreement with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This



agreement formally concluded the war. Despite acquiesced to most of Pakistan's demands, including 13,000 sq km (5,022 sq mi) of the territory it had captured, the 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war, assurance that Bangladesh would not conduct war crimes trials against Pakistani military personnel, and the inviolable viability of its long-standing, if baseless, claims on the disputed disposition of Kashmir. India and Pakistan respectively retained the territory seized in Kashmir and a new Line of Control was defined where the Cease Fire Line once stood.

**'Have 50 nations got it wrong?' Delhi HC asks as it looks at 1971 war**

Delhi High Court, hearing petitions challenging exception to marriage laws

India's aims at Shimla were modest despite vivisectioning the country, most notably securing Pakistan's commitment to resolving outstanding disputes peacefully and bilaterally. Indian participants aver that Bhutto had agreed to make the Line of Control the de jure border when times were more propitious to do so. He argued that this would require time, given the public outrage over the outcome of the war, and that to cede Pakistan's long-nursed position on Kashmir would be political suicide. Some Indian interlocutors justify India's appeasement of Pakistan as a strategic decision to not impose a "Treaty of Versailles"-like condition upon Pakistan. India also interpreted the 1972 agreement as a potential victory because Pakistan's agreement to settle disputes bilaterally obviated any scope for the United Nations or other bilateral or multilateral involvement in outstanding issues.

Unsurprisingly, Pakistan has never honoured its commitment to resolve outstanding disputes peacefully nor did it ever move to make the Line of Control the de jure border. Pakistan now claims that no such agreement was ever considered and continues its unending effort to change maps in Kashmir through low-intensity conflict, proxy war, and terrorism.

Not only has Pakistan never abided by this agreement, but the Pakistan that emerged from the 1971 War ironically was also stronger despite losing a significant amount of valuable territory and more than half of its population. The Pakistan that survived was more defensible, more ideologically coherent, had significantly fewer non-Muslim minorities, and strategically positioned to extract rents by collaborating with the United States on occasion while actively furthering its own agenda at the same time. Unfettered by the problematic Bengalis, Pakistan was able to seek financial, diplomatic, and political support from the Gulf State Monarchies, which, in turn, enabled Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to fulfil his dream of developing, in his own words, an "Islamic bomb."

Bhutto also began jihad in Afghanistan in 1973 following the ouster of King Zahir Shah by his cousin, Mohammad Daoud Khan. Khan began an aggressive liberalising campaign and brutally oppressed any opposition among the Communist and Islamist ranks alike. Bhutto, along with the ISI, deftly organised the Islamists who fled to Pakistan into seven effective guerrilla groups. Pakistan did this with its own meagre resources because doing so was critical to securing its enduring interests in Afghanistan. The United States would not become involved in the conflict until many years later, despite Pakistan's frequent requests.





In fact, in 1979, President Jimmy Carter sanctioned nuclear reprocessing, thanks in large measure to President Ronald Reagan who was inaugurated in 1981.

**'Have 50 nations got it wrong?' Delhi HC asks as it looks**

Delhi High Court, hearing petitions challenging exception to marriage

those sanctions, which came through in 1982 after which the United States—along with Saudi Arabia and China—provided massive overt and covert resources to Pakistan. In fact, throughout the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the United States continued funding Pakistan even though US officials understood it was still advancing its nuclear weapons programme.

When the United States reimposed sanctions in 1990, Pakistan was once again able to resurrect its strategic importance in the wake of 9/11. While ostensibly working with the United States, Pakistan received over \$34 billion even while actively supporting myriad terrorist organisations such as the Taliban and the Haqqani Network and working to undermine US efforts in Afghanistan. While benefiting from American assistance, Pakistan amassed the world's fastest-growing nuclear stockpile and has likely exceeded that of France while also developing battlefield nuclear weapons. Pakistan remains both able and willing to undermine India's quest for hegemony in South Asia and beyond.

During the same period, those who struggled to free the Bengalis of East Pakistan from West Pakistan's project of subordinating ethnic identity to that of an army-sponsored project of political Islam and establishing an independent Bangladesh on the principles of secular democracy failed to create a durable democratic state with a broad consensus on secularism. Within a few years, Mujibur Rahman and most of his family were murdered in a bloody coup. He left behind a legacy of corruption and authoritarianism that resembled that of Pakistan's own civilian autocrat, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. After a tumultuous power struggle, by 1977, General Ziaur Rahman was in control of the country. He removed secularism from the Constitution and began reviving the Jamaat-e-Islami, which the Awami League had illegalised because of its extensive collaboration with Pakistani forces in committing countless atrocities. By 1988, Bangladesh's next military leader, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad declared Islam to be the state religion and further resurrected the political salience of Jamaat-e-Islami.

When Bangladesh returned to democracy in 1990, the two main political parties vied for power and the right to rule rather than the privilege of governing. While the right-of-centre Bangladesh National Party, "led" by Khaleda Zia (the widow of Ziaur Rahman) is reviled for its explicit reliance upon the Jamaat-e-Islami among other regressive Islamist parties, the Awami League, "led" by Sheikh Hasina (the daughter of Mujibur Rahman) has also courted Islamist parties for the purposes of retaining control. Hasina long ago instituted one-woman rule secured through electoral malfeasance, misuse of legal instruments to harass her opponents, and other oppressive state tactics to silence her growing number of increasingly vocal critics across broad swathes of civil society. Even though Bangladesh's Supreme Court declared the constitutional amendments of previous military dictators illegal and presumably restored the principle of secularism as a fundamental tenant of the Constitution, Hasina has retained Islam as the state religion even as religious



minorities continue to suffer persecution under secular and democratic Bangladesh and forestal on the East” has not come to fruition and is unli

Advertisement

**‘Have 50 nations got it wrong?’ Delhi HC asks as it look**

Delhi High Court, hearing petitions challenging exception to mar

**Also read:** *Two yrs before 1971 war, RAW’s RN Kao told Indira Gandhi to be ready for Pakistan partition*

## Is India any safer?

Is India safer today than it was before vivisecting Pakistan in December 1971? India now faces a country with an uncertain future in the East and a Pakistan that is ever more committed to using violence in pursuit of its policies at home and abroad while enjoying complete immunity from consequences and impunity to continue with its sanguinary tactics to force its will upon Afghans as well as Indians—especially Kashmiris. While Britain’s unwillingness to adopt coercive policies towards Pakistan can be explained by the political power of British Pakistanis, the Americans have consistently demonstrated that they have little will or interest in constraining Pakistan even as the latter continues to engage in nuclear coercion and proxy warfare under its ever-expanding nuclear umbrella.

Thus, while India and the United States continue to forge important breakthroughs in their bilateral relationship—inclusive of defence, intelligence, and space cooperation—India has had very little success in weaning the Americans off of their inexplicable belief in Pakistan’s indispensability in managing security in South Asia even though Pakistan is the principal progenitor of this very insecurity. It seems as if no Pakistani outrage is ever enough to persuade Americans to see Pakistan as the enemy it is, rather than a problematic ally that can be motivated through a magical concoction of inducements. If the discovery of Osama Bin Laden in an Abbottabad safe house, a short distance from the presumably hallowed Pakistan Military Academy, wasn’t an adequate motivation, one would have thought that defeating the US-led forces in Afghanistan through its unstinting support for the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network among numerous other terrorist groups should have.

Instead of availing of a diminished logical dependence upon Pakistan to maintain the war in Afghanistan and adopting a coercive and punitive approach—perhaps in line with the US approach to Iran—Washington in fact facilitated the handover of Afghanistan to Pakistan via its proxies, the Taliban. Moreover, with the American embassy in Kabul closed, the US seems poised to continue its reliance upon Pakistan’s ostensible expertise in catching the very snakes it continues to farm.

Pakistan never suffered any punishment or consequence for the relentless persecution of its Bengali population and indeed learned a very important lesson. Namely, it can continue to violently harass, harangue, oppress and even kill its own domestic critics—often with American weaponry. The world is so numb to Pakistan’s



barbarism that it no longer registers significant of human rights organisations.

Advertisement

**'Have 50 nations got it wrong?' Delhi HC asks as it look**

Delhi High Court, hearing petitions challenging exception to mar

While Pakistan has learned lessons, the United States has learned nothing. Americans will continue to work with Pakistan, motivated by short-term-policy prerogatives. Sadly, the US will do so even at the expense of long-term American security interests because Pakistan invests the fungible American and international assistance into the very assets its uses to coerce the international community: nuclear weapons and terrorists.

In turn, India continues to struggle with defence reforms; the deafening silence of nonexistent inter-ministerial debates about what kind of threats India will face; the kinds of defence requirements it needs to manage if not confront those threats; and how to source these systems much less integrate them.

China continues its belligerent rise along India's borders and within India's near and distant strategic environment. Worse yet, China is doing so by working through India's nemeses: Pakistan and the odious Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

It's hard to escape the discomfiting conclusion that Pakistan, despite losing the battle for East Pakistan in 1971, continues to win the wars.

*Christine Fair is a professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University. She is the author of In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War. She tweets @cchristinefair. Her website is [christinefair.net](http://christinefair.net).*

(Edited by Prashant)

Recommended Content by [theprint.in](http://theprint.in)



**Seers to move SC to have their say  
Dharma Sansad 'hate speech' case**

