Kitchen Diplomacy

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Dec. 10—In the United States the President makes foreign policy. That understanding is fundamental to the constitutional system. In the end the American voice will be heard clearly only when he speaks.

But there are great dangers in Presidential policy-making, one of them that the process of decision may be too closely held, too personal. A striking example of this danger is afforded by President Nixon's policy in the Indo-Pakistan dispute.

Mr. Nixon is a committed supporter of Pakistan. The extent of that commitment, if anyone doubted it, was made clear when in receiving a new Pakistani Ambassador he publicly welcomed "the efforts of President Yahya Khan to move to reduce tensions in the subcontinent." That of a man whose forces in the last eight months have cold-bloodedly murdered thousands of innocent civilians and forced millions to flee because of their race—the most savage pogrom the world has seen in many years.

Among those who know or care about the Indian subcontinent, American policy has evoked widespread incredulity. That may rest on moral

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grounds, as in the case of a former American official in Pakistan who wrote Mr. Nixon to say that he could not square the policy with "my life as an American." Or the reaction may be as hard-boiled as that of The Economist of London, which in an article highly critical of India said, "It is a mystery why the Americans should have chosen to climb so ostentatiously on board the sinking Pakistani ship."

The President must have recognized that his policy had gone to a self-defeating extreme when he sent a White House aide out to explain it all to the press. There was a defensive tone to what this unidentified man said. We still thought India was a great democracy, he said, and a stanch friend. But she had precipitately broken up secret American efforts to bring President Yahya to a political settlement with the Bengali rebels—efforts that had been near success.

Is it conceivable that the White House official believed that explanation as he gave it? Sincerity must be assumed, but it would really be worrisome if a serious man believed such a fantasy as the idea of an imminent political agreement being aborted by India.

First, there never has been any realistic chance of a settlement with the Bengalis unless Yahya freed their leader, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, and talked with him. The informed men in the State Department, the British Foreign Office and everywhere else knew that. But Yahya kept him imprisoned and put him on secret trial for his life.

Second, according to qualified American sources, Yahya in his alleged concessions had not gone near the degree of autonomy for East Pakistan that his own brutal repression had made the inescapable price for a settlement. He had talked only of a kind of federalism, with the central Government keeping the main powers of finance, foreign affairs and defense. And what concessions there were may have been encouraged by fear of Indian military action.

Third, Mr. Nixon's own State Department and other experts—not surprisingly in the circumstances—were skeptical of the prospects for those secret talks. It was even less of a surprise that the Indians were losing patience, fearing that the talks were just a device to let the Pakistan Army continue its repressions in the east indefinitely and leave the burden of ten million refugees on India.

Fourth, the Indians had reason to doubt the appropriateness of Richard Nixon as a mediator, for they had observed in him no sign of sensitivity to the torment of millions. There are times for quiet diplomacy, but to remain silent in the face of horror on that scale is too quiet.

Now there was no great mystery to these factors; certainly they were well known to the President's chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger. Why, then, did Mr. Nixon react so intemperately, so emotionally on the side of Pakistan when hostilities began?

The emotion suggests that the President felt himself involved—and injured—on a very personal level. It is well known that Mr. Nixon has long liked and respected Yahya Khan. On the other hand, he is said to have found Mrs. Indira Gandhi cold and didactic. In the words of one close observer, "This was a matter of personal chemistry."

Beyond that, the President had invested his own political capital in the effort to heal the Pakistani division. However remote in fact, he must have thought he had a chance to pull off a diplomatic coup and been overcome by pique at its failure. Then, too, there was the threat that an Indo-Pakistani war might pose to his boldest diplomatic venture, the trip to Peking.

What all this shows is the risk of over-personalization when a President takes to himself too much of the process of foreign policy-making. The Nixon-Kissinger operation works well in important ways, avoiding the deadening bureaucracy of the State Department. But it is quite wrong when it allows the policy of a great power to be so sharply affected by personal feeling without the restraints of time and reflection that a system provides.