When Soviet PM almost barred India from crossing border

India and Bangladesh are now celebrating the events of 1971 that marked the birth of Bangladesh. It was also a period when the world order was witnessing tumultuous changes, with US President Richard Nixon virtually seeking an alliance with China’s Communist Party czar Mao Zedong, primarily to curb and contain communist Soviet Union.

Despite territorial and other differences, India had no interest in escalating tensions with Beijing. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was then celebrating her huge electoral victory in India, and looking forward to peace and economic development. What India had not envisaged was that it would get drawn into a fratricidal conflict between the eastern and western halves of Pakistan, resulting in the inflow of over 10 million refugees from East Pakistan.

PM Gandhi moved distributors in the days preceding the conflict to ensure Soviet support at a time when Nixon was not too friendly. But this was easier said than done. At her meetings in Moscow in October, Soviet Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and President Podgorny understood India’s position that it could not be expected to play host to 10 million refugees for any length of time, but Prime Minister Kosygin told Indian correspondents that any talk of India crossing the border into Bangladesh, in an effort to facilitate the return of refugees, was unacceptable.

Kosygin had played a key role in the Tashkent Agreement that ended the 1965 war and was fully versed with India-Pakistan relations. He was also keen to improve relations with the US that would help the rather fragile USSR economy. The controversies arising from his remarks kept members of the Indian and Soviet delegations working for hours past midnight as there were serious concerns in India about his comments becoming public. This compelled Kosygin to withdraw his earlier comments when he met Indian correspondents at the Moscow airport during Mrs Gandhi’s departure. It was clear that his Politburo comrades, including Brezhnev and Podgorny, did not accept his views. Fully appreciating the seriousness of the situation, the Indian press blocked out any reference to Kosygin’s ill-advised comments after they heard his explanation that he had been misinterpreted.

The 1971 Bangladesh conflict saw a new pattern of alliances in which China, the US and some “non-aligned” countries backed Pakistan and moved Security Council resolutions against India. However, the UK and France – major US allies – had little sympathy for the Pakistani cause. Most importantly, the Soviet Union vetoed American-backed resolutions seeking a cease-fire and Indian withdrawal, even as the Pakistan army was preparing to surrender in Bangladesh. There were then lobbies in New Delhi ready to shift armed forces and airpower in Bangladesh to the west, as victory in the east was around the corner. It was, however, made clear that India had no intention of doing so. Going through the records of what transpired in the talks, it was clear that PM Gandhi had played her cards skilfully in her talks in Moscow, and obtained the full support of the Soviet leadership. It was only appropriate and statesmanlike of defence minister Rajiv Singh to have acknowledged this publicly in a meeting he addressed in Bengaluru last month.

We had a fair idea of what was transpiring in the Pakistan embassy in Moscow and a particular interest in seeing how their two Bangladeshi officials, counsellor Abdus Kibria, who was dealing with economic issues, and the young first secretary Reazul Hussain from the foreign office, would react to the creation of Bangladesh. Both officials contacted us just after the conflict ended, stating their wish to leave the Pakistan embassy. The Soviets cooperated with us on this matter too and granted them stay. Both were involved in the setting up of a new Bangladesh embassy when the first Bangladesh ambassador arrived.

Parthasarathy was a diplomat with the Indian embassy in Moscow during the 1971 war.