

Between Alliance and Disappointment: Pakistan–U.S. Relations (1950–1979)

Introduction

Between 1950 and 1979, Pakistan's relationship with the United States passed through phases of alliance, expectation, frustration, and strategic renewal. The United States viewed Pakistan mainly as a Cold War ally, while Pakistan expected consistent support against India. These mismatched expectations defined the ups and downs in their bilateral relations.

Strengthening Alliances and American Approval in the 1950s

After Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan's visit to the United States in 1950, Pakistan fully entered the Western bloc. During the 1950s, Pakistan joined **SEATO (1954)** and **CENTO (1955)** — defense pacts created to counter the spread of communism.

The United States welcomed Pakistan's participation and began providing large amounts of economic and military assistance. This period marked the **“golden phase”** of cooperation, where Pakistan received aid for defense modernization, infrastructure, and industrial growth.

American experts helped Pakistan build its agriculture and communication sectors. Washington considered Pakistan a loyal ally, while Pakistan saw the alliance as a guarantee of protection and financial stability. However, this cooperation was largely based on Cold War needs rather than Pakistan's regional security concerns.

Pakistan's Expectations and Growing Disappointment

Despite receiving aid, Pakistan's expectations were higher. Islamabad believed its alliance with the U.S. ensured support in conflicts with India, especially over **Kashmir**.

However, American policymakers were more focused on containing Soviet influence globally than involving themselves in South Asian territorial disputes. This created a **gap in perception** — Pakistan saw the U.S. as a protector, while the U.S. viewed Pakistan as a convenient ally in global politics.

By the early 1960s, this imbalance began causing mistrust. Pakistan started realizing that the American partnership brought economic benefits but not strategic guarantees when it mattered most.

The 1965 War and American Neutrality

The **Indo-Pak War of 1965** was the first real test of U.S.-Pakistan relations. Pakistan expected military and diplomatic backing from Washington due to its alliance commitments.

Instead, the U.S. imposed an **arms embargo** on both India and Pakistan, cutting off military supplies. Pakistan saw this as **betrayal**, since American weapons had formed the backbone of its army. The embargo hurt Pakistan more than India, as it depended heavily on U.S. military technology.

This event marked a turning point. Pakistan began doubting American reliability and sought alternative partners, especially **China**, to diversify its foreign relations. The war revealed that

U.S. support would always be guided by global priorities rather than Pakistan's regional conflicts.

The 1971 War and Further Strain

The **1971 crisis**, which led to the breakup of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh, further weakened ties. Despite being a key ally, the United States did little to prevent India's intervention or support Pakistan's efforts to preserve its unity.

While President **Nixon** and Secretary **Kissinger** showed sympathy toward Pakistan and even used it as a communication channel with China, the U.S. avoided direct involvement to protect its broader strategic interests.

For Pakistan, this neutrality was another deep disappointment. The loss of East Pakistan was seen as proof that the American alliance had failed to protect Pakistan's sovereignty. Public opinion in Pakistan turned increasingly anti-American during this period.

Reassessment under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1972–1977)

After the 1971 war, **Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto** adopted a more independent foreign policy. He sought to reduce reliance on the West and strengthen ties with **China, Muslim countries**, and even the **Soviet Union**.

Bhutto initiated Pakistan's **nuclear program** to ensure national security after the 1971 defeat, which alarmed Washington. As a result, U.S. military and economic assistance declined during the mid-1970s.

Relations became further strained when the U.S. criticized Bhutto's growing authoritarianism and nuclear ambitions. However, Bhutto's outreach to the Islamic world through the **1974 Islamic Summit in Lahore** enhanced Pakistan's image among Muslim nations and balanced its international standing.

The Zia-ul-Haq Era and American Reaction (1977–1979)

In **1977**, General **Zia-ul-Haq** overthrew Bhutto's government in a military coup. The U.S. initially reacted negatively, suspending some aid programs and expressing concern over the end of democracy and human rights abuses.

However, the global situation soon changed dramatically. The **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979** transformed Pakistan's importance in U.S. strategy once again. Washington now saw Pakistan as a **frontline state** in the fight against Soviet expansion.

American criticism of Zia's regime softened, and preparations for renewed cooperation began. Thus, Pakistan's value in U.S. foreign policy shifted from democracy promotion to **strategic necessity**, marking the start of a new partnership that would dominate the 1980s.

Analysis of the 1950–1979 Relationship

Throughout this period, Pakistan's relationship with the United States remained **uneven and interest-based**. The U.S. viewed Pakistan as a tool in its global containment strategy, while

Pakistan sought military and political backing against India.

The failure of U.S. support during the 1965 and 1971 wars exposed the limits of this alliance.

Pakistan learned that Western alliances were **conditional**, not permanent.

However, both nations continued to cooperate when their interests aligned, proving that strategic needs—not ideology—defined the U.S.-Pakistan relationship.