

Gallup Pakistan History Project - Weekend Read 6 ‘Cold War in Pakistan: A Moment of Deep Uncertainty’: by Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

Geography is a powerful formative force. Location is often an influential ingredient in determining individual and collective destinies. These observations are particularly true for the history of the states that populate the international community. Many national histories are directly determined from and dependent on the circumstances and conditions circulating particular regions and neighbourhoods. Wars, famine, diseases, migration, political upheavals and many other events that define and structure a state’s life are often rooted closely to the dynamics of geography. This is true for the overwhelming majority of states. Only a tiny fraction of the states – generally global powers, have their histories and politics shaped by international factors beyond their immediate geographical neighbourhood. In Pakistan, geography has been instrumental in shaping national consciousness, identity, and the attendant policies.

Pakistan’s national history has been shaped by the unique circumstances of the country’s geographical neighbourhood. Within Pakistan, the state security and foreign policy narrative has been shaped by this feature in the use and circulation of the term: geostrategic advantages. Pakistan immediate neighbourhood is populated by states that are key characters in the international arena: China, India, Afghanistan, and Iran. Furthermore, the country’s proximity to the Middle East – the core of many historical and current international disputes and issues – has given Pakistan a unique vantage point to be at the centre of several developments in the international system. However, the primacy of Pakistan’s location has not always translated into blessings. The country’s history has been punctuated by the fluctuations and tremors launched in the region since 1947. Perhaps the most crucial of these regional-international events in the neighbourhood was the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the late 1970s. International affairs in the post-WWII era were defined by the atmospherics and dynamics of the Cold War. Many states in the world had to make a clear choice for allegiance between the United States and the Soviet Union. And when the Soviet forces amassed on Pakistan’s western borders in 1979, the country was thrust into the limelight on the international stage.

In this context, the year 1980 was a critical point in Pakistan's history. Under President Zia's military dictatorship, Pakistan began re-calibrating its foreign policy (yet again) partially in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. After a lull in Pakistan's relationship with the US through the 1970s, the country's military regime eagerly accepted re-entry into the US' alliance. The US, alarmed by the advance made the Soviet Union into South Asia, courted Pakistan and succeeded in convincing the Government to make the country the staging ground for resisting expanding Soviet presence and influence in South Asia. Perpetually insecure on the country's eastern border, Pakistan military regime and its security establishment became a part of the US-led alliance to bleed and defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

But history matters. Pakistan, since the country's independence, had chosen very early on to side with the US in the Cold War. However, after nearly three decades, and having lost East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in a war where US assistance was absent, Pakistanis' trust in the security of being a US ally had been seriously eroded. By 1980, most people in Pakistan had become suspicious of dealing with the US. In that same pivotal year, Gallup Pakistan administered a nation-wide, representative study to assess how Pakistanis viewed the two superpowers in the Cold War.

The poll asked Pakistan to compare and assess the two leading superpowers of the era: the United States and the Soviet Union. Specifically, the poll posed the following question to Pakistanis across the country: Which country do you think is more powerful, USA or USSR? A 31% majority of the respondents rated the USSR as more stronger than the US. 26% of all respondents rated the US as more stronger than USSR. Historical context explains the nature of this finding.

In 1980, Pakistan stood at a crossroads, both domestically and internationally. The Soviet Union had successfully invaded and occupied Afghanistan, and had reached Pakistan's western borders. Since independence, the Pakistani state had made the choice of siding with the United States in the Cold War. That decision brought little relief to Pakistan. In the preceding decade, 1970s, Pakistan's relations with the United States had reached a nadir – especially after the secession of East Pakistan. Pakistanis understood that the country's alliance with the United States had not generated any significant material or political benefits. Furthermore, in the late 1970s, the United States was on the back foot in Iran, where the Khomeini-inspired Revolution had ousted the Shah

of Iran – a staunch US ally. For Pakistanis, these developments had eroded the United States' perception as an ally, as well as a superpower.

In sharp contrast, the Soviet Union had reached Pakistan's western border, while the persistent enmity with India posed a continuing threat on the eastern front. It was in this context that by 1980, most Pakistanis felt that the Soviet Union was a more powerful adversary and competitor in the global struggle for supremacy with the United States. A combination of frequent disappointments in the bilateral ties with the US and the successful Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had convinced most Pakistanis that the Soviet Union was the dominant competitor in the Cold War.

Notwithstanding this explanation of the Soviet perception, a significant proportion of Pakistanis still felt that the United States was the more powerful adversary in the Cold War. This perception was rooted in the historical affiliation with the United States and its allies. More significantly, under President Zia, relations between Pakistan and the United States had begun thawing. In particular, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought the two countries closer than ever before, as for the US, the notion of a dominant Soviet Union in South Asia became a real threat. Both Pakistan and the United States were once again locked in a mutually beneficial embrace. For many Pakistanis, this resurgence and rejuvenation of bilateral relations meant that the United States still remained a powerful ally to Pakistan.

In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States, with the assistance of Middle Eastern monarchies, launched a call for Jihad across the Islamic countries. This strategy provided President Zia's military regime with an optimal environment to use Islam to entrench his power. On the international front, the military regime actively opposed the Soviet Union as more than national interest – the struggle against the Soviet Union was painted as a struggle in the interests of Islam and Muslims. This contextual atmosphere might also have played a role in increasing Pakistanis' sympathies for the United States after suffering several disappointments in its bilateral ties.

Crucially, a substantial 23% of all Pakistanis in 1980 felt that both the Soviet Union and the United States were equal in terms of their power and capability. This number provides greater insight into an average Pakistani's psyche at the time. When juxtaposing the Soviet presence on

Pakistan's western borders, the call for Jihad in a renewed alliance with the United States, and the brewing mistrust between the US and Pakistan meant that nearly a quarter of the country had become indecisive on this crucial foreign policy and national defence issue. Split between the experience of bilateral engagement with the US, the Soviet success in invading Afghanistan, and the developing regional scenario, many Pakistanis had come to the conclusion that both the Soviet Union and the United States were equal adversaries. This mindset also alludes to the general feeling of uncertainty that must have prevailed in the country in 1980. With the two superpowers embroiled in an (in)direct conflict in the country's backyard, Pakistanis were unsure about how their national, as well as the wider international fortunes would unfold in the titanic struggle for global supremacy between the Soviet Union and the US.

For students of Pakistan's history and foreign policy, particularly in the evolution of Pak-US bilateral ties, this poll provides a crucial insight into Pakistani mindset at a critical juncture in our national history. Insights from this intriguing assessment by Pakistanis in 1980 provide an indication of the course of national history, as well as the tenor of Pakistan's complex and troubled relationship with the eventual victor of the Cold War.