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Strategic Compartmentalization: Nixon, Humanitarianism, and the Limits of the U.S.-Pakistan Alliance in 1971

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the Nixon administration's response to Pakistan's 1971 crisis by asking not simply whether strategic interests displaced human rights, but how officials made those concerns appear separable. It develops the concept of strategic compartmentalization to describe a policy process in which constitutional breakdown and military repression were treated as Pakistan's internal affairs, refugees and famine were assigned to humanitarian channels, and President Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan's survival remained tied to opening to China and the wider Cold War balance. Drawing on declassified U.S. records, presidential conversations, diplomatic memoirs, United Nations material, and recent regional scholarship, the article traces the policy from the March crackdown to the December war. Pakistan's role as an intermediary with Beijing helps explain Washington's early caution, but it cannot fully account for the persistence of the pro-Yahya position after Henry Kissinger reached China in July. Personal gratitude, secrecy, executive centralization, distrust of India, and the substitution of the allied regime for the allied state gave the policy its durability. The article's central contribution is to show how genuine, life-saving relief could coexist with a strategy that insulated the political relationship at the heart of the crisis.



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Introduction

On 6 April 1971, diplomats at the United States Consulate General in Dacca sent Washington a formal dissent against American policy toward East Pakistan. They condemned the suppression of an elected majority and argued that official silence had placed the United States on the wrong side of democratic principle and mass violence. The cable did not reveal an emergency that senior officials had somehow missed. Reports describing attacks on university districts, Hindu

communities, political organizers, and civilians had already reached both the State Department and the White House. Its significance lay in making the administration's agency unmistakable: restraint was a policy choice, not the unavoidable result of confusion or inadequate information (Blood, 2002; State, 2025, pp. docs. 13, 19-20; Archive, 2002, pp. docs. 1-8).

The familiar explanation for this choice is persuasive, but too neat. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger valued Pakistan because President Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan served as a confidential intermediary in the opening to the People's Republic of China. They also read India's growing relationship with the Soviet Union as a threat to the regional balance and feared that Pakistan's collapse would weaken both American and Chinese positions in Asia. From this angle, the administration sacrificed humanitarian and democratic concerns to grand strategy. The documents support much of that interpretation, yet the stark opposition between realism and morality can conceal the institutional work required to keep the two apart. Strategy did not arrive as a single, settled interest. It was assembled through categories, personal judgments, secret channels, and decisions about which facts could legitimately affect policy (Warner, 2005; Raghavan, 2013; Bass, 2013; Saunders, 2014).

This article argues that the administration managed these tensions through strategic compartmentalization. The term refers to a governing practice in which connected facts are separated, assigned to different institutions, and judged by different standards. Refugees could be fed without making their safe return dependent on representative government. Famine prevention could be discussed in terms of grain, transport, and international access while the coercive political order producing insecurity remained largely insulated from American pressure. State Department officers could document atrocities as the National Security Council protected the presidential relationship with Yahya. Compartmentalization did not render humanitarian assistance false; American and international relief saved lives. Its political effect was subtler. It made relief compatible with the continued protection of a regime whose actions were generating the emergency.

The argument contributes to three debates. First, it refines the history of the American "tilt" by separating the reasons that produced caution in the spring from those that sustained support after Kissinger's secret journey to Beijing. Second, it connects diplomatic history with scholarship on humanitarian governance and the emergence of human rights in U.S. foreign relations. The administration did not fail to perceive suffering. It organized suffering in ways that limited its consequences for alliance policy. Third, the article offers an alliance-centered explanation through the idea of regime-state substitution. Nixon and Kissinger increasingly treated loyalty to Yahya's government as loyalty to Pakistan itself, even as that government undermined the constitutional foundations of the state. This distinction helps explain why American policy remained effective at preserving executive access but ineffective at restoring legitimacy.

The article asks a focused question: why did an administration possessing detailed knowledge, substantial economic influence, and an important security relationship define access to Yahya as more valuable than pressure for a credible political settlement? The answer is not that American leverage could certainly have prevented secession or war. Such a counterfactual cannot be demonstrated. The narrower claim is that the administration separated humanitarian consequences from political causation, and that this separation reduced the likelihood that available instruments – public condemnation, restrictions on military supply, aid conditionality, and support for negotiations with elected Bengali leaders – would be used in a coordinated way.

The discussion proceeds in seven stages. The next section places the concept of strategic compartmentalization within the historiography of 1971 and the social-scientific literature on executive decision-making, humanitarian governance, and alliance politics. A source and methods section then explains the document base and its limitations. The empirical sections reconstruct the constitutional breakdown, the China channel, the humanitarian response, and the December war. The final discussion identifies the broader implications for alliance reliability, executive secrecy, and the relationship between human rights and national interest.

Historiography and Analytical Framework

Scholarship on 1971 now extends well beyond the early diplomatic and military narratives. Foundational studies of Pakistan's political development located the crisis in unequal state-building, the concentration of military and bureaucratic authority in the western wing, and the inability of the federal system to translate East Pakistan's demographic majority into governing power (Jahan, 1972; Jalal, 1990; Sisson, 1990). Broader histories have situated the conflict within Bengali nationalism, decolonization, Indian strategy, superpower rivalry, and the contingent decisions of political and military leaders (Raghavan, 2013; Schendel, 2020). Recent work on law and recognition has further shown that Bangladesh's emergence was not simply the military result of December 1971, but a prolonged contest over constitutional authority, international personality, and the conditions under which a secessionist movement becomes a state (Farid, 2023; Price, 2024).

A second body of work centers on Nixon, Kissinger, and the machinery of crisis. Declassified memoranda, presidential recordings, and diplomatic testimony exposed the White House's hostility toward Indira Gandhi, its attachment to Yahya, and its readiness to bypass or overrule the State Department. These studies made the "tilt" shorthand for a policy that favored Pakistan diplomatically and, during the December war, explored support that pressed against legal and bureaucratic limits (Warner, 2005; Siniver, 2008; Bass, 2013). Archer Blood's memoir adds the perspective of an official who watched events unfold in Dacca, while Saunders's retrospective account shows that debate persisted even among policymakers associated with the administration (Blood, 2002; Saunders, 2014). Together, this literature demonstrates that institutional design mattered: the concentration of sensitive diplomacy in the White House allowed presidential preferences to outweigh dissent without eliminating the evidence on which dissent rested.

A third literature has placed civilian experience, genocide, sexual violence, displacement, and historical memory at the center of the story. Casualty estimates remain contested and have been politicized in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the wider international debate. That dispute, however, should not be allowed to dissolve the well-documented pattern of organized killing, targeted persecution, sexual violence, forced migration, and destruction. American diplomats used the expression "selective genocide" within days of the March assault. Later scholarship has examined both the evidentiary basis of genocide claims and the political uses of remembrance, apology, denial, and justice (Mookherjee, 2015; Tripathi, 2016; Bass, 2013; Qasmi, 2023). Research on the refugee crisis has also shown that displacement was not a humanitarian after-effect but a mechanism that internationalized the conflict and helped turn civil war into interstate war (Biswas, 2023).

These literatures often meet in the language of a conflict between realism and morality. The formulation is valuable because it captures a genuine hierarchy in the White House's priorities.

Yet it can also imply that policymakers first identified an objective strategic interest and then decided how much moral compromise it required. Research on organizations, perception, and executive decision-making suggests a more uneven process. Leaders interpret crises through advisory systems, institutional routines, personal loyalties, and categories that make some facts actionable while consigning others to the margins (Allison, 1999; Jervis, 1976; Allison, 1999). The key question is therefore not only how officials balanced strategy and ethics, but how they defined the objects to be balanced in the first place.

Strategic compartmentalization captures this process through four related moves. It separates causes from consequences, so political repression can be treated apart from refugee relief. It distributes responsibility, allowing humanitarian agencies to manage suffering while strategic officials manage the alliance. It creates unequal standards of evidence: refugee numbers, grain shipments, and transport capacity appear measurable, whereas legitimacy is described as uncertain, internal, or beyond American competence. Finally, it protects an executive narrative by restricting who can evaluate the trade-offs of secret diplomacy. The concept overlaps with bureaucratic politics but places less emphasis on bargaining among agencies than on the political consequences of dividing one crisis into administratively distinct problems. Alliance politics adds a further ambiguity: was Washington defending Pakistan's territorial integrity, Yahya's government, or Nixon's personal relationship with Yahya? In 1971 these objects increasingly collapsed into one another. The article calls that collapse regime-state substitution.

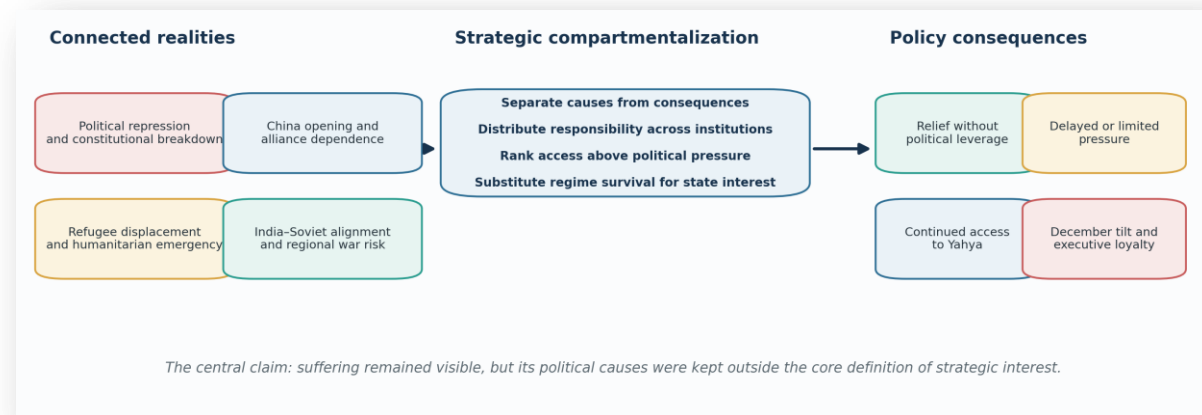


Figure 1. Strategic compartmentalization as the article's analytical model.

Sources and Method

The article uses qualitative historical document analysis and process tracing. Its principal documentary base is Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), volume XI, which contains 335 documents on the South Asia crisis, read alongside volume XVII on the China opening, the National Security Archive's declassified collection, Nixon-era presidential conversations, National Security Council memoranda, and selected congressional and United Nations material. Diplomatic memoirs by Archer Blood and the Pakistani officer Khadim Hussain Raja provide distinct participant perspectives that help illuminate both Washington's information environment and the political-military setting inside Pakistan (Blood, 2002; Raja, 2012). The purpose is not to count documents as independent observations, but to follow decision sequences: what officials

knew, how they classified that knowledge, which options remained available, and how justifications shifted between March and December 1971 (State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971. , 2005; State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XVII: China, 1969-1972., 2006; Archive, 2002).

Documents were read across four recurring themes: constitutional legitimacy, humanitarian relief, alliance and China policy, and the use of economic or military leverage. Particular weight is given to records that reveal disagreement or change over time, including the Dacca dissent, Senior Review Group and Washington Special Actions Group minutes, memoranda on arms and aid, Nixon-Kissinger conversations, and communications concerning China. Triangulation among cables, meeting records, retrospective scholarship, and published audio reduces dependence on any single official account. The method is interpretive rather than quantitative: its purpose is to reconstruct the categories through which the administration understood the crisis and to test whether those categories remained stable as circumstances changed.

The source base also imposes limits that should be stated plainly. Declassified American records privilege Washington's vocabulary and frequently represent Bengali, Pakistani, and Indian actors through U.S. diplomatic reporting. Memoirs offer access to experience but are retrospective and shaped by later controversy. These materials cannot replace systematic archival work in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, China, Britain, and Russia, nor can they settle every dispute over casualty figures, military intent, or regional decision-making. Regional histories, Pakistani testimony, studies of memory and gender, and United Nations records are therefore used to test American perceptions against a wider historical field (Raja, 2012; Raghavan, 2013; Mookherjee, 2015; Schendel, 2020; Qasmi, 2023).

The article does not claim to reveal a previously unknown archive. Its originality is analytical and temporal. Strategic compartmentalization links policy domains that are commonly examined in isolation—humanitarian relief, alliance management, the China opening, democratic legitimacy, and executive organization—and uses their interaction to explain a specific puzzle: why did the pro-Yahya position persist after Pakistan's role as the fragile intermediary with Beijing had diminished? Historical contribution need not depend solely on discovering a new document. It can also come from demonstrating that familiar records support a different causal sequence and a more precise account of policy durability.

Political Breakdown and the Narrowing of Policy

The crisis emerged from the institutional design of Pakistan and from the unequal political economy that had developed since 1947. East and West Pakistan were separated by Indian territory, but geography alone did not make the union unstable. The deeper problem was the distribution of power. The eastern wing contained a majority of the population, while the armed forces, central bureaucracy, and a disproportionate share of public investment remained concentrated in the west. Bengali demands for linguistic recognition, fiscal fairness, and provincial autonomy therefore concerned sovereignty rather than administrative adjustment. By the late 1960s, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Six-Point programme had turned autonomy into a mass political project, while military rule left constitutional compromise dependent on a narrow circle of leaders (Jahan, 1972; Jalal, 1990; Raja, 2012; Schendel, 2020).

The December 1970 election converted these long-standing inequalities into a constitutional test. The Awami League won an overwhelming victory in East Pakistan and a majority in the National Assembly. Under parliamentary rules, it was entitled to lead the formation of the central government and shape the new constitution. Senior officers and major West Pakistani politicians, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, feared the consequences of power moving eastward. Yahya postponed the National Assembly on 1 March 1971, and the non-cooperation movement in the east began to function as an alternative authority. American officials understood before the crackdown that military action was likely to produce mass bloodshed and strengthen separatism (State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971. , 2005, pp. docs. 2, 6).

Operation Searchlight, launched on the night of 25 March, aimed to break the political and organizational foundations of Bengali resistance. The army attacked university areas, police and paramilitary units, Awami League networks, and neighborhoods associated with opposition. Hindu communities were targeted with particular intensity as the campaign spread. Estimates of the dead vary widely, and surviving evidence does not permit a single uncontested total. The nature of the violence is nevertheless clear: systematic killing, sexual violence, forced displacement, and large-scale destruction accompanied an effort to rebuild central authority through terror (Raghavan, 2013; Mookherjee, 2015; Tripathi, 2016; Bass, 2013). Contemporary Pakistani testimony also reveals the depth of military and political dysfunction within the western command, complicating retrospective claims that the operation offered a realistic path back to constitutional order (Raja, 2012).

The term genocide requires careful use because it carries legal, scholarly, and commemorative meanings that do not always coincide. Bangladesh's official memory, Pakistani state narratives, survivor testimony, and revisionist accounts have produced sharply different claims about numbers, responsibility, and victim groups. A responsible analysis need not choose between numerical certainty and moral evasiveness. This article uses genocide when discussing the contemporary diplomatic judgment or the campaign's targeted character, especially the attacks on Hindus and political opponents, while recognizing the need to distinguish legal classification from national commemoration. The policy question is narrower and better documented: senior American officials received credible evidence of organized mass violence while choices about military supply, aid, public condemnation, and diplomatic pressure remained open (Bose, 2011; Bass, 2013; Qasmi, 2023).

The China Channel, Secrecy, and Executive Loyalty

Pakistan's role in U.S.-Chinese rapprochement gave Yahya an importance that exceeded the formal alliance. Nixon had sought an opening to Beijing before the East Pakistan crisis, and Pakistani officials carried messages that helped arrange Kissinger's secret mission. In July 1971, Kissinger left Pakistan for Beijing aboard a Pakistani aircraft under a carefully constructed cover story. The trip established direct high-level contact and prepared the ground for Nixon's visit the following year (State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XVII: China, 1969-1972., 2006, pp. docs. 124, 132, 135). The importance of this service was not merely diplomatic. It shaped the emotional and institutional context in which the White House interpreted every request to pressure Yahya.

The connection between the China initiative and restraint toward Pakistan was explicit. In late April, policy memoranda emphasized the importance of retaining a working relationship with Yahya, and Nixon instructed advisers not to place excessive pressure on him. The instrumental reasoning was understandable: public confrontation might threaten the confidential channel, reduce cooperation, or push Yahya toward defiance. Yet the language surrounding the relationship went beyond calculation. Nixon described Yahya as a friend, and Kissinger acknowledged to Ambassador Kenneth Keating that the president's special feeling for the Pakistani leader was a political fact even if it should not determine policy (Archive, 2002, pp. docs. 9-13; State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971. , 2005, p. doc. 64). Personalization shaped how evidence was interpreted. Yahya's assistance with China appeared to confirm loyalty and reliability. Indian criticism, by contrast, was filtered through Nixon's suspicion of Indira Gandhi and Kissinger's tendency to view India as moralizing, opportunistic, and increasingly aligned with Moscow. The refugee burden, Indian assistance to the Mukti Bahini, and the August Indo-Soviet Treaty were real strategic developments. But they were read through an existing hierarchy of trust that magnified Indian intentions and discounted the political consequences of Pakistan's military campaign (Hayes, 2012; Hess, 2007).

Secrecy reinforced this hierarchy of trust. Only a small circle knew the details of the China opening, so officials dealing with refugees, arms shipments, and reports of atrocities could not fully assess the trade-offs supposedly required by global strategy. Those who possessed the secret had an incentive to emphasize the danger that criticism might jeopardize rapprochement. The result was an epistemic imbalance: the costs of pressure were concentrated in the judgments of Nixon and Kissinger, while the costs of non-pressure were recorded by diplomats and aid officials with less authority over the final decision. In this setting, bureaucratic dissent did not disappear; it lost the ability to force a common assessment of the crisis.



Figure 2. The 1971 sequence from crisis knowledge to overt policy tilt. Source: Author's synthesis of the events discussed in the article.

The most revealing test came after Kissinger's visit. Once direct U.S.-Chinese contact had been established and the forthcoming presidential trip announced, Pakistan remained useful but was no longer the only fragile bridge between Washington and Beijing. If the channel alone

determined policy, the White House should have enjoyed greater freedom to condition support. Instead, Nixon's gratitude hardened. In August, he wrote that those seeking a more peaceful world would remain indebted to Yahya. A specific diplomatic service had become a broad moral credit that outweighed Yahya's role in Pakistan's constitutional collapse (Archive, 2002, p. doc. 20). Rapprochement therefore explains the origin of restraint more convincingly than its duration. Secrecy, personal loyalty, distrust of India, and regime-state substitution carried the policy beyond the point at which its initial operational rationale had begun to change.

Humanitarianism without Political Leverage

The refugee crisis made the separation of humanitarian response from political causation increasingly difficult. By the end of 1971, close to ten million people had crossed into India. Camps in West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, and other regions placed exceptional pressure on public health, food systems, local government, and development budgets. Disease and monsoon conditions deepened the emergency. Displacement also internationalized a conflict that Islamabad continued to describe as an internal affair. For India, the refugee burden was not simply evidence of suffering; it was proof that regional stability could not be restored without political change in East Pakistan (Biswas, 2023; Refugees, 1973).

The United States became a major source of relief. Washington supported refugee assistance in India, voluntary agencies, United Nations coordination, food programmes, and efforts to prevent famine inside East Pakistan. These measures had real humanitarian value and should not be dismissed as public relations. The problem lay in the division of responsibility they permitted. Refugees were counted, housed, and fed; famine was discussed through grain supply, transport, and access; political accommodation was treated as uncertain, intrusive, or beyond American competence. Yet internal discussions repeatedly acknowledged that refugees would not return safely without confidence in the political order. The administration understood the connection between relief and legitimacy but resisted allowing that connection to govern alliance policy (State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971. , 2005, pp. docs. 62, 89, 104, 111-112, 147, 155; Assembly, 1971).

Economic assistance created a similar problem. Pakistan depended on external finance and on decisions by aid consortia and international institutions. World Bank assessments of conditions in the east were deeply pessimistic. Washington allowed some multilateral caution while resisting an explicitly punitive American posture. This preserved flexibility, but it weakened the message reaching Islamabad. Yahya could see that donors were alarmed without concluding that his privileged relationship with Nixon depended on a transfer from military rule to representative politics. The White House defended restraint through the language of influence. A public break, officials argued, would reduce the capacity of the United States to moderate Yahya, obtain United Nations access, prevent famine, or encourage eventual compromise. This was not an irrational proposition. Diplomacy often requires contact with abusive governments. The weakness lay in the absence of a test. Quiet influence became self-validating: because pressure might reduce access, the relationship had to be preserved; because the relationship was preserved, the lack of political progress could be answered with more time. The means of influence became an end in itself.

The Dacca dissent attacked precisely this separation. Archer Blood and his colleagues argued that silence was not neutral and that the United States was shielding the Pakistani government

from deserved political judgment. Ambassador Kenneth Keating in New Delhi pressed for stronger condemnation; South Asia specialists in Washington associated themselves with the dissent; and aid officials warned that relief would remain fragile without a credible settlement. These disagreements show that the administration did not lack a contemporary language of democratic legitimacy, civilian protection, or official responsibility. That language was present inside government, but it did not control the executive process (Blood, 2002; State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971. , 2005, pp. 19-20).

The policy also underestimated Bengali agency. East Pakistan was not an empty arena in which India, Pakistan, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States moved pieces. Bengali political organization, memories of repression, guerrilla mobilization, and the destruction of trust were altering what outcomes remained possible. By summer, a return to the pre-March order had become increasingly implausible. American officials sometimes conceded privately that the eastern wing might become independent, but official policy continued to search for formulas that would preserve a nominal Pakistani framework. That gap between private expectation and public purpose weakened quiet diplomacy and marginalized the political experiences that were making reunification impossible (State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971. , 2005; Raghavan, 2013; Tripathi, 2016; Schendel, 2020).

The August Indo-Soviet Treaty intensified the White House's strategic frame. Nixon and Kissinger feared that Moscow would benefit from Pakistan's breakup, China's encirclement, and the humiliation of an American partner. The treaty mattered, but it often functioned as confirmation of prior assumptions. India also sought Soviet support because it feared Chinese intervention and doubted American neutrality. American protection of Pakistan made Soviet backing more valuable to India; that cooperation then appeared in Washington as evidence that the original alignment was necessary. Strategic compartmentalization therefore interacted with a self-reinforcing security narrative. By autumn, the policy's internal contradiction was visible. Relief had not produced mass return, quiet diplomacy had not yielded a credible settlement, and border conflict was intensifying. Yet the administration remained reluctant to impose conditions that would publicly separate the United States from Yahya. Washington argued that the relationship was necessary to prevent war, but the relationship did not generate the political movement needed to reduce the pressures driving the region toward war.

From Civil Conflict to the December Tilt

Full-scale war transformed protected access into the overt tilt. Pakistan launched air strikes against Indian airfields in the west on 3 December 1971, and fighting expanded across both fronts. In the east, Indian forces and the Mukti Bahini rapidly overwhelmed Pakistani defenses. Geography was decisive: East Pakistan was isolated, surrounded on three sides, and beyond meaningful reinforcement. Washington's immediate objective therefore shifted. Preserving a united Pakistan was no longer realistic; preventing the conflict from widening into a more comprehensive defeat of West Pakistan became the priority (Sisson, 1990; Raghavan, 2013; State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971. , 2005, p. doc. 208).

Nixon and Kissinger interpreted the war through American credibility in a triangular global relationship. If India, supported by the Soviet Union, could dismember a U.S. partner without

resistance, they feared that China would question Washington's reliability and Moscow would conclude that détente could coexist with Soviet-backed regional expansion. This reasoning gave the war significance beyond South Asia. It also encouraged the administration to describe India as the principal aggressor, even though the interstate conflict had emerged from a civil war, mass displacement, months of cross-border escalation, and Pakistan's opening attacks in the west (Warner, 2005).

At the United Nations, the United States pressed cease-fire and withdrawal proposals that aligned more closely with Pakistan's immediate needs than with India's insistence that the political order in the east could not be restored. Washington suspended economic assistance to India and pursued intensive diplomacy with Moscow, Beijing, Islamabad, and New Delhi. Internal conflict sharpened. State Department officials worried about legality and the appearance of partiality, while White House officials complained that the department was weakening presidential instructions. The crisis became a struggle over who could define American neutrality. The Soviet dimension reinforced the tilt but did not fully determine it. Moscow supplied India and blocked or resisted United Nations measures that might have frozen the military situation before the eastern campaign was complete. From the White House, these actions looked like a coordinated challenge to U.S. and Chinese interests. Yet India had independent reasons to act: the refugee burden, Bengali resistance, seasonal military constraints, and fear of Chinese involvement. Treating India chiefly as a Soviet instrument obscured the reciprocal dynamic through which American alignment encouraged deeper Indian reliance on Moscow (Hayes, 2012; Raghavan, 2013).

The administration's consideration of military transfers through third countries shows how far alliance loyalty had moved beyond the public policy framework. Nixon and Kissinger discussed aircraft transfers involving Iran and Jordan even while officials warned that the retransfer of American-origin equipment raised legal difficulties. The operational impact of these efforts was limited and, in some instances, uncertain. Their historical importance lies in executive intent. After months of defending access to Yahya as a way to moderate him, the White House was prepared to test legal and bureaucratic boundaries in order to assist his government during the war (Archive, 2002, pp. docs. 28-29; State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XI: South Asia Crisis, 1971. , 2005, pp. docs. 250-255, 273-274). This was no longer humanitarianism running alongside neutrality. It was an effort to convert strategic sympathy into material support.

The movement of the USS Enterprise and Task Force 74 toward the Bay of Bengal became the most visible symbol of the tilt. Historians still debate the deployment's precise mix of purposes: evacuation planning, deterrence of wider Indian operations, signaling to Moscow, reassurance to Beijing and Islamabad, or some combination of these. Operational ambiguity did not prevent a clear political effect. At the moment of Bangladesh's emergence, the image that dominated regional memory was not American refugee relief but a nuclear-powered carrier associated with support for Pakistan. The deployment collapsed the compartments the administration had maintained for much of the year: humanitarian concern, asserted neutrality, and alliance signaling could no longer be presented as separate dimensions of policy.

A narrow assessment can identify limited outcomes that Nixon and Kissinger regarded as successes. India did not continue a prolonged campaign to occupy or dismantle West Pakistan, and a cease-fire followed in the western theater after the surrender in Dacca. The White House

believed that its pressure on Moscow and signaling to Beijing helped produce restraint. The evidence does not establish, however, that India intended the destruction of West Pakistan or that American actions were decisive in preventing it. India had achieved its principal objective in the east and possessed strong political, diplomatic, and military reasons to avoid indefinite expansion (Warner, 2005; Raghavan, 2013). The opening to China also survived the crisis, a fact that makes it harder to claim that unqualified support for Yahya through December was indispensable to rapprochement.

The policy's deepest failure was political rather than military. Pakistan's emergency was fundamentally a crisis of representation. No amount of diplomatic protection could recreate a legitimate federation after the central government rejected an electoral majority and attempted to rebuild authority through coercion. American support could preserve access to Yahya, reduce his international isolation, and signal loyalty. It could not restore trust between the two wings, create a credible constitution, or make military rule acceptable in the east. The alliance was therefore strongest in the realm least capable of solving the crisis: relations between executives. This is why regime-state substitution matters. Washington defended the government it knew while losing sight of the political state that government was dismantling.

Discussion: Alliance Loyalty, Legitimacy, and Human Rights

Strategic compartmentalization explains how the administration could recognize suffering without incorporating its causes into the definition of national interest. Humanitarian agencies addressed refugees and famine; strategic officials protected the China channel and the alliance; legal and congressional actors debated arms and aid; and the president retained authority over the final hierarchy of priorities. Each compartment contained a plausible institutional logic. The failure arose from their combination. No actor with decisive power was required to connect refugee return, civilian security, constitutional legitimacy, and alliance support in a single policy test.



Figure 3. Institutional compartments and the absence of an integrated policy test.

This mechanism is more precise than a charge of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy points to a gap between declared values and actual behavior. Compartmentalization shows how that gap was produced, administered, and made politically tolerable. Relief programmes allowed officials to act on compassion without revising the relationship with Yahya. Quiet diplomacy allowed the White House to claim influence without specifying measurable political results. Secrecy allowed the China initiative to justify restraint without exposing its assumptions to broad review. Because each element contained a defensible purpose, the overall policy could survive even when its

premises were failing. The case also exposes the ambiguity of alliance credibility. Nixon and Kissinger feared that distancing the United States from Yahya would damage Washington's reputation in Beijing and elsewhere. Yet credibility is not a single asset carried unchanged from one relationship to another. Supporting an allied leader whose domestic strategy was destroying his own state demonstrated personal loyalty, but not necessarily competent alliance management. A policy intended to prove reliability instead revealed an inability to distinguish among the security of a partner state, the survival of its government, and the authority of a particular ruler (Saunders, 2014; Kux, 2001).

Regime-state substitution is the article's second conceptual contribution. It occurs when a patron treats the interests and survival of an allied government as equivalent to the interests and survival of the allied state. In 1971, this substitution marginalized the elected majority in East Pakistan and recast demands for representative power as threats to order. Pakistan came to be imagined through the executive relationship Washington already possessed. Because Yahya was the trusted interlocutor, alternatives to Yahya appeared dangerous to Pakistan even when his policies were accelerating Pakistan's disintegration. The concept helps explain why alliance loyalty can become counterproductive: support intended to stabilize a partner may reduce the external costs of a ruler's refusal to compromise. A more politically integrated realist strategy did not require immediate recognition of Bangladesh, moral denunciation without diplomacy, or an abrupt end to all contact with Pakistan. It could have defined influence through specific and observable conditions: suspension of indiscriminate military operations, international humanitarian access, meaningful contact with elected Bengali representatives, and restrictions on military supply until progress occurred. Such measures might have failed. The point is not to assert a certain counterfactual but to identify options discussed within government that aligned available leverage with the sources of instability.

The human rights dimension must be framed without imposing the institutional language of a later decade on 1971. The Nixon administration did not operate under the more developed human rights legislation and advocacy networks that emerged during the 1970s (Moyn, 2010; Keys, 2014; Snyder, 2018). Even so, the relevant moral and legal claims were available at the time. Diplomats connected democratic suppression, atrocities, and American credibility; members of Congress challenged assistance to a repressive ally; and officials debated the meaning of continuing military supply. The historical issue is therefore not the absence of human rights language, but the decision to keep that language outside the core definition of strategic interest. The crisis also offers a caution about humanitarian governance. Assistance can be indispensable while still producing depoliticizing effects. When refugees are treated primarily as an emergency population rather than as citizens displaced by a conflict over representation and state violence, political claims are translated into technical needs. This does not mean that relief should be delayed until justice or settlement is achieved. It means that relief should not be mistaken for a complete policy when the conditions generating displacement remain protected from leverage (Barnett, 2011; Biswas, 2023). In 1971, the genuine success of humanitarian action made the strategic separation easier to defend.

Seen from Pakistan, the episode illustrates how external alliances may strengthen rulers while weakening incentives for political settlement. Diplomatic reassurance lowered the international cost of delay but did not alter the balance of legitimacy within the country. Responsibility for the crackdown and the refusal of constitutional transfer remained with Pakistani decision-makers;

American policy did not create the underlying conflict. Yet patron support shaped the environment in which those decisions were taken by signaling that strategic cooperation could shield the regime from the full diplomatic consequences of domestic coercion (Raja, 2012; Haqqani, 2013; Qasmi, 2023). The decision-making structure, therefore, belongs at the center of the explanation. Nixon and Kissinger's prejudices and personal loyalties mattered because a centralized system allowed those judgments to organize policy categories. Bureaucratic reports, humanitarian expertise, congressional criticism, and diplomatic dissent could document failure without compelling a reconsideration of the hierarchy itself. Strategic compartmentalization was both cognitive and institutional: it was a way of seeing the crisis and a way of distributing authority. That combination explains why contrary evidence accumulated without producing a corresponding policy change.

Conclusion

The Nixon administration's response to Pakistan's 1971 crisis was neither a simple victory of realism nor a moment in which humanitarian concern vanished. Suffering was visible, extensively reported, and met with substantial relief. At the same time, the White House separated that suffering from the political and military structures that produced it. Refugees became a humanitarian problem; Bengali self-government was cast as a threat to order; India was increasingly read through Soviet power; and Yahya remained a trusted strategic partner. Once these classifications were embedded in the policy process, continued support appeared prudent even as the assumptions behind it weakened.

The China channel was crucial in the spring and early summer. It explains why Nixon and Kissinger feared that public pressure might endanger a highly secret diplomatic opening. It does not fully explain why the pro-Yahya position persisted after Kissinger had reached Beijing and direct contact was underway. Personal gratitude, distrust of India, executive centralization, and regime-state substitution extended the policy. Strategic compartmentalization brings those factors into a single account and shows how humanitarian action could coexist with political complicity without being reduced to mere insincerity. The outcome revealed the limits of alliance loyalty. Nixon and Kissinger protected the relationship they knew—an executive relationship with Yahya—but could not preserve the political order on which a united Pakistan depended. The United States possessed leverage over arms, aid, diplomatic recognition, and international finance, yet it did not organize those instruments around measurable movement toward a representative settlement. No alternative policy can be shown to have guaranteed peace or unity. The point is more modest: access was preserved longer than legitimacy, and the alliance was not used to confront the state crisis it claimed to manage.

For the wider study of foreign policy, 1971 demonstrates that human rights and strategy are not separate substances that leaders simply place on opposite sides of a scale. Their relationship is produced through institutions, categories, and narratives of credibility. When causes and consequences are assigned to different compartments, governments can respond generously to suffering while protecting the relationships that help perpetuate it. Reconstructing that process clarifies not only why the Nixon administration tilted toward Pakistan, but why a policy designed to defend American influence ultimately exposed its political limits.

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