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**Strategic Illusions and Realpolitik: A Pre-9/11 History of U.S.–
Pakistan Relations**



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Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive historical analysis of U.S.–Pakistan relations from Pakistan’s inception in 1947 up to the pivotal events of 9/11. It explores how Pakistan’s enduring security dilemma especially its rivalry with India and fragile military and economic foundations drove its strategic alignment with the United States. Anchored in Cold War containment logic, this asymmetric partnership evolved through shifting global power dynamics, ideological battles, and regional conflicts including the Kashmir dispute, multiple Indo-Pak wars, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the nuclear arms race in South Asia.

The analysis highlights how Pakistan’s geostrategic utility repeatedly brought it into the U.S. orbit, especially during the Cold War, but also how divergent objectives Pakistan’s India-centric security needs versus America’s global strategic calculus led to recurring cycles of cooperation and estrangement. Particular attention is paid to the post-Afghanistan War fallout in the 1990s, where shifting U.S. interests, rising concerns over nuclear proliferation, and Pakistan’s support for militant groups led to sanctions and growing mistrust. These frictions underscore the structural limitations and policy disconnects that laid the foundation for a fragile and transactional relationship in the post-9/11 era.

This study draws on extensive qualitative document analysis including declassified archives, official policy records, speeches, congressional reports, and academic literature complemented by expert insights from regional analysts. By synthesizing these sources, the research offers a nuanced and contextual understanding of the U.S.–Pakistan relationship in the decades before the War on Terror.

Keywords: U.S.–Pakistan Relations, Cold War Alliances, India–Pakistan Security Dilemma, Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia, Geostrategic Alignment.

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan’s foreign policy has been shaped by existential security concerns and regional power rivalries. From the outset, the nascent state found itself militarily under-equipped and economically fragile in comparison to its larger neighbour, India. These vulnerabilities pushed Islamabad to seek external support, leading to its alignment with the United States a decision driven more by pragmatic security needs than ideological affinity. This alignment, however, was built on fragile foundations, giving rise to decades of oscillating cooperation and mistrust that ultimately shaped the trajectory of bilateral relations in the years leading up to 9/11.

Geopolitical Imperatives and the Early Alignment

At its inception, Pakistan confronted a hostile regional environment marked by territorial disputes both in the east with India and in the west with Afghanistan over the Durand Line (Rubin & Siddique, 2006). It lacked a viable military-industrial base and received a disproportionately small share of military assets during partition—leaving it deeply insecure (Jalal, 1987; Rai, 1981). To compensate, Pakistan cultivated a pro-Western alignment, especially with the U.S., whose Cold War posture sought

reliable allies to contain Soviet expansion (Khan, 1983; McMahon, 1988). Joining Commonwealth structures and later subscribing to the SEATO and CENTO pacts in the mid-1950s demonstrated Pakistan's strategic choice to embed itself in the U.S. security orbit (Wikipedia contributors, 2025; Sunawar & Bano, 2015).

Strategic Utility and Conditional Support

Pakistan's utility to the U.S. dictated the ebb and flow of bilateral relations. As a frontline state during the Cold War, it leveraged its geostrategic location. The 1962 Sino-Indian War, for instance, heightened U.S. interest in Pakistan, yet simultaneous U.S.–India outreach complicated Islamabad's security calculations—exacerbating its insecurity (Ali, 2023). During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan once again became indispensable, becoming the hub for U.S.-supported mujahideen under Operation Cyclone, lensed against Soviet expansion (C. Chari, 2006; Wikipedia contributors, 2025; “Operation Cyclone,” 2025). U.S. aid during this period flowed generously amounting to US\$3.2 billion between 1981 and 1987, split between military and economic assistance (Wikipedia contributors, 2025; “Operation Cyclone,” 2025).

Yet this alliance was perpetually conditional. In 1965, much to Pakistani disappointment, the U.S. imposed an arms embargo during the Indo-Pak conflict, despite Pakistan's existing defense treaties a move driving Islamabad to reassess its alliance calculus (Wikipedia contributors, 2025; Sheikh, 2023). Similarly, the 1971 war and the growing concern over Pakistan's nuclear ambitions led to increasing U.S. distrust. Under President Carter, U.S. military aid was suspended in 1979 due to fears about nuclear proliferation (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). Although the Cold War revival for strategic purposes temporarily lifted sanctions, the lingering mistrust signalled that Pakistan's value to the U.S. was strictly utility-based (“Looking Away from Genocide,” 2013; Wikipedia contributors, 2025).

The Nuclear Question and Sanctions

The 1974 Indian nuclear test intensified Pakistan's pursuit of a deterrent, amplifying tensions with the U.S. (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). In response, the U.S. imposed laws like the Symington and Pressler Amendments to curb nuclear development effectively cutting off military and economic aid in the late 1980s and 1990s (Wikipedia contributors, 2025; Wikipedia contributors, 2025). Although there was a brief relaxation of restrictions during the early Reagan years, marked by covert tacit approvals, the late Cold War and post-Cold War tightening illustrated again that Pakistan's alignment was tolerated only when it served broader U.S. objectives (“Pakistan–United States military relations,” 2025; “United States aid to Pakistan,” 2025).

Post–Cold War Fragmentation and Strategic Estrangement

With the Soviet Union's collapse, Pakistan found itself strategically adrift. The U.S., no longer needing Islamabad as part of its anti-Soviet posture, viewed Pakistan instead through the twin lenses of nuclear proliferation and regional instability (Sheikh, 2023; Wikipedia contributors, 2025). The Pressler Amendment halted support due to non-compliance with nuclear declarations. Even F-16s that Pakistan had paid for were withheld markedly straining the relationship (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). Simultaneously, U.S. focus shifted to India which it began

viewing as a rising democratic partner further marginalizing Pakistan (Time, 2022). By the late 1990s, Pakistan became increasingly isolated labelled by some U.S. analysts as a "troubled state" or worse. The Clinton administration's sanctions in response to Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998 deepened the rift (Wikipedia contributors, 2025; Wikipedia contributors, 2025). Despite shared religious affiliations with the broader Muslim world, Pakistan's ideological affinities mattered little when U.S. strategic imperatives redirected against it.

Persistent Asymmetry and Missed Trust

From alliance to abandonment, the pre-9/11 U.S.–Pakistan relationship was characterized by persistent asymmetry. Pakistan consistently aligned itself with U.S. demands, even when sidelined or penalized, a testament to selective strategic compliance driven by existential fears—especially with India looming. U.S. foreign policy remained transactional: friendships were forged, sustained, or withdrawn entirely based on geopolitical climate. Historical turning points—1965, 1971, 1979–1989, 1998 underscore cycles of convergence followed by estrangement (Wikipedia contributors, 2025; C. Chari, 2006; The New Yorker, 2011). These oscillations of alignment fostered mistrust on both sides. Pakistan felt used and abandoned, while Washington viewed Islamabad as an unreliable partner too eager to pivot (Time, 2022; Wikipedia contributors, 2025). This legacy of distrust and transactional engagement laid the groundwork for a fragile, opportunistic partnership that would later evolve during the post-9/11 era.

Scope and Significance of the Study

This study examines this critical of pre-9/11 period to understand the frailties and patterns of the U.S.–Pakistan relationship, laying bare structural power imbalances and strategic misalignments. By exploring the foundational contours through Cold War alignment, nuclear sanctions, and post–Cold War disengagement, it contextualizes why Pakistan opted into U.S.-led security frameworks despite recurrent betrayals. Further, by synthesizing archival documentation, policy analysis, and academic insights, the study illustrates how this period fostered a climate of mistrust and strategic fragmentation that would resonate into the early 21st century.

Rationale and Significance

This study investigates the historical trajectory and transformation of U.S.–Pakistan relations from 1947 to the events leading up to 9/11. It focuses on the strategic decisions, regional compulsions, and mutual misperceptions that shaped a complex, often transactional alliance. By analysing key episodes of alignment and estrangement between the two countries particularly during the Cold War, the Soviet - Afghan War, and the nuclear non-proliferation era—this research aims to uncover the structural underpinnings of a relationship that swung between strategic cooperation and mutual distrust. These dynamics are critical to understanding how the foundations for the post-9/11 U.S.–Pakistan partnership were laid.

This study contributes to the existing body of international relations and security studies literature by foregrounding a Pakistani-centric perspective on its alliance behaviour and foreign policy decision-making in the decades prior to the War on Terror. While much of the scholarship emphasizes the U.S. strategic calculus, there remains a substantial gap in literature that fully explores how Pakistan's security

dilemma, particularly with India and Afghanistan, shaped its repeated turn toward the U.S. as a security guarantor. This study addresses that gap by situating Pakistan's choices within the broader framework of regional insecurity, ideological alignment, and the shifting global order from Cold War bipolarity to post-Cold War unipolarity. The rationale behind this research lies in the need to unpack the logic of asymmetric alliance formation—specifically how Pakistan, a geopolitically important but relatively weaker actor, navigated its strategic vulnerabilities through partnerships with a superpower whose global priorities often diverged from Pakistan's regional needs. From the SEATO and CENTO alliances of the 1950s, through the close collaboration during the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, to the nuclear sanctions and estrangement of the 1990s, the U.S.–Pakistan relationship evolved based on contingent strategic interests rather than sustained trust or shared values. Understanding this history is critical to grasping why the partnership remained fragile and reactive even as both states claimed strategic alignment.

The significance of this study also lies in its exploration of how strategic compulsions shaped foreign policy behaviour. For the U.S., Pakistan was often a tactical ally valuable for Cold War containment, regional intelligence, and military access. For Pakistan, however, alignment with the U.S. was frequently a means of counterbalancing India, securing military and economic aid, and bolstering its international legitimacy. This mismatch of strategic objectives created recurring cycles of alliance and abandonment, and these historical experiences deeply influenced Pakistani perceptions of the U.S. as an unreliable partner—a theme that would resurface post-9/11.

The study is particularly timely in reassessing this history, as it helps explain how pre-9/11 dynamics shaped the conditions under which Pakistan joined the War on Terror. U.S. frustration with Pakistan's nuclear program in the 1990s, sanctions under the Pressler and Symington amendments, and policy shifts under the Clinton administration reflected a strategic distancing that left Pakistan diplomatically and economically isolated by the end of the 20th century. In turn, these experiences heightened Pakistan's incentive to re-engage with the U.S. when the events of 9/11 created a new opportunity for strategic alignment. Understanding this preceding fragility is vital to contextualizing the nature of the post-9/11 partnership, especially its transactional and coercive dimensions.

This study also contributes to a more balanced understanding of Pakistan's strategic agency countering the common narrative that casts Pakistan as merely a passive or problematic partner. By situating Pakistan's foreign policy behaviour within the lens of realist theories (such as security dilemma, alliance formation, and balancing), this research demonstrates how Pakistan has consistently pursued rational policy decisions in a hostile regional environment—even when those decisions clashed with U.S. global expectations. Moreover, the study highlights the internal political and economic pressures that shaped Pakistan's decisions, including its fragile democratic institutions, civil-military relations, and dependency on foreign aid.

Finally, the research offers important insights for policy and diplomacy by analysing how decades of conditional engagement and shifting strategic interests created a legacy of mistrust between the two countries. This legacy explains why, even during moments of strategic convergence such as the Soviet - Afghan War, deep-rooted suspicions persisted. It also sheds light on why Pakistan has often responded to U.S. demands with selective compliance, hedging, or strategic ambiguity.

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By exploring these dynamics in the period before 9/11, the study provides critical historical context for understanding the long-term patterns of cooperation and confrontation in U.S.–Pakistan relations. It also lays the groundwork for answering the central research questions of this study:

Primary Research Question

To what extent did U.S. policies towards Pakistan evolve in the era before 9/11, and how did these shifts affect Pakistan's strategic posture and regional standing?

Sub-questions:

How much agency did Pakistan have in the bilateral relationship, and what prompted it to comply or defy U.S. demands at various junctures?

What were the key policy transitions and strategic inflection points across successive U.S. administrations from Truman to Clinton?

In what ways did these policies impact Pakistan's security calculus and stability within South Asia more broadly?

What implications did the pre-9/11 dynamics have for both countries' capacity to address emerging threats, including nuclear proliferation and regional conflict?

Research Methodology

This study investigates the historical evolution of U.S.–Pakistan relations from 1947 up to the events of 9/11, with a particular focus on how shifting strategic priorities, regional security dilemmas, and ideological confrontations shaped bilateral ties. The research aims to explore the underlying causes, patterns, and consequences of U.S. foreign policy decisions toward Pakistan during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, examining how Pakistan's role evolved as a function of broader U.S. geopolitical strategy.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a qualitative research methodology, utilizing document analysis and archival review as primary tools for data collection and interpretation. The methodological approach is descriptive, explanatory, and interpretive in nature aimed at uncovering the strategic motivations and political rationales behind the formation, transformation, and fragmentation of U.S.–Pakistan relations in the pre-9/11 era.

Qualitative Approach and Rationale

The study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand political behaviour and foreign policy decisions within historical, cultural, and strategic contexts (Polkinghorne, 2005). Following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) description, this qualitative research is a non-mathematical process of deriving meaning and understanding from textual data emphasizing interpretation over measurement.

Qualitative approaches are particularly suited for foreign policy analysis in historical contexts, as they allow for the exploration of motivations, discourse, patterns of alignment, and changes in bilateral trust (Levitt et al., 2021). The aim is not merely to chronicle the history of U.S.–Pakistan relations, but to analyse how and why foreign policy shifted over time and what consequences these shifts produced for Pakistan's security posture and strategic agency.

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Document Analysis

The primary method of data collection was qualitative document analysis (QDA). As Altheide (2000) suggests, QDA is a systematic approach to identifying themes, narratives, and patterns in textual material—especially policy documents, official statements, archival reports, and expert commentary. This method is particularly effective for analysing foreign policy behaviour across time periods, given the accessibility and stability of policy records.

Documents used in this study include:

Official U.S. foreign policy documents, such as the Mutual Defense Assistance Act (1949), Mutual Security Act (1951), Pressler and Symington Amendments, and U.S. National Security Strategies.

Declassified archival records, including diplomatic cables, policy memos, and speeches from the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton administrations.

Congressional hearings, reports from the Congressional Research Service (CRS), and statements by key U.S. officials addressing South Asia and non-proliferation.

Pakistani government responses, foreign ministry records, and official statements from key leaders, including Liaquat Ali Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, General Zia-ul-Haq, and General Pervez Musharraf.

Academic literature, think tank reports, and independent scholarly analyses of Cold War alignment, nuclear diplomacy, and regional security dynamics.

This vast range of sources enables a multi-layered analysis of foreign policy behavior—providing not only official accounts but also contrasting perspectives that highlight shifts in strategy, rhetoric, and mutual perceptions.

Sampling and Source Selection

The study employed purposive sampling to identify documents that directly addressed the U.S.–Pakistan relationship in the pre-9/11 context. This included records related to bilateral treaties, security pacts (e.g., SEATO and CENTO), nuclear cooperation and sanctions, and the Soviet Afghan War. Snowball sampling was also applied in the academic literature review—allowing one key source to lead to the next, ensuring the inclusion of interconnected events and analytical perspectives.

While document analysis forms the core of the methodology, triangulation was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of findings. Triangulation, as defined by Patton (1999), involves the cross-verification of data using multiple sources or methods. In this case, primary source documents were triangulated with scholarly articles, historical accounts, and policy analyses from both American and Pakistani perspectives.

Historical-Contextual Framing

A historical analysis framework underpins the entire methodology. This is essential for understanding the evolution of U.S. policy through successive administrations and changing global dynamics—from Cold War bipolarity to post-Cold War unipolarity. Historical analysis is useful not only for descriptive purposes but also for establishing causal explanations regarding foreign policy shifts and alliance behaviour (Merriam, 2002).

The study is divided into temporal phases (e.g., early Cold War, détente, post-Vietnam, post-Afghanistan, post-nuclear tests) to capture the changing contours of

U.S.–Pakistan relations. This periodization enables analysis of how different U.S. administrations depending on global threats (e.g., communism, nuclear proliferation, Islamic extremism) altered their stance toward Pakistan.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Although QDA provides a rich and efficient method of analysis, it is not without limitations. As Bowen (2009) notes, document analysis may be constrained by:

Selection bias, where certain documents are more readily available or widely cited.

Incomplete records, especially in the case of redacted or non-declassified documents.

Retrospective interpretation, where policy rationales are reconstructed post hoc rather than drawn from real-time analysis.

To mitigate these limitations, the study included diverse types of sources, emphasized transparency in data selection, and remained critically reflective of the geopolitical and ideological positioning of each document. While no human participants were involved in this study, ethical standards were maintained in the use of all materials, ensuring accurate citation and acknowledgment of sources.

Results and discussion

The partition of the subcontinent resulted in the states of Pakistan and India, and with this, religious boundaries were drawn, accompanied by migration and substantial bloodshed at that time (Khan, 2017). Not only was the land partitioned – so too were the assets of the two states. Following the partition, Pakistan received only one-third of the total reserves after partition of Sub-Continent as compared to India (Jalal, 1987). Pakistan received minimal military infrastructure as part of the partition settlement, which exposed its security vulnerability to its Indian counterpart. Pakistan received 3,000 tons of military stores out of 163,000 tons, 16 vessels of 48, two air squadrons of the 10, and no ordinance factories of the 26 that existed, which reflected Pakistan's military potential against India (Rai, 1981). In such circumstances, Pakistan had in many ways no choice other than to turn to the US to improve its economic and military strength. As an underdeveloped country, Pakistan's primary goal was to protect its territorial integrity, safety and economic strength (Siddiqi, 1960). Soon after independence, Pakistan and the US established security agreements and cooperated as regards intelligence, mainly due to Pakistan's security needs and the regional strategic dynamics.

The geostrategic location of Pakistan compelled it to play an important role in global politics. Soviet containment was the primary goal for the US at the time, as was pointed out by the Kennan's long telegram (Fakiolas, 1997). The US and Soviet Union were engaged in the Cold War to expand their spheres of influence across the world, mainly due to their ideological differences after World War II. In Europe, the two superpowers expanded their spheres of influence by forming treaties and pacts with European states. The US established NATO in 1949 to secure European states against the expansion of communism. This strategy was extended to Asia, and the US entered various alliances and treaties with Asian states too. Pakistan's strategic location made it the perfect choice for the US to obtain a direct connection to China; its proximity to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean provided an opportunity for the US to establish bases and pursue its global aims.

The Indian policy of non-alignment and its tilt towards the Soviet Union precluded the option of the US forming an alliance with that country. McMahon (1988) points

out that there were voices that favoured India as a means of curtailing communism; however, India's position of non-alignment was met with suspicion. Hence, the policy of containing the Soviet Union made Pakistan an important state for US policy makers.

Relations with the US were asymmetrical from Pakistan's inception as a state, as Pakistan wanted military and economic assistance for its survival and the US fulfilled that desire within the ambit of its larger global agenda which was to curtail the communist bloc. This remained the status quo between the two states in the contemporary era, and during the War on Terror era. Throughout the Cold War and beyond, relations between Pakistan and the US witnessed many ups and downs. This alternating closeness and periodical estrangement were often tied to changing regional security dynamics which were manipulated and adjusted according to the strategic needs of both states.

The Indo-Pakistani conflict of 1948 was testimony to the fragility of regional peace in South Asia. Kashmir remains a bone of contention and the epitome of enmity between the two nuclear states. The situation was exacerbated on the western border as Afghanistan refused to accept the Durand Line as the international boundary line between Pakistan and Afghanistan (Omrani, 2009). Thus, Pakistan's security situation was marred by conflict on both the eastern and western fronts. This security dilemma relating to the territorial integrity of Pakistan had been present since independence and compelled it to accede to US pacts in 1954 and 1955 (Choudhury, 1968). The alliance served to strengthen Pakistan's military and economic conditions for it to cope with the challenges of security and territorial integrity.

India's annexation of Junagadh and Hyderabad by military force exposed the vulnerable situation of Kashmir, which was independent at the time. India's occupation of Junagadh accentuated the fears of the Pakistani establishment, and the first war over Kashmir between Pakistan and India in 1948 exposed the fragility of the state of Pakistan. Kashmir has a majority Muslim population; however, its ruler attempted to go against the will of the majority and join India. This led to a conflict with Pakistan and the eventual division of Kashmir into two parts. The ceasefire occurred due to UN involvement; however, the issue remains unresolved (Talbot, 2009).

Jinnah had already declared in 1947 that Pakistan and communism could not coexist, and thus Pakistan's interests aligned more with the US and UK than with the Soviet Union (Kux, 2001). Despite this, the US initially prioritized India, offering an invitation to Nehru before Pakistan's prime minister was invited in 1949. Eventually, Liaqat Ali Khan's visit to the US laid the foundation of a formal alliance with the West (Chaudhri, 2000; Burki, 2015). Pakistan remained under threat from India, and the conflict over Kashmir flared up again in 1965 and during the Kargil crisis of 1999. The consistent threat to Pakistan's sovereignty and its weak economic position pushed it further into the US orbit (Haqqani, 2010; Chacko, 2013). For the US, Pakistan offered a strategic location near the Persian Gulf and China, which suited their containment strategy (Khan, 1983).

Pakistan never shifted its assessment of its primary threat from India to the Soviet Union. It maintained its focus on India even when aligning with the West in the Cold War. Pakistan also refused to withdraw troops from its eastern border, despite US pressure, due to the threat from India (Cohen, 1980). The US's need for allies in the Middle East and South Asia due to the Iranian oil nationalization in 1951 further

increased Pakistan's strategic relevance (Qureshi, 1978). Pakistan benefited from military and economic aid under the Mutual Defense Assistance Act (1949) and Mutual Security Act (1951), becoming a frontline state against communism.

Although most Third World countries remained non-aligned, Pakistan's security challenges led it to formally join the US bloc, even at the expense of Soviet antagonism (Saif, 2007). A weak economy, limited military power, and geographic vulnerabilities—such as the separation of East and West Pakistan by Indian territory—left Pakistan with few alternatives (Buzan, 1986; Diehl, 2002; Liebl, 2009). Afghanistan was the only country to oppose Pakistan's UN membership in 1947. It rejected the Durand Line and demanded adjustments to gain access to the sea. Afghanistan's relationship with India and its alliance with the Soviet Union made Pakistan feel encircled (Rubin & Siddique, 2006). The US supported Pakistan's stance on the Durand Line but largely adopted a policy of conflict management over resolution regarding Kashmir. While it supported a ceasefire in 1948, it did not support a long-term resolution because the Kashmir conflict did not align with broader US strategic objectives.

The Eisenhower Era

Eisenhower's presidency brought significant changes to South Asia's regional security landscape. Pakistan attracted U.S. interest as policymakers viewed it as a strategic state in the free world. During Pakistan's 1953 wheat crisis, the U.S. offered support, signalling cooperative ties. A defence pact followed in 1954, and Pakistan joined SEATO in 1954 and the Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) in 1955. These pacts aligned with U.S. Cold War strategies for regional containment of communism. Although intended to counter Soviet aggression, Pakistan viewed these agreements to bolster its military strength against India (Khan, 2010). Eisenhower affirmed that U.S. aid must not be used against non-communist states like India (Arif, 1984). Still, Pakistan's expectations diverged from U.S. assurances, and critics questioned the realism of these stipulations.

Pakistani policymakers prioritized threats from India over those from the Soviet Union. Their pragmatic choice to align with the U.S. stemmed from immediate regional fears rather than ideological confrontation with communism (Walt, 1985). This misalignment led to policy divergences Pakistan sought regional security while the U.S. pursued global containment. The Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement of May 1954 formalized economic and military aid to Pakistan (Khan, 1954), significantly enhancing the capabilities of its armed forces.

Despite this support, Pakistan faced consequences. Scholars like Dupree (1961) and Khan (1964) argued that Pakistan had hoped its U.S. alliance would support its position on Kashmir. However, the U.S. failed to intervene effectively. Arms deal with India added to Pakistan's disillusionment. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union vetoed resolutions against India on Kashmir and supported Afghanistan on the Pashtun issue (Levi, 1962), isolating Pakistan further.

Pakistan's foreign policy in the 1950s sidelined ideological preferences in favour of strategic compulsion. While the public favoured ties with the broader Muslim world, elites prioritized Western alliances (Sattar, 2010). The Baghdad Pact drew criticism from Egypt and Saudi Arabia as U.S. imperial overreach. The 1956 Suez Crisis provoked domestic backlash in Pakistan, prompting a policy reversal under pressure from opposition figures like Fatima Jinnah.

Ayub Khan's 1958 military coup reshaped Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy. His pro-U.S. stance was welcomed by the Eisenhower administration, which viewed military rule as more effective in maintaining regional stability (Tahir-Kheli, 1982). Ayub Khan's centralized control allowed for consistent foreign policy, and economic growth under his rule gave the impression of a progressing state (Kux, 2001). Eisenhower's 1959 visit to Pakistan—the first by a sitting U.S. president—reflected these close ties. The bilateral defence agreement signed that year assured U.S. assistance in case of aggression, though the U.S. clarified to India that it wouldn't support actions against it (Sattar, 2010).

Military cooperation peaked during this period. U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles visited Pakistan and was convinced by Khan of Pakistan's strategic value in curbing Soviet advances towards the Persian Gulf (Kux, 2001). Dulles famously remarked that ties with India were "intellectual" while those with Pakistan were from the heart (Abbas, 2004). Pakistan used this rhetoric to reinforce its importance to U.S. Cold War goals. In 1957, Pakistan granted the U.S. access to the Badaber base near Peshawar, which became key to intelligence operations. By 1959, the Peshawar airport was repurposed as a communication centre (Gilani, 2006). These concessions highlighted Pakistan's willingness to trade territorial access for strategic and financial aid. Islamabad's India-centric security motives deepened its U.S. alignment while attempting to isolate India diplomatically (Thornton, 1993).

The U.S. interest in Pakistan during this period was driven by broader containment strategies. While Truman had been indifferent to South Asia, Eisenhower's administration grew increasingly concerned about communism's spread into Asia and began seeking new allies like Pakistan (McMahon, 1988). The 1954 Mutual Defence Agreement marked a turning point. Just as NATO and the Marshall Plan had been effective in Europe, alliances in the Middle East and South Asia became essential to U.S. global containment. The Eisenhower Doctrine extended U.S. influence by enabling Pakistan to assist other CENTO allies such as Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. In exchange, Pakistan received substantial military and economic aid.

Yet the alliance also intensified tensions with the Soviet Union. Moscow responded with hostility, backing India on Kashmir and providing Afghanistan with support on its border claims. The U-2 spy plane incident of 1960, which launched from Pakistani soil, further escalated Soviet anger and exacerbated regional tensions (Sattar, 2010). The backlash exposed flaws in Pakistan's strategy: while gaining U.S. support, it also earned enmity from its immediate neighbours and Cold War rival states.

Scholars such as Harrison (1997), Bernard (1972), Wolpert (1982), and Hess (1987) have argued that the U.S. overemphasized Pakistan's strategic value, ignoring the destabilizing effects on regional politics—especially in Afghanistan and India. McMahon (1988) and others blame U.S. Cold War policies for transplanting global rivalry into South Asia, thereby fuelling regional insecurity.

Traditional scholars like Kennon (1951), Spanier (1960), and Graebner (1962) view U.S. actions as a defensive response to Soviet aggression. In contrast, revisionist thinkers—Walter (1967), Raynor (1972), Kolko (1972), and Combs (1983)—argue that the U.S. pursued aggressive policies to sustain capitalist dominance. According to this school, Washington's alliance with Pakistan served its own geopolitical ends rather than mutual security. Gaddis (1983) introduced a post-revisionist synthesis, acknowledging both defensive motives and strategic ambitions.

Leffler (1983, 1984) reinforces the idea that U.S. militarized foreign policy was

driven by structural insecurity in the post-war era. Pakistan's geography made it an ideal partner. Establishing distant military bases like Badaber ensured the U.S. could survive and retaliate in case of nuclear attack. Pakistan, as a strategic asset, became integral to this design (Alvi, 1958). Conversely, Pakistan viewed the U.S.—then accounting for 40% of global production—as a powerful ally in offsetting Indian threats and gaining military autonomy (Sattar, 2010). This asymmetrical alliance was emblematic of Cold War client–patron dynamics where superpowers shaped the behaviour of weaker states.

The Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon Eras

The Sino-Indian war of 1962, during the Kennedy era, sparked a divergence of interests between Pakistan and the US. Military aid was provided to India despite Pakistan's concerns, prompting Pakistan to build closer ties with China. The US viewed these ties as harmful to its interests in South Asia. However, Pakistan's foreign policy was strategically driven rather than ideologically oriented. It distanced itself from the Soviet Union and aligned with China, demonstrating that geopolitical needs outweighed ideological alignments.

Under President Johnson, the continuity of Kennedy's policies was evident. The growing closeness between Pakistan and China irritated US policymakers. During the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war, Pakistan felt abandoned when the US, rather than supporting its ally, imposed an arms embargo on both India and Pakistan. This deeply affected Pakistan, which was reliant on US military aid, unlike India which had Soviet support. This shift prompted Ayub Khan to seek closer ties with the Soviet Union, indicating a major shift in Pakistan's foreign policy alignment.

Pakistan's strategic ties with China, though previously viewed with suspicion by the US, gained importance under President Nixon. As Nixon sought to open diplomatic channels with China, Pakistan's role became critical in facilitating that engagement. Nixon expressed strong support for Pakistan and General Yahya Khan. During the 1971 crisis in East Pakistan, despite reports from US officials highlighting military atrocities, the Nixon administration refrained from strongly condemning Pakistan due to the strategic importance of its role in the China-US rapprochement.

Nevertheless, the US did not assist Pakistan during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. Although Nixon pressured India to cease its military actions in West Pakistan, Pakistan felt betrayed, particularly as a US ally under mutual defence agreements. This event significantly altered Pakistan's perception of its alliances. Pakistan withdrew from SEATO in 1972 and later sought to reduce its dependence on the US.

The aftermath of the 1971 war also drove Pakistan to pursue nuclear weapons. Feeling exposed and insecure after the loss of East Pakistan, Pakistan considered nuclear deterrence vital to maintaining a balance with India. After India's 1974 nuclear test, Pakistan accelerated its nuclear program. Efforts to obtain nuclear technology from France were thwarted by US pressure, but Pakistan continued its program, eventually succeeding in developing nuclear capability by 1983.

During this period, US non-proliferation policies, particularly the Symington and Glenn Amendments, penalized Pakistan for its nuclear ambitions but did not affect India, which had already conducted its nuclear test in 1974. The US justified this by suggesting India's nuclear capability was aimed at China, not Pakistan, highlighting the divergence between US global objectives and Pakistan's regional security

concerns.

Pakistan viewed its pursuit of nuclear weapons as essential to counter India's conventional military superiority and perceived hegemonic intentions. US efforts to curtail Pakistan's nuclear program without addressing India's capabilities further alienated Pakistan. It was clear that US policy did not fully align with Pakistan's regional security priorities, especially after repeated conflicts with India and US inaction during those critical moments.

Thus, during the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, US–Pakistan relations were marked by a fluctuating alignment shaped by shifting global and regional priorities. While strategic cooperation persisted, mutual distrust and diverging objectives led to significant strains that continued to shape the bilateral relationship into the post-Cold War era.

The Carter Era

During the 1970s, US aid to Pakistan declined significantly. Pakistan, facing an arms buildup in India—supported by the Soviet Union sought additional weapons. India's 1974 nuclear test deepened Pakistan's insecurity. In response, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto turned to China for support and publicly opposed Israeli policies, diverging from US Middle East strategies (Cheema, 1983). Bhutto famously declared Pakistan would "eat grass" if necessary to acquire nuclear weapons. Although the US offered A-7 aircraft, it couldn't deter Pakistan's nuclear ambitions (Paul, 1992). The Carter administration suspended aid in August 1978, briefly resumed it in October, and halted it again in 1979 over Pakistan's nuclear program (Mustafa, 1981).

President Carter, a staunch advocate of democracy and human rights, preferred India over military-ruled Pakistan. The Glenn Amendment penalized Pakistan due to its nuclear activities. US policymakers were also alarmed by the prospect of an "Islamic bomb." However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 shifted US priorities. Sanctions were lifted, and Pakistan became vital to US regional policy. Carter pledged to defend US interests in the Persian Gulf (Wriggins, 1983), offering economic and military aid, which General Zia-ul-Haq initially rejected as "peanuts." Pakistan saw the situation as an opportunity to enhance its strategic strength.

CIA Director William Casey backed a plan to recruit jihadis to fight communism in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2001). The ISI and CIA collaborated to use religion as a tool for their geopolitical goals. This convergence empowered Pakistan's military and boosted its nuclear development. In 1988, the Geneva Accord was signed for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. However, the mujahidin, who had fought the Soviets, were sidelined in post-war negotiations. Schaffer (2011) notes that the US's indifference toward post-war Afghanistan destabilized the region.

Reagan and the End of the Cold War

Under President Reagan, the US massively supported Pakistan in exchange for cooperation in Afghanistan (Coll, 1992). The CIA–ISI alliance became the largest covert operation in history. Despite Pakistan's nuclear ambitions, the US overlooked this due to shared anti-Soviet objectives (Weinbaum, 1991). Soviet incursions into Pakistani airspace and India's alignment with the USSR created pressure on both Pakistani borders, pushing Pakistan closer to the US. The US provided advanced weaponry and training to Pakistan's intelligence services. From 1988 to 1993, Pakistan received \$4 billion in US aid (Schaffer & Schaffer, 2011), which was also

used to counter India—contrary to US regional goals.

This period marked Pakistan's growing nuclear capability (Ahmed, 1999) and a shift in its foreign policy to focus on nuclear deterrence and conventional military buildup. The Reagan administration, prioritizing Soviet containment, did not pressure Pakistan over its domestic politics or nuclear activities. Sophisticated equipment, including F-16s—previously reserved for NATO allies—was supplied. The Afghan war became an opportunity for the US to retaliate against the USSR after its Vietnam defeat (Kux, 2001). At one point, Pakistan was the fourth-largest recipient of US aid.

Reagan supported Pakistan's role in the region. The 1985 Pressler Amendment required annual certification that Pakistan was not developing nuclear weapons for aid to continue. However, Zia acknowledged the transactional nature of the relationship, saying: "The two countries were the union of unequal and incompatible ... though they had common interests" (Kux, 2001).

US–Pakistan Post–Cold War Relations

The Cold War era witnessed a disparity between Pakistani and US interests in global and regional contexts. Convergence and divergence of interests overlapped due to the clash between superpowers—the US and the Soviet Union. The end of the Afghan War culminated in the Soviet Union's disintegration and the emergence of the US as the sole superpower, reshaping global politics (Walt, 2000). Pakistan's foreign policy, traditionally centred around India, had to adjust in response to shifting US strategic priorities. After Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan's nuclear ambitions became a central concern for the US.

A power vacuum emerged in Afghanistan post-Soviet withdrawal, leading to civil war. The US lost interest in Afghanistan after achieving its primary goal of defeating the USSR. It has been argued that Pakistan's ISI channelled support toward pro-Pakistan groups in Afghanistan, which later attempted to install an anti-US regime. Cohen (2007) suggests the ISI believed such groups could also be used in Kashmir.

Under President George H. W. Bush, US–Pakistan relations diverged. With the Soviet threat removed, the US no longer saw Pakistan as strategically vital. Nuclear proliferation and Pakistan's support for Kashmiri militants caused growing friction. Pakistan's reputation deteriorated, nearly earning the label of a terrorist state. The Bush administration focused on pragmatic global dominance rather than ideological competition. Hyland (1989) described the Bush doctrine as practical and non-ideological, focusing on cautious international engagement (Dumbrell, 1996). Non-proliferation emerged as a cornerstone of US policy, emphasizing global security.

While the US had historically embraced isolationism (Fensterwald, 1958), the post–Cold War world made disengagement impractical due to economic and military interdependence (Gaddis, 1991). "America First" debates resurfaced, yet US global involvement remained essential. Bush's response to the 1990–91 Gulf War reinforced US activism. He promoted a rules-based world order, where international law replaced brute force (Bush & Scowcroft, 2011).

In September 1990, the US imposed sanctions on Pakistan over its nuclear program (Schaffer, 2011). The US canceled the sale of already-paid-for F-16s and suspended \$700 million in aid (Sattar, 2010). By 1993, Pakistan risked being labeled a terrorist state due to its involvement in Kashmir and militant training camps near the Afghan border. The Afghanistan issue lost urgency for the Clinton administration as civil war persisted. Instead, US attention shifted toward China's rise, perceived as a future

threat to US supremacy.

President Clinton's administration sought to replace the Cold War's containment doctrine with "democratic enlargement." This policy promoted democracy and free markets, justified military interventions, and emphasized multilateralism (Miller, 1994). Clinton believed Russia no longer posed a threat (Lake, 1993). Academics proposed various frameworks—"end of history," "clash of civilizations," and "benevolent empire"—to understand US hegemony in the unipolar world (Wohlforth, 1999). Policymakers debated selective engagement and soft power in the post-Cold War world (Waltz, 2000), while smaller states like Pakistan grew wary of their vulnerable position in this system.

Clinton prioritized non-proliferation, worsening ties with Pakistan. Tony Lake flagged undemocratic states seeking nuclear arms as key threats (Lake, 1994). Though Clinton supported the Brown Amendment in 1995, F-16s were still withheld. After Pakistan and India's 1998 nuclear tests, sanctions hit both nations. US loans to Pakistan were suspended (Morrow & Carriere, 1999). The ISI's ongoing support for Kashmiri militants and training camps heightened tensions. India, meanwhile, was seen as a more stable, reliable partner. Human rights, democracy, and nuclear restraint were Clinton's key concerns. CIA warnings noted Pakistan was "on the brink" due to its Kashmir involvement (Kux, 2001).

The Pressler Amendment, enacted in 1990, had already ended military and economic aid to Pakistan over its nuclear ambitions. Once the third-largest US aid recipient after Egypt and Israel, Pakistan faced significant economic strain (Birdsall, 2011). In Clinton's final years, Taliban ascendancy in Afghanistan and attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (linked to Osama bin Laden) raised alarm. Pakistan recognized the Taliban regime, exacerbating concerns in Washington.

When President George W. Bush took office, the dynamics remained strained. General Musharraf's 1999 coup did little to improve relations. Coercion mixed with incentives marked US diplomacy. However, the 9/11 attacks radically shifted the relationship. Pakistan was thrust into the spotlight once more, becoming a "front-line non-NATO ally" in the War on Terror.

Conclusion

The trajectory of US-Pakistan relations prior to 9/11 was shaped by a complex interplay of strategic necessity, regional insecurity, ideological divergences, and shifting global power structures. Throughout the Cold War and into the post-Cold War era, the relationship oscillated between close cooperation and deep estrangement. These fluctuations were largely driven by the transformation of each state's national interests in response to changing geopolitical contexts, rather than by shared values or long-term strategic alignment.

During the Cold War, Pakistan's alignment with the United States was primarily dictated by its acute security concerns vis-à-vis India. The nascent state perceived India as an existential threat, particularly over the unresolved Kashmir issue. As a result, Pakistani leadership sought external alliances to bolster its military and economic capacity. The US, for its part, viewed Pakistan as a strategically located ally in its broader campaign to contain the spread of communism, especially in the South and Central Asian regions. Thus, convergence emerged not from ideological affinity but from a mutual, though temporary, alignment of interests Pakistan needed support against India, and the US needed a regional bulwark against Soviet expansion.

However, the relationship was fundamentally asymmetrical and transactional. The US was primarily concerned with global ideological rivalry, while Pakistan remained focused on its regional security dilemma. This mismatch in objectives led to repeated cycles of disillusionment. US arms aid to India during the Sino-Indian War of 1962, and its neutrality during the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971, were viewed in Pakistan as betrayals. Similarly, the US grew increasingly wary of Pakistan's nuclear ambitions and its use of Islamist proxies in Afghanistan and Kashmir, especially after the Cold War ended.

In the post-Cold War period, US interests shifted away from South Asia, leading to a decline in Pakistan's geostrategic importance. Pakistan's pursuit of nuclear weapons and its support for militant groups were now viewed through the lens of proliferation and terrorism, rather than Cold War utility. The imposition of sanctions in the 1990s and the growing closeness between the US and India further strained bilateral ties. Pakistan, meanwhile, remained trapped in a security-centric worldview, seeking to leverage any opportunity to counterbalance Indian regional dominance even if that meant supporting actors the US deemed extremist or destabilizing.

Ultimately, US-Pakistan relations before 9/11 reveal a pattern of selective engagement, shaped more by short-term strategic calculations than by any enduring partnership. Both countries often viewed each other instrumentally: Pakistan to external support against India, and the US as a power to be engaged when convenient. This legacy of mistrust, unmet expectations, and strategic divergence would set the tone for the fragile, transactional partnership that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. Understanding this historical backdrop is essential to grasp the roots of the deep-seated mistrust and misalignment that have characterized the relationship in the decades since.

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