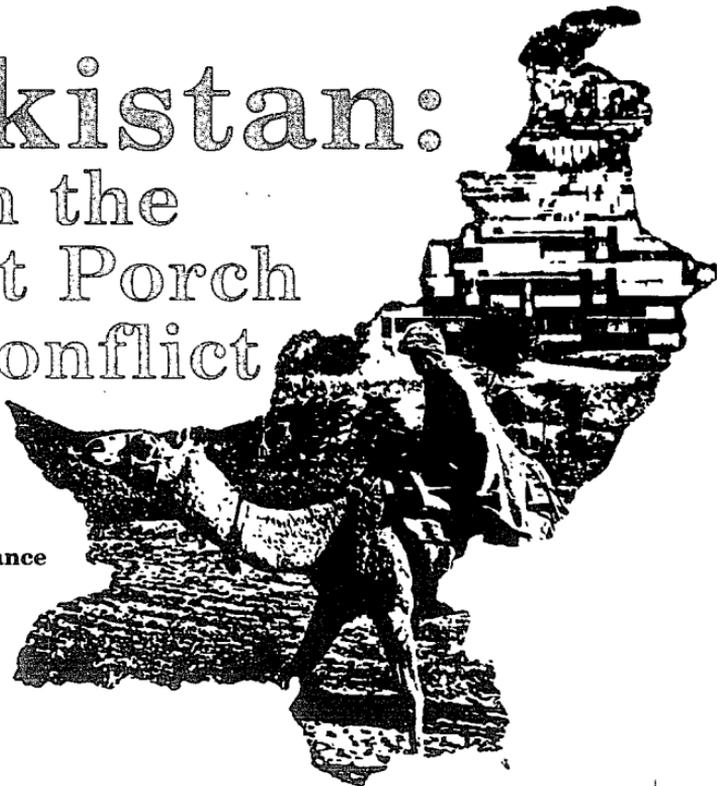


Pakistan: On the Front Porch of Conflict

Edgar O'Ballance



There are conflicts and minor skirmishes in many places around the world between many different factions. Perhaps none of these has the potential for growing into a confrontation between the superpowers as does Southwest Asia. This author cautions that we should not ignore the US ally in the region.

TODAY, Pakistan is a front-line state in the fight against Soviet expansion in Southwest Asia. Yesterday, it was ignored by the West, but now its strategic stability is of vital importance.

The daily possibility exists that Soviet and Pakistani troops may clash in battle as the Soviets press their policy of "hot pur-

suit" across the Pakistani frontier against the *mujahidin* who operate into Afghanistan from refugee camps in Pakistan. In hopes of averting such an eventuality, the Pakistani government has adopted an almost passive attitude along its 1,400-mile border with Afghanistan. Its anti-aircraft gunners have orders not to fire at Soviet

military aircraft (actually aircraft with Afghan markings but Soviet pilots), even if they fly into Pakistani air space.

The Soviet intention is to destabilize Southwest Asia and thus penetrate further by threats, intrigue and diplomacy. Belatedly, the US administration has recognized the strategic value of Pakistan, allocating some military aid to improve and update its military capability. Pakistan is no longer an unimportant pawn in the East-West struggle. Previously, Western attention in Southwest Asia tended to be focused on India, the dominant giant of the region, where the United States and the USSR had long been vying with each other for influence and strategic benefits. The United States now follows the insurgent struggle inside adjacent Afghanistan with great interest, comparing it perhaps somewhat erroneously with the Vietnam War.

The Soviets had been working to turn Afghanistan into a puppet state at least since 1965 when the People's Democratic Party, a thinly veiled communist organization, was formed with Soviet help and advice. By 1973, this party was strong enough to push King Zahir Shah from his throne and turn the kingdom into a republic. Successive Soviet-supported Afghan presidents—Mohammad Daoud, Nur Mohammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin—were, in turn, removed when they tended to stray too far from Kremlin guidelines.

In December 1979, a Soviet military invasion force entered Afghanistan. It brought with it Babrak Karmal who was installed as the Afghan president, an uneasy puppet position he still holds. Soviet troops were now within 320 miles of the Indian Ocean, within easy long-range bomber distance to the Persian Gulf and up against the Pakistani frontier. Afghanistan is an ideal crossroad position from where the

Soviets, according to opportunity, can penetrate west, south or east.

The Soviet military presence in Afghanistan evoked a spontaneous and country-wide insurrection by the *mujahidin* (warriors in the Holy War). It has been in progress ever since, with neither the well-armed Soviets nor the poorly armed *mujahidin* being able to completely dominate.

Soviet repression tactics of devastation and depopulation have caused about five million refugees (out of a probable population of about 17 million) to leave Afghanistan. About three million or more are in Pakistan and the remainder in Iran. The Soviets allege that refugee camps in Pakistan are recruiting and training centers for the *mujahidin* who raid into Afghanistan.

Also, the Soviets claim that arms routes from these camps lead across open frontiers to the *mujahidin* fighting in the interior. The Pakistani government denies this, insisting that "only humanitarian help" is offered to Afghan refugees. But they cannot deny that several *mujahidin* groups have their "exile" headquarters in the Pakistani cities of Peshawar and Quetta. Periodically, exasperated Soviet troops practice hot pursuit of withdrawing *mujahidin* right up to, and even just across, the Pakistani border. Aerial bombing and artillery and missile fire are used to hit Pakistani frontier villages and *mujahidin* border crossing points, causing civilian casualties.

The Afghan *mujahidin* need weapons, especially surface-to-air weapons, such as the SAM7, to counter Soviet helicopter gunships. So far, only a few have reached there, and many of them have been unreliable and faulty. The Egyptian-based Arab Organization for Industrialization, an arms manufacturing consortium, has worked on this project. It is producing an improved SAM7 with a range of over 4 miles and which is better able to avoid deflecting

flares dropped from Soviet aircraft. These were to be ready for distribution in 1985 and, if they reach the *mujahidin* in quantity and proper training is given, the course of the war may change. The *mujahidin* aim is to deprive the Soviets of their present control of air space for their helicopter gunships and force them to deploy infantry into mountainous terrain. There, the Soviets would be at a disadvantage and suffer heavy casualties. It remains to be seen if the Soviets fall for this.

The Soviets like to use proxy troops for their military adventures where possible. It will be some time, if ever, before the shattered Afghan government army is capable of meeting the Pakistani army on anything like even terms.

Strategic Problems

Pakistan, with a population of about 94.2 million and an area of about 310,400 square miles, is an elongated stretch of territory wedged between Afghanistan and India. It has an Indian Ocean seaboard, including the important port of Karachi. Broadly speaking, the northern and western parts of Pakistan are mainly mountainous, while there are expanses of desert and fertile land in the east and south. Economically poor, Pakistan is also relatively undeveloped and has serious problems, both internal and external.

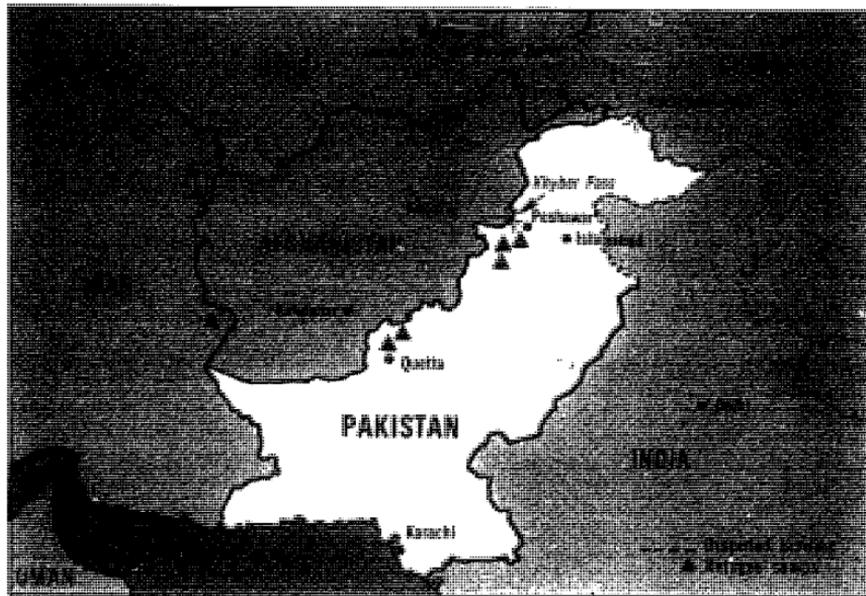
Besides many economic problems, the main internal political problems are holding together the four disparate provinces of Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP); countering internal subversion; and coping with the huge Afghan refugee population. A proportion of these refugees do not seem to want to return to their Soviet-occupied, devastated homeland. They are putting

down roots, buying land and developing businesses and commercial enterprises which often tend to infringe upon local interests.

To halt increasing internal disorder after allegations of electoral fraud, military rule was imposed in 1977, bringing some stability to the country. The Pakistani leader, General M. Zia-ul-Haq, has offered law, order and security as the alternative to the chaos and anarchy that would probably otherwise ensue. He is harnessing the Islamic religion and its sharia (religious law) in an attempt to prevent disintegration and unite all factions.

Zia sympathizes with and helps the Afghan *mujahidin* as much as he can. He has refused to recognize the Karmal government or to discuss Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan with either the USSR or the Afghan government. The United Nations has made three futile attempts to promote such talks at Geneva. This attitude brings him considerable Islamic support, both internally and from other Muslim countries. The multiparty opposition (officially, all political parties are banned, but they exist), should it ever come to power, has said it will establish relations with the Karmal government and repatriate all the Afghan refugees. Any attempt at forcible repatriation would cause a gigantic upheaval, as many of the men have weapons. This would also be seen as selling the *mujahidin* and the Afghan refugees down the river to a goddess regime.

Pakistan's external troubles are even more serious and mainly involve national security. One main threat is the USSR which might lose patience with Pakistan for sheltering the *mujahidin* and allowing *mujahidin* organizations to be active in and to operate from that country. Hot pursuit, even carried to the extreme of bombing and shelling Pakistani villages along the frontier, may not have much lasting effect, or



any at all, as the border is long and wide open. The Soviets may be tempted to bomb refugee camps suspected of harboring *mujahidin* or to mount a military offensive against certain sectors of Pakistan's frontier territory to drive refugees well away from it.

Pakistan's defense expenditures are low—about 4.5 percent of the gross national product—so its armed forces are comparatively small for the area they have to defend and the potential threats. Just under one-half million men are formed into 18 combat divisions and 20 independent or specialist brigades, with just over 2,000 tanks and armored vehicles, 1,000 guns of various types and over 300 combat aircraft. Such a force could briefly, but not indefinitely, hold a determined, concerted Soviet attack. The strain of doing so could

allow internal security problems to get out of hand, so prolonged resistance could be nationally suicidal. If attacked by the Soviets, Pakistan fully expects to have to fight on two fronts, as it fears India would also march against it to dismember the country.

Pakistan also fears fragmentation. The Soviets might stir up dissension in both Baluchistan province and the NWFP by having dissidents agitate for complete independence. Pakistani troops fought three separate campaigns against Baluchi "rebels" in the 1970s. The Soviets are conditioning a Baluchi government in exile and training political and administrative cadres in the USSR, ready to move them into Baluchistan province should an opportunity ever present itself. The Soviets are reviving the old idea of an independent

state of "Pushtunistan" to embrace territory inhabited by the ethnic Pathan population which is mainly in the NWFP and in adjacent parts of Afghanistan. The Pakistani government has less than nominal control over certain "tribal lands" in the NWFP.

The scenario of a Soviet attack on Pakistan may not be as black as it may seem. Formerly, Pakistan was hemmed in on the north by the trackless Himalayan mountain ranges and the Hindu Kush massifs, physically cutting it off from China. One of the first tangible results of changing Chinese foreign policy was the opening in June 1978 of the 500-mile-long Karakoram Highway over the 18,000-foot-high Karakoram ridge, the "Roof of the World." This linked the Chinese road system with that of Pakistan.

The Chinese Factor

China is a potential military ally and could move hundreds of thousands of soldiers into Pakistan. As neither the USSR nor India wants to tangle with hordes of Chinese infantrymen in mountainous terrain, the Karakoram Highway is a vital deterrent factor. This highway is also valuable economically as it opens up vast areas of northern Pakistan.

Introvert and isolationist China is now slowly shaking off the devastating effects of the misnamed Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It is questioning the teachings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir I. Lenin and Mao Tse-tung, giving thought to its defense problems and turning attention to the states on its periphery, especially those in southern Asia. For example, in February-March 1979, Chinese troops invaded Vietnam to undertake an 18-day punitive operation to

"teach that country a lesson"—a lesson that could perhaps be repeated or imposed upon another country.

In recent years, China has given some military aid to Pakistan, including 1,000 Chinese-made T59 tanks. China helped construct the Karakoram Highway and allegedly gave assistance to Pakistani nuclear weapon development projects. The Karakoram Highway could be used for a Chinese flanking movement against India. It should be remembered that China launched an invasion of India in 1962 and could do so again. China also has some claims on both Pakistani and Indian territory in that area and would be unlikely to stand passively by and watch Pakistan being dismembered to its own disadvantage.

China and the USSR remain longtime traditional enemies, with a common 3,150-mile border between them. The Peking leadership, completely surprised by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, had previously tended to disregard that country. Since 1979, the Soviets have reportedly annexed the Afghan Wakhan Strip, a sliver of territory that touches the Chinese border in the high Himalayas, so China sent some infantry weapons to the *mujahidin* by way of Pakistan. To date, Egypt has been the only other country to send arms to the *mujahidin*. Iran gives moral support to the *mujahidin* but so far has not given any material help.

The Indian Factor

To the east of Pakistan lies India with an area of some 1.26 million square miles and a population nearing 800 million people. It has an army of about one million men, formed into 31 combat divisions and 30 independent or specialist brigades, the majority of which are deployed and orientated

against Pakistan. The Chinese strategic threat to India is the logical one, but India, emotionally and illogically, regards Pakistan as its principal enemy. One has only to visit the region to discover the depths of fear and suspicion between these two countries.

Pakistan and India have fought three wars since partition in 1947, and the disputed mountain province of Jammu and Kashmir, divided since 1949 by the cease-fire line, remains a contentious issue. Occasional clashes occur between Pakistani and Indian troops along this line. The last of any significance was in July 1984 on a 47-mile-long glacier near the Nubra Valley in the north (in Indian-held territory). The United Nations has not yet succeeded in holding a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the inhabitants of Jammu and Kashmir.

Indian military activity in 1971 helped to sever "East Pakistan" (now Bangladesh) from then-West Pakistan. India never really accepted partition when the mainly Muslim part of British-ruled India broke away to become the independent state of Pakistan after the British departed. Pakistan alleges that India covets its two provinces of Sind and Punjab and wants to possess the whole of Jammu and Kashmir even though the population is mostly Muslim.

India would most probably like to possess the other two Pakistani provinces (Baluchistan and the NWFP) as well. The suspicion in many Pakistani minds is that India might be prepared to trade these to the USSR for a free hand with the other two, and allow Baluchistan province and the NWFP to become independent states to eliminate the concept of Pakistan from the map. India has an uneasy but practical relationship with the USSR, and the Pakistanis are convinced the two will one day gang up against them. India would not

Pakistani air force pilots planning an exercise



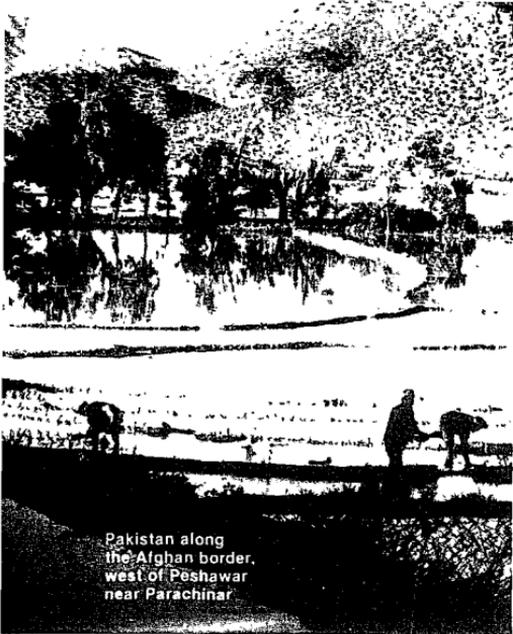
Embassy of Pakistan

want the Soviets to be up against its northwest border and, to avoid this, might be prepared to see the region "Balkanized" instead.

In such a scenario, India may calculate it would be fairly safe from Soviet expansion as Chinese troops could be rushed to the area along the Karakoram Highway. Pakistan remains the focus of attention of the Soviets, the Chinese and the Indians, and they tend to deter each other from precipitous military action.

American Attitude

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a shock to the US administration. Previously, Afghanistan had been largely ignored by Washington, but now something had to be done. After the Iranian experience, there was caution and hesitation. It was obvious that support had to be given to Pakistan even at the expense of Indian good will, if Pakistan was to stand firm. At first, then-President Jimmy Carter offered \$400 million, only half of which was to be spent on military items. This was rejected



Pakistan along
the Afghan border,
west of Peshawar
near Parachinar

Embassy of Pakistan

by Zia who described the offer as "peanuts." Eventually, the offer was considerably improved to a military package worth about \$3.5 billion.

The United States also agreed to sell Pakistan 40 *F16* aircraft, but the first deliveries were refused because they were not equipped with all of the latest sophisticated devices and electronic countermeasures. Reluctantly, the US administration reconsidered and sent properly equipped *F16*s. This military aid seemed grudgingly provided, perhaps partly because the country was under military rule, partly because of Indian lobbying and partly because it was suspected that Pakistan was working to produce its own nuclear weapons and would not agree to cancel its programs. These matters apart, realities should be faced. The elimination of Pakistan could only be of help to the Kremlin leadership and a hindrance to the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization generally.

More important to the United States is the kind of aid and how much should be given to the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan. Remembering that military aid was given by the USSR to the Vietcong in quantity, one might think it only poetic justice for the United States to send quantities of materiel to the *mujahidin*. Belatedly, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was ordered to organize an arms supply route for the *mujahidin* and for some training to be given. The CIA has been slow to start on these tasks, and even now there is some doubt whether any US arms are actually reaching the fighters in the Afghan mountains.

The United States' problem is that, if too much military aid is sent to the *mujahidin*, which would obviously have to be dispatched through Pakistan, it might provoke the Soviets into retaliatory action against Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan or against Pakistan itself. If Pakistan were attacked or came under intense Soviet military pressure, the US public would be unlikely to tolerate US combat troops being sent to Southwest Asia to help. Pakistan would probably have to rely upon China. This would mean Pakistan passing from the United States' sphere of influence to China's.

If no aid is given to the *mujahidin*, their resistance might wither away, leaving the Soviets safe and triumphant. It seems to have been decided that sufficient arms should be sent to enable the *mujahidin* to be a thorn in the side of the Soviet occupation force, but not enough to be a provoking crown of thorns. Circumstances, as much as unspoken consensus, have brought this about.

It seems there is little else the United States can do but send enough military aid to keep the Afghan insurgency going at its present low-intensity level and to slowly strengthen the Pakistani armed forces. It

seems that insurgent warfare may continue in Afghanistan and that Pakistan will continue to be the main springboard for the *mujahidin*. It also seems that the Karakoram Highway will continue to be the main deterrent to the powers involved in that region.

The Nuclear Factor

Should the situation escalate into conventional warfare of some sort, with an aggressor hoping to snatch a quick victory, then a nuclear factor may appear. China has a military nuclear capability, but it is doubtful whether it would use it. The Soviet nuclear capability is vastly superior, more accurate and more sophisticated, and the Soviets would not overlook any opportunity to eliminate the Chinese nuclear complexes. The danger of nuclear war does not come so much from the two superpowers or from China but from smaller nations with a nuclear weapon or two which could be provoked into using them as the last alternative to national demise.

India exploded a nuclear device in 1974. In 1978, when Carter visited there, he persuaded Prime Minister Morarji R. Desai to agree to stop work on developing the Indian nuclear capability. When Indira Gandhi again became prime minister, she restarted the nuclear program. We must presume India is now well on the way to producing nuclear weapons. In a war be-

tween India and Pakistan, it would be unlikely that India would be the "first user" of nuclear weapons. Indian armed forces are more than double those of Pakistan, so even setbacks on the battlefield should not be sufficient to cause the Indian nuclear button to be pressed.

The most likely first user of nuclear weapons in any conflict in Southwest Asia is probably Pakistan which is working to perfect a nuclear weapon and, according to most reports, will soon be successful. Out-numbered and out-gunned, the Pakistani government may have to choose between employing a nuclear weapon or accepting a defeat, terminating Pakistan as an independent sovereign state. India accuses China of helping Pakistan achieve this nuclear aim. Despite official Pakistani denials, other opinions are that Pakistan will make a nuclear test explosion in 1986 when the present US military aid program has been completed.

Pakistan is the keystone of stability and resistance to Soviet expansion in Southwest Asia and the Balkanization of that region. If Pakistan disappeared, the area would undoubtedly erupt into a conflagration the United States would unlikely be able to influence. At present, Pakistan rests its ultimate security on "Three Pillars": support from Islamic countries, support from China and planned nuclear weapons. A majority of the senior military officers I have spoken to have said there should be another pillar—the United States of America. *ME*



Edgar O'Ballance, retired British army colonel, is an author, a free-lance journalist and a commentator. He has written books specializing in defense and foreign affairs. His article "Underwater Hide-and-Seek" appeared in the April 1984 Military Review.