

A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF PAKISTAN-U.S. RELATIONS 1947-1999: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: The relationship between the United States and Pakistan has remained one of the most strategically significant yet volatile bilateral partnerships in modern geopolitical history. The interaction between the two states has been shaped by shifting global power dynamics, regional security challenges, and evolving national priorities, making it an important subject of study within international relations and political history. Understanding these fluctuations provides valuable insight into broader patterns of alliance behavior and foreign policy adaptation.

Objective: This narrative review aims to examine the historical trajectory of U.S.–Pakistan relations from 1947 to 1999, with emphasis on the political, military, and strategic developments that shaped periods of cooperation and discord.

Main Discussion Points: The review highlights that bilateral relations were initially strong in the post-independence years, marked by multiple security agreements and mutual strategic alignment. Tensions emerged during the wars of 1962, 1965, and 1971, reflecting mismatched expectations and divergent security priorities. A significant revitalization occurred during the Cold War era (1979–1989), when both states collaborated against Soviet expansion in Afghanistan. However, relations deteriorated again in the late 1980s and 1990s following U.S. sanctions linked to Pakistan’s nuclear program, illustrating the cyclical nature of the partnership.

Conclusion: Overall, the review finds that U.S.–Pakistan relations are characterized by recurrent shifts between strategic convergence and conflict, driven largely by changing geopolitical interests rather than stable long-term commitments. Further research is needed to understand the deeper structural factors underpinning these fluctuations and their implications for future policy.

Keywords: Cold War, Foreign Policy, Military Cooperation, Narrative Review, Nuclear Policy, Pakistan–U.S. Relations.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's early foreign policy was profoundly shaped by the strategic insecurities that emerged at the moment of its creation, particularly the unresolved dispute over Kashmir, which became the central determinant of its security outlook for decades (1,2). As a state grappling with the aftermath of communal violence, inadequate institutional capacity, and a persistent sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis India, Pakistan sought external military and economic support to consolidate its sovereignty. In this context, the United States appeared to be the most viable partner due to its leadership position in the post-war international system. Yet, Pakistan's initial overtures—including its request for USD 510 million in military aid in 1947—were declined, reflecting Washington's reluctance to immediately prioritize Pakistan in its regional policy calculations (3). The outbreak of the first Indo-Pakistan war in 1948 and the subsequent U.S. arms embargo on both states further underscored the asymmetry between Pakistan's expectations and American interests, even after the embargo was eased following the 1949 ceasefire (4). Despite this lukewarm beginning, Pakistan continued to view the United States as an essential security partner. Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan's visit to Washington in 1950 signaled Pakistan's willingness to align with the Western bloc, although the trip was framed as a goodwill initiative rather than an explicit Cold War commitment (5). His emphasis on shared democratic and ethical values was intended to build trust, yet U.S. support remained limited, with assistance confined largely to minor military supplies such as anti-tank and anti-personnel mines (3). Washington's subsequent request for Pakistani troops during the Korean War (1950–51) highlighted the divergent priorities of the two states: while the U.S. sought military contributions for its global containment strategy, Pakistan sought a firm security guarantee against India. The absence of such assurances, coupled with ongoing tensions over Kashmir, generated domestic opposition to deploying Pakistani troops abroad, despite Pakistan's broader pro-Western stance (4). The early 1950s further illustrated the fragility of Pakistan–U.S. engagement. Proposals such as the British-led Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO) were rejected by Pakistan due to its unresolved security concerns with India, while the initiative ultimately collapsed due to regional Arab opposition (5). Bilateral cooperation remained modest, evidenced by the approval of only USD 600,000 in economic aid in 1951 under the Four Point Program (6).

Even Vice President Richard Nixon's 1953 visit, despite expressing optimism about future collaboration, did not immediately translate into significant institutionalized partnership (7). At this stage, the relationship lacked the symmetry and predictability expected of a mature alliance. Pakistan's overriding pursuit of security guarantees, the U.S. view of Pakistan as a secondary yet strategically useful actor in South Asia, and the broader perception of a patron-client dynamic limited the depth of early cooperation (1,7). A significant shift occurred with Pakistan's entry into Western-sponsored military alliances. The signing of the 1954 Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S., followed by Pakistan's accession to SEATO (September 1954) and CENTO (September 1955), marked the country's transition into a structured security partnership aimed at countering Soviet influence (8). For Pakistan, these alliances offered international recognition and a semblance of strategic reassurance, despite domestic reservations. For the United States, Pakistan's geographic position offered military value in both Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian theatres, reinforcing the rationale for its inclusion in the broader containment architecture (8). Although these commitments did not explicitly address Pakistan's core fear of Indian aggression, they nevertheless laid the foundations for a long, complex, and often turbulent bilateral relationship. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate the historical evolution of Pakistan–U.S. relations as a product of mismatched expectations, shifting geopolitical priorities, and recurrent trust deficits. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to analyze how early historical interactions shaped the long-term trajectory of Pakistan–U.S. strategic engagement and to critically examine the structural factors that contributed to recurring instability within this bilateral relationship. The objective is to assess how these formative decades influenced Pakistan's security behaviour and to evaluate the extent to which U.S. strategic calculations aligned—or conflicted—with Pakistan's core national interests.

Pakistan and the USA Relations during President Ayub Era

During President Ayub Khan's tenure, Pakistan–U.S. relations entered a period of heightened strategic engagement shaped primarily by Cold War imperatives. The United States viewed the protection of Middle Eastern stability and the containment of international communism as essential components of its national security doctrine (1). As part of this broader geopolitical architecture, Washington pledged in 1959 that aggression against Pakistan would invite a coordinated international response, including the use of military force if circumstances required (2). Although this declaration symbolically elevated Pakistan's importance as a regional partner, it simultaneously reflected Washington's global priorities rather than a tailored commitment to Pakistan's security concerns, especially those related to India. President Ayub Khan capitalized on this strategic opportunity and actively deepened Pakistan's alignment with the United States. Bilateral collaboration expanded across military, economic, and diplomatic domains, and Pakistan emerged as a

reliable U.S. ally in the regional containment structure. However, despite increased cooperation, Pakistan experienced recurring disappointment over the absence of explicit U.S. guarantees against India—a gap that would shape future mistrust within the relationship.

Pakistan and the USA Relations during Yahya Khan's Era

The Yahya Khan period coincided with profound political upheaval within Pakistan and major global realignments. Domestically, the refusal to transfer power after the 1970 elections precipitated civil war and ultimately the secession of East Pakistan. In this turbulent context, U.S. President Richard Nixon pursued a strategic outreach to China as part of a recalibrated Cold War strategy aimed at counterbalancing Soviet influence (3). Pakistan became the indispensable intermediary for this diplomatic breakthrough, facilitating the secret mission that enabled the establishment of U.S.–China communication channels. This episode temporarily reaffirmed Pakistan's strategic value, yet deeper structural asymmetries persisted. While Islamabad sought long-term political and military benefits from this cooperation, Washington continued to prioritize its own global strategic calculus. Friction resurfaced during the 1971 Bangladesh crisis, when the U.S. response appeared cautious and, at times, aligned with India's position—intensifying Pakistan's perception of abandonment. The aftermath of the war marked a turning point: Pakistan withdrew from SEATO (1972) and later from CENTO (1979), symbolizing its growing disillusionment with Western-led alliances and the limits of U.S. support (4,9).

Prime Minister Bhutto and President Richard Nixon Era

Following the trauma of 1971, Pakistan's foreign policy under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto shifted toward diversification of alliances, engagement with the Muslim world, and a stronger assertion of national autonomy. Although the U.S.–Pakistan relationship experienced a brief revival through cooperation on U.S.–China normalization, it weakened as Washington recalibrated South Asian policy to accommodate emerging Indian influence (10). The most consequential development of this period was India's 1974 nuclear test, which fundamentally altered Pakistan's threat perception. Bhutto's subsequent diplomatic outreach to Washington succeeded in lifting the arms embargo imposed after 1965, yet the U.S. downplayed India's nuclear provocation—a stance that deepened Islamabad's distrust (6,11). In pursuit of strategic parity, Pakistan signed an agreement with France in 1976 to acquire a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant. U.S. resistance to the deal reflected its global non-proliferation framework but was interpreted in Pakistan as discriminatory and misaligned with its existential concerns. This tension illustrates a recurring pattern in bilateral relations: Pakistan sought security assurances against India, whereas the United States sought to prevent nuclear proliferation irrespective of regional asymmetries.

President Jimmy Carter Period

During the Carter era, nuclear issues became the predominant source of friction. Pakistan's pursuit of nuclear capability—justified as a strategic necessity following India's 1974 test—prompted Washington to impose sanctions under emerging non-proliferation legislation (12). The domestic political environment in Pakistan also shifted, culminating in the 1977 elections and the consolidation of General Zia-ul-Haq's rule. A dramatic transformation in bilateral relations emerged after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Confronted with the potential expansion of Soviet influence into South Asia and the Persian Gulf, Washington urgently reassessed Pakistan's strategic utility. Carter authorized covert military support for anti-Soviet forces and extended a multi-billion-dollar assistance program to Pakistan (13,14). Ironically, U.S. aid during this period strengthened Pakistan's military, economy, and—indirectly—its nuclear development, despite earlier sanctions. This contradiction underscores one of the central paradoxes of U.S. foreign policy toward Pakistan: short-term strategic needs often overshadowed long-term concerns regarding nuclear proliferation and governance.

New Intensity between the Two Global Powers

The dual shocks of the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan reshaped U.S. engagement in the region. Pakistan faced unprecedented pressures from both its eastern and western borders, while internal instability in the frontier regions heightened its security vulnerabilities (9). Recognizing Pakistan's pivotal position in the evolving regional conflict, the United States sought to establish it as a “frontline state” in the anti-Soviet struggle. Although the U.S. offered an initial \$400 million aid package, General Zia rejected it as “peanuts,” arguing that the scale of Pakistan's challenges demanded much greater support (15-17). This exchange revealed both Pakistan's growing strategic confidence and U.S. underestimation of regional complexities. Ultimately, Washington substantially increased its assistance, laying the groundwork for a deep—though transactional—security partnership throughout the 1980s.

Soviet Union–US Cold War Era and Pakistan's Role

During the height of the Cold War, Pakistan became central to U.S. efforts to contain Soviet expansion. The 1981 multi-year security and economic assistance agreement, including \$3.2 billion in aid and the supply of F-16 aircraft, marked one of the most robust periods

of bilateral cooperation (18). Additional commitments under President Reagan expanded this assistance, while Pakistan facilitated U.S. covert operations supporting Afghan Mujahideen forces. However, the alignment remained fundamentally interest-based rather than value-based. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S. attention rapidly shifted away from the region. The Pressler Amendment came into full effect in 1990, suspending military and economic assistance due to Pakistan's nuclear program—a policy deeply resented in Islamabad and interpreted as abandonment after years of cooperation (19,20). The 1990s witnessed increasing divergence between the two countries. Pakistan's continued support for the Taliban, justified as essential for securing "strategic depth," clashed with evolving U.S. security concerns (21). Nuclear tensions intensified following India and Pakistan's reciprocal nuclear tests in 1998, prompting Washington to impose additional sanctions under the Glenn Amendment. The 1999 coup further strained relations, triggering the suspension of aid under Section 508 of the Foreign Assistance Act (14,22).

CONCLUSION

The review demonstrates that Pakistan–U.S. relations have evolved through repeated cycles of cooperation and disengagement, shaped primarily by shifting geopolitical priorities rather than a stable foundation of shared strategic objectives. While the early post-independence decade reflected strong bilateral alignment through multiple security agreements, these expectations gradually weakened as Washington emphasized its commitments against communist aggression rather than regional conflicts involving India. Evidence from subsequent decades indicates similarly fluctuating patterns, with the 1979–1989 period marking a renewed strategic partnership driven by joint efforts against Soviet expansion in Afghanistan, followed by renewed tensions in the 1990s over Pakistan's nuclear trajectory. The existing literature consistently shows that these oscillations stem from divergent national interests rather than failures of diplomacy, underscoring the need for more nuanced, context-sensitive analyses of bilateral behavior. Given the limited predictive strength of current evidence and the predominance of descriptive accounts, future research should prioritize comparative, longitudinal studies that assess how global power shifts, regional security dynamics, and domestic political transitions collectively influence long-term stability in Pakistan–U.S. relations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Muhammad Rizwan Majeed*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Areeba Amir	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Muhammad Imran Majeed	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Imran Ali	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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