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Kishan S Rana July 30, 2013

Indo-Pak relations, from the files

A monumental work laying out the key documents on Indo-Pak relations contains both insights and material for many PhD dissertations

Avtar Singh Bhasin, formerly of the historical division of the ministry of external affairs, has compiled a monumental work laying out all the key documents available in India (and some others) on the country's most convoluted relationship in its neighbourhood. This work caps his previous archival collections covering relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, besides his annual compilations of foreign affairs documents. The production of these tomes is a tribute to his tenacity and industry, for which current and future scholars should be grateful. These documents would have surely been lost to neglect and decay but for Mr Bhasin's efforts, which were supported by high-ranking officials. This publication marks new thinking in the Indian external affairs establishment on openness and respect for scholarship. This trend coexists with remnants of the external affairs ministry's notions that it should be an information monopolist, but it always takes time to reverse old ways. Consider this: many of the documents opened up here bear the highest security classification of "Top Secret". Researchers now have a surfeit of original material; it will take a while to digest the lavish feast that Mr Bhasin presents. Let me focus this review on selections from the first four volumes, covering India-Pakistan political relations from 1947 to 1989. What new insights are offered? Mr Bhasin points out in his 150-page introduction that, contrary to popular belief, the 1971 Indo-Soviet treaty resulted from Moscow's persistent efforts and was not an Indian initiative. On June 5, 1971, following his farewell discussion with then Soviet defence minister, Marshal A A Grechko, ambassador D P Dhar wrote from Moscow to India's foreign secretary, T N Kaul: "[I] wonder if we are being wise in reacting in a lukewarm manner to the Soviet offer of unequivocal help to us... I am not sure whether the conclusion of a treaty in the form in which it was discussed in the year 1969 would satisfy the needs of the present situation. Perhaps an exchange of letters ... would be an equally good substitute... Or again we could think of a secret document..." (Document 0588, volume III, pages 1,385-6). Of course, matters moved rapidly thereafter, which has been well-documented here, and the Indo-Soviet treaty was signed on August 9, 1971. We also find evidence of Pakistan's efforts, on the eve of the Simla conference in July 1972, to tempt India with the prospect of conversion of the ceasefire line in Kashmir into a permanent international frontier. That was the Soviet analysis of the visit that Aziz Ahmad, then Pakistan's foreign secretary, paid to Moscow just days before the Simla conference, at the end of June 1972 (Document 0703, volume III, pages 1,685-90). A "Top Secret" Soviet memorandum from former USSR ambassador N Pegov to then external affairs minister Swaran Singh in New Delhi on June 27, 1972, a day before the Simla conference, declared: "...the party's pledges not to use force and not to intervene into each other's domestic affairs, etc. Talks with A Ahmad produced an impression that [Zulfikar Ali] Bhutto is ready to achieve ultimately in principle an agreement on this matter already in Simla on the condition that such agreement would remain strictly secret for some time, until the president paves the way in Pakistan for making this agreement public". This memorandum adds: "A Ahmad made to understand that Bhutto is ready, in principle, to consider the possibility of converting the ceasefire line into the permanent international frontier." We

may wonder how much this wishful Soviet assessment played a role in Indira Gandhi's decision on the night of July 2, when she met Bhutto, without aides, and accepted whatever promise or assurance she received from him. Those key elements of Simla remain hidden, since there is no record of that crucial meeting. Also, in the course of a discussion in Bonn in 1994, P N Dhar, an important participant at Simla, told me that his own account of what transpired at Simla had been written out but would be released only after his death. Alas, even after the death in July 2012 of this fine public figure, that personal narrative has not emerged. [REDACTED] figure in this collection just once, through a note I recorded as a PMO official on 1982, when the departing Pakistan high commissioner, Abdul Sattar, called on Indira Gandhi. Mr Sattar wanted from Gandhi a word of praise; she was loath to being manoeuvred. This note reads: "[The PM said] ... it was high time that we put an end to confrontation. She was always a little sad to hear comments in Pakistan that she had not reconciled herself to the creation of Pakistan. Here in India she was often blamed for the opposite." When Mr Sattar waxed eloquent on his efforts to rectify distorted comments in the Pakistani press about India, and his help to Indian journalists to visit his country, Gandhi wryly observed: "...despite this there were frequent press statements, and also statements by leaders". Unusually, Mr Sattar brought his wife to that meeting, but no note keeper. I wonder how my three-page note on that conversation matches his report to Islamabad. [REDACTED] Most of the documents in this collection are of Indian origin, naturally. But one finds a few surprises, the odd Pakistan document - sourced from heaven knows where - and some other papers, such as the record of Bhutto's conversation with then US president, Richard Nixon, on September 18, 1973, clearly a US document that reached India from some unspecified source (Document 0804, volume III, pages 2,189-2,200). This collection brings out a need for deeper comparative analysis, in which scholars collate material from diverse sources, including oral history accounts. Mr Bhasin's collection provides an important head start, providing raw material for dozens of PhD dissertations.

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INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS 1947-2007

A Documentary Study

Avtar Singh Bhasin

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