

James Reston

China and the '72 Race-- Tilt!

Washington

EVER SINCE the Indian-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.

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.



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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 Indian - Pakistani crisis, he was determined not to oppose Pakistan and risk the possibility that China would call off his February 21 trip to Peking.

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NOBODY IN authority here will admit it publicly, but privately officials concede that there was a conflict between 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.

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, and has been building its naval power ever since. For example, Moscow now has over 200 attack submarines to 94 for the United States, but we still have more nuclear subs than the Soviet Union.

Long before the Indian - 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 USSR, 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.

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NEVERTHELESS, with all the different pressures of 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 were decisive with 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.

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 his allies in Japan and Korea.

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. Re-election is much closer at hand and the China trip will look good on satellite television from the Forbidden City even if it solves nothing at all.

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