

## Press Release

### India's role in the 1971 Bangladesh war was result of New Delhi's grand strategy

December 10, 2021

New Delhi: "India's intervention in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was the first and only time since 1947 that India formulated and implemented a grand strategy," said Chandrashekhar Dasgupta, former Indian ambassador to China and author of the recently released book, *India and the Bangladesh Liberation War* (Juggernaut, 2021) at a Flagship Seminar organised by the Centre for Social and Economic Progress on December 9.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The seminar revisited the historic victory achieved by Bangladesh and India, addressing the questions that remain about New Delhi's aims and role in the war.

Moderated by **Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, the seminar featured **Chandrashekhar Dasgupta**, former Indian diplomat; **Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP, and former National Security Advisor; **Mohammed Ayoob**, University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations at James Madison College and the Department of Political Science, Michigan State University; **Sajjad Zahir**, Veteran, Bangladesh Liberation War, and Padma Shri Awardee. Rakesh Mohan, President, CSEP and member, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, made the opening remarks.

Introducing the book, Xavier said that it gives a bird's eye view of various elements that are brought together through political decisions -- diplomatic, military, economic and political factors. The conversation traversed the run-up to the war in 1971 – the Indira Gandhi-led government's decision that a hasty intervention in East Bengal would be counterproductive, efforts to garner international support, the final military campaign, and economic preparations to facilitate the return of refugees in the aftermath of the war.

Dasgupta said, "The central argument is that these military operations were only one part, albeit crucially important part, of a multi-dimensional grand strategy that encompassed defence, foreign and economic policy as well as management of home affairs."

Shivshankar Menon concurred with this view, saying that the lesson which emerges is how grand strategy "was a whole country effort – iterative, flexible and realistic". "This [India's grand strategy during the war] should put to stop all arguments that India does not have a strategic culture. This also shows an Indian approach to the use of force, that force is part of the larger political goals or national goals," he said.

Dasgupta said that in the run-up to the war, India was acutely aware of the fragility of the Pakistani state and its unity. "Many of our Pakistani friends believe that India had always wanted to break up Pakistan and we simply seized the opportunity that presented itself in 1971. The documentary evidence proves without a doubt that this would not be the case," he said.

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According to Dasgupta's account, after the December 1970 elections in Pakistan, India was pinning its hopes on the Awami League to lead the central government and foster democratic reforms. This was until March 25 when the Pakistani army launched Operation Searchlight and instituted a reign of terror. "At that point, we realised that the hopes for a democratic transition were not going to work out. We recognised that Bangladesh was going to emerge as an independent state," Dasgupta said. "And that the only sensible role that we could play, the role which was in our national interest, was to hasten the emergence of an independent and sovereign state of Bangladesh."

Ayooob added, "Despite all humanitarian considerations of the refugee problem, it was primarily the strategic and geopolitical reasons that motivated India's intervention." He stated that after the March 25 crackdown, K. Subrahmanyam termed Indian intervention in East Pakistan as the "opportunity of the century." Ayooob argued that, "East Pakistan, particularly if it existed in the form that it did, particularly in the event of a two-front war, could have posed a major security concern for New Delhi. An independent Bangladesh would not have."

Zahir, a veteran of the 1971 war, described the overwhelming support on the ground for a liberated Bangladesh. "Being a freedom fighter and a Pakistani-trained officer, I have been to the villages, with guerrilla villagers. All the villages were ours. Pakistanis, after the month of August, were not coming out of their bunkers. In the day time, they used to do some patrolling, evenings they used to take shelter in the big bunkers. They had a totally defensive mentality," he said. For his part in the war, India recently awarded Zahir a Padma Shri in 2021.

Ayooob emphasised that part of India's strategy was to demonstrate to the international community that the Indian government was acting with utmost restraint and first testing all options before taking the decision to go to war. An example of this was the major conference in July 1971 convened by Jayaprakash Narayan and funded by the Ministry of External Affairs. "The single focus of the conference was that India must act immediately. This is one example of the deliberate strategies to show how the government was under great pressure to act but did so with extreme restraint," he added.

Menon pointed out that 1971 was also "the first media war on global scale." "The 4pm daily briefing by MEA spokesperson actually began in 1971. The use of publicity to get public opinion on our side, using television to spread pictures, made it impossible for the other governments such as U.K. and France to support the U.S. and Pakistan in consortium meetings," he said.