

The China Factor — Impact of Improved Pakistan–China Relations on Pakistan–Soviet Ties

Introduction

Pakistan's foreign policy during the Cold War aimed to maintain balanced relations with major powers. However, one of the most significant developments in the 1960s and 1970s was the **deepening friendship between Pakistan and China**. While this relationship brought many advantages for Pakistan, it also had a direct and lasting impact on its relations with the **Soviet Union**. The growing closeness between Pakistan and China was viewed by Moscow with suspicion, and it became a key factor shaping Pakistan–Soviet relations for decades.

Emergence of Pakistan–China Friendship

Pakistan began strengthening ties with China after the **Sino-Indian War of 1962**, when China emerged as a regional power and India received support from the Soviet Union. Pakistan saw China as a reliable partner in countering India's dominance in South Asia. Diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries rapidly expanded. High-level visits took place, including President Ayub Khan's visit to China in 1965. This period marked the beginning of strong **political, military, and economic cooperation** between Islamabad and Beijing. The growing partnership with China gave Pakistan an alternative to Western dependence but also created unease in Moscow.

Soviet Concerns Over the China–Pakistan Alliance

The Soviet Union viewed Pakistan's friendship with China as a **strategic threat** to its influence in the region. Relations between the USSR and China had already deteriorated due to the **Sino-Soviet split** in the early 1960s, leading to rivalry between the two communist powers. When Pakistan aligned itself closely with China, the Soviet Union interpreted it as a move against its regional interests. Moscow began to see Pakistan as part of an anti-Soviet bloc. This suspicion weakened the limited progress that had been achieved during Ayub Khan's time. The USSR grew increasingly cautious and reduced its warmth towards Pakistan's leadership.

The 1971 Indo-Pak War and Soviet Tilt Toward India

The deepening China–Pakistan partnership coincided with the Soviet Union's growing support for India. During the 1971 Indo-Pak War, the USSR signed a **Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation** with India and provided it with strong diplomatic and military backing. In contrast, China supported Pakistan politically. This alignment of sides during the war clearly reflected the impact of the Pakistan–China relationship on Moscow's policies. The Soviet Union opposed Pakistan's stance and indirectly blamed Islamabad's closeness with Beijing for increasing regional instability. As a result, Pakistan–Soviet relations deteriorated further after the breakup of East Pakistan.

Impact on Economic and Political Relations

The strained political environment also affected economic cooperation between Pakistan and the Soviet Union. Many proposed development projects were delayed or cancelled due to growing distrust. The USSR reduced its technical assistance and preferred to focus on India as its main South Asian partner. Pakistan, in turn, continued to seek Chinese support in defence and industrial sectors. The Soviet media often criticised Pakistan's alignment with China, while Pakistani policymakers viewed the USSR as biased towards India. Thus, political tension weakened opportunities for meaningful economic collaboration.

Cold War Rivalries and Regional Alignments

During the 1970s and 1980s, global politics intensified the divide between Pakistan and the Soviet Union. Pakistan's alliance with China, and later its cooperation with the United States during the **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979)**, made relations even more hostile. The USSR considered Pakistan an important base for anti-Soviet activities supported by China and the U.S. Meanwhile, Pakistan saw the Soviet presence in Afghanistan as a security threat. The earlier diplomatic balance achieved under Ayub Khan completely disappeared. The Cold War rivalry between Moscow and Beijing ensured that Pakistan–Soviet ties remained tense for years.

Conclusion: Lasting Effects of the China Factor

The improvement in Pakistan–China relations brought both opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. While it strengthened Pakistan's regional position and security, it also **complicated its relationship with the Soviet Union**. Moscow's growing support for India and its mistrust of Pakistan's alliance with China created long-term diplomatic distance. The “China factor” thus became a defining element in Pakistan–Soviet relations during the Cold War. It demonstrated how Pakistan's foreign policy, though aimed at balance and independence, was often shaped by the larger power rivalries of the time.