

***HELD HOSTAGE BY THE COLD WAR:
FOUNDATION OF PAKISTAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS***

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The record of history shows that Pakistan's perplexing bilateral relations with the Soviet Union and Russia, replete with mistrust, antagonism and hostility, were not rooted in any clash of ideologies but in Pakistan's quest for security and economic well-being as a hostage of the Cold War. The communist ideology as such, and the concomitant Godless atheism, never prevented China, which has been, and continues to be, an avowed communist country, from becoming Pakistan's trusted friend and strategic ally. But as a practical matter, it was not China, but the Soviet-led spread of communism and the attendant expansionist policies, that the West, especially the United States, perceived as a greater threat to the global equilibrium emerging from the Second World War.¹

The newly-born Pakistan, virtually devoid of any economic and military assets, but facing territorial disputes with India over Kashmir and, to a lesser extent, with Afghanistan over the Durand Line, was in desperate need to build itself economically and militarily. And the magnitude of its requirements was such that in choosing its benefactor between the principal Cold War adversaries, Pakistan could only turn to the more distant yet highly developed and prosperous United States, instead of the neighbouring yet relatively backwards and war-ravaged Soviet Union. Missing from this alliance, however, was the bond of a common adversary – the primary US goal was containing the spread of communism, while Pakistan's primary goal was to secure itself against India. As a result, Pakistan not only entertained unrealistic (and therefore unfulfilled) expectations of reciprocity from the US, but also succeeded in annoying and alienating the Soviet Union, thereby forcing it (and thereafter Russia as its principal successor) to woo, befriend and continuously strengthen its relations with India.

It is evident that at the outset, India and the Soviet Union were neither close friends nor did they possess any specific ideological affinity. If anything, the Soviet Union viewed Pakistan more favourably than India. The Stalin government is on record for having viewed Nehru and his post-independence ruling coterie as representatives "of the interests of the Indian, and first of all, the Hindu, bourgeoisie".² Stalin also attached ideological significance to the fact that while independent India retained Lord Mountbatten as Governor-General, Jinnah had rejected Mountbatten and himself became Pakistan's first Head of State. Moreover, Nehru had sent

Vijaylakshmi Pandit, one of his famous sisters, as India's first Ambassador to Moscow, but Stalin never granted her a single audience.³

Compelled by the force of circumstances, however, the Pakistani leadership was determined to distance itself from the Soviet Union and commit itself to the Western camp in the expectation of generous economic assistance and a security guarantee against India. Accordingly, a week after independence in August 1947, the Government of Pakistan informed Moscow that Britain would represent Pakistan's interests in the Soviet Union.⁴ A month later, when the Pakistani Cabinet was preparing to despatch Pakistan's first delegation to the United Nations, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah observed, "Pakistan was a democracy and communism did not flourish in the soil of Islam. It was clear, therefore, that our interests lay more with the two great democratic countries, namely, the UK and the USA rather than with Russia".⁵

Despite this, Soviet policy continued to be accommodative towards Pakistan. When the Security Council debated Pakistan's membership to the United Nations in September 1947, the Soviet Union cast an affirmative vote (for the record, Afghanistan was the only country that voted against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations). Thereafter, in November 1947, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov proposed in a session of allied foreign ministers in London that Pakistan should be included among the countries that must be consulted before negotiating a peace treaty with Germany (the Western powers, however, rejected this proposal).⁶

Nevertheless, diplomatic relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union were slow to begin, as the Liaquat government's first response to the Soviet request for an exchange of ambassadors in 1948 was that it was not immediately possible due to a "shortage of personnel in Karachi". Eventually, Pakistan's first Ambassador presented his credentials in Moscow on 30 December 1948, and the first Soviet Ambassador to Pakistan took office on 22 March 1950. On the other hand, Pakistan's first Ambassador to the US took office in October 1947 and the first US Charge d'Affairs had already arrived in Karachi on the eve of Pakistan's independence on 13 August 1947.⁷

Pakistan's first major affront to the Soviet Union was delivered by Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan who, while attending a reception during a brief visit to

Teheran at the Shah's invitation in May 1949, met the Soviet Charge d'Affairs and informally expressed interest in visiting the Soviet Union. This resulted in a formal letter of invitation from Stalin in June 1949, which Liaquat promptly accepted but then used as leverage with the Truman administration and, by December 1949, managed to extract an invitation to visit the US. Notably, in May 1949, the US had invited Nehru for an official visit to Washington. Liaquat eventually visited the US in May 1950, and then vacationed in Canada for several days, but never visited the Soviet Union. There remains a big question mark on why Liaquat acted in this manner given that Nehru's visit to the US in 1949 never prevented India from cultivating close ties with the Soviet Union.⁸

Having managed to open the US door, Pakistan pressed into service its emphatic anti-communist credentials. It had to first deal with a skeptical President Truman, but thereafter found a more receptive ally in President Eisenhower who, after visiting Pakistan (and India) in May 1953, returned to Washington appreciative of Pakistan's pro-Western stance and disdainful of India's neutralism. Exactly a year later, the US and Pakistan signed a Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement (resulting in a comprehensive \$171 million military aid package to Pakistan, which by 1956 was revised upwards to \$505 million).⁹ This was followed by Pakistan's entry into the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in September 1954 and the Baghdad Pact in May 1955 (reconfigured as CENTO in July 1958 after a revolution in Iraq), connecting Pakistan with Turkey and Iran.¹⁰ In March 1959, the US entered into a bilateral Executive Agreement with Pakistan, assuring US action in the event of external aggression.¹¹

While in its shaky first decade, Pakistan developed some sense of security after a plethora of treaties, agreements, correspondence and conversations involving the United States, but subsequent events would prove that there always remained a gulf between the American and Pakistani perceptions of the scope of these arrangements. According to the American view, these were aimed to secure Pakistan solely against the communist threat, but as far as the Pakistanis were concerned, these were also aimed to guarantee Pakistan's security in the event of an Indian attack. Somewhere in this gulf lay the roots of a potential Pakistan-Soviet *détente*.

By 1955, Pakistan had not only placed itself squarely on the US side of the fence, it had also warmed up to China, especially after Prime Ministers of both countries met at the Bandung Conference in April and announced their mutual understanding, with Premier Chou En-lai criticising Soviet imperialism and declaring that China was not an imperialist nation. Clearly, a disapproving Soviet Union had been squeezed out of any equation involving Pakistan. With this in view, and by then having rebuilt its war-ravaged economy, the Soviet Union responded by strengthening its relations with Pakistan's adversaries and granting them unwavering support in the international arena. The message was clear – while Pakistan's Western alliances could provide it with economic and military aid, it was the Soviet Union who had its finger on South Asia's pulsating territorial disputes.

With Khrushchev visiting India and then Afghanistan in December 1955, the Soviet Union declared that Kashmir was decidedly an Indian state and announced firm support to Afghanistan over the Pashtunistan issue.¹² The Soviet Union exercised its veto on Kashmir in the Security Council for the first time only in January 1957 (it had not vetoed the original two resolutions in 1948 and 1949),¹³ and in April 1958, an *Aide Memoire* addressed to the Government of Pakistan bluntly stated, "the Soviet government is compelled to note with regret that for reasons beyond its control, the relations between the USSR and Pakistan leave much to be desired..."¹⁴

Much to Soviet consternation, in 1959 Pakistan entered into a ten-year lease establishing a US strategic military base near Peshawar. In May 1960, an American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft originating from this base was shot down over Soviet territory as it conducted aerial photography of strategic installations, yielding the first real low point in the troubled history of Pakistan-Soviet relations. At a reception in Czechoslovakia's embassy in Moscow a week later, the mercurial Khrushchev confronted the terrified Ambassador Salman Ali of Pakistan with the famous threat "Peshawar has been marked on our maps... ..we will ...aim our rockets at your bases as well."¹⁵

The U-2 incident brought home to Pakistan the perils of over-reliance on the United States, which sat thousands of miles away, at the cost of inviting the wrath of the Soviet Union, which was virtually next door. This is what caused a sense of realism to develop in Soviet-Pakistan relations.¹⁶ Sensing Pakistan's discomfort and

recognising that Pakistan was eager to normalise relations, the Soviet Union came forward a few months later with an offer to assist Pakistan in natural resource exploration, culminating in a \$30 million dollar oil project in March 1961. With a thaw in relations setting in, another agreement was entered into between the Soviet Union and Pakistan in June 1964 involving the import of \$11 million worth of Soviet agricultural machinery.¹⁷

The early 1960s also saw a cooling off in US-Pakistan relations as the Kennedy administration started courting India with significant increases in economic aid. During Ayub Khan's state visit to the US in 1961, President Kennedy promised that Pakistan would be consulted before the US supplied any arms to India. But Pakistan's pro-West foreign policy suffered a major setback during the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962 when both the US and the Soviet Union rushed to India's support as it took a severe beating from the Chinese. Not only was the US promise to consult Pakistan conveniently forgotten, but the Kennedy administration also prevailed over Pakistan not to open up a battlefield against India in Kashmir at a point in time when a military operation to liberate Kashmir would have had the highest probability of success.

The Lyndon Johnson administration that took office upon the assassination of Kennedy in 1963, further aggravated the US-Pakistan relationship when it approved a long-term military aid package to India in May 1964. This naturally forced Pakistan to move closer to its two communist neighbours, China and the Soviet Union. In the first half of 1965, Ayub scheduled visits to China, the Soviet Union and the US, and unlike Liaquat, was determined to show the world that Pakistan could develop cordial relations with its communist neighbours while at the same time maintaining cordial relations with the US.

Ayub was accorded a spectacular welcome during his visit to China in March 1965, which was followed by a ground-breaking visit to Moscow in April 1965, the first ever time a Pakistani Head of state visited the Soviet Union. Altaf Gauhar, who was present during Ayub's meetings with the Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev, Alexei Kosygin, Anastas Mikoyan, and Andrei Gromyko, has provided an extensive account of the ensuing conversations in his Ayub era treatise. The talks began in a tense atmosphere, with each side presenting the other with a list of its grievances. The Soviets accused the US of "pursuing a policy of enslaving the people of Asia" and

Pakistan of “acting as an instrument of this policy”, and Ayub accused the Soviets of disproportionately arming India who treated the Kashmiris “no better than hostages”, and was “able to do all this because it had the support of the Soviet Union”. But both sides were sincerely desirous of improving Pakistan-Soviet relations and, recalls Gauhar, what began as “a meeting between strangers” soon turned into “a frank exchange of views” between two parties that appeared to understand each other.¹⁸

The Soviet side agreed to do its “level best” to end the Kashmir dispute and Pakistan agreed to reconsider its treaty arrangements with the US. The two countries also agreed to co-operate in trade, oil prospecting and cultural as well as technological exchanges. As the first day of discussions drew to an end, and Kosygin started folding his papers, Ayub told Kosygin, “I wish we had met earlier.” Kosygin replied, “We shall remedy that situation. Not the past, but the future.”¹⁹

Leonid Brezhnev joined the second set of meetings that were held 24 hours later, “He was shuffling two pencils in his right hand, one blue and one red...” recalled Altaf Gauhar, “...and was speaking softly, almost philosophically.”²⁰ He went on to express his appreciation for Ayub’s earnest and keen desire to improve relations with the Soviet Union, and assured Ayub that, “the Soviet Union would reciprocate his desire all down the line.”²¹ Altaf Gauhar further recalled:

Brezhnev put his hand in his right pocket and pulled it out saying, “See I have kept nothing in my pocket. Everything here is above board.” He said that Soviet Union had attached “paramount importance” to Ayub’s visit. There was no superficiality or demagoguery in the talks, which had proceeded on the right lines. The relations between the two countries could be improved, trade expanded, visits exchanged, and technical know-how provided by the Soviet Union... ..Again he said, “Mr. President you can look into my pocket, I have nothing but a comb,” and he proceeded to brandish a small brown comb. Ayub responded by showing him his pocket, saying that he too had nothing there: “I wear my heart on my sleeve...”²²

Everyone could see that both sides had achieved significant results in less than 24 hours. As the meetings ended, Kosygin observed, “In one day we have achieved more than what others take years and, sometimes, fail to achieve.”²³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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³ *Ibid.* p. 321.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Minutes of Pakistan Cabinet Meeting, 9 September 1947, CF/47, National Documentation Centre, Islamabad, as cited by Dennis Kux, “A Ride on the Roller Coaster: US-Pakistan Relations 1947–1997”, in *Pakistan: Founder’s Aspirations and Today’s Realities*, op. cit. p. 287.

⁶ Hafeez Malik, *Soviet-Pakistan Relations and Post-Soviet Dynamics* op. cit. pp. 39–41.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 32–33.

⁸ Hafeez Malik, “Pakistan’s Relations with the Soviet Union and Russia”, in *Pakistan: Founder’s Aspirations and Today’s Realities*, op. cit. pp. 321–322.

⁹ Dennis Kux, “A Ride on the Roller Coaster: US-Pakistan Relations 1947–1997”, in *Pakistan: Founder’s Aspirations and Today’s Realities*, op. cit. pp. 291–292.

¹⁰ Hafeez Malik, “Pakistan’s Relations with the Soviet Union and Russia”, in *Pakistan: Founder’s Aspirations and Today’s Realities*, op. cit. p. 318.

¹¹ Dennis Kux, “A Ride on the Roller Coaster: US-Pakistan Relations 1947–1997”, in *Pakistan: Founder’s Aspirations and Today’s Realities*, op. cit. p. 293.

¹² Hafeez Malik, *Soviet-Pakistan Relations and Post-Soviet Dynamics* op. cit. p. 88.

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¹⁴ *Aide Memoire* presented by the Soviet Ambassador to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, 14 April 1958, R. K. Jain (ed.), *Soviet South Asian Relations, 1947–1978*, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), Vol. II, p. 10, as cited by Hafeez Malik, “Pakistan’s Relations with the Soviet Union and Russia”, in *Pakistan: Founder’s Aspirations and Today’s Realities*, op. cit. pp. 320.

¹⁵ Michael R. Beschloss, *May Day; Eisenhower: Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) p. 256, as cited by Hafeez Malik, “Pakistan’s Relations with the Soviet Union and Russia”, in *Pakistan: Founder’s Aspirations and Today’s Realities*, op. cit. pp. 324.

¹⁶ Hafeez Malik, “Pakistan’s Relations with the Soviet Union and Russia”, in *Pakistan: Founder’s Aspirations and Today’s Realities*, op. cit. pp. 325.

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¹⁸ Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan’s First Military Ruler* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1993), pp. 292–294.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 294.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 299.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* pp. 300–301.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 301.