

East or West? Pakistan's Alliance with the USA during the Cold War

Introduction

After independence in 1947, Pakistan faced multiple challenges—economic weakness, security threats from India, and lack of global recognition. In this early phase, Pakistan had to decide whether to align with the Western bloc led by the USA or the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union. This decision became one of the earliest and most defining moments in Pakistan's foreign policy.

Pakistan's Strategic Dilemma after Independence

In the late 1940s, Pakistan was struggling for survival. Its relations with India were tense due to the Kashmir dispute, and it had limited resources to maintain internal stability. Pakistan urgently needed international allies for economic aid and defense support.

The Soviet Union invited Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan first, but the government did not respond promptly. On the other hand, the USA showed interest in Pakistan as a potential ally in the region. Pakistan's leaders were attracted to the democratic and capitalist model of the West, which they believed could help the country modernize. Fearing the spread of communism and seeking recognition, Pakistan gradually leaned toward the United States.

Liaquat Ali Khan's Visit to the USA (1950)

In May 1950, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan visited the United States, marking the beginning of formal relations between both countries. The visit aimed to secure economic aid, military assistance, and political support at the international level, especially on the Kashmir issue. Liaquat's decision to visit the USA instead of the Soviet Union symbolized Pakistan's entry into the Western camp during the Cold War. He presented Pakistan as a Muslim country that supported peace, democracy, and anti-communism. The American leadership welcomed Pakistan's stance, viewing it as a potential partner against Soviet expansion in Asia. However, this move created a diplomatic distance between Pakistan and the Soviet Union, a gap that persisted for years.

Pakistan's Motivations for Aligning with the USA

Pakistan's alignment with the USA was driven by several motives:

- **Security concerns:** Ongoing conflict with India over Kashmir made Pakistan seek military allies.
- **Economic dependency:** Pakistan's economy needed urgent financial aid and technological assistance.
- **International recognition:** Pakistan wanted the USA's support to strengthen its global position.

- **Ideological preference:** Pakistan's leadership preferred the democratic, capitalist system of the West over communism.
- **Modernization hopes:** The U.S. model of development appealed to Pakistan's elite and policymakers.

These factors made the American alliance appear as both a necessity and an opportunity for Pakistan's survival and progress.

U.S. Motivations for Supporting Pakistan

From the American perspective, Pakistan had great strategic importance. During the Cold War, the U.S. sought to prevent the spread of communism, especially in Asia and the Middle East. Pakistan's geographic location—bordering the Soviet Union, China, and near the Middle East—made it a valuable ally for intelligence and defense purposes. Moreover, as a Muslim-majority country, Pakistan could serve as a bridge between the Western and Islamic worlds. The U.S. policymakers also believed Pakistan's army could be a strong regional partner in defense alliances. Thus, both countries found mutual benefits in cooperation.

Early Outcomes of the Alliance

The U.S.-Pakistan relationship brought tangible results during the 1950s. Pakistan received financial aid, development loans, and technical assistance through American programs. U.S. experts helped Pakistan plan its industrial, agricultural, and educational development. Militarily, Pakistan joined Western defense pacts such as **SEATO (1954)** and **CENTO (1955)**, strengthening its defense capacity. The partnership raised Pakistan's international profile and improved its security position. However, the dependence on U.S. aid also reduced Pakistan's freedom in foreign policy decisions. Over time, it became clear that American support came with political and strategic conditions.

Consequences and Long-Term Implications

Liaquat Ali Khan's decision to visit the USA shaped Pakistan's foreign policy for decades. It aligned the country permanently with the Western bloc and deepened its economic and military dependence on the U.S.

Relations with the Soviet Union remained strained for years, and Pakistan missed opportunities for balanced diplomacy. The U.S. alliance gave Pakistan short-term gains—aid, recognition, and military power—but it also tied Pakistan's policies to Washington's strategic interests. This dependency became visible during later crises when U.S. support fluctuated.

The 1950 visit thus laid the foundation for Pakistan's Western-oriented foreign policy and created a long-lasting pattern of reliance on American assistance.

Conclusion

Pakistan's decision to align with the United States during the early Cold War period was a turning point in its diplomatic history. Liaquat Ali Khan's 1950 visit opened the door to decades of U.S.-Pakistan cooperation, bringing both benefits and challenges.

While the alliance helped Pakistan strengthen its economy and defense in the short term, it also limited Pakistan's foreign policy independence and created tensions with the Eastern bloc. The choice reflected Pakistan's desire for survival, development, and global recognition—but it also made the nation heavily dependent on external support.