

Politics and Strategy

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WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON—Ever since the Indo-Pakistani war, there has been considerable doubt here about the wisdom of President Nixon's military strategy in backing Pakistan, but there should be little doubt about the domestic political strategy he had in mind when he sided with Pakistan and China against India and the Soviet Union.

He wants to be in a position to campaign for re-election on the proposition that he is the man who reduced the American Expeditionary Force in Vietnam from 550,000 to 40,000, who brought China out of isolation and established a line of communication to a quarter of the human race, who defused the Berlin problem and began the process of negotiating the control of strategic nuclear weapons. Nobody understands the potential power of this argument as well as his Democratic opponents.

The Nixon "tilt"—to use the latest White House jargon—is not toward Pakistan but toward Peking. The "China opening" is the key to his bid for re-election as "a man of peace," and according to those who think they understand his diplomacy in the Indo-Pakistani crisis, he was determined not to oppose Pakistan and risk the possibility that China would call off his Feb. 21 trip to Peking.

Nobody in authority here will admit it publicly, but privately officials concede that there was a conflict between Mr. Nixon's world military strategy and his domestic campaign strategy, and the considerations of Presidential politics prevailed.

In terms of the world strategic struggle for bases, allies and control of the seas, there was a powerful case to be made for Washington backing India. Aside from the obvious point that India is the most populous democracy in the world, and Pakistan a weak dictatorship, India dominates the sea routes between Japan and the oil fields of the Middle East, which are vital to Japan's spectacular economy and which, on

present official calculations here, will be supplying between 30 and 35 per cent of the U.S. petroleum products by 1980.

Nobody knows this better than the Soviet Union. Moscow learned in the Cuban missile crisis that it could not bring its influence to bear all over the world without a vastly expanded navy.

Long before the Indo-Pakistani war, the Soviet Union had built a naval base for India at Visakhapatnam on the Bay of Bengal, and one of the military arguments in Washington for avoiding an open break with India was that India was obviously going to win with the military and diplomatic aid of the U.S.S.R., which would then be seeking access to the naval base at Visakhapatnam, or failing that, offering much needed aid to Bangladesh in return for military facilities at Chittagong, the new nation's port, also on the Bay of Bengal.

No doubt there were many other considerations in the President's decision to back Pakistan. Nothing is ever quite so simple as a choice between a good military strategy and a good Presidential campaign strategy. The President had personal ties to the Pakistani leaders and to the leaders of the other Muslim countries, which happen to control much of the oil of the Middle East, and while he understood the pressure of the Bangladesh refugees on India, he did not think this justified India's open aggression across the Pakistani borders.

Nevertheless, with all the different pressures or military strategy and political campaign strategy tugging him in opposite directions, the belief of well-informed men here is that the short-range political advantages of protecting the China trip and the possibility of reaching at least a limited accommodation with China were decisive with Mr. Nixon.

Aside from politics, his argument is that reaching even the beginnings of an understanding with China may do more to avoid conflict in the Pacific than anything else, and if the cost of this is a temporary squabble with India and the establishment of Soviet naval and air power in the Bay of Bengal, a U.S.-China accommodation may be worth it.

This of course is one of the weaknesses of dramatic diplomacy and spectacular summit meetings set long in advance. The President had bet so much on the Peking trip that he could not easily risk losing it. And once he protected it by opposing India and siding with Peking, he created new problems with Japan and Korea.

Here, for example, despite Mr. Nixon's personal assurances, are President Chung Hee Park of Korea saying that he will watch the Nixon Peking visit "with deep concern," and the Japanese Ambassador to the United States, Nobuhiko Ushiba, warning that Mr. Nixon's trip might be "the beginning of a process of unraveling our [U.S.-Japanese] mutual security in the Far East."

These fears, however, though natural, are probably groundless. Mr. Nixon is not going to Peking to sell out the Japanese or the Koreans or the Chinese Nationalists, but to create an atmosphere of conciliation, and through it, the basis for his own re-election.

It is silly to accuse him of acting against India because he was irritated by Prime Minister Gandhi or grateful to the Pakistani government for slipping Henry Kissinger into China. He has much larger objectives in view. He doesn't want to enhance Soviet naval and air power across the oil routes to Japan, or increase Moscow's ability to blockade U.S. energy supplies at the other end of the world, but these are long-range considerations. The re-election campaign is much closer to hand, and the China trip will look good on satellite television from the Forbidden City, even if it settles nothing at all.