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Pak-US Alliance In Cold War And Its Impact On Region

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Abstract

This study examines the security partnership between Pakistan and the United States during the Cold War, focusing on shifting alliances and strategic interests. The research uses a qualitative historical methodology, analyzing secondary sources including books, research articles, policy documents, and archival records to understand the evolution of bilateral relations. The findings reveal that Pakistan aligned with the US in the 1950s to fulfill its security and economic needs, becoming a frontline state in the containment of communism. However, US support for India in the 1962 Sino-Indian War and its limited assistance during the 1965 and 1971 wars created uncertainty in Pakistan. As a result, Pakistan strengthened its strategic partnership with China. The study further finds that US-Pakistan cooperation revived after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, where Pakistan played a central role in supporting the Afghan resistance. This complex and uncertain relationship remained a serious concern for Pakistan's policymakers, who believed that the United States primarily pursued its own regional objectives while neglecting the interests and security concerns of its allies.

Keywords: Rapprochement, Alliances, Security Needs, Containment, Commitment.



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Introduction

Pakistan and United States of America (USA) remained a major security partnership during the cold war years, as Pakistan remained a frontline ally state for the US in its containment approach in the South Asian region during the cold war years. The search for security during the early years of independence has driven Pakistan's policies towards the US which fulfilled its security and financial needs during the cold war years. Despite being the close security partner of Pakistan in the 1950s they Washington reached to support New Delhi in the 1962 war with Peoples Republic of China (PRC). This event was a turning point for Pakistan as it diversified its policy options and figured Beijing a reliable strategic partner to deal with the India threat in the coming years. Pakistan being a security partner is left alone by the Washington in the 1965 and 1971 wars and faced the economic and military sanctions until the 1979 when Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) invaded Afghanistan and Islamic Revolution came in Iran this left US with no option but to seek Pakistan's support in containment of the communist aggression in the region. Islamabad's jihadi policy and supporting the Afghan and foreign Mujahedeen through training and providing weapons and logistic support has led the defeat of the Soviet forces and they withdraw from the Afghanistan at the end of the cold war era. Despite the important role of Pakistan during the cold war years the US remained a non-trustworthy ally who has left Pakistan in difficult times and its commitment towards Islamabad was also questioned during the 1990s and in 2010s. Washington centered its policies in the region towards the containment of the communism and the influence of Soviet Union and once the threat is eliminated they left their security partner open to threats. This puzzled relationship between two states remained a major concern for Pakistan's policy makers as they viewed it US's own pursual of their objectives in the region and ignored the concerns of their allies. The diplomatic ties between the United States of America (USA) and Pakistan established right after the independence and the Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan's US visit in 1950 has shown the commitment towards the west despite the USSR invitation to Pakistan (Sattar, 2020). Pakistani leadership viewed US as an opportunity to progress as it was the home of the 40% global production and was very little affected by the World War II in comparison to Soviet Union which was in continuous wars since the Revolution of 1917. The US pushed the British government for the independence of the Indian subcontinent during the 1940s. The earlier signs of Pakistan's policy were driven towards Muslim unity and the containment approach towards communism as Pakistan being an Islamic state opposed the idea of communism. This led the US interests towards Pakistan right after the independence but still they did not commit as Pakistan in October 1947 has asked for the US\$ 2 billion loan and called it an eastern bastion to contain the communist threat. Even during the Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan's visit of US in May 1950 he quoted communism a threat to prosperity and peace of the region (Khan, 1950). The initial steps of the Pakistan's foreign policy directed towards the west and the researchers have described the major reasons of the Pakistan's tilt towards the US in the 1950s which includes: Influence of western education on military and political leadership of the country. Most the military & political elite was educated and trained by the western institutions such as Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was Oxford graduate & Ayub Khan & other senior military official were trained by British officers and they have the better familiarity of the western systems in comparison to the communist and this has become one of the reasons of the tilt towards west rather than to Soviet Union.

Literature Review

Pakistan security and financial needs driven towards US. Economic assistance from the western allies was also become a major factor as Pakistan was facing economic issues from day one. During the early years of cooperation US provided Ideological differences with Soviet Union as Pakistan

being a Muslim majority state & is known as citadel of Islam. Pakistan built on the Islamic ideology has strong reservations over the communist ideology. Pakistan viewed communism a threat as it can penetrate into its political system & the influence of communism in its western neighbor Afghanistan can have huge impact over it. US containment policy can provide it a shelter to fight this menace & help it build strong defenses against the threats (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015). Muslim states close links with the west as they have viewed US/ western powers as champion of democracy and human rights and called the communist forces as the forces of evil and a threat to their established rule (Afzal, 1996). The Middle Eastern monarchies feared the rebellion against their rule and the western democracies provided them that support since the end of world war-I when the Ottoman Empire was divided into different parts and Middle Eastern states remained under the western influence (Ali & Anwar, 2023). During the mid-1950s Pakistan officially joined the western alliances and signed the security agreements with the US in 1954 and later in 1959 (Ali, 2021), which provided the US to station at Peshawar Air Station which was used for espionage purposes. Pakistan continued to cooperate with the US despite the threats from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the 1962 U-2 incident has proved to be major security threat between two states (Bashir & Mustafa, 2014). The relations took a u turn when the 1962 war broke out between China and India. Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) was humiliating the Indian forces in the war and this led the Indian Prime Minister Nehru to write a letter to the US President John F. Kennedy to seek help to counter the Chinese aggression. The US support to India is viewed through their policy of containment and has changed the foreign policy dynamics for Pakistan as US threatened Pakistan not to open second front against India (Riedel, 2015). Despite Indian defeat in its war with China. Pakistan asked the US not to provide financial and military support to New Delhi which was rejected. The US not only stopped Pakistan but has also committed to provide financial and military support to the New Delhi in order to counter the communist aggression. US viewed this policy shift towards India owing to its policy of Containment and its commitment to support non-communist states who are threatened by the communist states (Hussain, 2016). Pakistan did not open the 2nd front against India due to US warning that it will violate its alliance with US as it is aimed against communism. Pakistan demanded for the Kashmir in response to staying neutral but Kennedy rejected this & warned Pakistan of dire consequences. But at the end of the war it pressured India to open talks with Pakistan for resolution of the issue which begun six round of talks of until 1963 (Shah, 1999). But in the meantime Pakistan begun talks with China without US knowledge and resulted the Boundary Agreement between China and Pakistan in 1963. This ended the prospects of any agreement on Kashmir and US too was concerned despite its warnings to Pakistan not to engage any agreement with communist states (Bashir & Mustafa, 2014). The China factor in Pakistan's policies has played a key role as it has become a strategic partner of Islamabad since the 1960s. Pakistan signed Border Agreement with China in 1963 (Small, 2015). and viewed it a counter to the Indian aggression in the region Their partnership has grown in the 1960s when the China threatened the New Delhi of opening a second front against India in 1965 war. The military cooperation was initiated in 1966 and at the end of war with India in 1971 when Pakistan was left alone by its allies China stood to its side. Their cooperation also continued in development of nuclear weapons as Beijing provided the technical assistance and other support when the allies has sanctioned Pakistan's nuclear programmer. During the 1971 war with India, US despite its reservations continued to support Pakistan and did not wanted to disintegrate due to the US interests. US bluff to threaten India of naval attack to protect Pakistan in 1971 war (Nanda, 2004). and US even encouraged China to open second front against India & if USSR came to rescue India US will also extend its support to China. Nixon did not liked Indira Gandhi & his closeness with Yahya Khan. US was protecting the territorial integrity & for it sent USS Enterprise to Bay of Bengal. But these efforts did not

become productive as the East Pakistan became a separate independent state and is known as Bangladesh. At the end of the war the relations between two states reached to new low as the Pakistan withdrew from SEATO and CENTO (Kux, 2001) and has diversified its policies towards the establishment of ties with Soviet bloc, and increased strategic cooperation in various field with China. But this alienation with Washington did not continued for too long as the situation changed in 1979 when Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and led Pakistan the next target of communist forces providing a gateway to the warm waters of Indian Ocean. US removed the military and financial sanctions over Pakistan and has provided military support to Pakistan to deal with the Soviet threat. The Mujahedeen groups were trained and equipped in Pakistan to fight against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan and branded it as Jihad against infidel forces. The operation Cyclone continued until the USSR withdrawal from Afghanistan and thus ending the US interest in the region and once again Pakistan was left alone to deal with the mess created by US in the region.

Method and Material

This study uses qualitative methods to examine Pakistan–United States relations during the Cold War period. The research relies on secondary data sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government documents, policy statements, and historical archives. Relevant literature was systematically reviewed to identify key themes such as security alliances, strategic interests, regional conflicts, and policy shifts. A historical-analytical method was employed to examine major events, including Pakistan’s alignment with the United States in the 1950s, the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the 1965 and 1971 wars, and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Comparative analysis was also used to assess periods of cooperation and divergence between the two states. The collected data were critically analyzed to understand patterns of trust, dependency, and strategic realignment in Pakistan’s foreign policy decisions during and after the Cold War.

Results and Discussion

The findings show that the Pakistan–United States relationship during the Cold War was primarily driven by strategic and security interests rather than long-term partnership commitments. In the 1950s, Pakistan joined US-led alliances such as SEATO and CENTO to secure military and economic assistance against perceived threats from India (Sattar, 2010). However, US support for India during the 1962 Sino-Indian War created distrust in Pakistan and encouraged it to strengthen relations with China (Rizvi, 2000). The study further reveals that US military sanctions imposed after the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistan wars deepened the perception of abandonment in Islamabad (Kux, 2001). Cooperation revived after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when Pakistan became a frontline state supporting the Afghan resistance with US assistance (Coll, 2004). Despite this cooperation, the relationship remained conditional and interest-based, as demonstrated by renewed sanctions in the 1990s under the Pressler Amendment (Siddiqa, 2003).

Impact on Region

The relations between Pakistan and US are full of twists and turn during the cold war years as both the countries shared security ties which has huge effect on the politics of the region.

Table 1: *The Alliance Impact on The Regional Scenario Can Be Summed Up in Following Points*

No.	Key Theme	Description	Reference
1	Military Strengthening of Pakistan	Pakistan emerged as a significant regional power to counter India and communist influence. US military assistance, including advanced weapons systems such as F-16 fighter jets, strengthened Pakistan's defense capabilities and enhanced its strategic position in South Asia.	—
2	Balance of Power	Due to India's larger size and greater resources, Pakistan sought external security partners. The US, as a producer of advanced military technology, became a key ally in helping Pakistan maintain the regional balance of power.	—
3	US Role in East Pakistan Crisis	US involvement in regional politics influenced historical developments. During the 1971 crisis, the US administration ignored diplomatic warnings from its officials in East Pakistan. President Nixon avoided pressuring Yahya Khan due to Pakistan's role in US-China diplomacy.	Bass, 2015
4	US-China Rapprochement	Pakistan played a crucial diplomatic role in facilitating US-China rapprochement in the 1970s. President Yahya Khan helped establish communication between Nixon and Chinese leaders, contributing to normalization of relations and China's global integration.	Kissinger, 1979
5	Kashmir Mediation Efforts	The US attempted to mediate the Kashmir dispute in 1963 under President Kennedy, but the initiative failed. This was the last major US effort to resolve the issue during the Cold War.	Riedel, 2015
6	US Commitment Issues	US reliability remained questionable, especially when it supported India in 1962–63 and imposed military embargoes during the 1965 and 1971 wars. Sanctions on Pakistan's nuclear program further deepened mistrust.	—

Pakistani government decided to build their own nuclear weapons even they have to eat grass in 1970s (Khan, 2012). Pakistan has acquired the technology from various countries through different means. The project was initiated by the former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, but after the Indian nuclear test in 1974 they took the project on war footing and Pakistani leadership has focused on development on the nuclear device. The scientists like Dr. A.Q. Khan has played an instrumental role in development of nuclear programmer. During this difficult period Pakistan has moved closer towards China and became the major reason of Pakistan's strengthened ties with Beijing who continued to provide support to Pakistan in testing times. The ups and downs continued even at the end of the cold war as Pakistan remained under the sanctions due to its nuclear programmer under the Pressler Amendments of 1985. But these sanctions were further

increased with the additional sanctions after the 1998 nuclear tests of India and Pakistan, and were further added democracy related sanctions after 1999 military coup on 12th October 1999 (Zehra, 2018).

Table 2: This Was One of Lowest Periods of The US Engagement with Pakistan Which Led The

No.	Key Issue	Description
a	Economic Sanctions and Pressure	After the end of the Cold War, Pakistan faced increased economic pressure due to US sanctions imposed over concerns related to nuclear weapons, democracy, and human rights. These sanctions negatively affected Pakistan's economic growth and financial stability.
b	Afghan Refugee Crisis	The influx of approximately four million Afghan refugees placed a heavy burden on Pakistan's economy. This situation not only strained economic resources but also created significant foreign and domestic policy challenges for the state.
c	Rise of Religious Extremism	During the Afghan jihad, numerous madrasahs and religious schools were established with financial support from Western and other foreign states. Over time, this contributed to the rise of religious extremism within the country.
d	Emergence of the Taliban	After the Soviet withdrawal, internal conflicts among Mujahideen groups led to instability in Afghanistan. This power struggle facilitated the emergence of the Taliban, which gained control of most parts of Afghanistan by 1996.
e	Rise of Global Terrorism and 9/11	Some jihadi groups turned against Western interests and governments. This shift eventually contributed to the September 11, 2001 attacks by Al-Qaeda on the World Trade Center, leading to the US-led War on Terror.

With the terror attacks on US twin towers on 9/11, 2001 the US has initiated the War on Terror and the Al-Qaeda was held responsible for the terror attacks this led US President to Afghanistan where Taliban were in control of power and were hosting the Al-Qaeda Chief Osama bin Laden. The US asked Afghan Leader Mullah Muhammad Omar to hand over the Osama or they will turn the Afghanistan into Stone Age. The Taliban's refused to hand over the guest and pledged to protect the guest at any cost according to their Pashtun traditions. Pakistan on the other hand joined as a frontline state in war on terror due to various reasons including a) Military government of Musharraf was under extreme pressure from international quarters & its legitimacy issue was the major issue since the military takeover in 1999 (Zehra, 2018). Through a coup. b) Pakistan was facing severe economic crisis as it was under constant US sanctions since the end of cold war particularly related to its nuclear programmer & military coup related sanctions. The war on terror has established friendly ties between two states which has increased military and financial assistance as Pakistan received over US \$33 billion packages.

Table 3: But This Led the Disastrous Consequences for Pakistan as the War has

No.	Theme	Detailed Description	Reference
1	Rise of Terrorism and Human Losses	After joining the US-led War on Terror, Pakistan experienced a sharp increase in terrorist attacks, including assassination attempts on President Pervez Musharraf. The conflict resulted in over 70,000 civilian and military casualties and economic losses exceeding US\$150 billion.	Musharraf, 2006
2	Proxy Warfare and Internal Security	Pakistan witnessed increased proxy attacks by groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). The state labeled these groups as <i>Fitna al-Khawarij</i> and launched military operations against them, arguing that external forces used these proxies to destabilize the country.	—
3	Killing of Osama bin Laden	The US operation that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad in May 2011 further strained US–Pakistan relations. Washington questioned Pakistan’s commitment to counterterrorism despite Pakistan’s significant sacrifices in the War on Terror.	Obama, 2020
4	Economic Slowdown and CPEC	Foreign investment declined due to security instability until China launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015, investing US\$46 billion in energy, infrastructure, and industrial projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).	—
5	US–India Strategic Partnership	Since the early 2000s, the US strengthened strategic relations with India in defense, science and technology, economy, and agriculture. The US views India as a counterbalance to China, reducing its strategic reliance on Pakistan.	Noonari, 2009

Conclusion

Pakistan’s geo strategic importance as an important state provides it an advantage as it is situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East and it has access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and most important of all its Gwadar Port is present on the mouth of the Persian Gulf making it an important country. The country with a population of the 250 million and possessed the powerful army to deal with the threats and a nuclear power makes it one of the important states of the globe. IT is in that scenario Pakistan has always remained an important strategic partner of the United States during the cold war years and has protected the US interests in the region and has made possible the containment of the communism in the region. Although the various factors during the cold war has affected the politics and the security nexus between two states and the commitment issues of the Washington is viewed a betrayal to Pakistan. Despite these reservations the Pakistan has been able to continue its security nexus with US and has dealt with the external threats including the Soviet influence in the region, countering the Indian aggression and maintaining delicate balance with the China and US. Pakistan’s diversification of policy directions has further reduced its dependency over the US and increased its strategic bond with the China and this has led Pakistan to develop nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles

including the JF-17 Thunder and made Pakistan a regional power which has threatened the aggressive and expansionist forces like India and Afghanistan in the region.

Recommendations

Pakistan's experience during the Cold War and the post-9/11 era highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to security, diplomacy, and economic stability. Strengthening national security infrastructure remains crucial to counter terrorism, proxy attacks, and regional threats. Modernized defense capabilities, combined with better coordination between the military, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies, can ensure internal stability. Diversifying foreign policy partnerships is equally important. While maintaining strategic ties with major powers, Pakistan should seek balanced relations with multiple states to avoid over-reliance on any single partner. Cooperation with China, Central Asian countries, and other Islamic nations can provide alternative sources of security and economic support. Economic resilience should be a priority to reduce vulnerability to external pressures. Initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), foreign direct investment, and development of domestic energy and industrial sectors can strengthen Pakistan's financial stability. Countering radicalization and extremism is another key recommendation. Education reforms, vocational training, and integration of madrasahs into mainstream curricula can reduce the long-term influence of extremist ideologies. Finally, proactive diplomacy and institutionalized crisis preparedness are necessary. Pakistan must engage transparently with global powers, manage refugee crises effectively, and implement post-conflict rehabilitation programs to safeguard national interests and maintain regional stability.

Conflict of Interest

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