

Historical Context of Pakistan–Britain Relations

Pakistan and Britain shared a deep historical connection through the British Empire. After independence in 1947, Britain quickly recognised Pakistan and maintained cordial relations based on trade, education, and diplomacy. Many Pakistani elites were educated in Britain, and English institutions influenced Pakistan's legal and administrative systems. Membership in the Commonwealth provided Pakistan an important platform to engage with other nations, especially the former British colonies, reinforcing its global legitimacy.

Pakistan's Membership and Withdrawal from the Commonwealth

Pakistan joined the Commonwealth as a founding member in 1947, symbolising continuity and friendship with Britain and other member nations. However, political tensions began to grow over Britain's neutral stance on the Kashmir dispute and its support for India in various international forums. The situation worsened after the **1971 Indo-Pak war**, when Britain recognised **Bangladesh's independence** early, angering Pakistan. Consequently, in **January 1972**, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto announced Pakistan's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, reflecting his policy of independence and national pride.

Consequences of the Withdrawal

Pakistan's withdrawal had both political and economic implications. It reduced its access to Commonwealth trade and development programmes, technical assistance, and educational scholarships. Diplomatic interactions with several Western states became limited. Pakistan, under Bhutto, instead focused on strengthening ties with **Muslim, African, and socialist countries** as part of his "Look East and Islamic World" policy. Although bilateral relations with Britain continued, Pakistan's influence in global Commonwealth discussions diminished.

Rejoining the Commonwealth

Pakistan rejoined the Commonwealth in **1989**, under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. This decision represented a major shift in Pakistan's foreign policy, aligning once again with democratic and Western nations. Britain and other Commonwealth members warmly welcomed Pakistan back, seeing it as a step toward greater political stability and global engagement. Re-entry revitalised cooperation in trade, education, and governance and restored Pakistan's visibility in international forums. It also helped improve Pakistan's global image after years of isolation.

Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's Strategic Importance

The **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979** was a turning point in Pakistan's relations with Britain and other Western powers. The invasion alarmed the West, as it appeared to extend Soviet influence toward South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Britain, in alignment with the United States, supported Pakistan's role as a **frontline state** against Soviet expansion. Western aid, including British humanitarian and military assistance, increased significantly. Britain also helped fund

Afghan refugee programmes in Pakistan and provided diplomatic backing at international forums.

Impact on Commonwealth Relations

The Afghan crisis indirectly strengthened Pakistan's ties within the Commonwealth. Although Pakistan was not a member at the time of the invasion (it rejoined later), its role in resisting Soviet expansion earned global attention and respect among Western and Commonwealth nations. After rejoining, Pakistan benefited from development aid, student exchange programmes, and policy cooperation under Commonwealth frameworks. However, the conflict also brought challenges such as extremism, refugee crises, and regional instability, which later affected Pakistan's internal and external affairs.

Conclusion

Pakistan's relationship with Britain and the Commonwealth evolved through phases of cooperation, withdrawal, and re-engagement. Bhutto's withdrawal reflected Pakistan's desire for independence and dignity, while the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan highlighted Pakistan's strategic importance to the West. Britain's support during the Afghan crisis restored mutual trust, paving the way for Pakistan's eventual return to the Commonwealth. Despite political fluctuations, Pakistan's connection with Britain and the Commonwealth remained an essential part of its diplomatic and historical identity.