



Pakistan

and the

Middle East Connection

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The United States' relations with Pakistan have shifted through the years since Pakistan achieved independence. This article reviews events of that period and considers Pakistan's present relationship with the Middle East and its possible impact on US foreign policy.

UNITED States' policy objectives in Southwest Asia since the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan have been to promote stability in the region, to protect the Western Alliance's Persian Gulf oil lifeline, to resist further Soviet expansion and to maintain the security of Israel.¹ The Reagan administration is attempting to accomplish these objectives by building a "strategic consensus" among key states in the region. Pakistan, with whom a five-year, \$3.2-billion arms and economic aid package was recently concluded, would seem to be the eastern anchor of this consensus.

Yet, in recent years, Pakistan has withdrawn from the Central Treaty Organization, joined the Nonaligned Movement, established increasingly close ties with many Arab states of the Middle East and become an advocate of the Islamic Conference position on Palestine. When the Soviet Union occupied neighboring Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan rejected the initial US offer of aid as "peanuts" and, even after accepting the present \$3.2 billion package, has taken great pains to remind the world that "Pakistan is not part of any Gulf strategy of the US."²

Past US policies in this region have habitually suffered from two flaws. First is an Arab-Israeli policy that has antagonized almost every local government and made normal political relations, let alone military cooperation, extremely difficult. Second is a tendency to meet foreign policy challenges with quick, massive and expensive military responses while giving only incidental attention to the international political matrix in which those measures are to be imbedded.³ Policymakers in the United States sometimes have forgotten that:

A security structure that emphasizes military implements and induces primary

reliance on the generation of fighting capabilities, but is not well anchored in stable, cooperative, and mutually beneficial political relationships among its component parts will be forever vulnerable to sudden breakup, easily exploitable by the Soviets, unreliable in times of crisis—at worst, downright self-defeating.⁴

It would be prudent, therefore, to examine Pakistan's foreign policy imperatives, particularly as they relate to the other Islamic states of the Middle East and Southwest Asia region, before constructing a regional policy dependent on them.

Pakistan's geopolitical position in Southwest Asia has been described as that of an earthenware pot squeezed between the iron pots of India, China, the USSR and the United States.⁵ With the possible exception of Israel, no other state has been more concerned with basic survival than has Pakistan. In its 35 years of independence, Pakistan has fought three major wars with India. Not surprisingly, the most fundamental imperative of Pakistani foreign policy has been a search for security vis-à-vis its much larger neighbor.

Despite the centrality of security, another imperative can be identified which, although subordinate, is nonetheless relevant to understanding Pakistan's foreign policy behavior. This is an ideological imperative manifested in the importance attached to the Islamic religion and the cultivation of close relations within the *Ummah*, the universal brotherhood of Islam. Frequently, Western policymakers have ignored the notion that religion and political behavior are inseparable in Muslim states. They forget that:

Islam is not merely a set of religious beliefs, but a complete and systematic political ideology. In the consciously secular milieu of the Twentieth Century, it has been difficult to recognize Islam as a politi-

cal ideology, because of the Western tradition of judging the rest of the world by Western standards. The West has separated religion and politics for centuries; therefore, it assumes that Islamic nations do the same.⁶

Shortly after independence, Liaquat Ali Khan, the first prime minister, announced the foreign policy objectives of the new state:

Our strongest interests, therefore, are firstly the integrity of Pakistan. An important secondary objective has been the cultivation of close relations with other Muslim countries. . . .

From then until the present time, those twin imperatives of security and ideology have guided Pakistan's relations with the Middle East. An examination of them in the context of a short historical narrative will show that its close identification with those states and support for "Islamic" causes is not inimical to US policy objectives in the region. On the contrary, it is complementary to that policy.

In the early years of independence, Pakistan sought a position of nonalignment in the evolving cold war between the East and West and assiduously promoted Muslim causes in an effort to enlist Muslim states in its behalf during the protracted struggle with India over Kashmir. Despite the Western and secular orientation of many early leaders, Pakistan regularly invoked Islam and the notion of Islamic fraternity in order to build a sense of national unity in a multiethnic state. Thus, the security and ideological imperatives initially were in harmony. In fact, through Islam, the *Ummah* might even become a significant world force. As Khan stated:

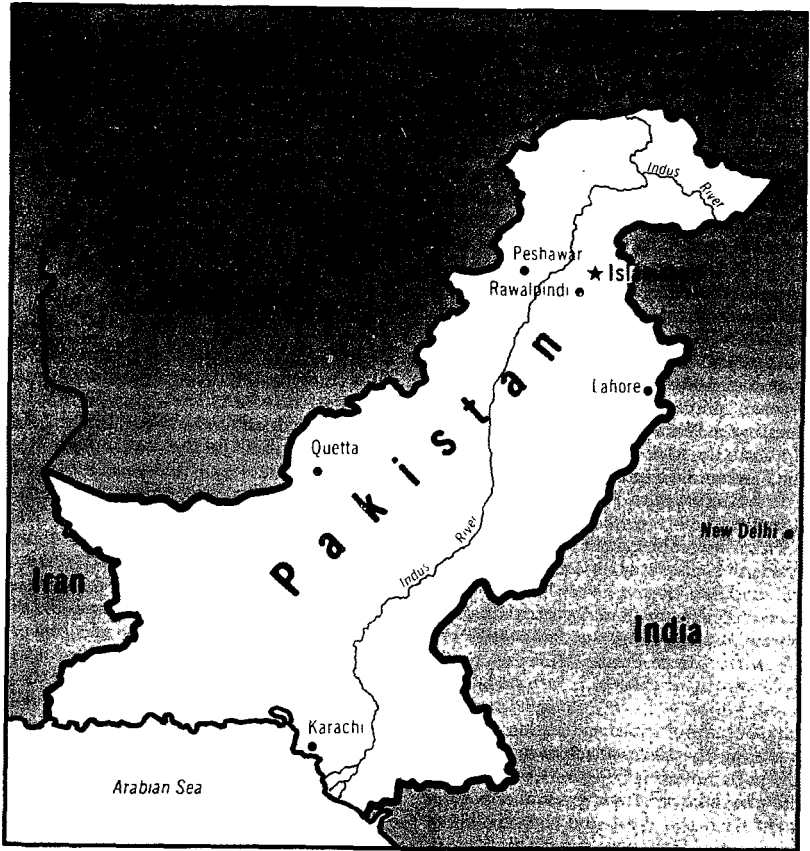
A cardinal feature of this (Pakistan's) ideology is to make Muslim brotherhood a living reality. . . . Part of the mission which Pakistan has set before itself (is) to do

*everything in its power to promote closer fellowship and cooperation between Muslim countries. . . . Why cannot the Muslim peoples get together to protect themselves and show to the world that they have an ideology and a way of life which insures peace and harmony in the world?*⁶

Ironically, these attempts to develop an Islamic consensus were not well-received in the Middle East because religion was not considered to be especially important by many of the Muslim elites in those newly independent and soon-to-be independent states. Unlike the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent who "Had also to guard against falling from the frying pan of British imperialism into the fires of perpetual Hindu domination,"⁹ these Muslims were not as conscious of their religious identity.

Theirs had been a straightforward struggle against colonialism in which religion had played no role. Nationalism was a much stronger motive force. Many Middle Eastern elites echoed Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser: "We are Egyptians first, Arabs second, and Muslims third. . . . I do not want to use Islam in international politics."¹⁰

Pakistan's hope of leading the Muslim world finally ended in the summer of 1952 when its plans to host yet another conference of Muslim prime ministers was abandoned because of a generally lackluster response from the invitees.¹¹ Just as relevant, however, was the fact that Pakistan's security position was no better than before. The Kashmir dispute was still unresolved, and, with no help forthcoming from the *Ummah*, Pakistan lacked the means to resolve it. When Khan ordered the army to prepare for war with India in 1951, he was told that such a thing was impossible because there were only 13 operational tanks in the entire army.¹² When the United States issued an invita-



tion to join the Baghdad Pact the following year, Pakistani leaders were, therefore, receptive.

In 1953, the United States invited both India and Pakistan to join the Baghdad Pact, one of a series of collective security arrangements aimed at containing the spread of communism. India declined, but

Pakistan accepted on both security and ideological grounds. Prime Minister Mohammed Ali Bogra declared in 1954 that his nation's acceptance of US military aid was "perhaps the most effective step ever taken to insure the security and progress of our country."¹¹ Curiously enough, membership in the pact also satisfied the

ideological imperative. Although India was a major security threat, communism posed an ideological threat. S. M. Burke explains:

*Muslim Pakistan, at least for a decade and a half, regarded Godless Communism as a real menace to her ideology and security, and fully agreed with Christendom that a concerted effort by all God-fearing nations was necessary to prevent it from spreading.*¹⁴

The Muslim states of the Middle East disagreed strenuously. Still relatively unconcerned with religion, the fact that Pakistan had joined in a military pact with the principal guarantor of Israel overshadowed every other consideration.¹⁵ Nasser complained that Pakistan was abetting a Western strategy of splitting the Arab world and that, by emphasizing the Communist threat to the region, it was camouflaging the far greater Israeli threat.¹⁶

Pakistan's behavior during the 1956 Suez crisis completed its isolation from the Middle East. Despite overwhelming public opinion in favor of Egypt, Pakistani leaders strongly supported Pakistan's new Western allies. Prime Minister H. S. Suhrawardy stated, "I refuse to be isolated. We must have friends."¹⁷ Security was the paramount consideration.

During the 1962 Indochinese War, the US policy of supplying military aid to India began a process of gradual estrangement from the West and corresponding improvement in relations with the Middle East. The trend was accelerated after the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War when the United States placed an embargo on military supplies to both countries, a move which hurt Pakistan much more than India. Most Middle Eastern states had been strongly supportive of Pakistan during the war, and Pakistan reciprocated by strongly condemning Israel in the 1967 Six-Day

War. By 1969, all American bases in Pakistan were closed.

Following the outbreak of war between India and Pakistan in 1971, Washington once again imposed an embargo on military aid. This time, however, the Middle East provided material as well as moral support—Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Libya sent jet aircraft; Egypt strongly protested Soviet support of India; and Iran acted as a "safehaven" for Pakistani aircraft while providing badly needed logistic support.¹⁸

Defeat and dismemberment by India left Pakistan militarily vulnerable, diplomatically isolated from the West and in search of a new national identity. Far from leaving West Pakistan a homogeneous nation, the war had accentuated the subdued ethnic differences within the state and reopened the delicate question of national identity.¹⁹ Western models of democracy had not worked, and Pakistan had been defeated by its traditional enemy despite membership in a military alliance with the strongest nation in the world. Clearly, a new direction was needed.

Pakistan now turned once again to the Middle East. The vast wealth and growing political importance of the region made such a move desirable on both security and ideological grounds. Further, it was desired by all parties. In return for financial aid with which to rebuild its economy and military establishment, Pakistan would provide a pool of skilled technical labor for the Middle East. These states also desired assistance in building up their own military establishments. Defense cooperation with Pakistan would carry no superpower strings, and, since it was not geographically a Middle Eastern state, there was little danger of local political entanglements.²⁰

Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto quickly began his courtship of the region. His first overseas visit was to Afghanistan



Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

China Pictorial

and the Middle East, "a journey among brothers."²¹ During the Ramadan War with Israel, he not only gave strong diplomatic support to the Arab belligerents, but sent medical teams to both Syria and Egypt.²² His hosting of the Second Islamic Summit Meeting at Lahore shortly after the war provided a forum to reaffirm Pakistan's Islamic identity and improve his ties with key Middle Eastern leaders. Scrapping all traces of the Western connection, Bhutto initiated a foreign policy of "bilateralism" which he defined as "first, deciding issues on merits, being impartial and universal in approach, and not getting entangled in conflicts of the superpowers or the great powers."²³

This policy was maintained by Bhutto's successor, President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, and resulted in 1979 in Pakistan's membership in the Nonaligned Movement. In qualifying for this membership, Pakistan severed its remaining link with the West—membership in the Central Treaty Organization.

Pakistan's policy toward the Middle East has now come full circle and returned to what it was at the time of independence.

Pakistan's security needs are being met through access to Saudi petrodollars, and its ideological needs are fulfilled by the position of respect and leadership it has attained within the *Ummah*. What does this imply for US interests in the region? Will the building of a strategic consensus to deter further Communist expansion be held hostage, for example, to the resolution of the Palestinian question on terms favorable to the Islamic Conference? Will the entire structure collapse into chaos, as in Iran, because of the resurgence of militant, xenophobic Islam among the states of the region?

On numerous occasions, Pakistan has subscribed to the views of the Islamic Conference on Palestine: Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territory including Jerusalem, Palestinian self-determination in their own homeland under Palestine Liberation Organization leadership and the dismantling of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.²⁴ However, the November 1981 Arab summit in Fez, Morocco, demonstrated that there is a wide spectrum of opinion among Middle Eastern states over the details and strategy of concluding an agreement.

Pakistan has identified itself with the moderate bloc on this issue and appears anxious to avoid the hostility of either the radical or conservative states. An observer at another recent Islamic Summit Conference describes Pakistan's diplomatic maneuvering:

... the division among the members of the Islamic Conference made Pakistan's position all the more difficult. Islamabad got around this difficulty by adopting a policy of going along with the moderate leadership provided by the Saudi Arabian government on the Arab-Israeli question and other issues of concern to the Islamic World. This saved it from making a difficult choice between supporting radicals

such as Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria or the openly pro-Western States such as Egypt, Sudan, Oman, and Somalia which had expressed themselves in favor of negotiations with Israel.²⁵

Despite its general solidarity with the Islamic Conference on Palestine, Pakistan clearly does not view it as a crucial foreign policy issue. It is certainly not crucial enough to jeopardize the US arms deal or the close relationship with Saudi Arabia which enables Pakistan to pay for it. On this issue, ideology gives way to security.

A second US concern is that Zia will lose control of the Islamization process he has begun and unleash the same type of militant Islamic fundamentalism that has so destabilized Iran. This view presupposes that Islam is like a contagious virus that infects state after state as in an epidemic. Such a theory is very much overstated.

Turkey has chosen the five principles of nationalism, populism, etatism, republicanism and revolutionism as the basis for its polity; Indonesia is becoming more secular; nationalism still reigns supreme in most of the Arab Middle East; and Iran and Iraq are at war.²⁶ As with Palestine, there are far too many shades of Islam and too many differing political contexts to speak of an imminent Islamic resurgence. Even in Pakistan, Zia's attempts to build a genuine Islamic state have been more cosmetic than substantive:

Although Muslim identity is very important to the people, and Islam is probably the only meaningful ideology, it has not been put into operation nor given its legitimate role in the political system. . . . the emphasis seems to be on ritualistic aspects and legal precepts of Islam.²⁷

At the present time, there is no clear consensus about the nature of an Islamic state. There have been periodic conflicts among sects (Sunni, Shi'ia, Ahmadi) and groups (Westernized elites, clergy, com-

mon people) within Pakistani society. These domestic conflicts carry over into foreign policy as well:

The problem of constructing an 'Islamic' foreign policy is even more complex and difficult, partly because the implication of such principles are hazy, but also because Pakistan has little control over its external environment. The Westernized political leader who is attacked by the orthodox Muslim for failing to be true to the 'teachings' of Islam often finds his best defense in regular visits from and to other Muslim leaders.²⁸

Islam is a powerful force in Pakistan. However, until a clearer consensus emerges, it does not appear likely that radical changes will take place.

Pakistan's present policy of nonalignment and close relations with the Middle East seems to pose no threat to the United States' desire to establish a strategic consensus in Southwest Asia and is probably more beneficial than if it elected to return to the former client-state relationship of the 1950s. The strong commitment to Islam is desirable from the standpoint of building national identity and pride. The disintegration of Pakistan into its ethnic components or even a prolonged period of civil strife such as occurred in Baluchistan in the mid-1970s would create a situation ripe for Soviet exploitation, given their present position in nearby Afghanistan.

The close economic ties with the Middle East mean a lesser degree of US aid will be necessary to strengthen the Pakistani economy and armed forces. Pakistan's membership in the Nonaligned Movement allows it to be an effective "pointman" for US interests on the Afghanistan issue without being dismissed as a US puppet. And, finally, Pakistan's moderate position on Palestine is supportive of Saudi Arabia, another key state in the strategic consensus.

Domestically, Pakistan's present foreign policy satisfies its security and ideological imperatives. It has brought emotional fulfillment and pride over Pakistan's place in the Muslim world and has increased its sense of security vis-à-vis India through its association with an increasingly powerful group of nations.⁷ At the same time, Pakistan's military ties with the United States are better than at any time in the past 20 years.

There is no reason to believe that the Middle East connection affects Pakistan's regional outlook. The notion that Pakistan is becoming more a Middle Eastern state and less a South Asian state has much to recommend it in terms of eco-

nomics and culture. However, it overlooks the basic facts of geography.⁸

It is frequently forgotten that, while the oil-rich states of the Middle East are wealthy, they are far from being powerful in the military sense of the term. The fact that Pakistan turned first to the United States for assistance after Afghanistan was simply a realistic recognition that, in a confrontation with a great power, only another great power can provide countervailing force.⁹ Until such time as the Soviet Union quits Afghanistan or the Indian military capability is matched, Pakistan's security imperative will demand that it play a role complementary to US objectives in the region.

NOTES

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